

Social Accountability Between Consensus and Confrontation: Developing a Theoretical Framework for Societal Accountability Relationships of Public Sector Organizations

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Abstract

Numerous politicians and scholars have argued that accountability of public authorities to citizens, clients, and societal actors is needed in the current age of governance. Academic debates about social accountability are however scattered with incompatible conceptualizations, high normative expectations, and sobering findings. This article develops an in-depth framework that provides a comprehensive definition and typology of social accountability. It discusses major empirical challenges to social accountability and multiple behavioral styles within social accountability. By distinguishing consensual and confrontational styles of account-holding and account-giving, this article shows that social accountability could serve multiple purposes that go beyond rosy ideals.

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Introduction

Public organizations often operate in a “complex web of accountabilities” in which they may be scrutinized by multiple accountability forums (Koppell, 2005; Page, 2006; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). In recent years, the academic literature has paid increasing attention to the participation of citizens, clients, and societal actors in holding public organizations to account (e.g., Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019; Ojala et al., 2019; Reddick et al., 2020). Bovens (2007) has argued that there is in many Western democracies an urge for “more direct and explicit accountability relations between public agencies, on the one hand, and clients, citizens and civil society, on the other hand” (p. 457). Engaging the public in public accountability is often viewed with normative expectations (McCandless, 2001; Moore, 2014). As “accountability” is seen as a “golden concept” (Bovens, 2007, p. 448), direct accountability of public organizations to the general public would be its “superlative” (Schillemans, 2007, p. 185).

Accountability to citizens, clients, or the public at large—referred to as *social accountability*—has been promoted as a means to improve alignment between policy implementation and the interests and needs of citizens and societal stakeholders (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009, p. 259) and as a response to an assumed lack of trust in government (Bovens, 2007, p. 457). As social accountability stresses direct citizens’ and clients’ influence on public service providers, it has become an attractive component of many public management reforms (Mattei et al., 2018). The disaggregation of public services to (quasi-) autonomous executive organizations has been said to increase the need for alternative means of accountability as an additional control mechanism as the lines of traditional hierarchical accountability through a direct chain of delegation attenuates (e.g., Flinders, 2001; Strøm, 2000; Thatcher & Sweet, 2002). Social accountability gives citizens some direct control over these public sector organizations and, as such, it forms a potential remedy against problems of democratic legitimacy and the possibilities of “accountability deficits” (cf. Mulgan, 2014). In addition, the changing political environment in most Western democracies—with rising populism, intense politicization, and concerns about eroding support for public institutions (e.g., Flinders, 2011; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Wood, 2016)—has strengthened the call to create more direct and participatory forms of accountability (see also Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019, pp. 334–335).

Despite increasing academic and popular attention, the conceptualization of social accountability within the public administration literature remains relatively underdeveloped. Although societal forms of accountability are included in many public administration frameworks of accountability (e.g., Bovens, 2007; Sinclair, 1995; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012), the concept of social accountability often remains loosely discussed and demarcated. Whereas social accountability empirically often goes hand in hand with “horizontal” and “voluntary” accountability (Bovens et al., 2014, p. 12; see also Koop, 2014; Schillemans, 2008), it has been theoretically developed to a lesser extent and not always been clearly distinguished from those two. In addition, some authors question whether forms of social accountability could “represent a full accountability mechanism” (Lindén, 2015, p. 1009) and include all necessary elements of accountability as information provision, discussion, and consequences (cf. Bovens, 2007).

Furthermore, the literature about social accountability faces a large variation in scope and precision about the set of account-holders to whom organizations give an account. Account-giving could be directed to specific (individual) citizens (Meijer, 2007), but also to society at large or an imaginary “court of public opinion” (Christensen & Lodge, 2018; Moore, 2014). Public agencies render account to news media (Maggetti, 2012) or institutionalized forums, such as societal councils (Lindén, 2015). In recent years, digital changes, as the rise of social media, have provided increasing opportunities for new and alternative forms of accountability (Lindquist & Huse, 2017; Ojala et al., 2019). Still, a clear overview of the different types of account-holders within forms of social accountability is lacking.

Outcomes that might be expected from social accountability provide a further gap in our knowledge. The potentials and pitfalls of social accountability are heavily debated. Some authors presented social accountability as a highly democratic ideal, considering it as a renewal of democracy (cf. McCandless, 2001; Moore, 2014). Others are more concerned about dysfunctionalities that are associated with social accountability (Flinders & Moon, 2011; Gebreiter & Hidayah, 2019). As Brandsen et al. (2008) argue, social accountability might be a concept “infused with too many daydreams” (p. 19).

Given these challenges in the literature, the purpose of this article is to develop a conceptual framework to study the functioning of social accountability of public sector organizations in practice. Starting with a systematic and comprehensive inventory of academic research on the subject, a search via research databases such as Web of Science and Scopus shows the increasing use of “social accountability” in scientific publications since 1980 across multiple disciplines (see Figure 1). However, social accountability is scattered across various disciplines. Besides public administration, “social

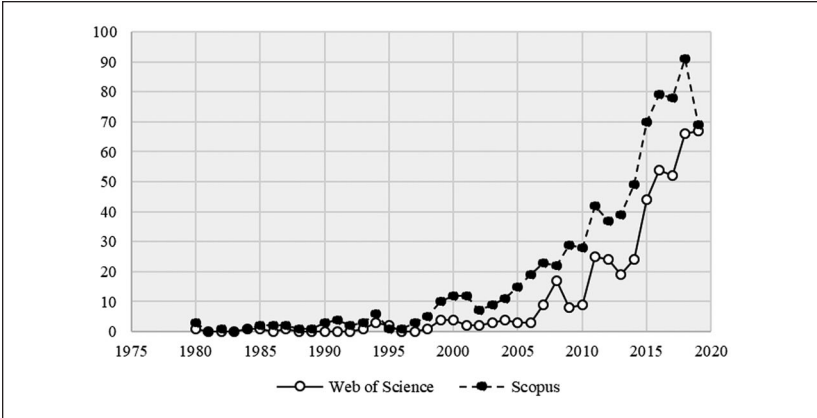


Figure 1. Increasing academic attention for “social accountability” (1980–2019). Note. Number of yearly publications with “social accountability” in title, abstract, and keywords in Web of Science and Scopus. Time span: 1980–2019 (as of October 5, 2020).

accountability” is often used in the vocabularies of medical fields (e.g., Boelen & Heck, 1995; Boelen & Woollard, 2009) and development and democratization studies (e.g., Fox, 2015; Malena et al., 2004; Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006).¹ These disciplines have developed their own notions of social accountability, but these have (slightly) different connotations and/or a different focus than our discipline’s understanding of public accountability (cf. Lindén, 2015, p. 1011). In research traditions within medical fields, social accountability of medical schools is closely related to the concept of social responsibility and defined as “the obligation to direct their education, research and service activities towards addressing the priority health concerns of the community, region, or nation they have a mandate to serve” (Boelen & Woollard, 2009, p. 888). In contrast to public administration, accountability is here merely seen as a “virtue,” rather than being approached as a “mechanism” (cf. Bovens, 2010).

The fields of development and democratization studies provide another large body that discusses “social accountability.” These streams of literature share the mechanistic approach to accountability with the field of public administration. Within these fields, social accountability has however become an “umbrella concept” with multiple conceptual frameworks and analytical approaches, which also includes a wide variety of practices, including participatory budgeting and citizen co-governance (see, for example, Fox, 2015; Malena et al., 2004). As these disciplines further study social accountability in contexts “in which representative government is weak, unresponsive, or

non-existent” (Fox, 2015, p. 346), it is questionable whether and to what extent their findings are transferable and applicable to the context of bureaucratic structures and public organizations in Western and other established democracies. This all makes it rather challenging to fully integrate these perspectives into a public administration understanding of social accountability that focuses on the accountability relationships of public sector organizations vis-à-vis citizens, clients, and (other) societal actors.

To develop a structured theoretical discussion of social accountability, we have used the Bovens’ (2007) framework as an “organizing principle.” This allows us to both use many existing and disparate publications on social accountability in public administration and political science yet tie them together in a unified narrative. Bovens’ (2007) framework has a number of advantages. First of all, it is purely descriptive and is not normative, as many studies on (social) accountability are. Second, it is primarily used in public administration and political science, our fields of interest. Third, its baseline definition is comparable and can be used in conjunction with other leading contributions to accountability theory (Bovens et al., 2014, p. 5). Fourth and finally, it is one of the most cited operationalizations of accountability in the current literature and it provides a clear and structured conceptualization of public accountability that enables empirical analyses and that reflects the “relational core” of accountability (Bovens, 2007; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012).

To enhance our understanding of social accountability, the article systematically follows the major elements of Bovens’ (2007) framework to public accountability: the notion of an accountability forum, the phases of information provision, debate, and consequences, followed by a discussion of the “relational core” of accountability and its actor–forum relationships. The article first develops (a) a definition of the concept of social accountability and (b) a typology of its salient types of account-holders. It proceeds by (c) applying the three phases of accountability processes to forms of social accountability. Moving its attention to the relational dynamics of accountability and to the actor–forum relationships within social accountability, the article further develops a typology of the (d) major behavioral strategies by both public entities (as account-givers) and by citizens, clients, and societal actors (as account-holders). To do so, this article systematically synthesizes conceptual debates and empirical contributions to the study of social accountability within our field, but also by relating to the broader literature about public sector accountability and other debates in the fields of public administration and public management.

For studying social accountability and understanding its functioning in practice, this article argues that three research questions stand out: To what

type of societal actors is account-giving directed? When and to what extent are both societal actors and public sector organizations actively involved in processes of social accountability? And what are the behavioral aims and strategies of both parties in social accountability?

As such, the article presents a conceptual framework that is characterized by a variety and multiplicity in terms of *involved account-holders* in social accountability and with regards to the *intensity* of accountability processes and the *intentions* and behaviors of both account-holders and account-givers.

Conceptualizing Social Accountability: One Concept, Many Notions?

To study social accountability, one should first define accountability, as the concept has provided much contestation (e.g., Bovens et al., 2014; Mulgan, 2003; Pollitt & Hupe, 2011; Sinclair, 1995). However, in the public administration literature, some consensus has evolved around Bovens' (2007) more precise and descriptive understanding of accountability. His widely used definition refers to accountability as "a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences" (Bovens, 2007, p. 450). Importantly, accountability in this sense is a relational concept. One of its crucial aspects is that accountability connects account-givers with "audiences" or "accountability forums" (see also Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012).

A prominent notion in the study of accountability is the variety of types of accountability relationships within the public sector. Whereas accountability has traditionally been positioned within the vertical lines of delegation from voters, via parliaments, to governments (see Strøm, 2000), many authors stress the multiplicity and hybridity of accountability in modern governance (e.g., Biela & Papadopoulos, 2014; Koppell, 2005). Under influence of multiple trends in state and society, new and alternative accountabilities have been added to the traditional and hierarchical system of public accountability (Bovens, 2007; Michels & Meijer, 2008; Reddick et al., 2020).

To reflect this multiplicity of accountability, many analytical frameworks have been developed to capture the various forms of accountability (Willems & Van Dooren, 2012, see also Bovens, 2007; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Sinclair, 1995). Often, a common way to distinguish these types is by asking the "accountability to whom" question (Bovens, 2007, p. 454): different types of accountability are demarcated based upon the nature and characteristics of the account-holder *to whom* justification and explanation is directed. Based upon this criterion, Bovens

(2007, pp. 455–457) distinguishes political, legal, administrative, professional, and social accountability. Political, judicial, professional, and administrative accountability forums have been well-established account-holders in the public administration literature as it is, for example, already shown in Romzek and Dubnick's (1987) classical study of the U.S. Challenger tragedy. This is however only the case for social accountability to a lesser extent (cf. Willems & Van Dooren, 2012, p. 1019).

Forms of social accountability start from the notion of citizens and societal stakeholders as account-holders. Social accountability is a form of accountability that is directed to account-holders that are located in civil society (cf. Bovens, 2007). Rather than following the lines of accountability within the vertical structure of representative democracy, social accountability is based upon the idea of citizenship that is embedded in alternative and participatory models of democracy (Hupe & Hill, 2007, see also Mattei et al., 2015, 2018). Social accountability is closely associated with horizontal forms of accountability (cf. Schillemans, 2008, 2011): It is "horizontal accountability in the true sense, as the complete hierarchical chain, including Parliament, is surpassed and the agency, the minister, or the public manager is directly accountable to the citizenry" (Bovens, 2005, p. 199). Social accountability is often informal and voluntary in nature (Koop, 2014). However, practices of social accountability could have more or less mandatory and formalized elements, such as legal requirements for public organizations to make information publicly available and a legal obligation to install public panels and client councils in some policy domains (Lindén, 2015; Meijer, 2007; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). As Christensen and Lodge (2018) argue, "social accountability refers to account-giving to the public at large which include mandatory requirements and voluntary initiatives to give account" (p. 120).

Whereas the horizontal nature of social accountability is widely recognized, the "public" or "social" characteristics of its account-holders have been loosely defined. Many definitions of social accountability in the public administration literature include various examples of societal stakeholders, such as "nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), interest groups, and clients" (Lindén, 2015, p. 1009), "the public at large, stakeholders or (civil) interest groups and users' organizations" (Byrkjeflot et al., 2014, p. 174), "societal actors such as interest groups, spontaneous coalitions and the media" (Reichersdorfer et al., 2013, p. 276), and the "public at large, the media, particular stakeholders, or (civil) interest groups, users' and patients' organizations" (Neby et al., 2015, p. 133). Bovens (2007) refers to "the role of non-governmental organisations, interest groups and customers or clients as relevant 'stakeholders' in rendering account" (p. 457). Others conceptualize social accountability in more general terms, such as Ojala et al.'s (2019)

understanding of social accountability as “a communicative interaction between a public organisation and such interested publics that relates to a specific issue concerning authorities’ conduct” (p. 281). In their framework of multiple forms of accountability, Willems and Van Dooren (2012) refer to societal forms of accountability as “public accountability,” in which governments or public organizations are being held to account through critical debate and scrutiny in the public forum. Their conceptualization stresses the notion of a public sphere, in which public opinion is formed and where public accountability takes place. Here, “public accountability” is defined as “accountability of persons or institutions vested with authority toward criticism, questions, and commentary voiced in public by citizens or organized civil society” (Willems & Van Dooren, 2012, p. 1019).

Based upon these conceptualizations, this article defines social accountability as a horizontal and explicit accountability relationship in which a public sector organization gives an account vis-à-vis citizens and societal actors, including the media. An accountability relationship should entail two additional elements to be classified as social accountability: (a) it should consist of a nonhierarchical but a horizontal relationship between the account-holder and the account-giver and (b) the account-holder should be classified as a societal actor (i.e., citizens, clients, and organized groups, including the media) and that claims to represent a particular societal interest with regard to a public authorities’ conduct. Those societal actors could differ across public organizations, depending upon organizational context and the public environment of an organization. Large and well-known public agencies could attract broad public attention from, for example, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), national media, and social media (see, for example, Byrkjeflot et al., 2014; Lindén, 2015; Ojala et al., 2019). The public environment for local and small-scale health care institutions is however very different, as patients, clients, and their representatives are considered as one of the most important types of societal groups to whom they could give an account to (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). The next section further explores potential account-holders or “accountability forums” in the societal environment of public sector organizations.

Social Accountability to Whom: A Typology of Four Forms of Social Accountability

The shared characteristic of social accountability is that account-giving is directed to account-holders located in civil society. The study of social accountability is however characterized by a large variation in scope and precision about the accountability forum. Account-giving could be directed to

citizens as individuals, but the forum is often made up out of collective entities composed of citizens (Damgaard & Lewis, 2014). In its broadest sense, social accountability is directed to an entire society: “the public at large” (Christensen & Lodge, 2018). In such an understanding, society as a whole acts as a “court of public opinion” (Moore, 2014) to which public organizations should give an account. Other authors however have a more specific focus in defining the nature of the forum, reflected in concepts as citizen accountability, stakeholder accountability, or media accountability. Meijer and Schillemans (2009) use the term “citizen accountability” for “mechanisms and practices where public sector organisations directly account for their conduct in the broadest sense of the words to citizens, clients or more generally to societal stakeholders” (p. 255). Meijer (2007, p. 167) refers to “stakeholder accountability,” starting from the notion of (societal) stakeholders as account-holders. The media increasingly plays an important role in accountability and could be considered as a forum on its own within social accountability (Bovens, 2007; Djerf-Pierre et al., 2014; Maggetti, 2012).

Based upon a systematic search of the existing public administration literature about “social,” “horizontal,” “downward,” “participatory,” “societal,” “voluntary,” “citizen,” “stakeholder,” and “media” accountability, this section develops a typology of account-holders that are grounded within society or the “court of public opinion” (see Table 1). It synthesizes the existing literature into a forum typology that distinguishes four different types of account-holders within social accountability, based upon their level and form of internal organization. These categories are not mutually exclusive in practice, but they rather illustrate the focus and diversity in specifying account-holders within the literature about social accountability.

First of all, the role of account-holder could be fulfilled by *individual citizens*. These citizens could be *clients*—direct links of accountability between public service providers and their clients are particularly reflected within the New Public Management (NPM) discourse. Under NPM, public administrators are expected to pay specific attention to signals from their clients and consumers (Lægreid, 2014). The introduction of choice and competition in public services would lead to more responsiveness and accountability of public service providers to clients. According to the NPM logic, it provides clients with the options of “exit” and “voice” as arrangements to react to public sector performance (Lægreid, 2014; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). Individual citizens could however also call public organizations to account for purposes beyond client interests. From the notion of citizens as stakeholders, citizens demand accountability from a public authority as that authority affects their rights and interests (the “principle of affected interests,” see Moore, 2014; Mulgan, 2003). Another role of citizens in social

Table 1. Typology of Account-Holders in Social Accountability.

Account-holders	Examples	References
Individual forums	Individual citizens, clients, or stakeholders	Læg Reid (2014), Meijer (2007), and Mizrahi & Minchuk (2019)
External and loosely organized forums	Ad hoc coalitions, mobilized groups, “networked publics,” social media	Alon-Barkat & Gilad (2016), Neu et al. (2020), and Ojala et al. (2019)
External and organized forums	Organized civil society (as nongovernmental organizations, interest groups, civil society organizations) and news media	Djerf-Pierre et al. (2014), Kohler-Koch (2010), and Maggetti (2012)
Internally institutionalized forums	User panels, client councils, and stakeholder boards	Lindén (2015), Pierre (2009), and Schillemans (2008)

accountability is that of active participants (“*citoyens*”) in a democratic society who want to directly take part in public decision-making about important societal issues and who monitor public officials themselves (Meijer, 2007, p. 180). Due to shifts in state–citizens interactions and increasing roles and responsibilities of citizens, they have now gained a greater role in the monitoring of public officials (Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019).

Second, accountability demands stem from loosely organized groups of citizens, as “networked publics” or informal “ad hoc” groups of citizens (Lindquist & Huse, 2017; Ojala et al., 2019; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). With the increasing digitalization of society, the importance of such loosely organized and spontaneous coalitions has grown. On new media platforms, citizens quickly share information with fellow citizens, develop shared perceptions about public officials’ conduct and voice criticisms (Ojala et al., 2019; Schillemans et al., 2013). While the introduction of Web 2.0 and social network technologies has changed the daily lives of citizens, it further changes the lines of communication between citizens and governments (Bekkers et al., 2011). New and online media have the potential to create an online public sphere, in which public opinion is formed and claims are made against public institutions (Neu et al., 2020). Social media platforms have helped “to aggregate and organize individual voices in ways that contributed to the emergence of stakeholder groupings that spoke [. . .] in the name of ‘we the people’” (Neu et al., 2020, p. 482). Social media could be a dominant

venue for the public scrutiny of public officials, although its effects on public sector behavior still have to be seen (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016). Beside these new media opportunities, this category of loosely organized account-holders could further entail forms of demonstrations and social protests by which means informal groups of citizens could demand direct accountability from public authorities (Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2016; Moore, 2014).

Third, another category of account-holders in social accountability are organized groups. This category includes two subcategories, namely organized civil society and news media. Organized civil society, such as NGOs, civil society organizations (CSOs), interest groups, or public sector unions, are a type of account-holders that often claim that they represent and act on behalf of (some part of) society. Rubenstein (2007) refers to the role of NGOs in accountability practices as “surrogate accountability.” In this understanding, CSOs act as a surrogate on behalf of the “general public” or the “public interest” during one or more phases of the accountability process (Rubenstein, 2007, p. 617). For example, in the field of migration policies, humanitarian organizations often participate in processes of accountability as representatives of the interests of the asylum population (Lindén, 2015). At a European level, CSOs have a prominent place in attempts to strengthen social accountability of the European Union and its institutions (Kohler-Koch, 2010). In addition to organized civil society, news media are an increasingly important forum in social accountability (e.g., Bovens, 2005; Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016; Maggetti, 2012). Within the system of accountability, media have a double role; they serve as an accountability forum on its own, and they further provide the infrastructure to activate citizens and other account-holders (Reichersdorfer et al., 2013). Traditionally, journalism has portrayed itself as a form of accountability in its own right by speaking truth to power and holding powers accountable (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2014; Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016), most strongly captured in forms of watchdog journalism (Norris, 2014).

A final set of account-holders within social accountability are those institutionalized by public sector organizations, such as public panels, client councils, and user boards. In the 1990s, many of these types of panels were established by public agencies to strengthen their public accountability (Bovens, 2005). Institutionalized forms of social accountability are very common in Scandinavian countries (Lindén, 2015; Pierre, 2009), but also in the Netherlands (Schillemans, 2008; Van Eijk & Steen, 2014) and the United Kingdom (Bovens, 2005; Flinders & Moon, 2011). Citizen oversight agencies that monitor conduct of police agencies in the United States form another example of institutionalized practices of social accountability (Ali & Pirog, 2019). Predominantly, client councils are found in domains as health care and

education to foster accountability to patients, pupils, and students—or their representatives (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009; Pierre, 2009). Also in other policy sectors, there is a growing trend to install public panels or stakeholder councils (Lindén, 2015; Schillemans, 2008).

Social Accountability in Practice: Elements of an Accountability Relationship

All forms of social accountability discussed above have been heralded as truly democratic innovations. Despite those rosy expectations, Bovens (2007, p. 457) however argues that “not all of these [societal] accountability relations involve clearly demarcated, coherent and authoritative forums that the actor reports to and could debate with” and that “[i]t remains an empirical question to what extent these groups and panels already are full accountability mechanisms.” The literature on accountability debates whether forms of social accountability could represent all elements of a full accountability mechanism (cf. Damgaard & Lewis, 2014; Lindén, 2015).

Although many studies have addressed the question to what extent social accountability does “work” in practice, empirical findings about the proper functioning of social accountability are however often scattered and unrelated, while reflecting a large diversity in terms of research focus and scope. Many findings are based upon qualitative case study research (e.g., Christensen & Lodge, 2018; Klenk, 2015; Lindén, 2015; Mattei et al., 2015, 2018; Meijer, 2007; Ojala et al., 2019). There has been some but relatively limited quantitative research on societal forms of accountability (e.g., Koop, 2014; Maggetti, 2012; Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019; Reddick et al., 2020). A considerable body of literature on social accountability has been conceptual in nature, albeit often with the use of some empirical examples (e.g., Damgaard & Lewis, 2014; Lindquist & Huse, 2017; Michels & Meijer, 2008; Vanhommerig & Karré, 2014). To synthesize these existing findings on social accountability, Table 2 provides a structured summary of main findings and insights on the functioning of social accountability in practice, along the main elements of Bovens’ (2007) conceptualization of accountability: the obligation of accountability and the three phases of accountability in terms of information provision, debate, and consequences.

First of all, following Bovens’ (2007) definition of accountability, accountability is more than a mere relationship between an actor and a forum, the actor should also have a *felt* obligation to render an account to some significant other (see also Mulgan, 2003). This aspect of accountability has been debated for social accountability, as most of its empirical manifestations do often not have a legal obligation to render an account (Koop, 2014; Lindén,

Table 2. Previous Findings on the Functioning of Social Accountability in Practice.

Aspects of an accountability relationship	Functioning of social accountability	References
Obligation		
Felt obligation	The obligation to render an account is often informal and/or self-imposed.	Bovens (2007); Koop (2014)
Information phase		
Demand for information	Transparency may improve information position societal actors. There is an information asymmetry between public organizations and societal actors.	Reichersdorfer et al. (2013); Willems & Van Dooren (2012) Greiling & Spraul (2010); Schillemans (2008)
“Production” of information	Social accountability mostly relies on already available public information. Citizens may be actively involved in information gathering.	Jacobs & Schillemans (2016); Meijer (2007); Meijer & Schillemans (2009) Mizrahi & Minchuk (2019)
Use of information	Most citizens and societal actors are often unlikely to use available information. News media and social media are successful in collecting and sharing information.	Curtin & Meijer (2006); Greiling & Grüb (2015); Meijer (2007) Jacobs & Schillemans (2016); Norris (2014); Ojala et al. (2019)
Debate phase		
Venues	Institutionalized forms of social accountability provide room for discussion and reflection. News media and social media serve as alternative venues for questions and discussion.	Arras & Braun (2018); Schillemans (2008) Maggetti (2012); Ojala et al. (2019); Reichersdorfer et al. (2013)
Structure	No fixed format for debate and/or mostly informal and “free-floating in nature.”	Meijer (2007); Klenk (2015)
Consequences phase		
Direct consequences	There are limited formal sanctions available in social accountability. Social accountability may have a large impact through informal sanctions and reputational effects.	Bovens (2007); Lindén (2015) Reichersdorfer et al. (2013)
Indirect consequences	Social accountability may have an impact via the public organization’s <i>anticipated reactions</i> to future accountability. Social accountability may have a large impact due to its connections to hierarchical accountability.	Meijer (2007); Meijer & Schillemans (2009) Ankamah (2019); Schillemans (2008); Reichersdorfer et al. (2013)

2015). However, as Bovens (2007, p. 451) argues, the obligation to render an account could also be informal or even self-imposed. Even beyond formal requirements, public officials could still *feel* obliged to render an account for their conduct to, for instance, citizens and clients (Overman et al., 2020). Such a view on accountability is dominant in behavioral and social

psychological literature (e.g., Hall et al., 2017; Hall & Ferris, 2011; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999), but this “subjective element” of accountability has also been recognized in the public administration literature (Schillemans, 2008, p. 177; see also Day & Klein, 1987; Koop, 2014; Sinclair, 1995).

To qualify as an effective and meaningful accountability mechanism, actor–forum relationships should further consist of three elements or phases of accountability that could be analytically distinguished: the *information* phase, the *debate* phase, and *consequences* phase (Bovens, 2007, pp. 451–452; see also Bovens et al., 2014; Mulgan, 2003; Schillemans, 2008). In the first phase, the actor needs to provide information about his or her conduct to the forum. The second phase of accountability processes consists out of the debate phase in which the forum could interrogate the actor and could question the information and conduct of the actor. Finally, accountability forums need to be able to pass judgment on the conduct of the actor and, importantly, these consequences could exist out of both formal sanctions and informal consequences, for example, “naming and shaming” and negative publicity (Bovens, 2007, pp. 451–452).

With regard to the *information phase* of accountability, social accountability is suggested to strongly rely upon publicly available information. Compared with vertical and hierarchical powers, Meijer (2007, p. 168) argues that citizens and societal actors do not have formal possibilities to demand disclosure of information. The exchange of information for societal forms of accountability is usually supply-driven and depending upon the actor’s willingness to provide information. As a result, social accountability often faces issues of information-asymmetries as citizens, clients, and other societal actors have limited knowledge of what information is available compared with those of public authorities (Greiling & Spraul, 2010; Schillemans, 2008). As Jacobs and Schillemans (2016) argue, “(t)he information phase largely depends on organisations that feel bound to render an account but are often not formally obliged to do so” (p. 26).

Another issue related to the information provision in social accountability is whether and to what extent citizens and other societal account-holders use this information to hold public organizations to account. “Forum drift,” by which forums discharge from their duties and obligations to hold public agents to account (Schillemans & Busuioc, 2015), might be a pivotal issue, specifically for forms of social accountability. This is particularly of concern for individual citizens and clients as account-holders. Based upon multiple case studies in Dutch health care and education, Meijer (2007) argues that only a very limited number of citizens use information for these purposes. Most citizens “simply have better things to do than to process large amounts of government data” (Meijer, 2014, p. 514). Client councils and stakeholder

bodies often face recruitment problems (Schillemans, 2008, p. 190). According to Curtin and Meijer (2006), citizens frequently face difficulties to proceed and understand information about the conduct of public authorities. Although reporting instruments are being implemented that better fits with citizens' needs and interests, a documentary analysis of sustainability reporting by German and Austrian public utilities shows that public information is often too technical or too lengthy and time-consuming for citizens (Greiling & Grüb, 2015; see also Willems & Van Dooren, 2012).

However, in recent years, increasing norms and rules of transparency in most Western democracies, reflected in Freedom of Information acts and sunshine legislation, have improved the information position of citizens, clients, and societal stakeholders (Meijer, 2007; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). Also, public information becomes more accessible, as organizations could have strategic and reputational purposes to disclose information "to start an 'accountability process', thus trying to render social accountability" (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016, p. 25). Reichersdorfer et al. (2013, p. 275) also mention "press releases and media, spontaneous publicity (blogs, social networks)" as forms of greater information provision in social accountability.

Also, the rise of social media provides citizens a potential platform to easily share and collect information about the conduct of public authorities (Neu et al., 2020; Ojala et al., 2019). Against the background of the European refugee crisis, Ojala et al. (2019) documented large civic engagement on new media platforms in calling the Finnish Immigration Service to account for its conduct and actions. Furthermore, a greater ability of news media to lay hands on nonpublic information could positively influence the information position of social accountability (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016; Norris, 2014). Whereas most institutionalized forms of social accountability rely upon supply-driven information, qualitative research shows that these bodies were often convinced that they received all the information they needed because of their good relationships with the boards and managers of public agencies (Schillemans, 2008, p. 185). Some studies further document active participation of citizens in practices of information gathering and account-holding. For example, survey research among Israeli citizens stresses that citizens will be willing to monitor the performance of public officials "if they believe that it is very likely that a critical mass of citizens will do so and that the performance indicators influence their lives and can benefit them" (Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019, p. 350).

Regarding the *debating phase* of accountability, forms of social accountability are characterized by a variety of potential venues and settings for discussion between actor and forum. According to Meijer (2007), forms as stakeholder accountability provide "no fixed format for debate about policies and performance of public service organizations" and "much of the debate takes place in

the media and those debates often do not provide fair opportunities for redress” (pp. 168–169). Whereas vertical forms of accountability usually have certain rules that ensure discussion, the debating phase of social accountability is largely informal and “free-floating” in nature (Meijer, 2007, p. 169). As Klenk (2015) argues, “[v]ery often, [. . .], claims for social accountability are voiced through non-formalized channels, such as demonstrations or public media” (p. 985).

In recent years, changes emerged that provide new settings and possibilities for discussing public authorities’ conduct. New digital innovations, such as social media, have created greater possibilities for direct and interactive communication between public organizations and their public environment (see Ojala et al., 2019). The traditional news media has still an important role in facilitating public debate and providing a forum to discuss public actors’ (mis)conduct (Maggetti, 2012; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013). Also “petitions, opinion polls, public interviews and discussions, demonstration and virtual protests” are considered as potential elements of the discussion phase of social accountability (Reichersdorfer et al., 2013, p. 275). For institutionalized forms of social accountability, the nature of the debate is most structured as the possibility to discuss and to ask critical questions about actor’s conduct do regularly take place in formal meetings (Schillemans, 2008). On a European level, agencies have increased discussion possibilities with non-state stakeholders by installing public consultations and stakeholder bodies and involving stakeholders in management boards (Arras & Braun, 2018).

In the consequences phase of accountability, social accountability is often associated with weak or no (formal) sanctioning possibilities (Meijer, 2007; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). Citizens and other societal actors generally do not have a formal mandate to judge and sanction public organizations for their conduct and behavior (Bovens, 2007; Lindén, 2015). Institutionalized forms of social accountability could yield some formal powers, but their formal sanctioning possibilities are still limited, compared with those of vertical powers (Schillemans, 2008).

However, several authors stress the importance of informal and reputational consequences for public organizations, which are associated with social accountability (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). As public organizations are concerned with bureaucratic reputation for their persistence, negative media coverage and an unfavorable public opinion are not necessarily less influential than “heavier” and formal sanctions (Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016, p. 26; Schillemans, 2008, p. 176). As Busuioac and Lodge (2017) suggest, reputational concerns are in general an important filtering mechanism that affects the degrees of importance and intensity of accountability. Day and Klein (1987, p. 247) discussed that informal social sanctions potentially have a strong or even stronger context than formal sanctions of political or legal

forms of accountability. Reichersdorfer et al. (2013) show that social accountability could have a crucial impact on decision-making in migration policies by triggering attention for important political decisions and putting pressure on decision-makers. In addition, public officials could often consider it as important to be accountable to their communities (Sinclair, 1995).

Furthermore, the “weak” mechanisms of social accountability could result into formal sanctions, as these accountability mechanisms are often connected with traditional accountability arrangements toward hierarchical powers (Schillemans, 2008, p. 191). For example, Ankamah (2019) shows that societal stakeholders have a strong supportive role for the effective performance of accountability functions by anti-corruption agencies in three Australian states. Based upon a multiple case study of accountability in immigration administration in three European countries, Reichersdorfer et al. (2013, pp. 286–287) shows that forms of social accountability were closely interlinked to political accountability and could trigger account-holding processes in the political domain.

In addition to this, even the possibility to be held to account by citizens or societal stakeholders—the “hint of accountability” (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009, p. 285)—often has an impact on public organizations. As Meijer (2007) argues, “(t)he key argument is that stakeholders do not ask public service organizations to account for their performance, but the fact that they could call them to account stimulates public service organizations to change their policies and behaviour” (p. 167).

Whereas social accountability might formally be a “weak” or even limited form of accountability, it however could have a substantial impact on public organizations and could be of relatively high intensity in all accountability phases of information provision, debate, and consequences. How forms of social accountability take further shape depends upon the relational characteristics of accountability and the behavior and type of involvement of both account-holders and account-givers, as will be discussed in the next section.

Consensual and Confrontational Styles of Social Accountability

The previous sections discussed to whom social accountability could be directed and how processes of social accountability take place. For meaningful accountability processes, it is however of great importance that both account-givers and account-holders consider this relationship as relevant and existent and are involved in the relationship (see, for example, Busuioc & Lodge, 2017; Schillemans & Busuioc, 2015). As the concept of accountability has a “relational core” (Bovens et al., 2014; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987), by connecting

account-givers with account-holders, the behaviors of both parties at the ends of the accountability relationship are crucial for the functioning of social accountability in practice. Both account-holders and account-givers could however have different *intentions* and employ different *behavioral strategies* in forms of social accountability. After elaborating upon the multiple forms of social accountability and the multiple phases in social accountability, this section addresses the question: What types of functions could social accountability serve for both public authorities and for social actors?

For both actors and forums, the existent literature on social accountability differentiates between predominantly consensus-oriented and predominantly confrontation-oriented accountability behaviors. Whereas consensus presupposes a certain level of agreement between parties that aim to achieve a mutual outcome by the exchange of ideas and views, confrontation is associated with divergences in views and conflicts of interest (Koppenjan, 2007). As Mansbridge (2014) argues, an important distinction could be made between trust-based and sanctions-based accountability. Whereas consensual forms of social accountability are largely associated with mutual trust between account-holders and account-givers, conflict and potential negative consequences will steer and guide the behaviors of account-holders and account-givers in confrontational styles of social accountability.

Account-Holders

In a consensual style of social accountability, the account-holder serves as a cooperative partner, willing to invest in higher quality service delivery, more responsiveness, or added public value (Brandsen et al., 2008; Lindén, 2015; Schillemans, 2008). The account-holder operates on the basis of consensus and aims to improve existing policies of the entity from the perspective of a social group or citizens. Account-holders will try to put their or citizens' interests higher on the organization's agenda and to ensure that their needs and wishes are included in decision-making without fundamentally challenging the entity in any way. This can be called a civic form of social accountability. In case of consensus-oriented behavior, account-holding approaches serve as a means to demand responsiveness from public organizations to society in general or to specific groups of citizens. In this understanding of social accountability, account-holders aim to provide public organizations with input from a client or outsider perspective (Halachmi & Holzer, 2010).

This strategy is often stressed in the literature about institutionalized forms of social accountability, such as client councils and public panels. An important finding of Schillemans' (2007) study into the functioning of client councils was that client councils often sympathize with the board of a

public agency and that they appear to agree with each other on many important points. According to Schillemans (2007, pp. 215–216), such a stance could be explained by a “socialization process,” in which the views of account-giver and account-holder converge over time. As part of being in a client council, initially critical customers will gradually identify themselves with the public sector organization. Based upon a study of citizens’ motivations for participating in client councils in health care services, Van Eijk and Steen (2014) further found that community-centered motives play an important role for involvement of client council members. Often, individuals become active in client councils aiming to improve the functioning of the health care providers and to be valuable for clients in general (Van Eijk & Steen, 2014, p. 373).

Also within the large body of literature about social accountability within development and democratization studies, accountability is mainly seen as an approach to bolster citizen engagement and voice and to improve public service responsiveness to citizens’ needs and to inform policies with greater citizen input (see, for example, Fox, 2015; Malena et al., 2004). Social forms of accountability are here presented as a promising way to improve citizen control over public services in the context of countries where democratic structures are “weak, unresponsive, or non-existent” (Fox, 2015, p. 346). International donor organizations, such as the World Bank, stress the importance of social accountability for creating more public service responsiveness, in particular to poor people. As Malena et al. (2004) stated in their 2004 World Bank report, “social accountability mechanisms provide a means to increase and aggregate the voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. This enhanced voice empowers the poor and increases the chance of greater responsiveness on the part of the state to their needs” (p. 5).

Account-holders could however also have a more confrontational stance to public actors and could take the role of *watchdog*. The watchdog or correction perspective has been stressed in studies on the role of news media in public sector accountability monitoring power-holders on behalf of the citizenry (e.g., Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016; Norris, 2014). The media is characterized by a critical stance toward public authorities, as reflected in forms of media scrutiny and investigative journalism (Norris, 2014). This watchdog role is further fulfilled by citizens who monitor the performance of public organizations and call them to account for potential misconduct, for instance via social media (Ojala et al., 2019; Vanhommerig & Karré, 2014).

The watchdog function of accountability has been heralded as it serves as additional checks and balances to public organizations and could detect potential misconduct and failures (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2014; Norris, 2014; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). However, intensified public scrutiny has

further been associated with a negativity bias toward public authorities and a focus on policy failures and incidents (Bovens, 2005; Curtin & Meijer, 2006). This has provided contestation whether confrontational forms of social accountability could further have perverse effects for general trust in politicians and public administrators, rather than prefiguring out what could be improved (Meijer, 2007, p. 172; cf. Flinders, 2011).

Account-Givers

Also with regard to the account-giver, the public administration literature often focuses on a consensual style of accountability. In a consensual style of account-giving, the main objective for account-givers is to stimulate learning (Greiling & Halachmi, 2014; Halachmi & Holzer, 2010). Instead of learning-by-doing, this would be learning-by-accountability. Account-giving then serves as a means to gather new insights about policies and services. This could help improve services and align policies better with the needs of society and citizens (Halachmi & Holzer, 2010; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). New and dynamic forms of citizen-oriented accountability are considered to provide “vital learning potentials” for public organizations (Schillemans et al., 2013, p. 427). This learning perspective has been further stressed in research into institutionalized forms of social accountability, as they form an effective way to provide new information to public agencies and to stimulate policy improvement (Schillemans, 2011).

However, the aims of account-givers shift to achieving political-strategic or reputational benefits in confrontational settings of accountability. Rather than being a learning mechanism, social accountability then serves as a tool to enhance an organization’s reputation and bolster its legitimacy (Christensen & Lodge, 2018; see also Busuioc & Lodge, 2017). In this perspective, account-giving includes features of a public showcase, by which means public organizations show the general public how important and indispensable their functioning is, rather than being open and transparent for outside scrutiny (Vanhommerig & Karré, 2014). A study of public communication activities of quango’s in Great Britain finds that “communication strategies exist to facilitate (and promote) their political functions, not to encourage scrutiny of their internal workings” (Deacon & Monk, 2002, p. 42). Within these confrontational settings of accountability, account-giving behavior could reinforce a “performance paradox” (cf. Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). As a result of social accountability, Meijer (2007, p. 172) argues that public organizations will try to score high on indicators and information that are available for citizens, while these indicators do not necessarily provide an accurate measure for their actual performance.

Table 3. Types of Accountability for Account-Holders and Account-Givers in Social Accountability.

Perspective of account-holder / account-giver	Accountability-as-consensus-seeking	Accountability-as-confrontation
Account-holder	<i>Civic</i> accountability	<i>Watchdog</i> accountability
Account-giver	<i>Learning-by</i> -accountability	<i>Showcase</i> accountability

To summarize, Table 3 presents an overview of these different forms of intentions and behaviors of both account-holders and account-givers in social accountability, resulting into four different forms of social accountability. Rather than merely providing public control, it shows that social accountability could serve multiple purposes and multiple functions, reflecting into the multiplicity of behavioral approaches to social accountability.

Conclusion and Discussion

The role of citizens, clients, and societal actors in public accountability has attracted increasing academic attention. To move the study of social accountability forward, this article develops a conceptual and theoretical framework that (a) integrates hitherto mostly unconnected streams in the academic literature on social accountability, (b) is applicable to multiple and specific forms of social accountability, and (c) reflects the relational core of accountability and focuses on the intentions and behaviors of both account-holders and account-givers. As such, this framework aims to further the systematic study of forms and practices of social accountability and guide research that analyses under which conditions and to what extent social accountability leads to desirable outcomes. This framework could be applied to public sector organizations operating in multiple contexts, in multiple domains and sectors, in a diverse set of countries. To study social accountability, one should take into account (a) the nature of the involved account-holder, (b) the involvement of both account-holders and account-givers in all phases of accountability processes, and (c) their behavioral strategies and intentions.

For further research, this article argues that three sets of research questions stand out. A first set of questions relates to the types of account-holders that are involved within social accountability. By creating a typology of four categories of account-holding entities, this typology (see Table 1) helps structure and guide research into social accountability. Further research could focus on mapping these different account-holders and their

importance and prevalence in holding public organizations to account. As the different types of account-holders do not operate in a vacuum and are interlinked (see, for example, Ojala et al., 2019), analyzing the interplay and connections among different types of social accountability could also be a way forward in our understanding of social accountability in practice. For instance, the rise of new and informal forms of social accountability could provide several challenges to more established and institutionalized arrangements of social accountability, as public panels and client councils.

A second set of questions relates to the involvement of both account-holders and account-givers in social accountability. Whereas forms of social accountability could include all elements of an accountability relationship, their functioning in practice heavily depends upon the involvement and behavior of public organizations and societal actors (see Schillemans & Busuioc, 2015). Further research could identify under which conditions forum engagement is more likely to occur. Combining insights from the public participation literature with the study of social accountability is a promising avenue to improve our understanding of the willingness of citizens to participate in monitoring and account-holding activities (cf. Damgaard & Lewis, 2014). Also, the rise of social media has created new opportunities for loosely organized groups of citizens and “ad hoc coalitions” to operate as “agents of accountability” (cf. Moore, 2014; Ojala et al., 2019) that forms a genuine area for research into new types of social accountability. In addition, both reputational (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017) and behavioral (Overman et al., 2020) approaches to public accountability are potentially suitable in understanding and explaining under which conditions public actors are more committed to societal forms of accountability.

A final set of questions relates to the consensual and confrontational intentions of both account-holders and account-givers. When is consensual behavior more likely and under which conditions are confrontational styles of behavior more likely in social accountability? The characteristics of accountability forums could be determinant for styles of social accountability, as the watchdog role is often associated with mediatized forms of social accountability (cf. Norris, 2014) rather than with its institutionalized forms that are more consensual in nature (Schillemans, 2008). However, other factors could influence the nature of social accountability too. Consensual styles of social accountability are more likely to be expected in settings of mutual trust and mutual agreement (Mansbridge, 2014), whereas political salience and sensitivity of a policy issue (Koop, 2014; Ojala et al., 2019) and strategic concerns (Deacon & Monk, 2002) could stimulate confrontational styles of social accountability. Given the relational character of accountability, another line of research lies with a focus on how the aims and behaviors

of both account-holders and account-givers interact with each other and how they influence accountability processes and outcomes. To assess these different assumptions, further research could focus on these multiple drivers of different styles of behavior for both account-givers and account-holders in social accountability.

In particular, the broader accountability environment could further affect the intensity and nature of social accountability. As social accountability is an addition to traditional modes of accountability, rather than a replacement (see, for example, Willems & Van Dooren, 2012), it is crucial to take the wider “accountability regime” (Biela & Papadopoulos, 2014, p. 370) into account when studying the effects of social accountability. On one hand, traditional forms of accountability determine the nature and course of social accountability. They could constrain the influence of social accountability as political and vertical forums are often considered as the most important account-holders within broader systems of accountability (see, for example, Schillemans, 2008). As public actors often have to “prioritize” accountability demands as they are confronted with multiple accountabilities (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017, p. 92), the perceived threat of sanctions by political and judicial forums could limit the possibilities for influential social accountability. A greater importance of hierarchy, norms, and jurisdictions could decrease the opportunities for public organizations to respond to public pressures. On the other hand, intense political and legal accountability could make public actors also more sensitive to public pressures from clients, interest groups, and media and thus lead to a greater importance for social accountability (Koop, 2014; Schillemans, 2008; Verschuere et al., 2006). The political and judicial environment could further influence the nature of social accountability. For instance, intense scrutiny, politicization, and blame games could activate negative press and public distrust and cynicism (cf. Flinders, 2011), stimulating a mere confrontational style of social accountability, rather than a consensual one.

By connecting to the broader accountability landscape and foundational theories, the proliferation of various and new social accountability relationships also has important implications for functioning of other types of accountability. As Reichersdorfer et al. (2013) argue, social accountability is influenced by its dynamics with political, judicial, and administrative accountability, but could also influence these forms of accountability. Social accountability could generate “spilling out” effects to traditional forms of accountability and such increasing its indirect but substantial influence over public sector actions and behaviors (Neu et al., 2020, p. 474). Social accountability could function as a “trigger” for forms of accountability, such as parliamentary questioning (political accountability) and inspections (judicial

accountability; see, for example, Ankamah, 2019; Ojala et al., 2019; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013). Whether social accountability occurs in a consensual or confrontational nature might have consequences for formal and vertical accountability. Confrontational and unfavorable media coverage could also trigger critical parliamentary questions (cf. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016), while positive feedback from client councils or interest groups about a public agent's conduct could also reassure vertical powers. In the hands of public actors, social accountability could also be a form of a strategic showcase by which means an organizational reputation in the wider environment will be enhanced. As such, confrontational styles of social accountability could protect public organizations from accountability to vertical powers and could help resist intense legal and political pressures (cf. Day & Klein, 1987, pp. 170–171; see also Deacon & Monk, 2002).

In conjunction with the broader accountability context, future studies could benefit from integrating generic theoretical approaches into the study of social accountability. This could enhance our knowledge of the actual processes and outcomes of social accountability and behaviors under conditions of social accountability. Traditionally, most studies of accountability implicitly or explicitly presume rational and goal-directed behaviors of both the individuals and organizations that are held accountable as well as of their various accountability forums. This is expressed in the dominance of principal-agent theory, also in public accountability research (Gailmard, 2014; Schillemans & Busuioc, 2015; Strøm, 2000). Goal-directed and rational behavior is likely to shape actual processes of social accountability and can help further this agenda. However, recent studies of accountability have shown how reputational goals and concerns are of great importance in understanding accountability (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017). This is also relevant to social accountability, where both accountable governmental actors as well as their various societal stakeholders are also driven by reputational concerns. Finally, a number of recent studies of accountability relates public sector accountability processes to behavioral insights and theories that are derived from psychology (Aleksavska et al., 2019; Overman et al., 2020). In these studies, the behavior of individuals under accountability conditions has been studied extensively in experimental studies, providing new insights about the functioning of accountability in general (for a review, see Hall et al., 2017). This offers a further theoretical basis for studying social accountability.

Finally, some herald social accountability as a truly democratic innovation. Willems and Van Dooren (2012, p. 1028) argue that societal forms of accountability could “play a genuine role in establishing and guarding democratic governance” with “its power to influence public opinion and reputation.” Others are concerned about its implications for representative

democracy and argue that social accountability could “undermine” (Byrkjeflot et al., 2014, p. 185), “reduce” (Flinders & Moon, 2011, p. 659), and “conflict” (Mattei et al., 2015, p. 471) with formal modes of political accountability. This article shows that the multifaceted, both consensual and confrontational, nature of social accountability could provide possible explanations for its different outcomes. The one is however not better than the other. Whereas consensual forms of social accountability could stimulate reflexive dialogue and learning (Halachmi & Holzer, 2010; Schillemans, 2008), it remains an empirical question to what extent these accountability practices do really “bite” and challenge public authorities. Confrontational styles of social accountability could be very effective and critically challenge public authorities, but might also result into inquisition, blame avoidance, and window-dressing (Flinders, 2011; Gebreiter & Hidayah, 2019; Meijer, 2007). Evaluating social accountability thus requires sensitivity to its multiple forms and purposes, its functioning within the wider accountability regime, and its potential trade-offs.

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Note

1. A systematic search reveals that social accountability is most often used in Web of Science categories, including “Health care sciences services” ($N = 111$), “Education scientific disciplines” ($N = 89$), “Public environmental occupational health” ($N = 52$), and “Development studies” ($N = 41$) between 1980 and 2019.

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