Lerner, J.S., & Tetlock, P.E. (1999). Accounting for the effects of accountability.

*Psychological Bulletin, 25*(2), 255-275.

Accountability:

* Education
* Health care
* Civil and criminal justice
* Business
* Politics

Proposed as solutions to

* National debt
* Failing schools
* Climate change

Accountability refers to the implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one’s beliefs, feelings, and actions to others. It also usually implies that people who do not provide a satisfactory justification for their actions will suffer negative consequences.

Accountability is not a unitary phenomenon:

1. Mere presence of another (someone will observe their performance)
2. Identifiability (what they say or do will be linked to them personally)
3. Evaluation (performance will be assessed by another according to some normative ground rules with some implied consequences)
4. Reason-giving (expect that they must give reasons for what they say or do)

**What impact do various kinds of accountability ground rules have on thoughts, feelings, and action?**

* Experimental work has repeatedly shown that expecting to discuss one’s views with an audience whose views are known led participants to strategically shift their attitudes toward that of the audience; even if they produce inefficient decision outcomes, and even when they feel personal involvement in the decisions that need to be made.
* When the views of the audience are completely unknown, simple conformity is not an option. People who do not feel locked into any prior commitment often engage in preemptive self-criticism – thinking in more self-critical, integratively complex ways in which they consider multiple perspectives on the issue and try to anticipate objections that reasonable others might raise to positions they might take.
* The effect of an unknown audience fail to elicit preemptive self-criticism when participants think they can guess the views of their audience.
* Cognitive dissonance theory and impression management theory predict that after people have irrevocably committed themselves to a decision, learning of the need to justify their actions will motivate cognitive effort—but this effort will be directed toward self-justification rather than self-criticism. Because people are not supposed to say one thing and do another, postdecisional accountability should prompt defensive bolstering, focusing mental energy on rationalizing past actions.
* This depends on the perceived expertise of the other or audience and relative importance of the issue, and typical of individuals who score high on dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity
* Outcome accountability should heighten the need for self-justification, increasing the desire to defend past decisions. Process accountability should lead decisions makers to engage in more evenhanded evaluation of alternatives and decrease the need for self-justification
* Outcome accountability produces greater commitment to a prior course of action
* Process accountability may improve accuracy

Synthesis:

Self-critical and effortful thinking is most likely to be activated when decision makers learn prior to forming any opinions that they will be accountable to an audience (a) whose views are unknown, (b) who is interested in accuracy, (c) who is interested in processes rather than specific outcomes, (d) who is reasonably well-informed, and (e) who has a legitimate reason for inquiring into the reasons behind participants’ judgments.

**Under what conditions will accountability attenuate, have no effect on, or amplify cognitive biases?**

Two primary models of how predecisional accountability to an unknown audience might affect cognitive biases

1. The effect of motivational inductions (accountability) on judgment depends on the difficulty of the judgment (MD model)
2. The effect of accountability depends on a complex host of moderators, including the cause of a given bias, the type of accountability, and the decision maker’s knowledge of formal decision rules. (may best fit the evidence).

* Predecisional accountability to an unknown audience will improve judgment to the extent that a given bias results from lack of effort, self-critical awareness of one’s judgment processes, or both.
* When participants expect to justify their judgments, they want to avoid appearing foolish. They prepare themselves by engaging in an effortful and self-critical search for reasons to justify their actions.
* Accountability attenuated bias on tasks to the extent that (a) suboptimal performance resulted from lack of self-critical attention to the judgment process, and (b) improvement required no special training in formal decision rules, only greater attention to the information provided.
* Predecisional accountability to an unknown audience has no effect on bias if, even after increased attention to one’s decision process, no new ways of solving the problem come into awareness.
* No amount of increased effort can compensate for lack of knowledge about how to solve problems that require special training. The only examples of accountability improving judgments requiring formal rules are those where participants received training in the relevant rules.
* A desire to avoid appearing foolish in front of an audience heightens (a) the need to ensure that one’s choice is securely based on reasons and thus (b) the preference for options that are easy to justify.