

Conceptual Promiscuity and Credible Research on Accountable Governance

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Outline of remarks prepared for staff presentation at
School of Governance, University of Utrecht
Tuesday, 20 April 2004

The study of accountability is both frustrating and fascinating for those who take the concept seriously. The frustrations come from the “promiscuous” use of accountability by those who use it in their search for justice, democracy, ethics and enhanced performance. In the process, we have lost sight of central role that accountability plays in modern governance. To reestablish a credible research agenda focused on accountability, we need to revisit its historical roots, acknowledge its role in contemporary governance, and redesign our research to deal with issues of accountability as empirical (rather than design) questions.

- I. The frustrations and fascinations of studying accountability
 - a. Frustrations: A simple concept and the complex reality
 - i. The P-A version and the Institutionalized Standard
 - ii. The reality: managing expectations
 - 1. Quiet Successes: American city management
 - 2. Tragic Failures: The Challenger accident
 - b. Fascinations: Key to governance.
 - i. Relevance across sectors.
 - ii. Foundational, rather than structural.
- II. The (mis)use of accountability: Problems of “conceptual promiscuity”
 - a. The promise of justice
 - b. The promise of democracy
 - c. The promise of ethics
 - d. The promise of performance
- III. Reestablishing the foundations: Three approaches to credible research on accountability
 - a. Historical analysis: Accountability and modern governance
 - b. Functional perspectives: Governmentality, symbolism and the regulation of authority
 - c. Putting empirical agendas first: Heeding the “plea for mechanisms”