

A short handbook on accountability abuse ^{1.0}

By Tada Hozumi



A few words before we get started

In sharing this piece of writing with you, I'm reserving the right to correct and/or adjust myself later.

That is to say that nothing in here should be taken as unchangeable canon. It is simple a sketch of my thoughts at a particular time, with the information I have.

Particularly, the subject of accountability abuse is still a new one where a lot of the theory around it needs to be tested, adapted, and refined in real world situations.

At the same time, I hope this short handbook helps you gain a bit more grounding and orientation around the matter and serves in reducing the harm of accountability abuse in our communities.

Who am I?

My name is Tada. I'm a Japanese Canadian somatic (means of the body) healing practitioner that has done a lot of work in the field of racial-cultural trauma.

I'm currently based in the traditional territories of the musqueam, tsleil-waututh, and squamish nations AKA Vancouver BC.

I've arrived at working with the subject of accountability abuse by starting with experimental projects that looked at the relationship between white people and people of color (POC) through the lens of relationship psychotherapy, rather than just intersectional feminism, which I felt was a limiting frame in dealing with interpersonal issues.

One of the major concerns I had at the time was that I noticed white people getting abused by POC that were using social justice language but there was no way to describe the behavior. I also saw that this was a major issue across gender and other identity lines.

Since, I've also been the subject of campaigns that were about cutting me off from my work and community through vague, false, or exaggerated claims of my past behavior.

Why did I write this handbook?

Because of my personal and professional experiences I have grown a deep concern for addressing the kind of abuse that I believe I have experienced.

In my time of studying and thinking about accountability abuse I have seen and heard of people that have lost their businesses, fallen to street homelessness and addiction, and even died from overdose, with

accountability abuse being a major factor in their psychological downturn.

Yet, accountability abuse seems to remain a topic that is sidelined, even within activist spaces. It is often seen as collateral damage, an inconvenience, to important systemic changes to institutionalized racism, misogyny, and so on.

I don't deny that the last few years of internet-driven dissemination of social justice knowledge to have been very important. It has improved some parts of my life in tangible ways. But it has also deeply undermined many parts.

The conversation around a healthy approach to 'social justice' is not nearly perfect and final, especially given so much of this information has gone out into the world through means that are simplistic, intense, and super-fast, such as through tweets and viral blog articles.

As a culture, we have a lot of work to do to course-correct and adjust.

A lot of the conversations around cancel culture is a sign that we need to mature the conversation and include accountability abuse as a central piece of that discussion.

What is accountability abuse?

'Accountability abuse' refers to abuses of power, or negligent uses of power, that happen when we take on policing roles within a community without the appropriate checks and supports for ourselves.

Often it means attacks on individuals and groups through false, distorted, and unsubstantiated claims of harm.

It can also mean a claim is valid but the process for seeking accountability is lacking in accountability, making the claim still problematic.

The core defining characteristic of accountability abuse is not about truth, but about the process of seeking accountability itself.

The reality is that you can have untrue claims that are pursued in a non-abusive way and you can have true claims that are pursued in an abusive way. We will come back to this again later as it is a critical understanding.

It is also important to remember ‘truthfulness and falseness’, as well as ‘abuse and negligence’, are on a continuous spectrum.

Is accountability abuse about stopping cancel culture?

Accountability abuse is definitely connected to the recent cultural conversation around cancel culture.

It is important to recognize though that accountability abuse has a long history. For example, the historical incidents of the Salem witch trials and the lynching of a Emmett Till are both cases of accountability abuse, inflicted by people with dominant power, white people and/or men, onto individuals who were minorities.

A lot of the conversation around cancel culture is really about the new direction of accountability abuse in an era where there has been so much intense work done in a short amount of time to shift power in society towards people who were previously marginalized.

With so much recent interest in social justice, it has created conditions in certain contexts that exempted certain groups of people from being exempt of accountability for their behavior.

This handbook is mostly about addressing this particular new problem.

What are the consequences of accountability abuse?

The consequence of accountability abuse can be as severe as any other form of abuse. In the worst cases, it can even lead to suicidal depression, street homeless, and death. I know a case of each of these.

Personally, I have been lucky to have the resiliency skills, financial resources, and language to understand my experience so that I was able to get through the worst of it, although in reality it will probably not end.

How do you define accountability abuse?

I currently define accountability abuse to be any dynamic where accountability is being pursued in a non-accountable way produces excessive unnecessary harm and is unrelenting even in the face of requests for their to change.

Naturally, there will be a grey area of whether an act is considered severe enough to be called abuse and lands more into the territory of negligence through ignorance. I think what is important to remember though is that non-accountability in matters of accountability need to be scrutinized deeply and there are no reasons for not always aiming to do a better job.

What is very clear to me though is that what defines accountability abuse is ultimately NOT defined by whether a claim of harm is true or false. Rather, what defines accountability abuse is in HOW a claim is being

pursued non-accountability - although truthfulness may impact severity since false claims are almost always problematic.

The above makes common sense because for example: let's say a police officer shoots someone and kills them. The appropriateness of this act isn't whether the person who had been killed was 'guilty' of a crime or was a deviant character, which is the way many people frame the conversation around police brutality in respect to Black people. The real issue, to me, is whether the police officer made choices that were in integrity and fit the circumstances.

Similarly, online conversations about call-out culture too often get into evaluations of whether a claim of harm was justified because it was true or not.

This focus on what is true or false completely misses the point that the process in which the claim is brought needs to be overseen closely if we are in positions to police and pass judgement on what we see as poor behavior in our communities.

This idea that we as members of a community must enact justice in our communities, may cause queasiness for some people. But this is nothing to shy away from. We will inevitably be called to weigh in on matters of harm and it is actually irresponsible as adults to not have thought through this, especially if we have roles of community leadership.

Basically, if we want to end the prison industrial complex and police brutality, we need to be able to model something different at a community level. This is something that probably all people who are proponents of addressing call-out culture agree upon, even though we may disagree on the solutions.

For myself, I find it very important to recognize that many indigenous and elder cultures have had, and still have such alternative approaches that integrate justice, community building, and spirituality together.

Exploring these models at depth is outside of the scope of this mini handbook but you can google a freely watchable film called Hollow Water to start to get a taste of what this may look like.

How do you identify accountability abuse?

While I do have specific criteria I use to vet claims for accountability abuse, I find it useful to start by actually speaking to the psychological state that I think we should be aiming for when we receive a claim.

In general, I believe the best disposition for us to be in when discerning a claim is open and genuinely curious, being comfortable with holding some unknowns.

If we can't access that I think it is important that we take some time and space to reduce our reactivity.

Here is a grounding and orientation sequence that I often use:

- 1) Find a quiet place
- 2) Open up my field of vision, take in the whole space I am in.
- 3) Open up my hearing, listening for near and far sounds.
- 4) Gently touch my hips and legs. Wiggle my toes.
- 5) If its possible, take a gentle breath into my belly.

6) Fall into a short nap, if that is available.

7) If I can't get through the above steps, I wait till I can.

When you practice the above skills enough, you will also be able to use them in real-time.

For example, you're listening to a friend, complaining about another friend's behavior, and instead of getting sucked in completely, you could quickly open up your field of vision to not get too emotionally tangled up with each other.

This might sound like the opposite of being helpful to someone but it often is actually a much better than completely accepting their reality right away. I will talk about this more a bit later, in the context of looking at the cultural issue of 'believing survivors'.

Next, having taken a bit of mental distance from the urgency-laden question of needing to validate or invalidate the truth of the claim itself, we can more accurately assess the claim for its own accountability.

Below is a list of criteria I use in assessing claims.

The basic principle behind my assessment process is: the less checks-and-balances there is in how a claim is brought forth, the more risk there is that the claim is abusive or negligent.

Please note, the presence of any one of these elements could make a claim of harm benefit the categorization of accountability abuse, but in the end, assessment is an art, not just a science.

1. Anonymity

Anonymity is a big issue in validating a claim of harm since it essentially gives no way for the accused to respond to the claim.

While anonymity makes sense when people are seeking merely support and resources for themselves, such as shelter, finances, and counseling, it is extremely risky for it to stand when there is consequence is being sought.

Anonymity may still be permissible in some circumstances if there are other factors that majorly back up a claim, but in general almost any claim that is anonymous should probably considered not immediately actionable on its own in terms of seeking consequence - a deeper investigation would be needed.

2. Vagueness

Vagueness is another issue in validating a claim of harm since it also makes it difficult for the accused to respond to the claim.

“X is racist” or “Y crossed a boundary” are examples of vague claims that are full of room for interpretation.

Claims such as “Z made me feel violated”, also fall under the umbrella of vague claims as they are solely or heavily based on internal emotional experiences, even though the feelings they express may be true.

It is important to remember that there is a difference between holding space for someone’s emotional expression in a supportive way and taking their testimony as truth to be acted upon.

Claims are more accountable if they address specific incidents, and even more so if they are backed up by evidence.

3. Confidentiality

Confidentiality means that the details of the claim are asked to be withheld from the accused.

This makes it very difficult for the accused to respond to the claim, which of course makes the claim less accountable. More investigation would be required to act upon such a claim.

4. Intention

How a claimant is showing up is extremely important.

If a claimant's goal is to have the accused respond in a reconciliatory process, this has innate accountability built in, which makes it a much safer claim to engage with, even if other aspects of it are not as solid e.g. a lack of evidence.

If the claimant's goal is that the accused's life is to be negatively affected in any way, the risk goes up and the accountability measures built in to the claim will begin to matter much more deeply.

For example: if someone wanted a confidential, vague, and anonymous claim to have significant impact on someone, such their removal them from a job, you can probably immediately classify that as likely abuse and negligence at minimum.

On the other hand, if someone was seeking accountability for an alleged harassment incident, which they have memory loss around and have no

evidence for, a request for a healing circle or reconciliation process may be a much more appropriate ask that can cover for the lack of checks-and-balances in the claim itself.

What about ‘believing survivors’?

To put it simple, there has been too long a conflation between believing survivors and taking them seriously in a responsible way.

Automatically believing anyone claiming harm as a survivor or as a person of marginalized identity, creates privileged classes that are immune to accountability in making claims of harmful behavior or character.

Something that is critical to understand here is that manipulative interpersonal patterns such as narcissism love to exploit points of non-accountability in a system. That is to say, if you establish a standard of believing survivors by virtue of their claim alone, without any checks and balances, people with manipulative tendencies will abuse that vulnerability to impunity.

While this may sound like a problematic and contradictory statement at first, it is shown that for example, throughout history white women have routinely lied and project claims of harm on to Black men, causing massive amounts of damage, as seen in cases like the lynching of Emmett Till or the 2020 Amy Cooper incident in Central Park.

This pattern is widespread because white women are a privileged class in relation to Black men when it comes to the subject of claiming harm.

So when we say that we must believe survivors, we have to understand that this ‘belief’ has always existed for specific dynamics and it has been chronically abused.

Moreover, manipulative behaviors are compulsive. That is to say that, if you give people with narcissistic patterns a weakness they may exploit to gain advantage in relationship, they will do it over and over again, heavily distorting reality.

While this is no perfect science, my sense is that 50% or more of claims of harmful behavior and character about fellow community members in activist communities are probably fabricated or deeply distorted. This is natural because we have created an environment that fosters chronic compulsive accountability abuse or at least negligence.

This is how the math of the above may work out:

Let’s say you have 10 people who are making a claim of harm. Only 1 out of 10 of them has heavily manipulative behaviors. That 1 person will compulsively continue to exploit the system and flood it with false and distorted claims, deeply distorting the overall field.

Another related issue is that people with these kinds of manipulative patterns tend to network with each other and share information through social media groups and various back channels. They also usually have a group of people that are bonded to them in narcissist-codependent type dynamics. Each one of these codependent people are also potentially the next narcissistic abuser.

What should I do if I am being subject to accountability abuse?

Right now, is a difficult time because common knowledge about accountability is low and there is such massive pressure still for us to comply if people who claim to be abuse survivors and/or have marginalized identities say that we have done harm or are harmful people.

What is probably most important is for you to find some kind of therapist or counsellor that can work with you. Particularly, the psychological damage that accountability abuse will be an in-depth process to heal and outside of the capacity of short handbook like this one.

You might though share this handbook with the people around you so you can be more sure that they understand what you are going through.

You can also practice the grounding and orientation sequence I shared with you earlier as a way to develop resilience skills for what will likely be a difficult time.

What should I do if I see someone being subject to accountability abuse?

Being a bystander is a VERY important role in the accountability abuse dynamic since it is inherently a mob dynamic that festers when people are complicit through silence.

Yes, if you stand up for others, you risk becoming a target. I've been there. But taking these risks is what makes our communities safer places to be in the end.

In my opinion, every person has the responsibility to take part in actions that identify and mitigate accountability abuse.

What if I receive a claim of harm as a community leader and I don't know if it is accountability abuse?

If you are a community leader, the subject of accountability abuse is a very important one to address.

This is because whatever decisions you make can greatly amplify the harms of accountability abuse and missteps in managing claims of harm can massively hurt both the claimant and the accused.

Up till now, situations where community leaders are asked to weigh in on claims has been mostly dealt with either not believing the claimants at all or believing the claimant every time.

Needless to say both of these models are deeply problematic and ripe for abuse.

Community leaders need to learn to take their time in discerning claims.

A great place to start would be assessing the criteria already mentioned above of: anonymity, vagueness, confidentiality, and intention.

Here are some examples of questions you may ask to discern claims of harm:

“May I ask the accused about these details and give them your name?”

“Can you be specific about an incident that shows you that what you says is true about this person's behavior or character?”

“Do you have the explicit consent of the person you claim the accused has harmed, or has the person you claim has been harmed made a public statement I can look at?”

“What would you like me to do with this information?”

If someone is hostile to the above questions you should probably immediately put up some red flags and maybe even pursue accountability in a possible case of accountability abuse.

Finally, my assertion is that community leader need to be ready to be held accountable to high standards. People’s lives are at stake.

What should I do if I am a community leader and I confirm a case of accountability abuse?

I think this is where different people and organizations may have different tolerances for their next steps.

Obviously, at the minimum, the claimant should be told their claim is not actionable and potentially even abusive.

Personally, I hold a higher tolerance for taking measures that prevent further harm. This means I would likely:

- Clearly inform the claimant that they are suspected of accountability abuse
- Contact the accused so they also may respond and know what is happening

While there may be different legal situations that impact our ability to act, my general stance is that, as a community leader, failure to act from a place of fear is not excusable.

What are the causes of accountability abuse?

I understand that in this handbook I've talked a lot about what accountability abuse is and how to reduce the harm of it.

Discussing the origins of accountability abuse open up to a much longer and deeper conversation that is not just about harm reduction but about healing very underlying patterns.

For myself, I understand accountability abuse as a manifestation of our lack or loss of capacity in micro-policing communities. If you understand that at some point, more or less, all of our ancestors lived in smaller communities that needed to self-govern, you see that the ability to engage in justice and not simply dispose of community members at whim was critical.

The policing complex we see now is a result of these smaller communities, through a movement of expansionist imperialism, losing the ability to govern themselves to various central governments that have taken over them.

So what we see now is that for a VERY long time, wisdom traditions about how to self-govern has been lost.

Because of this, the longer conversation around accountability abuse is actually about how to resuscitate these elder knowledges and reintegrate them as useful practice into a 21st century sociopolitical landscape.

What next?

Please feel free to share this book with people in your community. Read it together. Discuss it.

How can I support this project?

Other than sharing this book with peers and discussing its contents, you're also welcome to make a donation at my website here: <https://selfishactivist.com/support-my-work/>

Thank you

Thank you to all of my friends, colleagues, and clients that have stuck with me through the worst of it. It's been because of you that I have survived till this point and been able to keep in tact.

I won't name you because I wouldn't want to put you in harms way from critics.

I also want to send big gratitude to the elders and ancestors that I haven't met in flesh but have supported me by reminding me that this is all a part of a process of dreaming into a better future - I hope to do justice to your wisdom.

And finally, blessings to you and yours for taking on this subject of accountability abuse that is at the very core of our question of how we may live well together on this earth.