

# Accountability and hybridity in welfare governance

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## Abstract

Hybridity has become a central characteristic of accountability in public governance. Contemporary service delivery is increasingly defined by the mixing and layering of public, market and social accountability regimes operating as overlapping 'hybrid' accountability arrangements. Although hybrid accountability is not a new phenomenon, recent trends have accelerated the process of hybridization, particularly in welfare state governance. In this symposium, we seek to advance our understanding of the under-theorized concept of hybrid accountability and empirically examine what is actually going on. In this introductory article, we put forward a definition of what hybridity means in public welfare governance and explore its origins and dynamics. We then present the articles of this symposium, showing how they go beyond fixed and static typologies to grasp the dynamics of interactions between actors, values and mechanisms under hybrid accountability. We conclude by reflecting on a future research agenda for studying hybrid accountability arrangements.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, classical bureaucratic patterns of providing public services have been transformed significantly by the blurring of boundaries between state, market and civil society modes of governance (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 and new regulatory arrangements have become dominant in the delivery of public services (Levi-Faur and Gilad 2004; Le Grand 2009). The reasons for these reforms include ideological preferences for smaller government, fiscal pressures to lower the costs of public services, decades-long criticism of public bureaucracies as

inefficient and paternalistic and attempts to promote social innovation and social entrepreneurship. Regardless of motivation, these reforms have provided a fertile ground for the proliferation of market and, at times, network forms of governance of public services, particularly in the realm of welfare state services (Gilbert 2013; Levi-Faur 2014; Benish et al. 2017).

In terms of accountability, the focus of this symposium, the introduction of business-like and network-based governance regimes (Bode 2006) has challenged the conventional doctrines of hierarchical accountability and top-down management, typical of state-centred public administration (Black 2008). The revised organizational structures offer a range of 'new' market and social forms of accountability, while 'old' political, legal, administrative and professional mechanisms often remain in place (see, e.g., Mulgan 2003; Jantz et al. 2018). As a result, public, market and civil society forms of accountability have given way to mixed, multifaceted and multi-level forms—leading to accountability arrangements which are hybrid in nature (Scott 2000; Considine and Afzal 2011; Benish 2014).

In this symposium, we aim to advance the scholarly understanding of these hybrid forms of accountability. Hybrid accountability arrangements are, of course, not a new phenomenon in public administration (Mulgan 2003, 2006). Hybridity is implicit in existing typologies of accountability—such as Mark Bovens' (2006) widely used typology. They show that public sector workers have always had multiple accountability commitments—to politicians, high-level bureaucrats, courts and audit entities. However, such typologies tend to focus on ideal types of accountability and to study each separately, overlooking the interactions between them. Moreover, the trends of NPM, contracting out, marketization and the rise of multiple regulatory agencies (at international, state and local levels) have radically accelerated the process of hybridization. Under these new arrangements, various actors—including business and non-profit organizations—are pursuing public policy following multiple, overlapping and at times conflicting logics of accountability (Romzek 2014). Account-giving is no longer a 'settled situation' in which the questions of who is accountable to whom and how are relatively clear and uncontroversial (Lægreid 2014; Christensen and Lægreid 2017).

Hybridization poses significant challenges to understandings of accountability. Although scholars have started to refine existing typologies to account for the above-mentioned administrative reforms (e.g., Behn 2001; Hupe and Hill 2007; Mair et al. 2015), there is still much to learn, theoretically and empirically, about hybrid accountability. The greatest challenge is the unprecedented complexity of the policy and of the organizational environment in which public action is now conducted. The ideal types of accountability developed thus far are useful analytical tools, but the realities of accelerated hybridization require us to learn how the 'new' market and social types of accountability play out in the eco-system of public administration, as well as how 'old' and 'new' accountability arrangements coexist and co-evolve, despite their inconsistent and, at times, conflicting logics. 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.'

The governance of welfare state services provides an excellent domain for studying hybrid accountability. When the sustainability of post-war welfare states is debated (Ferrera 2000, 2018), healthcare, schools and social welfare are often identified as central fields for reforms and for experiments with NPM and quasi-markets (Benish 2010; Brodtkin 2011; Mattei 2016). The welfare state has shifted markedly from a provider (or positive) model towards a regulatory one, with choice, competition and a mix of public and private welfare arrangements occupying a growing share in the delivery and management of social policies (Levi-Faur 2014; Haber 2015; Benish et al. 2017). The intense interaction between state, market and civil society actors, norms and mechanisms in contemporary welfare governance is a useful laboratory for understanding hybrid accountability (Mullins et al. 2018), as policy-makers and regulators struggle with the task of making heterogeneous providers accountable to the public interest, while street-level organizations and workers struggle with the need to function in an environment with an ever-increasing mix of accountability commitments.

We use the context of welfare governance to advance the analytical framework defining the 'grammar' of hybrid accountability by empirically examining what is actually going on in hybrid structures of accountability. The article by Gore, McDermott, Checkland, Allen and Moran examines the hybridity of accountability obligations in the context of the National Health Service (NHS) in England; Benjamin Ewert focuses on healthcare professionals and their multiple

identities as account-givers, and Schwabenland and Hirst study how managers of third sector organizations in the field of people with learning difficulties cope with hybrid and conflicting accountabilities. The three articles move the scholarly debate beyond rigid typologies to embrace a multifaceted and multidimensional conceptualization of accountability. They do not challenge typologising per se; rather, they try to go beyond fixed and static typologies to grasp the driving forces and dynamics of and the interactions between accountability requirements under the new governance structures of public services.

To introduce the symposium and to contribute to the theorizing on hybrid accountability, we start this introductory article by defining what hybridity means in the context of accountability. In the next section, we explore the origins and development of hybrid accountability to contextualize historically the theorizing advanced in this symposium. We then present the gist of the symposium articles, setting out their key research questions and discussing their main findings and arguments against the backdrop of the existing scholarly debate. We conclude by reflecting on the challenges of studying hybrid accountability and by pointing to possible lines of future research.

## 2 | DEFINING HYBRID ACCOUNTABILITY

Accountability relations form in various contexts, and they rely on different logics, values and mechanisms. In general, 'accountability' refers to providing an account of one's activities (Mulgan 2003; Bovens 2007; Christensen and Lægreid 2011). At its core, accountability rests on principal-agent relationships, in which one or more person (the principal) engages another person or persons (the agent) to perform activities on his or her behalf. Normally, accountability is an *ex-post* arrangement whereby sanctions are imposed if the agents deviate from the principals' decisions. To provide a systematic understanding of the 'grammar of accountability', Mashaw (2006) suggests grouping the various accountability types into three regimes: public, market and social.

According to Mashaw, each of these three accountability regimes operates with a distinctive set of goals and values and employs its own accountability mechanisms. Public accountability regimes are generally based on the authoritative and hierarchal logic of the state. Their organizing principle is holding public actors accountable to citizens' democratic will by limiting their discretion and institutionalizing legality and rule of law. They include the 'traditional' types of political, legal and administrative accountability found in public governance (see Mulgan 2003; Bovens 2007). Market accountability regimes are based on the logic of competitive markets and the managerial logic of corporate governance. They are meant to hold firms' managers and workers to the ultimate goal of maximizing shareholders' profits while giving managers the prerogative to manage the corporation effectively. In product markets, these accountability systems are based on the notion of 'consumer sovereignty', that is, the power of consumers to hold producers to account for the quality and price of their product and for their ability to meet consumers' preferences or wants (Lodge and Stirton 2010). Social accountability regimes replicate the logic of the civil society of communities and cultures. They are created within various social networks—such as the family, professions or voluntary organizations. The content of accountability is created by the members of a group (such as professional groups); they are usually informal, and accountability is enforced through social pressure and reciprocal obligations among the members.

Until recently, the public administration literature on accountability under-theorized the concept of hybridity, with most scholarly efforts invested in developing and studying ideal types of accountability. But the emergence of recent research on hybrid organizations has pushed the field in new directions (see, e.g., Battilana and Dorado 2010; Seibel 2015; for hybridity in public organizations see particularly: Denis et al. 2015; Skelcher and Smith 2015, and the rest of the articles in the symposium in that issue). Not only has this literature highlighted the importance of the interplay between multiple logics explaining the ways actors operate, but it has also provided a useful conceptual framework for theorizing hybridity. According to this literature, hybridity is created when two or more institutional logics or arrangements are integrated. As such, hybridity exists between and across the boundaries of traditional

conceptual divides, such as state, market and civil society, and it involves assembling and mixing different forms of institutional features across these sectoral boundaries.

Building on this literature, we define hybridity in the context of accountability as the integration of accountability arrangements between and across the boundaries of the public, market and social regimes of accountability. Hybrid forms of accountability mix actors, values and mechanisms from these three regimes by applying two or more regimes to the same situation at once. Such hybridity is evident when we examine accountability at the street level (Brodkin 2008) when street-level organizations and workers from various sectors are required to adhere, at the same time, to logics, values and mechanisms from different regimes. This is the case, for instance, when non-state agencies and workers are subject to public-law requirements (such as legality, equality, transparency and due process) or when public sector agencies and workers are subject to competitive pressures or to performance-based management.

Hybrid accountability arrangements can be a result of the layering of accountability commitments onto principals from different sectors. In this regard, while the public administration literature has traditionally focused on the relations between public officials and service providers, studying hybrid accountability requires looking at all the accountability relations that may influence street-level decision-making and actions. This includes, for instance, the commitments to shareholders in business organizations and the commitments to board members and donors in civil society organizations. It should also include accountability schemes that organizations take upon themselves voluntarily, for instance, as part of their 'corporate social responsibility' commitments.

Hybrid accountability can be also a result of the diffusion of accountability types across regimes. For instance, professional accountability is anchored in the logic of social accountability regimes (members of a professional group account to each other for meeting self-determined professional standards; see Mashaw 2006), but with the rise of the post-war welfare state, it was integrated into public administration to serve as an alternative accountability tool (Freidson 2001). As we elaborate below, recent trends have considerably increased the diffusion of logics, values and mechanisms between sectors, for instance, by integrating market accountability and managerial accountability into the governance of public services.

### 3 | ORIGINS OF HYBRIDITY AND ITS DYNAMICS

An important part of understanding hybrid forms of accountability is to comprehend how they emerge, are constructed and develop over time. In this section, we analyse several key sources of and paths to hybridization in contemporary public services delivery systems, with an emphasis on welfare state services.

A first source of hybridity is the integration of business-like arrangements within public sector agencies, emphasizing results, efficiency and responsiveness to customers (Hodge and Coghill 2007). The diffusion of market competition and corporate management logics into the public sector management is at the core of the NPM agenda (Hood 1991; Osborne and Gaebler 1992). It is accomplished, for example, by mimicking private sector management and emphasizing the managerial accountability of agencies for their results (Mattei 2009; Mattei et al. 2015). Likewise, competition and choice-based arrangements have been introduced, initiating competition between public units or allowing service users to 'punish' providers by exiting, thereby increasing market-type accountability (Mulgan 2003; West et al. 2011). As a result, public servants, who traditionally operate according to the bureau-legal and the professional logics of post-war welfare bureaucracies, are now subject to accountability types that originate from market regimes.

A second source of hybridity is the significant growth of private-for-profit and non-profit-entities in the delivery of publicly funded services through contracting out and other forms of public-private partnerships (Greve 2011; Dean 2015). By taking this direction, governments not only gain access to the efficiency, innovation or financing capacity of non-governmental actors but also buy into the accountability structures these actors bring with them. For example, for-profit entities entering into a contract with a governmental commissioning unit bring with them accountability commitments to maximize the shareholders' profits and their business culture; non-profits bring

accountability commitments to the board of directors and their community culture. Thus, contracting for service provision with non-state agents adds layers of accountability relations with principals who act according to market and civil society logics, and it mixes public policy commitments with business and community cultures of management.

A third source of hybridity is the emergence of collaborative forms of governance in the design and delivery of policy (e.g., Kenis and Provan 2009; Lahat and Sher-Hadar 2019). These models of governance, often developed alongside and sometimes as a response to the shortcomings of NPM, integrate civil society values and mechanisms and their cooperative logic into the governance of public services (Phillips and Smith 2011). This is done, for example, through the use of collaborative public–private policy networks in the healthcare and social sectors (Saz-Carranza et al. 2016). The typical reason for forming such policy networks is to address a complex problem (such as poverty, homelessness or chronic health problems) when no one organization possesses the required knowledge and tools to solve it. As a result, values and mechanisms from social accountability regimes, which are based on cooperation, informality and trust, are further integrated (beyond the professional accountability model) into the originally hierarchical and bureau-legal structure of public service delivery.

A fourth source of hybridity is the expansion of regulated markets after privatization. This is perhaps best illustrated by the ongoing commercialization of old-age pensions (Leisering 2012). With the worldwide promulgation of pension reform programmes based on the 1994 World Bank report, private pensions, hitherto playing a marginal role, have become part of the institutionalized governance of old-age protection (Mabbett 2011). In these markets, pension funds adhere to the principles of the market, competing for paying clients, but they are also increasingly subject to consumer and social regulation and must meet requirements based on norms of fairness and social justice (Benish et al. 2017).

A fifth source of hybridity, closely connected to the previous one, is the proliferation of regulatory bodies—at the supranational, national and local levels—to whom public service providers need to account. Paradoxically, as Levi-Faur (2005) has pointed out, the rise of neoliberal reforms has led to regulatory growth, including in the social arena (Levi-Faur 2014). Consider, for example, the growth of regulation inside government (Hood et al. 1999), the massive creation of new forms of accountability through systems of audit and inspection (Power 2003) and the expansion of public accountability norms and mechanisms to private companies (Gilad 2008, 2011; Reiss 2009; Benish and Levi-Faur 2012; Benish and Maron 2016). Another such expansion is the rise of private non-governmental regulators at the domestic or international level (such as ISO) who create and enforce standards of social accountability in the production of social services. These extended regulatory requirements, whether mandatory or voluntary, add more accountability relations and further stir the mixture of accountability values and instruments in service delivery.

This outline is not exhaustive, but it shows how far we have gone in layering and mixing accountability arrangements under the new governance of public services, especially in the social arena. We are seeing multiple layers of accountability imposed on state and non-state agents by various stakeholders. Vertical/horizontal and formal/informal mechanisms and rationales of control are being mixed via rules, competition, cooperation and professionalism. At the same time, mandatory state-led systems are being blended with self-regulation and other forms of voluntary non-state systems of accountability.

## 4 | CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SYMPOSIUM TO HYBRID ACCOUNTABILITY RESEARCH

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 NHS in England (Gore et al. 2020). Under the reform, a new membership-based and locally oriented healthcare commissioning organization was given responsibility for commissioning primary healthcare services, while 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 article 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 organizations now decide 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.

From a broader perspective, by focusing on the relationships between accountability actors and their accountability forums, rather than cataloguing types of accountability mechanisms, the article offers a nuanced conceptualization of hybridity as it relates to accountability obligations *per se*. It suggests that the policy reforms rooted in hybrid logics may not only lead to hybridity in terms of the coexistence of conflicting accountability obligations to different organizations; they may also lead to hybridity in the obligations to the same organization. One organization might pose accountability obligations that are themselves hybrid, that is, simultaneously formal-informal and vertical-horizontal.

Benjamin Ewert's article discusses the changing world of professional accountability in healthcare (Ewert 2020). Historically dominated by professional accountability based on collegiality and trust, accountability relations in healthcare are now 'essentially multiple' and inconsistent (Hupe and Hill 2007, p. 279), with healthcare professionals operating in a dynamic environment and rendering account to multiple account-holders at the same time. Consequently, today's healthcare professionals find themselves juggling medical, administrative and managerial tasks.

Against this backdrop, Ewert investigates how healthcare professionals' accountability relations can be analytically grasped and how the relative importance of their different accountability logics is constructed. To this end, he develops a framework for understanding the identity of healthcare professionals as incorporating one cross-cutting identity (professional) and six nested identity facets, such as the partner, citizen and manager. From a theoretical point of view, this multi-faceted identity framework proposed by Ewert enriches the discussion on multiplicity, multidimensionality and accountability by adding the multidimensional perspective of the account-giver.

The article convincingly argues that professionals mobilize different facets of their identity when accounting to different stakeholders: 'different types of accountability govern different interactions' (Emanuel and Emanuel 1996, p. 236), and professionals' multifaceted identities and related accountability forms vary across healthcare contexts and settings. Ewert assumes a strong connection between identity facets and accountability forms, and he proposes conceiving of professionals' identities and accountability relations as multidimensional, because a single-dimension perspective does not cover the full range of quality and accountability in today's healthcare.

Christina Schwabenland and Alison Hirst investigate how the dynamics of conflicting accountabilities are managed in the third sector (Schwabenland and Hirst 2020). They do so in the context of third-sector organizations based in England and Wales providing services for people with learning difficulties. The article argues that third-sector organizations providing services to governments through competitive tenders are located at the nexus of multiple, dynamic and essentially hybrid accountability relationships. As such, they need to manage the tensions between multiple commitments, some of which may conflict, others of which may potentially be reconciled.

The article makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the hybridization process by examining the choices managers make in enacting, reconciling or resisting competing accountability demands and showing how they deploy agency when making these choices. It elucidates the far-reaching hybridity of the third sector and the complex forms of agency this expansion cultivates. It finds that these contexts provide an extensive toolkit used by managers to negotiate, create alliances, resist, accept defeat, try things out or conduct business-as-usual.

The authors find that in seeking reconciliation, managers draw on a repertoire of resources, combining pragmatic responses with future imaginings. Overt resistance to accountability demands, Schwabenland and Hirst say, is rare. Decisions are justified in terms of the needs of service users to the extent to which they are likely to promote an 'ordinary life' for them (though these needs are defined in differing ways). However, while 'ordinary life' provides a foundational heuristic for future imaginings, it is also variously invoked to justify limits on services. Hence, much like Ewert's identification of the role of nested and cross-cutting identities, Schwabenland and Hirst find that the concept of 'ordinary life' is used as a yardstick across practically all problematic situations encountered by managers; it is multi-faceted and negotiable and may even be implicitly revoked in some circumstances.

## 5 | FUTURE RESEARCH ON HYBRID ACCOUNTABILITY

This article and the other articles in this symposium point to the centrality of hybridity in contemporary structures of accountability in public services. By going beyond the traditional focus of the literature in public administration on ideal types of accountability and by examining all the accountability obligations of street-level organizations and workers, we try to provide a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the implications of the assemblage of accountability types from different regimes on how public services are designed and operated. Obviously, this symposium cannot offer comprehensive answers. Rather, we hope to offer a starting point for further research, as there is much more to do if we are to figure it all out. We conclude this article by highlighting several questions that we consider vital for theorizing and empirically investigating hybrid accountability.

*The interplay question:* A key challenge in unlocking the puzzle of hybridity is understanding how accountability arrangements—public, market and social, formal and informal, mandatory and voluntary—relate to each other under 'polycentric' accountability regimes (Black 2008). These accountability arrangements are frequently in tension with one another. Scholars have warned, for instance, that the economically informed logic of NPM is incompatible with the context of social service delivery, because social services involve a degree of professional autonomy and tacit knowledge which cannot be spelled out in contracts and performance indicators. However, at the same time, some scholarly work shows that these accountability regimes can sometimes supplement and even reinforce each other (see, e.g., Binder 2007).

The articles in this symposium add further examples of the contradictory and supplementary dynamics between accountability regimes. However, 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 the inevitable trade-offs between these accountability arrangements in terms of who is accountable to whom? And for what? What are the side-effects, surprises and unintended consequences of the interactions? Finally, it is important to understand how interactions develop over time and whether some patterns of mixing are more stable and enduring than others.

*The street-level question:* A second area of inquiry relevant to hybrid forms of accountability is their impact on street-level work (see, e.g., Brodtkin 2008, 2011). The changes in governance and public administration highlight the complex institutional environment in which street-level work is now conducted. This change is apparent, for example, in the case of bureaucrats inside public administration, who are increasingly required to account for their performance in terms of outcomes and cost-saving, and in the case of the 'new' street-level workers from the voluntary and the business sectors, who are committed via contracts to public policy and their clients, but also to the economic and other interests of their private employers—whether firms or non-profits (Cohen et al. 2016).

As the article by Gore et al. suggests, the environment of multiple accountability commitments may make street-level work much more constrained, but in situations of contradicting demands, it may give street-level workers more, not less, leverage in choosing which requirements to fulfil. Paradoxically, this may increase the discretion of street-level workers. Therefore, understanding how street-level workers make decisions under multiple accountability

commitments is crucial for understanding hybridity. How do they react to the web of interactions within which they need to meet multiple expectations? Are some accountability relations or measures more influential on decision-making than others and, if so, why? Do street-level workers comply with, resist or reconcile their multiple accountabilities?

*The process of hybridization question:* Schwabenland and Hirst's article opens a space for asking how the process of hybridization plays out in practice. The study of organizational structures and formal accountability arrangements using classic principal-agent theory is not entirely useful to advance the understanding of how managers and professionals choose among different options and, by so doing, create new forms of hybrid accountability. Examining the process of hybridization and agency drift that leads to hybrid accountability can illuminate how actors deal with multiple demands and expectations. Future studies are needed to advance our understanding of how professionals become creative 'principals' of the process of hybridization, not passive agents of formal structures.

*The measurement question:* Accountability systems are there for a reason. The public policy objective of measuring and evaluating the accountability of hybrid organizations is bound to be contested, but the complexity of the new hybrid structures, as discussed by Christina Schwabenland and Alison Hirst in their article, seems to make it even harder. It is difficult to evaluate how these systems actually work in practice, and the combination of hybrid forms, mechanisms and values makes the evaluation criteria for accountability performance much harder to ascertain. Thus, we need more research on the evaluative framework of hybrid accountability, as criteria developed for public organizations need to be adapted to different contexts, social expectations and interactions.

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