

Organizing Accountability, Quantification and Criminal Justice in South Africa

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‘Accountability’ is a word infused into the language of contemporary politics, policies and organisational life. Accountability is the capacity and willingness of people who have been given power over other people and hold public responsibilities, to explain and justify their past actions and future decisions to the public. Producing accountability requires both narration and calculation; a recounting of events in story form and a reckoning.

Usually the call is for greater and more expansive forms of accountability, never for less. Various scholars have argued that many institutions worldwide increasingly meet growing pressure to demonstrate accountability by relying on formal quantitative measures and by creating verifiable accounts. Rankings, performance indicators and benchmarking, designed to evaluate performances of individuals and organizations and whole countries, have become so pervasive in local and global governance that various sociological and social anthropological scholars now speak of an ‘audit explosion’. The standard of accountability is criticized for narrowly shifting towards performance as a ‘bottom line vision of accountability’ and because the ratio of narration to calculation used for the production of accountability has declined, at least in terms of authoritativeness.

In this paper, based on 15 months ethnographic fieldwork in South African criminal justice institutions, I explore the process of organizing accountability in the South African National Prosecuting Authority and the South African Police Service. I discuss the ways in which the authority and contestability of account giving and decision making is affected through the increasing use and reliance on new calculative performance management systems.

I show how criminal justice employees constantly move and switch between the various logics and demands of organizational accountability - between accounts as stories, explanations and justifications for conduct on the one hand and accounts as coded, often numerical representations on the other hand. I will argue that the two faces of accountability are interdependent and mediate each other. Observed criminal justice employees are ‘creatures of statue’ and ‘creatures of numbers’ at the same time.

In a second step I will show, however, that criminal justice employees’ interpretative flexibility in their daily interaction with numbers is limited. This limitation is on the one hand one of the main reasons why quantification as a medium of communication is particularly effective in getting communication accepted and producing accepted decisions in the observed organizing processes. On the other hand one of the main reasons why quantification causes tensions, uneasiness and fear, because ‘not everything what counts can be counted’.