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Political Accountability as a Radial Concept

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Abstract

In the current article, I attempt to conceptualize political accountability in a disciplined fashion by proposing a strategy of conceptualization based on the internal radial structure of this difficult social science concept. Furthermore, I argue that accountability is still an under-explored concept. Its meanings are used interchangeably in the literature, which is fraught with definitions based on specific empirical cases. A disciplined conceptualization of political accountability can bring resolution to long-drawn scholarly arguments of what accountability is and what it is not

Keywords

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself".
(James Madison, The Federalist No. 51)

Introduction

The literature on democracy and democratic consolidation in newly democratized countries is fraught with definitions of political accountability based on specific empirical cases, leading to theoretical confusion and long-drawn scholarly arguments of what accountability is and what it is not[1]. The concept of accountability has a paramount importance in the context of these arguments. A regime cannot be considered democratic if it lacks formally institutionalized and practically functional systems of accountability that would constrain the abuse of political power.

A variety of empirical cases had been used to support one definition of accountability or another. The conceptualization of accountability had been conducted mainly in an undisciplined manner, through what literature calls "conceptual stretching"[2]. This is a process of adding conceptual labels to its root definition, forcing it to fit new empirical circumstances in order to support a broader theoretical argument. Some attempts to conceptualize accountability in a disciplined manner employed the ladder of abstraction model, based on a taxonomic hierarchy of categories that share in common one theoretically relevant element. It turned out to be entirely inappropriate, given that accountability has an internal radial structure in which different categories of objects do not necessarily share a single theoretically relevant element.

I will *firstly* offer a tentative definition of political accountability. I will *secondly* present some examples of conceptual stretching from the literature on democratic transition and consolidation in order to highlight how the search for definitions that would fit new empirical cases has obscured that accountability has a radial structure, in which objects in the same category will not share *all* of the theoretically relevant attributes that define the category[3].

I *thirdly* explore the semantic meanings of accountability and each of its constituting dimensions, in order to reveal its radial structure, which makes the ladder of abstraction an inappropriate strategy of conceptualization[4]. I will finally conceptualize political accountability according to its internal radial structure, explaining how I came to the definition offered in the first section of the article.

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[1] The current article is not meant as a critique of a long and reputed strand of scholarly work dealing with the faulty lines of democracy in the newly democratizing countries, which placed political accountability at the core of its theoretical assumptions. I critically review this literature in order to highlight its shortcomings and offer a disciplined conceptualization of accountability.

[2] Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64:4 (1970): 1033-1053; David Collier and James E. Mahon Jr., "Conceptual Stretching Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (December, 1993): 845-855.

[3] George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Collier and Mahon, op. cit.

[4] Andreas Schedler, "Conceptualizing Accountability," in Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999): 13-28.

A definition of political accountability

Concepts are not simple elements of a theoretical system. They are also data containers possessing analytically discriminating power: the lower the discriminating power, the more misleading empirical facts are gathered, increasing misinformation and misunderstanding[5].

Political accountability is an under-explored concept with evasive meaning, fuzzy boundaries and confusing internal structure[6]. Scholars selected some of its theoretically relevant features while completely disregarding others, according to their own research concerns[7]. Accountability fares along cognate concepts, such as "corporate social accountability", "communitarian responsiveness" and "individual moral responsibility" in terms of the intrinsically ambiguous (even contradictory) elements that are contained within its structure[8]. To make matters worse, accountability is a concept that lies at the heart of one of the most widely used definitions of democracy[9].

Such observations highlight the crucial importance of defining the elusive concept of accountability in a systematic and theoretically relevant fashion, avoiding a "low discriminating power" and a low capacity to discern among empirical information and interpret it[10].

I will next offer a definition of accountability that is the outcome of disciplined conceptualization, based on the radial structure of this concept, eloquently explored in the literature[11]. Its major strength is the absence of labels that make reference to specific empirical cases of accountability, such as "*electoral*" accountability, "*institutional*" accountability, "*vertical*" or "*horizontal*" accountability. This definition can be applied equally to any field of literature dealing with problems of accountability, be it democracy literature, cosmopolitan theories of justice and accountability or legal approaches to the concept. I will demonstrate how I came to this definition in the latter sections of the current article.

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[5] Sartori, op. cit.

[6] Schedler, op. cit.

[7] Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5 (January, 1994): 55-69; Guillermo O'Donnell, "Illusions about Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 7 (April 1996): 34-51; Guillermo O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies," in Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999): 29-52; Guillermo O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability: the Legal Institutionalization of Mistrust," in Scott Mainwaring and Christopher Welna, eds., *Democratic Accountability in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 34-55; Adam Przeworski, Susan Stokes and Bernard Manin, eds., *Democracy, Accountability and Representation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1999).

[8] Philippe C. Schmitter, *The Quality of Democracy: The Ambiguous Virtues of Accountability* (Istituto Universitario Europeo, September: 2003): 3-4

[9] Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lyn Karl, "What Democracy Is...and Is Not," *Journal of Democracy*, 2/3 Summer (1991): 75-88.

[10] Sartori, op. cit: 1039.

[11] Schedler, op. cit.

> Accountability represents the use of legal, societal and/or political resources for demanding information and explanation (both prospectively and retrospectively) from the elected and/or non-elected State officials, for the purpose of punishing the incumbents through legal or non-legal sanctions. When using non-legal sanctions, accountability implies also the capacity and willingness to demand the activation of agents of accountability who can impose punishment of legal nature.

Any action that corresponds to the above mentioned criteria can be considered an act of accountability, without the need of "labeling" it in order to reflect the specific circumstances when it occurs, the mechanism of imposition, the type of resources engaged or the stage in the policy-making process when it takes place between the agent of accountability (be it a State institution, a civil society actor or a political party) and the subject of accountability (be it a State institution, an elected or non-elected State official or any other political actor).

Specific research concerns and the conceptual stretching of accountability

The interest in political accountability burgeoned since the early 1990s. However, some scholarly work dedicated to its rigorous definition and categorization, aiming to explore the concept's boundaries and internal structure, emerged only after a decade of low conceptual discipline. The literature used the concept of accountability in order to explore already established topics in social science, only from a new, different perspective[12].

Elections have been presented as a mechanism of accountability, while formal constitutional relations of power between Executive and Legislature are now presented as mechanisms of institutional accountability. For almost a decade, the use of accountability has been driven by a "make your own" approach: authors picked and chose whatever defining element they needed for the purpose of their research, as I will show later. The theoretical and empirical concerns of different strands of literature had been significantly reflected in the meanings that had been associated to accountability.

This concept polarized the literature almost to the same extent as the concept of *democracy*, whose definition had elicited significant scholarly attention and disagreement in the context of the literature on democratic transition and consolidation. "Modern representative democracy" necessarily entails the capacity to hold the rulers accountable: democracy is "a regime or a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their representatives"[13].

The interpretation of accountability as a qualifier for democracy has not been followed by much elaboration on the actual concept, despite that it seemed to provide a vital link between the State and society, between the power holders and the citizens.

Recent literature attempted to develop a model of *measuring* the level of accountability in a given polity, which would be equally applicable to old and new democracies[14]. It switches from the spatial dimension of accountability (the points in the institutional structure linking the State to society where an act of accountability occurs)

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[12] Schmitter, op. cit: 3-4.
[13] Schmitter and Karl, op. cit: 76.
[14] Schmitter, op. cit.

to a temporal dimension (at what moment in the process of policy-making actors enter contention and hold each other accountable). From this perspective, accountability among citizens, representatives and power holders should be conceived as ex-ante, ex-post and in between the two, when the actual decisions are debated and decided upon. Each act of accountability has its own mechanism of activation, depending on the moment when it occurs and the resources engaged by the actors who enter contention[15].

Measuring the degree of accountability in a polity would be an indicator for the quality of democracy (QoD): the higher the level of accountability, the better the quality of democracy. After more or less all new democracies survived and some are faring surprisingly well, the need to capture and explain the problems they confront switched from the 1980s and early 1990s concern with the consolidation of democracy (CoD), to the late 1990s and early 2000s concern with the quality of democracy (QoD). Measuring QoD function of DoA would lead to categorizing democracies across the world according to differences in *degree* and not in *type*.

Literature also claimed that political accountability is nothing less than the most important marker for the *nature* of a democratic regime: *different types* of democracies exhibit different levels of accountability, according to the capacity and willingness of political institutions *and citizenry* to hold the rulers accountable[16]. The research aim has been the categorization democracies across the world according to differences in *type*, as opposed to differences in *degree*. This literature assumes that a low accountability of the Executive power is a permanent feature of an under-theorized type of democracy (labeled "delegative" democracy) based on a culturally-specific understanding of politics.

The attempt to categorize democracies according to theoretically relevant criteria had a major contribution to the understanding of how mechanisms of accountability work (or should work) and their malfunctioning in the new democracies around the world. However, the attempts to theorize a new type of democracy had been more successful in conceptualizing accountability across spatial dimensions (vertical vs. horizontal accountability, as I will show latter), rather than separate the new democracies (delegative) from the established ones (liberal) function of causally relevant cultural factors.

Accountability has been used interchangeably in the same work: a feature of non-elitist decision making process, as well as the "degree and means by which elected policy-makers are responsible to citizens"[17]. The research concern had been to highlight the advantages of presidential regimes over parliamentary ones. The former presumably exhibit a higher level of accountability, given a few specific features: *firstly*, the voters have the possibility to replace the Executive power by direct voting, *secondly,* the presidential regimes have mechanisms of institutional checks and balances (given the independence of the Executive from the Legislature) and *thirdly*, the Presidents play an active role as arbiters of politics.

I will next offer some examples of conceptual stretching by critically reviewing the scholarly work that attempted to conceptualize accountability. Despite its obvious conceptual shortcomings, this work bettered our understanding of what political accountability is and how it should function.

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[15] Ibid: 19-20.

[16] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994, 1996, 1999).

[17] John M. Carey and Matthew S. Shugart, *Presidents and Assemblies: constitutional design and electoral dynamics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 34, 44, 49 fn, 90-91.

Conceptual stretching through label-adding

Labeling accountability as *vertical* and *horizontal*

The early 1990s literature on democratic transition and consolidation proposed the seminal distinction between two main types of accountability: *vertical* and *horizontal* (highly instrumental in ordering the action of different agents of accountability)[18]. Each of these two labels defines a spatial dimension: accountability between State institutions and society (vertical) and accountability among State institutions (horizontal).

Vertical accountability implies that citizens make elected officials answerable at the ballot box. It has been assumed to be the only type of accountability that functions in the new democracies. *Horizontal accountability* takes place across a network of autonomous powers that can investigate and eventually punish wrongdoings of other State offices. It is presumably weak or outright inexistent in the new democracies, where the Executive power undermines the legitimacy and proper functioning of other State institutions in an effort to rule in a complete lack of institutional constraints. Empirical evidence from some new democracies led to the theoretical claim that a low Executive accountability is indicative of a new type of democracy[19].

Initially, accountability had a low conceptual definition: a *procedure* (italics added) through which representatives are held responsible for their actions by the public[20]. Two years latter *horizontal accountability* had been described (but not necessarily conceptualized) somewhat more extensively. Formal institutions have well-defined and legally established boundaries that delimit the exercise of their authority[21]. Any trespassing of these boundaries is punished by other State institutions charged with redressing wrongdoings, abuses of power and/or State corruption. The network of institutional boundaries and accountabilities (sic!) is an important part of the institutionalization of democracy[22]. The liberal nature of the new democracies had been called into question, as long as the institutionalization of *horizontal accountability* had been defined as weak or outright inexistent.

The labeling of accountability as vertical and horizontal on the basis of empirical evidence and the sketchy description of the faulty functioning of State institutions of accountability in the new democracies left a plethora of questions unanswered: what are the actual causes of institutional weakness and the ensuing low *horizontal accountability* in the newly democratized countries, which are the institutions of *horizontal accountability* and how do they relate to each other since they are part of an interdependent network, do actors such as political parties play any role in upholding *horizontal accountability*, is civil society reacting to the apparent incapacity of State institutions to uphold accountability?

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[18] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994, 1996).
[19] Ibid.
[20] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994).
[21] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1996).
[22] Ibid: 44.

It should be emphasized that this literature did not direct a significant effort into conceptualizing accountability beyond the purpose of attempting to develop a theory of "delegative" democracy[23]. The strong theoretical assertions about the significance of a low accountability in the new democracies had not been matched to an equally strong conceptual definition.

The first to indirectly admit the conceptual stretching through the adding of labels had been O'Donnell himself: "my interest in what I labeled (sic) <<horizontal accountability>> stems from its absence"[24]. Conceptualizing on the absence of something accurately reflects the strict positivism behind the democratic transition and consolidation literature of the 1980s and early 1990s.

In search for a better definition, *horizontal accountability* implied "the existence of State agencies that are legally enabled and empowered, and factually willing and able, to take actions that span from routine oversight to criminal sanctions or impeachment in relation to actions or omissions by other agents or agencies of the State that may be qualified as unlawful"[25].

The same claim had been put forth once again: horizontal accountability is inexistent in the new democracies, where vertical accountability is the only functioning form of accountability. The malfunctioning of horizontal accountability mechanisms had served as empirical proof for defining "a new type of democracy" and the attempts to develop a whole new "theory" that would explain the functioning of a new type of democracy.

As initially defined, vertical accountability refers to the society aiming to hold the rulers accountable through elections[26]. This spatial metaphor describes the asymmetric relationship between unequals: "above" equals resources of power, while "below" equals powerlessness[27]. However, it remains mute regarding to the direction in which vertical accountability comes into action, from top down or bottom up. In the realm of politics, the less powerful actor (the society as agent of accountability) attempts to hold accountable the more powerful actor (i.e. the Executive power) as subject of accountability, first and foremost through elections.

Given the mentioned disparity in resources available to the society as agent of accountability, the efficiency of elections as a mechanism of holding politicians accountable had been brought into question[28]. One cannot know if elections enforce prospective or retrospective controls. Therefore, it could be reasonably inferred that voters cannot force the governments to act responsibly. Politicians know that most of their decisions will not be controlled by the public, as long as voters can vote only once every few years. Furthermore, shortages of information prevent voters from evaluating the government performance and decisions.

These strong theoretical assertions had been challenged from different directions, each with its own label.

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[23] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994, 1996, 1999, 2003).
[24] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1999): 29.
[25] Ibid: 38.
[26] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994).
[27] Schedler, op. cit: 23.
[28] Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, op. cit.

Societal accountability

The hasty conceptualization of accountability (mainly in electoral and legal/institutional terms) led to objections. An entire process of conceptual stretching ensued, matched in the literature only by the well-known conceptual stretching of democracy, which aimed to catalogue democracies according to types: "delegative", "illiberal", "populist", "corporatist", "electoral" and many other labels[29].

The constant labeling of various instances of accountability piggy-backed on the critiques put forth to the theoretical claims about the nature of the new democracies. The initial labels (vertical and horizontal), the under-conceptualization of accountability and its subordination to specific research concerns are in most part responsible for the scholarly difficulty in coming to terms with the meanings and ambiguities of accountability.

The vibrant civil societies present in some of the new democracies further challenged *vertical accountability* described strictly in electoral terms[30]. The successful demonstrations leading to resignations of elected politicians, the impeachment and/or prosecution of elected or non-elected State officials, are examples of vertical (*but non-electoral!)* accountability that highlight the limitations of a strictly legal/institutional approach.

The implication is that *vertical accountability* is not the only form of accountability that functions in the new democracies: the incapacity of State institutions of *horizontal accountability* to hold the rulers accountable is not rooted in an understanding of politics based on a culture of strong, providential leaders, as claimed by some literature[31]. There is obviously something wrong with the newly established institutions and/or political actors if the society itself does mobilize against the abuses of State power.

Societal accountability had been defined as part of vertical accountability, equally important to elections[32]. A new label had been added to the concept in a spiraling scholarly debate based on conceptual stretching to fit new empirical circumstances[33]. It had been later linked to *horizontal accountability* mechanisms[34]: it exposes and denounces wrongdoings of State officials that would otherwise go unnoticed and unpunished, imposes symbolic sanctions on public officials and institutions, establishes parallel "societal watchdog" organizations that monitor the performance of specific public agencies and offices and activates the operation of institutions of *horizontal*

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[29] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994, 1996); Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, "The Types of Democracy Emerging in Southern and Eastern Europe and South and Central America," in Peter Volten, ed., *Bound to Change: Consolidating Democracy in East Central Europe* (New York: Institute for EastWest Studies, 1992): 42-68; Zakaria Fareed, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (London, W.W. Norton: 2003). For a full list of examples of conceptually stretching democracy see David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research", *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (April, 1997): 430-451.

[30] Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti, "Societal Accountability", in *Journal of Democracy* 11, 4 (2000): 147-158.

[31] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994, 1996, 1999).

[32] Smulovitz and Peruzzotti, op. cit: 153.

[33] Sartori, op. cit.; Joseph LaPalombara, "Macrotheories and Microapplications in Comparative Politics: a Widening Chasm," *Comparative Politics* Vol. 1, No. 1 (October): 52-78.

[34] Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti, "Societal and Horizontal Controls: Two Cases of a Fruitful Relationship," in Scott Mainwaring and Christopher Welna, eds., *Democratic Accountability in Latin America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003): 309-343.

accountability by incurring reputation costs on elected and non-elected State officials through social mobilization and media denunciation.

Further stretching accountability: horizontal balance and mandated horizontal

The initial vague conceptualization of accountability had undergone further stretching. Horizontal accountability institutions had eventually been defined as being of different types and functioning in different ways[35]. They may be active in two directions: one attempting to prevent and/or redress unlawful *encroachment* by one State agency upon the proper authority of another, the other punishing unlawful advantages (*corruption*) that public officials obtain for themselves and/or their associates[36].

According to these two directions, different types of agents of accountability become activated. Instead of engaging in a disciplined conceptualization of accountability, new labels had been added to the concept root in order to fit new empirical instances:

1. horizontal balance accountability[37]: The Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary impose *horizontal balance accountability* when redressing the transgressions of any of them into the constitutionally defined boundaries of another, encroaching on its jurisdiction. However, the agents of *horizontal balance accountability* have some limitations: respond rather reactively (and consequently intermittently), redressing the institutional transgressions generates highly visible and costly conflicts among supreme State institutions (these costs are even higher when the conflict occurs between State institutions with electoral legitimacy, such as a directly elected President and the Legislature), the agents are perceived as motivated by partisan reasons.
2. mandated horizontal accountability[38]: the shortcomings of *horizontal balance accountability* mentioned earlier led to the establishment of agents of *mandated horizontal accountability* that are proactive and continuous in their activity: ombudsmen, accounting offices, controllers, Conseils d'Etat, Courts of Accounts, etc. These bodies are legally assigned to oversee, prevent, discourage, promote the sanctioning of (or even directly sanction) the actions or omissions of other State agencies that are presumed unlawful, at national or sub-national levels.

Even labeled *balance* and *mandated*, the conceptual definition of *horizontal accountability* has a strong legal connotation, implying relations among State institutions, aiming to redress illegalities (be they trespassing of institutional prerogatives or outright corruption). It remains mute regarding the representational dimensions of accountability, given that some State institutions perform *different accountability functions simultaneously!*

Legislatures not only punish the trespassing of the Executive power into their institutional prerogatives when the later takes on legislative functions issuing laws by

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[35] O'Donnell, op. cit (2003): 34-55.
[36] Ibid: 34.
[37] Ibid: 44- 45.
[38] Ibid: 45.

Executive decrees. Legislatures also expose the policy initiatives of the Executive to greater institutional scrutiny, in the name of the popular mandate received at elections. Policy scrutiny occurs equally in presidential systems (where both the Legislature and the President have *direct* electoral legitimacy and had been entrusted to make public policy) and parliamentary systems (where the Executive is rooted in the Legislature). In the later systems, the Executive exercises its policy-making functions after receiving its mandate from the Legislature, but remaining under its close policy control.

Further stretching the concept by adding a new label: extended accountability

The incapacity of *horizontal accountability* mechanisms (be they *balance* or *mandated*) and *vertical accountability* mechanisms (be they *electoral* or *societal*) to cover instances of policy-making accountability led to the stretching of the concept by adding another label: *extended accountability*[39]. It represents "the embeddedness of the decision making center into a network of autonomous political institutions that limit the arbitrariness of the incumbents"[40].

This new label surpasses the more legal/institutional notion of accountability implied by the metaphor of horizontality. It insures the representation of a wide range of societal interests in the process of policy-making, in a timeframe that extends beyond and in-between electoral cycles. It also strengthens the connection between State and society in the process of policy-making. It can be exercised not only among State institutions, but also by organized societal actors in relation to State institutions.

Therefore, accountability also implies actions attempting to force elected officials *to take into account* in the exercise of government a broad range of societal interests, basically demanding that they should govern for those who elected them, and not for private interest groups that lobby the government. *Extended accountability* takes place through a continuous dialogue and interaction between State and society, as well as among State institutions. From this particular perspective, a Legislature exercises an act of *extended accountability* when amending the Executive policy initiatives with its own policy views.

Furthering the theoretical confusion: oblique accountability

The concept is further stretched by the definition of *oblique accountability*[41]. It describes actions of non-State or semi-State actors aiming to hold the power holders accountable for their misdeeds, not just for trespassing the prerogatives of other State institutions. These actors use their peculiar position between the State and society to garner public support for their actions.

It follows quite logically that political parties, organizations that are partly State actors, partly societal actors, occupy such an oblique position. Political parties are positioned between the State institutions ordered horizontally at the higher State level enjoying plenty of power resources, and individuals acting in scarcity of power

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[39] David Stark and Laszlo Bruszt, *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 188-189.
[40] Ibid: 188.
[41] Philippe Schmitter, "The Limits of Horizontal Accountability", in Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, eds., *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999: 61-62, fn 4).

resources. However, there is clearly an overlap of meanings between *oblique accountability* and *extended accountability*. Both define an act of accountability taking place not only among State institutions aiming to punish illegalities, but also between the State and society via organized actors (such as political parties or labor unions) aiming to influence the process of policy-making from their uniquely *oblique* position.

To sum up the current subsection, one is left still wanting for a clear and exhaustive conceptualization of political accountability. It might as well turn out that all labels (*horizontal balance, mandated horizontal, vertical, societal, extended* and *oblique*) that had been added to the concept to fit new empirical instances *do define* a legitimate act of accountability. But which one does better and why? How is the disciplined researcher supposed to treat combinations of the above labels? Could some of these labels define acts of accountability that are more legitimate than others? Which approach is more suitable and why? The dichotomous approach (i.e. existent/non-existent accountability)[42] or the more fuzzy approach, ordering accountability in a temporal space (i.e. more/less accountability) according to the moment of activation[43]?

I argue that one cannot find an answer to these questions unless engaging in a disciplined act of conceptualizing, by offering not only a proper definition but also a systematic and exhaustive categorization of various instances of political accountability, highlighting commonalities and differences, function of theoretically relevant criteria. Given that concept formation should stand prior to quantification[44], some of the attempts to quantify accountability that I reviewed above enhance the confusion surrounding the under-defined and under-explored concept of political accountability.

When one would expediently attempt to solve his or her own research problems without any taxonomical backing, using the above labels as a simple check-list, one would most likely embark on an "indiscriminate fishing expedition for data", with an inadequate fishing net of their own making[45]. The outcome had already been a substantial contribution to a "growing potpourri of disparate, non-cumulative and – in the aggregate – misleading morass of information"[46] on various instances of accountability.

A disciplined use of terms and procedures of comparison employing various models of conceptualizing (either a classic ladder of abstraction or the more recent model of radial categories) can gather and discern the most relevant empirical information, therefore increasing the clarity of scholarly dialogue. I will next demonstrate how I came to the "label-free" definition of accountability offered earlier by sketching the basic logic beyond disciplined conceptualization building on the insights of previous scholarly work[47].

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[42] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994, 1996, 1999, 2003).
[43] Schmitter, op. cit (2003).
[44] Sartori, op. cit: 1038.
[45] LaPalombara, op. cit: 66; Sartori, op. cit: 1039.
[46] Sartori, op. cit: 1039.
[47] Ibid; Collier and Mahon, op. cit; Schedler, op. cit.

Accountability: semantic meanings

Accountability has two basic connotations[48]. The first is *answerability*, namely the obligation of public officials to *inform* about and to *explain* what they are doing. The second is *enforcement*, namely the capacity and willingness of agents of accountability to impose sanctions on the subjects of accountability.

Answerability implies the obligation of the subjects of accountability to answer questions and inquiries coming from the agents of accountability (be they the public, or various agencies of accountability). Also, specialized agencies within the State demand that the subjects of accountability should *inform* about and *explain* their actions and decisions. Therefore, accountability is both *retrospective* and *prospective*, politicians having to give account not only for what they have done, but also for their future actions[49].

The right to receive information (on the part of the agent of accountability) and the obligation to release it (on the part of the subject of accountability) the right to receive an explanation, and the duty to justify one's conduct, are ways of exercising accountability that are distinct from (but equally important to) the account the politicians give to the electorate.

The *enforcement* dimension implies the capacity and willingness of agents of accountability to impose sanctions on the subjects of accountability who have gone beyond their constitutionally assigned powers, committed illegalities while exercising their mandates or failed to perform according to initial promises and voter's expectations. It complements the *answerability* dimension of accountability in both of its variants, *information* and *explanation*. The right to demand information and explanation and the obligation to respond to such demands purportedly aim at overseeing, checking and/or establishing wrongdoings, constituting the ground for a decision regarding potential punishment and/or redress. The subjects of accountability have to bear the consequences of their actions, including potential sanctions[50].

The issue of sanctions has elicited significant scholarly discussion. Are there any forms of accountability which function in the absence of sanctions? Is the capacity to punish an integral part of political accountability? In other words, can we speak of a legitimate act of accountability in the absence of sanctions? And what can be considered sanction and what cannot?

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[48] For the comprehensive exploration of the structure and meaning of accountability see Schedler, op. cit: 13-26.
[49] Ibid: 15, 27 fn 6.
[50] O'Donnell, op. cit (1994): 61.

The literature had shown eloquently that capacity to punish is an integral part of political accountability[51]. Sanctions are the fundament of credible and effective action on the part of the agents of accountability. However, the capacity to punish *goes beyond legal punishment*[52]. In the realm of politics removal from office as outcome of public exposure of inappropriate conduct (although not necessarily illegal) constitutes a severe form of punishment. Also, a Legislature amending the Executive legislative initiatives does not impose punishment of legal nature, although it acts according to constitutional provisions. It holds the Executive accountable for its policy-making acts according to its electoral mandate.

Therefore, accountability does not necessarily require *legally ascribed* power to sanction, just as it does not require *legalized authority* to oversee. Sanctions can be of *legal nature* (such as prosecution of public officials carried out by the specialized agencies within the State) or *non-legal nature* (such as the resignation from office as outcome of public exposure of wrongdoing or the amending of Executive legislative proposals in the Legislature).

To summarize, accountability has two major dimensions, each with its own sub-dimensions:

1. answerability:

    • demanding and receiving *information*, prospectively or retrospectively.
    • demanding and receiving *explanation*, prospectively or retrospectively.

2. punishment:

    • power to punish legally ascribed:
        - sanctions of legal nature (i.e. prosecution as outcome of legal investigation)
        - sanctions of non-legal nature (i.e. amending of Executive policy acts in the Legislature)
    • power to punish not ascribed legally:
        - sanctions of non-legal nature (i.e. "throwing the rascals out" at the ballot box).
        - demanding the activation of agents that impose punishment of legal nature (i.e. civil society oversight and action against wrongdoings of State officials).

The agents of accountability are all actors (State institutions, individuals, civil society organizations, labor unions or political parties) that attempt to hold accountable the subjects of political accountability (other State institutions, elected or non-elected State officials at national or sub-national level). Most acts of accountability (although not all of them) are played out between organizations[53].

Accountability can be missing one of its dimensions and still represent a full

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[51] O'Donnell, op. cit. (2003); Schmitter, op. cit (1999); Jose Maria Maravall, "Accountability and Manipulation", in Adam Pzeworski, Susan Stokes and Bernard Manin, eds., *Democracy, Accountability and Representation* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1999): 154-196.
[52] Schedler, op. cit: 16 (*italics added*).
[53] Schmitter, op. cit. (2003): 5.

instance of the concept, as long as the agents of accountability attempt to keep the subjects of accountability under control, ultimately through the threat of punishment of legal or non-legal nature[54]. Therefore, accountability can be imposed in various ways, according to the agents' capacity to enforce punishment. It cuts across the boundaries between State and society, ranging from casting the ballot in elections to actions of oversight and control, from mechanisms of checks and balances to civil society initiatives.

Some agents (such as the agencies of oversight and control) can uphold the law themselves, possessing a higher capacity than civil society to control and redress wrongdoings through punishment. However, civil society actions demanding punishment can either activate agencies of oversight and control, or lead to the resignation of elected and non-elected officials, acts that represent an outright punishment in the realm of politics[55].

Some agents of accountability impose only non-legal punishment, such as demonstrators successfully demanding the resignation of an elected official. Others (such as labor unions) hold the Executive accountable by forcing it to negotiate policy and take into account a diversity of societal interests. Still, some agents of accountability (such as anti-corruption bodies) employ both dimensions of accountability: they are legally able to demand information and/or explanation as well as impose punishment of legal nature acting in accordance with legally ascribed prerogatives.

Therefore, the radial structure of accountability is based on different types of *punishment* (legal or non-legal, each with its own mechanism of imposition), on different types of answerability relations established between the agents and the subjects of accountability as well as on different types of resources engaged. Equally legitimate acts of accountability may possess one of these theoretically relevant elements, but not the others, while no single element of those enumerated above is found in *all* instances of the concept.

As I have mentioned earlier, accountability cannot be conceived in the absence of *punishment*. It could be reasonably inferred that *punishment* is the single unifying element that is found in all instances of the concept, helping to order the categories taxonomically. This would make the ladder of abstraction model amenable to conceptualize accountability. However, as I have shown, punishment is of different types. Some types of punishment may be present in one instance of the concept, but not in others. The presence/absence of *different types of the same theoretical feature* is the trademark of radial structure concepts[56].

Defining accountability as a radial concept avoids stretching, while providing for an effective operational tool. Furthermore, it highlights that various categories of accountability do not constitute *diminished subtypes* of the concept. They are full instances grouped in non-central subcategories, which are positioned around the central subcategory in a radial structure.

A diminished subtype is an incomplete form of a concept. It identifies missing attributes of the root definition, increasing conceptual differentiation and therefore referring to a different set of cases than the root definition[57]. Diminished subtypes are

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[54] Schedler, op. cit: 17.
[55] Ibid: 16-17.
[56] Lakoff, op. cit.
[57] Collier and Levitsky, op. cit: 430-451.

not full instances of the concept and can only make modest claims about it. In the diminished subtype strategy of categorization, the full attributes that make for a *full instance of the concept* are found only in the root definition, which is not the case with accountability defined as a radial concept, as I will exemplify later.

I have critically reviewed all these interpretations in order to reveal the *radial* structure of accountability and show that it is a full instance of the concept (*and not a diminished form of it*!) even when some of its dimensions or sub-dimensions are missing.

Furthermore, explaining *the logic* of "recursive cycles of mutual accountability"[58] suffices for the purpose of scientific explanation. It makes unnecessary the need to explain the success or failure of each and every single occurrence of an act of accountability. A disciplined conceptualization will help explain *what* happens and *how* it happens (by how I understand the identification, systematic definition and classification of circumstances and causes). The logical rigor of disciplined conceptualizing not only renders irrelevant the dichotomous definition of accountability[59], but also eliminates the theoretical relevance of non-occurrence itself , without the need for further explanation.

Conceptualizing Accountability according to its radial structure

I will next exemplify how political accountability can be conceptualized according to the radial structure model. For comparison purposes, I will also conceptualize "democracy" according to Sartori's classic ladder of abstraction model.

	Democracy	**Number of objects**
Higher abstraction (Highest extension/Lowest intension)	Elections (all democracies in the world)	120 countries
High intermediate abstraction	**Elections** + A	100 countries
Medium abstraction	**Elections + A +** B	80 countries
Lower intermediate abstraction	**Elections + A + B +** C	60 countries
Lower intermediate abstraction	**Elections + A + B + C +** D	40 countries
Lowest abstraction (Lowest extension/Highest intension)	**Elections + A + B + C + D +** E	20 countries

*Democracy conceptualized according to the ladder of abstraction model: A, B, C…..E = theoretically relevant elements that improve the quality of a democracy.

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[58] Schedler, op. cit.
[59] O'Donnell, op. cit. (1994, 1996, 1999).

Free, fair and regularly organized elections are the most important prerequisite of democracy, present even in those democratic regimes of low democratic quality[60]. At the highest level of abstraction, the category contains the largest number of objects, given its lowest intension (only one defining attribute). These objects (namely the 120 countries in the Table above) are considered democracies according to the theoretically relevant minimal criteria of having free, fair and regularly organized elections.

Going down the ladder of abstraction is accompanied by adding theoretically relevant elements (other than elections) that define a democracy and increase its quality (such as various liberal rights, socio-economic inclusion, etc). This leads to a higher intension and lower extension of categories of democracies: more defining attributes, harder to meet by a large number of countries, therefore decreasing the number of objects in each subordinate category.

The super-ordinate categories have greater extension and lower intention, therefore containing less specific elements and consequently a larger number of objects. The subordinate categories are contained within the super-ordinate ones because they have an increased intention, possessing not only the defining attributes of the next super-ordinate category, but also other theoretically relevant elements. Therefore, the subordinate categories become increasingly specific, containing less and less objects. According to this logic, the 20 countries found at the lowest level of abstraction are also found in *all* the super-ordinate categories, up to the highest level of abstraction (see Table above).

Categories are organized in a taxonomic hierarchy in the ladder of abstraction strategy of conceptualization. They are separated from each other by clearly defined boundaries. Most importantly, this taxonomic hierarchy is based on one single unifying element (in the case of democracy the single unifying element is elections) possessed by all objects (countries) in all categories, regardless of their position (subordinate or super-ordinate).

Conceptual stretching is different than the exercise of going up and down the ladder in order to form categories by adding or subtracting theoretically relevant elements. It occurs *within* each category. The concept is "stretched" to fit specific empirical circumstances that authors use as examples to support their theoretical assertions. A hypothetical example would be the labeling as "corporatist" democracy of a regime defined by the theoretically relevant features of Elections + A + B if A represents the legalization of labor unions and B represents the existence of corporatist arrangements

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[60] It is indeed difficult to establish if individual voting is prospective (on the basis of electoral promises) or retrospective (on the basis of previous government performance) (Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, 1999). However, the free and regularly organized elections had been the only functional mechanism of accountability in many newly established democracies, where the newly founded democratic institutions had been weak and exhibited serious malfunctioning particularly immediately after the collapse of their respective non-democratic regimes. Furthermore, free, fair and regularly organized elections are considered the most minimal criteria of any democracy and constitute the theoretical cornerstone of literature on democratic transition and consolidation: Schmitter and Karl, op. cit. 1991; Guillermo O'Donnell, Philipe Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, *Transitions from authoritarian rule: prospects for democracy* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press: 1986); Guillermo O'Donnell and Philipe Schmitter, *Transitions from authoritarian rule: tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 1986), as well as the more classic work on democracy - Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London, Allen&Unwin, 4th edition: 1954); Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, Yale University Press: 1971).

among major economic actors[61].

I will next exemplify why political accountability cannot be conceptualized according to Sartori's ladder of abstraction. I will also show why the radial model is more appropriate in this particular case. I will *firstly* recapitulate the theoretically relevant elements of accountability. They are *answerability* and *punishment*. The first implies demanding and receiving *information* and *explanation*, prospectively or retrospectively. The second implies the existence of power to punish that is legally ascribed leading to sanctions of legal nature or sanctions of non-legal nature.

Punishment also implies the existence of power to punish that is not ascribed legally, leading to sanctions of non-legal nature or the demanding of activation of agents that impose punishment of legal nature.

I will *secondly* reorder these elements of accountability in a different way:

A = information prospectively.
B = information retrospectively.
C = explanation prospectively.
D = explanation retrospectively.
E = legally ascribed power to impose sanctions of legal nature.
F = legally ascribed power to impose sanctions of non-legal nature.
G = non-legally ascribed power to impose sanctions of non-legal nature.
H = non-legally ascribed power to activate the agents that can punish legally.

The presence of all these elements in a single act of political accountability would make it an ideal instance of the concept, rarely met in reality, if ever. Such an ideal act of political accountability would be positioned at the lowest level of abstraction on Sartori's ladder model. The largest number possible of defining features would give it a high intension and low extension on a classic ladder model. Such a category would contain only a few objects, if any.

I will next use the ladder model operating with hypothetical instances of accountability and graft it with empirical instances of accountability (see the table below).

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[61] See Schmitter and Karl, op. cit. (1992) for an example of stretching democracy with the label "corporatist" in order to match the concept to empirical information deemed to have theoretical relevance.

*Accountability conceptualized according to the ladder of abstraction model:

	Accountability	**Number of objects**
Highest abstraction	(?)	
	A+B	10 instances
	Societal Accountability: **D+G**	
	Societal Accountability: **A+G**	80 instances
	Mandated Horizontal Accountability: **B+E**	60 instances
	Mandated Horizontal Accountability: **D+F**	3 instances
	A+B+C	1 instance
	Extended Accountability: **A+C+G**	83 instances
	Extended Accountability: **B+D+F**	17 instances
	Electoral Vertical Accountability: **A+B+C+D+G**	40 instances
Lowest abstraction	A + B + C + D + E + F + G	Hypothetical instance

The combinations in bold letters represent empirical instances of accountability already explored in the literature (as reviewed earlier), whereas the combinations in non-bold letters represent hypothetical instances, which might as well not exist in the real world. However, these hypothetical instances reflect the logic of the classic ladder of abstraction.

According to Sartori, the less attributes define a category, the more superordinate that category is. According to the same logic exemplified earlier with the concept of democracy, the subordinate categories (lower extension and higher intension) should be contained within the superordinate categories.

I will next explain the four examples of accountability and their respective theoretically-relevant attributes as shown in the Table above. Electoral Vertical Accountability implies voters holding the political actors accountable at the ballot box imply the demanding of information prospectively and retrospectively (A+B), the demanding of explanation prospectively and retrospectively (C+D), as well as capacity to punish the power holders through non-legally ascribed power to impose sanctions of non-legal nature (G) when casting the ballot. The table above shows Electoral Vertical Accountability accordingly, as a combination of **A+B+C+D+G.**

Societal Accountability implies that individuals or civil society organizations holding accountable the political actors or institutions requires the demanding of information prospectively (A) or explanation retrospectively (D) as well as the imposition of punishment through sanctions of non-legal nature (G) (i.e. reputation costs or demanding the activation of State agents of accountability which can impose punishment of legal nature). It appears clearly that different acts of societal accountability possess different theoretically relevant elements, given the radial structure of the concept. According to the classification in the above table, Societal

Accountability is shown as a combination of either **D+G** or **A+G**.

Mandated Horizontal Accountability implies institutions that are legally assigned to oversee, prevent, discourage, promote the sanctioning of (or even directly sanction) the actions or omissions of other State agencies that are presumed unlawful, at national or sub-national levels require the demanding of information retrospectively (B) and the imposition of sanctions of legal nature (E) (i.e. institutions that can uphold the law themselves). However, some of the mandated horizontal accountability institutions (i.e. the Ombudsperson) act by demanding explanation retrospectively (D) and administering punishment of non-legal nature (F). As with Societal Accountability, different instances of Mandated Horizontal Accountability possess different theoretically relevant elements, given the radial structure of the concept. Mandated Horizontal Accountability is shown in the table above as either **B+E** or **D+F**.

Extended Accountability implies institutions and civil society actors that expose policies to greater institutional scrutiny, reducing the arbitrariness of decision making and insuring the representation of a wide range of societal interests in the process of policy-making necessarily require information and explanation prospectively and retrospectively (A, B, C, D), as well as punishment of non-legal nature (F). A Legislature amending the policy proposals of the Executive exercises an act of Extended Accountability by demanding information and explanation retrospectively (B+D) and imposing punishment of non-legal nature (F). However, an NGO promoting the specific interests of a civil society group will hold the Executive accountable for a piece of legislation that influences its interests by demanding information and explanation prospectively about the intentions of the Executive (A+C), as well as by making use of its non-legally ascribed power of imposing sanctions of non-legal nature when amending the Executive act with its own policy views (G). Therefore, Extended Accountability is shown in the above table as either **A+C+G** or **B+D+F**.

It becomes obvious that political accountability cannot be conceptualized using the ladder of abstraction strategy. *Firstly*, the super-ordinate categories do not contain the instances of accountability present in the subordinate categories. *Secondly*, there are no clearly separated categories (as in the case of democracy on the ladder of abstraction) given the absence of a single theoretically relevant element shared by all categories. Categories of accountability in bold letters become problematic once ordered on a classic ladder of abstraction. *Thirdly*, the central subcategory (Electoral Vertical Accountability shares features with the non-central subcategories, but these non-central subcategories *do not necessarily share features with each other,* as in the case of ladder of abstraction!

As it comes out quite clearly, the central sub-category is "*central*" because it contains the largest number of theoretically-relevant attributes of an act of accountability, and its "*sub-category*" status is justified by the fact that it does not contain *all possible* theoretically relevant attributes of a hypothetical act of accountability (A + B +......+ G, as shown at the lowest level of abstraction in the table above). Following the same logic, the non-central subcategories are "*non-central*" because they contain a smaller number of theoretically relevant attributes than the central subcategory.

The definition of accountability employing the ladder of abstraction model inevitably leads to conceptual stretching through label-adding when one is confronted with the need to categorize different empirical instances. As I have demonstrated, the radial structure of accountability requires a different strategy of conceptualization.

I will now present the conceptualization of accountability according to the radial structure model, in order to show why this is more appropriate than the ladder of abstraction in this particular case (see table below*).

*Accountability conceptualized according to the radial structure model:

Ideal (hypothetical) act of accountability	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Societal Accountability	-	-	-	D	-	-	G
	A	-	-	-	-	-	G
Mandated Horizontal Accountability	-	B	-	-	E	-	-
	-	-	-	D	-	F	-
Extended Accountability	A	-	C	-	-	-	G
	-	B	-	D	-	F	-
Electoral Vertical Accountability (Central subcategory)	A	B	C	D	-	-	G

As explained earlier, the radial structure of accountability is based on the different types of *punishment* (legal or non-legal, each with its own mechanism of imposition), on different types of answerability relations established between the agents and the subjects of accountability as well as on different types of resources engaged.

Different combinations of these elements (type of punishment, resources engaged and mechanism of imposition) constitute equally legitimate acts of accountability, generating categories that do not necessarily share one common constituting element.

The table above reflects the category types specific of radial structure concepts: all the subcategories share elements in common with the central subcategory, although the central subcategory itself does not posses all elements that would constitute an ideal act of accountability. The subcategories themselves may or may not share elements in common. The above exercise in conceptualization reflects the logic behind the definition offered earlier in the paper:

> Accountability represents the use of legal, societal and/or political resources for demanding information and explanation (both prospectively and retrospectively) from the elected and/or non-elected State officials, for the purpose of punishing the incumbents through legal or non-legal sanctions. When using non-legal sanctions, accountability implies also the capacity and willingness to demand the activation of agents of accountability who can impose punishment of legal nature.

Conclusion

In this article, I had attempted to show that the radial model of conceptualization is more appropriate than the classic ladder of abstraction when dealing with the ambiguous concept of political accountability. The model originates in linguistic philosophy[62], while some literature eloquently advocated for its application to comparative politics[63].

I have built the argument of the current article on the literature that provided a comprehensive exploration of the meanings and structure of accountability[64]. I put forth a definition of accountability ridden of labels that would reflect empirical circumstances. A "label-free" definition can diminish the theoretical confusion (mostly found in the democracy studies literature) surrounding the meanings and significance of political accountability. I have also attempted to explain the logic behind the definition of political accountability put forth initially by explaining the two main strategies of conceptualization (the ladder of abstraction and the radial structure) in order to highlight their respective strengths and shortcomings when applied to concepts with different internal structures. I had shown that the radial structure strategy fits the internal structure of political accountability, being the most appropriate strategy of conceptualization when applied to this difficult political science concept. This strategy unites all instances of the concept reviewed earlier (vertical accountability, horizontal balance accountability, mandated horizontal accountability, extended accountability, etc) elevating them to the equal status of full instances of accountability.

Furthermore, the radial structure model offers *a logical framework of relating to each other* to conceptual categories that cannot be ordered taxonomically! It takes the under-defined concept of "accountability" from the world of institutions where it had been relegated by the metaphor of horizontality and links it back to society according to previous literature arguments[65]. This highlights the crucial importance of popular elections as the primary mechanism of delegating the political power that legitimates the State. Furthermore, the act of power delegation through free, fair and regularly organized elections requires the creation of specific mechanisms of accountability. Firstly, these mechanisms should control those who had been entrusted to administer the political power delegated to them. Secondly, they should insure the unbiased representation of a broad range of societal interests in the policy-making process.

A proper conceptual framework of accountability has the merit of avoiding a sterile debate on what constitutes a legitimate act of accountability and what does not. The continued theoretical confusion regarding the meanings and significance of political accountability has constantly prevented more empirically oriented research, such as applying the concept to the real world in a systematic fashion through operationalization and measurement.

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[62] Lakoff, op. cit.
[63] Collier and Mahon, op. cit.
[64] Schedler, op. cit.
[65] Smulovitz and Peruzzotti, op. cit. (2000, 2003); Stark and Bruszt, op. cit.