



**Accountability and Hybridity: Understanding Mixed
Accountability Regimes under the New Forms of Welfare
Governance**

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Abstract

Hybridity has become a central characteristic of accountability in current public governance, particularly in the realm of social services. Contemporary service delivery systems are increasingly defined by the mixing and layering of accountability regimes with actors (both public and private) operating in multiple, overlapping, and at times conflicting accountability relations. The symposium aims to advance our understanding of this still under-research area by theorizing and empirically investigating hybrid arrangements of accountability. In this introductory article, we suggest a definition for what hybridity means in the context of accountability and explore the origins and development of hybrid accountability in current welfare institutions. We then present the contribution of the symposium papers against the background of the existing scholarly debate. We conclude by reflecting on the challenges of studying hybrid accountability and suggesting future lines of research in this field.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, we have witnessed the radical reform of post-war welfare states, particularly the ways they are organised and managed (Brodkin, 2011; Mattei, 2009). As part of wider administrative reform programmes, often referred to as “New Public Management” (NPM) (Hood, 1991) and based on the idea that governments should “steer rather than row” (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), quasi-market arrangements have become embedded in welfare institutions (Le Grand, 2009). The reasons for these reforms include ideological preferences for smaller government, fiscal pressures to lower the costs of the welfare state, decades-long criticism of welfare bureaucracies as inefficient and paternalistic and attempts to promote social innovation and entrepreneurship. But regardless of motivation, these reforms have been a fertile ground for the proliferation of market and, at times, network forms of welfare governance and the rise of the regulatory state *inside* the welfare state (Gilbert, 2013; Levi-Faur, 2014; Benish et al., 2017).

In terms of public accountability, the focus of this symposium, the introduction of quasi-markets and network-based methods of welfare governance has challenged the conventional assumptions

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3 and doctrines of hierarchical accountability structures. While traditional concerns about *who* is
4 accountable *to whom* and *how* remain firmly established in the public administration scholarship,
5 there is an ongoing scholarly debate on whether public accountability has increased or been eroded
6 (see, e.g., Lodge and Stirton, 2010; Haque, 2001). However, these “accountability deficit” debates
7 often overlook the fact that the new structures of service delivery offer a range of “new” market
8 and social types of accountability, while “old” political, legal and professional mechanisms often
9 remain in place (see, e.g., Mulgan, 2003; Jantz et. al., 2018). Thus, current institutional
10 arrangements are increasingly defined by the mixing and layering of accountability regimes --
11 leading to *hybrid* structures of accountability (Scott, 2000; Benish 2014; Considine and Afzal,
12 2011).

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22 In this symposium, we aim to advance the scholarly understanding of these hybrid forms of
23 accountability. Hybrid accountability arrangements are, of course, not new (Mulgan, 2003, 2006),
24 particularly in the realm of welfare services (Clarke and Newman, 1997). But current welfare
25 governance is conducted in an even more complex environment in which multiple actors – both
26 public and private – operate in overlapping, fluid and at times conflicting accountability regimes
27 (Romzek, 2014). Account-giving is no longer a “settled situation” in which accountability
28 requirements and their meaning are clear and uncontroversial (Christensen and Lægreid, 2017).
29 Although scholars have started to refine existing typologies to account for this complexity (e.g.,
30 Behn, 2001; Mair et al., 2015), there is still much to learn about the multiplicity of hybrid
31 accountability arrangements, their dynamics and their implications for public services.
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41 In order to introduce this symposium and to contribute to the theorising on hybrid accountability,
42 we start this introductory article by defining what hybridity means in the context of accountability.
43 In the second section, we explore the origins and development of hybrid accountability to
44 contextualise historically the theorising advanced in this symposium. We then present the gist of
45 the symposium papers, setting out their key research questions and discussing their main findings
46 and arguments against the backdrop of the existing scholarly debate. We conclude by reflecting
47 on the challenges of studying hybrid accountability and pointing to possible future lines of research
48 in this field.
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Defining Hybrid Accountability

Until recently, public administration literature under-theorised the concept of hybridity, but recent research on hybrid organisations has started to develop this concept (Skelcher and Smith, 2015). According to this literature, hybridity is created when two or more institutional logics or arrangements are integrated in different patterns of mixing (e.g., Battilana and Dorado, 2010). As such, hybridity exists between and across the boundaries of traditional conceptual divides, such as state, market and civil society. It involves assembling different forms of institutional features across sectoral boundaries and combining different governance mechanisms (Seibel, 2015).

The concept of accountability is a much more widely used concept in public administration, although it is also widely debated (Mulgan 2003; Bovens, 2006). Accountability relations may form in various contexts, and they may rely on different values and mechanisms, but, in general, “accountability” refers to providing an account of one’s activities. At its core, it rests on agency relationships, in which one or more person (the principals) engages another person or persons (the agents) to perform activities on his or her behalf. Scholars point to the multiple types of accountability found in current public administrations (see, e.g., Behn, 2001; Hupe and Hill, 2007; Lægreid, 2014). In one of the most accepted classifications, Mark Bovens (2006) distinguishes five distinct types of accountability: *political accountability* by which voters delegate sovereignty to elected representatives who, in turn, place authority in the hands of high-level bureaucrats; *legal accountability* to the courts; *administrative accountability* encompassing a wide range of auditing mechanisms within public sector institutions; *professional accountability* in which professionals account for their behaviour and expertise to their peers; and *social accountability* which denotes the growing number of horizontal answerability levers by which clients, citizens and interest groups attempt to bypass traditional command chains and hierarchies to more directly provide public servants with feedback and hold them responsible for perceived failures (Mattei, 2016).

Through the trends of managerialism, contractualisation and marketisation, NPM reforms have introduced new forms of market-type accountabilities into the public sector, emphasising results, efficiency and responsiveness to customers (Hodge and Coghill, 2007). Mimicking private sector managements, they emphasise, for instance, the *managerial accountability* of managers and their units for their performance to the actors who have delegated authority to them (Mattei, 2009).

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3 Likewise, competition and choice-based arrangements have been introduced, allowing service
4 users to “punish” providers by exiting, thereby increasing the need for *market accountability* to
5 service users (Mulgan 2003; West et al., 2011).
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10 In the effort to provide a systematic understanding of the “grammar of accountability”, Mashaw
11 (2006) suggests grouping these various accountability types into three regimes: public, market and
12 social. According to Mashaw, each regime operates with a distinctive set of goals and values and
13 uses distinctive accountability mechanisms. *Public accountability regimes* are generally based on
14 the authoritative and hierarchal logic of the state. They include the systems of political, legal and
15 administrative accountability in public governance. The organising principle of these
16 accountability regimes is holding public actors to citizens’ democratic will by limiting their
17 discretion and institutionalising legality and rule of law. *Market accountability regimes* are based
18 on the logic of competitive markets and the managerial logic of corporate governance. They are
19 meant to hold firms’ managers and workers to the ultimate goal of maximising shareholders’
20 profits whilst giving managers the prerogative to manage the corporation effectively. In product
21 markets, these accountability systems are based on the notion of “consumer sovereignty”, i.e., the
22 power of consumers to hold producers to account for the quality and price of their product and for
23 their ability to meet consumers’ preferences or wants (Lodge and Stirton, 2010). *Social*
24 *accountability regimes* replicate the logic of the civil society of communities and cultures. They
25 are created within various social networks – such as the family, professions or voluntary
26 organisations. The content of accountability is created by the members of the group; groups are
27 usually informal, and accountability is enforced through social pressure and reciprocal obligations
28 among the members.
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45 Coming back to the notion of hybridity, we define hybrid accountability as the integration of
46 accountability arrangements between and across public, market and social accountability regimes.
47 Hybrid forms of accountability layer and mix actors, logics, norms and mechanisms from public,
48 market and social accountability regimes by applying two or more of these differing regimes to
49 the same situation at once. In the following section, we analyse the different sources of and paths
50 to hybridisation, pointing to different types and dynamics of blending and explaining the
51 challenges of understanding such hybrid arrangements.
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Origins of Hybridity and its Dynamics

An important part of understanding hybrid forms of accountability is to comprehend how they emerge and are constructed and developed over time. There are several key sources of hybrid accountability in contemporary service delivery systems. The first is the integration of market-like arrangements *within* public sector agencies. This is done, for example, by initiating competition between public units or by requiring public sector agencies and civil servants to adhere to performance standards. As a result, public servants, who are wired according to the bureau-legal and the professional logics of post-war welfare bureaucracies, are now also subject to market and managerial types of accountability.

A second source of hybridity is the significant entrance of private – for-profit and non-profit – entities into the arena of delivering publicly-funded social services through contracting out and other forms of public-private partnerships (Dean, 2015; Greve, 2011). The government not only gains access to the efficiency, innovation or financing capacity of non-governmental actors, but it also buys into the accountability norms and mechanisms these actors bring with them because of their legal structure and their methods of self-regulation. Thus, the plurality of welfare provision brings in additional market and civil society logics and cultures of account-giving and adds layers of accountability relations (e.g., to executive boards and shareholders).

A third source of hybridity is the emergence of collaborative forms of governance in designing and delivering policy (e.g., Kenis and Provan, 2009; Lahat and Sher-Hadar 2019). This is done, for example, through the use of collaborative public-private policy networks in the health care and social sectors (Saz-Carranza et al., 2016). The typical reason for forming a network is to address a complex problem (such as poverty, homelessness or chronic health problems) when no one organisation possesses the required knowledge and tools to solve it. These models of governance, often developed alongside and sometimes as a response to the shortcomings of NPM, integrate social accountability measures and their cooperative logic into the governance of social services (Phillips and Smith, 2011).

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3 A fourth source of hybridity is the expansion of regulated welfare markets, perhaps best illustrated
4 by the ongoing commercialisation of old-age pensions (Leisering, 2012). Following the worldwide
5 promulgation of pension reform programs based on the 1994 World Bank report, private pensions,
6 which played only a marginal role in the past, have become part of the institutionalised governance
7 of old-age protection (Mabbett, 2011). In these markets, the pension funds adhere to the principles
8 of the market, competing for paying clients; but they are also increasingly subject to consumer and
9 social regulation and must meet requirements based on norms of fairness and social justice (Benish
10 et al., 2017).
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18 A fifth source of hybridity is the proliferation of regulatory bodies – at the supranational, national
19 and local levels – to which social service providers need to account. Paradoxically, as Levi-Faur
20 (2005) has pointed out, the rise of neoliberal reforms has led to regulatory growth, including in the
21 social arena (Levi-Faur, 2014). Consider, for example, the growth of regulation inside government
22 (Hood et al., 1999), the massive creation of new forms of accountability through systems of audit
23 and inspection (Power, 2003), and the expansion of public accountability norms and mechanisms
24 to private companies (Gilad, 2008; Reiss, 2009; Benish and Levi-Faur, 2012). Another such
25 expansion is the rise of private non-governmental regulators at the domestic or international level
26 (such as ISO) who create and enforce standards of social accountability in the production of social
27 services. These extended regulatory requirements, whether mandatory or voluntary, add more
28 accountability relations and further stir the mixture of accountability values and instruments in
29 service delivery.
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41 This outline is not exhaustive, but it shows how far we have gone in layering and mixing
42 accountability arrangements in the new governance of public services, especially in the social
43 arena. We are seeing multiple layers of accountability – public, market and civil society - added
44 to state and non-state actors, including at the supranational and subnational levels. Formal and
45 informal mechanisms and rationales of control are being mixed via rules, competition, cooperation
46 and professionalism. And mandatory-state-led systems are being blended with self-regulation and
47 other forms of voluntary-non-state systems of regulation.
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Contributions of the Symposium to Hybrid Accountability Research

The papers in the symposium are all empirical explorations of the uncertainty of hybrid accountability regimes. By investigating contemporary reforms in health care and in the third sector, they suggest the focus on the co-existence of different types of accountability mechanisms has contributed only minimally to the analytical and definitional clarity of hybridity. Taking a new direction, they study the relational dimension of accountability and ask how the relationship between forum and actor in different organisational settings becomes uncertain rather than fixed in a static typology. They move beyond the refinement or expansion of “sterile” typologies by offering a more nuanced conceptualisation of hybridity, thus illuminating its obscurity.

The first symposium article, by Oz Gore, Imelda McDermott, Kath Checkland, Pauline Allen and Valerie Moran, examines the accountability arrangements put in place in a recent, radical reform of the National Health Service (NHS) in England. Under the reform, a new membership-based and locally oriented healthcare commissioning organisation was given responsibility for commissioning primary healthcare services, whilst the national body, NHS England, retained statutory responsibility for primary care-related welfare functions. This new delivery model aimed at “liberating” professionals by situating clinicians at the centre of healthcare planning and commissioning. The system became hybrid both because it instituted hybrid decision-making (managerial, lay and clinical) and because it had a hybrid governance structure (national and local).

Based on Brodtkin’s (2008) “street-level” approach to studying accountability from “inside out”, the paper analyses the performance accountability arrangements instituted to govern this hybrid service delivery model, focusing on the interface between the mechanisms of accountability and their intended or unintended consequences “on the ground.”. The authors find that because of the uncertainty inherent in this hybrid model, in practice, practitioners working within locally formed and oriented organisations decided on the shape and detail of healthcare commissioning governance structures. They note that while granting professionals more discretion might be an intended result of reform, it can lead to “managerial discretion drift” and a loss of public accountability, as it becomes harder for the public to understand why welfare delivery models take the shape they do.

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3 In a broader view, by focusing on the relationships between accountability actors and their
4 accountability forums, rather than cataloguing types of accountability mechanisms, the paper
5 offers a nuanced conceptualisation of hybridity as it relates to accountability obligations *per se*. It
6 suggests the policy reforms rooted in hybrid logics may not only lead to hybridity in terms of the
7 co-existence of conflicting accountability obligations to *different* organisations; they may also lead
8 to hybridity in the obligations to the *same* organisation. The very same organisation might pose
9 accountability obligations that are *themselves* hybrid, i.e., simultaneously formal-informal and
10 vertical-horizontal.
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19 Benjamin Evert's paper discusses the changing world of professional accountability in health care.
20 Historically dominated by professional accountability based on collegiality and trust,
21 accountability relations in healthcare are now "essentially multiple" and inconsistent (Hupe and
22 Hill, 2007, p. 279), with healthcare professionals operating in a dynamic environment and
23 rendering account to multiple accountholders at the same time. In this regard, today's healthcare
24 professionals have to permanently juggle medical, administrative and managerial tasks.
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31 Against this backdrop, Evert investigates how healthcare professionals' accountability relations
32 can be analytically grasped and how the relative importance of their different accountability logics
33 is constructed. To study these multiple accountabilities, he develops a framework for
34 understanding the identity of health care professionals as incorporating one cross-cutting identity
35 (professional) and six nested identity facets, such as the partner, citizen and manager. From a
36 theoretical point of view, this multi-faceted identity framework proposed by Evert enriches the
37 discussion on multiplicity, multidimensionality and accountability by adding a multidimensional
38 perspective of the account-giver.
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46 The paper argues convincingly that professionals mobilise different facets of their identity when
47 accounting to different stakeholders: "different types of accountability govern different
48 interactions" (Emanuel and Emanuel, 1996, p. 236). Moreover, professionals' multifaceted
49 identities and related accountability forms vary across healthcare contexts and settings. Evert
50 assumes a strong connection between identity facets and accountability forms, and he proposes to
51 conceive of professionals' identities and accountability relations as multidimensional, because a
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3 single-dimensional perspective does not cover the full range of quality and accountability in
4 healthcare.
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8 Christina Schwabenland and Alison Hirst's paper investigates how the dynamics of conflicting
9 accountabilities are managed in the third sector. They do so in the context of third sector
10 organisations based in England and Wales providing services for people with learning difficulties.
11 Third sector organisations providing services to governments through competitive tenders are
12 located at the nexus of multiple, dynamic and essentially hybrid accountability relationships. As
13 such, they need to manage the tensions between multiple commitments, some of which may
14 conflict, others of which may potentially be reconciled.
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22 The paper makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the hybridisation process by
23 examining the choices managers make in enacting, reconciling or resisting competing
24 accountability demands, and showing how they deploy agency in making these choices. To this
25 line of scholarship, the paper adds an elucidation of the far-reaching hybridity of the third sector
26 and the complex forms of agency this cultivates. It finds these contexts provide an extensive toolkit
27 which managers use to negotiate, create alliances, resist, accept defeat, try things out or conduct
28 business-as-usual.
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36 The authors find that in seeking reconciliation, managers draw on a repertoire of resources,
37 combining pragmatic responses with future imaginings. Overt resistance to accountability
38 demands, they say, is rare. Decisions are justified in terms of the needs of service users to the
39 extent to which they were likely to promote an "ordinary life" for them (though these were defined
40 in differing ways). But whilst "ordinary life" provides a foundational heuristic for future
41 imaginings, it is also variously invoked to justify limits on services. Hence, much like Evert's
42 identification of the role of nested and cross-cutting identities, Schwabenland and Hirst find the
43 concept of "ordinary life" is used as a yardstick across practically all problematic situations
44 encountered by managers; it is multi-faceted and negotiable and may even be implicitly revoked
45 in some circumstances.
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Future Research on Hybrid Accountability

Hybridisation poses significant challenges to understanding accountability. The greatest challenge is the unprecedented complexity of the policy and organisational environment in which public action is now conducted. In this symposium, we take a step forward in advancing the analytical framework required to define and capture the “grammar” of hybrid accountability and empirically examine what is actually going on in hybrid structures of accountability in the welfare sector. There is obviously much more to do if we are to figure out the complex and multifaceted systems of accountability. We conclude this paper by highlighting several questions we consider vital for theorising and empirically investigating hybrid accountability.

The interplay question. A key challenge in unlocking the puzzle of hybridity is understanding how accountably arrangements – public, market and social, formal and informal, mandatory and voluntary – relate to each other under “polycentric” accountability regimes (Black, 2008). Clearly, “old” and “new” accountability arrangements co-exist and co-evolve, even when they are founded on inconsistent and, at times, conflicting principles (Christensen and Lægreid 2017). But as Halliday (2004, p. 89 points out: “It remains substantially unclear how these regimes mingle and compete within the administrative arena and we have much still to learn about the complex relationships between the various accountability regimes.”

Often these accountability arrangements are in tension with another. Scholars have warned, for instance, that the economically informed logic of NPM is incompatible with the context of social services delivery, because these services involve a degree of professional autonomy and tacit knowledge which cannot be spelled out in contracts and performance indicators (Broadbent et al., 1996). However, at the same time, some scholarly work shows that sometimes these accountability regimes can supplement and even reinforce each other (see, e.g., Binder, 2007).

The papers in this symposium add further examples of the contradictory and supplementary dynamics between accountability regimes. But we need a more nuanced understanding of how these accountability regimes *exactly* interact. Under what conditions do they contradict each other, and under what conditions are they mutually reinforcing? What determines the relative importance of each regime, and which values and mechanisms prevail? Such an inquiry requires us to look at

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3 the inevitable trade-offs between these accountability arrangements in terms of who is accountable
4 *to whom?* And *for what?* What are the side-effects, surprises and unintended consequences of such
5 interactions? Finally, it is important to understand how interactions develop over time and whether
6 some patterns of mixing are more stable and enduring than others.
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12 *The street-level question.* A second area of inquiry relevant to hybrid forms of accountability is
13 their impact on street-level work. Street-level workers' power and decision making were always
14 at the core of much of the scholarly writing on accountability, especially in the context of social
15 services for vulnerable clients (see, e.g., Brodtkin 2008, 2011). The changes in governance and
16 public administration highlight the even more complex institutional environment in which street-
17 level work is now conducted. This change is apparent in the case of "old" street-level bureaucrats
18 inside public administration, who increasingly need to account for their performance in terms of
19 outcomes and cost-saving, and in the case of the "new" street-level workers from the voluntary
20 and the business sectors, who are committed via contracts to public policy and their clients, but
21 also to the economic and other interests of their private employers – firms and non-profits (Cohen
22 et al. 2017). This is evident also in all the papers of this symposium. The environment of multiple
23 accountability commitments may make their work much more constrained, but in situations of
24 contradicting demands, it may give them more, not less, leverage in choosing which requirements
25 to fulfil. Thus, paradoxically, this may increase the discretion of street-level workers (as Gore et
26 al.'s paper suggests). Therefore, understanding how street-level workers make decisions under
27 these multiple accountability commitments is crucial for understanding hybridity. How do they
28 react to these requirements? Are some requirements more influential on decision making than
29 others and, if so, why? Do they comply with, resist or reconcile their multiple accountabilities?
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45 *The process of hybridisation question.* Schwabenland and Hirst's paper opens a space for asking
46 how we explain the *process* of hybridisation as it plays out in practice. The study of organisational
47 structures and formal accountability arrangements using the classic principal-agent theory is not
48 entirely useful in advancing the understanding of how managers and professionals choose among
49 different options and by so doing create new forms of hybrid accountability. Examining the process
50 of hybridisation and agency-drift that leads to hybrid accountability can illuminate how actors deal
51 with multiple demands and expectations. Future studies are needed to further our understanding of
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3 how individual strategies and discretion to cope with multiple and often conflicting demands may
4 lead to new hybrid accountability whereby professionals become creative “principals” of the
5 process of hybridisation, not passive agents of formal structures.
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10 *The measurement question.* Accountability systems are there for a reason. Hybrid systems are
11 prone to accountability-overload because of redundancy and the “explosion” of accountability
12 requirements (Power, 2003). At the same time, they are prone to insufficient accountability
13 because of goal displacement and the dominance of market accountability over the traditional
14 public values of social services (Behn, 2001; Romzek, 2014). The mission of *measuring* and
15 *evaluating* the adequacy of accountability was always hard, but the complexity of the new
16 structures seems to make it even harder. It is hard to evaluate and measure how these systems
17 actually work (see the interplay question above), and the multiplicity makes the evaluation criteria
18 much harder to ascertain.
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