



Literature Review Findings: How the Literature Defines “Accountability” Accountable for What? To Whom?

Remarks by David Hurley, *Connecting the Dots* project manager.

Good morning, everyone.

Let me begin by introducing Claire Elliott, our intrepid literature reviewer whose hard work underlies everything I am about to share with you. She is also the person who recommended the Top 10 citations which can be found in your binder. Many of the documents that she referred us to can be found on-line. Claire is truly the expert here, I am just the spokesperson.

Claire and I have been tasked this morning to take you on a brief walking tour of what was discovered in the lit. review around three topics.

What is accountability? How do we define it?
Accountable to whom?, and
Accountable for what?

Surprisingly, even in the literature, there seems to be a general assumption that when I write about “accountability”, you know exactly what I mean. We didn’t discover a plethora of well-tuned definitions of the word.

The Office of the Attorney General and the Treasury Board noted in 1998 that in most discussions of accountability the central focus is on “assigning blame and punishing wrong-doing”

the central focus of “accountability” is on “assigning blame and punishing wrong-doing” (Canada, OAG & TB, 1998; Independent Blue Ribbon Panel, 2006, p. 1).

The Independent Blue Ribbon Panel on Grant and Contribution Programs, which we will talk about further this afternoon, was charged with making federal funding programs “more efficient while ensuring greater *accountability*.”

Despite the centrality of the concept of accountability to their mandate, the Panel's 128-page report does not, at any point, provide a simple or explicit definition of the term.

However, the Panel does state that accountability is often viewed as providing “value” for “money”

A pair of authors maintains that

What becomes clear upon reading about accountability is that few documents manage, or even attempt to define the concept in simple terms (Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2007, p. 209).

The Government of Canada's own *Federal Accountability Act* (2006) and accompanying *Action Plan* (2007) also neglect to define accountability in direct and simple terms. The meaning of accountability must be extracted from statements about the qualities and benefits of a “strong accountability regime”.

Basically, the Government states that a strong accountability regime:

ensures public resources are used “effectively and efficiently” (producing “value-for-money”); promotes ethical and policy-based decisions, motivated by a concern for the public interest; rewards good performance and carries consequences when “rules are knowingly broken”, and embraces transparency as a way to make “government more accountable” and support the participation of citizens and organizations in public policy development (2007, p. 3).

- “effective and efficient” use of public resources
- ethical and policy-based decisions – public interest
- Rewards and consequences
- Transparency to make “government more accountable”
- Support participation in public policy development

Action Plan (2007, p.3)

As we can see, this image of accountability, while incorporating components of the earlier ones, reaches beyond issues of financial accountability and control, to address broader democratic concerns about ethical and political responsibility in government. It adds the idea of “transparency” to help assure the accountability of government itself.

What about the “person in the street”? If we were to walk outside today and poll a random sampling of passers-by, I would bet that most people, when asked what accountability in the public arena means to them would go immediately to

the “value-for-money” definition. They may say something like “getting my money’s worth” or “not wasting my taxes”.

From 2002-2004, the Canadian Policy Research Network conducted four citizen dialogues to gather the public’s perspectives on four different issues. While accountability was not one of these 4 topics, it was brought up throughout the discussions. The authors of these findings noted that accountability was consistently linked in citizens’ minds with the concepts of “*trust, transparency and citizen engagement*, all of which lie at the core of a healthy democracy,”

- Trust
- Transparency
- Citizen engagement

Abelson and Gauvin (2004)

In the lit review, we discovered that among five authors there was agreement that it’s impossible to discuss accountability without asking “accountable *to whom?* and *for what?* (Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2007; Beder, 1999; Campbell, 2007; Merrifield, 1998).

“Accountability in public policy is not (as) straightforward. It requires specification of who will be accountable to who in a particular policy sector, how that accountability process will be accomplished, and to what end.

Ben Jaafar, 2007, p. 209

Do any of the few definitions of accountability address the “to whom” and the “for what” part of the puzzle?

The Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector defined accountability as “the requirement to explain and accept responsibility for carrying out an assigned mandate in light of agreed upon expectations.”

Accountability is the requirement to explain and accept responsibility for carrying out an assigned mandate in light of agreed upon expectations. (Panel on Accountability & Governance in the Voluntary Sector, 1999, p. 11)

The Office of the Attorney General and the Treasury Board looked upon it as “The obligation to answer for a responsibility conferred.”

Accountability is the obligation to answer for a responsibility conferred. (Wilson, as cited by OAG & TB, 1998, *Current Pressures*, ¶ 2)

Both of these definitions are, to a degree, more conventional views of accountability, which sees responsibility as flowing in primarily one direction. In other words, they assume the existence of a superior-subordinate relationship,

where accountability is assigned by one party to another with the first party retaining both the responsibility and ability to judge the performance of the second party.

Aucoin and Jarvis maintain that there is the “other side” of accountability, asserting that it is not just a one-way street of reporting. To work best it involves a relationship that allows for and supports decision-making, and feedback that informs program delivery and outcomes performance.

This notion of an interactive and ongoing accountability is not common in definitions or discussions of the topic, which brings us to this 1998 definition from OAG and the Treasury Board:

Accountability is a relationship based on the obligation to demonstrate and take responsibility for performance in light of agreed expectations. (OAG & TB, 1998, *Current pressures*, ¶ 3)

In a moment, we are going to ask you to examine this definition in your small group discussions. For now, how does it address our two areas of concern: accountable to whom and for what?

Accountable to whom?

...accountability is a relationship...

Who are funders accountable to? Who are providers accountable to? Are they accountable to the same or different parties? Are they accountable to one another?

Funders

Most funders of adult literacy operate within federal and provincial government hierarchies, and, as such, are accountable to parliaments that represent citizen and taxpayer needs. Their chief role within this governing framework is to design and administer funding programs that meet the needs of citizens, while upholding the values and fulfilling the policy objectives defined by the government.

As stewards of public resources, they are responsible for ensuring the most proper, effective and efficient use of these resources (Aucoin & Jarvis, 2005, p. 30; Voluntary Sector Initiative, 2002a, p. 6).

Funders primarily operate under what Jaafar and Anderson refer to as the “economic-bureaucratic” view of accountability or EBA

Economic-Bureaucratic Accountability

... This orientation reflects a business metaphor that emphasizes a consumer-producer relationship and the delineation of responsibility

for action. ... The important characteristic of EBA is that the account is provided to an external stakeholder, be it in a hierarchal bureaucracy or to a client base. The results are what matters, and the process is validated only by performance. (Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2007, p. 211)

The EBA approach is characterized by a need to manage performance to produce clear and measurable results (Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2007, p. 211). The EBA orientation is viewed as prioritizing outputs and outcomes (i.e., results) over inputs or processes

Practitioners, on the other hand, view themselves as accountable to both learners and funders, and, if operating within the community/voluntary sector, to governing boards, other non-government funders, individual donors, and a range of other stakeholders.

As recipients of public funds, they are responsible for meeting the specific performance and reporting expectations defined by their funding agreements.

Practitioners operate under what Jaafar and Anderson refer to as the “ethical-professional” view of accountability or EPA. EPA rests on qualitative measures of accountability,

Ethical professional accountability

.... This orientation is a process-based accountability where the means are emphasized over the ends. ... responsibility is considered a moral professional obligation of all stakeholders. EPA emphasizes giving an account of ongoing practices and conditions that are collectively recognized as important and necessary to the accomplishment of consensually defined ends or goals.

(Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2007, p. 211)

If the EBA orientation is viewed as prioritizing outputs and outcomes (i.e., results), then the EPA orientation may be described as being more concerned with “inputs”. The EPA approach is based on the understanding, among funders and practitioners, that there are clear basic conditions that must be satisfied to achieve desired results. If these conditions (or inputs) are absent, then there is little hope of achieving results, or being able to account for them (Merrifield, 1998, p. 37).

This alignment of EBA priorities with funders and EPA priorities with practitioners does not intend to suggest that funders don’t bother themselves with process, or that providers don’t care about results. Rather, it serves to delineate the different

priorities of each group, as they work to define roles and responsibilities, articulate and fulfill expectations, and, most importantly, develop ways of defining and measuring performance for the purposes of effective accountability.

Accountable for What?

...performance in light of agreed expectations.

This part of the definition leads us in all sorts of directions that are incredible fodder for small group discussions. For example, you might want to discuss:

- What expectations are we agreeing on?
- Do we have a shared understanding of what “literacy” means?
- How do we measure performance?
- What performance are we measuring?
- What outcomes or outputs are we measuring?

And, of course, you will want to add to your discussion the thoughts and reflections about these topics from your colleagues in the field. For that information, I leave you in the capable hands of Marina Niks, our field review coordinator.