

***Navigating between the state
and the streets***

*When and why social accountability matters for
public sector organisations*

Lars Brummel

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Navigating between the state and the streets
When and why social accountability matters for public
sector organisations

Navigeren tussen de staat en de straat
wanneer en waarom maatschappelijke verantwoording van belang
is voor publieke organisaties
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1. The many faces of social accountability

Are citizens, clients, users, and other societal stakeholders relevant within the wider web of accountability relationships of executive public sector organisations? According to some, they certainly are. Within the public administration literature, various books and articles have documented that public sector accountability has become increasingly pluralistic and diverse. In particular, there has been a trend towards a greater involvement of societal actors and groups in public sector accountability (Acar et al., 2008; Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000; Bovens, 2007; Dimova, 2020; Flinders, 2001; Papadopoulos, 2010; Pollitt, 2003; Schillemans, 2011; Verschuere et al., 2006; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). In modern governance, public sector organisations have to navigate between the state and the streets: they are not only hierarchically accountable to their political principals, but also horizontally to their various societal stakeholders. This latter type of accountability can reflect a wide array of practices and mechanisms in public administration. Consider for example the illustrations below.

Example 1. The *Central Administration Office* (CAK) in the Netherlands – a semi-autonomous agency that is responsible for the collection of financial contributions in the domains of healthcare and social care–installed a client council in 2018. The client council is an independent body consisting of seven individual members that all have personal experiences with the service delivery of the CAK. Client participation has been an important aspect of health and welfare policies in the Netherlands (Trappenburg, 2008; Van de Bovenkamp et al., 2010). For most other important agencies within the Dutch welfare state, client arrangements have been legally required. The CAK however introduced the client council on a voluntary basis. The client council meets several times per year with the Board of Directors of the CAK. The client council helps with identifying problems within the service delivery from a client’s perspective and can provide the CAK with solicited and unsolicited feedback on the quality of its services (see Chapter 5 of this dissertation).

Example 2. Many police departments use Twitter for direct accountability to citizens (Crump, 2011; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015). Think of regional and local police departments, such as the Utrecht police force (@POL_Utrecht) and the police force of Berlin (@polizeiberlin), but also national police services of countries ranging from New Zealand (@nzpolice) to Kenya (@PoliceKE). In 2010, the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) organised a Twitter Day, in which the police force “tweeted” about every incident that it dealt with over a period of 24 hours. At that time, the GMP was faced with potentially large budget cuts from the British government and the police department used Twitter to give the public an impression of the workload its officers face (Vanhommerig & Karré, 2014).

Example 3. During the European refugee crisis between 2015 and 2017, the Finnish Immigration Service was subject to critical debate and scrutiny on (online) media platforms. Particularly during the first few months of the refugee crisis, the agency was

held accountable by anti-immigrant and right-wing publics through constant monitoring and online criticisms. These publics used a variety of online media platforms for account-holding purposes, such as Twitter, Facebook, weblogs, and discussion forums. In response to the critical monitoring and scrutiny, the Immigration Service felt obliged to account for its conduct through public communication activities (Ojala et al., 2019).

Example 4. Imagine a fictional but realistic decision-making scenario that was used for the vignette experiment in Chapter 6. A safety region (or *veiligheidsregio* in Dutch) – a regional body that is responsible for security and emergency policies – decides on closing a fire station in a particular neighbourhood. To make a good decision, the safety region discusses its plans with residents of the neighbourhood. During several sessions, the safety region explains and justifies its decision. Citizens can ask questions and can also give their own ideas. The safety region states that it takes the ideas of citizens very seriously when implementing its new policies for the fire service.

These examples are some of the empirical manifestations of what can be labelled and regarded as so-called ‘social accountability’: citizen- and society-oriented forms of accountability (see Textbox 1.1. for definitions of accountability and social accountability). These many faces of social accountability have often been heralded with great expectations and social accountability has been considered as a “superlative” of the golden concept of accountability (Schillemans, 2007, p. 185). For example, Henry E. McCandless (2001, p. 318), an academic writer and former auditor general from Canada, argues: “*Holding to account does change the relationship between citizens and authorities. By holding to account and doing something sensible with the answering, we can control authorities instead of being controlled by them*”. Arnold Moerkamp, former CEO of the Dutch Healthcare Institute, stated in 2018, “in my opinion, citizen involvement in important governmental decisions is a *must* in order for being credible and trustworthy” (Moerkamp, 2018). Or in the words of Respondent 14 – a public official of a semi-autonomous agency in the Netherlands and one of the interviewees in Chapter 5 of this dissertation:

“My view is that client and user councils are only becoming more important. More and more important. Because look... you can have a meeting about the multiannual policy plan, and then the stakeholders can respond to it, but I can imagine that it will become more intensive. Because you have an increasingly open and transparent society, it means that you just say: hey, we really want to hear your opinion on this and that. We already do that, but maybe we’ll do that more often. That you actually have a kind of a constant and open communication line with your users... That’s my view, my own idea, I think that this will only intensify in the near future.”

However, social accountability also raises a range of questions. To what extent are client panels and stakeholder bodies, such as the client council of the CAK, actually able to keep public agencies in check? What drives public agencies to establish formal accountability relationships with their stakeholders? Can social accountability really function as a control mechanism or does it rather turn into a tool for impressions management, such as the Twitter Day of the Greater Manchester Police? What does a

social media storm do with public sector organisations, such as the Finnish Immigration Service? To what extent are social accountability arrangements helpful for increasing citizens' legitimacy perceptions of public sector organisations? Would citizens be more willing to accept the decision of the safety region to close the local fire station, if the safety region justifies and explains its decision to fellow citizens? Is social accountability really a *must* for the credibility and trustworthiness of the public sector, as Mr. Moerkamp has suggested? In other words, when and why does social accountability actually matter in practice?

Textbox 1.1. Defining accountability and social accountability.

In this dissertation, *accountability* refers to a specific relational mechanism that connects an account-giver (or accountable actor) with an account-holder (or accountability forum) in which the account-giver has and/or feels an obligation to explain and to justify its conduct to the account-holder, the account-holder can ask questions and the account-giver may face consequences (see e.g. Bovens, 2007, 2010; Bovens et al., 2014; Day & Klein, 1987; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). *Social accountability* reflects the direct and explicit accountability relationships of public sector organisations vis-à-vis citizens, clients, and societal actors (Brummel, 2021; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021). A further conceptualisation of social accountability can be found in Chapter 2.

1.2. *The quest for social accountability?*

Let us first look at the quest for social accountability in a greater detail. To start with, the call for social accountability can be positioned in the light of the increasing complexity of executive governance. Over the recent decades, the delivery of various governmental services and duties have been moved away from the state to new forms of governance that are insulated from politics and that operate at a distance from central government (Bovens et al., 1995; Flinders, 2001; Greve et al., 1999; Vibert, 2007). This resulted in a “rise of the unelected”: public policy implementation increasingly takes place through independent agencies, policy networks, multi-level governance arrangements, public-private partnerships and forms of coproduction and co-creation. In particular, a process of so-called “agencification” has taken place in many Western countries since the 1980s, whereby agencies have been created that became responsible for the execution and implementation of various public tasks such as public service delivery, regulation, and many others (Majone, 1994, 1999; Overman, 2016; Pollitt et al., 2001; Verhoest, 2017; Verhoest et al., 2012). Examples include various types of agencies, such as the Next Step Agencies in the United Kingdom, the Italian *Agenzia*, the German *Bundesoberbehörden*, and the Dutch ZBOs (*zelfstandige bestuursorganen*), but also forms of decentralised and multi-level regional governance, such as the safety regions (*veiligheidsregio's*) in the Netherlands and

other forms of inter-municipal cooperation (IMCs). As a result, “[m]odern governance is (...) dispersed across multiple centers of authority” (Hooghe & Marks, 2003, p. 233).

This “hollowing out of the state” (Rhodes, 1994) has spurred debates about its negative consequences for democratic legitimacy and accountability. Accountability has been presented as “a cornerstone of public governance and management” (Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000, p. 45), but empirical analyses and evaluations of accountability in modern governance tend to be pessimistic in nature. Accountability failures and deficits are commonly diagnosed. According to various scholars, traditional hierarchical and vertical lines of accountability have become more blurred in hybrid and horizontal governance arrangements, triggering the empirical question whether these can still guarantee control (see e.g. Flinders, 2001; Hupe & Edwards, 2012; Michels & Meijer, 2008; Van Kersbergen & Van Waarden, 2004). Scholars further suggest that citizens demand alternative forms of accountability in the modern state (Keane, 2009; Lewis et al., 2014; Romzek, 2000). As such, it has been argued that we should “rethink” accountability (Behn, 2001) or “come to terms with” accountability (Willems & Van Dooren, 2012) in order to make accountability “work” (Bovens et al., 2008) for this current era of governance. Given these challenges, how can accountability be safeguarded in modern governance?

To strengthen the accountability of executive governance, various authors have argued that new and innovative forms of public sector accountability are needed. Accountability can come in many different forms and guises other than hierarchical control (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). There are potentially many “watchful eyes” (Aleksavska, 2021) or so-called “accountability forums” (Bovens, 2007; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012) that can monitor public agencies and officials – with every breath they take and with every move they make.

The largest accountability forum to whom public authorities can be accountable is society at large. In current debates, scholars and politicians have argued that citizens, stakeholders, and societal actors should have a particular role in new practices of public accountability and can be important for holding agencies and officials accountable through various forms of social accountability. As Bovens (2007, p. 457) argues, “[a]gencies or individual public managers should feel obliged to account for their performance to the public at large or, at least, to civil interest groups, charities and associations of clients.” Mulgan (2000, p. 568) suggests: “[p]ublic officials have been encouraged to be more directly approachable and accommodating to members of the public and less concerned with following set procedures or deferring to the instructions of their bureaucratic superiors.”

Pleas for social accountability can be positioned in broader debates about the transformation of representative democracy and public accountability. In recent years, a “monitory turn” (Dimova, 2020, p. 263) has become more prominent in political thinking that broadens the scope and opportunities for accountability and that has been reflected in debates around “monitory democracy” (Keane, 2009) and “counter-democracy” (Rosanvallon, 2008). This monitory turn challenges the privileged position of elections

as the main accountability mechanism in democratic societies and embraces new forms of accountability through non-electoral representation (see also Van Reybrouck, 2018). In this view on democracy, accountability becomes decentralised and there is no single or dominant centre of accountability – accountability rather has multiple centres, forms and layers (Dimova, 2020; Flinders, 2011).

Across the globe, the idea of social accountability has become popular among a range of politicians, political parties, and political institutions. For example, the World Bank has embraced social accountability in one of its reports in 2004 as a contribution to improved governance, better service delivery, and civic empowerment (Malena et al., 2004). For developing countries in the Global South, social accountability is often presented as an alternative to the weak vertical and horizontal accountability mechanisms that are associated with corruption and fraud (Fox, 2015; Joshi & Houtzager, 2012). In Europe, various politicians have favoured social accountability as an important accountability innovation, including, amongst others, David Cameron, former British Prime Minister, who stated in 2010 as part of his ‘Big Society’ agenda:

“In the system of bureaucratic accountability almost everything is measured or judged against a set of targets and performance indicators, monitored and inspected centrally. That was the past. We intend to do things differently, very differently. We want to replace the old system of bureaucratic accountability with a new system of democratic accountability – accountability to the people, not the government machine (...) To give you just one example: instead of teachers thinking they have to impress the Department of Education, they have to impress local parents as they have a real choice over where to send their child.” (Cameron, 2010)

In the Netherlands, the social liberal political party Democrats 66 (D66) proposed in its most recent election manifesto in 2021 that public sector organisations should be obliged to be accountable to clients and users by the means of the introduction of a ‘horizontal accountability requirement’: *“this means that directors and managers should not only be accountable to an inspectorate or a supervisory board, but also to the users of the services they offer”* (D66, 2021, p. 128). Furthermore, particular forms of societal and citizen-directed accountability are embraced by populist movements across the globe that favour greater citizen control over bureaucratic institutions by strengthening the direct accountability of the nation’s public administration to the general public (Moynihan, 2022; Stoker, 2019).

Social accountability has further been supported in various academic discourses, in which the concept has been favoured by participatory democrats, advocates of New Public Management (NPM) and supporters of stakeholder involvement in collaborative governance. Participatory democrats embrace social accountability as a form of democratic innovation. They argue that it contributes to the renewal and strengthening of democracy by creating some direct control of citizens over public bodies and service providers and, by increasing the range of influence points available to citizens in public sector decision-making. Social accountability can create more open and inclusive accountability practices, in particular for societal groups that are most (dis)affected by

agencies' policies and decisions, thereby creating new avenues for participatory forms of bureaucracy (Moffitt, 2014). As such, social accountability answers to the calls for more participatory and direct elements of citizen involvement in modern-day representative democracies (see e.g. Barber, 1984; Goodin, 2008; Pateman, 1970).

Elements of social accountability can also be traced back in many public management reforms that have been inspired by the discourse of NPM, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. Under the influence of NPM, public sector organisations were expected to become more responsive and client-oriented (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Hood, 1991). An important aim of NPM-related reforms was to complement existing accountability structures with new forms of social accountability towards clients, users, and customers for improving public sector performance. These types of social accountability are often market-based in nature and further include elements of choice and competition (Lægreid, 2014). These elements were introduced in particular “to put citizens in the *driver's seat*, making them in charge of their service provision” (Tummers et al., 2014, p. 9). Within such a framework, social accountability can be seen as part of an alternative democratic model of the “supermarket state” (Christensen & Lægreid, 2002, p. 280), that presupposes that governments and agencies have a service-providing role and that defines citizens in their role as clients, users or customers. Rather than following a participatory logic, NPM-inspired pleas for social accountability were inspired and guided by a “consumer logic” (Aberbach & Christensen, 2005).

In the last decades, under the influence of post-NPM reforms in public administration, the NPM-related focus on citizens as consumers has been supplemented and partly overshadowed by a general view of encouraging wider public participation in the public service system (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011). In New Public Governance (NPG), there has been a strong emphasis on multiple forms of accountability, including account-giving to stakeholders and citizens, and on the participation of a wide variety of stakeholders in public problem-solving and public service production (Tørfing & Triantafyllou, 2013; see also Osborne, 2006). Hansen et al. (2022) refer to the ‘stakeholder logic’ as the main justification of social accountability within the paradigm of collaborative and interactive governance. In NPG-based modes of governance, citizens can be involved in accountability practices and processes beyond their client interests and can hold governmental organisations accountable based on the principle of affected interests (Mulgan, 2003).

Yet, it is important to note that social accountability has also been associated with several practical and normative challenges. Beyond its proponents, social accountability also has its sceptics and critics. Whereas social accountability sometimes is presented as a “genuine scrutiny option” (Willems & Van Dooren, 2012, p. 1029) or as a direct democratic form of accountability that improves “democratic governance by linking citizen responses to public services directly to the public sector organisations that provide these services” (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009, p. 259), empirical research shows that social

accountability is associated with several pitfalls and challenges. Social accountability is portrayed as a weak form of accountability that tends to be highly symbolic in nature (see e.g. Aleksovska, 2021; Lindén, 2015; Meijer, 2007, 2014).

Furthermore, various scholars do not consider social accountability as a tool for strengthening (democratic) accountability, but rather perceive social accountability as a challenge or obstacle to agency accountability. They warn against the problematic nature of social accountability for representative government and the ‘primacy of politics’. Social accountability cannot be considered as a full substitute for democratic control and it does not strengthen democratic legitimacy, because forms of social accountability do not have a formal democratic and electoral mandate (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021; Michels & Meijer, 2008; Papadopoulos, 2007, 2010). The customer logic, reflected in NPM discourses, has been criticised, particularly in recent years, as “consumerism” reflects a market-driven but very limited understanding of citizenship that puts a strong focus on individual client preferences, and ignores the role of broader public interests and democratic values in public sector accountability (Aberbach & Christensen, 2005; Christensen & Lægreid, 2002). Within debates on accountability in collaborative governance, the ‘stakeholder logic’ has also been associated with multiple problems from a democratic perspective. As Hansen et al. (2022, p. 17) suggest, “scholars ascribing to the stakeholder logic must consider the political costs of endorsing forms of accountability and legitimacy that short-circuit the oversight (not to say influence) conducted by political representatives of the wider electorate”. Papadopoulos (2010) for example criticizes the stakeholder logic by pointing out that social accountability is not a solution for enhancing the lack of democratic legitimacy within collaborative governance arrangements, but that the stakeholder logic rather reflects a shift from government of and by the people to governance with some of the people. As Papadopoulos (2010, pp. 1042–1043) concludes: “*broad organised pluralism cannot be a corrective to the uncoupling of governance networks from the democratic (representative) circuit*”. These critical remarks show that social accountability is not an uncontested and problem-free democratic innovation in public policy implementation but has also been associated with several challenges for representative democracy.

In the light of these current debates about social accountability, this dissertation seeks to improve our empirical understanding of the actual functioning of social accountability for public agencies and public sector organisations. The aim of this dissertation is therefore to understand when and why social accountability matters. Is social accountability actually important for public agencies? When is social accountability most relevant to public agencies and their CEOs? For what purposes do agency representatives consider social accountability as important? And does social accountability also matter for the legitimacy and trustworthiness of public sector organisations in the citizen’s eyes? It is these kinds of questions that will be addressed in this dissertation.

1.3. Central research puzzle: when and why does social accountability matter

As discussed above, social accountability has been a major topic of normative and theoretical debates about the state and future of accountability in democratic governance. Social accountability is presented as a solution for improving the accountability of executive governance, but it has also been seriously questioned. A large part of this debate is theoretical and normative, while our empirical understanding of social accountability – about its drivers and its relevance within executive governance – has several important limitations. This is where the empirical research endeavour of this dissertation starts. In particular, the aim of this doctoral study is to improve our understanding about *when* and *why* does social accountability matter in the context of executive governance. Therefore, the focus of this dissertation is on five major research challenges that are related to social accountability.

An initial challenge is a conceptual one: social accountability does not have “a fixed format” (Meijer, 2007, p. 168), but can include a range of processes and practices that are directed to a multiplicity of downward and societal stakeholders – for a glimpse of the diversity of practices and processes that can be considered as social accountability, see the examples of social accountability presented in Section 1.1. As forms and modes of social accountability are often not clearly demarcated and, social accountability takes place through multiple settings, venues, and mechanisms, it can easily become a concept that is hard to study empirically. Empirical research on social accountability has focused on forms such as websites, (social) media, client panels, citizen oversight, advisory boards, and consultative procedures with users/stakeholders (Ali & Pirog, 2019; Lindén, 2015; Mattei et al., 2018; Ojala et al., 2019). The literature about social accountability faces a large variation in scope and precision about the set of account-holders to whom organisations can potentially give an account, ranging from the “public at large” (Christensen & Lodge, 2018) or the “court of public opinion” (Moore, 2014) to the news media, civil society organisations, interest groups and even individual citizens and clients. This is also reflected by the many synonyms and related terms that social accountability is associated with, such as ‘societal accountability’ (Smulovitz & Peruzzotti, 2000), ‘stakeholder accountability’ (Meijer, 2007), ‘citizen accountability’ (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009), ‘citizen-initiated accountability’ (Schillemans et al., 2013) ‘media accountability’ (Maggetti, 2012), ‘media-covered accountability’ (S. Jacobs et al., 2021), ‘downward accountability’ (Verschuere et al., 2006) or ‘participatory accountability’ (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Thomann et al., 2018). Before we can know when and why social accountability does matter, we first need to have a clear understanding of what is meant by ‘social accountability’. Thus the first challenge is to improve our conceptual understanding of social accountability.

Furthermore, the actual impact and influence of social accountability on executive governance have been debated. This is particularly related to the fact that social accountability often faces problems in terms of weak judgement and sanctioning

opportunities (Bovens, 2007; Lindén, 2015). It has even been questioned whether forms of social accountability can reflect a full accountability mechanism. The influence and importance of social accountability can sometimes be minimal, symbolic or non-existent. However, there is empirical research that suggests that social accountability can have a relevant impact on decision-making and behaviour in the public (Byrkjeflot et al., 2014; Ojala et al., 2019; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013; Schillemans, 2008, 2011). Although these studies seem to suggest that social accountability can matter, our understanding of *when* social accountability matters can still be improved. In particular, the political environment of public agencies, including accountability relationships with their parent department and the political and media salience of their agency tasks, has been considered as an important explanation for the prevalence of social accountability arrangements (Koop, 2014; Schillemans, 2008). However, it remains relatively undiscovered how these factors correlate to the perceived relevance of social accountability for agencies and their agency-CEOs. Also, the societal environment of agencies might influence perceptions of the relevance of social accountability: different forms of social accountability can “trigger” a different level of attention and a different response of agency-CEOs. In many Western democracies, stakeholder arrangements have been implemented in the public sector in order to strengthen the social accountability of agencies (Schillemans, 2011; Van Thiel, 2019). In recent years, social media has been presented as an important addition to the accountability environment of public agencies (Ojala et al., 2019; Vrangbæk & Byrkjeflot, 2016). Our understanding of which forms of social accountability are more likely to matter is still limited. Thus, the second and third challenges are to understand *when* social accountability matters and, in particular, how both the (a) political and (b) societal environment of public agencies relate to the importance of social accountability.

Next to *when* social accountability matters for public agencies, a subsequent question is *why* social accountability does matter for public agencies. As social accountability cannot rely upon hierarchical or sanctioning powers, the public administration literature has focused on alternative mechanisms for explaining the relevance of social accountability for public sector organisations. Particularly, scholars have stressed the importance of different motivations and motivational drivers for public agencies to strengthen their accountability relationships vis-à-vis societal stakeholders. Social accountability might be explained by different logics of action. The accountability of public agencies is suggested to be driven by a ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March & Olsen, 2011; see also Koop, 2014), but accountability-seeking behaviour can also be explained in the light of potential costs and benefits (De Boer, 2021; Karsten, 2015). In recent years, there has been growing attention for the role of reputational considerations in the accountability behaviour of public agencies. Accountability can be an important mechanism to cultivate reputation and legitimacy (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017). A comprehensive overview of the role of these different motivations for account-givers in social accountability would improve our understanding of why social accountability can matter for public agencies. Therefore, a fourth challenge is to improve our understanding of *why* social accountability matters.

The accountability literature is not only concerned about how public authorities respond to social accountability, but also shows an interest in the legitimizing impact of social accountability on society at large (Christensen & Lodge, 2018; Wood, 2015). One of the often-pitched expectations of social accountability is that it can strengthen the perceived legitimacy of public sector organisations and increase citizens' trust in and support for the public sector (Bovens, 2007, 2010; Halachmi & Holzer, 2010). According to Bovens (2007, p. 457), a potential contribution of social accountability arrangements is that they might contribute to restoring "a perceived lack of trust in government". In governmental decision-making, you can't always get what you want. Obtaining citizens' consent with decisions— and particularly that of so-called 'decision losers' —, is therefore a fundamental challenge for public authorities in democratic societies (see e.g. Anderson et al., 2005; Grimes, 2006; Werner & Marien, 2022). In academic and societal debates, it is suggested that citizens might be more likely to accept public decisions if they know that their authorities justify and explain these decisions towards their fellow citizens. As such, social accountability can help to foster public consent. However, despite these potential benefits, the accountability literature has shown limited attention for citizens' attitudes towards and their expectations about social accountability. Our empirical understanding of the nexus between social accountability and citizens' perceived legitimacy remains limited and requires more empirical research. Does social accountability actually matter for citizens and their legitimacy perceptions? A fifth and final challenge is thus to test whether and to what extent social accountability is associated with an increase in citizens' legitimacy perceptions.

To summarize, the research challenges that this dissertation aims to address are fivefold. The empirical study of social accountability faces the challenge of a (1) relatively unclear and elusive concept with high normative expectations but unclear and incompatible conceptualisations. It is further unclear *when* social accountability matters for public agencies, and, particularly, whether and to what extent characteristics of the (2) political and (3) societal environment of public agencies relates to the perceived relevance of social accountability for agency-CEOs. Additionally, a subsequent research gap remains (4) *why* social accountability matters for public agencies. Finally, there is no clear empirical evidence that shows that (5) social accountability does in fact matter for the legitimacy of executive governance, as perceived by citizens. These research challenges are the five research gaps that will be addressed in this dissertation.

1.4. Research questions

The central ambition of this dissertation is to improve our empirical understanding of when and why social accountability matters in the context of executive governance. The main research question is therefore outlined as: *When and why does social accountability matter?*

To answer this research question, five sub questions have been formulated in order to address the main research question in a systematic and empirical way. These questions

will guide the five subsequent chapters in this dissertation. They address the various research gaps with regards to the empirical study of social accountability in executive governance that were discussed in Section 1.3. Below, I present the five sub questions and I discuss how they are related to the main research question, as well as how they are studied and answered in this dissertation.

A first sub question (RQ1) is: *How can we better understand social accountability?* This question addresses the first research gap and reflects an important question as it contributes to our conceptual understanding of social accountability. Answering the question further provides the relevant theoretical and conceptual ground for answering the four subsequent empirical research questions. Based upon a literature review, this first sub question will be addressed in Chapter 2.

The second and third sub questions are both relevant for understanding *when* social accountability matters for public agencies. The second sub question (RQ2) reads as: *To what extent are characteristics of the political environment of public agencies associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs?* This question relates to the second research gap by focusing on how the political environment of public agencies can be of relevance for the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs. This question will be answered by the means of survey research of N=575 agency-CEOs from seven different countries, including N=67 agency-CEOs from Dutch agencies (ZBOs and *agentschappen*). The answer to this sub question will be presented in Chapter 3.

Related to this, a third sub question (RQ3) is formulated: *To what extent are characteristics of the societal environment of public agencies associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs?* This question is important for understanding when social accountability matters. The chapter focus on the role of characteristics of the societal environment of public agencies for explaining when social accountability matters, and, as such, it addresses the third research gap. The answer to this question will be based upon a mixed methods design with a quantitative survey of N=103 agency-CEOs from the Netherlands and with two qualitative focus groups with N=14 participants, including agency-CEOs and agency representatives. Chapter 4 answers this third sub question.

Moving our attention to *why* social accountability matters for public agencies, the fourth sub question (RQ4) addresses this research gap and is formulated as: *How do agency representatives describe the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements within public agencies in their own words?* The focus will be on individual motivational drivers within public agencies for involving societal stakeholders in stakeholder arrangements, as this can potentially function as an important venue for social accountability. Chapter 5 will provide an answer to this sub question based upon qualitative interviews of N=25 agency representatives from nine Dutch agencies.

Finally, the dissertation seeks to answer whether social accountability does matter for citizens and their legitimacy perceptions of executive governance. The fifth sub question (RQ5) reads as: *What is the influence of social and political accountability arrangements*

for citizens' legitimacy perceptions? This question is important, because it brings our attention to the final research problem in the study of social accountability: understanding whether and to what extent social accountability matters for citizens' legitimacy perceptions. An experimental design with N=1574 citizens from the Netherlands will provide an answer to this fifth and final sub question. The results of this vignette experiment can be found in Chapter 6 of this dissertation.

1.5. Research approach and methodology: how to study social accountability?

This dissertation uses multiple methods, including survey research (Chapters 3 and 4), focus groups (Chapter 4), qualitative interviewing (Chapter 5) and survey experiments (Chapter 6). The dissertation thus has a high level of methodological pluralism and diversification. Each empirical chapter will zoom in on issues of case selection, data collection, measurement, data analysis, and (other) methodological issues that are most relevant to a particular study. Yet, these various chapters all have in common that they aim to better understand social accountability through an individual-level perspective. This individual-level approach to accountability connects the different empirical chapters in the dissertation and, as such, forms the consistent empirical strategy of this dissertation.

An individual-level approach to accountability has become prominent in public administration research. While the formal and institutional design of accountability still remains important, various scholars have recently argued that the functioning of accountability is crucially influenced by how both individual account-givers and account-holders think and feel about these relationships (see e.g. Aleksavska, 2021; Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Han & Perry, 2020; Karsten, 2015; Overman & Schillemans, 2022). Accountability involves human work: accountability demands directed to public sector organisations are perceived and mitigated by individuals leading or working for the organisations, while these individual managers and officials can also be important as the 'accountability providers' (Karsten, 2012) or 'accountability entrepreneurs' (Bovens, 2005) in shaping the account-giving behaviour or accountability strategies of their organisations. The way in which individual public managers "perceive, order and deal with" accountability can therefore be crucial for actual accountability processes and practices at the organisational level (Yang, 2012, p. 256). Particularly, the individual members of a "governing coalition" within an agency (Cyert & March, 1992), including CEOs and high-ranked agency officials, can have an important impact on how an organisation deals with accountability on a strategic level. Or, as Sinclair (1995, p. 220) argued in her important work on public accountability: "efforts to improve accountability would be informed by an understanding of the diversity of ways in which managers construct, hold and enact a sense of being accountable."

In the past years, an individual-level approach to accountability is reflected in the increased attention of public administration scholars for the *felt accountability* of public

managers and officials (Overman & Schillemans, 2022; see also Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2022; Schillemans et al., 2021b; Wood et al., 2022). This stream of literature largely builds upon experimental research in social psychology and behavioural sciences. Felt accountability can be defined as “[t]he implicit or explicit expectation that one’s decisions or actions will be subject to evaluation by some salient audience(s) with the belief that there exists the potential for one to receive either rewards or sanctions based on this expected evaluation” (Hochwarter et al., 2007, p. 227). An important insight from the social psychological and behavioural literature is that the same accountability mechanism could be perceived differently by different individuals (Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Hall & Ferris, 2011). These individual perceptions of accountability are an important driver for individuals’ actions and behaviours (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Tetlock, 1992) and are suggested to be a relevant micro-level foundation for the organisational outcomes of accountability processes (Han & Perry, 2020; Overman & Schillemans, 2022). As Hall et al. (2017, p. 208) have argued, individual-level felt accountability might be “the most pervasive (and perhaps even the most powerful) single influence on human social behaviour.” Based upon these insights, this dissertation uses related concepts, such as the perceived relevance of social accountability (Chapter 3) and stakeholder orientation (Chapter 4), to tap into this individual and perceptual dimension of social accountability. Studying when social accountability is more likely to trigger the individual attention of agency-CEOs provides us therefore with a good indicator of when social accountability does matter for public agencies.

Additionally, the role of individuals’ motivations and motivational drivers has been considered important within the literature on public sector accountability. Individual motivations can be a relevant driver for how accountability takes place in practice, particularly when these processes and practices are (partially) self-imposed or voluntary. For agency managers and officials, the public administration literature has shown that there can be a multiplicity of motivations to engage more (voluntarily) in accountability practices (De Boer, 2021, 2022; Koop, 2014), ranging from moral and professional norms of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 2011) and learning objectives (Schillemans, 2011) to reputational considerations (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017) and strategic concerns (Karsten, 2015). Studying the different types of motivations of agency representatives in the context of social accountability can be very meaningful and relevant, because these “accountability providers” (Karsten, 2012, p. 148) shape the accountability relationships of their agencies with societal stakeholders in practice. This research approach and focus will guide Chapter 5 of the dissertation.

With regards to the nexus between social accountability and legitimacy, this dissertation also takes an individual-level approach (see Chapter 6). While legitimacy can be a concept that is difficult to measure directly (Thomas, 2014), a micro-level perspective on legitimacy focuses on the legitimacy beliefs and perceptions that citizens have about their political and governmental authorities. From a micro-level perspective, legitimacy is considered as “a psychological property of an authority, institution, or social

arrangement that leads those connected to it to believe that it is appropriate, proper, and just” (Tyler, 2006, p. 375). Legitimacy can be assessed based on citizens’ evaluations of whether political institutions and authorities are considered to act in a rightful, appropriate, and fair way. A focus on legitimacy perceptions and beliefs is common used in disciplines, such a psychology, law, political science, and public administration (see e.g. De Fine Licht et al., 2014; Esaiasson et al., 2019; Grimes, 2006; Grimmeliikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; Mazepus, 2017; Tyler, 1988, 2006; Van den Bos et al., 1998; Werner & Marien, 2022). By focusing on how (social) accountability affects citizens’ legitimacy perceptions about executive governance, this dissertation thus uses the individual as an unit of analysis and focuses specifically on the legitimacy of authorities as perceived by citizens. It thereby provides a novel perspective to theoretical and macro-level debates about the connections between social accountability and legitimacy.

1.6. Studying social accountability in the Netherlands

The empirical research of this dissertation focuses on social accountability in the context of Dutch executive governance. The Netherlands offers a relevant country context for the study of social accountability for various reasons. Traditionally, executive governance in the Netherlands is marked by the strong involvement of societal actors in public policy making and implementation (Hendriks & Tops, 2001; Mol et al., 2021; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a). The Netherlands has often been classified as a neo-corporatist country, where societal actors are incorporated in (informal) processes of governance, decision-making and deliberation (Kickert, 2003). From an international perspective, the accountability style of Dutch agencies can be characterised as highly horizontal and society-oriented (Schillemans et al., 2022). Attention-grabbing accountability interventions have taken place within the Dutch public sector which were focused on strengthening the horizontal and social accountability relations of public sector organisations. For example, five Dutch agencies established the Public Accountability Charter in 2000, in which they announced to give more account to their societal stakeholders and society at large (Bovens, 2005; Koop, 2014; Yesilkagit, 2004). Also in policy domains, such as education, health care, and social housing, recent attempts have been made to promote and strengthen social accountability (Brandsen et al., 2010; Meijer, 2007; Oude Vrielink et al., 2009).

This dissertation focuses on various types of public sector organisations. Chapter 3 investigates the relevance of social accountability for agency-CEOs of both *ZBOs* (independent administrative bodies) and *agentschappen* (departmental agencies). Both legal types of organisations belong to the most common types of agencies in the Netherlands. Departmental agencies (type I agencies, see Verhoest et al., 2020) exist since the new public management-style reforms in the early 1990s divorced these agencies from their parent departments. Departmental agencies have a semi-autonomous position, although they have no legal identity and fall under full ministerial responsibility (Smullen et al., 2001; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a). The other type of agencies, *ZBOs*, or type II

agencies, are legally independent entities with limited ministerial responsibility and high managerial autonomy (De Kruijf & Van Thiel, 2018; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a). There can be a large diversity across ZBOs in terms of task portfolio, size, and funding. ZBOs are a dominant feature in the Dutch administrative system – in 2020, there were more than one-hundred ZBOs in the Netherlands (Mol et al., 2021). In addition to ZBOs and departmental agencies, the empirical study of Chapter 4 also includes *adviescolleges* (advisory councils) and *planbureaus* (planning agencies). These types of organisations operate at a distance from the parent department and form an important part of the policy evaluation and advisory system in Dutch public administration (Halffman, 2009; Mol et al., 2021; Putters & Van Twist, 2007). Chapter 5 focuses on stakeholder arrangements of nine large ZBOs. An overview of these nine different agencies can be found in Table 5.1. Chapter 6 moves our attention to the regional tier of Dutch governance and focuses on a hypothetical decision-making procedure by a so-called safety region (or *veiligheidsregio* in Dutch). Safety regions are public bodies that operate in the domains of security and emergency policies in a specified regional area that covers the full territories of multiple municipalities. From an accountability perspective, safety regions offer a relevant research context. As safety regions are not directly managed and controlled by elected politicians, this has spurred debates about their democratic accountability (Muller et al., 2020).

The focus of this dissertation on Dutch executive governance raises questions about the generalizability of this dissertation’s findings. Administrative cultures and traditions can have a strong impact on the accountability styles of public sector organisations (Bach et al., 2017; Schillemans et al., 2022). The Netherlands can be considered as a critical case and a “most likely case” that is appropriate for falsifying some of the propositions in the accountability literature but might be limited for tests of verification (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Several empirical chapters discuss and reflect upon the generalizability of their empirical findings beyond the case of the Netherlands. Importantly, Chapter 3 puts the findings from the Dutch case in an internationally comparative perspective by comparing survey data from agency-CEOs in the Netherlands with agency-heads in six different Western democracies. Chapter 7 further includes a broader discussion about the implications of country context for social accountability and the generalizability of the dissertation’s main findings.

1.7. The academic relevance of the dissertation

The academic relevance of the dissertation is threefold. First, this dissertation makes an *empirical contribution* to the broad and dispersed body of literature about new and alternative forms of accountability in executive governance, by providing a detailed empirical account of when and why social accountability matters in executive governance. This dissertation empirically tests some of the often-claimed expectations and assumptions about social accountability. For example, Chapter 4 shows if and when social accountability can trigger the attention of agency-CEOs for their stakeholder environment (Damgaard & Lewis,

2014; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009; Pollitt, 2003). Chapter 6 tests Bovens' (2007; 2010) claim that social accountability arrangements can contribute to the perceived legitimacy of governmental organisations and can increase public trust in government. As such, this dissertation provides a fine-grained empirical understanding of how social accountability works in practice.

Second, the dissertation also makes a *theoretical contribution* by theorizing when and why social accountability matters and using multiple theories to explain social accountability, its antecedents, and its outcomes. As social accountability is not based upon formal ownership and hierarchy, but rather takes place through non-hierarchical and often informal and voluntary interactions. Accountability scholars have proposed alternative explanations for the relevance of these horizontal and non-hierarchical forms of accountability that go beyond the dominance of principal-agent understanding of accountability (Schillemans & Busuioc, 2015). In recent years, novel perspectives on accountability, such as a behavioural perspective (Aleksovska, 2021; Han & Perry, 2020; Overman & Schillemans, 2022; Schillemans, 2016) and a reputational perspective (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017; Carpenter, 2014; Maor, 2014) on accountability, have made their way into public administration literature and shone a new light on accountability, which is promising for better explaining how social accountability works. In light of increasing (social) media pressures on executive governance, the mediatisation literature also offers theoretical ground to the study of social accountability and can be particularly helpful for explaining the importance of social media for social accountability (see e.g. Chadwick, 2017; Schillemans, 2012). Finally, the dissertation also uses insights from procedural fairness literature to theorize the effects of social accountability on citizens' legitimacy perceptions (Esaiasson et al., 2019; Lind et al., 1990; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2000, 2006; Van den Bos et al., 1998). As such, the dissertation develops an individual-level understanding of social accountability that combines and incorporates insights from the behavioural literature on accountability, reputation theory, the mediatisation literature, and procedural fairness theory.

Third, the dissertation makes a *methodological contribution* by showing how the use of multiple methods can contribute to a more nuanced empirical understanding of social accountability. The public administration literature on accountability has been dominated by qualitative case study designs (Bovens et al., 2008; Schillemans, 2013; Yang, 2014). Yang (2012, p. 274) called for methodological pluralism in accountability research for "capturing the complex realities of accountability as each research approach makes unique contribution to our understanding." In recent years, the accountability literature has witnessed an increasing use of quantitative methods, such as experimental research (Aleksovska, 2021; Bouwman et al., 2018; Tu & Gong, 2022) and large-N survey research (Bach et al., 2017; Reddick et al., 2020; Schillemans et al., 2021b). This dissertation combines both qualitative and quantitative, including experimental methods, to strengthen our understanding of when and why social accountability matters in

executive governance. The different empirical chapters draw on a quantitative study (Chapter 3), a qualitative study (Chapter 5) and an experiment (Chapter 6). Chapter 4 is multi-methodological in nature, where main insights come from a quantitative study to which qualitative focus groups are added to provide further insights into some of the statistical patterns that were found. As such, the dissertation contributes to the field of accountability research by showing how the use and combination of various methods can be helpful for understanding the multiple aspects, antecedents and outcomes associated with public sector accountability.

1.8. The societal relevance of the dissertation

Next to its academic relevance, this dissertation also holds societal relevance. First, this doctoral study gives empirical insights into the relevance and importance of social accountability for executive governance. As Section 1.2. has shown, social accountability has been promoted in multiple political programs and many public management reforms. Politicians and scholars have argued for the implementation of accountability interventions in order to strengthen social accountability of executive governance. Furthermore, the role and relevance of social media platforms for public sector accountability have led to public debates – in which social media is both presented as a valuable addition to, and a potential challenge for accountability. Yet, these discussions often lack a clear understanding of the actual impact of social accountability within the public sector. There has, for example, been an over-simplified and stereotypical image of public agencies as closed institutions that are unresponsive and unwilling to listen to citizens (Bertram et al., 2022; Szydlowski et al., 2022), while some politicians and political institutions swear by the effectiveness and importance of certain accountability practices – such as David Cameron, the World Bank, or a group of politicians from D66. In this dissertation, I aim to provide scientific and empirical nuances to these debates about the state of social accountability within executive governance by showing when and how social accountability actually matters for public agencies.

Second, this study aims to provide a more fine-grained understanding of the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements within public agencies. Stakeholder arrangements are presented as a valuable instrument for strengthening democratic and public control over executive governance, but are further associated with multiple problems and challenges in practice (see e.g. Arras & Braun, 2018; Busuioc & Jevnaker, 2022; Lindén, 2015; Moffitt, 2010; Schillemans, 2008, 2011). In the Netherlands, for example, there has been a renewed interest for the role of client and stakeholder panels in the public sector, particularly in response to some recent scandals and fiascos in public policy implementation (Dekkers et al., 2021; Tijdelijke Commissie Uitvoeringsorganisaties, 2021). Chapter 5 unpacks the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements by focusing on *why* stakeholder arrangements matter for public agencies. These insights can be relevant for practice by providing policy-makers and agency officials with an overview

of different organisational purposes and motivations that stakeholder arrangements can potentially serve. The findings might further lead to more realistic expectations about the contributions of stakeholder arrangements to agency accountability.

Third, and finally, the dissertation investigates whether social accountability arrangements can be a potential and helpful tool for strengthening citizens' legitimacy perceptions. Although it has been often claimed (see for example Moerkamp's quote in Section 1.1.), empirical evidence for a relationship between social accountability and citizens' legitimacy perceptions remains rather limited. This information is societally relevant and can be highly important for public sector organisations, because it is a key challenge in modern-day governance to maintain citizens' consent to unpopular and difficult decisions (see e.g. De Fine Licht et al., 2022; Werner & Marien, 2022). As such, insights from this dissertation can inform debates about social accountability with an empirically grounded analysis about when and why social accountability matters.

1.9. Outline of the dissertation

To conclude Chapter 1, let us take a look ahead at the remaining chapters of this dissertation. The next chapter, Chapter 2, will present the theoretical and conceptual pillar of this dissertation by defining and conceptualizing social accountability based upon a review of the existing literature about social accountability. The empirical research of this dissertation will be presented in Chapters 3 – 6. Based upon survey research, Chapter 3 discusses the relevance of social accountability for agency-CEOs of agencies in the Netherlands in an international-comparative perspective and will further show how the relevance of social accountability are related characteristics of the political environment of public agencies. Next, Chapter 4 presents how and to what extent characteristics of the societal environment of public agencies are associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs. The chapter does so by combining quantitative findings from a large-N survey with qualitative findings from focus group discussions. Chapter 5 devotes attention to the motivational drivers of social accountability and provides insights into which motivations can explain the importance of stakeholder arrangements within nine different public agencies in the Netherlands. Chapter 6 considers the effects of social and political accountability arrangements on citizens' legitimacy perceptions about executive governance by presenting the empirical findings of a vignette experiment. Table 1.1. provides an overview of the chapters, including the questions that these chapters answer and the research approach that has been used to answer these questions. Finally, the dissertation ends with Chapter 7 – the conclusion and discussion – in which the empirical findings will be discussed, the central research question will be answered, and various scientific and societal implications of the dissertation will be presented.

Table 1.1. Overview of chapters and questions of the dissertation.

Chapter	Research question	Research approach	Publication status
Chapter 2	How can we better understand social accountability?	Literature review	Published in <i>Administration & Society</i>
Chapter 3	To what extent are characteristics of the political environment of public agencies associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs?	Quantitative design with N=575 agency-CEOs from seven different countries	Published in <i>Bestuurswetenschappen</i> (co-authored with Sjors Overman and Thomas Schillemans)
Chapter 4	To what extent are characteristics of the societal environment of public agencies associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs?	Mixed methods design with a quantitative survey of N=103 agency-CEOs from the Netherlands and two qualitative focus groups with N=14 participants, including agency-CEOs and agency representatives	Published in <i>Public Administration</i>
Chapter 5	How do agency representatives describe the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements within public agencies in their own words?	Qualitative design with interviews of N=25 agency representatives from nine Dutch agencies	Paper under review
Chapter 6	What is the influence of social and political accountability arrangements for citizens' legitimacy perceptions?	Experimental design with N=1574 citizens from the Netherlands	Paper under review (co-authored with Lisanne de Blok)



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CHAPTER 2

Conceptualizing social accountability

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 conceptualisations, high normative expectations, and sobering findings. This study 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 behavioural styles within social accountability. By distinguishing different styles of account-holding and account-giving, this study shows that social accountability could serve multiple purposes that go beyond rosy ideals.

2.1. Introduction

Public organisations often operate in ‘complex web of accountabilities’ in which they may be scrutinised 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 organisations to account (Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019; Ojala et al., 2019; Reddick et al., 2020). Bovens (2007, p. 457) 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”. Engaging the public in public accountability is viewed with normative expectations (McCandless, 2001; Moore, 2014). As ‘accountability’ is seen as a ‘golden concept’ (Bovens, 2007, p. 448), direct accountability of public organisations to citizens, stakeholders, and the public at large 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 organisations 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 organisations and, as such, it forms a potential remedy against problems of democratic legitimacy and the possibilities of ‘accountability deficits’ (Mulgan, 2014). In addition, the changing political environment in most Western democracies – with rising populism, intense politicisation 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 (Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019, pp. 334–335).

Despite increasing academic and popular attention, the conceptualisation 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 (Bovens, 2007; Sinclair, 1995; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012), the concept of social accountability often remains loosely discussed and demarcated. Whereas social accountability empirically 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 (Bovens, 2007).

Furthermore, the literature about social accountability faces a large variation in scope and precision about the set of account-holders to whom organisations 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 institutionalised 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 (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, p. 19) argue, social accountability might be a concept “infused with too many daydreams”.

Given these challenges in the literature, the purpose of this chapter is to develop a conceptual framework to study the functioning of social accountability of public sector organisations in practice. In order to develop a structured theoretical discussion of social accountability, we have used 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. Secondly, it is primarily used in public administration and political science, our fields of interest. Thirdly, its baseline definition is comparable and can be used in conjunction with other leading contributions to accountability theory (Bovens et al., 2014, p. 7). Fourthly and finally, it is one of the most cited operationalisations of accountability in the current literature and it provides a clear and structured conceptualisation 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 chapter systemically 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 chapter 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 chapter further develops a typology of the (d) major behavioural strategies by both public entities (as account-givers) and by citizens, clients and societal actors (as account-holders). To do so, this chapter systematically synthesises 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. As such, the chapter presents a conceptual framework that is characterised 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 behaviours of both account-holders and account-givers.

2.2. 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 connect 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 (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, p. 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 (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 (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; Mattei et al., 2015, 2018). Social accountability is closely associated with horizontal forms of accountability (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 formalised elements, such as legal requirements for public organisations 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, p. 120) argue, "social accountability refers to account-giving to the public at large which include mandatory requirements and voluntary initiatives to give account".

Whereas the horizontal nature of social accountability is widely recognised, 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 organisations (NGOs), interest groups, and clients" (Lindén, 2015, p. 1009), "the public at large, stakeholders or (civil) interest groups and users' organisations (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' organisations" (Neby et al., 2015, p. 133). Bovens (2007, p. 457) refers to "the role of non-governmental organisations, interest groups and customers or clients as relevant 'stakeholders' in rendering account". Others conceptualize social accountability in more general terms, such as Ojala et al.'s (2019, p. 281) 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". 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 organisations are being held to account through critical debate and scrutiny in the public forum. Their conceptualisation 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 organised civil society" (Willems & Van Dooren, 2012, p. 1019).

Based upon these conceptualisations, this chapter defines social accountability as a horizontal and explicit accountability relationship in which a public sector organisation 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 non-hierarchical 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 organised 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 organisations, depending upon organisational context and the public environment of an organisation. Large and well-known public agencies could attract broad public attention from, for example, non-governmental organisations, national media and social media (Byrkjeflot et al., 2014; Lindén, 2015; Ojala et al., 2019). The public environment for local and small-scale healthcare 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 organisations.

2.3. 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 characterised 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 organisations 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, p. 255) 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”. 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 2.1.). 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 organisation. 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.

Table 2.1. 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 organised forums	Ad hoc coalitions, mobilised groups, ‘networked publics’, social media	Alon-Barkat & Gilad (2016), Neu et al. (2018) and Ojala et al. (2019)
External and organised forums	Organised civil society (as NGO’s, interest groups, civil society organisations) and news media	Djerf-Pierre et al. (2014) ; Kohler-Koch (2010); and Maggetti (2012)
Internally institutionalised forums	User panels, client councils and stakeholder boards	Lindén (2015); Pierre (2009) and Schillemans (2008)

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 NPM discourse. Under NPM, public administrators are expected to pay specific attention to signals from their clients and consumers (Læg Reid, 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 (Læg Reid, 2014; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). Individual citizens could however also call public organisations 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 accountability is that of active participants (“*citoyens*”)

in a democratic society who wants 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 organised 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 digitalisation of society, the importance of such loosely-organised 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 organise 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 behaviour still have to be seen (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016). Beside these new media opportunities, this category of loosely organised 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).

Third, another category of account-holders in social accountability are organised groups. This category includes two subcategories, namely organised civil society and news media. Organised civil society, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations (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, civil society organisations 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 organisations often participate in processes of accountability as representatives of the interests of the asylum population (Lindén, 2015). At a European level, civil society organisations have a prominent place in attempts to strengthen social accountability of the European Union and its institutions (Kohler-Koch, 2010). In addition to organised civil society, news media are an increasingly important forum in social accountability (Bovens, 2005; S. 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; S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016), most strongly captured in forms of watchdog journalism (Norris, 2014).

A final set of account-holders within social accountability are those institutionalised by public sector organisations, 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). Institutionalised 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 institutionalised practices of social accountability (Ali & Pirog, 2019). Predominantly, client councils are found in domains as healthcare 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).

2.4. 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 (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 (see e.g. Christensen & Lodge, 2018; Klenk, 2015; Lindén, 2015; Mattei et al., 2015, 2018; Meijer, 2007). There has been some but relatively limited quantitative research on societal forms of accountability (Koop, 2014; Maggetti, 2012; 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 2.2. provides

a structured summary of main findings and insights on the functioning of social accountability in practice, along the main elements of Bovens' (2007) conceptualisation of accountability: the obligation of accountability and the three phases of accountability in terms of information provision, debate and consequences.

Table 2.2. Previous findings on the functioning of social accountability in practice.

Accountability elements	Functioning of social accountability	References
<i>Obligation</i>		
Felt obligation	The obligation to render an account is often informal and/or self-imposed	Bovens, 2007; Koop, 2014
<i>Information phase</i>		
Demand for information	Transparency may improve information position societal actors	Reichersdorfer et al., 2013; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012
	There is an information asymmetry between public organisations and societal actors	Greiling & Spraul, 2010; Schillemans, 2008
'Production' of information	Social accountability mostly relies on already available public information	S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016; Meijer, 2007; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009
	Citizens may be actively involved in information-gathering	Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019
Use of information	Most citizens and societal actors are often unlikely to use available information	Curtin & Meijer, 2006; Greiling & Grüb, 2009; Meijer, 2007
	News media and social media are successful in collecting and sharing information	S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016; Norris, 2014; Ojala et al., 2019
<i>Debate phase</i>		
Venues	Institutionalised forms of social accountability provide room for discussion and reflection	Arras & Braun, 2018; Schillemans, 2008
	News media and social media serve as alternative venues for questions and discussion	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, 2016
<i>Consequences phase</i>		
Direct consequences	There are limited formal sanctions available in social accountability	Bovens, 2007; Lindén, 2015
	Social accountability may have a large impact through informal sanctions and reputational effects	Reichersdorfer et al., 2013
Indirect consequences	Social accountability may have an impact via the public organisation's <i>anticipated reactions</i> to future accountability	Meijer, 2007; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009
	Social accountability may have a large impact due to its connections to hierarchal accountability	Ankamah, 2019; Schillemans, 2008; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013

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, 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., 2021). Such a view on accountability is dominant in behavioural and social psychological literature (Hall et al., 2017; Hall & Ferris, 2011; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999), but this 'subjective element' of accountability has also been recognised 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 out 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, e.g. "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 to 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 to those of public authorities (Greiling & Spraul, 2010; Schillemans, 2008). As S. Jacobs and Schillemans (2016, p. 26) 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".

Another issue related to the information provision in social accountability is whether and to what extent citizens and other societal account-holders use these information to hold public organisations 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 healthcare 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).

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 organisations could have strategic and reputational purposes to disclose information “to start an ‘accountability process’, thus trying to render social accountability” (S. 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 non-public information could positively influence the information position of social accountability (S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016; Norris, 2014). Whereas most institutionalised 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 characterised by a variety of potential venues and settings for discussion between actor and forum. According to Meijer (2007, pp. 168-169), forms as stakeholder accountability provide “no fixed format for debate about policies and performance of public service

organisations” and “much of the debate takes place in the media and those debates often do not provide fair opportunities for redress”. 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, p. 985) argues, “[v]ery often, (...), claims for social accountability are voiced through non-formalised channels, such as demonstrations or public media”.

In recent years, changes emerged that provide new settings and possibilities for discussing public authorities’ conduct. New digital innovations, such as social media, have create greater possibilities for direct and interactive communication between public organisations 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 (Reichersdorfer et al., 2013, Maggetti, 2012). 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 institutionalised 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 an 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 organisations for their conduct and behaviour (Bovens, 2007; Lindén, 2015). Institutionalised forms of social accountability could yield some formal powers, but their formal sanctioning possibilities are still limited, compared to those of vertical powers (Schillemans, 2008).

However, several authors stress the importance of informal and reputational consequences for public organisations, that are associated with social accountability (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). As public organisations are concerned with bureaucratic reputation for their persistence, negative media coverage and an unfavourable public opinion are not necessarily less influential than ‘heavier’ and formal sanctions (S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016, p. 26; Schillemans, 2008, p. 176). As Busuioc 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 connected with traditional accountability arrangements towards 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 organisations. As Meijer (2007, p. 167) argues: “(t)he key argument is that stakeholders do not ask public service organisations to account for their performance, but the fact that they could call them to account stimulates public service organisations to change their policies and behaviour”.

Whereas social accountability might formally be a ‘weak’ or even limited form of accountability, it however could have a substantial impact on public organisations 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 behaviour and type of involvement of both account-holders and account-givers, as will be discussed in the next section.

2.5. Social accountability, the consensual logic and the confrontational logic

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 e.g. 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 behaviours 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 *behavioural 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?

In the existing literature, a distinction can be traced between a predominantly consensual logic to social accountability and a predominantly confrontational logic to social accountability. Consensus and confrontation reflects two ends of a spectrum:

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. This distinction between consensus and confrontation echoes other distinctions in the accountability literature, such as Flinders's (2011) notion of the politicisation of accountability and Mansbridge's (2014) distinction 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 behaviours of account-holders and account-givers in confrontational styles of social accountability. Both logics will have implications for the expectations of the behaviour of both accountable actors and accountability forums in 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 organisation'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 behaviour, account-holding approaches serve as a means to demand responsiveness from public organisations to society in general or to specific groups of citizens. In this understanding of social accountability, account-holders aim to provide public organisations with input from a client or outsider perspective (Halachmi & Holzer, 2010).

This strategy is often stressed in the literature about institutionalised 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 'socialisation 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 organisation. Based upon a study of citizens' motivations for participating in client councils in healthcare services, Van Eijk and Steen (2014) further found that community-centred 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 healthcare 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 democratisation 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 e.g. 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 organisations, 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, p. 5) 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."

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. S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016; Norris, 2014). The media is characterised by a critical stance towards 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 organisations and call them to account for potential misconduct, for instance via social media (Ojala et al., 2019; Vanhomerig & Karré, 2014).

The watchdog function of accountability has been heralded as it serves as additional checks and balances to public organisations 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 towards 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). Account-giving then serves as a means to gather new insights about policies and services. This could help to improve services and to 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 organisations (Schillemans et al., 2013, p. 427). This learning perspective has been further stressed in research into institutionalised 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 organisation'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 organisations 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 behaviour could reinforce a 'performance paradox' (Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). As a result of social accountability, Meijer (2007, p. 172) argues that public organisations 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.

To summarize, Table 2.3. presents an overview of these different forms of intentions and behaviours of both account-holders and account-givers in social accountability, resulting into four different forms of social accountability. It shows that social accountability could serve multiple purposes and multiple functions, reflecting into the multiplicity of behavioural approaches to social accountability.

Table 2.3. Types of social accountability: account-holder's and account-giver's perspectives.

Perspective	Consensual logic of accountability	Confrontational logic of accountability
Account-holder's perspective	<i>Civic</i> accountability	<i>Watchdog</i> accountability
Account-giver's perspective	<i>Learning-oriented</i> accountability	<i>Showcase</i> accountability

2.6. 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 chapter 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 behaviours 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 organisations operating in multiple contexts, in multiple domains and sectors, in a diverse set of countries. To study

social accountability, one should take into account (1) the nature of the involved account-holder, (2) the involvement of both account-holders and account-givers in all phases of accountability processes and (3) their behavioural strategies and intentions.

As such, this chapter identifies three important issues for the empirical study of social accountability. A first issue 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 2.1.*) helps to 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 organisations to account. As the different types of account-holders do not operate in a vacuum and are interlinked (see e.g. Ojala et al., 2019), analysing the interplay and connections between 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 institutionalised arrangements of social accountability, as public panels and client councils.

A second issue concerns 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 behaviour of public organisations 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 organised 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 behavioural (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 issue relates to the consensual and confrontational intentions of both account-holders and account-givers. When is consensual behaviour more likely and under which conditions are confrontational styles of behaviour 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 mediated forms of social accountability (cf. Norris, 2014) rather than with its institutionalised 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 behaviours 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 behaviour 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 e.g. 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 the 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 e.g. 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 organisations 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, politicisation 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 behaviours (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 e.g. Ankamah, 2019; Reichersdorfer et al., 2013; Ojala et al., 2019). Whether social accountability occurs in a consensual or confrontational

nature, might have consequences for formal and vertical accountability. Confrontational and unfavourable media coverage could also trigger critical parliamentary questions (cf. S. 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 organisational reputation in the wider environment will be enhanced. As such, confrontational styles of social accountability could protect public organisations from accountability to vertical powers and could help to resist intense legal and political pressures (cf. Day & Klein, 1987, pp. 170-71, 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 behaviours under conditions of social accountability. Traditionally, most studies of accountability implicitly or explicitly presume rational and goal-directed behaviours of both the individuals and organisations 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 behaviour is likely to shape actual processes of social accountability and can help to 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 behavioural insights and theories that are derived from psychology (Aleksovska et al., 2019; Overman et al., 2021). In these studies, the behaviour 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 chapter shows that the multi-faceted, 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.



CHAPTER 3

The relevance of social accountability

Abstract

This contribution analyses the degree of relevance that CEOs of independent administrative bodies (ZBOs) and departmental agencies assign to their accountability relationships with social stakeholders. Although there is substantial attention for social forms of accountability in the scientific literature, no large-scale quantitative research has been conducted into how agency-CEOs experience this accountability. This study fills this gap on the basis of survey research by: (1) mapping the importance of forms and practices of social accountability for agencies; and (2) considering potential explanations for differences in the importance of social accountability in agencies. The study finds that agency-CEOs in the Netherlands attach great importance to accountability towards their broad public environment, also compared to other countries with similar types of implementing organisations. This observation is in line with the Dutch reputation of corporatist and interactive governance. Differences in the importance of social accountability between agencies cannot be explained by the vertical accountability relationship with the parent department or other institutional organisational characteristics. The analysis shows that social orientation is greater among agencies where the media has more influence over administrators. Social accountability is associated with greater perceived media pressure.

3.1. Introduction

The functioning of public agencies has always been a major issue on the political agenda in the Netherlands. Recent scandals and incidents within public policy implementation have spurred political and public debates about public agencies. In 2021, a parliamentary research committee of the Dutch House of Representatives did an investigation into the problems within some of the major executive public organisations. Meanwhile, the Dutch government has developed a policy agenda focusing on broader issues related to the functioning of agencies (Van der Vlist & Heerschop, 2020).

Public agencies have an important position within governance. They operate within an increasingly complex and rapidly changing society and have to implement complex legislation and rules into concrete and tailor-made decisions for individual citizens and clients. For many citizens, these organisations form their direct contact with the government (Van der Vlist & Heerschop, 2020; see also Overman, 2017; Van Thiel, 2020). Given their crucial position between government and citizens, public agencies are confronted with expectations both from *the central state* and from *society*, leading to multiple accountabilities. Public agencies are accountable to their parent department via the formal and vertical lines of accountability, but also give an account to citizens, clients and societal stakeholders by forms of horizontal and social accountability (Bovens, 2007; Hooge & Helderma, 2008; Oude Vrielink et al., 2009).

In recent years, many public agencies have introduced accountability arrangements such as client councils, user boards and stakeholder panels. In addition, public organisations are often held to account by interest groups, non-governmental organisations, and other *civil society* actors. The advent of social media platforms, such as Twitter, has created the possibilities for direct lines of accountability between public organisations and (individual) citizens (see Brummel, 2021).

To what extent do public agencies perceive these “public eyes” (Meijer, 2007)? To what extent are judgments and evaluations of societal actors considered to be important for agencies’ strategic decisions? Despite increasing academic attention for forms of social accountability, there has still been limited quantitative and large-N research conducted into the experiences and perceptions of agency-CEOs with regards to their accountability relationships with citizens, clients and societal stakeholders.¹

This study’s aims are twofold. First, this study investigates the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs in the Netherlands – both *ZBOs* (independent administrative bodies) and *agentschappen* (departmental agencies). We will compare Dutch agencies with similar types of executive organisations in five other Western European democracies and Australia. Second, this study looks for potential explanations for differences in the importance of social accountability for public agencies. We focus on

¹ For the Dutch context, see e.g. Hooge & Helderma (2008); Schillemans (2007); Oude Vrielink et al. (2009) and Vanhommerig & Karré, (2011). Recent contributions to the international academic literature include Lindén (2015), Mizrahi & Minchuk (2019) and Ojala et al. (2019).

how and to what extent elements of the accountability environment (more precisely, the strength of departmental accountability) and characteristics of the political context (more precisely, the politicisation of an agency's most important task) relate to the perceived relevance of social accountability. To do this, this study is based upon large-scale survey research among agency directors of Dutch (N=67) and foreign (N=508) executive agencies about their accountability environment.

3.2. The relevance of social accountability

The multiple accountabilities of public sector organisations are a well-known phenomenon in the public administration literature. Several authors have described how public organisations have to deal with a complex 'web of accountability' (Page, 2006) or 'accountability regime' (Biela & Papadopoulos, 2014), in which they have to serve 'multiple masters' (Thomann et al., 2018) and are accountable to a multiplicity of accountability forums (Hooge & Helderma, 2008; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). Organisations are not only accountable to the minister, but also to inspectors, regulators, critical citizens and clients, et cetera (Oude Vrielink et al., 2009). Multiple accountabilities have their advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, multiple accountabilities could contribute to the public and democratic control over the use of public resources and could stimulate organisational learning (Van Montfort, 2010; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). On the other hand, there have been diagnoses of an excessive 'accountability industry' and concerns about the dysfunctional effects of accountability demands from many different stakeholders (Flinders, 2011; Koppell, 2005; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). Nevertheless, the empirical reality is that many eyes of many different stakeholders are focused on public service providers (cf. Bovens, 2007; Keane, 2009).

Although there are many different typologies of public accountability (see Willems & Van Dooren, 2012), an important distinction could be made between vertical and horizontal accountability (Bovens, 2007; Schillemans, 2008; see also Mulgan, 2003). Vertical accountability has been considered as the traditional form of accountability (Hooge & Helderma, 2008; Vanhomerig & Karré, 2011). In the case of vertical accountability, a subordinate gives an account towards a hierarchical superior. Many forms of political accountability are vertical in nature: for the case of executive agencies, the most important form of political accountability is their accountability relationship with their parent department (Bovens, 2007). Since the 1980s, the implementation of many public tasks has been delegated to public agencies – not only in the Netherlands, but also worldwide. Policy implementation increasingly takes place outside ministerial control. The proliferation of many (semi-)autonomous agencies resulted in the question of whether the vertical and traditional lines of accountability are still appropriate mechanisms to ensure public accountability (Flinders, 2001; Greve et al., 1999; Van Thiel, 2018). Furthermore, vertical accountability is a "circuitous route" for involving other non-state stakeholders in the governance and accountability of agencies (Hooge & Helderma, 2008, p. 96).

These concerns about accountability deficits have led to the implementation of new modes of accountability that are often horizontal in nature and that are directed towards societal stakeholders. Horizontal accountability consists of the accountability relationships in which the account-holder is not hierarchically superior to the account-giver. In horizontal accountability, account-giving is directed to so-called ‘third parties’ (Schillemans, 2008). An important form of horizontal accountability is social accountability, by which means public organisations give an account vis-à-vis (groups of) citizens and other societal stakeholders (Bovens, 2007). Social accountability is not a replacement of political accountability, it rather represents an addition and extension to ministerial control (Biela & Papadopoulos, 2014; Schillemans, 2008).

Social accountability appeals to a democratic ideal of direct citizen influence on the functioning of public sector organisations. Pleas for introducing forms of social accountability are often highly normative (McCandless, 2001; Moore, 2014). However, there has been debate about the actual impact and functioning of social accountability. There are concerns about the limited formal influence of citizens and societal actors and their limited possibilities to judge and sanction organisational behaviour and performance (Bovens, 2007; Lindén, 2015; Michels & Meijer, 2008). However, others emphasize that the potential informal consequences of these relatively “weak” forms of social accountability are often of great importance to public agencies: agencies fear reputational damage, negative media attention and dissatisfied clients. Social accountability could further “trigger” monitoring and scrutiny from vertical powers such as ministerial departments and regulators (Day & Klein, 1987, p. 247; Schillemans, 2008).

Differences in the importance and influence of social accountability could potentially be explained by differences in the environmental characteristics of public agencies. First of all, the wider accountability regime, and, in particular, the importance of traditional political and vertical accountability structures, offer a possible explanation for the perceived relevance of social accountability. Social accountability does not take place in a vacuum but in addition to existing forms of hierarchical and political control (Biela & Papadopoulos, 2014; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). Political accountability to the parent department could both strengthen and reduce the importance of social accountability for public agencies (Schillemans, 2008). In addition, the political context of public agencies could offer an alternative explanation for the relevance of social accountability. The politicisation of an agency’s task often has a significant impact on varying aspects of agency accountability (Koop, 2011, 2014). The political salience of public agencies could increase the need for social accountability. Thus, the academic literature offers three perspectives on the importance of social accountability. First, there is a *crowding out perspective* that suggests that high levels of political control constrain the effects of social accountability. A second perspective is a *synergistic perspective* that assumes that the importance of political and social accountability is interlinked. Finally, the *politicisation perspective* suggests that the political saliency and sensitivity of public agencies is related to a higher importance of social accountability.

According to the crowding out perspective, a greater emphasis on political accountability could be a constraint for the actual influence and impact of social accountability. As Schillemans (2008) states, “[i]n situations of tight vertical control, horizontal accountability has little effects and could be seen as basically symbolic” (Schillemans, 2008, p. 192). For public agencies, an important and often-used strategy to deal with accountability demands from multiple audiences is to prioritize the demands of particular key audiences (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017, p. 92). Psychological-experimental research with public officials in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom shows that the possibility of sanctions has a strong influence on the prioritisation of accountability demands: public officials tend to assign higher priority to stakeholders that are more likely to ‘punish’ them if they do not comply with their demands (Aleksovska et al., 2022). Under strict ministerial control, public agencies are thus less able to prioritize societal stakeholders’ needs and wishes, while agencies with less control from their parent department could give more attention to societal concerns. In short, the *crowding out perspective* suggests that:

A high degree of accountability to the parent department is negatively associated with the importance of social accountability (departmental accountability ↑, social accountability ↓).

In contrast to the crowding out perspective, the synergistic perspective argues that the relevance of social accountability for public agencies is positively related to the strength of political accountability. According to this perspective, the “shadow of the hierarchy” could reinforce the impact of social accountability, as the relatively weak forms of social accountability could gain strong influence through their connection with existing political accountability arrangements. Social accountability could have an impact on an agency’s hierarchical relationships: social accountability functions as a “fire alarm oversight” (cf. McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984; see also Schillemans, 2007) that provides the ministerial department and/or parliament with information about an agency’s (mis)conduct and performance. Ultimately, these signals could lead to interference of vertical powers. Under strict ministerial control, public agencies might therefore be more oriented towards their societal environment (Koop, 2014). Furthermore, many public officials consider it their duty to be accountable, both vertically and horizontally (Overman, 2021). The *synergistic perspective* leads to the following expectation:

A high degree of accountability to the parent department is positively associated with the importance of social accountability (departmental accountability ↑, social accountability ↑).

Besides formal accountability, the politicisation of an agency’s most important task could further matter for the importance of social accountability, as the politicisation perspective suggests. According to the academic literature, political salience is a determinant factor for the accountability of public agencies (Koop, 2011, 2014). Due to crises and incidents, organisational size or a major impact for society, public agencies differ in the amount and type of media attention they receive (Maggetti, 2012; Schillemans & Van Thiel, 2009). In a more politicised environment, public agencies are more likely

to become suspect of media coverage, rather than organisations that operate largely under the radar and remain out of sight for the media and citizens. Political sensitivity of agencies increases the need to safeguard their legitimacy and thus results in a greater emphasis on the proper functioning of accountability relationships (Verschuere et al., 2006). Research has shown that organisations with higher levels of political saliency are more often held accountable by their parent department (Koop, 2011), but that they are also more likely to voluntarily give an account to societal stakeholders (Koop, 2014).

From a strategic and Machiavellian logic, social accountability further provides public agencies an opportunity to increase organisational reputation among key stakeholders in their societal environment (see also Busuioc & Lodge, 2017; Karsten, 2015). As public agencies voluntarily commit themselves to societal forms of accountability, they could potentially achieve a stronger power position in relation to their parent department and other important powers. As Day and Klein (1987, pp. 170–171) argue, social accountability could serve to resist vertical control as “giving an account is seen to be a way of avoiding being called to account” (see also De Boer, 2021; Moffitt, 2010).² In turbulent political circumstances, this seems to be even more important. Thus, the politicisation perspective argues:

A high degree of politicisation is positively associated with the importance of social accountability (politicisation ↑, social accountability ↑).

3.3. Methods

This study uses data from the Calibrating Public Accountability (CPA) survey (Schillemans et al., 2021b). The survey was conducted between May and December 2017 among directors (CEOs) of agencies in seven Western democracies: Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Switzerland.³ These countries are very comparable to each other as they have gone through numerous reforms over the last decades with regards to the position of agencies within public administration, structures of accountability and public sector management (Verhoest et al., 2012). The survey includes items about the external accountability relationships of agencies and about the importance and functioning of different accountability practices. The survey includes a total of N=661 responses, N=499 respondents completed the full questionnaire. The response rate was around 50 percent in most countries. In the Netherlands, N=56 agency directors completed the entire survey - a response rate of 53 percent (Schillemans et al., 2021b, p. 902).

² Day and Klein (1987) refer to ‘upward accountability’ and ‘downward accountability.’

³ With regard to the relevance of social accountability forums, the questionnaire administered to the Australian respondents contained slightly different survey items. The Australian respondents were therefore excluded from this part of the comparative analysis.

To measure the importance of social accountability for agency directors – this study’s main variable of interest – this study focuses on both the perceived relevance of five different stakeholders in the societal environment of public agencies and the perceived importance of two practices of social accountability. With regard to the relevance of accountability forums, respondents were asked to indicate whether and to what extent the following bodies or organisations were relevant for their agency’s most important task: (1) advisory / consultative bodies that represents experts (2), advisory / consultative bodies that represent clients, (3) interest groups, (4) civil society organisations and (5) public sector unions. Their responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1= ‘not relevant at all’ to 5= ‘highly relevant.’ Together, these five items form a reliable scale to measure the relevance of societal stakeholders for public agencies.⁴

In addition, the questionnaire includes two questions that provide insight into the importance of social accountability practices for public agencies. These two items are: “For our most important task it is important that our organisation makes performance results publicly available to all stakeholders” and “For our most important task it is important that our organisation regularly meets societal stakeholders on a strategic level.” Both survey questions provided seven answer categories, ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. Survey responses to these items were highly correlated.⁵

This study considers a number of potential explanations for the importance of social accountability for public agencies, starting with the accountability relationship between ministerial departments and agencies. To measure formal political accountability, the survey includes questions based upon Brandsma’s (2010) accountability cube. This measuring instrument for formal accountability reflects the three well-known phases of accountability: the information phase, the debate phase and the consequences phase (Bovens, 2007). With regard to the information phase, respondents were asked to indicate how frequently certain forms of information provision about the agency’s most important task to the parent department took place: via periodic reports, via formal evaluations, via external audits, via writing after a formal query and via informal settings. For the debate phase of accountability, respondents were asked how often the main task of the organisation was discussed with a representative of the parent department: by the CEO in a formal meeting, by the CEO informally, by others at lower levels in the organisation in formal meetings and by others at lower levels in the organisation informally. Seven items were included to measure the application of consequences in the accountability relationship between parent department and agency. Respondents could indicate how often certain positive and negative consequences were applied in order to punish or reward organisational performance with regard to their most important task. These were: increase / decrease your budget, grant additional / reduce your tasks, issue

4 Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.755$. A principal component analysis further shows that one construct for the relevance of social accountability forums could explain 51 percent of the variance between the five variables. There was no statistical ground to remove one of the items from the construct.

5 Pearson’s $r(56)=0.583, p<0.001$.

binding directives, grant or reduce your operational autonomy, appoint or dismiss staff (incl. executives), issue public praise or a public reprimand and enhance or constrict future career choices of executives.

To investigate the effects of politicisation for the relevance of social accountability, two variables were included: importance of the media and the diversity of views of relevant stakeholders. In previous research into public accountability, media attention is frequently used as an indicator of the political salience of organisational tasks (Koop, 2011, 2014; see also Warntjen, 2012). In addition, the diversity of views and opinions of different stakeholders indicates the degree of conflict in the political environment of agencies (see e.g. Byrkjeflot et al., 2014; Thomann et al., 2018). To measure the importance of the media, four statements were included about the influence of the media on the respondents' daily work (based upon Schillemans, 2012), namely: "Stories in the news media are often important and informative for our work," "I often adjust my daily schedule and priorities because of questions from or stories in the media," "The question 'How will this be seen by the media?' is generally in the back of my mind" and "Strengthening the reputation of our organisation is important." All these questions were measured on a seven-point scale and together form a reliable scale for the degree of mediatisation.⁶ One item was used to measure the diversity of views of relevant stakeholders. Respondents were asked whether external actors hold either similar or different views on the agency's most important task. They were offered five answer categories, ranging from "they hold strongly different views and opinions" to "they hold strongly similar views and opinions."

Several control variables were included in this study. These are institutional factors that could potentially influence the relevance of social accountability for agencies, namely organisational size, organisational location, agency type and agency task. Organisational size is measured in terms of the number of employees (in FTE). For organisational location, a dummy variable was included to differentiate between agencies that are located in The Hague, as the political-administrative capital of the Netherlands, and agencies that are located in other parts of the country. For agency type, this study uses a dummy variable for type-2 agencies (*ZBOs*) with type-1 agencies (*departmental agencies*) as a reference category. With regard to agency task, the analyses include a dummy variable for regulatory agencies.

3.4. Results

The results section is structured as follows. First, we identify the degree of importance of social accountability for agency directors in the Netherlands, also in comparison to their foreign colleagues. Second, we examine the three possible explanations for differences across agencies with regards to the perceived relevance of social accountability.

⁶ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.787$.

Social accountability? Quite important!

How important are the evaluations and judgments of different societal stakeholders for Dutch public agencies, compared to agencies in Denmark, Norway, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Switzerland? Table 3.1. and Figure 3.1. answer this question: in general, Dutch agency managers are slightly more likely than their colleagues from the five other countries to agree that the opinions or judgments of social actors have a significant influence on their strategic decisions and on the execution of their public tasks. Of all six countries, Dutch agencies attribute the highest relevance to these horizontal forums in general, although the differences with other countries are limited.

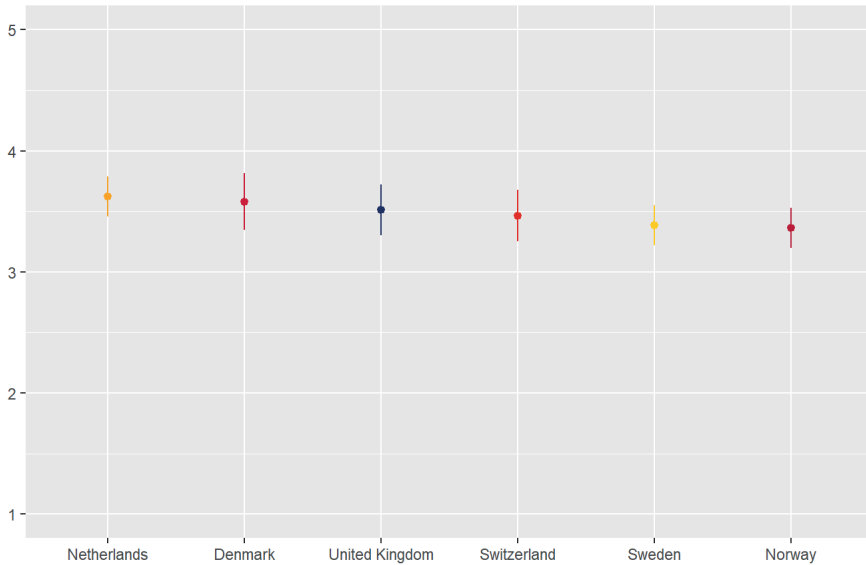
As Table 3.1. shows, Dutch agency managers assign higher levels of importance to client councils and user boards, interest groups and non-governmental organisations than their foreign colleagues. These findings reflect the emphasis on horizontal and social accountability in the Dutch public sector in general. The perceived influence of consultative bodies of experts does however not significantly differ between Dutch and other European agencies. Compared to the other countries, public sector unions are significantly less important for Dutch agencies than for agencies abroad. A possible explanation is that the Netherlands is one of the countries in Europe with the lowest percentage of union membership and that union membership is sharply declining, while Scandinavian countries are generally known from their high union membership rates (De Beer & Berntsen, 2019).

Table 3.1. Comparing Dutch agencies with agencies from abroad: the relevance of social accountability forums (1=not relevant at all, 5= highly relevant).

	Dutch ZBOs and departmental agencies			Agencies from other countries			Difference
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Advisory / consultative body representing experts	43	3.88	1.179	338	3.61	1.179	t (379)=1.437; p=0.152
Advisory / consultative body representing clients	46	3.96	1.010	338	3.62	1.205	t (63.798)=2.042; p=0.045
Interest groups	58	3.90	0.831	360	3.58	1.119	t (93.904)=2.569; p=0.012
Civil society organisations	59	3.51	0.972	344	3.10	1.224	t (92.741)=2.830; p=0.006
Public sector unions	60	2.90	1.217	361	3.24	1.161	t (419)=-2.509; p=0.040
Relevance of social accountability forums	62	3.63	0.694	372	3.43	0.862	t (432)=1.666; p=0.096

Note: Level of significance is based upon a T-test for independent samples between the mean score for Dutch agencies and the mean score for agencies from other countries, including Denmark, Norway, United Kingdom, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Figure 3.1. Relevance of social accountability forums.



Note: the columns reflect the mean scores for each country with 95% CI.

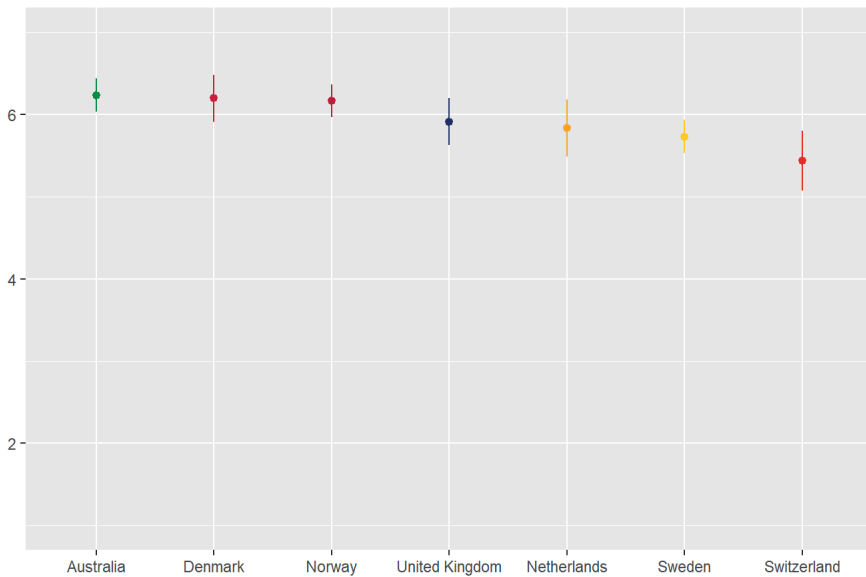
With regard to the importance of practices of social accountability, the Netherlands does not differ from the five other European countries and Australia. As Table 3.2. shows, the differences between the Netherlands and the other countries are relatively small: Dutch agency directors consider these practices just as important as their foreign colleagues. Figure 3.2. shows that the relevance of accountability practices in the Netherlands is very similar to countries such as Sweden and the United Kingdom. The importance of both practices of social accountability is high in the Netherlands: 84.2% of the Dutch agencies indicate that the disclosure of performance information to all stakeholders is (very) important with regard to their most important task, and 75.4% of the organisations consider regular meetings with societal stakeholders on a strategic level as (very) important. In short, Dutch agency-CEOs indicate that their organisations consider social accountability as highly relevant. The relevance of social accountability is at least as high for Dutch agencies as for agencies in other Western democracies.

Table 3.2. Comparing Dutch agencies with agencies from abroad: the relevance of social accountability practices (1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree).

	Dutch ZBOs and departmental agencies			Agencies from other countries			Difference
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
<i>For our most important task, it is important that our organisation...</i>							
...makes performance results publicly available to all stakeholders	57	5.91	1.479	451	6.13	1.184	t(506)=-1.274; p=0.203
...regularly meets societal stakeholders on a strategic level	57	5.75	1.527	450	5.77	1.363	t(505)=-0.063; p=0.950
Relevance of social accountability practices	57	5.83	1.337	451	5.95	1.117	t(506)=-0.699; p=0.485

Note: Level of significance is based upon a T-test for independent samples between the mean score for Dutch agencies and the mean score for agencies from other countries, including Australia, Denmark, Norway, United Kingdom, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Figure 3.2. Relevance of social accountability practices.



Note: the columns reflect the mean scores for each country with 95% CI.

Explaining the relevance of social accountability? It is the media, stupid!

After comparing Dutch agencies with other public agencies abroad, the next question is: which differences do we see across Dutch agencies with regard to the relevance of social accountability? The regression analyses in Table 3.3. provide an answer to this question.

First, institutional factors do not explain differences in the importance of social accountability for public agencies. The organisational size of an agency is not related to the perceived relevance of social accountability. There are no significant differences between ZBOs and departmental agencies nor between organisations located in The Hague and organisations with their headquarters elsewhere in the Netherlands. Regulatory agencies are significantly less likely to consider societal accountability forums as relevant than organisations with another type of main task. These significant findings do however not hold for the perceived relevance of accountability practices.

Table 3.3. does not find any evidence for a relationship between the vertical and political accountability structures with the parent department and the importance of social accountability. This means that the study does not support the crowding out perspective (departmental accountability ↑, social accountability ↓), nor does it support the synergetic perspective (departmental accountability ↑, social accountability ↑). The extent to which agency directors consider social accountability as important is unrelated to the prevalence of hierarchical accountability practices.

The analyses provide some reason to assume that there is a positive link between the degree of politicisation of an agency task and the importance of social accountability (the politicisation perspective; politicisation ↑, social accountability ↑). Some nuances should however be made. On the one hand, the regression analyses support the politicisation perspective, as the degree of mediatisation is found to be positively related to the importance of social accountability. This positive relationship is significant for both the relevance of accountability forums and the relevance of accountability practices. The empirical findings however also refine the political perspective. There is no correlation between the diversity in stakeholder opinions and views and the perceived relevance of social accountability. In sum, social accountability is more important for public agencies within a more mediatised environment, but not for organisations that operate within a more conflictual environment.

Table 3.3. Linear regression: what explains the relevance of social accountability forums and social accountability practices for agency-CEOs?

	(1) Relevance of social accountability forums	(2) Relevance of social accountability practices
Political accountability	-0.073	-0.161
Importance of the media	0.350**	0.483**
Conflictual views of stakeholders	-0.143	-0.105
Organisational size (fte)	0.155	-0.032
Location (0= The Hague, 1= elsewhere)	0.050	-0.017
Type (0= departmental agency, 1= ZBO)	-0.163	-0.165
Regulatory task (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.410**	-0.070
R ²	0.375	0.235
N	57	57

Note: The table reports standardised regression coefficients (β) from linear regression models. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

3.5. Conclusion and discussion

This study shows that Dutch agencies consider their societal stakeholders as slightly more relevant than agencies in rather similar countries. There are limited differences between the Netherlands and comparable countries with regard to the importance of practices of social accountability, such as information provision to all stakeholders and regular meetings on a strategic level with societal stakeholders. Nevertheless, both practices are considered to be highly relevant according to most Dutch agencies. Despite concerns about the actual impact and influence of social accountability in the existing literature (see e.g. Michels & Meijer, 2008), this study underlines high levels of importance of social accountability for public agencies. A majority of Dutch agencies is strongly oriented to their societal environment. These findings are in line with the strong consensual tradition of interactive governance or “*polderen*” in the Netherlands, by which means societal stakeholders are involved in policy formulation and policy implementation (Hendriks & Tops, 2001; Van Thiel, 2020).

Differences between public agencies with regards to the relevance of social accountability are mostly related to the perceived influence of the media. Organisations in a politicised but specifically mediatised environment are more inclined towards social accountability than organisations with limited media attention. As such, this study supports the politicisation perspective on social accountability and is in line with previous research that underlines the importance of the media for the functioning of public sector organisations (Klijn & Korthagen, 2018; Schillemans, 2012).

The findings challenge the stereotyped image of public agencies as technocratic and closed institutions. The high relevance of social accountability should however not be seen as a form of purely democratic and client-oriented idealism of agency-CEOs. Although democratic and normative motives potentially play a role in fostering

social accountability (Koop, 2014; see also March & Olsen, 2011), a strong stakeholder orientation is likely to be a strategic concern for most agencies (Karsten, 2015; Moffitt, 2010). Strategic motivations could explain why agencies are more inclined to social accountability under conditions of mediatisation. By their openness to societal stakeholders and their consultations with relevant societal actors, agencies are better informed about developments in their environment and about their external reputation. As such, social accountability could be a tool for agencies to prevent negative media publicity and could provide agencies with the potential support from key societal actors during times of intense media pressures.

This study further shows that the ‘communicating vessels’ principle does not hold for the interaction between political and social accountability: agencies with higher levels of political accountability do not experience more social accountability and vice versa. Ministerial control does not constrain social accountability and there is no zero-sum game between both forms of accountability. The shadow of the media has a stronger impact on the social accountability of public agencies than the ‘shadow of hierarchy’ (cf. Schillemans, 2008).

This study has its limitations. Due to its cross-sectional design, it is rather difficult to provide causal claims. The small number of Dutch agencies further has its statistical limitations. This requires some caution for drawing causal inferences: this study rather provides clear insights on the correlation and interplay of social accountability of public agencies with other relevant agency characteristics. Additionally, this study does not pay attention to agency accountability to non-institutionalised and loosely organised groups of citizens and stakeholders. With the advent of social media platforms and the revival of societal protest, ‘ad hoc coalitions’ and social movements could become very important accountability forums for public agencies in the current era of governance (Bekkers et al., 2011; Ojala et al., 2019; Vanhomerig & Karré, 2011).

Nevertheless, this study’s findings could have important implications for public agencies in practice. Given the desirability of a more responsive and client-oriented public sector (Van der Vlist & Heerschop, 2020), it is a positive sign that social accountability is of great importance to most agency-CEOs. The study’s findings highlight the impact of politicisation and mediatisation for agency behaviour: the media’s watchdog function could foster the relevance of social accountability forums and practices to agencies. Some authors however consider the influence of the media on the bureaucracy as problematic (Flinders, 2011; Klijn & Korthagen, 2018). Given concerns about ‘the movement and expansion of politics beyond representative institutions’ (Bovens et al., 1995), a greater emphasis on social accountability could also be interpreted as a deviation of the primacy of politics. Forms of social accountability do not have the same formal status as vertical and political lines of accountability. Also, horizontal forums such as client councils, interest groups and non-governmental organisations, could face problems in terms of their unbalanced representation of clients, users and other societal stakeholders (Raad voor het openbaar bestuur, 2017).

It is therefore crucial that a proper mix and balance exist between, on the one hand, vertical and political accountability, and, on the other hand, horizontal and social accountability. Social accountability is not a replacement for formal political and vertical accountability structures but could be a valuable addition to existing accountability arrangements. However, the diversity and multiplicity of stakeholder views and values must be considered; accountability should not only be directed to the usual suspects in citizen and stakeholder participation. Only then are public agencies properly accountable to both state and society.



4

CHAPTER 4

The venues of social accountability

Abstract

Public agencies have to deal with accountability demands from various societal stakeholders. Stakeholders may address their accountability demands via formal stakeholder arrangements but can also use social media for account-holding purposes. This contribution analyses to what extent these different venues of social accountability affect the perceived relevance of societal stakeholders to agency-CEOs – their so-called “stakeholder orientation”. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, this study shows that agency-CEOs’ stakeholder orientation is strongly associated with actual social media attention. In contrast, the relationship between formal stakeholder arrangements and stakeholder orientation is weak. Qualitative insights from focus group discussions suggest that the associations between social media attention and stakeholder orientation can be explained by the organisational adoption to social media and the reputational risks of social media storms. Overall, the findings support that social media attention is the most important catalyst for stakeholder orientation, rather than stakeholder arrangements.

4.1. Introduction

Public agencies are often confronted with various expectations and evaluations of a wide array of societal stakeholders. The academic literature assumes that stakeholders, i.e. citizens, clients and/or users, have taken a greater role in holding public sector organisations accountable (Bovens, 2007; Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2019; Verschuere et al., 2006). On the one hand, public agencies are bound to “more formalised accountability relationships” (Lindén, 2015, p. 1012) with their societal stakeholders by the establishment of client councils, stakeholder panels and other stakeholder arrangements within the public sector (see e.g. Mattei et al., 2018; Schillemans, 2008). On the other hand, public agencies are increasingly faced with bottom-up public pressures and critical debate in the public sphere, particularly due to a rapidly changing (social) media environment (Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2016; Moore, 2014; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). Due to the rise of social media platforms, societal stakeholders could use the Internet to hold public sector organisations directly accountable (Brummel, 2021; Ojala et al., 2019). According to Vrangbæk and Byrkjeflot (2016, p. 114), “ad hoc e-based virtual interest groups and campaigns (...) have supplemented traditional civic society interest organisations and mass media in the accountability functions of demanding information and passing judgments”.

An important question remains to what extent formal stakeholder arrangements and social media attention are associated with a stronger organisational orientation towards societal stakeholders. Forms of so-called social accountability are heralded as they can stimulate organisational responsiveness (Damgaard & Lewis, 2014; Mattei et al., 2018), but they are also criticised because of their unclear and limited impact on the public sector (Lindén, 2015; Michels & Meijer, 2008). As social accountability is relatively weak in terms of formal consequences and sanctions (see e.g. Bovens, 2007), we need to better understand whether and how social accountability can be of potential relevance to public sector organisations.

Taken together, our research aim is to investigate to what extent elements of the societal accountability environment of agencies – namely formal stakeholder arrangements and social media attention – are associated with a greater stakeholder orientation of individual heads and leaders of public agencies (hereafter: agency-CEOs). Our focus is on the individual stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs, as core members of the ‘governing coalition’ of agencies (cf. Cyert & March, 1992), because social-psychological insights suggest that individual-level perceptions of accountability are an important predictor for human behaviour (Hall et al., 2017; Tetlock et al., 1989) and can be a relevant micro-level foundation of the actual impact of accountability on organisational behaviour and decision-making (Overman & Schillemans, 2022).

Based upon multiple streams of literature, this study theorizes and explicates how formal stakeholder arrangements and social media attention can contribute to agency-CEOs’ stakeholder orientation. To test these theoretical explanations, the study uses a mixed-methods design combining quantitative with qualitative data. First, we draw upon

survey research among agency-CEOs of N=103 public agencies in the Netherlands (response rate= 48.5 percent). The survey was distributed among the CEOs of multiple types of public sector organisations that operate at arm's length from the government and that are responsible for the execution of public tasks in various policy fields and domains (see Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a). In order to study the relationships between agency characteristics and agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation, the survey data was combined with secondary and organisational data.

Second, we rely upon qualitative insights from two focus groups with N=14 agency-CEOs, high-level agency representatives and public sector experts from the Netherlands about their experiences with social accountability, stakeholder arrangements, and social media attention. The aim of the qualitative study is to better interpret results from the quantitative study by finding potential mechanisms and factors that explain patterns of relevance and importance of societal stakeholders for public agencies.

By following this approach, this study shows that agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation is significantly related to the amount of social media attention, but not to the existence of stakeholder arrangements. The qualitative study suggests that the associations between social media attention and stakeholder orientation can be explained by a mix of mediatisation processes and reputational concerns.

4.2. Public agencies, accountability relationships vis-à-vis societal stakeholders, and agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation

Accountability is generally defined as an interactive relationship in which a public actor explains and justifies his/her behaviour and decisions towards a significant other in the light of possible consequences (see e.g. Hupe & Hill, 2007; Mulgan, 2000; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). Bovens' (2007) minimal definition of accountability has become widely used and he defines 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). Accountability could be directed to multiple audiences or so-called 'accountability forums' (Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). To the accountability relationships between agencies and stakeholders, it is often referred to as 'social accountability' (Bovens, 2007, p. 457). Social accountability can be defined as the direct and explicit accountability relationships of public sector organisations vis-à-vis audiences of citizens, clients, users, and other societal stakeholders (see also Brummel, 2021; Ojala et al., 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021).

Social accountability comes in different empirical manifestations. Predominantly, social accountability has been studied in the context of formal and institutionalised relationships between public organisations and societal stakeholders. Under these conditions, stakeholders and/or stakeholder representatives are included in formal arrangements, such as stakeholder boards and other forms of stakeholder participation

and consultation (see e.g. Arras & Braun, 2018; Bovens, 2007; Schillemans, 2008). However, public organisations are also held to account by *external* ‘accountability agents’ (Moore, 2014), such as civic associations, interest groups and individual citizens and clients. These accountability agents voice their criticisms and demands towards public organisations through informal communicative interactions within the larger public sphere, for instance via media and, particularly, via social media (Ojala et al., 2019).

The actual consequences of social accountability for both organisational and individual behaviour are often unclear (cf. Brummel, 2021; Overman & Schillemans, 2022). Here, we focus on how social accountability is associated with the *stakeholder orientation* of agency-CEOs. The notion of stakeholder orientation can be considered as an individual-level attitude of agency-CEOs about the perceived importance of interacting and engaging with relevant societal stakeholders (Schillemans et al., 2021a; Wood, 2015). Agency-CEOs often have considerable discretion in “how they cope with societal stakeholders (...) in their strategic environment” and could make “strategic decisions about the deployment of their scarce commodity time” (Schillemans et al., 2021a, p. 1240). As they often have to deal with multiple and conflictual accountabilities (Romzek & Dubnick, 1987), agency-CEOs need to make prioritisation decisions between competing accountability demands (Aleksavska et al., 2022; Busuioc & Lodge, 2017). To understand these decisions, public administration scholars have focused on the individual and subjective dimension of accountability by asking to whom public managers and officials feel accountable (see e.g. Schillemans, 2008; Thomann et al., 2018). Social-psychological literature provides further insights into individual-level accountability by focusing on how features and pressures from the accountability environment influence *individual’s* subjective conceptions of accountability (i.e., their “state of mind”) through cognitive and psychological processes (see e.g. Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999; Tetlock et al., 1989). This individual’s “state of mind” or so-called “felt accountability” is suggested to have large effects on a range of behavioural outcomes (Hall et al., 2017) and can ultimately impact organisational outcomes (Overman & Schillemans, 2022). We use stakeholder orientation as the individual lens to study whether and when agency-CEOs perceive their relationships with societal stakeholders as relevant and important.

The relationship between formal stakeholder arrangements and stakeholder orientation

We distinguish two theoretical perspectives that might explain the drivers of agency-CEOs’ stakeholder orientation. In the first place, an important “trigger” for stakeholder orientation can be the existence of stakeholder arrangements, such as stakeholder boards and stakeholder consultations (Schillemans, 2008; Van Thiel, 2019). In political discourses, involving societal stakeholders in formal accountability practices is assumed to enhance responsiveness of public organisations (Mattei et al., 2018). For example, ‘client focus’ has been a major catch-phrase of many public sector reforms that

promote the introduction of client/stakeholder panels and other alternative channels of accountability (Mulgan, 2000; Pollitt, 2003). Although some authors critically question whether stakeholder bodies and panels are effective in holding public agents accountable (see Bovens, 2007; Lindén, 2015), Schillemans (2008) shows that stakeholder arrangements can have a considerable influence on agency behaviour by complementing vertical accountability and by stimulating learning. The central idea is that stakeholders will matter more to agencies if they have a formal position and formal influence within an agency's "accountability regime" (Biela & Papadopoulos, 2014). As a result, formal stakeholder arrangements are likely to be associated with a higher perceived importance of societal stakeholders for agency-CEOs.

The association between formal stakeholder arrangements and agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation can be theorised based upon the literature on felt accountability. Formal stakeholder arrangements might trigger the 'anticipated accountability' of agency-CEOs (Overman et al., 2021) as it creates the formal opportunities for a moment of accountability to occur, in which they need to explain and justify their conduct to involved stakeholders (see also Hall et al., 2017; Overman & Schillemans, 2022). This anticipation of accountability can 'nudge' accountable individuals to align their views more with stakeholders' preferences and to consider these preferences as more important (Tetlock et al., 1989). Furthermore, the existence of formal stakeholder arrangements can reflect a 'logic of appropriateness' (March & Olsen, 2011) suggesting that it is expected and appropriate behaviour for agency-CEOs to engage and interact with stakeholders. As stakeholder involvement is formally embedded within organisational structures by the means of stakeholder boards and stakeholder consultations, agency-CEOs can consider it to be "natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate" (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 478) to pay acute attention to societal stakeholders. Agency-CEOs will allocate more time and attention to societal stakeholders as it is in accordance with the institutionalised rules and practices within their agencies, and, as such, it becomes a part of their 'institutional identity' (Olsen, 2013, p. 466; see also Karsten, 2015).

The relationship between social media attention and stakeholder orientation

Social media attention can further be relevant for agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. With the mediatisation of public agencies, agency-CEOs are subject to accountability pressures from traditional mass media and social media. Public administration scholars have widely recognised the role of traditional mass media as an important accountability forum (see e.g. Djerf-Pierre et al., 2013; S. Jacobs et al., 2021; Maggetti, 2012). Social media platforms provide a tool for *direct* lines of accountability between public sector organisations and various stakeholders, including interest groups, non-governmental organisations and also individual clients and citizens. Social media technologies are suggested to create a "virtual public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2002) that enables direct communication and interactions between citizens, societal actors, and governmental authorities. As such, social

media can contribute to “a public space for account-giving, debate and scrutiny of the performance of [...] governance” (Sørensen & Torfing, 2021, p. 13).

A link between social media attention and stakeholder orientation can be expected based upon the mediatisation and reputational literature. The mediatisation literature suggests that mediatisation processes of public bureaucracies strongly influence organisational behaviour and individual behaviours within organisations, including communication activities and accountability towards external audiences (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). The rise of social media has “strengthened the penetrative and intrusive capacity of the media as a social system affecting other social systems and have become part of ‘hybrid media systems’ (...) in which traditional and social media feed into each other and exert ever more pressure on other institutions” (Schillemans et al., 2019, p. 601). In this ‘hybrid media system’ (see Chadwick, 2017), “old” and “new” media institutions intertwine and reinforce each other, potentially increasing their impact and relevance for governments and public sector organisations – and this might spill over into agency-CEOs’ stakeholder orientation.

From a reputational perspective, criticisms and negative reports on social media platforms about an organisation’s conduct can be an important reputational threat for public agencies (see e.g. Boon, Salomonsen, Verhoest, et al., 2019). The reputation literature portrays agencies as strategic actors that aim to cultivate a positive organisational image across important external audiences through reputation-building endeavours (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017; Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Wæraas & Maor, 2014). Agencies’ reputation-building strategies are affected by the degree of reputational threats, whereby higher threats are suggested to encourage agencies to expand their repertoire of reputational strategies (see e.g. Rimkutė, 2020). The hostility of the social media environment can challenge the legitimacy of public agencies thereby increasing the importance of reputation-management activities (Zavattaro & Eshuis, 2021). Stakeholder engagement can be an attempt to manage constituencies, reputation and support (Schillemans et al., 2021a) and it offers agencies a strategy to build long-term constituencies and to cultivate a good reputation across important audiences (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021; Busuioc & Lodge, 2017). Under high accountability pressures from the “virtual public sphere”, agency-CEOs can therefore feel prompted to ‘volunteer’ more time and attention to interacting and engaging with societal stakeholders and managing stakeholder relationships. In sum, we expect a positive association between social media attention for public agencies and agency-CEOs’ stakeholder orientation.

4.3. Data and methods

Our study focuses on the stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs of different types of semi-autonomous public bodies in the Netherlands: departmental agencies or *agentschappen* (semi-autonomous organisations/bodies without legal independence), independent administrative bodies or *ZBO’s* (legally independent organisations/bodies

with managerial autonomy) and governmental advisory bodies that are legally established as *adviescollege* or *planbureau*.⁷ Despite some variation in their formal and legal autonomy, these organisations operate at arm's-length distance from their parent department (see e.g. Schillemans, 2008; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a).

For this study's purposes, the Netherlands offers a relevant context to the study of accountability relationships between public agencies and societal stakeholders. Historically, public agencies are an important feature of the Dutch institutional context and are strongly involved in the execution and implementation of many public policies (Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a). Various public agencies in the Netherlands have implemented stakeholder arrangements (Koop, 2014; Schillemans, 2008). The Netherlands is further a relevant case to study the impact and importance of social media pressures for stakeholder orientation, as the use of social media platforms is generally high across the Dutch population (Hellsten et al., 2019) but also among many Dutch public sector organisations (Bekkers et al., 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015). As Dutch agencies are subjected to formal stakeholder arrangements and social media attention to various degrees, this provides relevant empirical ground to this study.

Our study uses a mixed-methods design that complements quantitative data with qualitative data. Our approach was sequential in nature, in which we first conducted a quantitative study for identifying patterns between agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation and organisational and individual characteristics. The qualitative study was used for strengthening our understanding of the factors and mechanisms accounting for the empirical patterns from the quantitative study. Below, both components of our research design are described in terms of data and methods.

Quantitative study

The quantitative part of this study consisted out of a survey among CEOs of agencies in the Netherlands. The survey was conducted under full control of the author in the context of a larger evaluation project commissioned by the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Finance with regards to the governance regimes for different semi-autonomous public organisations in the Netherlands. As a sampling procedure, CEOs or heads of organisations were approached to participate in the study, indicating that some of the descriptive parts of the questionnaire could be delegated to other employees. We choose to focus on the CEO as a core member of the 'governing coalition' (cf. Cyert & March, 1992) of an agency for reasons of comparability across public agencies. Such an approach is similar as previous quantitative and large-N research into public agencies (see Verhoest et al., 2012). Our survey was fielded between 20 April and 31 May 2021. In total, N=212 respondents were invited to participate in the survey. A reminder to the respondents was sent twice. A number of N=103 full responses were recorded, reflecting

7 Because of the similarities and their sample size, *adviescolleges* (advisory boards) and *planbureaus* (planning bureaus) are grouped together as one category of public agencies in the quantitative analyses.

a response rate of 48.5 per cent. This is comparable with previous survey research among Dutch agencies (cf. Schillemans et al., 2021a; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a).

In our study, the dependent variable is agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. To measure this orientation, Schillemans et al.'s (2021) two-item measurement of "horizontal orientation" (see Wood, 2015) has been applied to this study's context. Their measures have been slightly adopted to reflect all three phases of Bovens' (2007) conceptualisation of accountability, including information provision, debate and the possibilities of consequences. As such, stakeholder orientation was measured by a three-item scale with the following items: "It is important for our task that our organisation makes information about the functioning of our organisation publicly available to societal stakeholders" (M=5.97, sd=1.505), "It is important for our task that our organisation has regular meetings with societal stakeholders at a strategic level" (M=5.74, sd=1.768) and "It is important for our task that our organisation anticipates judgments and evaluations of societal stakeholders about the performance of our organisation" (M= 5.67, sd=1.756). All survey questions were measured on a 7-point Likert scale with answer options ranging from 1= "Fully disagree" to 7= "Fully agree". The scale is a reliable scale with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.804$. A principal component analysis further shows that only one component has an eigenvalue above 1.00 (Eigenvalue= 2.155) and this component explained 71.84 percent of the proportion of variance, indicating one-dimensionality of the three-item scale. For robustness reasons, Appendix I presents the statistical results for the original two-item scale.

As a first independent variable, the existence of formal stakeholder arrangements was investigated by asking respondents to indicate whether two arrangements were present within their agencies. These were (1) "an consultative body with clients, customers or users" and (2) "formal consultation procedures with societal actors" (see Lindén, 2015; Schillemans, 2008). These two arrangements are suggested to be most common practices of formal social accountability in the Netherlands (see Schillemans, 2008). Both items were measured on a dichotomous scale. Formal consultation procedures with societal actors were the most common form in our sample (N=36), followed by consultative bodies representing clients, customers, or users (N=29). In total, N=52 organisations (49.5%) in the sample have implemented at least one of these accountability arrangements.

The second dependent variable is social media attention for public agencies. We measure actual attention collecting data via online software tool *Coosto*. Coosto is a commercial tool for social media monitoring, but is commonly used in academic research for collecting social media data, for instance in the field of communication science (see e.g. Hellsten et al., 2019; Wonneberger et al., 2021). The software crawls and archives all posts that have been sent by social media users located in the Netherlands (Wonneberger et al., 2021). In this study, we focus on Twitter because Twitter is an important medium for online political and public discussions, also in comparison to other social media platforms (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; Hellsten et al., 2019). The database consisted of the number of messages or 'tweets' by Twitter users that were *addressed to*

public agencies in our sample. Tweets were included that mention the username of an organisation's main Twitter account. The research period covers a timeframe of one year, from 21 April 2020 to 20 April 2021. Social media attention was highly skewed across organisations, ranging between 0 and 606,196 Twitter posts ($M=9\,775.18$, $sd=59\,989.81$). There was a non-normal distribution of social media attention with skewness of 9.825 ($SE=0.238$) and kurtosis of 98.438 ($SE=0.472$). To correct for skewness, the variable was log-transformed.

The study's focus on objective Twitter attention rather than subjectively perceived social media pressures, has certain advantages in terms of overcoming methodological problems that are mostly related to common method bias (Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015). Although the (traditional) news media has an important agenda-setting function in the current media landscape, this study focuses on social media attention instead of news media attention, as a focus on traditional news media might risk "overlooking the fact that interested publics, including citizens and civil society groups, may be much more directly involved in accountability processes" (Ojala et al., 2019, pp. 281–282). As a robustness check, Appendix II provides additional insights into the associations of agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation with news media attention. In comparison, the associations of agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation with social media attention were remarkably stronger than with news media attention.

Finally, this study includes five control variables – three organisational and two individual characteristics. On an organisational level, agency size is an important factor that could influence a range of organisational characteristics, also relevant to this study (see e.g. Boon, Salomonsen, & Verhoest, 2019; S. Jacobs et al., 2021; Koop, 2014; Verschuere et al., 2006). Size has been measured by the number of FTEs of employees – data was obtained from official governmental sources, such as annual reports and the official ZBO register of the Dutch national government. To correct for skewness, the variable has been log-transformed. We further control for organisational type. Legal status is often considered as a basic structural feature of public agencies and could be relevant for multiple organisational aspects, such as independence and formal accountability (see e.g. Verhoest et al., 2012). A dummy variable has been included in order to control for the different legal types of organisations in this study – with independent administrative bodies (ZBOs) as a reference category. With regards to organisational task, the literature makes an important distinction between regulatory and nonregulatory agencies, particularly with regards to stakeholder environment (Rimkutė, 2020; Van Thiel & Yesilkagit, 2014). Based upon survey data about agencies' task portfolio, we include a dummy variable for agencies with regulatory tasks (ref. category= nonregulatory agencies).⁸

⁸ Respondents were asked to respond to the following survey question: "Could you please indicate which of the categories below most adequately describes your most important task?" Answer categories "Supervision, regulation and control (e.g. market-regulation, inspection, rule-enforcement)" and "Quality assessment, certification and licensing" were considered as regulatory tasks, all other answer options are coded as non-regulatory tasks (cf. Van Thiel & Yesilkagit, 2014).

The study controls for two individual characteristics of agency-CEOs: gender and tenure. Information about respondents' characteristics was obtained from the survey data.⁹ Gender is a dichotomous variable with 0=male and 1=female, while years of tenure has been measured on a six-point scale with answer categories ranging from “less than one year” to “more than 20 years”.¹⁰

Qualitative study

The qualitative part of the study followed after the quantitative study and consisted out of two focus groups with a total amount of N=14 participants, including (former) agency-CEOs and high-level agency representatives from the Netherlands.¹¹ A focus group can be defined as “a data-collection method that brings together a small group of individuals (i.e., six to eight people) to discuss a series of open-ended questions” (Cyr, 2017, p. 1038). Focus groups stimulate interactive and open discussions and facilitate the collection of a wider range of opinions and perspectives. They are often suggested to be well suited in mixed-methods designs for the validation and interpretation of research findings and for generating insights that may not surface in individual interviews or survey research (Cyr, 2017; Kitzinger, 2006).

Focus groups were held in June 2022 and sessions range between 1 hour and 1.5 hours. The focus groups were used to understand from an insider perspective how the societal accountability environment of public agencies can impact the stakeholder orientation for agency-CEOs. We therefore purposefully sampled participants with sufficient knowledge and experience with regards to Dutch public agencies and their societal accountability environment. We choose the following set-up for our focus groups. First, participants were provided with a written summary about the survey results prior to their participation in one of the focus groups. At the start of both focus groups, a short presentation was given about the survey findings, and we invited participants to share their initial thoughts about our findings. We explicitly asked whether our findings were recognizable and convincing to our participants. Participants were strongly encouraged to interact with other participants by sharing their own experiences and by asking questions about and responding to the perspectives of fellow participants (in line with Kitzinger, 2006). Both focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Based on an iterative coding process, major themes and topics from the discussions were identified, ordered, and finally categorised. As the focus groups were held in Dutch, the quotes used in this chapter have been translated to English by the author.

⁹ In the case of missing data (N=5), we use the contact information of the respondent in order to determine her/his gender. This has been done in order to increase statistical power.

¹⁰ Other answer options were 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years and 16-20 years.

¹¹ In total, N=23 participants were invited to participate in our qualitative study. Five proposed participants did not respond to our invitation. Six proposed participants indicate that they did not have to time to participate in our study, while two of them suggest inviting another participant from their own professional network for attending one of the focus groups.

4.4. Results: what relates to agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation?

Quantitative findings

Which patterns do we find in the stakeholder orientation of Dutch agency-CEOs? Table 4.1. presents the descriptive statistics for all key variables of this study, including agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. As Table 4.1. shows, stakeholder orientation is relatively high with a mean score of 5.79 (SD=1.41) on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 to 7. There is however quite some variance in the levels of stakeholder orientation across respondents, as scale scores range between 2.00 and 7.00, showing that some agency-CEOs are strongly oriented towards their societal stakeholders, while others are less oriented to their stakeholder environment.

Table 4.2. shows the correlation matrix between our main variables. Stakeholder orientation has significant bivariate correlations with the existence of a consultative body with clients, users and/or stakeholders ($r=0.251$, $p=0.011$), the existence of formal consultations with societal actors ($r=0.248$, $p=0.012$), social media attention ($r=0.339$, $p<0.001$), organisational size ($r=0.269$, $p=0.006$), advisory bodies ($r=-0.246$, $p=0.012$) and agencies with regulatory tasks ($r=0.206$, $p=0.037$). Correlation coefficients range between -0.246 and 0.339 , indicating relatively weak to moderate correlations. Some of the independent variables do also significantly correlate with each other. Most notably, the correlation coefficient between social media attention and organisational size is high ($r=0.735$, $p<0.001$). This is theoretically not surprising (see Boon, Salomonsen, & Verhoest, 2019), but could create problems of multicollinearity. A multicollinearity analysis, using variance inflation factors, however shows a maximum VIF value of 4.081, whereas a VIF value above 5 or 10 is often considered as a threshold for a problematic amount of collinearity (Alin, 2010).

Table 4.1. Summary statistics.

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
(1) Agency-CEO's orientation to societal stakeholders	103	5.79	1.41	2.00	7.00
(2) Consultative body w. clients/users	103	0.28	0.45	0	1
(3) Consultation with societal actors	103	0.35	0.48	0	1
(4) Social media attention (log)	103	4.64	3.99	0.00	13.31
(5) Organisational size (log)	103	3.62	2.59	0.00	9.72
(6) Agency type: Departmental agencies	103	0.16	0.36	0	1
(7) Agency type: Advisory bodies	103	0.39	0.49	0	1
(8) Task: agencies with regulatory tasks	103	0.19	0.40	0	1
(9) Gender: female	103	0.31	0.47	0	1
(10) Tenure	103	1.57	1.12	0	5

Table 4.2. Correlation matrix of key variables of interest.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1) Agency-CEO's stakeholder orientation	---	0.251*	0.248*	0.339***	0.269**	-0.077	-0.246**	0.206*	0.079	0.010
		p-value	0.012	<0.001	0.006	0.442	0.012	0.037	0.428	0.923
(2) Consultative body w. clients/users		---	0.130	0.244*	0.483***	0.149	-0.455***	0.129	-0.094	0.046
		---	0.192	0.013	<0.001	0.134	<0.001	0.193	0.346	0.642
(3) Consultation with societal actors		---	---	0.233*	0.287**	0.023	-0.292***	0.052	0.036	0.154
		---	---	0.018	0.003	0.818	<0.001	0.602	0.719	0.122
(4) Social media attention (log)		---	---	---	0.735***	0.251**	-0.354***	-0.056	0.302**	-0.214*
		---	---	---	<0.001	0.011	<0.001	0.576	0.002	0.030
(5) Organisational size (log)		---	---	---	---	0.462***	0.608***	0.047	0.165	-0.182
		---	---	---	---	<0.001	<0.001	0.640	0.097	0.066
(6) Agency type: Departmental agencies		---	---	---	---	---	-0.342***	-0.007	0.002	-0.293**
		---	---	---	---	---	<0.001	0.942	0.987	0.003
(7) Agency type: Advisory bodies		---	---	---	---	---	---	-0.391***	-0.018	0.055
		---	---	---	---	---	---	<0.001	0.854	0.579
(8) Task: agencies with regulatory tasks		---	---	---	---	---	---	---	-0.011	-0.076
		---	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.910	0.443
(9) Gender: female		---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	-0.138
		---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.163
(10) Tenure		---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
		---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

In Table 4.3., the regression results of this study are presented. First of all, Model 0, only including individual control variables and basic organisational characteristics, shows that these factors are poorly associated with agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. The associations between agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation and agency-CEOs' individual characteristics are weak. With regards to organisational variables, agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation is positively related with organisational size and is further significantly lower for agency-CEOs of departmental agencies (as compared to ZBOs). Model 0's coefficient of determination R^2 is 0.109, indicating that Model 0 could explain nearly 11 percent of the data variation.

Model 1 considers the relationships between stakeholder orientation and formal stakeholder arrangements – consultative bodies and consultation procedures. Both arrangements are however not significantly related to stakeholder orientation. Although the associations between stakeholder arrangements and stakeholder orientation were in the expected direction, the correlation coefficients were not significant at an alpha level of $p < 0.05$ or $p < 0.1$. In comparison to Model 0, R^2 slightly increased from 0.109 to 0.123. We thus find very limited support for a positive association between agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation and formal stakeholder arrangements.

Model 2 examines the association of agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation with social media attention. In line with the expectations, there was a significant and positive relationship between social media attention and stakeholder orientation ($B=0.121$, $SE=0.051$, $p=0.020$). With $R^2=0.150$, Model 2 is able to explain 15 percent of variation within the data. Although there is still a large proportion of variance in stakeholder orientation that cannot be explained by Model 2, the findings provide some empirical ground that social media pressures are positively associated with agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation.

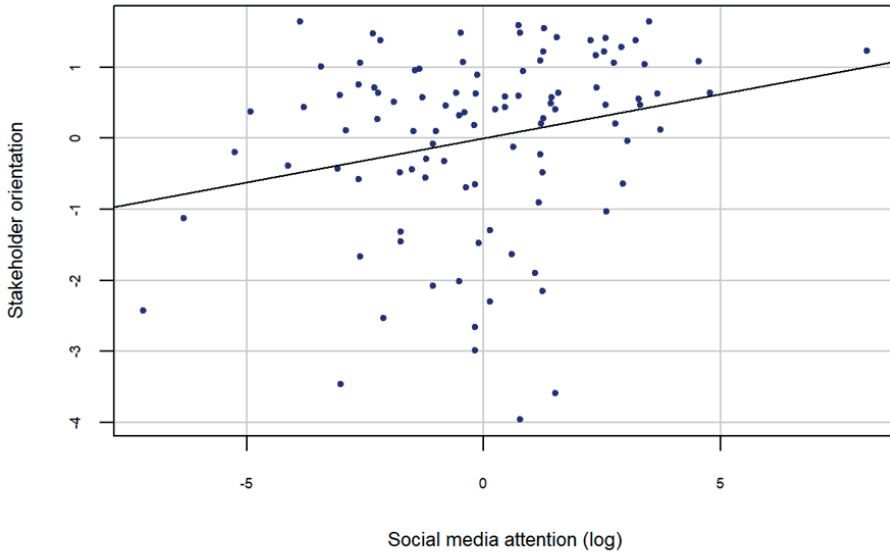
Finally, Model 3 represents the full model of this study including the existence of both formal accountability arrangements and the amount of social media pressures, but also controls for organisational size, type and task and individual characteristics. The full model provides additional evidence that social media attention is related to agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. After controlling for the existence of both stakeholder arrangements, the amount of social media attention has a significant and positive relationship with the dependent variable – stakeholder orientation ($B=0.125$, $SE=0.051$, $p=0.017$). To illustrate, Figure 4.1. shows the added-variable plots of social media attention for stakeholder orientation. For each doubling of the volume of Twitter messages or “tweets”, agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation increases with 0.12 points on a seven-point scale – an increase of approximately 1.5 percent points. Meanwhile, stakeholder arrangements did not have a significant association with stakeholder orientation. Other organisational and individual factors are neither significantly related to stakeholder orientation.

Table 4.3. Multiple linear regression: explaining stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs.

	Model 0			Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Control variables			Formal stakeholder arr.			Social media attention			Full model		
	B	SE	P	B	SE	P	B	SE	P	B	SE	P
(Constant)	5.154***	0.503	<0.001	5.045***	0.503	<0.001	5.108***	0.492	<0.001	4.997***	0.490	<0.001
Consultative body w. clients/users (0= no, 1= yes)	---	---	---	0.403	0.353	0.256	---	---	---	0.498	0.346	0.153
Consultation with societal actors (0= no, 1= yes)	---	---	---	0.471	0.298	0.188	---	---	---	0.429	0.291	0.144
Social media attention (log)	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.121*	0.051	0.020	0.125*	0.051	0.017
Organisational size (in FTEs, log)	0.184*	0.072	0.012	0.132	0.078	0.094	0.036	0.094	0.701	-0.025	0.100	0.799
Departmental agencies (ref.= ZBOs)	-0.957*	0.429	0.028	-0.840	0.431	0.054	-0.798	0.425	0.063	-0.671	0.425	0.118
Advisory bodies (ref.= ZBOs)	-0.175	0.390	0.656	-0.002	0.399	0.996	-0.241	0.382	0.530	-0.058	0.390	0.881
Agencies with regulatory tasks (ref.= non-regulatory tasks)	0.592	0.379	0.122	0.593	0.376	0.118	0.681	0.372	0.071	0.680	0.369	0.068
Female (ref.= male)	0.083	0.293	0.778	0.136	0.296	0.646	-0.083	0.295	0.778	-0.019	0.295	0.948
Tenure	0.024	0.127	0.853	-0.027	0.129	0.834	0.063	0.125	0.613	0.014	0.127	0.913
F	3.075**		0.009	2.781**		0.008	3.563**		0.002	3.264**		0.002
R ²	0.109			0.123			0.150			0.166		
N of cases	103			103			103			103		

Note: the dependent variable (DV) is agency-CEO's stakeholder orientation. The scores reflect unstandardised coefficients from multiple linear regression analyses. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

Figure 4.1. Partial regression plot: The added value (AV) of social media attention for predicting agency-CEO's stakeholder orientation.



Qualitative findings

The focus groups provide insights into the mechanisms and factors that can potentially explain patterns of stakeholder orientation. In general, participants recognize the potential impact of social media attention for public sector organisations. Participants were presented with the main findings from this study and asked to what extent they made sense in their considerable experience. They clearly expressed this was the case. As a high-level agency representative (R10) has experienced, “[our agency] just had one large social media storm. (...) I was actually surprised by the professionalism with which the activists were able to organise themselves, there can be a lot of organisational power behind it.” Others consider the rise of social media as a “major shift” for public agencies (R13, high-level agency representative) that has also impacted their strategic and external communication (R3, agency-CEO).

The qualitative study provides additional insights to the relationship between social media attention and agency-CEOs’ stakeholder orientation. We highlight two sets of explanations that were most often mentioned. First, some participants mention the relevance of organisational processes and practices, such as web care and social media monitoring, as an explanation of why agencies are more concerned about and aware of social media attention (R5, R6, R14). Public organisations have adopted themselves to

the changing media landscape. According to a high-level agency representative (R14), this implies that *“if there is something important going on social media platforms, this also impacts what is important for an organisation.”* Also, (corporate) communication departments within large agencies often report on how agencies are discussed on Twitter, thereby increasing the awareness of agency-CEOs about social media attention for their organisations (R6, high-level agency representative). As a public sector expert (R5) further explains, *“attention triggers attention”* and agency-CEOs are more likely to devote their time and attention to societal stakeholders if they feel that there is also a societal interest for the functioning of their organisations. Various participants indicate that social media can further extend existing traditional media pressures (R1, R8, R11, R12). From this perspective, stakeholder orientation can then be considered as a consequence of mediatisation and organisational adoption to social media.

A second set of explanations relates to the reputational risks for public agencies that are often associated with social media attention. In particular, several participants mention that social media storms can be a strong pressure on public organisations (R3, R7): *“You could also easily translate ‘social media’ into ‘commotion’”* (R2, high-level agency representative). Public organisations can be very sensitive for social media attention and fear negative and hostile sentiments towards public authorities (R9, high-level agency representative). These concerns are particularly important for organisations with a salient task portfolio. As an agency-CEO (R8) suggests: *“If you do work directly for citizens, then of course social accountability is important, but there is also a greater chance that you will end up in a media storm on social media.”* For public organisations, it is difficult *“or at least a very optimistic attempt”* to manage and influence social media storms (R10, high-level agency representative). For example, an agency-CEO describes that *“when you get into trouble and receive bad social media attention you want to counter it with the good news as a defensive strategy”* (R3, agency-CEO). As part of such a strategy, it is of concern for agency-CEOs to build stakeholder support by interacting and engaging with important stakeholders in the societal environment. As an agency representative (R2) explains, stakeholders can function as ‘a kind of external ambassadors’ for organisational policies and decisions and might act as a form of opposition to critical voices on social media platforms during times of commotion. As such, these explanations reflect a strategic and reputational perspective on agency-CEOs’ stakeholder orientation.

Additionally, the focus group discussions touch upon the role of stakeholder arrangements and their potential impact on stakeholder orientation. Although several participants recognize that stakeholder arrangements might be of limited relevance for stakeholder orientation (R8, R9), others were still *“somewhat surprised”* (R7, high-level agency representative) by the quantitative study’s results. Various participants consider stakeholder arrangements as an important and relevant form of accountability (R3, R11, R12, R14). Nevertheless, the focus group discussions further underline that stakeholder arrangements can be often confronted with several organisational challenges and might

therefore be rather “*complex*” (R4, public sector expert) in practice. For example, several participants have experienced problems with the recruitment and involvement of difficult societal stakeholders in stakeholder arrangements and the limited or weak representation within stakeholder panels and consultations (R6, R9, R13). As one agency-CEO (R3) explains based upon his own experience: “*We really want to involve stakeholders. It also helps to improve your service. But [stakeholder arrangements] are complicated. Stakeholders argue and disagree with each other, then some stakeholders leave, and you get new stakeholder collectives. It is impossible to do it all in a proper way*”. As such, the focus group discussions largely confirm and extend the findings from the quantitative study and also provide some points for reflection to our statistical results.

4.5. Conclusion and discussion

This study has investigated to what extent the existence of stakeholder arrangements and the amount of social media attention are associated with the stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs. Based on a survey of N=103 CEOs of Dutch agencies, this study shows that their stakeholder orientation does not correlate with the existence of formal stakeholder arrangements, but that their stakeholder orientation is strongly correlated with the amount of attention that public agencies attract on social media. Qualitative findings suggest that this link between social media attention and stakeholder orientation can be explained by a mix of factors, including organisational visibility, processes of mediatisation and reputational considerations.

Importantly, this study adds to the literature about the role of societal stakeholders in public sector accountability by showing how different aspects of the societal accountability environment align with the stakeholder orientation of individual agency-CEOs. Our findings suggest that social media attention is particularly associated with a greater importance of societal stakeholders for agency-CEOs. We thereby extend the existing body of literature that discusses how social media platforms are an important supplement within the accountability environment of public agencies (Brummel, 2021; Ojala et al., 2019; Vrangbæk & Byrkjeflot, 2016). Whereas most of these studies focus on how citizens and stakeholders use social media platforms for accountability purposes, we show that social media attention might activate or “trigger” agency-CEOs’ stakeholder orientation. In addition, our qualitative findings point out to the importance of mediatisation and reputational considerations for explaining the relevance of social media attention for stakeholder orientation. In line with mediatisation theory (Chadwick, 2017; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014), the qualitative findings suggest that agency-CEOs are more oriented towards their stakeholder environment under conditions of high social media attention because of organisational processes of mediatisation and social media adaption. The qualitative study further offers support for the role of reputational considerations for explaining associations between social media attention and stakeholder orientation (cf. Busuioc & Lodge, 2017), suggesting that social media pressures are a

potential reputational threat that increases the need for agencies to strengthen their accountability relationships with societal stakeholders in order to manage support and reputation.

Our study does not find support for a link between formal stakeholder arrangements and agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. The qualitative study underlines the findings from the survey and provides additional depth to our quantitative study. As such, our findings extend existing concerns about the functioning of stakeholder arrangements as an important venue for agency accountability (see also Lindén, 2015; Schillemans, 2008) by showing that stakeholder arrangements are not a guarantee for securing the stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs.

Despite its contributions to the literature, this study still faces some caveats and unanswered questions that can be addressed in further research. First, this study uses survey responses to measure the stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs. As frequent interactions with societal stakeholders are often considered to be normatively desirable (see e.g. Pollitt, 2003), this could be a limitation as survey responses of CEOs about their stakeholder orientation might be prone to social desirability bias. The distribution of responses however shows sufficient variance with regard to the outcome variable, but we should be careful with drawing conclusions about individual behaviour and attitudes based upon survey data.

A second issue relates to the generalizability of this study's findings beyond the Dutch case. It is currently not known to what extent country context might influence the results of this study. Importantly, the Netherlands is a country with high levels of social media adoption by both public organisations and societal stakeholders (see e.g. Bekkers et al., 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; Hellsten et al., 2019). Given the significant relationships between social media attention and stakeholder orientation, this is an important factor to consider while generalizing this study's results. Further research is needed to examine whether this study's patterns hold in other country settings, such as countries with other administrative cultures and traditions and/or media systems.

A third concern of this study relates to issues with causality. Theoretically, causality remains a complex issue in both research on public sector accountability and studies about (social) media and public administration. Although mediatisation has a potential large impact on the bureaucracy, public organisations are able to influence their social media environment by their (strategic) actions and responses (Schillemans et al., 2019). By using multiple data sources and methods, this study was able to overcome some of the methodological problems, such as common method bias (cf. Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015). To generate more causal knowledge about the effects of social media attention on accountability outcomes, longitudinal and in-depth case studies could improve our understanding of underlying causal mechanisms (Yang, 2012).

To conclude, this study shows that the amount of social media attention for public agencies is strongly related to stakeholder orientation. In contrast, formal stakeholder

arrangements are limitedly associated with higher stakeholder orientation. Stakeholder arrangements are not a panacea for enhancing a greater stakeholder orientation of CEOs of public agencies. Rather, the findings underpin the pivotal role of social media visibility for citizens, clients, and societal actors to be effective in drawing the attention of agency-CEOs. The growing relevance of social media attention within accountability processes and practices can have important implications for public sector governance and requires caution because social media is often associated with multiple biases and problems (see e.g. Feeney & Porumbescu, 2021; Ojala et al., 2019; Sunstein, 2007). Social media is not an unbiased and problem-free venue for social accountability – a major challenge for public agencies is to develop strategic responses for dealing with social media storms.



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CHAPTER 5

Social accountability and stakeholder arrangements

Abstract

This chapter analyses how managers and officials within public agencies perceive the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements. Many agencies have established formal accountability relationships with societal stakeholders by introducing stakeholder bodies and panels. The academic literature has however debated whether and how stakeholder arrangements can reflect a full accountability mechanism. Based on original qualitative interviews with 25 representatives from nine Dutch agencies, this study distinguishes five different perspectives that agency managers and officials have about the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements: a control perspective, an institutional perspective, a managerial perspective, learning perspective, and a reputational perspective. Agency managers or officials do not often describe stakeholder arrangements as a form of accountability, but their experiences and perceptions include elements of accountability. Rather than strengthening control and scrutiny, stakeholder arrangements are perceived as an accountability mechanism that relates to a mixture of agency demands and motives.

5.1. Introduction

Stakeholder involvement has become an important aspect of the governance structures of many public agencies. Across the public sector, agencies have established institutionalised and interactive relationships with their most important stakeholders by the means of client panels, user boards, and other *stakeholder arrangements*. From an accountability perspective, stakeholder arrangements have been presented as an additional layer of accountability that can strengthen the accountability of public agencies (Bovens, 2007; Schillemans, 2011; Scott, 2000; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012).

The actual accountability function of stakeholder arrangements has however spurred academic debates. Scholars critically question whether stakeholder arrangements are a full accountability mechanism that includes all elements of information provision, debate, and potential consequences. Particularly, stakeholder arrangements are suggested to have a weak control function, because they often lack formal judgment and sanctioning possibilities (Lindén, 2015; Papadopoulos, 2010). Others have however emphasized the indirect and informal control function that stakeholder arrangements can have (Byrkjeflot et al., 2014; Meijer, 2007; Schillemans, 2008). Rather than strengthening control, there are a range of different perspectives in the literature that consider stakeholder arrangements as an accountability mechanism with alternative functions and purposes. Schillemans (2011), for instance, argues that stakeholder arrangements facilitate accountability processes that contribute to organisational learning (see also Greiling & Halachmi, 2014; Schillemans & Smulders, 2015). According to Koop (2014), stakeholder arrangements can be a form of accountability to which agencies voluntarily adhere because of moral and professional norms but also because of instrumental concerns. Additionally, stakeholder arrangements can form a reputational tool by which means agencies show their accountability ties with stakeholders and, as such, try to strengthen their legitimate authority across multiple audiences (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021; Busuioc & Rimkutė, 2020; De Boer, 2021).

Against this background, this chapter focuses on how public managers and officials experience and describe the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements in their own words. For improving our understanding of accountability, it is important to understand how accountable individuals think and feel about their accountability relationships. Crucially, their individual perceptions of accountability can be a connecting link in the relationship between accountability arrangements and actual organisational outcomes (Overman & Schillemans, 2022). Within the public administration literature, many authors have emphasized this subjective and ‘felt’ element of accountability for the functioning of accountability relationships in practice (Acar et al., 2008; Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Karsten, 2015; Yang, 2014). As Sinclair (1995, p. 220) for instance argues in her seminal work on public sector accountability: “efforts to improve accountability would be informed by an understanding of the diversity of ways in which managers construct, hold and enact a sense of being accountable.”

Therefore, this study draws on original qualitative interviews with N=25 agency representatives from nine different independent administrative bodies or so-called ZBOs (*zelfstandige bestuursorganen* in Dutch) in the Netherlands about their experiences with stakeholder arrangements. ZBOs are legally independent entities with limited ministerial responsibility and high managerial autonomy (De Kruijf & Van Thiel, 2018). Since the 2000s, various ZBOs have implemented new institutional arrangements to strengthen their accountability vis-à-vis stakeholders and society at large (Koop, 2014; Yesilkagit, 2004). From an international-comparative perspective, societal stakeholders are particularly relevant within the accountability environment of Dutch agencies (Schillemans et al., 2022). This provides a relevant empirical context for better understanding the different ways in which agency managers and officials perceive and socially construct the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements.

This chapter makes three contributions. In the first place, this chapter makes an empirical contribution to the literature by exploring how agency managers and officials perceive the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements. Although the public administration literature often refers to stakeholder arrangements as a form of accountability (Bovens, 2007; Schillemans, 2011), it is often unclear whether public managers and officials consider stakeholder arrangements as a relevant accountability mechanism. As argued above, the perceptions of individual account-givers about their accountability relationships, as well as their motivations and intentions, can strongly matter for how accountability works in action. Therefore, studying the individual perspectives of account-givers is highly valuable for understanding whether and how stakeholder arrangements can be considered as an important form of accountability.

Second, this chapter also relates to the question how we can theoretically understand the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements in agencies. Various scholars have proposed a range of different theoretical perspectives for explaining accountability behaviour of public agencies in non-hierarchical settings (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2018; Olsen, 2013; Schillemans, 2011). This chapter sheds a light on whether and how these theoretical explanations are reflected in the perspectives that agency managers and officials have about the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements.

Finally, this chapter offers insights that can be relevant for practice. Because there is a growing tendency in multiple countries and policy sectors to involve and engage stakeholders within the formal accountability structures of agencies, it is relevant to understand the impact and implications of stakeholder arrangements for the accountability of agencies. In academic and public debates, stakeholder arrangements have been heralded for creating more open and inclusive accountability practices, but they are also suggested to be problematic because stakeholders do not have a full and formal democratic mandate and stakeholder arrangements can create problems of capture and biases (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021; Papadopoulos, 2010). In the light of these debates, this chapter sketches

out how agency managers and officials perceive the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements, thereby providing empirical input for discussions about the role and relevance of stakeholder arrangements within the larger accountability regime of public agencies.

5.2. Theory

Accountability, social accountability, and stakeholder arrangements

The accountability of public agencies is an important topic in the academic literature (see e.g. De Boer, 2022; Lægveid & Rykkja, 2022; Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2022; Van de Sande et al., 2021). Following Bovens' (2007) conceptualization of accountability, accountability can be defined as an relationship between an account-giver and an account-holder, in which an account-giver renders information to an account-holder and this account-holder can ask questions and pass judgement on the account-giver's conduct (Bovens, 2007, p. 450). According to Bovens (2007), accountability thus consists of three important elements: information provision, debate, and potential consequences.

Many studies have shown that accountability has become multidirectional; agencies are not only accountable upward to central government but are also increasingly faced with the expectations and judgements of a wide array of downward and societal stakeholders (Verschuere et al., 2006; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). These stakeholder-oriented forms of accountability are often referred to as 'social accountability'. Social accountability reflects a range of accountability practices that can be directed to general and non-specific audiences and to more specific audiences within society (Brummel, 2021). On the one hand, social accountability has been fostered by increased transparency (Meijer, 2007; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). Many public organisations have committed themselves to account-giving practices, for instance via websites, press releases, or social media (De Boer, 2021). These account-giving practices are generally directed to wider and unspecified audiences, i.e. the "public at large" (Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). On the other hand, specific stakeholders can be involved and represented within the formal accountability arrangements of agencies. These types of arrangements are established in multiple policy domains and contexts and in different countries and jurisdictions, including the European Union, several European countries and the United States (Arras & Braun, 2018; Busuioc & Jevnaker, 2022; Moffitt, 2010; Pierre, 2009; Schillemans, 2011; Verschuere et al., 2006). Stakeholder arrangements can consist of a mix of mandatory and voluntary elements. Within several organisational and administrative contexts, stakeholder arrangements can be a mandatory requirement for public sector organisations, but stakeholder bodies and panels are often self-imposed in nature (Bovens, 2007; De Boer, 2021; Koop, 2014).

There could be major differences across public organisations which type of societal stakeholders are involved in stakeholder arrangements, largely depending upon an agency's stakeholder environment. For example, De Boer (2021) refers to "interest groups, clients and users, professional peers and regulates" as important stakeholder

groups of public sector organisations (see also Koop, 2014). This diversity of stakeholders is further reflected in the variety of names under which these stakeholder arrangements are known. Predominantly, in domains as social services and health care, stakeholder arrangements consist of clients and/or client representatives and go under names such as “client councils”, “client panels” and “patient panels” (Brummel, 2021; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009; Pierre, 2009). In other domains, stakeholder bodies are more diverse in nature, also including interest groups, regulated companies, labour unions, user organisations, civil society organisations and other external stakeholders; and are often known as “user bodies”, “stakeholder councils”, “boards of stakeholders/users” or “consultative forums” (Busuioac & Jevnaker, 2022; Lindén, 2015; Schillemans, 2011). “Advisory bodies” and “advisory committees” are further examples of how non-state stakeholders can be involved within formal structures of public agencies – these bodies often include a wide range of societal actors (Moffitt, 2010).

Stakeholder arrangements from an accountability perspective

Are stakeholder arrangements a relevant “accountability forum” for public agencies (Bovens, 2007, p. 450)? Stakeholder arrangements are very different from the more traditional and vertical modes of accountability, in which a subordinate is formally accountable to a hierarchical superior (Acar et al., 2008; Gailmard, 2014; Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2018). The accountability relationships between agencies and stakeholders are based on a principle of affected interests, instead of hierarchical ownership (Mulgan, 2003). Often, agencies do not have a formal obligation to be accountable to their stakeholders. Within the accountability literature, there has been further discussion whether stakeholder arrangements include all three elements or phases of accountability that Bovens (2007) has analytically distinguished (see also Klenk, 2015; Meijer, 2007). Importantly, stakeholder arrangements often lack the formal opportunities to judge and sanction agency behaviour (Lindén, 2015; Schillemans, 2008). For these reasons, the control function of stakeholder arrangements has been considered as limited.

Meanwhile, others have suggested that stakeholder arrangements can be important for controlling agencies. Stakeholder arrangements have been associated with informal and indirect sanctions, and there can be a strong informal or felt obligation for public agencies to give an account to stakeholders (Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). Because hierarchical accountability is not always an effective control mechanism, stakeholder arrangements are particularly relevant within a ‘hybrid’ framework of accountability, in which hierarchical and societal modes of accountability reinforce each other (Goetz & Jenkins, 2001; Reddick et al., 2020; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). In this framework, stakeholder arrangements can contribute to departmental control by providing a form of ‘fire-alarm oversight’ that informs political principals about the functioning and the potential failures of public agencies (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984).

Rather than control, social forms of accountability, such as stakeholder arrangements, might however be more important for different functions within the accountability landscape of agencies. When hierarchy is absent, Acar and colleagues (2008) argue that accountability turns into a tool for managing expectations instead of a control mechanism. In addition to a control perspective, this study distinguishes four additional perspectives on the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements based on the public administration literature.

In the first place, stakeholder arrangements might reflect a 'logic of appropriateness' (March & Olsen, 2011), whereby agencies render an account vis-à-vis stakeholders because they consider it to be rightful and expected (Koop, 2014). According to an institutional perspective, public agencies can experience a strong *moral* obligation (instead of a formal obligation) to be accountable to their stakeholders (Byrkjeflot et al., 2014). Stakeholders can claim legitimate and moral authority to hold public agencies accountable because of their affected interests (Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2022; Mulgan, 2003; Overman & Schillemans, 2022). Public officials often feel a strong intrinsic motivation to be not only accountable to their hierarchical superiors, but also to be responsive to affected citizens and stakeholders (Sinclair, 1995).

Stakeholder arrangements can also be a relevant accountability mechanism from a managerial perspective, because they contribute to an effective implementation of agency's policies and an efficient collaboration between agencies and stakeholders. For example, stakeholder arrangements might serve agencies' informational needs and can be a platform for facilitating and monitoring stakeholder compliance (Arras & Braun, 2018). If agencies collaborate with specific stakeholders, for instance, through networks and/or partnerships, these stakeholders become important actors within an agency's environment that have key resources and expertise that is relevant for policy implementation (De Boer, 2022). "Peer accountability", which means that agencies use accountability to inform their collaborative network partners and discuss policies and programs with them (Papadopoulos, 2010, p. 1040), can be an important tool for effective relationship management. From this perspective, stakeholder arrangements are also of instrumental value because they can function as an instrument for stimulating organisational effectiveness (see Christensen et al., 2020; March & Olsen, 2011).

Stakeholder arrangements can further be valuable from a *learning perspective*, whereby they function as "a regular mechanism to confront administrators with information about their own functioning and forces them to reflect on the successes and failures of their past policy" (Bovens, 2007, p. 464). Stakeholders often have relevant knowledge of a policy field or first-hand experience with the effects of agency's policies, and their views and opinions can thus be relevant for improving organisational services and performance (Greiling & Halachmi, 2014; Schillemans & Smulders, 2015). Learning motives can be based upon norms of appropriateness, because it is considered to be appropriate to learn and obtain feedback from stakeholders (Karsten, 2015). Yet, learning motivations

can further reflect an instrumental logic, because organisational learning can be a means towards organisational improvement (De Boer, 2021).

In recent years, there has been a particular interest for the importance of reputational considerations within accountability practices and processes. According to a *reputational perspective*, stakeholder arrangements can be a tool for managing and building long-term constituencies and for cultivating a good reputation among various audiences (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Busuioc & Rimkutė, 2020; Carpenter & Krause, 2012). Many public agencies pursue to maintain good relationships with their most important client and stakeholder groups and are concerned about a negative reputation among dissatisfied clients and/or stakeholders (Klenk, 2015; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). Stakeholder arrangements can be important for coalition-building with stakeholders, by which means agencies strive to increase their external support among a broad range of societal actors. Wood (2015), for example, argues that strengthening agency accountability vis-à-vis external stakeholders can be crucial for maintaining organisational reputation and legitimacy. As such, agencies can convey an image of “a reputable actor in the eyes of one’s audience(s), conveying the impression of competently performing one’s (accountability) roles, thereby generating reputational benefits” (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, p. 247). Stakeholder arrangements can stimulate greater organisational autonomy because it legitimizes organisational conduct and might delegitimize the formal control from political authorities (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021; De Boer, 2021). Although a strong reputation can be a strategic asset for public organisations, reputation-seeking behaviour can also reflect an intrinsic value because agencies can consider it as appropriate and socially desirable to act in accordance with audience expectations (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, p. 250).

5.3. Research context and case selection

This study focuses on the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements within the context of Dutch independent administrative bodies or so-called ZBOs. Dutch ZBOs are legally independent entities that are based on statutes under public or private law and that have a relatively high degree of managerial autonomy (type II agencies, see Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a). There is substantial variance between ZBOs in terms of task portfolio, organisational structure, and size, but exemplarily is that ZBOs are able to make legally binding decisions (De Kruijf & Van Thiel, 2018). From a historical perspective, public agencies have an important place in the administrative tradition of the Netherlands. During the 1980s and 1990s, the number of ZBOs strongly increased (Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a, p. 180). Despite recent political attempts to reduce the number of ZBOs, they still remain a dominant feature of the Dutch administrative state (Dekkers et al., 2021).

Dutch ZBOs offer a relevant research context for this study’s purposes. First, the ministerial responsibility of ZBOs is restricted – given the fact that ZBOs are often criticized for their lack of accountability, they are more likely to consider accountability

to stakeholders as important (Schillemans, 2008). Second, the involvement of societal actors and stakeholders in executive governance have been traditionally strong in the Netherlands (Dekkers et al., 2021; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012a). Particularly in the 2000s, attention-grabbing accountability innovations have taken place within several ZBOs that have stimulated greater horizontal and social accountability (Koop, 2014; Yesilkagit, 2004). The accountability landscape of Dutch agencies is very horizontal and society-oriented in nature, also compared to agencies in other European states, such as Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (Schillemans et al., 2022). Third, there is substantial variation with regards to how stakeholder arrangements are institutionalized within ZBOs. Because ZBOs strongly vary in terms of size, salience, and task portfolio (De Kruijf & Van Thiel, 2018), ZBOs deal with a range of different types of users, clients and affected stakeholders. There are further differences between ZBOs with regards to the legal base of stakeholder arrangements: some ZBOs have introduced stakeholder panels and bodies based on statutory responsibilities, while for others, stakeholder arrangements reflect a self-imposed and voluntary instrument (Dekkers et al., 2021). Taken this together, Dutch ZBOs offer a relevant plausibility probe for exploring the different ways in which the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements is constructed within agencies.

This study includes ten stakeholder arrangements within nine ZBOs. Table 5.1. lists the different stakeholder arrangements that have been studied. These stakeholder arrangements were identified and selected based on a website search (in December 2019) of the various stakeholder arrangements of a vast majority of ZBOs (n= 91). The sample of nine ZBOs consists of agencies with different task portfolios, including agencies that are responsible for important welfare policies (UWV, SVB and CAK), but also organisations with policy tasks, such as land registration (Kadaster), higher education accreditation (NVAO), and forest maintenance (Staatsbosbeheer). There are also differences between agencies with regards to the types of stakeholders that are involved within these stakeholder arrangements, ranging from individual clients and client representatives to interest groups, user/consumer organisations and other civil society actors. The sample is further a mix of mandatory and voluntary examples of stakeholder arrangements. As such, this case selection reflects a maximum variation approach, whereby cases were purposefully selected in order to have enough diversity to find shared patterns across a set of comparable but heterogenous cases.

5.4. Research approach

This study is based upon a qualitative research design with original interviews with N=25 agency representatives about their perceptions of and experiences with stakeholder arrangements. The aim of the interview study was to better understand how agency representatives interpret the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements by focusing on how they describe the role of stakeholder arrangements within their own

words and based upon their own beliefs, opinions, and experiences. Qualitative research is considered to be a suitable method “for probing the meaning of accountability as constructed or experienced by actors in their daily life” (Yang, 2014, p. 166; see also Sinclair, 1995).

The respondents of this study were individual representatives within public agencies that have personal and first-hand experiences with stakeholder arrangements. These respondents include, among others, CEOs, COOs, division heads, and senior managers and officials of public agencies. For some agencies, also chairpersons and/or support staff of stakeholder arrangements were interviewed. These respondents were purposefully approached for an interview because of their experiential expertise about the object of study. The aim was to recruit at least two respondents for each agency, although this turns out to be not possible for two cases due to reasons of data accessibility (see Table 5.1.). Interviews range between 30 and 75 minutes and were held between March 2020 and January 2021. Because of the coronavirus crisis and social distancing restrictions in the Netherlands at the time of data collection, all interviews were conducted online or by phone.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature. During each interview, respondents were asked questions about the actual functioning of stakeholder arrangements (e.g., How often do you meet? When was the last meeting? Who participates in these meetings?), but also about their own beliefs, perceptions and experiences (e.g., Why do you think that the arrangement is important? What is your attitude during meetings? How does the arrangement contribute to your organisation? What are the requirements for a good member of such a board or panel? What are important challenges for the arrangement in the near future?). Follow-up questions were asked in order to clarify respondents' answers and to collect further elaboration and/or illustrative examples to their answers (e.g., Do you have a concrete example of this?). At the end of each interview, respondents were provided the opportunity to address issues that were not discussed earlier during the interview. By using a semi-structured approach, specific insights were collected with regards to this study's research aims, while it was further possible to obtain a larger overview of respondents' perceptions and experiences about stakeholder arrangements and to address potential 'blind spots' of the researcher. All interview materials were fully recorded (after respondent's permission) and transcribed.

As an analytical approach, this study uses a combination of open and thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first phase of coding, interview materials were reread. Relevant features of the data were assigned a code that reflects closely what the respondent has said. In a second stage, codes were compared and grouped together in order to identify reoccurring themes in the dataset. Based on a creative and iterative coding process, in which empirical evidence was further compared with theoretical insights from the accountability literature, the coding process ended up with five different perspectives identified on the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements.

For a member check of the findings, the study's initial results were presented and discussed during two focus group sessions that were organised in June 2022 with N=14 participants from various agencies (including agency-CEOs and high-level agency representatives). During the focus groups, a summary of the study's results was presented, and participants were invited to reflect upon the most important findings and discuss these findings with each other. The focus group discussions largely confirm the findings and patterns from the qualitative interviews, but also leads to a refinement of one of the perspectives in this study (the control perspective) after it raises critical debate and reflection within both focus groups.

To ensure confidentiality for respondents, respondent numbers are used in the text when referring to the interview materials and using direct quotes from the interviews. All quotes used in this chapter were translated from Dutch to English by the author.

Table 5.1. List of organisations, main tasks, stakeholder arrangements and stakeholder groups.

Agency	Task portfolio	Name of stakeholder arrangement	Legal base	Most important stakeholders that are involved	No. of interviews
UWV	Implementation of employee insurances	Central client council	Mandatory	Recipients of unemployment benefits and job-seekers (or their representatives)	1
SVB	Implementation of pension and benefits schemes	Client advisory board	Mandatory	Pensioners and recipients of child benefits and personal care budgets, or their representatives (or their representatives)	3
CAK	Collection of personal contributions in social care	Client council	Voluntary	Clients in long-term care, assisted living or social support, and people with no health insurance (or their representatives)	4
Kadaster	Land registry	User board	Mandatory	Notaries, local authorities, consumer organisations	3
CBR	Administration of drivers' licenses	User board	Mandatory	Driving schools and instructors, consumer organisations	3
RDW ¹	Licensing of vehicles and vehicle parts	General stakeholder platform / technical stakeholder platform	Voluntary	Vehicle industry, garage companies, insurance providers, consumer organisations	6
NVAO	Quality assurance of higher education	Stakeholder panel	Voluntary	Educational institutions and student organisations	1
Sbb	Forest maintenance and services	Advisory board	Voluntary	Local authorities, environmental organisations, farmers	2
COA	Asylum reception	Advisory board	Voluntary	Local authorities, housing corporations, asylum-seekers' interests	2

¹For the case of the RDW, two different accountability arrangements were studied.

5.5. Results

Stakeholder arrangements and aspects of accountability

Do stakeholder arrangements function as an accountability tool? And what explains their importance and relevance for accountability purposes? A first observation is that respondents hold somewhat different views about whether stakeholder arrangements can be classified as a form of accountability. Some respondents specifically refer to stakeholder arrangements as a “form of horizontal accountability” (R4, R16), while several interviewees indicate that stakeholder arrangements do not have an accountability function. As a public official (R1) for instance states, “it might have a bit of evaluation, perhaps, but it is much more focused on the future than that you say: hey, that’s about, well, some kind of accountability or whatever”. It seems that stakeholder arrangements are sometimes considered in the light of a narrow interpretation of accountability (see also Schillemans, 2015), in which the concept is interpreted as a formal principal-agent mechanism rather than as a social relationship. Some respondents clearly separate stakeholder arrangements from other entities to whom they are (formally) accountable, such as a parent department and/or a supervisory board (R10, R17). As R18 (agency head) argues: “We do tell them what we have done, but it is not the case that we then need their approval. (...) That more formal role, that we have to be accountable, and we have to get approval, that is really the role of the parent department”.

Although many respondents do not discuss stakeholder arrangements in terms of accountability, their descriptions of stakeholder arrangements contain several elements of accountability. In practice, stakeholder arrangements are said to function as an “information platform” (R23, chairperson) or a “kind of reporting body” (R20, public official) in which the organisation provides information about important policies and decisions to its main stakeholders. Agencies do not only provide information to their stakeholders about *what* they are doing, but also “explain *why* [they] are doing it” (R19, public official). Although most respondents describe the relationships between agencies and stakeholders as “harmonious” (R8), “constructive” (R22) and “positive” (R24), various respondents suggest that stakeholder councils do critically monitor organisational conduct and ask critical questions if needed (R5, R7, R11, R14, R15). Respondents further provide examples in which stakeholders’ opinions and evaluations were considered as highly important, also in the absence of formal judgment and sanctioning possibilities (R3; R4; R9; R12; R21). For some agencies, stakeholders can give a formal advice about new policies, such as new tariff proposals. As R12 (agency manager) explains, “because we only get our turnover from our customers, so our customers have an important role in approving our tariffs... or, at least, they are given the opportunity to give a highly important advice on this subject.” Some respondents however argue that the actual impact (or consequences) from stakeholder arrangements on agencies remains unclear or limited (R8, R17). In general, the interviews indicate that accountability elements are present in stakeholder arrangements and that stakeholder arrangements can have an

accountability function, although these mechanisms might not always be perceived as a form of accountability.

To understand the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements in more detail, the remaining of this section will discuss five different perspectives on the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements: a control perspective, an institutional perspective, a managerial perspective, a learning perspective, and a reputational perspective. These five perspectives are also summarized in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Five perspectives on the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements.

Perspectives	Expectations	Empirical evidence
<i>Control perspective</i>	Stakeholder arrangements can extend and supplement existing forms of control	R6, R10, R11, R15, R19, R22, R23.
<i>Institutional perspective</i>	Stakeholder arrangements can reflect norms of appropriate behaviour	R1, R4, R7, R8, R14, R19, R20, R25.
<i>Managerial perspective</i>	Stakeholder arrangements can strengthen organisational coordination with external stakeholders	R3, R11, R14, R19, R20, R21, R24.
<i>Learning perspective</i>	Stakeholder arrangements can contribute to organisational learning	R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R8, R9, R16, R17, R18, R21, R23, R24, R25.
<i>Reputational perspective</i>	Stakeholder arrangements can be a source of organisational legitimacy and reputation	R3, R11, R12, R13, R16, R20, R21, R23.

A control perspective

Stakeholder arrangements might have the potential to function as a tool for control and oversight. However, the direct control function of stakeholder arrangements is often discussed as minimal or even non-existent (R1, R2, R5, R9). As R5 (public official) for instance explains, “[The client council] does not really take a very controlling role. It is always a bit of searching, [...] They function more as an advisory body with us, I would say.” The control function of stakeholder arrangements is often hampered, because stakeholder arrangements can become “invisible within the wider organisation” (R8, public official) while their “impact is often unclear and less concrete” (R17, public official). According to an agency-CEO (R9), it is also a question whether stakeholder arrangements should function as a control mechanism, because: “They do not have a control function and they shouldn’t have it either, because we already have many institutions that control us”. However, when stakeholders have a more formal or mandated position, they might be more likely to function as a tool for control (R11, R15). As R15 (chairperson) argues, it is highly relevant that the stakeholder board is a legal instrument, rather than “something without obligation”.

Stakeholder arrangements can particularly be relevant from a control perspective by extending and supplement existing forms of control. Several interviews illustrate that stakeholder arrangements provide the parent department with relevant information about the functioning of agencies (R15; R19; R22). As such, these arrangements can function

as a “fire alarm” for departmental accountability (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984). As R10 (public official) for example states, “As a client platform, they can go to the ministry. And, of course, that gives them the opportunity to put something on the political agenda.”

Furthermore, stakeholder arrangements can address other formal institutions, such as Parliament and political parties (R23) and the Ombudsmen (R6). R6 (chairperson) explains: “We have discussed and stated their most far-reaching means, our options if our objectives are not achieved. And the ombudsman is then one of them.” This function is mostly relevant under specific circumstances, such as policy conflicts, media incidents, and disagreements between agencies and stakeholders. From a control perspective, stakeholder arrangements might be a limited instrument. They might however form an “accountability trigger” (S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016), stimulating other accountability processes, including departmental accountability.

An institutional perspective

From an institutional perspective, stakeholder arrangements can reflect a practice that is in accordance with norms of appropriateness. According to this perspective, agencies involve and interact with societal stakeholders because they consider it as fair and appropriate behaviour and because it is expected of them from their societal and professional environment. Multiple respondents stress the importance of listening carefully to stakeholders, “particularly if you work with a vulnerable group of clients” (R4; R7) and because “it nicely fits with the Dutch *polder* culture, that everybody is allowed to have his or her opinion on important matters” (R19). And R14 (public official) argues: “Because you have an increasingly open and transparent society, it means that you just say: hey, we really want to hear your opinion. We already do that, but maybe we’ll do that more often”. Here, involving stakeholders in accountability practices is portrayed as “natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate” (March & Olsen, 2011, p. 478; see also Koop, 2014). And, as R2 (agency manager) also explains: “I do not have to give an account to them [stakeholder platform]. But I do find it professional to indicate what I have done with their advice. They cannot hold me accountable, but I do feel a moral obligation to deal with their advice in a very professional manner.”

Public officials further mention that they find it appropriate that stakeholder arrangements represent a good and balanced mix of stakeholders, including not only private companies, but also civil society organisations, “because they can represent the citizens in some way” (R20, public official). It is however difficult to find a proper balance and representation of all stakeholder interests (R6, R25). Several groups of stakeholders and clients are underrepresented in stakeholder arrangements and “it is often hard to find the right people” (R25, public official). From an institutional perspective, this can be challenge, as a balanced and diverse representation of stakeholders within stakeholder arrangements is often considered to be in line with norms of appropriateness.

A managerial perspective

For multiple respondents, stakeholder arrangements can further be an important coordination mechanism with external stakeholders. From a managerial perspective, stakeholder arrangements can contribute to effective policy implementation. A few respondents mention the importance of stakeholder arrangements for external collaboration and coordination: “If you want to maintain good relationships with your stakeholders, then you have to take time for these kind of things” (R21, agency manager). Stakeholder arrangements provide external stakeholders with a direct access to public agencies, while they enable agencies to have regular and frequent contacts with their most important stakeholders (R19, public official). As R11 (public official) also explains, “having those contacts with stakeholders is just incredibly valuable. (...) With a user board, you now just have a contact file that you can use and that makes it always easier”. As public agencies often cooperate with various stakeholders, the coordination function of stakeholder arrangements has become increasingly important. Frequent meetings with stakeholders are a potential source for “de-escalation” (R21, agency manager), as “it is better to talk *with* each other, rather than *about* each other” (R24, agency manager). Elements of accountability, such as information provision and debate, can be supportive to effective coordination with stakeholders, as R14 (public official) explains: “we are increasingly collaborating with stakeholders in chains. So, everyone benefits from sharing clear and transparent information because you work together.” The quote reflects Arras and Braun’s (2018) finding that stakeholder arrangements can be particularly important for serving agency’s informational needs.

Stakeholder arrangements provide further opportunities to inform stakeholders about new and relevant policy developments. As such, stakeholders are better prepared for the implementation of new legislation – involving and consulting stakeholders can stimulate their compliance with these new rules (R3, R20). As R20 (public official) further explains, “What you do, you need to do with these stakeholders; you need to have some administrative capacity to get all stakeholders ‘on board.’” Justification and explanation to external stakeholders is therefore crucial. As R24 (agency manager) argues: “If you explain things, you can come very close to each other. But if you do not explain it, things can go wrong.” These findings underline the importance of “effectiveness motivations” (De Boer, 2022) for understanding the adaption of stakeholder arrangements as an accountability practice (see also Arras & Braun, 2018).

From a managerial perspective, a potential challenge reflects the limited interest and involvement of stakeholders within stakeholder arrangements (R12, R13, R15, R20). Formal stakeholder meetings are not always “effective” (R12, agency manager) and, as R20 (public official) argues, “many issues are not that relevant to all stakeholders. You should find topics that are really relevant for everyone or for most parties sitting at the table. That is sometimes difficult”.

A learning perspective

Multiple respondents consider stakeholder arrangements as a learning tool. According to various respondents, stakeholder arrangements can provide an alternative form of accountability that is more reflective and learning-oriented in nature, for instance, by formulating lessons with regards to the quality of public services and stakeholder experiences with the organisation (R4, R16, R23). R25 (public official) considers a client council as “a mirror that shows us what the effects of our services are... when does it not go well and when can it work better?”. As such, “it helps for keeping the human aspect of your services in mind”. For others, stakeholder meetings have a “sounding board function” (R3, agency manager; R24, agency manager) or a “thermostat function” (R21, agency manager), in which the organisation discusses important policy developments with stakeholders and stakeholders can provide relevant feedback. Stakeholder arrangements further inform agencies about external developments, for instance, how organisational decisions are perceived by external actors (R2, agency manager). Stakeholder arrangements are meaningful from a learning perspective because stakeholders can provide different perspectives, as R5 (public official) further explains:

“I notice that they have a slightly different perspective than we have. Because they have a client perspective. Especially in the field of communication, I notice that they come up with ideas and those ideas are then also adopted. They can come up with ideas that we think of... we hadn't thought of that yet...”

These experiences reflect Schillemans' (2011) learning perspective to accountability. However, for some respondents, stakeholder arrangements do not fulfill such a learning function, because “(the) group of stakeholders lacks the knowledge to come with surprising insights” (R7) or “because we are only sending information, rather than really discussing it with our stakeholders” (R13). Whereas the expertise and experiences of stakeholders can importantly contribute to organisational learning, a (perceived) lack of knowledge and engagement may hinder the learning potential of stakeholder arrangements. The perceived expertise of stakeholders is thus crucial for stimulating learning by accountability (cf. Overman & Schillemans, 2022).

A reputational perspective

A reputational perspective considers stakeholder arrangements as a source for public agencies to cultivate their organisational reputation and legitimacy among their most important stakeholders. Reputational considerations can impact how agencies with their accountability relationships to societal stakeholders. For various respondents, frequent consultations with societal stakeholders serve as an attempt to create greater support for agency's major decisions (R3, R12, R16). Stakeholder arrangements might further influence stakeholder perceptions about the willingness of agencies to listen to the feedback from stakeholders and stakeholder concerns. The chairperson of a stakeholder arrangement (R23) notes that the agency always mentions the role and importance of its stakeholder platform in its annual report, “full of proud”. And R20 (public official)

suggests: “With our stakeholder platform, stakeholders can never say that we do not pay attention to them”. For another respondent (R21, agency manager), stakeholder meetings are also a form of “impressions management” by showing to the wider set of stakeholders that stakeholder representatives have been consulted about important matters, while you “also give these parties arguments to convince their constituencies of a certain new policy”.

In addition, stakeholder arrangements might help agencies for legitimizing their conduct towards the parent department, although this function is often not explicitly discussed. Still, one respondent (R11, public official) mentions that her agency informs the minister on an annual base with an overview of formal feedback from the user board and how the agency has dealt with these suggestions, and “it is a pity for us if that list is incomplete”. As a quote of R16 (agency-CEO) further illustrates: *‘For us, [a stakeholder board] is really a proof towards the minister: look, stakeholders have been invited to talk, this is what they think. It is really a governance buzzword, that helps a lot’*. As such, stakeholder arrangements can also be a strategic tool contributing to the credibility and authority of public agencies (see also Karsten, 2015).

5.6. Conclusion and discussion

This chapter has discussed how managers and officials within public agencies perceive the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements. Within the public administration literature, it has been often debated whether stakeholder arrangements can be a relevant and meaningful form of accountability. There are a range of different theoretical explanations and perspectives on the functions that stakeholder arrangements can fulfill as an accountability mechanism. Based on original qualitative interviews with N=25 agency representatives from nine different Dutch ZBOs, this study provides a multi-faceted and diverse picture of the different ways in which agency members and officials perceive and describe the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements. Some important lessons can be learned.

First, agency representatives do not often refer to stakeholder arrangements as a form of “accountability”, but their perceptions and descriptions of the role of stakeholder arrangements often include elements of an accountability relationship, including information provision, debate, and, to a lesser extent, the application of potential consequences. This might be related to the fact that stakeholder arrangements are also associated with a range of other functions, such as strengthening participation, consultation, and/or responsiveness (Arras & Braun, 2018; Busuioc & Jevnaker, 2022; Moffitt, 2010). Public managers and officials might however use a rather strict interpretation of the word “accountability”, in which the term is restricted to a set of formal obligations to which agencies have to adhere (Schillemans, 2015). Within their wider accountability regime, the accountability relationships between agencies and parent departments are often considered to be the most important and influential ones

(Schillemans et al., 2022). Stakeholder bodies and panels can still provide a relevant accountability mechanism but might not always be perceived as a form of accountability.

Second, this study shows that agency representatives hold a diversity of perspectives about the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements: a control perspective, an institutional perspective, a managerial perspective, learning perspective, and a reputational perspective (see also Table 5.2.). This study suggests that, while the control element of accountability is perceived as less dominant in the context of stakeholder arrangements, agency representatives consider stakeholder arrangements as a relevant form of accountability because they can trigger other forms of control but also because they reflect moral and professional norms and/or they can contribute to coordination needs, learning objectives, and reputational considerations.

These findings extend existing insights suggesting that stakeholder arrangements are a limited source for control (Lindén, 2015; Schillemans, 2011). This seems to be particularly related to the fact that stakeholder arrangements are often voluntary in nature and do not have strong and formal sanctioning possibilities. Still, the findings also reflect that stakeholder arrangements are perceived as a relevant “accountability trigger” (S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016) within the broader accountability environment of agencies, suggesting that stakeholder arrangements can, at best, provide some “fire alarm” oversight (McCubbins & Schwartz, 1984) to Dutch ZBOs. Because of this, the control function of stakeholder arrangements can be considered as indirect and incidental, rather than completely non-existent.

In addition, this study complements a body of literature that suggests that accountability in non-hierarchical settings is associated with different functions rather than control and answerability (Acar et al., 2008; Karsten, 2015; Koop, 2014). With the absence of hierarchy, there are a range of different theoretical perspectives for interpreting how agency representatives perceive the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements. Traditionally, principal-agent theory has been a dominant theoretical framework within the study of public accountability (Bovens, 2007; Gailmard, 2014). New and horizontal forms of accountability, such as stakeholder arrangements, are however suggested to stand in contrast with some of the elements of a principal-agent understanding of accountability (Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2018, pp. 176–177). This study suggests that the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements can be understood by a mixture of theoretical approaches. In practice, agency representatives use a diversity of perspectives on the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements, rather than one dominant perspective that explains the relevance of stakeholder arrangements. Stakeholder arrangements can be both of intrinsic and instrumental value, as their relevance is related to both moral norms and managerial needs. In line with existing literature on accountability and learning (Bovens, 2007; Schillemans, 2011; Schillemans & Smulders, 2015), the findings also reveal perceptions of stakeholder arrangements as an accountability mechanism that fosters organisational learning. Stakeholder arrangements

are further perceived as a tool for strengthening legitimacy and cultivating reputation and, as such, this study underlines the relevance of reputational considerations within accountability relationships (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021; Busuioc & Rimkutè, 2020).

Importantly, these different perspectives seem to be complementary rather than competing approaches – the findings show that respondents often combine elements of these different perspectives while describing the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements. This can also be explained by the fact that there is some theoretical overlap between the different perspectives. Reputational considerations can reflect both a logic of appropriateness and a logic of consequences (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016), while learning can be instrumental for organisational improvement and effectiveness, but can further be considered as an appropriate practice in itself (De Boer, 2021). This would call for more theoretical diversity and integration within the study of horizontal and societal modes of accountability.

Despite of these contributions, this study still faces some unanswered questions that can guide further research. In the first place, a remaining question is *when* agency representatives consider certain aspects of the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements as more important. In particular, the study suggests that the actual account-holding behaviour of stakeholders within stakeholder arrangements might be crucial for explaining how agency representatives perceive the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements. As this study shows, the various accountability perspectives of agency representatives often go hand in hand with challenges that the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements is associated with, including biased and unbalanced stakeholder presentation and a limited level of involvement of stakeholders within stakeholder arrangements. Although agency representatives can consider stakeholder arrangements as a relevant and important form of accountability, stakeholder arrangements might still form a “trap” in their personal experiences when these arrangements are perceived to function not properly (Sinclair, 1995). According to Overman and Schillemans (2022), account-givers’ perceptions about their accountability relationships are shaped by how they value (1) the expertise and (2) the legitimacy of an account-holder. Accountability is perceived to be more meaningful when an account is rendered to an authoritative and legitimate accountability forum (see also Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2022). Given the relational core of accountability (Bovens, 2007; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012), the perceptions of agency representatives about the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements are likely to be a reflection of the account-holding behaviour of the latter. As this study only focuses on how agency representatives construct their perceptions of the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements, further research can also focus on the other side of the accountability relationship by exploring and explaining stakeholders’ perceptions of and experiences with stakeholder arrangements in public agencies.

A further question remains to what extent this study’s findings are generalizable and transferable to other national and/or institutional contexts. Particularly, administrative

tradition has been considered to be a relevant contextual factor for explaining differences in the accountability landscapes of agencies (Bach et al., 2017; Schillemans et al., 2022; Yesilkagit, 2004). Within the consociational and corporatist tradition of Dutch public administration, there has been a strong emphasis on the involvement of societal actors and stakeholders in policy-making and implementation (Lijphart, 1969). Stakeholder arrangements can be considered as a reflection of this tradition of a “corporatist-consensual model of deliberation with interest groups and pragmatic compromise” (Kickert, 2003, p. 127). When administrative concentration and centralized control are stronger within an administrative system, the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements might be perceived as more symbolic and less relevant (Schillemans et al., 2022). Further research can test and validate some of this study’s findings by studying the role and relevance of stakeholder arrangements within different administrative traditions and contexts.

To conclude, this chapter has shown the variety of perspectives that agency managers and officials have about the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements in practice. Stakeholder arrangements are often not perceived as a control instrument. However, agency representatives consider stakeholder arrangements as a relevant form of accountability because of a combination of both intrinsic and instrumental motivations. Because an individual account-giver’s perceptions and motivations might matter for the outcomes of accountability processes (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Overman & Schillemans, 2022), these findings can have practical relevance. Given their weak control function, stakeholder arrangements might be a limited solution for compensating the accountability deficits of agencies, but they can still be a relevant input for other control mechanisms. More importantly, there are a range of different functions that stakeholder arrangements can fulfill as an accountability mechanism. The stories and experiences of respondents suggest that stakeholder arrangements can be interpreted as a form of appropriate behaviour or as a feedback mechanism. Simultaneously, stakeholder arrangements can be a strategic form of accountability in order to boost an agency’s reputation. The assessment and evaluation of the role of stakeholders in agency accountability, is, in the end, also a question about normative and democratic implications (Papadopoulos, 2010). Nevertheless, these different perspectives and notions of the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements are important for our understanding of the actual relevance and impact of stakeholder arrangements for agency accountability.



CHAPTER 6

Social accountability and legitimacy perceptions

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of social and political accountability arrangements for citizens' legitimacy perceptions. Accountability arrangements are often suggested to improve the perceived legitimacy of governmental organisations. Based upon a pre-registered vignette experiment with a representative sample of N=1574 citizens from the Netherlands, we show that social accountability (accountability to citizens) increases legitimacy perceptions, but that political accountability (accountability to politicians) does not affect legitimacy perceptions. The findings further indicate that accountability is most relevant to decision losers but largely irrelevant to decision winners. This has important implications for our understanding of the impact of accountability for perceived legitimacy.

6.1. Introduction

Public accountability is often seen as a cornerstone of good governance. According to the academic literature, accountability could for instance contribute to democratic control and organisational learning (Schillemans, 2011; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). In addition, public accountability can help foster public consent, by strengthening the perceived legitimacy of governmental organisations and increasing citizens' trust in and support for political institutions (Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000; Bovens, 2010; Greiling, 2014). Whereas ill-designed or badly managed accountability arrangements “could reinforce the idea that the responsiveness of public officials and agencies is something of a charade”, meaningful accountability practices can promote the trustworthiness and acceptance of governmental authorities among the general public (Bovens et al., 2008, p. 239). However, despite these potential benefits, there has been limited attention for citizens' attitudes towards public accountability in the accountability literature (see, for an exception, Pérez Durán, 2016).

Borrowing insights from procedural fairness theory, this study investigates the consequences of two types of accountability – political and social accountability – for citizens' legitimacy perceptions. To do so, we employ novel survey data from a representative sample of N=1574 citizens from the Netherlands, fielded in February 2022, including a pre-registered vignette experiment especially designed for this research endeavour. Using a fictional scenario of a decision-making procedure on the relocation of fire stations by a Dutch safety region (*veiligheidsregio*), we manipulate the type of accountability – no accountability, political accountability, and social accountability – and outcome favourability – negative and positive decision outcomes. This allows us to investigate whether the use of both political and social accountability arrangements can enhance legitimacy perceptions (captured as fairness perceptions, decision acceptance and trust) and whether they do so for both decision winners and losers (cf. Esaiasson et al., 2019). Taken together, we seek to answer the following research question: *What is the influence of social and political accountability arrangements for citizens' legitimacy perceptions?*

In doing so, this chapter contributes to the literature in three ways. First, our *empirical contribution* is that we are among the first to demonstrate the consequences of accountability arrangements for citizens' legitimacy perceptions. As we differentiate between two forms of accountability – political and social accountability arrangements – our research allows us to test whether these social accountability arrangements have a different impact on legitimacy perceptions compared to traditional forms of political accountability, as Bovens (2007, p. 457) has theorised. We further investigate whether accountability has different consequences depending on outcome favourability. Accountability can be particularly relevant for citizens' legitimacy perceptions under conditions when citizens are confronted with unfavourable policy decisions (Anderson et al., 2005; Esaiasson et al., 2019; Werner & Marien, 2022). Accordingly, we expect that public accountability positively affects perceived legitimacy in general and can even compensate negative policy outcomes.

Second, our *theoretical contribution* is that we bridge streams of literature on public accountability, procedural fairness, and citizens' process preferences. Based upon procedural fairness theory, we argue that accountability processes can have an important signalling function that procedures are fair and appropriate thereby increasing the likelihood that citizens accept decisions and trust the decision-makers (see e.g. Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2006; Van den Bos et al., 1998). As such, we provide a novel perspective to academic debates about the connections between accountability and legitimacy. We also extend the procedural fairness literature by demonstrating how post-decisional accountability processes can be of relevance for perceived legitimacy (cf. De Fine Licht et al., 2022).

Finally, our study makes a *societal contribution*. In recent years, various politicians and scholars have proposed social accountability (i.e. direct accountability to citizens and clients) as a supplement or an alternative to political accountability (Mattei et al., 2018). In multiple realms of the public sector, governmental organisations have implemented mechanisms and arrangements to be directly accountable vis-à-vis citizens, clients, and the public at large (Brummel, 2021). While social accountability is suggested to contribute to (external) governance legitimacy (see e.g. Hansen et al., 2022; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021), its empirical effects on the legitimacy perceptions of citizens are largely unknown. With our experimental study, we aim to investigate whether social accountability arrangements can fulfil the potential of a helpful tool for strengthening citizens' legitimacy perceptions.

6.2. Theoretical framework

Accountability, political and social accountability

As “the über-concept of the late 20th and early 21st centuries” (Flinders, 2011, p. 597) in modern governance, accountability has received a lot of scholarly attention. Many different theoretical frameworks and conceptualisations of accountability have emerged in the academic literature (see e.g. Bovens, 2007; Day & Klein, 1987; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). In this chapter, we follow Bovens' (2007, 2010) influential conceptual contribution to defining accountability that considers accountability as a relational mechanism that connects an account-giver with an account-holder in which the former is answerable to the latter. Accountability can then be defined 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).

Public accountability is a broad concept where account-giving can be directed to multiple account-holders (Willems & Van Dooren, 2012). From a democratic perspective, two different types of accountability are of particular importance for the legitimacy of governmental decisions: *political accountability* and *social accountability*. These two types of accountability reflect two distinct notions of how the democratic accountability of governance can be strengthened (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014; Mattei et al., 2015).

Traditionally, the democratic function of accountability is secured by the vertical and hierarchical lines of political accountability (Behn, 2001). Political accountability is located within the opposite direction of the so-called ‘democratic chain of delegation’ (Strøm, 2000), whereby each agent should be obliged to give an account to a hierarchical superior. It reflects “the direct line or chain of accountability [that] links the public servant with the Permanent Head (or CEO), in turn accountable to the minister, to the executive or cabinet, to parliament and hence to the electors” (Sinclair, 1995, p. 225). As such, political accountability is rooted in the notion of the ‘primacy of politics’, that attributes answerability to civil servants for their deeds and actions towards elected politicians that have ultimate decision-making authority in representative democracy (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2014; Klijn & Skelcher, 2007).

Social accountability, on the other hand, can be defined as the direct and explicit accountability relationships of public sector organisations vis-à-vis audiences that consist of citizens, clients, or societal actors (Brummel, 2021; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021). Whereas political accountability is embedded within a system of representative democracy, social accountability reflects a form of accountability that is consistent with a direct and participatory type of democracy (Hupe & Hill, 2007). In political and academic discourses, social accountability is often heralded as a democratic innovation by providing citizens and societal actors a greater influence within public sector accountability (Mattei et al., 2018). Social accountability does not follow a “fixed format” but often takes place through (social) media, public reporting, and public panels (Meijer, 2007, p. 168). In particular, the increased use of citizens’ charters, client panels and user bodies is suggested to reflect an important trend towards greater social accountability in public governance (Bovens, 2007; Schillemans, 2011).

The effects of accountability on citizens’ legitimacy perceptions

Accountability and legitimacy are often discussed in relation to each other. Within the literature, there is a widespread idea that accountability can contribute to public sector legitimacy (Bovens, 2007, 2010; Olsen, 2013; Schmidt & Wood, 2019). However, so far limited empirical knowledge exists about the actual effects of accountability arrangements on citizens’ *legitimacy perceptions* of public institutions (cf. Pérez Durán, 2016). Based upon both the accountability literature and procedural fairness theory, multiple arguments can however be identified to explain why accountability practices could positively contribute to citizens’ legitimacy perceptions.

In the accountability literature, accountability is often described as normatively desirable and many authors consider accountability as a “virtue” of good governance (Bovens, 2010; Dubnick, 2014; Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). An often-made theoretical claim is that accountability could contribute to reassuring and increasing public confidence in government (see also Aucoin & Heintzman, 2000; Bovens, 2007; Halachmi & Holzer, 2010). Accountability is a form of expected and appropriate behaviour (Olsen, 2013)

and, as Greiling (2014, p. 624) suggests, it “is regarded as an instrument which signals competence and organisational trustworthiness and demonstrates how compliance and procedural fairness are met (...)” Particularly, existing research into citizens’ accountability preferences shows that citizens in general consider accountability as an important value for democratic governments (Bryson & MacCarthaigh, 2021; Pérez Durán, 2016).

In addition, the nexus between accountability and legitimacy perceptions is reflected in novel reputational approaches to accountability that consider accountability procedures and practices as communicative strategies of public institutions to achieve legitimate authority across external audiences (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; De Boer, 2021). Within this literature, accountability is seen as a means to legitimize organisational conduct and to appear legitimate “among multiple audiences ‘that matter’”, including informal audiences, such as the public at large (Busuioc & Rimkutė, 2020, p. 1262). By showing accountable behaviour, governmental organisations can obtain a positive reputation among the wider public and generate public support and trust (Christensen & Lodge, 2018; Wood, 2015).

The procedural fairness literature provides further ground for the legitimizing effect of accountability mechanisms. Procedural fairness theory argues that citizens not only care about outcomes, but also evaluate their authorities on the basis of the procedures that are associated with these outcomes. The central notion is that citizens will be more likely to accept the outcome of a decision-making process if they consider the procedures as fair and just, for instance if they feel that the process is open and inclusive, and authorities are respectful to citizens (Esaiasson et al., 2019; Lind & Tyler, 1998; Tyler, 2006). While accountability consists of a justifying dimension (Pérez Durán, 2016), procedural fairness literature suggests that elements of explanation and justification can importantly contribute to (perceived) fair procedures and acceptability of one’s authority (Tyler, 2000). Account-giving can further be interpreted as a sign that decision-making authorities are concerned about the effects of their decisions for the well-being of others (cf. Shapiro et al., 1994). As accountability scholars focus on retrospective and post-decisional (*ex post facto*) processes of account-holding and account-giving (Bovens, 2007), it is particularly relevant that research on procedural fairness indicates that not only pre-decision arrangements, but also post-decision arrangements (i.e. announcements, explanations and post-decision voice), can contribute to perceived legitimacy (see e.g. De Fine Licht et al., 2022; Lind et al., 1990).

Based upon these multiple streams of literature, we thus expect that accountability will increase the likelihood that citizens consider procedures as fair and support a decision and that these effects will hold for both political and social accountability. The first hypothesis therefore reads as:

Hypothesis 1: Decision-making procedures with explicit account giving to citizens (H1.1) or to politicians (H1.2) lead to higher legitimacy perceptions compared to decision-making procedures where account-giving does not take place.

A subsequent question is whether the type of – political and social – accountability generates different effects for citizens’ decision acceptance and trust. There is no consensus within the literature on which type of accountability has a larger impact for legitimacy perceptions. On the one hand, the accountability literature suggests that in particular social accountability can increase fairness perceptions of citizens. Bovens (2007, p. 457) for instance argues that in particular “processes of accountability [...] in which citizens and interest groups can pose questions and offer their opinion” can contribute to the confidence of citizens in governmental organisations (see also Halachmi & Holzer, 2010; Moore, 2014).

Similarly, theories of participatory democracy often assume that citizens prefer a greater citizen involvement in public and political affairs (see e.g. Barber, 1984; Fung & Wright, 2003; Norris, 1999). With a general tendency towards more direct participation and influence of citizens in public decision-making, citizen involvement in accountability practices might stimulate citizens’ positive procedure evaluations and, as an effect, their decision acceptance. Novel research has indicated that citizen involvement in public decision-making can also contribute to fairness perceptions among wider groups of citizens, also including those that do not participate and/or are not willing to participate (D. Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021; Werner & Marien, 2022).

This also corresponds to the procedural fairness literature, which considers experienced voice opportunities as a core feature of a fair process (Hirschman, 1970). According to procedural fairness theory, voice enhances a sense of control during the decision-making process, leading to higher fairness perceptions and decision acceptability (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Moreover, people also care about voice opportunities for relational and symbolic rather than instrumental reasons (Lind & Tyler, 1988).

Still, it is important to note that there is also existing work that critically questions whether social accountability can contribute to citizens’ legitimacy perceptions, compared to political accountability. For example, Grimes (2006) found that unbiased and transparent decision-making procedures contribute to citizens’ legitimacy perceptions, but citizen influence during a process is less important for their legitimacy beliefs (cf. Arnesen, 2017; De Fine Licht, 2014). Similarly, the theory on stealth democracy argues that citizens want a decision system that is built on democratic ideals, but do not want or need to take part in such a system – except in unusual circumstances (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001). In line with this, the public administration literature reports low levels of citizens’ interest and willingness to participate in accountability activities and practices (see e.g. Curtin & Meijer, 2006; Meijer, 2007).

Building on the dominant insights from accountability studies, participation literature and procedural fairness theory, we predict a stronger effect for social accountability compared to political accountability. Our second hypothesis is outlined as:

Hypothesis 2: Decision-making procedures with explicit account giving to citizens lead to higher legitimacy perceptions compared to decision-making procedures with explicit account giving to politicians.

Furthermore, the effects of accountability on decision acceptance and trust are particularly relevant under conditions in which a political decision is made with negative consequences for citizens. An important notion in the procedural fairness literature is that fair and appropriate procedural arrangements in decision-making could enhance citizens' willingness to accept a decision, even if they disagree with the decision outcome (Tyler, 2006). Procedural arrangements, such as accountability practices, could compensate for the negative effects of a particular decision outcome. To take this line of argument one step further, one can even argue that the potential benefits of accountability processes should be studied by focusing specifically on 'losers', i.e., those for which the outcome is unfavourable (Brummel, 2020; Werner & Marien, 2022). Considering that the favourability of outcomes shapes the evaluation of these processes (Esaiaasson et al., 2019), winners are anyway more likely to accept the outcome of the process. For the fostering of democratic legitimacy, it is therefore crucial to study the potential of accountability procedures to generate losers' consent (Anderson et al., 2005).

In sum, while we are interested in the legitimizing effects of accountability in general, we also believe a more important test is assessing losers' reactions to accountability procedures (cf. Werner & Marien, 2022). This leads to the final hypothesis of the study:

Hypothesis 3: Among decision losers, decision-making procedures with explicit account giving to citizens (H3.1) or to politicians (H3.2) lead to higher legitimacy perceptions compared to decision-making procedures where account-giving does not take place.

6.3. Data & Methods

To test above hypotheses, this study employs a vignette experiment in order to understand the effects of different types of accountability on citizens' legitimacy perceptions. The vignette experiment was embedded in an online survey and was conducted in the Netherlands among a representative sample of N=1574 Dutch citizens. Data was collected within the Dutch LISS Panel (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences) in the period between February 5, 2022, and February 28, 2022. The LISS Panel consists of 5,000 households, comprising approximately 7,500 individuals, and is based on a true probability sample of Dutch households drawn from the official population register by Statistics Netherlands (CBS). Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet connection. More detailed information about the survey and sampling procedures are available on the LISS website (<http://www.lissdata.nl/>). Information about the composition and characteristics of the sample can be found in Appendix I. Prior to the data collection, the research design was preregistered via the Open Science Framework (OSF) and information about the preregistration can be found on https://osf.io/njdp6/?view_only=98fbffab84d842128e662bb123a1a07d.

Experimental design

For our study, we designed a 2x3 between-subjects randomised survey experiment in which each respondent is confronted with only one treatment or vignette. A vignette is a “short, carefully constructed description of a person, object, or situation, representing a systematic combination of characteristics” (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010, p. 128). The use of experimental research has as one of its major advantages that it provides a more accurate picture of causal effects by isolating the effects of other confounding factors and, as such, increasing internal validity. In particular, vignette experiments are well suited to study citizens’ responses to specific situations or circumstances, as they embed questions in a concrete, realistic context and are therefore less abstract and more realistic than conventional survey designs (Steiner et al., 2016, p. 53).

The vignette discussed a decision made by a Dutch safety region (or so-called *veiligheidsregio*) with regards to a local fire station. A safety region is a public body that operate in the domains of security and emergency policies in a specified regional area that covers the full territories of multiple municipalities. Safety regions are a form of intermunicipal cooperation (Klok et al., 2018) and the Netherlands is currently divided in 25 safety regions. Since their establishment in 2010, safety regions are responsible for multiple emergency and security issues, including the fire services, according to the Safety Regions Act. Because of the limited direct influence and control of elected politicians over safety regions, there have been concerns about the democratic accountability of safety regions (see e.g. Muller et al., 2020).

The rationale for focusing on fire service policies was to provide participants with a realistic decision that is generally easy to understand and that could be of relevance to every Dutch citizen. The vignette was formulated in such a way that it was understandable for readers with B1 level Dutch. The scenario could further generate clear positive or negative consequences for participants. We select a safety region as a decision-making body in our experiment because of its executive and non-partisan nature and because citizens do not often have direct contact with safety regions. Compared to, for example, municipalities or provincial governments, participants’ responses are less likely to be influenced by previous experiences, personal prejudices and/or biases. Because of the restricted accountability of safety regions in practice, results are further unlikely to be affected by participants’ expectations about the formal and actual accountability of safety regions. In addition, safety regions are not an unknown and invisible form of governance in the Netherlands. Between February 1, 2020, and February 1, 2022, a total of 1,486 newspaper articles, mentioning “safety region”, has been published in one of the five largest national newspapers in the Netherlands (*De Telegraaf*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, and *Trouw*).¹² As most Dutch citizens will be informed about the existence of safety regions, this contributes to the ecological validity of our experiment.

12 Source: NexisUni.

In the experimental setup, participants read a vignette and were either informed that the safety region closes a fire station in their neighbourhood (a *negative decision outcome*) or opens a new fire station in the participant's neighbourhood (a *positive decision outcome*). As a consequence of the decision, the arrival time of the fire brigade would either increase or decrease with 15 minutes for the specific case of the participant. After reading about the decision outcome, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three accountability treatments. For some of the participants, there was no further information provided about the accountability processes with regards to the safety region's decision (*no accountability treatment*). The *no accountability* condition forms the baseline category in this study. Under the *political accountability* treatment, participants were informed that the safety region gave an account about its decision plans to close/open a fire station vis-à-vis local politicians from municipalities within the specific region. If participants were assigned to the *social accountability* treatment, they were provided information that the safety region involved citizens in the accountability processes about its fire service policies. For both accountability treatments, the accountability process was described in such a way that it reflects all three dimensions or phases of Bovens' (2007) conceptualisation of accountability by including elements of information provision, debate and the possibilities of judgement and consequences. An English translation of the vignette is presented in Table 6.1. (see Appendix II for the version in Dutch).

Taken together, our design manipulates two dimensions: outcome favourability and the degree and type of accountability. Participants were informed about a decision with either (1) positive or (2) negative outcomes. The experimental design had three accountability treatments: (1) a treatment without account-giving, (2) a treatment with account-giving directed to politicians or (3) a treatment with account-giving directed to citizens. This results in six different experimental conditions, also reflected in Table 6.2.

Table 6.1. Full text of vignette (translated to English).

<p>Imagine the following situation happening in your area of residence</p> <p>The Netherlands is divided into 25 safety regions. Municipalities work together in a safety region. They do this to ensure the security of the residents. For example, the safety region decides on the fire service.</p> <p>[Negative / positive decision treatment] The safety region where you live has a plan for the fire service. The fire service must be able to do its work better and smarter. In the policy plan, the fire station in your neighbourhood closes / a new fire station opens in your neighbourhood. If there is an accident or fire in your neighbourhood, the fire brigade is 15 minutes longer / shorter on its way.</p> <p>[No accountability treatment] The safety region can take these kinds of decisions autonomously.</p> <p>[Political / Social accountability treatment] The safety region can take these kinds of decisions autonomously. To make a good decision, the safety region does discuss this plan with politicians/citizens from the municipality. The safety region explains the plan during meetings with politicians/citizens. During these meetings politicians/citizens can ask questions about the plan and about the implementation of the plan. They can also give their own ideas. The safety region takes the ideas of politicians / citizens very seriously when implementing the plan for the fire service.</p>
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Table 6.2. Overview of six different vignette scenarios.

	<i>Positive outcome</i>	<i>Negative outcome</i>
<i>No accountability</i>	(1) No accountability x Positive outcome	(2) No accountability x Negative outcome
<i>Accountability to politicians</i>	(3) Political accountability x Positive outcome	(4) Political accountability x Negative outcome
<i>Accountability to citizens</i>	(5) Social accountability x Positive outcome	(6) Social accountability x Negative outcome

Outcome variables

Our core variable of interest is (institutional) legitimacy, which is a concept that is hard to measure directly (Thomas, 2014). Hence, we focus specifically on the legitimacy of authorities as perceived by citizens, also referred to as subjective legitimacy (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001; Tyler, 1988). In line with previous research on procedural fairness, we capture this using fairness perceptions of the decision-making arrangement (cf. Werner & Marien, 2022). Past research has repeatedly shown that the fairness of procedures is closely linked to other core facets of legitimacy, such as trust in authorities and decision acceptance (De Fine Licht et al., 2014, 2022; Esaiasson et al., 2019; Grimes, 2006). To increase robustness, we also employ two additional operationalisations of our dependent variable, that is decision acceptance (also referred to as consent) and trust in the decision-making authority. We thus operationalize citizens' legitimacy perceptions as (1) fairness perceptions, (2) decision acceptance and (3) trust. In the results section, we focus on fairness perceptions, but we report our findings for decision acceptance and trust in Appendices II-III.

In the vignette experiment, *fairness perceptions* were measured by a single survey item: "The decision to close / open the fire station has been made fairly". To measure *decision acceptance*, respondents were asked to respond to the following item: "I accept the decision to close/open the fire station." Both items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, with answer options varying from "Fully disagree" (1) to "Fully agree" (7). These items are highly comparable to often-used measures in procedural fairness research (see also Esaiasson et al., 2019). The measurement of *trust in decision-makers* was based upon a shortened version of Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies's (2017) three-dimensional scale for trust in public organisations (see Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2020). The shortened scale consists of the following three items: "the safety region is fair to citizens", "the interests of citizens are paramount to the safety region", and "the safety region carries out its task very well". Measurement was on a seven-point Likert scale with answer options ranging from "Fully disagree" (1) to "Fully agree" (7). Please note that for the regression analyses, all items have been (re)coded to an 0-1 format.

Analytical approach

To test our first hypothesis, we take no accountability as a reference category and code respondents as having received a vignette on a procedure with either social accountability ($\text{SocialAccount} = 1$) or political accountability ($\text{PoliticalAccount} = 1$). Moreover, we control for the favourability of the outcome, where respondents who were told in the vignette that a fire station in their neighbourhood was closing were coded as losers ($\text{Loser} = 1$) while those who were told that a fire station was opened even closer to them are coded as a winner ($\text{Loser} = 0$).

We will use the following equation to specify Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models for the first hypothesis:

$$L = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{SocialAccount} + \beta_2 \text{PoliticalAccount} + \beta_3 \text{Loser} + e$$

To test our second hypothesis, we will directly compare political and social accountability. Hence, we code our accountability treatment variable in a binary variable thereby leaving out the no accountability condition. Seeing that we expect that the effect of social accountability trumps that of political accountability, we take political accountability as a reference category ($\text{SocialVsPolitical} = 0$).

$$L = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{SocialVsPolitical} + \beta_2 \text{Loser} + e$$

To test our third hypothesis, which focuses specifically on the effects of accountability for so-called losers (those who were told in the vignette that a fire station in their neighbourhood was closing), we will use the following equation to specify OLS regression models for the third hypothesis:

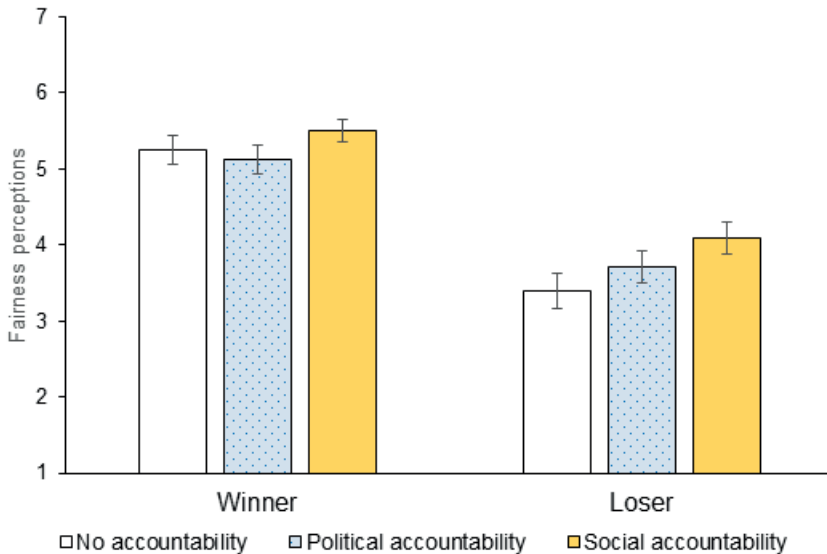
$$L = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{SocialAccount} + \beta_2 \text{PoliticalAccount} + \beta_3 \text{Loser} + \beta_4 \text{SocialAccount} * \text{Loser} + \beta_5 \text{PoliticalAccount} * \text{Loser} + e$$

In addition to testing hypotheses, we test for various heterogeneous treatment effects (HTE). This part of the analysis will be exploratory, and hence we will not draw hypotheses about these effects. Each heterogeneous treatment effect is tested by interacting them with our accountability (SocialAccount & PoliticalAccount) and/or our decision outcome (Loser) variable. We will test for HTE based upon respondents' (1) pre-treatment level of political trust, (2) satisfaction with democracy, (3) support for populist parties, (4) perceived importance of accountability for democracy, (5) perceived insecurity and (6) educational attainment. Appendix V (Tables A5 – A11) presents and discusses the findings from these exploratory analyses.

6.4. Results

To investigate the effect of outcome favourability and type of accountability for fairness perceptions, we first present the descriptive results. Figure 6.1. shows the mean scores (with a 95% confidence interval) within all six experimental conditions for the key variables of interest. We highlight two observations from these figures. First, in line with previous research, a clear pattern from the data emerges showing that decision winners are consistently more likely than decision losers to consider the decision procedure as fair (see also Esaiasson et al., 2019; Werner & Marien, 2022). On average, decision winners score the fairness of a procedure with $M=5.30$ ($SD=1.37$), while decision losers give it $M=3.74$ ($SD=1.72$) on a seven-point scale (irrespective of the presence of any account-giving). Second, the different types of accountability seem to lead to varying levels of fairness perceptions. That is, among losers, social accountability results in the highest level of perceived fairness ($M=4.10$, $SD=1.67$), while no accountability results in the lowest ($M=3.40$, $SD=1.75$). Political accountability seems to increase fairness perceptions only marginally among losers ($M=3.71$, $SD=1.69$) as compared to no accountability. For winners, it appears that social accountability results in the highest fairness perceptions ($M=5.51$, $SD=1.12$), compared to both political accountability and no accountability, while political accountability does not seem to boost perceived fairness at all ($M=5.13$, $SD=1.54$), as compared to no accountability ($M=5.25$, $SD=1.38$). In other words, account-giving indeed seems to result in higher fairness perceptions, in particular for so-called losers. For winners, this pattern is much less clear.

Figure 6.1. Fairness perceptions on a 1-7 scale: mean scores (with 95% CI).



Moving to our hypotheses, we first empirically test whether account-giving to citizens or to politics indeed leads to higher fairness perceptions compared to decision-making procedures where account-giving does not take place, as predicted by Hypothesis 1. In Table 6.3., Model 1 presents the results of an OLS regression model including the effects of a negative decision outcome (compared to a positive decision outcome) and the effects of both political and social accountability (compared to no accountability). The empirical findings do not provide support for Hypothesis 1.1., as political accountability does not increase citizens' fairness perceptions. In other words, political accountability does not have a significant effect on citizens' fairness perceptions, as compared to no accountability ($b=0.017$, $SE=0.017$, $p=0.323$). However, the results provide greater support for Hypothesis 1.2., as social accountability has a significant and positive effect on citizens' fairness perceptions ($b=0.082$, $SE=0.017$, $p<0.001$). This means that being told that the safety region explains its plans to citizens, rather than simply taking the decision autonomously without accountability, results in an 8.2 percent increase in the perceived fairness of the procedure.

Table 6.3. Accountability and perceived fairness: The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Effect	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.682*** (0.014)	0.688*** (0.014)	0.708*** (0.018)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	-0.259*** (0.014)	-0.236*** (0.016)	-0.309*** (0.025)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	0.017 (0.017)		-0.020 (0.024)
Social accountability	0.082*** (0.017)		0.044* (0.024)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.065*** (0.016)	
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			0.072* (0.034)
Loser x Social acc.			0.073* (0.034)
F	126.963***	111.146***	77.597***
R ²	0.213	0.187	0.215
N of cases	1399	960	1399

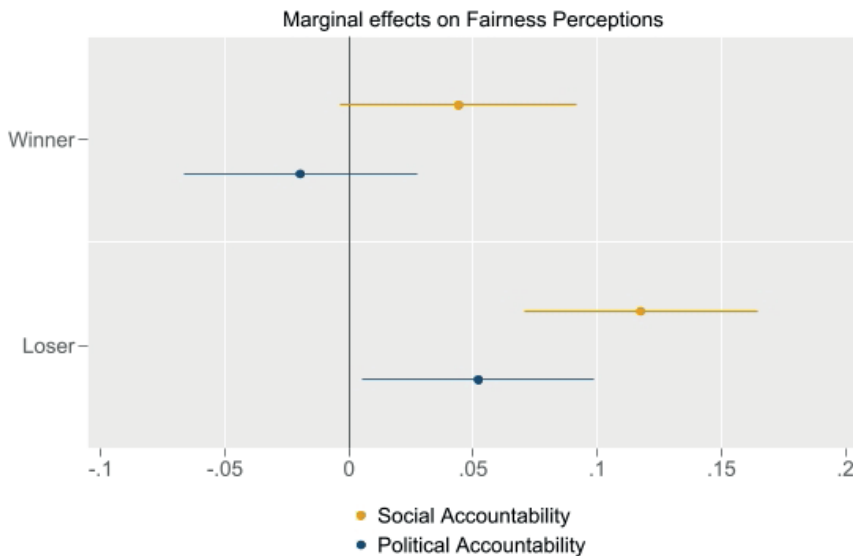
Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardised coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. * $p<0.1$, ** $p<0.05$, *** $p<0.01$, **** $p<0.001$.

Next, we investigate whether there are substantive differences between the different forms of accountability in their potential to generate perceived fairness, as predicted by Hypothesis 2. Model 2 in Table 6.3. shows the effects of social accountability on citizens'

fairness perceptions, but with political accountability as a reference category. Compared to political accountability, social accountability does significantly increase citizens' fairness perceptions ($b=0.065$, $SE=0.016$, $p<0.001$). In other words, social accountability procedures resulted in an increase of fairness perceptions of 6.5 percent compared to political accountability procedures. Based upon these findings, Hypothesis 2 can thus be corroborated.

Last, we study whether accountability generates different for decision winners and losers, as predicted by Hypothesis 3. Model 3 explicitly tests this hypothesis by including interaction effects between outcome favourability and both political and social accountability. The results show a significant and positive interaction effect, meaning that the effects of political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions are conditional upon outcome favourability ($b=0.072$, $SE=0.034$, $p=0.034$). Also, for social accountability, there is a significant and positive interaction effect with outcome favourability ($b=0.073$, $SE=0.034$, $p=0.031$). To better grasp these interaction effects, Figure 6.2. shows the marginal effects of political and social accountability on fairness perceptions for both winners and losers, indicating that both forms of accountability are most beneficial for fairness perceptions of decision losers. Social accountability increases the fairness perceptions of losers with 11.75 percent, while barely changing the fairness perceptions of winners (marginal effect is 4 percent, significant only at $p<0.1$). Political accountability also significantly increases the fairness perceptions of losers, albeit to a lesser degree (a 5 percent increase) while the fairness perceptions of winners do not change with political accountability, compared to no accountability. These findings support both Hypothesis 3.1 and 3.2.

Figure 6.2. Marginal effects of political and social accountability on winners' and losers' fairness perceptions.



Appendices II-III show the experimental findings for decision acceptance and trust. The results are similar to our findings for citizens' fairness perceptions, albeit with some minor differences. Opposed to Hypothesis 1.1, political accountability does not increase citizens' decision acceptance and trust. Instead, political accountability is associated with a decrease in citizens' levels of decision acceptance. In line with Hypothesis 1.2, a positive relationship between social accountability and citizens' trust in decision-makers is confirmed. Social accountability does however not lead to higher levels of decision acceptance, although the effect was in the expected direction. The findings provide additional support for Hypothesis 2, as both citizens' decision acceptance and trust are significantly higher for social accountability, as compared to political accountability. With regards to Hypothesis 3, the results show that social accountability contributes to decision losers' decision acceptance and trust, thus confirming Hypothesis 3.2. The results in Appendices II-III fail to corroborate Hypothesis 3.1. Although political accountability does significantly increase decision losers' fairness perceptions, this does not lead to higher levels of decision acceptance and trust.

6.5. Conclusion and discussion

Various scholars have suggested that accountability can restore citizens' trust and confidence in public institutions. Our study provides novel insights into the links between accountability and (perceived) legitimacy by testing to what extent political and social accountability arrangements increase citizens' legitimacy perceptions. By conducting a vignette experiment among citizens in the Netherlands, we investigated how both political and social accountability affect perceived legitimacy if citizens were confronted with either a positive or negative decision.

Our findings show that accountability affects citizens' legitimacy perceptions, but the effects are more subtle than expected. Social accountability contributes positively to citizens' legitimacy perceptions, but political accountability does not. The effects of accountability on legitimacy perceptions are further dependent upon outcome favourability. Accountability is particularly important for the legitimacy perceptions of decisions losers but is of lesser concern for decision winners.

Our main contribution is that we provide first empirical support for Bovens' (2007, p. 457) theoretical assumption that social accountability can contribute to citizens' perceived legitimacy of governmental authorities. Our findings further extend insights from both the literature on procedural fairness and theories on participatory democracy suggesting that citizens care about voice opportunities for them and their fellow citizens in decision-making procedures. We show that these findings do not only hold for citizen participation in pre-decisional consultations (see e.g. D. Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021; Werner & Marien, 2022), but also for citizen involvement in post-decisional accountability. Yet, not only procedures, but also outcomes matter. As the effects of accountability on legitimacy perceptions are dependent upon outcome favourability, this study supports

Esaiasson et al.'s (2019) findings that procedural means can have a moderate impact on decision acceptance but that outcome favourability further has a considerable influence on the likelihood that citizens accept decisions. In relation to this, it is interesting to mention that our experiment shows that social accountability boosts fairness perceptions, but only generates a minor increase in decision acceptance.

The null – and sometimes even negative– effects of political accountability on citizens' legitimacy perceptions are remarkable and in contrast to our hypotheses. These effects should be considered in the light of relatively low levels of political trust in the Netherlands at the time of data collection in February 2022, due to the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis, a lengthy cabinet formation and a series of political incidents and scandals (see also De Blok & Brummel, 2022). Citizens' trust in politicians is often lower than trust in professional administrators (Van de Walle, 2004; Yang & Holzer, 2006) and citizens might therefore perceive political accountability rather as a form of unnecessary political inference with the administration. Another potential explanation is however that most citizens consider accountability processes between politics and administration of limited relevance for their own lives (see Mizrahi & Minchuk, 2020), thereby also having a relatively small impact on their legitimacy perceptions.

Despite these contributions, our study has several caveats and opportunities for further research. First, external validity remains a complex issue in experimental research. Although our experimental design reflects a realistic decision-making procedure, we acknowledge issues of mundane realism due to the hypothetical scenario of our experiment. Second, our scenario focuses on one single policy decision in the context of one specific country. As our experimental study is the first to establish a causal link between accountability and perceived legitimacy, this also raises questions about the generalizability of our study's findings. Further research is needed to test whether our findings hold beyond our experimental scenario and context. Third, this study has a specific focus on two types of accountability: political and social accountability. Further research can inform us whether different forms of accountability, such as professional, judicial, and administrative accountability (see e.g. Bovens, 2007; Willems & Van Dooren, 2012), generate different effects on citizens' legitimacy perceptions. As social accountability can come in many different forms– e.g. via websites, social media, and consultative procedures and panels with specific users/stakeholders (Brummel, 2021) – this provides an additional avenue for further research. Fourth, there is a range of factors in reality that can intersect with the relationship between accountability arrangements and legitimacy perceptions. For example, the politicisation of accountability, often associated with blame-games, can have important consequences for how citizens perceive accountability processes (Bryson & MacCarthaigh, 2021; Flinders, 2011). As citizens' understandings of procedures are largely shaped by informational cues, for instance via media (cf. De Fine Licht, 2014), media coverage could further moderate the effects of actual accountability procedures on legitimacy perceptions.

To conclude, our study provides new insights to current debates about accountability in executive governance from a procedural fairness perspective. Political accountability is a core principle of representative democracy, but we show that it is not a guarantee for securing citizens' acceptance of governmental organisations and their decisions. Citizens are more likely to accept decisions and decision-making procedures when they are informed about the involvement of their fellow citizens in accountability processes. This can be a potential benefit of social accountability arrangements. However, social accountability is associated with several challenges and governmental organisations often experience difficulties in establishing accountability relationships with citizens (see e.g. Meijer, 2007; Papadopoulos, 2010). In order to enhance perceived legitimacy, it is further crucial that citizens are informed about the existence of social accountability arrangements. Yet, if conducted properly, governmental organisations can benefit from stressing and communicating the involvement of citizens in their accountability processes because it might improve the legitimacy and acceptance of their decisions across the wider public.



7

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion and discussion

7.1. Answering the research questions

This dissertation seeks to answer the central research question that has been outlined as *“When and why does social accountability matter?”*. The central research question has been divided into five sub questions. Chapters 2 – 6 of the dissertation explore and answer these questions.

The first sub question this dissertation explores is: *“How can we better understand social accountability?”* (see Chapter 2). This question is important in order to clarify and better conceptualize social accountability. To answer the question, we conducted a conceptual review of existing public administration literature on societal and horizontal forms of accountability. This review shows that social accountability (and its many synonyms) has gained increasing popularity in academic and societal discourses, but that it is also a form of accountability that has been loosely defined and conceptualised. In this dissertation, social accountability refers to the horizontal and explicit accountability relationships of public sector organisations vis-à-vis their societal environment. Insights from this conceptual overview are important building blocks for the four different empirical studies in this dissertation. First, the existing literature shows that social accountability can reflect a wide variety of different activities and practices. Social accountability can further be directed to different groups in society: individual citizens and clients, loosely organised groups of citizens/clients, traditional news media, organised civil society, and stakeholder arrangements, such as client councils and user bodies. These different activities and audiences are reflected in the various chapters of this dissertation, for instance by focusing on the role of organised civil society (Chapter 3) and stakeholder arrangements (Chapter 5) in social accountability, but also by considering the importance of social media in social accountability (Chapter 4). The review further shows that there are contrasting expectations about the aims and functions of social accountability. Across different streams in the literature, social accountability has been suggested to contribute to the responsiveness of the public sector, the critical monitoring of public sector conduct, organisational learning, and the legitimacy and reputation of public sector organisations. Forms of social accountability are however also associated with a plethora of normative and practical challenges. This dissertation zooms in into the importance of these various aims and demands of social accountability for public agencies (Chapter 5), while it further has particular attention for the effects of social accountability on citizens’ legitimacy perceptions (Chapter 6), as one of the potential outcomes of social accountability practices and processes.

The second sub question is: *“To what extent are characteristics of the political environment of public agencies associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs?”* (see Chapter 3). Based on survey research with agency-CEOs of N=575 agencies in the Netherlands and six other Western democracies, Chapter 3 shows that the perceived relevance of social accountability is relatively high for Dutch agency-CEOs (N=67), also from an international-comparative perspective. Within the accountability environment

of Dutch public agencies, societal stakeholders (i.e. client and user councils, civil society organisations, and interest groups) have a more prominent place in comparison to public agencies within other national administrative cultures and traditions (Australia, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway, and the United Kingdom). These findings can be interpreted in the light of the Dutch administrative tradition of corporatism and consociationalism, in which societal stakeholders have an important place in policy execution and policy implementation. Though, the differences between countries were sometimes limited, there was meaningful variation in the relevance of social accountability across Dutch agencies.

Importantly, this dissertation provides evidence that the mediatisation of an agency's task portfolio is associated with a stronger focus of agency-CEOs on social accountability practices and societal accountability relationships. The perceived importance of the media was strongly related to the attention and relevance that agency-CEOs devoted to social accountability. The importance of social accountability is however unrelated to the strength of departmental accountability of agencies. Rather, the relevance of social accountability is highly associated with the political and media salience of public agencies, while administrative cultures and traditions also matter for the importance of social accountability for public agencies.

In Chapter 4, the following sub question has been answered: *“To what extent are characteristics of the societal environment of public agencies associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs?”* By using a mixed-methods design, including quantitative and qualitative research, the study uncovers the importance of social media attention and social media storms for the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs. A quantitative survey with N=103 agency-CEOs from Dutch public agencies shows that their so-called stakeholder orientation was positively and significantly associated with the actual amount of attention that their agencies received on Twitter. In contrast, Chapter 4 did not find any significant associations between the existence of stakeholder arrangements within public agencies, such as stakeholder councils and stakeholder consultations, and agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. Furthermore, a qualitative study, consisting of two focus group sessions with N=14 agency-CEOs, high-level agency representatives and public sector experts, suggests that the associations between social media attention and stakeholder orientation can be explained by the organisational adoption to social media and the reputational risks of social media storms. For public agencies, social media pressures can be a potential reputational threat, and this fosters the need for strengthening accountability relationships with societal stakeholders and managing trust, support, and reputation across stakeholders. Taken together, Chapter 4 underlines the importance of social media attention as a catalyst or “trigger” for agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. The chapter also showed that stakeholder arrangements as potential forms of social accountability did not have a significant impact on the stakeholder orientation (or felt accountability) of agency-CEOs.

To further understand the role of stakeholder arrangements in agency accountability, Chapter 5 discusses the following sub question: *“How do agency representatives describe the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements within public agencies in their own words?”* To answer this question, qualitative research has been conducted, consisting of interviews with N=25 agency representatives from nine different agencies in the Netherlands. These nine agencies involve various groups of non-governmental and societal stakeholders through the means of formal stakeholder arrangements, such as client councils, user bodies, and expert panels, which (may) have a formal or informal accountability function. The qualitative study unravels five different – theoretically and empirically informed – perspectives on the perceived importance of these stakeholder arrangements within public agencies: a control perspective, an institutional perspective, a managerial perspective, a learning perspective, and a reputational perspective. The different perspectives and motivations are not mutually exclusive and agency representatives often use elements of multiple perspectives while describing the function of stakeholder arrangements. The control function of stakeholder arrangements was only relevant in rare cases, for example during policy crises and failures, disagreements with stakeholders and/or media and political events. However, intrinsic and instrumental motivations can explain why agency representatives perceive stakeholder arrangements as a relevant mechanism. Despite the practical challenges that stakeholder arrangements are often associated with, the qualitative study shows that their potential relevance can be understood in the light of various motivational drivers, including agencies’ professional and societal norms, coordination needs, learning objectives and reputational considerations.

Moving its focus to citizens’ legitimacy perceptions, the fourth and final sub question of the dissertation was *“What is the influence of social and political accountability arrangements for citizens’ legitimacy perceptions?”* Chapter 6 addresses this sub question and presents the findings from a vignette experiment with a representative sample of N=1574 citizens from the Netherlands. Using a fictional scenario of a decision-making procedure on the relocation of fire stations, the experimental study shows that social accountability arrangements can increase citizens’ legitimacy perceptions, but that political accountability arrangements are not associated with higher levels of perceived legitimacy. Furthermore, the effects of accountability are particularly relevant for decision losers and are largely unimportant for decision winners. The experimental findings provide empirical support for the claim that social accountability can contribute to the perceived legitimacy of governmental organisations in the public’s eye and to the public acceptance of governmental decisions. Citizens are more likely to accept decisions when they know that governmental organisations have explained and justified their decisions to their fellow citizens by the means of social accountability arrangements.

Table 7.1. Overview of questions and findings of the dissertation.

Research questions	Research approach	Main findings
1. How can we better understand social accountability?	Literature review	Social accountability has been associated with a multiplicity of forms, functions, and challenges.
2. To what extent are characteristics of the political environment of public agencies associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs?	Quantitative design with N=575 agency-CEOs from seven different countries	Social accountability is slightly more important for agency-CEOs in the Netherlands in comparison to other Western political-administrative traditions. The importance of social accountability is strongly associated with the perceived influence of the media.
3. To what extent are characteristics of the societal environment of public agencies associated with the perceived importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs?	Mixed methods design with a quantitative survey of N=103 agency-CEOs from the Netherlands and two qualitative focus groups with N=14 participants, including agency-CEOs and agency representatives	The importance of social accountability for agency-CEOs is strongly associated with social media attention and this can be explained by the organisational adaptation to social media and the reputational threats of social media storms.
4. How do agency representatives describe the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements within public agencies in their own words?	Qualitative design with interviews of N=25 agency representatives from nine Dutch agencies	Both intrinsic and instrumental motivations can explain why agency representatives perceive stakeholder arrangements as a relevant accountability mechanism, in the absence of elements of formal control and scrutiny.
5. What is the influence of social and political accountability arrangements for citizens' legitimacy perceptions?	Experimental design with N=1574 citizens from the Netherlands	Social accountability arrangements increase citizens' legitimacy perceptions, political accountability arrangements do not increase citizens' legitimacy perceptions.

For a summary of these findings, Table 7.1. provides an overview of the questions and findings of the empirical chapters of this dissertation. In the rest of this final chapter, I first discuss the implications of these findings for answering the main research question (Section 7.2.). I also reflect upon the limitations of this dissertation, and I mention some potential avenues for further research to improve our understanding about when and why social accountability matters (Section 7.3.). In addition, I discuss the scientific contributions (Section 7.4.) and societal contributions (Section 7.5.) of this dissertation. Finally, Chapter 7 will end with an epilogue (7.6.).

7.2. Conclusion: three take home messages

The central research question was outlined as “When and why does social accountability matter?”. Based on above findings, the answer to this question can be summarised by formulating three important *take home messages* based on the empirical research within this dissertation. First, social accountability matters for public agencies, but particularly under conditions of high media salience and high social media attention. Second, as a form of social accountability, stakeholder arrangements are a limited tool for scrutiny and control, but they can still be relevant for agencies serving both intrinsic and instrumental motivations. Third and finally, the use of social accountability arrangements can potentially contribute to the perceived legitimacy and acceptance of governmental decisions (see also Table 7.2.).

Message #1. Social accountability matters for public agencies, particularly under conditions of high media salience and high social media attention.

While social accountability has been considered as a weak form of accountability in terms of formal judgement and sanctioning possibilities (see Chapter 2), this dissertation suggests that social accountability is often perceived as relevant and important across public agencies and their CEOs. These findings hold in particular for public agencies in the Netherlands, but also for semi-autonomous organisations in other countries in Western Europe and Australia (see Chapter 3). Theoretical and normative debates about social accountability often tend to end in trenches between high-pitched expectations and sobering scepticism (Chapter 2). This dissertation presents a nuanced picture of the actual relevance of social accountability: for most agencies, the parent department remains the most important and influential ‘accountability forum’, but societal stakeholders are considerably relevant within the wider accountability landscape of public agencies (see also Schillemans et al., 2022; Yesilkagit & Van Thiel, 2012b).

Furthermore, the empirical findings suggest that social accountability is particularly important for agencies that are faced with high levels of perceived mediatisation and social media attention. Chapter 3 finds that the relevance of social accountability was positively and significantly correlated with the perceived influence of the media, whereas the degree of departmental accountability was of less importance for the relevance of social accountability. Chapter 4 extends these findings by showing that the stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs was strongly predicted by the actual amount of Twitter attention for public agencies. The qualitative insights from Chapter 4 provide greater depth to our insights about the role of social media attention for explaining stakeholder orientation. The findings are in line with a mediatisation perspective on public sector organisations that suggest that processes of mediatisation and media salience impact how agencies interact with their societal environment (Fredriksson et al., 2015; Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014). From a reputational perspective, the findings suggest that social media storms can be an important reputational threat that forces public agencies to expand their reputational repertoire by using stakeholder engagement as a strategy to

manage constituencies, reputation, and support (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021; Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017). Taken together, the mediatisation of agencies, and more specifically social media attention, seems to be a key component for a better understanding of when and why social accountability matters.

Message #2. As a form of social accountability, stakeholder arrangements are a limited tool for scrutiny and control – they can however provide an alternative accountability mechanism that is driven by agencies' demands and needs.

The public administration literature often portrays stakeholder arrangements as an important tool to strengthen social accountability of public agencies, but stakeholder arrangements are also associated with multiple challenges (see Chapter 2). Chapter 4 of this dissertation shows that stakeholder arrangements do not affect the stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs. These findings are in line with previous empirical research which shows that the existence of stakeholder involvement and stakeholder participation within public agencies often has a limited impact on the self-perceived accountability of agency managers (Verhoest et al., 2015; Verschuere et al., 2006).

The qualitative study in Chapter 5 provides a more precise picture of how the accountability function of stakeholder arrangements is experienced within public agencies. On the one hand, stakeholder arrangements are a limited instrument for strengthening control over public agencies – only in rare and exceptional circumstances, stakeholder arrangements can fulfil an important controlling and scrutinizing function. On the other hand, stakeholder arrangements might serve a range of organisational demands and motives. For agency representatives, such as CEOs, managers, and officials, stakeholder arrangements are important in the light of professional and societal norms, coordination needs, learning objectives and reputational and strategic concerns. Rather than a control mechanism or a scrutiny tool, stakeholder arrangements can be beneficial for public agencies and might contribute to various organisational aims and purposes. This is in line with existing research on 'voluntary accountability' that focuses on the importance of different motivational logics for explaining why agencies proactively commit themselves to accountability practices towards stakeholders (Arras & Braun, 2018; De Boer, 2022; Karsten, 2015). Both intrinsic and instrumental motivations can explain why agency managers and officials consider stakeholder arrangements as a relevant form of accountability. Organisational context is of further importance for explaining which sets of motivations will prevail. In sum, stakeholder arrangements might be problematic and limited as a solution for the accountability deficits of public agencies (see also Papadopoulos, 2007; Schillemans, 2008). Still, the importance of stakeholder arrangements should not be neglected and should be judged and interpreted in the light of different agency demands and motivations.

Message #3. The use of social accountability arrangements can contribute to the perceived legitimacy and acceptance of governmental decisions.

A third and final ‘take home message’ is that this dissertation shows that social accountability arrangements have the potential to contribute to the perceived legitimacy and acceptance of decisions that are made and implemented by governmental organisations. Chapter 6 provides experimental evidence for a relationship between social accountability arrangements and citizens’ legitimacy perceptions, as Bovens (2007, p. 457) has theoretically suggested. This is also in line with procedural fairness theory, suggesting that citizens are more likely to accept decision outcomes if they consider the decision-making procedures as fair and just (cf. Tyler, 2006). Whereas multiple studies have found that citizen involvement in pre-decisional consultations contributes to perceived legitimacy (D. Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021; Werner & Marien, 2022), this study is among the first to establish a relationship between citizen involvement in post-decisional accountability processes and the legitimacy perceptions of the wider public.

This can be an important benefit of social accountability arrangements. Yet, agencies often face difficulties in involving diverse groups of citizens and stakeholders. In practice, stakeholder arrangements can be associated with problems of unbalanced stakeholder representation, whereby specific groups of stakeholders are overrepresented (see Chapter 5). For increasing perceived legitimacy, it is further crucial that citizens are informed about the existence of social accountability arrangements and understand the functioning of accountability processes (cf. De Fine Licht, 2014). Nevertheless, the experimental findings suggest that social accountability arrangements have the potential to contribute to the legitimacy and acceptance of governmental decisions, but proper and well-designed accountability processes are necessary.

Table 7.2. Overview of take-home messages of the dissertation.

Take home message
1. Social accountability matters for public agencies particularly under conditions of high media salience and high social media attention.
2. As a form of social accountability, stakeholder arrangements are a limited tool for scrutiny and control – they can however provide an alternative accountability mechanism that is driven by agencies’ demands and needs.
3. The use of social accountability arrangements can contribute to the perceived legitimacy and acceptance of governmental decisions.

7.3. Limitations and further research

Inevitably, this dissertation also comes with its limitations. Below, I reflect on some caveats to this study, and I present potential avenues for further research into social accountability.

In the first place, a particular challenge reflects the integration of research findings based on a diversity of methods, cases, and samples. Social accountability is a broad

‘umbrella concept’ that is associated with multiple forms and practices (see also Brandsen et al., 2008). The multi-methodological and multi-focused approach of this dissertation has its strengths, as it provides the potential to study a range of different research questions related to social accountability. However, this approach has limitations for the potential of combining and mixing empirical insights. For example, the forms of social accountability that are studied in Chapters 4 and 5 are different from the social accountability arrangements in the experimental study of Chapter 6. An empirical question remains whether the experimental findings in Chapter 6 can be translated to the stakeholder arrangements of Dutch agencies, such as the CAK and the RDW, that are discussed in Chapter 5.

Second, this dissertation’s focus on individual perceptions of accountability has its limitations. A micro-level approach to accountability has several advantages, as outlined in Section 1.5. However, the use of survey responses of agency-CEOs, as in Chapters 3 and 4, faces two important challenges. Their perceptions of accountability might be prone to a range perceptual biases, such as social desirability bias. Generally, respondents may feel pressured to report more positively on accountability practices than is actually the case. As Hall and colleagues (2017, p. 215), for example, have noted, “when asked if they [people] feel accountable, most answer that they are”. To minimize these biases, several attempts have been made, such as ensuring confidentiality of survey responses, asking neutrally formulated questions, and complementing survey results with qualitative findings. Although these attempts can reduce perceptual biases, problems with perceptual data remain an issue of concern. Additionally, another problem with individual perceptions of accountability is that the selection of individuals can impact the outcomes of the study. As this dissertation focuses on the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of agency-CEOs and other members of the “governing coalition” of public sector organisations (Cyert & March, 1992), their perceptions are not necessarily representative for all aspects of an organisation. It is currently not known how these individual perceptions and experiences relate to organisational practices. It remains further an empirical question how social accountability affects practitioners operating in the “swampy lowlands” of public sector organisations (Schön, 2017) and who are often in direct contact with citizens and clients at the street level (Lipsky, 2010). Public professionals and street-level bureaucrats can have an important role in strengthening the accountability of public sector organisations to citizens, clients and other stakeholders (Hupe & Hill, 2007). If we want to move beyond the “talk” of agency-CEOs and high-ranked agency managers about the relevance of social accountability, ethnographic and field research can provide further insights into how social accountability works ‘in action’ within public agencies (Van de Sande et al., 2021).

A third issue surrounds the generalizability of the findings of this dissertation. Most of the research has been conducted in the context of the Netherlands, with the exception of the comparative research in Chapter 3. The administrative traditions

and cultures of the Netherlands impact some of this dissertation's results. As already discussed in Chapter 3, Dutch governance and politics is well-known because of its *polder* tradition, in which non-state and societal actors are strongly embedded in political and administrative procedures (Hendriks & Toonen, 2017; Lijphart, 1969). As Yesilkagit and Van Thiel (2012a) argue, stakeholder participation and stakeholder involvement have traditionally been dominant features of the governance regime of public agencies in the Netherlands. A further question remains whether findings about the importance of media and mediatisation for social accountability are transferable to countries with different media systems than the democratic-corporatist model of the Netherlands (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Particularly, as social media use is relatively high in Dutch society (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; Wonneberger et al., 2021), this is a relevant contextual factor to consider while interpreting and generalizing findings about the role and importance of social media in social accountability. With regards to the vignette experiment in Chapter 6, the findings should be considered against the background of the relatively low levels of political trust in the Netherlands at the time of data collection in February 2022, as the country was faced by the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis, a lengthy cabinet formation and a series of political incidents and scandals (see also De Blok & Brummel, 2022). Thus, further research is needed to assess whether findings from this dissertation are transferable to other national contexts and settings.

Fourth, this dissertation has a clear focus on the social accountability of public agencies. For further research, it might be relevant and interesting to apply insights from this dissertation to the context of policy networks, collaborative governance, public-private partnerships, and European and global governance (see e.g. Ansell & Gash, 2008; Considine, 2002; Curtin et al., 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2016). Accountability is often presented as a challenge for these realms of governance (Schillemans, 2013). Social accountability can be a relevant theme for the study of these modes and types of governance, as social accountability might have the potential, for instance, to make policy networks more transparent and open to citizens (Klijn & Skelcher, 2007; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021) or to contribute to the democratic legitimacy of the European Union (Steffek, 2010).

Fifth and finally, this dissertation has a strong focus on the role of account-givers in social accountability (with the exception of Chapter 6), while the literature on social accountability can further benefit from a better understanding of forum behaviour of account-holders in social accountability, such as citizens, clients, and societal actors. As discussed in Chapter 2, citizen and stakeholder involvement in social accountability processes can be a problematic issue. Many citizens are often not interested in participating in account-holding activities (Meijer, 2007) and find it rather difficult to process accountability information (Curtin & Meijer, 2006; Greiling & Grüb, 2015). Also, the involvement of stakeholders and stakeholder groups in social accountability can strongly differ (Schillemans, 2008; Schillemans et al., 2016). Further research can inform

us when and why citizens and stakeholders are more likely to fulfil account-holding tasks. For instance, reputational considerations can be important for explaining the intensity and diligence of accountability forums in public sector accountability (Busuioc & Lodge, 2017; Leidorf-Tidå, 2022). In addition, research on public participation can provide relevant insights to improve our understanding of the willingness of citizens to participate in monitoring and account-holding activities (Damgaard & Lewis, 2014). Both quantitative and qualitative research can be useful for these purposes. For example, survey research of Mizrahi and Minchuk (2019) provides some relevant insights about factors that trigger citizens' willingness to monitor public officials' conduct and performance. Yet, qualitative research can also be relevant in order to tap into the different sets of motivations of citizens and stakeholders for their involvement in various forms of accountability and scrutiny.

7.4. Scientific contributions and implications

This dissertation makes several contributions to the academic literature on accountability. Beyond its empirical contributions, reflected in the answers to the sub questions and the three take home messages, this dissertation also makes theoretical and methodological contributions (see also Section 1.7.). *Theoretically*, the dissertation stresses the importance of (1) novel behavioural and (2) reputational approaches to the study of accountability, while some of its findings further relate to the (3) mediatisation literature and (4) procedural fairness literature. *Methodologically*, the dissertation shows that (5) a mix of research methods, including both quantitative and qualitative ones, can improve our understanding of forms of accountability and their antecedents. I will discuss these theoretical and methodological contributions in greater detail below.

First of all, this dissertation shows that accountability scholars can benefit from using novel theoretical approaches in the accountability literature in order to improve our understanding of when and why social accountability does matter in practice. Particularly, the dissertation points our attention to the importance of account-givers' accountability perceptions and motivations, including reputational and strategic considerations, for the functioning of social accountability in practice. Novel theoretical approaches to the accountability literature, such as a reputational (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017; Christensen & Lodge, 2018; De Boer, 2021; Wæraas & Maor, 2014) and a behavioural perspective (Aleksowska, 2021; Han & Perry, 2020; Overman & Schillemans, 2022; Schillemans, 2016), can therefore be useful to better understand the effects and antecedents of social accountability. Insights from the behavioural sciences about accountability might be helpful to further the study of social accountability in public administration. An important insight from psychological research is that the same accountability mechanism could be perceived differently by different individuals (Frink & Klimoski, 1998; Hochwarter et al., 2007; Tetlock, 1992). These individual perceptions are important for how individuals respond to and act in the light of accountability pressures from their environment (Hall

& Ferris, 2011) and are a relevant foundational micro-cog for understanding the link between accountability mechanisms and accountability outcomes at an organisational level (Overman & Schillemans, 2022). As social accountability does often not consist of a formal obligation and cannot rely upon formal consequences and/or sanctions, social accountability is particularly dependent on whether public sector workers show a sense of so-called “felt accountability” (Hall et al., 2017) towards citizens, stakeholders and the public at large. Chapters 3 – 5 show that individual accountability perceptions were highly useful in understanding when social accountability has more impact on public sector individuals and can for instance, trigger more “awareness” of the societal environment among agency-CEOs and high-level agency representatives. Depending on the organisational and environmental context, the salience of social accountability can strongly differ (see Chapters 3 and 4). Furthermore, agency managers and officials can have different perceptions about the different functions and purposes of stakeholder arrangements (Chapter 5). An empirical question remains whether and how these micro-level accountability perceptions are associated with accountability outcomes at the meso-level of public organisations (cf. Jilke et al., 2019). Studies on social accountability can benefit from a greater focus on how these forms of accountability are felt and perceived by public sector individuals.

The dissertation further shows the importance of bureaucratic reputation and reputational considerations for the study of social accountability. From a reputational perspective, accountability has been associated with the management of an organisation’s day-to-day appearances in front of a diverse set of external audiences that hold their beliefs about the unique capacities, roles, and obligations of an agency (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Carpenter, 2014; Maor et al., 2013). Reputation is a source of organisational power and autonomy (Maor, 2014), whereas the fear of reputational damage is an important constraint for organisational behaviour (Van Erp, 2007). The reputational literature on accountability portrays public sector organisations as reputation-sensitive actors that adopt account-giving strategies for enhancing their reputation (Busuioc & Rimkutė, 2020; De Boer, 2022). During this “Reputation Era” in public administration (Zavattaro & Eshuis, 2021), the role of reputation seems to be indispensable for the study of social accountability. This dissertation shows that social accountability provides public agencies a strategic tool for dealing with reputational threats, such as negative media publicity and social media storms (see Chapters 3 and 4). In addition, Chapter 6 provides evidence that social accountability arrangements can be a reputational advantage for public sector organisations because they can legitimize organisational decisions among the wider public. Reputational considerations are often considered to be strategic, but they might further reflect internalized expectations of appropriate behaviour (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2018). Public actors might care about their reputation among stakeholders audiences because they consider the cultivation of their reputation as an intrinsic value. As Chapter 5 shows, account-giving practices to stakeholders can be of

strategic self-interest for public agencies, but agency managers and officials also perceive stakeholder arrangements as an appropriate form of accountability. The accountability function of stakeholder arrangements should not be associated with either normative or strategic behaviour, but might rather be driven by a combination of both intrinsic and instrumental motivations.

The dissertation further relates to the literature about mediatisation in the public sector. Chapters 3 and 4 suggest that it is important to consider the role of the media context for the study of social accountability. The role of the media – and particularly the importance of social media – was a crucial factor for explaining the relevance of social accountability for public agencies. Many scholars have recognised the role of the media in the accountability landscape of agencies and they suggest that accountability has become an increasingly mediatised and media-covered event (Djerf-Pierre et al., 2013, 2014; S. Jacobs et al., 2021; Maggetti, 2012). There has also been growing academic attention to the role of social media in stimulating and activating bottom-up accountability processes (Ojala et al., 2019; Vrangbæk & Byrkjeflot, 2016). Chadwick (2017) refers to the existence of a ‘hybrid media system’, in which social media provides an additional layer to the existing media landscape and in which ‘old’ and ‘new’ media institutions intertwine and reinforce each other. The importance of media salience for the existence accountability practices of agencies to stakeholders has already been demonstrated (Koop, 2014). In addition, this dissertation provides empirical base for a connection between social media attention and the relevance of social accountability for individual agency-CEOs. Qualitative insights from focus group discussions give a greater depth to these insights (see Chapter 4). As such, insights from this dissertation answer recent calls in the public administration literature to devote more attention to the role of social media pressures and social media storms in the accountability environment of public agencies (cf. Feeney & Porumbescu, 2021; Lindquist & Huse, 2017; Vanhommerig & Karré, 2014). As agencies operate in an increasingly mediatised environment and can become subject to a ‘social media logic’ (Dekker et al., 2021, pp. 41–47), this is an important factor to take into consideration for studying the accountability relationships of public agencies.

In addition, the dissertation offers a new theoretical perspective to the accountability literature by incorporating insights from the procedural fairness literature into the study of public sector accountability (see e.g. Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 2006; Van den Bos et al., 1998). Procedural fairness has largely been a *‘terra incognita’* in accountability studies but seems to be a valuable theoretical lens to understand how accountability can contribute to public perceptions of legitimacy and trustworthiness of the public sector. Based on procedural fairness theory, it was possible to theorize how social accountability arrangements can contribute to citizens’ legitimacy perceptions. As such, this dissertation is one of the first studies to provide an empirical base for Bovens’ (2007, p. 457) assumption that social accountability increases the legitimacy and acceptance of governmental authorities (see Chapter 6). For scholars that are interested

in the connections between accountability, trust, and support, combining insights from the study of accountability and the procedural fairness literature can provide a relevant theoretical background.

Finally, this dissertation makes a *methodological* contribution to the field of accountability studies. Traditionally, the accountability literature has been dominated by qualitative and case study research (see e.g. Day & Klein, 1987; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987; Sinclair, 1995). In recent years, scholars have also increasingly adopted quantitative and experimental methods to study public sector accountability (Aleksavska, 2021; Brandsma, 2014; Koch & Wüstemann, 2014). This dissertation uses a multi-methodological approach to address questions about social accountability. Whilst the traditional interview method can still be of high relevance to uncover the relevance and meaning of accountability within the public sector (as shown by Chapter 5), Chapter 3 shows that quantitative research is suitable for showing patterns and associations with regards to the importance of social accountability for agencies. In particular, Chapter 4 underlines the strengths of using a ‘mixed methods’ design for the study of social accountability, whereby qualitative findings can provide greater depth and explanation to patterns and associations that are discovered by the means of quantitative research (see also Gilad, 2021). In line with an increased use of experimental methods in accountability studies (see e.g. Aleksavska et al., 2022; Bouwman et al., 2018; Hong, 2017; Tu & Gong, 2022), this dissertation also uses experimentation as a research method, but it further extends existing experimental research on accountability. Rather than focusing on the effects of accountability and accountability arrangements for account-givers’ attitudes and behaviour, the dissertation contributes by focusing on how (both political and social) accountability arrangements can affect the attitudes and perceptions of external audiences – in this case, the wider population of citizens (see Chapter 6).

7.5. Societal contributions

The accountability of public agencies has been an issue of societal concern in most Western democracies. In recent years, various forms of social accountability have often been presented as a valuable solution for improving accountability of executive governance. Meanwhile, social accountability is associated with several concerns. What are the most important lessons of this dissertation for these societal debates and discussions about social accountability? I will use the three take home messages (Section 7.2.) to structure the discussion on the societal contributions and recommendations of the dissertation. Table 7.3. provides a summary of the societal contributions and recommendations of this dissertation.

First of all, the dissertation draws our attention to the important role of media and social media in strengthening the relevance of social accountability for public agencies. Media attention and social media attention can trigger the attention of agency-CEOs for their stakeholder environment and for social accountability (Chapters 3 and 4). Is

this welcoming news or not? At first sight, this might be good news illustrating that the important accountability function of (social) media does work. The media have been heralded as a crucial watchdog of governmental authorities and can further be important for activating and triggering accountability processes (S. Jacobs & Schillemans, 2016; Norris, 2014). There has also been optimism about the transformative and democratizing potential of social media for the relationships between citizens and their governments (see e.g. Chadwick & May, 2003; Dahlgren, 2013; Vanhommerig & Karré, 2014). Yet, the influence of social media on public bureaucracies comes with many normative questions, resulting in contrasting and critical assessments of the desirability of social media's impact on public services, public accountability and democratic governance (see e.g. Feeney & Porumbescu, 2021; Flinders, 2012; Keane, 2013; Sunstein, 2007). Various scholars have warned that growing social media pressures on governmental authorities might feed into a 'monitory democracy' (Keane, 2009) or 'inquisition democracy' (t Hart, 2001) that can be at odds with important democratic values. Concrete examples of adverse effects include how accountability on social media can be biased towards illiberal and undemocratic ends (Ojala et al., 2019) and is faced with problems of harassment and misinformation (Feeney & Porumbescu, 2021). According to Flinders (2012, p. 25), social media platforms can be "simply used as tools to promote a crude version of political cynicism". The responsiveness of public sector organisations to social media platforms also comes with dilemmas about organisational robustness and the pursuit of long-term goals (Dekker & Bekkers, 2015) and might challenge traditional and formal democratic processes (Bekkers et al., 2011). Given the indispensable nature of social media for modern-day public organisations, and the importance of social media attention for social accountability, it is crucial to be aware of the limitations and biases that social media pressures are associated with.

Secondly, the dissertation shows the difficult and complicated nature of stakeholder arrangements from an accountability perspective. Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate that the controlling and scrutinizing function of stakeholder arrangements can be very limited in practice. Chapter 5 further reveals that agency managers and officials perceive stakeholder arrangements as an important contribution to organisational demands rather than as a control mechanism. As such, this raises doubts about the potential of stakeholder boards and panels as a remedy for the limited departmental control over public agencies (see also Busuioc & Jevnaker, 2022; Lindén, 2015; Schillemans, 2008). As stakeholders do not have a clear and formal democratic mandate (Papadopoulos, 2010; Redert, 2021), it is however questionable whether stakeholder arrangements *should* be expected to compensate for the limited democratic accountability of agencies. Stakeholder arrangements conflict with an 'electoral logic' of democracy and accountability (Hansen et al., 2022) while these arrangements also often lack a broad and diverse representation of stakeholders, including the absence of "real citizens" (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021; Meijer & Schillemans, 2009). Yet, the dissertation also leaves room for a nuanced appraisal of

stakeholder arrangements. Stakeholder arrangements can still be relevant for alternative aims and purposes. Chapter 5 shows that agency representatives consider stakeholder arrangements to be important for a range of organisational demands, such as moral and professional norms, coordination needs, learning objectives, and reputational concerns. Also, several elements of accountability can contribute to these demands, even though stakeholder arrangements might be perceived as a more informal – and perhaps weaker – accountability mechanism than traditional accountability structures. Although some of these motivational drivers can be very strategic in nature (Karsten, 2015) or may reflect self-presentational and marketing concerns (Acar et al., 2008; De Boer, 2022), agency representatives often indicate to be willing and motivated to involve stakeholders in stakeholder arrangements for the improvement of organisational functioning and performance (for instance, through learning and mutual adjustment). It depends upon the organisational context which sets of motivational drivers will prevail. For practice, realistic expectations about stakeholder arrangements are important: do not consider stakeholder arrangements as a remedy for agencies' accountability deficits and keep in mind the challenges that stakeholder arrangements are associated with (e.g., the involvement of a wider set of stakeholders, including “real citizens”), but value their potential relevance for a range of different demands and purposes.

Finally, a clear finding from this dissertation is that social accountability arrangements can be relevant for enhancing citizens' legitimacy perceptions about governmental organisations and decisions, also when citizens are confronted with negative policy outcomes (Chapter 6). This can be an important benefit of social accountability arrangements. Such a legitimizing effect of social accountability is particularly relevant in the light of modern-day challenges that force governments to take far-reaching and often unpopular decisions with regards to major societal problems, such as the energy transition, societal inequality, and refugee reception. In bureaucratic decision-making, it is inevitable that salient decisions divide citizens into winners and losers – an important challenge for democratic governments is how their decision-making procedures and processes can still rely on the consent and support of decision losers (Brummel, 2020; De Blok & Kumlin, 2021; Werner & Marien, 2022). In the current era, the legitimacy of governmental conduct becomes of increasing concern due to blame games, rising populism, an aggressive media industry, and a gradual erosion of political trust and support (see e.g. Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007; Dalton, 2004; Damhuis, 2020; Flinders, 2011; Hood, 2010). Under the influence of bureaucrat bashing and anti-public sector sentiments, citizens' compassion for governmental institutions and officials cannot be taken for granted (Szydłowski et al., 2022). Non-transparent and badly managed decision-making procedures that are not open and inclusive for citizens might further spur public suspicion and distrust towards the public sector. Good and well-designed accountability processes, in which citizens are involved and voice opportunities are created, might however help by fostering perceived fairness and decision acceptance. In line with other recent research, it is important that

accountability processes involve balanced and representative groups of citizens (Beyers & Arras, 2021) and that governmental organisations show a clear willingness to adhere to citizens' recommendations (Van Dijk & Lefevere, 2022). Without actual citizens' influence in accountability processes, social accountability might further risk to turn into a presentational strategy or a form of "accountability washing", in which public sector organisations aim to appear accountable without actually being accountable (Busuioic & Lodge, 2016; De Boer, 2021). If conducted in a proper way, the positive news is however that social accountability can contribute to reassuring citizens' confidence in governmental organisations and governmental decision-making.

Table 7.3. Overview of take-home messages and recommendations of the dissertation.

Take home message	Recommendation
1. Social accountability matters for public agencies, but particularly under conditions of high media salience and high social media attention.	1. Be aware of the limitations and biases that are inherent to social media attention and develop strategic approaches for taming the "social media beast".
2. As a form of social accountability, stakeholder arrangements are a limited tool for scrutiny and control – they can however provide an alternative accountability mechanism that is driven by agencies' demands and needs.	2. Have realistic expectations about stakeholder arrangements: value and improve their relevance for organisational demands (e.g., consider involvement of a wider set of stakeholders, including "real citizens"), but do not consider stakeholder arrangements as a remedy for agencies' accountability deficits.
3. The use of social accountability arrangements can contribute to the perceived legitimacy and acceptance of governmental decisions.	3. Implement well-designed accountability practices and processes and inform and communicate to the wider public how societal involvement in accountability has been arranged.

7.6. Concluding remarks

This book has started with sketching some of the many faces of social accountability: the client council of the CAK, online accountability activities of police departments, the social media storm that the Finnish Immigration Service was subject to, and the involvement of citizens in the accountability processes of a Dutch safety region. These examples raise various questions that were the starting points of my research endeavour.

The findings show that social accountability does not only have many different faces, but also that its implications for executive governance are multi-faceted. As a control mechanism, the added value of social accountability in public sector governance is limited. The relevance of social accountability turns out to be particularly driven by media attention, but the role of social media in accountability processes comes with several biases and limitations. Stakeholder arrangements reflect only a weak scrutiny mechanism. Meanwhile, these forms of social accountability lack the democratic mandate for compensating problems with traditional mechanisms of democratic accountability.

However, social accountability is particularly relevant for strengthening the reputation and legitimacy of public sector organisations. Within public agencies, stakeholder arrangements are perceived as important because they reflect internalized expectations of appropriate behaviour and they are a helpful source for managing audience's expectations. Furthermore, accountability processes, in which affected citizens are involved and that are communicated to wider audiences, can contribute to the legitimacy of public sector organisations among the public at large.

As such, this dissertation calls for a nuanced reflection about the impact of social accountability within the public sector. As a source of legitimacy, social accountability can be crucial in an era in which the reputation of governmental authorities is suggested to be under pressure. However, social accountability might become a marketing instrument in the hands of public sector organisations, when actual control and influence are absent. Rather than a strategic resource, social accountability should reflect an appropriate practice which requires that public sector organisations are dedicated to improving their relationships with citizens and stakeholders and feel committed to the public interest. Because, ultimately, social accountability should matter for the public.

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APPENDICES CHAPTER 4

The venues of social accountability

Appendix I

Multiple linear regression: explaining stakeholder orientation of agency-CEOs (two-item scale)

	Model A1.0			Model A1.1			Model A1.2			Model A1.3		
	Control variables			Formal stakeholder arr.			Social media attention			Full model		
	B	SE	P	B	SE	P	B	SE	P	B	SE	P
(Constant)	4.903***	0.501	<0.001	4.790***	0.500	<0.001	4.846***	0.481	<0.001	4.730***	0.479	<0.001
Consultative body w. clients/users (0= no, 1= yes)	---	---	---	0.366	0.351	0.299	---	---	---	0.484	0.338	0.155
Consultation with societal actors (0= no, 1= yes)	---	---	---	0.519	0.297	0.083	---	---	---	0.466	0.284	0.104
Social media attention (log)	---	---	---	---	---	---	0.153**	0.050	0.003	0.156**	0.050	0.002
Organisational size (in FTEs, log)	0.214**	0.072	0.004	0.162**	0.078	0.039	0.028	0.092	0.763	-0.034	0.097	0.730
Departmental agencies (ref.= ZBOs)	-1.107*	0.428	0.019	-0.898**	0.428	0.039	-0.817	0.415	0.052	-0.687	0.415	0.101
Advisory bodies (ref.= ZBOs)	0.168	0.389	0.667	0.342	0.397	0.391	0.085	0.374	0.821	0.272	0.380	0.477
Agencies with regulatory tasks (ref.= non-regulatory tasks)	0.701	0.378	0.066	0.705	0.374	0.063	0.812*	0.364	0.028	0.813*	0.360	0.026
Female (ref.= male)	0.049	0.292	0.868	0.096	0.294	0.745	-0.160	0.288	0.580	-0.098	0.288	0.734
Tenure	0.067	0.126	0.599	0.014	0.128	0.915	0.117	0.122	0.342	0.065	0.123	0.602
F	2.986*		0.010	2.765**		0.009	4.107**		0.001	3.764***		<0.001
R ²	0.105			0.122			0.176			0.196		
N of cases	103			103			103			103		

Note: the dependent variable (DV) is agency-CEO's stakeholder orientation (two-item scale). The scores reflect unstandardised coefficients from multiple linear regression analyses. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

Appendix II

Multiple linear regression: agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation and news media attention

	Model A2		
	<i>Full model, including news media attention</i>		
	B	SE	P
(Constant)	5.061***	0.501	<0.001
Consultative body w. clients/users (0= no, 1= yes)	0.432	0.352	0.223
Consultation with societal actors (0= no, 1= yes)	0.432	0.299	0.152
News media attention (log)	0.106	0.085	0.217
Organisational size (in FTEs, log)	0.064	0.095	0.500
Departmental agencies (ref.= ZBOs)	-0.766	0.434	0.081
Advisory bodies (ref.= ZBOs)	-0.071	0.402	0.860
Agencies with regulatory tasks (ref.= non-regulatory tasks)	0.628	0.376	0.099
Female (ref.= male)	0.097	0.296	0.745
Tenure	-0.009	0.129	0.946
F	2.658**		0.009
R ²	0.128		
N of cases	103		

*Note: the dependent variable (DV) is agency-CEOs' stakeholder orientation. The scores reflect unstandardised coefficients from multiple linear regression analyses. *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.*

APPENDICES CHAPTER 6

Social accountability and legitimacy perceptions

Appendix I

Composition and background characteristics of experimental groups

	Group 1 (N=257)			Group 2 (N= 268)			Group 3 (N=262)		
	%	M	sd	%	M	sd	%	M	sd
Gender									
Female	53.7			53.7			46.6		
Male	46.3			46.3			53.4		
Age		48.09	18.09		46.85	17.98		45.46	18.67
Highest educational level									
Lower education	24.2			16.0			23.8		
Medium education	34.8			36.6			31.8		
Higher education	41.0			47.4			44.4		
Political left-right self-placement (0=left, 10=right)		5.28	2.15		5.13	2.10		5.31	2.27
	Group 4 (N=269)			Group 5 (N=256)			Group 6 (N=262)		
	%	M	sd	%	M	sd	%	M	sd
Gender									
Female	51.3			50.4			45.4		
Male	48.7			49.6			54.6		
Age		46.80	18.37		48.40	18.77		46.77	18.49
Highest educational level									
Lower education	22.5			19.1			24.5		
Medium education	38.6			39.8			34.5		
Higher education	39.0			41.0			41.0		
Political left-right self-placement (0=left, 10=right)		5.17	2.18		5.15	2.26		5.29	2.16

Note: Group 1= Decision winner/no accountability, Group 2=Decision loser/no accountability, Group 3=Decision winner/political accountability, Group 4=Decision loser/political accountability, Group 5=Decision winner/social accountability; and Group 6=Decision loser/social accountability.

Appendix II

Dutch version of the vignette

Stelt u zich voor dat de volgende situatie plaatsvindt bij u in de buurt:

Nederland is verdeeld in 25 veiligheidsregio's. In een veiligheidsregio werken gemeentes samen. Ze doen dat om de veiligheid van de inwoners te garanderen. De veiligheidsregio beslist bijvoorbeeld over de brandweer.

[Winnaar / verliezer] De veiligheidsregio waar u woont heeft een plan voor de brandweer. De brandweer moet slimmer en efficiënter worden. In het plan **[opent een nieuwe / sluit de] brandweerkazerne bij u in de buurt**. Wanneer er een ongeluk of brand bij u in de buurt is, is de brandweer daardoor **15 minuten [korter / langer] onderweg**.

[Geen verantwoording] De veiligheidsregio kan dit soort beslissingen zelfstandig nemen.

[Politieke / Maatschappelijke verantwoording] De veiligheidsregio kan dit soort beslissingen zelfstandig nemen. Om tot een goed besluit te komen, spreekt de veiligheidsregio wel over dit plan met **politici / burgers** uit de gemeente. De veiligheidsregio geeft uitleg over het plan tijdens bijeenkomsten met **politici / burgers**. Tijdens deze bijeenkomsten kunnen **politici / burgers** vragen stellen over het plan en over de uitvoering van het plan. Ze mogen zelf ook ideeën geven. De veiligheidsregio neemt de ideeën van **politici / burgers** heel serieus bij de uitvoering van het plan voor de brandweer.

Appendix III

Accountability and decision acceptance

Figure A1. Decision acceptance on a 1-7 scale: mean scores (with 95% CI).

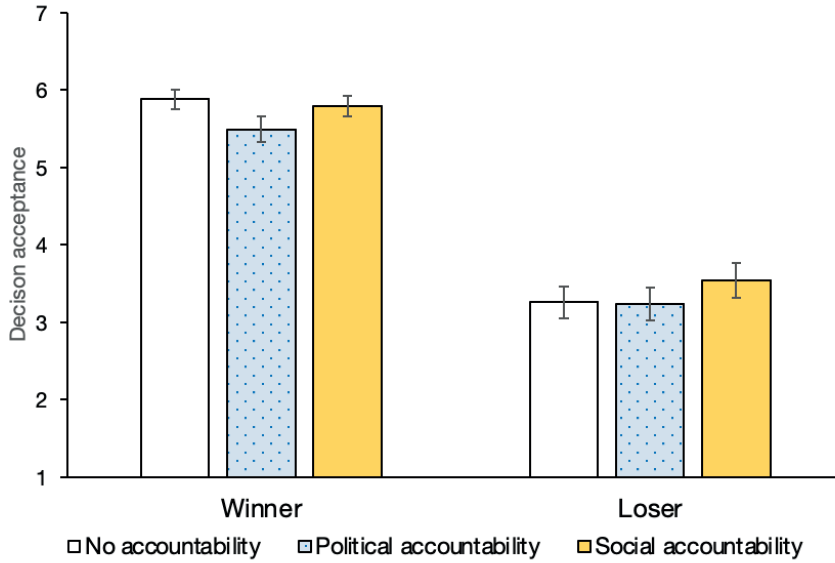
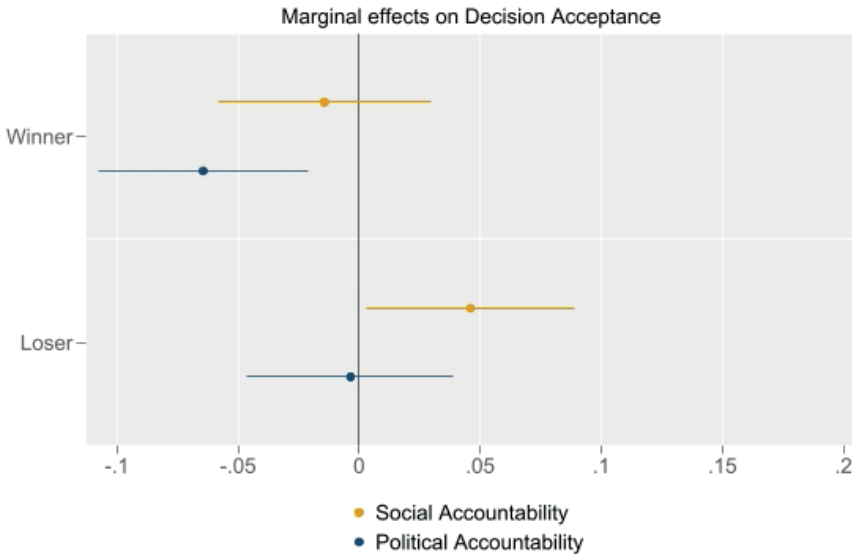


Table A1. The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' decision acceptance.

Effect	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.792*** (0.013)	0.749*** (0.014)	0.813*** (0.016)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	-0.396*** (0.013)	-0.375*** (0.016)	-0.436*** (0.022)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	-0.034* (0.015)		-0.064** (0.022)
Social accountability	0.016 (0.016)		-0.014 (0.022)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.050** (0.016)	
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			0.061* (0.031)
Loser x Social acc.			0.060* (0.031)
F	325.770***	277.657***	196.868***
R ²	0.390	0.353	0.391
N of cases	1527	1016	1527

Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardised coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. * $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure A2. Marginal effects of political and social accountability on winners' and losers' decision acceptance.



A

Appendix IV

Accountability and trust

Figure A3. Trust in decision-makers on a 1-7 scale: mean scores (with 95% CI).

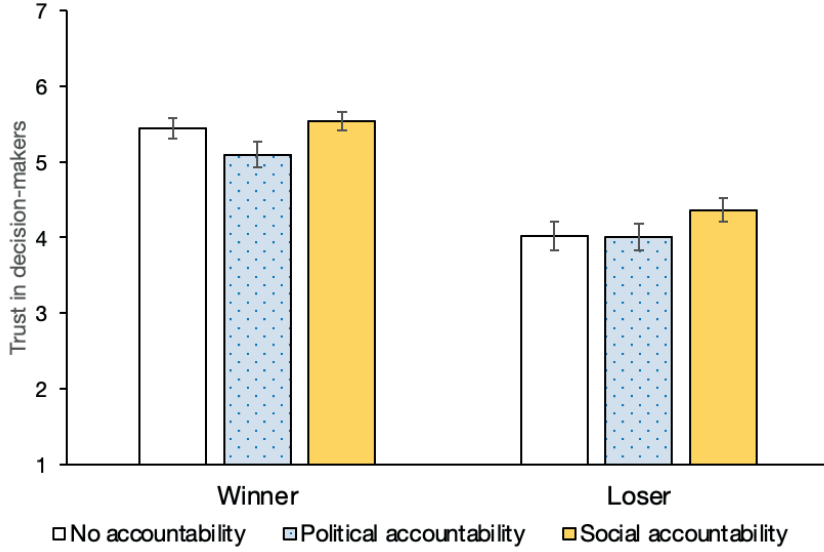
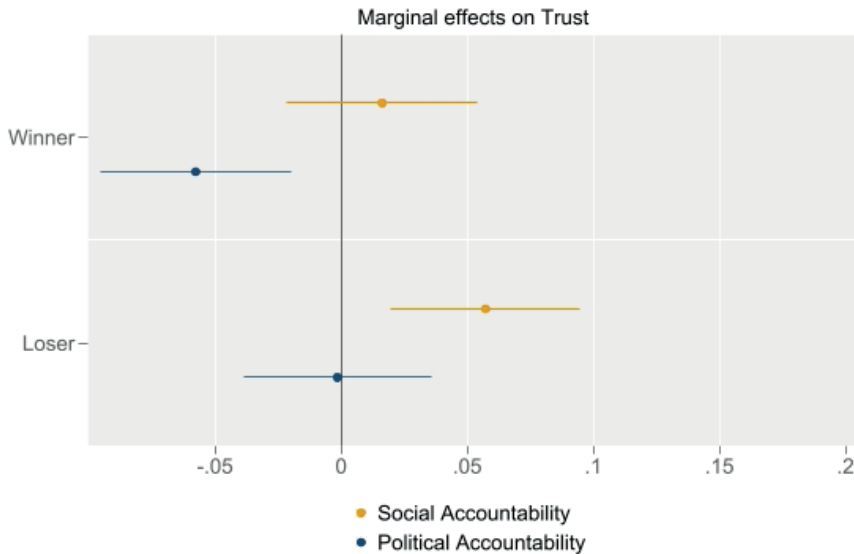


Table A2. The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' trust in decision-makers.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Effect	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.723*** (0.011)	0.686*** (0.011)	0.740*** (0.014)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	-0.204*** (0.011)	-0.188*** (0.013)	-0.237*** (0.019)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	-0.029* (0.014)		-0.058** (0.019)
Social accountability	0.037** (0.014)		0.016 (0.019)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.066*** (0.013)	
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			0.056* (0.027)
Loser x Social acc.			0.041 (0.027)
F	122.469***	113.464***	74.532***
R ²	0.196	0.182	0.198
N of cases	1494	1009	1494

Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardised coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. *p<0.1, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

Figure A4. Marginal effects of political and social accountability on winners' and losers' trust in decision-makers.



A

Appendix V

The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions: heterogeneous treatment effects

With regards to the heterogeneity of our treatment effects, Tables A6 – A11 provides insights about our experimental effects by political trust, satisfaction with democracy, populist party support, perceived importance of accountability, perceived insecurity and educational attainment (see Table A5 for how these variables are operationalised and measured). With regards to our accountability treatment, we see two interesting patterns. First, Table A7 suggests that political accountability is particularly beneficial for fairness perceptions of citizens with higher levels of satisfaction with democracy. It might not come as a surprise that political accountability, as one of the main features of representative democracy, has larger effects for fairness perceptions of citizens that are most satisfied about the way in which this democratic system works. Moreover, the effect of social accountability, as compared to political accountability, is also smaller for respondents that are most satisfied with democracy. Interestingly, we do however not find a similar pattern with regards to respondents' political trust.

Second, we found larger experimental effects of social accountability on fairness perceptions for respondents that report higher levels of perceived insecurity (see Table A10). These explorative findings are in line with 'uncertainty management theory' suggesting that uncertainty has an important role in the construction of fairness judgements and that procedural fairness is most important for people that are affected by uncertainty.¹³ Social accountability matters most for citizens that feel vulnerable and insecure in their daily lives.

13 See: Van den Bos, K., & Lind, E. A. (2002). Uncertainty management by means of fairness judgments. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, Vol. 34 (pp. 1–60). Academic Press.

Table A3. Operationalisation and measurement of variables.

Variables	Measurement
Political trust	<p><i>Four-item scale</i></p> <p>“Can you indicate how much trust you personally have in each of the following institutions?”</p> <p>Dutch government Dutch parliament Politicians Political parties”</p> <p>(measured on a ten-point scale from “No trust at all” to “A lot of trust”)</p>
Satisfaction with democracy	<p>“In general, how satisfied are you with the way in which democracy functions in the Netherlands?”</p> <p>(measured on a four-point scale from “Very unsatisfied” to “Very satisfied”)</p>
Populist party voting	<p>Dummy variable based upon a recall question on the respondent’s vote at the previous parliamentary election (“For which party did you vote in the parliamentary elections of 17 March 2021?”)</p> <p>0= those who did not vote for a populist party; 1= those who voted for PVV, FVD, JA21, BBB or the SP (cf. the Populist, https://popu-list.org/)</p>
Perceived importance of accountability for democracy	<p><i>Two-item scale</i></p> <p>“How important do you think it is that...</p> <p>... government organisations explain decisions to citizens ... government organisations gather citizens’ opinions while making and implementing decisions”</p> <p>(measured on a four-point scale from “Not important at all” to “Very important”)</p>
Perceived insecurity	<p><i>Three-item scale</i></p> <p>“How likely it is that, in the next 12 months...</p> <p>... you will have too little money to get by ... will be involuntarily unemployed for at least four weeks ... will get seriously ill”</p> <p>(measured on a four-point scale from “Very unlikely” to “Very likely”)</p>
Education	<p>Highest level of education, measured on a three-point scale:</p> <p>0= primary school or vmbo (intermediate secondary education) 0.5= havo/vwo (higher secondary education / preparatory university education) or mbo (intermediate vocational education) 1= hbo (higher vocational education) or wo (university)</p>

Note: all variables have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1.

Table A4. The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions: the role of political trust.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Effect	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.585*** (0.037)	0.575*** (0.036)	0.642*** (0.044)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	-0.401*** (0.037)	-0.343*** (0.044)	-0.540*** (0.067)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	0.017 (0.045)		-0.054 (0.060)
Social accountability	0.147** (0.046)		0.044 (0.064)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.127** (0.044)	
Political trust	0.187** (0.067)	0.224** (0.066)	0.133 (0.082)
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			0.170* (0.090)
Loser x Social acc.			0.228* (0.093)
Loser x Political trust	0.261*** (0.066)	0.199* (0.079)	0.413** (0.120)
Political acc. x Political trust	0.010 (0.081)		0.068 (0.111)
Social acc. x Political trust	-0.116 (0.083)	-0.121 (0.079)	-0.001 (0.117)
Loser x Political acc. x Pol. trust			-0.164 (0.163)
Loser x Social acc. x Pol. trust			-0.270 (0.166)
F	70.493***	57.587***	46.151***
R ²	0.260	0.229	0.264
N of cases	1387	953	1387

Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardized coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, **** $p < 0.001$.

Table A5. The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions: the role of satisfaction with democracy.

Effect	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.681*** (0.038)	0.590*** (0.036)	0.729*** (0.045)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	-0.383*** (0.038)	-0.334*** (0.046)	-0.492*** (0.067)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	-0.071 (0.046)		-0.140* (0.061)
Social accountability	0.098* (0.048)		0.029 (0.066)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.165*** (0.046)	
Satisfaction with democracy	0.004 (0.051)	0.151** (0.051)	-0.029 (0.062)
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			0.161* (0.092)
Loser x Social acc.			0.155 (0.096)
Loser x Sat. dem.	0.177** (0.052)	0.139* (0.062)	0.263** (0.090)
Political acc. x Sat. dem.	0.134* (0.063)		0.185* (0.085)
Social acc. x Sat. dem.	-0.023 (0.064)	-0.152* (0.062)	0.024 (0.089)
Loser x Political acc. x Sat. dem.			-0.133 (0.126)
Loser x Social acc. x Sat. dem.			-0.115 (0.128)
F	59.036***	49.798***	38.315***
R ²	0.231	0.208	0.233
N of cases	1354	930	1354

Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardized coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, **** $p < 0.001$.

Table A6. The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions: the role of populist party support.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Effect	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.684*** (0.016)	0.687*** (0.015)	0.712*** (0.020)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	-0.237*** (0.015)	-0.213*** (0.018)	-0.289*** (0.027)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	0.015 (0.018)		-0.027 (0.026)
Social accountability	0.073*** (0.019)		0.036 (0.027)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.057** (0.018)	
Voted for populist party	-0.013 (0.036)	0.005 (0.039)	-0.018 (0.044)
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			0.081* (0.037)
Loser x Social acc.			0.071* (0.037)
Loser x Populist	-0.128*** (0.036)	-0.128** (0.043)	-0.127* (0.064)
Political acc. x Populist	0.021 (0.045)		0.044 (0.064)
Social acc. x Populist	0.056 (0.044)	0.038 (0.043)	0.043 (0.061)
Loser x Political acc. x Populist			-0.039 (0.090)
Loser x Social acc. x Populist			0.034 (0.088)
F	58.345***	47.658***	37.877***
R ²	0.223	0.196	0.225
N of cases	1399	960	1399

Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardized coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, **** $p < 0.001$.

Table A7. The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions: the role of perceived importance of democratic accountability.

Effect	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.623*** (0.064)	0.589*** (0.066)	0.598*** (0.080)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	0.046 (0.063)	0.012 (0.078)	0.098 (0.107)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	-0.049 (0.077)		0.016 (0.109)
Social accountability	-0.042 (0.078)		-0.030 (0.111)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.006 (0.078)	
Importance of dem. accountability	0.075 (0.080)	0.128 (0.083)	0.141 (0.099)
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			-0.140 (0.153)
Loser x Social acc.			-0.028 (0.156)
Loser x Importance	-0.398*** (0.080)	-0.323** (0.099)	-0.535*** (0.135)
Political acc. x Importance	0.088 (0.097)		-0.043 (0.137)
Social acc. x Importance	0.171 ^a (0.099)	0.084 (0.099)	0.104 (0.140)
Loser x Political acc. x Import.			0.275 (0.193)
Loser x Social acc. x Import.			0.142 (0.197)
F	59.239***	46.696***	38.619***
R ²	0.230	0.197	0.233
N of cases	1363	935	1363

Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardized coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. ^a $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A8. The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions: the role of perceived insecurity.

Effect	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.735*** (0.020)	0.709*** (0.020)	0.752*** (0.025)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	-0.263*** (0.019)	-0.248*** (0.023)	-0.293*** (0.035)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	-0.019 (0.024)		-0.052 (0.034)
Social accountability	0.018 (0.024)		0.006 (0.034)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.038 (0.023)	
Perceived insecurity	-0.245*** (0.067)	-0.109*** (0.064)	-0.208* (0.081)
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			0.062 (0.048)
Loser x Social acc.			0.025 (0.048)
Loser x Perc. insecurity	0.034 (0.065)	0.070 (0.076)	-0.062 (0.121)
Political acc. x Perc. insecurity	0.154* (0.079)		0.141 (0.109)
Social acc. x Perc. insecurity	0.310*** (0.082)	0.150* (0.076)	0.192 (0.118)
Loser x Political acc. x Perc. ins.			0.050 (0.159)
Loser x Social acc. x Perc. ins.			0.229 (0.165)
F	53.345***	42.850***	34.754***
R ²	0.216	0.186	0.218
N of cases	1333	917	1333

Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardized coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. * $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A9. The effects of social and political accountability on citizens' fairness perceptions: the role of education.

Effect	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)	Coeff. (SE)
Constant	0.679*** (0.025)	0.677*** (0.026)	0.708*** (0.030)
Decision outcome (ref=Winner)			
Loser	-0.337*** (0.026)	-0.307*** (0.030)	-0.406*** (0.046)
Type of accountability (ref= No acc.)			
Political accountability	0.013 (0.031)		-0.014 (0.043)
Social accountability	0.112*** (0.032)		0.047 (0.044)
Type of accountability (ref= Pol acc.)			
Social accountability		0.099** (0.030)	
Education	0.001 (0.036)	0.018 (0.036)	-0.001 (0.044)
Interaction effects			
Loser x Political acc.			0.063 (0.063)
Loser x Social acc.			0.137* (0.064)
Loser x Education	0.129*** (0.036)	0.121* (0.042)	0.151* (0.064)
Political acc. x Education	0.013 (0.044)		-0.008 (0.060)
Social acc. x Education	-0.044 (0.044)	-0.057 (0.042)	-0.004 (0.063)
Loser x Political acc. x Education			0.029 (0.088)
Loser x Social acc. x Education			-0.093 (0.089)
F	58.125***	47.666***	38.013***
R ²	0.223	0.196	0.226
N of cases	1395	957	1395

Note: all items have been (re)coded to range between 0 and 1. The values report unstandardized coefficients (B) from ordinary least squares regression. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$, **** $p < 0.001$.

DECLARATION OF CO-AUTHORSHIP

Chapter 3 was co-authored by Sjors Overman and Thomas Schillemans. We describe contributions to the chapter in accordance with the CRediT taxonomy. *Lars Brummel*: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. *Sjors Overman*: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data collection. *Thomas Schillemans*: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data collection. This chapter has been published as an original research article in *Bestuurswetenschappen*: Brummel, L., Overman, S., & Schillemans, T. (2021). Uitvoeringsorganisaties tussen staat en straat: De relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording voor directeuren van ZBO's en agentschappen. *Bestuurswetenschappen*, 75(1), 27-45.

Chapter 6 was co-authored by Lisanne de Blok. We describe contributions to the chapter in accordance with the CRediT taxonomy. *Lars Brummel*: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. *Lisanne de Blok*: Methodology, Formal analysis, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. The paper is currently under review with an international peer-reviewed journal.

SAMENVATTING IN HET NEDERLANDS

Dit proefschrift gaat over het belang van maatschappelijke verantwoording in het openbaar bestuur. Publieke organisaties leggen niet alleen verticaal verantwoording af aan de minister of de politiek (de belangrijkste vertegenwoordigers van de “staat”), maar verantwoorden zich ook aan een breed scala aan maatschappelijke actoren, zoals burgers, cliënten, gebruikers en afnemers van diensten, en andere maatschappelijke belanghebbenden (ruwweg de “straat”). Verantwoording aan deze laatste groep noemen we ‘maatschappelijke verantwoording’. In politiek, media en wetenschap heersen er meestal hoge verwachtingen over vormen van maatschappelijke verantwoording. Maatschappelijke verantwoording zou de controle op het openbaar bestuur kunnen vergroten en de responsiviteit van publieke organisaties bevorderen. Door maatschappelijke verantwoording kunnen publieke organisaties het vertrouwen van de samenleving winnen en kunnen ze hun legitimiteit vergroten.

In de bestuurskunde is er echter volop discussie of maatschappelijke verantwoording in de praktijk een relevante aanvulling is op de bestaande verantwoording in de publieke sector. Want wanneer en waarom ervaren bestuurders van publieke organisaties maatschappelijke verantwoording als relevant? En doet maatschappelijke verantwoording er ook toe om de legitimiteit van publieke organisaties te vergroten? Het doel van dit proefschrift is om dit debat te informeren en te verrijken met empirische kennis. Dat gebeurt heel concreet door de volgende onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden: *wanneer en waarom doet maatschappelijke verantwoording ertoe?*

Het proefschrift beantwoordt deze vraag aan de hand van zowel kwantitatieve als kwalitatieve methoden. De focus ligt daarbij altijd op het individu en diens ervaring met maatschappelijke verantwoording, omdat deze individuele ervaringen van groot belang kunnen zijn voor de uiteindelijke effecten van maatschappelijke verantwoording in de praktijk. Deze samenvatting biedt een overzicht van de belangrijkste bevindingen uit het onderzoek.

Maatschappelijke verantwoording afgebakend

Om de bevindingen van dit proefschrift beter te kunnen plaatsen, is het allereerst van belang om het begrip ‘maatschappelijke verantwoording’ af te bakenen. Verantwoording is een begrip dat vele betekenissen kan hebben. Dit proefschrift hanteert de volgende definitie van verantwoording: “een sociale relatie waarin een actor zich verplicht voelt of verplicht is om voor zijn handelen een uitleg en rechtvaardiging te geven aan een significante ander.”¹⁴ Verantwoording draait niet alleen om het verstrekken van informatie (of transparantie), maar stelt anderen ook in staat om over het optreden van een actor vragen te stellen en daar mogelijke consequenties, waaronder sancties, aan te verbinden. Verantwoording kan gericht zijn aan tal van verschillende partijen of zogeheten

14 Deze definitie van verantwoording komt uit: Schillemans, T. & Bovens, M. (2004). Horizontale verantwoording bij zelfstandige bestuursorganen. In: S. van Thiel (ed.), *Governance van uitvoeringsorganisaties: Nieuwe vraagstukken voor sturing in het publieke domein* (pp. 27–37). Apeldoorn: Kadaster.

‘verantwoordingsfora’. Wanneer het gaat om verantwoording aan maatschappelijke belanghebbenden, zoals burgers, cliënten, gebruikers en/of afnemers van diensten, spreken we dus over ‘maatschappelijke verantwoording’.

Maatschappelijke verantwoording kent vele verschijningsvormen, functies en uitdagingen. Dit blijkt uit Hoofdstuk 2: een literatuurstudie van de bestuurskundige literatuur rondom het begrip maatschappelijke verantwoording. Maatschappelijke verantwoording kent veel synoniemen en omvat vormen van verantwoording die gericht zijn aan individuele burgers, maar ook aan non-gouvernementele organisaties, belangengroepen of klanten- en gebruikersraden. Daarnaast kunnen de media en sociale media een grote rol spelen in maatschappelijke verantwoording. Aan de ene kant zijn er hoge verwachtingen aan maatschappelijke verantwoording, maar aan de andere kant is het de vraag of vormen van maatschappelijke verantwoording wel beschikken over alle elementen van verantwoording, namelijk informatievoorziening, debat en mogelijkheden tot consequenties. Daarnaast wordt maatschappelijke verantwoording in verband gebracht met een breed scala aan mogelijke functies en rollen. Hierdoor is het niet duidelijk wanneer en waarom maatschappelijke verantwoording relevant kan zijn in de praktijk. Om onze kennis over maatschappelijke verantwoording te vergroten, brengen de empirische hoofdstukken van het proefschrift (hoofdstukken 3 tot en met 6) in kaart wanneer en waarom maatschappelijke verantwoording in de context van het Nederlandse openbaar bestuur ertoe doet.

De opbrengsten van empirisch onderzoek naar maatschappelijke verantwoording

In de eerste plaats biedt hoofdstuk 3 inzicht in de relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording voor bestuurders van zelfstandige bestuursorganen (zbo’s) en agentschappen. Bestuurders van deze organisaties, zo blijkt uit dit onderzoek, hechten meer belang aan maatschappelijke verantwoording dan bestuurders van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties in vijf andere West-Europese landen en Australië. Deze resultaten komen uit een enquête onder 575 bestuurders van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties in zeven landen. Het grotere belang van maatschappelijke verantwoording past bij de Nederlandse traditie van corporatistisch en consensusgericht bestuur, waarbij maatschappelijke groepen betrokken worden bij de vorming en uitvoering van beleid. Toch is het verschil tussen Nederland en de zes andere landen niet heel groot. De politieke omgeving van overheidsorganisaties bepaalt deels het belang van maatschappelijke verantwoording voor bestuurders. De mate waarin organisaties verantwoording moeten afleggen richting het ministerie blijkt niet uit te maken voor de relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording. Maatschappelijke verantwoording is vooral belangrijk voor bestuurders van zbo’s en agentschappen die veel belangstelling van de media ervaren. De relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording hangt namelijk sterk met samen met grotere ervaren mediadruk.

Hoofdstuk 4 laat zien dat het belang van maatschappelijke verantwoording vooral groot is voor bestuurders van overheidsorganisaties wanneer hun organisatie veel in de belangstelling staat op de sociale media. Het hoofdstuk komt tot deze conclusie op basis van een multi-methodologisch onderzoek. Uit een enquête onder bestuurders van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties (met 103 deelnemers) blijkt dat hun oriëntatie richting maatschappelijke belanghebbenden sterk samenhangt met het daadwerkelijke aantal berichten op de sociale media over hun organisatie – gemeten aan de hand van het aantal Twitterberichten verschenen over de desbetreffende organisatie in de periode van één jaar. Opvallend is dat de aanwezigheid van stakeholderfora, zoals klanten- of gebruikersraden, binnen een organisatie niet bijdraagt aan een grotere relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording voor individuele bestuurders. Uit kwalitatieve focusgroepen (met in totaal 14 deelnemers) blijkt dat bestuurders en andere vertegenwoordigers van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties sociale mediastormen als een reputatierisico beschouwen voor hun organisatie. Onder een grotere druk van sociale media ervaren individuele bestuurders meer noodzaak om hun “maatschappelijke antenne” te versterken en initiatieven te nemen die de maatschappelijke verantwoording van hun organisatie vergroten. Sociale media-aandacht “triggert” op deze manier de oriëntatie van de bestuurder richting de maatschappelijke omgeving van de organisatie.

Uit Hoofdstuk 5 blijkt binnen verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties een diversiteit aan perspectieven over de rol van stakeholderfora, zoals klanten- en gebruikersraden. Interviews met 25 bestuurders en managers van negen verschillende zbo’s laten zien dat lang niet iedereen stakeholderfora ervaart als een (belangrijke) vorm van verantwoording. Bestuurders en managers twijfelen met name of stakeholderfora een controlerende functie kunnen en moeten uitoefenen. Desondanks blijken stakeholderfora voor veel geïnterviewden te functioneren als een alternatieve vorm van verantwoording. Verantwoording draagt dan niet zozeer bij aan meer controle, maar dient verschillende instrumentele en intrinsieke motivaties binnen zbo’s. Waar sommige bestuurders en managers klanten- en gebruikersfora beschouwen als een morele en professionele plicht, zien anderen deze vorm van stakeholderbetrokkenheid als instrument om de coördinatie van de organisatie met haar externe belanghebbenden te vergroten. Daarnaast beschouwt men het als belangrijk om verantwoording af te leggen aan stakeholderfora omdat het bijdraagt aan het lerend vermogen van de organisatie of omdat het de reputatie en legitimiteit van de organisatie kan bevorderen. Vaak combineren bestuurders en managers meerdere van deze perspectieven. Zo laat dit onderzoek zien dat er in de praktijk verschillende verwachtingen bestaan over de rol die stakeholderfora als verantwoordingsmechanisme kunnen vervullen.

In het laatste empirische hoofdstuk, Hoofdstuk 6, verschuift de focus naar de relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording voor burgers. Dit hoofdstuk bespreekt namelijk in welke mate maatschappelijke verantwoording de legitimiteit van overheidsbeslissingen onder burgers kan vergroten. Een surveyexperiment met

een representatieve groep van 1574 Nederlanders bevestigt dat maatschappelijke verantwoordingsarrangementen een positief effect hebben op de legitimiteitspercepties van burgers. Daarvoor is het wel belangrijk dat burgers ook op de hoogte zijn van het bestaan van deze maatschappelijke verantwoordingsprocessen. In het onderzoek kregen burgers een fictief scenario over de beslissing van een veiligheidsregio om bij hen in de buurt een brandweerkazerne te sluiten of te openen. Daarnaast werd er over de beslissing soms geen verantwoording afgelegd, soms alleen aan politici verantwoording afgelegd of soms alleen aan burgers verantwoording afgelegd. Deelnemers aan het experiment bleken de sluiting van een brandweerkazerne in hun buurt in grotere mate als eerlijk en legitiem te beschouwen als de veiligheidsregio daarover verantwoording aflegt aan een groep getroffen burgers. Wanneer de beslissing van de veiligheidsregio echter uitpakt in het voordeel van burgers, is het belang van verantwoording kleiner en heeft verantwoording nauwelijks effect op hun steun en acceptatie van de beslissing. Maatschappelijke verantwoording blijkt dus met name belangrijk voor de ‘verliezers’ in de besluitvorming en niet zozeer voor winnaars. Tenslotte blijkt uit het experiment dat politieke verantwoording niet of nauwelijks bijdraagt aan meer legitimiteit van beslissingen onder burgers. Maatschappelijke verantwoording heeft kortom een grotere invloed op de legitimiteitspercepties van burgers dan politieke verantwoording.

Tabel S1. Overzicht van onderzoeksvragen en belangrijkste bevindingen van het proefschrift.

Onderzoeksvragen	Onderzoeksaanpak	Belangrijkste bevindingen
1. Hoe kunnen we maatschappelijke verantwoording conceptualiseren?	Literatuurstudie	Maatschappelijke verantwoording is een veelzijdige vorm van verantwoording en kent een pluriformiteit aan praktijken, functies en uitdagingen.
2. In welke mate zijn kenmerken van de politieke omgeving van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties gerelateerd aan de relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording voor bestuurders van deze organisaties?	Kwantitatief onderzoek met N=575 surveyresponses van bestuurders van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties uit zeven verschillende landen	De relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording is enigszins hoger voor bestuurders van zbo's en agentschappen dan voor bestuurders van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties in vergelijkbare landen. De relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording hangt sterk samen met ervaren mediadruk.
3. In welke mate zijn kenmerken van de maatschappelijke omgeving van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties gerelateerd aan de relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording voor bestuurders van deze organisaties?	Multi-methodisch onderzoek met een kwantitatieve survey onder N=103 bestuurders van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties en twee kwalitatieve focusgroepen met N=14 bestuurders en andere vertegenwoordigers van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties	De relevantie van maatschappelijke verantwoording hangt sterk samen met daadwerkelijke aandacht voor organisaties op sociale media. Sociale mediadruk wordt ervaren als een belangrijke reputatie-uitdaging voor verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties, waardoor maatschappelijke verantwoording belangrijk is.
4. Hoe beschrijven bestuurders en managers van zbo's de verantwoordingsfunctie van stakeholderfora in hun eigen woorden?	Kwalitatief onderzoek met interviews onder N=25 bestuurders en andere hooggeplaatste vertegenwoordigers van negen verschillende zbo's	Binnen verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties bestaan verschillende perspectieven op de verantwoordingsfunctie van stakeholderfora. Stakeholderfora worden beperkt als controlemiddel ervaren. Bestuurders en managers zien stakeholderfora als een verantwoordingsarrangement dat relevant is voor intrinsieke en instrumentele redenen.
5. In welke mate hebben maatschappelijke en politieke verantwoordingsarrangementen een effect op de legitimiteitspercepties van burgers?	Experimenteel onderzoek onder N=1574 Nederlandse burgers	Maatschappelijke verantwoordingsarrangementen kunnen de legitimiteit van beslissingen onder burgers vergroten, politieke verantwoording draagt niet bij aan de ervaren legitimiteit van beslissingen onder burgers.

De drie belangrijkste lessen over maatschappelijke verantwoording

De uitkomsten van deze verschillende studies zijn samengevat in Tabel S1. Op basis van deze bevindingen komt dit proefschrift tot drie belangrijke ‘take home messages’ of kernboodschappen, die in hoofdstuk 7 worden besproken.

1. Maatschappelijke verantwoording is vooral belangrijk voor overheidsorganisaties wanneer er sprake is van grote (sociale) mediadruk.

Vormen van maatschappelijke verantwoording winnen aan belang door de daadwerkelijke en ervaren invloed van de media op de publieke sector. Bestuurders van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties hechten meer waarde aan maatschappelijke verantwoording en hun contact met maatschappelijke belanghebbenden wanneer hun organisatie onder grotere druk van de (sociale) media staat.

Onder grote mediadruk is maatschappelijke verantwoording vooral van belang voor de reputatie van een organisatie. Door zich al in een vroegtijdig stadium te verantwoorden richting de maatschappelijke omgeving, proberen organisaties zich te wapenen tegen mogelijke negatieve mediaberichtgeving. Maatschappelijke verantwoording wordt zo vooral van strategisch belang en verschaft organisaties potentiële steun en legitimiteit wanneer deze organisaties te maken krijgen met kritische media.

Het is de vraag in hoeverre het wenselijk is dat publieke organisaties gevoelig zijn voor sociale mediastormen. De invloed van de media op de bureaucratie wordt door sommigen als problematisch beschouwd. Vanwege haar niet-representatieve karakter zijn de sociale media bovendien een gemankeerde graadmeter voor de publieke percepties over overheidsfunctioneren. Het is daarom van belang dat verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties bewust zijn van de beperkingen van de sociale media en zich robuust kunnen opstellen ten tijde van een mediastorm.

2. Stakeholderfora dragen maar beperkt bij aan controle en toezicht, maar worden toch als een belangrijke vorm van maatschappelijke verantwoording ervaren.

Bestuurders en managers van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties zien stakeholderfora niet vaak als een controle-instrument. Zij beschouwen stakeholderfora echter als een relevant ‘verantwoordingsforum’ dat bijdraagt aan andere organisatiedoelen. Er bestaan verschillende perspectieven op de rol van stakeholderfora binnen overheidsorganisaties. Volgens betrokkenen zijn stakeholderfora een morele en professionele plicht of kunnen ze de coördinatie met externe partijen vergroten, maar stakeholderfora kunnen ook bijdragen aan het lerend vermogen van de organisatie of de reputatie van de organisatie vergroten.

Zo schetst dit proefschrift een genuanceerd beeld van de relevantie van stakeholderfora als verantwoordingsinstrument. Deze bevinding roept de vraag op in hoeverre stakeholderfora de gebrekkige controle op de uitvoering kunnen compenseren. Tegelijkertijd laat dit onderzoek zien dat de rol van stakeholderfora binnen verzelfstandigde

overheidsorganisaties niet irrelevant is. Stakeholderfora hebben vooral een praktisch nut. Het is belangrijk om realistische verwachtingen van stakeholderfora te hebben en oog te houden voor de verschillende rollen die stakeholderfora in de praktijk vervullen.

3. Het gebruik van maatschappelijke verantwoordingspraktijken kan de ervaren legitimiteit en acceptatie van overheidsbeslissingen vergroten.

Maatschappelijke verantwoording kan een belangrijke rol spelen in het vergroten van de legitimiteit van het openbaar bestuur en het versterken van het draagvlak voor overheidsbeslissingen. Burgers zijn eerder bereid een moeilijke en nadelige maatregel te accepteren, zodra zij weten dat een overheidsorganisatie verantwoording heeft afgelegd aan een groep burgers.

Dit is een potentieel voordeel van maatschappelijke verantwoordingsarrangementen. Het is daarbij wel van cruciaal belang dat burgers op de hoogte zijn van deze verantwoordingspraktijken. Dit vraagt om goede en vindbare communicatie door overheidsorganisaties over hun verantwoordingspraktijken. Het is daarbij wenselijk dat maatschappelijke verantwoording geen marketinginstrument wordt, waarbij organisaties verantwoording vooral strategisch inzetten om draagvlak te vergroten zonder zich daarbij daadwerkelijk open te stellen voor de feedback van burgers.

Slotakoord

Dit proefschrift laat een tweezijdig beeld zien van de meerwaarde van maatschappelijke verantwoording in het openbaar bestuur. Maatschappelijke verantwoording blijkt een beperkt controle-instrument. Bestuurders van verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties ervaren maatschappelijke verantwoording als belangrijker onder grote mediadruk. De rol van sociale media als verantwoordingskanaal blijft echter gemankeerd en incidentgericht. Klanten- en gebruikersfora zijn maar beperkt in staat om verzelfstandigde overheidsorganisaties te controleren. Daarnaast kennen deze verschillende vormen van maatschappelijke verantwoording geen democratisch mandaat en daardoor kunnen ze een gebrek aan democratische controle niet compenseren.

Tegelijkertijd blijkt dat maatschappelijke verantwoording vaak van praktisch nut kan zijn voor bestuurders en managers van overheidsorganisaties. Deugdelijke verantwoordingsprocessen, waarbij naar burgers goed geluisterd wordt en waarin burgers hun stem mogen uiten, hebben bovendien de potentie om de legitimiteit van publieke organisaties te vergroten onder het brede publiek. Dit is zeker van belang in een tijdperk waarin een gezaghebbende reputatie van het openbaar bestuur niet vanzelfsprekend is. Het is aan publieke organisaties om te komen tot vormen van maatschappelijke verantwoording, die niet alleen bijdragen aan de positie en het belang van de organisatie, maar met als doel om de relatie tussen burgers en overheidsorganisaties te verbeteren en het vertrouwen in het openbaar bestuur te vergroten.

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