

A young girl with dark hair is blowing bubbles. The bubbles are in focus, appearing to float over her face and hair. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

# **The little book on accountability abuse**

**By Tada Hozumi**

## **Version 0.5 (beta)**

(the book maybe updated freely and you are welcome to download new versions)

# **A few words before we dive in**

In sharing this piece of writing with you, I know that I might correct and/or adjust some of my thoughts later.

That is to say that nothing in here should be taken as unchangeable canon. It is simply 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 spreading in many subcultural communities.

# Getting Started

# About me

My name is Tada. I'm a Japanese Canadian somatic 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 through some experimental projects I started in 2017 that looked at the relationship between white people and people of color (POC) through the lens of relationship psychotherapy, rather than just mainstream intersectional feminism, which I felt was a limiting frame for dealing with interpersonal issues.

One of the major concerns I had at the time was that I noticed white people were getting abused by POC using social justice language but there was no way to describe or diagnose the behavior accurately and separate it from reasonable asks in relationship. I also saw that this phenomenon was also a major issue across gender and other identity lines.

In fact, people who were willing to accept accountability abuse as just behavior towards themselves would also be most likely to commit it towards others.

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.

(You can read about the above experience in a sharing piece on my blog but I'm intentionally not linking it here as the purpose of this handbook isn't to spread information on that specific matter. )

As a result of experiencing these dynamics in my own life, I've come to a place of no longer considering myself 'left', 'woke', 'progressive', 'social justice advocate', 'advocate', and so on.

I see myself as someone walking the path of being in relationship with the kin I share this experience of life, without bypassing or fixating on what people call 'systemic oppression'.

## **Why I wrote this book**

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 that are devoted to being about regenerating healthier cultures. It is often seen as collateral damage, a small inconvenient bump along the way to freedom from racism, misogyny, and so on.

To be sure, I don't deny that the last few years of internet-driven dissemination of social justice knowledge to have been very important to

our societal 'evolution'. It has improved some parts of my life in tangible ways. But it has also deeply undermined many parts.

The reality is that the conversation around a healthy approach to change is not nearly perfect and final, especially given so much of this information has gone out into the world through means that are intended to deliver simplistic and intense experiences at hyper-speed, such as tweet-able memes and snappy viral blog articles made out of listicles.

As a culture, we have a lot of work to do to course-correct and adjust from the fall-out of such impactful information proliferating in such an ungrounded way.

To me, a lot of the recent conversations around cancel culture is a sign that we need to regroup and mature the conversation, which means including accountability abuse as a central piece of the discussion.

So let's begin this exploration by first getting down to the basics by defining accountability abuse and looking at its consequences.

# **Accountability Abuse Basics**



# Defining accountability abuse

**‘Accountability abuse’ is an abuse of power pattern that happens when we take on policing roles within a community without the appropriate checks-and-balances and supports for ourselves.**

Or simply put, it is when accountability is pursued in a non-accountable way.

The most common forms of accountability abuse are attacks on individuals and groups through false, distorted, and unsubstantiated claims of harm, whether it is through reports of harm made privately to organizations, or public online call-outs that have no substantial backing.

Accountability abuse can also take place even when a claim is valid but the process for pursuing consequences for an alleged harm is itself lacking in structural accountability.

**Following, the core defining characteristic of accountability abuse is not about truthfulness, but about process.**

Too often, our (online) conversations about call-out culture get into distracting discussion of whether a call-out was justified because it was true or not. This is an entirely wrong way to approach the issue and it becomes obvious if we look at how the same logic would play out in our government-run justice systems.

For example: let’s say a police officer shoots someone and kills them. The appropriateness of this shooting shouldn’t hinge on whether the person who had been killed was ‘guilty’ of a crime or was a deviant character. The most important evaluation to be made is whether the

police officer made choices that were in integrity and appropriate to the circumstances.

Similarly, if we are in positions in our communities, to police and pass judgement on what we see as poor behavior, we need to oversee each other's decisions carefully, without getting pulled into hyper-focused discussions that are about 'what happened', or the alleged character of the accused, to the detriment of the process's integrity.

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 irresponsible as adults to not have thought through this, especially if we have volunteered ourselves to be in 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.

In my own further explorations around this subject, I find it very important to recognize that many indigenous and elder cultures have had, and still have, such alternative approaches that integrate governance, community building, and spirituality together.

Exploring these models at depth is outside of the scope of this short handbook but you can watch a freely accessible film called [Hollow Water](#) to start to get a taste of what this may look like.

Also, [Restorative Circles](#), [Family Constellations](#), and [Process-Oriented Psychology](#), are all modern group work forms that touch on these subjects with roots in indigenous-animist cultures.

You may also read my essay: “Why justice needs ritual: on the sacred origins of harm”.

## **The consequences of accountability abuse**

Currently, there is a lack of understanding for how severe the consequences of accountability abuse can be.

The reality is that the accountability abuse can have as much impact on a person's life as any other form of abuse. It can lead to:

- Loss of psychological well-being
- Isolation from peers
- Loss of housing
- Loss of employment and/or income
- PTSD and complex PTSD

In the worst cases, accountability can 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 and remain a factor for the rest of my personal and professional life.

A big part of mitigating accountability abuse is to get people to understand how real the damage is and how critical it is to address it for our various communities to function.

This brings us to our next subject: the relationship between accountability abuse and 'cancel culture'.

# **Accountability Abuse and 'Cancel Culture'**

# **The historical origins of accountability abuse**

Accountability abuse is definitely connected to recent cultural conversations around ‘cancel culture’.

It is important to recognize though that accountability abuse has a long history that precedes our time and to understand it’s true origins though we need to go back, even very far, in time.

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. Accountability abuse is a manifestation of this lack or loss of capacity in micro-policing our own smaller communities.

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

# Accountability abuse in the 'cancel culture' era

Like I said above already, accountability abuse has a long tradition.

In fact, the historical incidents of the Salem witch trials and the lynching of a Black boy named Emmett Till are both cases of accountability abuse, inflicted by mobs of people with dominant power, white people and/or men, onto individuals who had less power.

A lot of the conversation around cancel culture, to me, is really just 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 - without developing a corresponding understanding of how to wield and check that power well.

This has created a dynamic in many social justice communities where claiming a marginalized identity allows you to access a privileged class, with no checks-and-balances for its behavior.

This dynamic is no where more evident in how the idea of 'Believing Survivors' has spread as common acceptable practice in activist/leftist/progressive communities.

## The problem with 'Believing Survivors'

When I speak of 'Believing Survivors' here, I do not just refer to the mass movement advocating for defaulting to believing alleged sexual assault claims, but also the general trend in social justice communities to automatically affirm the subjective experience of a person that claims

harm by any kind of oppression, as a remedy to the historic neglect that marginalized people have been faced with when claiming their experience.

For example, in many activist communities, if a non-white person says someone is a racist, this becomes truth without any need of qualifying that statement. Similarly, if a non cis-man claims they 'felt' like they were threatened by the presence of a man, that internal experience is validated as fact.

The problem with this is that automatically believing anyone claiming harm as a survivor or as a person of marginalized identity, creates privileged groups that are immune to accountability in making claims of harmful behavior or character.

In this setup, people who are alleged victims of harm or oppression are perceived to be perfect human beings not capable of exploiting power. The common sense truth reveals something opposite. Women, Black people, sexual assault survivors, disabled people, ... no identifiable group is free from malignant personality patterns.

It is critical to understand here that manipulative interpersonal patterns such as narcissism will always move to exploit any points of non-accountability in a system. Following, 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.

## **The prevalence of accountability abuse**

In understanding how much malignant human patterns can impact our reality, it is important to understand that the manipulative behaviors I discuss above are compulsive.

That is to say that, if you give people with manipulative patterns a kind a weakness they may exploit to gain advantage in relationship, they will do it over and over again, heavily distorting reality and the general trustability when it comes to claims of harm.

While this is not perfect science and just my subjective experience, over the years, I would say 50% or more of claims of harmful behavior and character about fellow community members in activist communities that I have heard of I would say are based on fabricated or distorted claims, especially if they are on-line. In my personal and professional life, I’ve actually found it rarer to receive a claim of harm about someone that is laid out in a way that is substantial and has checks-and-balances. This is natural because we have created an environment that fosters chronic compulsive accountability abuse or at least negligence.

This is how the above math 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 that enable them. Each one of these people with codependent patterns are also potentially the next central source of collective abuse.

It is important to understand that the recent cultural conversation around cancel culture is essentially about the normalization of these dynamics within activist communities.

In order to address this normalization, the first step that needs to be taken is for individuals to develop more skills to be able to identify accountability abuse as it is happening.

## **My stance on cancel culture**

At present, I don't see myself as being on either side of the broad strokes of the cancel culture conversation although by default I am against the normalization of poor practices in activist communities as a kind of collateral damage.

My belief is that rigorous practices of accountability, that present alternate strategies to handle the true complexity of interpersonal conflict and violence are necessary to undoing a lot of the injustices of the dominant justice system. I understand prevention of accountability abuse to be necessary to this rigorous endeavor.

I also do not conflate accountability abuse with someone experiencing pain because accountability is being sought. It is natural for there to be consequences when someone shows themselves to not have the capacity to hold the power and responsibility they hold in community.

Ultimately, I think mainstream conversations around cancel culture highlights the problem but the answers require us to dig deeper and bigger questions about fostering healthier communities, hopefully led by our elder ways.

# **Identifying Accountability Abuse**

I believe identifying accountability abuse to be both an art and science. There is a lot of signs that can make it clear it is happening and other times it requires more careful intuitive sensing without committing to a view.

Because of this, something that is very important to me is first talking about the the psychological state that I think we should be aiming for when we receive a claim of harm.

## **Grounding and Orienting**

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 to the story 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 immediately accepting their reality, especially if: there is no evidence, the claims are lacking in specific details, and/or there is a lot of emotional interpretation of events in them.

## **Criteria for assessing accountability abuse**

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.

The presence of anyone of these elements could make a claim of harm benefit the categorization of accountability abuse, but in the end, like I already said, assessment is both art and science.

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## **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 support and resources for themselves, such as shelter, finances, and counseling, it is extremely risky for it to stand when there are consequences 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 be 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 to the person feeling them.

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. Interpretation**

Interpretation refers to how claimants are interpreting reality based on their internal experience.

For example take a reporting such as: "X reached across the table and touched my hand. I felt extremely uncomfortable at the time but felt frozen to say anything. It seems like another sexually predatory pattern of theirs."

If you look at this example you see that the claimant is describing their internal experience of their actions as the justification of their escalated assessment of X's behavior as predatory. On its own, this testimony is actually simply a documentation of someone being triggered by a relatively small act of non-consent that in reality could have had its own context.



I consider these kinds of internal descriptions of experiences incredibly vulnerable as they may highly manipulate the recipient of the claim.

By nature, when humans see the description of an emotion, we tend to recreate that within our bodies and our perception becomes easily. When this happens, information will tend to be rerouted through our nervous system in a way that makes it very difficult for us to have a sober interpretation of actual events.

The presence of a interpretation in claims should be taken as a serious cue for accountability abuse, or at least negligence, as it shows the claimant has significant trouble separating experience from reality.

This may further signify conscious or unconscious patterns of weaponizing victimhood, especially vagueness.

## **5. Intention**

How a claimant is showing up is extremely important.

If a claimant's goal is to have the accused respond in a reconciliatory or reparatory 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 without a way to defend themselves, the risk goes up considerably 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 often immediately classify that as negligence at minimum and abuse at worst.

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, without pre-determining victim and perpetrator roles, may be a much more appropriate ask that can cover for the lack of checks-and-balances in the claim itself.

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Having laid out the above criteria for discerning accountability abuse, please remember that this is not meant to be canonical but rather a useful first step.

Recognition of accountability abuse is new and working with it will be a process of trial and error where our collective road map will need to be redrawn many times.

That said, I hope this section has helped you get a more grounded and oriented sense of how to identify accountability abuse.

Next, I'd like to discuss some preliminary steps of how we may respond to accountability abuse when we see it happening.

# **Responding to Accountability Abuse**

I think the most important piece in responding to accountability abuse is what to do about the powerful emotions it can bring up.

Accountability abuse has an innately vague nature that weaponizes our discomfort with what is unknown. Because of this, it has a special way of targeting our shame and fear around our past traumas, including intergeneration and ancestral traumas. This is difficult for us to deal with even when we recognize that triggering is happening on an intellectual level.

To deal with this issue, I invite you again to repeat the grounding and orientation exercise introduced in the last chapter.

Once you've done that, you can remind yourself that accountability abuse is not about whether the claim of harmful behavior or character is true but about the process of seeking accountability itself.

Next, let's take a look at what it's like to respond to accountability abuse from the various positions you might be in.

## **If you realize you are the subject of accountability abuse**

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

Something that is important to get clear about in this situation is to get internally secure with the assertion that accountability abuse is happening. There is an important process to gaining this clarity, because

at first, you might not have enough evidence to clearly determine that abuse is happening. What I generally suggest is to go through the above criteria I mentioned and request them to be addressed in how things are being handled by asking for names, receipts, details, and so on.

If there is a denying or even contemptuous response to that request, you may start to establish accountability incompetence, negligence or even abuse.

In the midst of this, I also highly recommend that you find some kind of therapist or counsellor that can work with you. Particularly, the psychological damage that accountability abuse can cause will be an in-depth process to heal that is outside of the capacity of a short handbook like this one.

Finally, you might also share this book and other supportive texts with the people around you so you can be more sure they understand what you are going through.

Above all, hold on, it s a rough ride.

## **If you see someone may be 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 through enabling.

I believe, at the very least, we are responsible for not enabling abuse by spreading of acting upon potentially negligent or abusive claims.

You may also decide to stand up and speak out against accountability abuse if you conclude that its happening. Of course this will put you under the risk of becoming a target. I've been definitely been there myself. But I do believe that taking these risks is what makes our communities safer places to be in the end.

In the end, I believe, every person in community has the responsibility to take part in actions that identify and mitigate accountability abuse to the best of their ability and capacity.

## **If you are a community leader and you receive a claim of harm about someone**

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. 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 the binary of 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.

As a community leader, discerning and managing claims of harm is an essential skill you are accountable for developing at a high standard.

I believe a great place to start developing this skill would be using the assessment criteria already mentioned above of: anonymity, vagueness, confidentiality, and intention.

Following, 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 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 you might be engaging in or enabling accountability abuse**

With any kind of abuse, it is important to be accountable to one’s actions. As a standard you may apologize to anyone who you’ve affected, including those who may have received a problematic claim of harm through you.

I also think there would be cases that financial reparations and other material measures are appropriate and necessary depending on how you have affected parties.

**In Closing**



## **Next steps**

I highly encourage you to share this book with the people in your community. Like I already said, nothing in this book is meant to be canon.

A lot of what I present here has to be tested and refined in the real world. We are just at the beginning of dealing with this subject.

## **Supporting my work**

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

## **Finally, thank you**

Thank you to all of my friends, colleagues, and clients that have stuck with me through the worst of it. I won't name you because I wouldn't want to put you in harms way from critics.

It's been because of you that I have survived till this point and been able to put out this short handbook that I will hopefully reduce future harm.

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.