Book Reviews

I hope that these reviews will be of interest. Please send any comments, replies, ideas for book reviews, and information about books which may interest SPAR readers to the following address:

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Accountability in Social Research: Issues and Debates
Norma R.A. Romm
2001, 326 pp. $45, £31.50 (cloth)
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Norma Romm’s recent addition to her publications on research methodology, her ground-breaking book, entitled Accountability in Social Research: Issues and Debates, is an extremely serious work which explores various arguments on what it might mean to practice social research in an accountable way. She begins her presentation by taking the reader on a journey across different theoretical positions and their methodological implications, and she draws these together to explain the different criteria that might be employed to define researcher accountability. While the journey is challenging, it offers a scenic experience indeed, as the text weaves through landscapes full of features and textures that present the reader with a great deal to learn.

Having offered an introduction on the subject of accountability (in terms of ongoing debates about the practice of science) in Chapter 1, Romm organizes Chapter 2 as an elucidation and extrapolation of the variety of arguments positioned in relation to one another. She begins with an elucidation of positivism and concentrates on accountability in terms of positivist argumentation. Researcher

1 Her other main publications on theory and methodology include The Methodologies of Positivism and Marxism: People’s Education in Theoretical Perspective (with V. I. McKay) and Diversity Management (with R. L. Flood).
accountability is defined here in terms of striving to adhere to the “proper” practice of science. Researchers are seen to be accountable to both the scientific community and the wider community, and as fulfilling this accountability by adhering to scientific protocol.

She then discusses a so-called nonfoundationalist position (similar to Popperian argumentation), which defines researcher accountability in terms of the responsibility to practice science in a way that maximizes the chances of discovering the truth about the matters under investigation. Next she elucidates the scientific realist position, which would define researcher accountability as similarly (but through a different route) exploring possibilities for scientists to advance knowledge of reality in the midst of uncertainty. This is followed by her exploration of the interpretivist view, which defines accountability as linked to social scientists’ efforts to develop plausible accounts of the motivating meanings that constitute social existence. An elucidation of critical theory is given next, and here Romm shows that accountability is linked to the emphasis given to subjecting the values that guide an inquiry to rational discursive examination. Thereafter, she explores what she calls antifoundationalist feminism. This, she says, is an argument that defines researchers’ accountabilities as linked to their way of developing social relationships in which heterogeneity can be instantiated.

She also refers briefly in Chapter 2 to what she calls discursively oriented constructivism, in which, as she notes, the accountability of social inquirers is assessed in discourse as social activity. The focus is on the value of discursive exchange between ways of constructing and working with information and not in trying to reconcile positions through an appeal to either science or reason as traditionally understood.

In Chapter 3, Romm extends her line of argumentation to ways in which accountability can be understood within a constructivist position by developing what she calls a trusting constructivist position. She devotes this chapter to explaining what a constructivist approach, more specifically, a trusting constructivist approach, would entail. According to her, trusting constructivism focuses on the cultivation of trust through processes of social discourse. And as far as the “product” of the research is concerned, its status is seen to derive from the discursive possibilities it serves to set up. Trust, for Romm, should not be defined in terms of people trying to account for themselves as responding to the “evidence” of reality but rather in terms of their sensitivity to a range of arguments and choices involved in coconstructing visions with others. This is a matter of people being prepared to create trust on grounds other than appealing to some kind of access to the “truth.”

Having set out the various positions that might be employed for assessing the practice of accountability, Romm develops a sophisticated framework for considering research examples. She then, in Chapters 4–7, applies this to her examination of various research positions on accountability through an investigation of four examples derived from research projects from different parts of the globe.