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Research Article

Toward a Public Administration Theory of Felt Accountability

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Abstract: *The literature on public accountability is extensive but overwhelmingly focuses on accountability of organizations. Yet, accountability mechanisms can function properly only when individuals believe that they will be held accountable in the future. This article bridges that gap by translating and extending the psychological concept of "felt accountability" to the public administration scholarship. The particular context of accountability in public organizations requires us to integrate knowledge about (1) the diverse professional roles of public sector employees, (2) the saliency and authority of various and multiple account holders, and (3) the substance of the accountability demands. The current article integrates this contextual knowledge with an individual perspective on accountability. This effort represents an important contribution to public accountability literature, as it allows scholars to properly understand the consequences of psychological insights about accountability for the public sector, and to adequately translate psychological insights and recommendations to a public accountability context.*

Evidence for Practice

- The impact of accountability mechanisms on individual behavior is predicated on the individuals' acceptance of the account holder's authority. Individuals will change their behavior as a result of such mechanisms only when they anticipate future accountability to a salient account holder.
- Adequate accountability mechanisms acknowledge the beliefs of account givers about their own professional role, about the perceived authority of the account holders, and about the contents of the accountability demand.
- The perceptions of future accountability that account givers hold are the result of internalizations of (in) formal norms. Socialization is key in shaping the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms.

Accountability mechanisms are important tools of governance to evaluate and, when necessary, sanction behavior (Bovens 2007). These tools of governance include not only a variety of formal mechanisms such as elections, audits, and performance reporting (Peters 2014) but also informal processes of accountability (Benjamin and Posner 2018; Romzek, LeRoux, and Blackmar 2012). What they have in common is that the implementation of all of these accountability mechanisms is generally aimed at monitoring the execution of public policies, at improving organizational outcomes, and at foregoing undesirable behavior by public managers (Day and Klein 1987; McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987). As such, accountability mechanisms have an important function in securing democratic and constitutional control.

In the current empirical accountability research in public administration, a focus on public *organizations* predominates (Olsen 2013; Schillemans 2016). Accountability mechanisms aim at accountable

organizations; yet, these can be effective only when *people* in those organizations perceive these mechanisms to exist and, consequently, adjust their behavior in the desired direction. It is, thus, the individual perception of the accountability mechanism that triggers actions in a public sector employee. The individual actions, in turn, should lead to improved, more accountable organizational performance as the aggregated effects of individual responses to an organizations' accountability environment (Coleman 1990). In other words, the effective implementation of accountability mechanisms in the public sector on the meso-level presumes that micro-level decision makers adapt their behavior in the presence of such mechanisms (Jilke et al. 2019). Only when agents have a mental imprint of (future) accountability, they are able to anticipate appropriately toward the accountability mechanism. Therefore, it is imperative to study accountability at the actor level in order to assess its effects on decisions and behaviors in public administration. Scholars, such as Barbara Romzek

and Jonathan Lupson and their colleagues, have noted the importance of the study of accountability as an interpersonal process (Lupson and Partington 2011; Romzek, LeRoux, and Blackmar 2012). In a similar vein, scholars on street-level bureaucrats, including Peter Hupe and Eva Thomann, center on the individual perceptions of accountability (Hupe and Hill 2007; Thomann, Hupe, and Sager 2018). And, recently, several scholars in public administration have started studying accountability using methods and insights from behavioral sciences (Aleksovska, Schillemans, and Grimmelikhuijsen 2019; Bouwman et al. 2018; Han and Perry 2020b; Ossege 2012; Overman, Schillemans, and Grimmelikhuijsen 2020; Schillemans 2016). However, to date, the public administration literature lacks a clearly articulated theory of accountability at the individual level.

A public administration theory of accountability at the actor level can draw on the host of studies on accountability in psychology (Aleksovska, Schillemans, and Grimmelikhuijsen 2019; Han and Perry 2020a; Lerner and Tetlock 1999). Most of the empirical studies in psychology employ the concept *felt accountability* (Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017): the impression of account givers that they will be held accountable for their behavior and performance in the future. This subjective impression has been found crucial, as individuals who are subject to comparable accountability environments with the same objective conditions report contradictory accountability perceptions (Frink and Klimoski 2004).

This approach of accountability serves as the starting point for this article. If our goal is a better understanding of the consequences of accountability mechanisms for behaviors and decisions by account givers in the public sector, then the conceptualization and theorizing of felt accountability is essential. Therefore, the goal of this article is to translate and extend the generic psychological theory of felt accountability to the context-dependent specificities of public administration. This generic theory of felt accountability is discussed in the next section, followed by a translation and extension to a public administration context.

Felt Accountability

The starting point of this study is the definition of felt accountability by the psychologists Angela Hall and Gerald Ferris, building on decades of experimental research on the effects of accountability (cf. Lerner and Tetlock 1999). They stipulate that felt accountability is

> an 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. (Hall and Ferris 2010, 134).

A moment of accountability need not occur, but there must be a possibility of the moment occurring (Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017, 206). Also, the belief that an explanation may be required as well as an acknowledgement of the possibility of consequences is necessary (ibid.). This definition of felt accountability is aligned with many conceptualizations of accountability in our field (Bovens, Schillemans, and Goodin 2014,

6); yet, it stands out by its focus on the individual's expectations about future accountability.

Scholars in psychology apply a phenomenological view of felt accountability (Tetlock 1992). This view presumes that, in situations where the objective accountability settings are comparable or even identical, the perception of accountability is, to some extent, different among different individuals (Frink and Klimoski 2004). Felt accountability denotes the individual's explicit or implicit "sense of accountability" toward an accountability environment (cf. Klingner, Nalbandian, and Romzek 2002) and varies according to professional socialization and beliefs.

Such accountability environments vary along four dimensions (Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017). Accountability *source* refers to the person or institution to whom accountability is rendered. Accountability *focus* is the extent to which individuals are held accountable for decision processes or outcomes. Accountability *salience* refers to whether one is held accountable for important decisions or outcomes. And accountability *intensity* denotes the multiplicity of accountability sources. Public administration actors operate in a number of special accountability environments, as we will discuss throughout this article.

A key issue in accountability environments is the *timing* of accountability (Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017; Lerner and Tetlock 1999). At what moment in the individual's decision process is accountability enacted or expected? Is the person held accountable *before* committing to a course of action or *after* having taken a decision or pursuing that course of action. And, when accountability is expected, does the individual know the expectations held by salient accountability holders, so that decisions can be aligned to those expectations, or are accountability expectations ambivalent or unknown? The timing of accountability will have an impact on how decision makers respond to accountability, as has been theorized for public administration (Schillemans 2016). Expected accountability to an accountability forum with known views generally triggers an acceptability heuristic in which decision makers resort to courses of action that conform with those known preferences. Unexpected accountability generally invokes defensive responses, while expected accountability to salient forums with unknown views induces higher cognitive complexity of decision making.

In psychology, accountability is understood as potentially the most powerful source of external social influence on individual behaviors (Tetlock 1992). Schlenker and Weigold (1989, 23) stated boldly that "… the influence of other people on our thoughts, feelings, and actions, operates only in the context of accountability. It is a fundamental aspect of social life." Felt accountability, thus, influences the actor's behavior and decision making (Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017). It contains an idea of behaviors that may be sanctioned or are appropriate in one's accountability environment (Olsen 2017). Felt accountability is, therefore, a form of influence that the account holder has over the account giver. This form of influence is based on an impression imprinted in the actor's mind as the result of some form of authority. The awareness of this authority influences the daily behavior of public sector employees. It relates to what Carl Friedrich coined the "rule of anticipated reactions," explaining how influence can be rendered via anticipated reactions (Friedrich 1963).

To understand the type of influence that accountability mechanisms have on individuals, we cannot follow the strict, rigid, and formal institutions of principal authority. Instead, authority and influence are bargained and accepted under specific conditions by the account giver (Carpenter and Krause 2015). This argument is particularly important in the public sector, where many organizations and individuals function with an extent of autonomy that is even institutionally defined.

Therefore, the authority and influence that fuel felt accountability in an agent are the result of a psychological contract based on a combination of formal and unwritten rules or formal or informal accountability mechanisms. Informal mechanisms may include "group norms, corporate cultural norms, loyalty to an individual's superior and colleagues, even an emphasis on and respect for the customers of one's outputs" (Frink and Klimoski 2004, 3). The various mechanisms in conjunction exert influence on the individual. The mechanisms create an impression that a specific—for the account holder undesirable—decision alternative is more costly or less appropriate for the account giver to choose. At the same time, this perspective allows for the possibility of deliberate defiance in the shadow of accountability (Friedrich 1963, 205–209): a specific action may be costly or not appropriate but the account giver may be able, and willing, to bear the costs (see also Oliver 1991). A hierarchical relationship is, thus, no necessary precondition for felt accountability, which also provides an improved understanding of voluntary accountability (Koop 2014; Reiss 2009).

In short, felt accountability forms an important cog in the micro-foundations of accountability and its effects on individual behavior in public administration. As argued in this section, the relation between account holder and account giver, and the substance of accountability, are key elements that determine felt accountability. Yet, to date, the development of this theory is mostly based on a generic idea of a generic person who is accountable to some generic salient audience, without further specification or contextualization (Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017). Yet, as we will argue in the following section, individuals are socialized into roles and develop specific ideas about the authority of the account holder based on continued interaction. To build theoretical expectations based on the concept of felt accountability in public administration research, we, thus, need to acknowledge the specific relational and substantive aspects of felt accountability in public administration. The next sections will discuss the particulars of the relational and the substantive aspects of felt accountability in a public administration context.

Integrating Felt Accountability in Public Administration: Relational and Substantive Aspects

In psychology, felt accountability is considered to be a phenomenon consisting of separate sub-dimensions. Jennifer Lerner and Philip Tetlock argue in their seminal review (1999, 255):

> It is, however, a mistake – and a rather common one – to view accountability as a unitary phenomenon. Even the simplest accountability manipulation necessarily implicates several empirically distinguishable submanipulations.

They point to dimensions of accountability such as presence, identifiability, evaluation, and reason-giving (ibid. 255–256; see also Han and Perry 2020a). Presence refers to the expectation of the presence of an account holder. Identifiability refers to the expectation that the account giver will be personally accountable. Evaluation refers to the "normative ground rules" of the account holder, and reason-giving refers to the expectation that an explanation of the account giver's behavior will be required. Put differently, the two former dimensions point to the relationship between account giver and account holder. The latter two concern the substantive (accountability about what?) question. These dimensions tie in well with the distinctions made in the current article. The following section will discuss these dimensions in depth and will focus on contextual specificities in public administration. The translation of the subdimensions requires some adaptation to the specific accountability environment that the public sector constitutes. These dimensions directly relate to three questions often asked in the public accountability literature (Goodin 2003; Mulgan 2003, 23–30): (1) who is accountable, (2) to whom, and (3) about what?

Who Feels Accountable?

One's perception of accountability is partly the product of individual variations, but also dependent on professional role identities (Katz and Kahn 1978). These roles represent activity based on accepted, standardized norms and, therefore, abstract behavioral requirements from individuals (ibid. p. 45). Roles are borne out of shared norms and expectations and, as such, regulate behavior as individuals continuously make sense of what is expected from them in their organizational role. These role related expectations extend to expectations of accountability (Frink and Klimoski 2004). The perspective from role theory recognizes that individual-felt accountability is determined by forces operating at multiple levels (from the individual or dyad to the broader system). Moreover, the design of accountability mechanisms only partly regulates felt accountability, and other personal and interpersonal factors also explain considerable variance in behavior. This perspective also underlines the importance of socialization into a role and, thus, into expectations of accountability, which will take time to stabilize (ibid.).

Public organizations boast numerous archetypical functionaries whose perceptions of accountability are likely to deviate from the classic image of the student who is evaluated by the professor or the employee who is answerable to a supervisor. Many accountability relations are "peculiar" and differ from "simple" hierarchical relations (Waldo 1948). Hereafter, we discuss the specificities of roles and identities and translate those to four important archetypes of public sector employees that deviate from the generic accountability relationship in psychology.

Personal or Collective Identity. Most tasks in the public sector—and, indeed, elsewhere—are performed in groups where one manager is accountable for the performance of a group of people. Part of the identity dimension is, therefore, the difference between accountability for one's own performance and for collective performance. Individuals may feel less accountable because they perceive their individual effort is not directly identifiable, which psychologists term social loafing (Harkins and Jackson 1985). In the hierarchy of public administration, accountability for others is particularly salient. Accountability claims are usually not laid on the

person, but on the position, for example, in terms of ministerial responsibility. Therefore, the responsible individual may often be identifiable. However, Anthony Downs already argued that the size of government organizations leads to imperfect and diminishing control, and decreasing coordination (Downs 1967; see also Kroon, 't Hart, and Van Kreveld 1991). As a consequence, senior managers are not identifiable as a potential individual culprit in the large mechanic of a public organization (Bovens 2004, 78–79). As a result, civil servants may strategically and effectively evade accountability and blame (Hood 2011). This limited control is "balanced" by forms of social influence within (public) organizations. Civil servants use various tactics of social influence, such as reputation, organizational politics, or impressions management (Hall, Wikhamn, and Cardy 2016, 2255), to affect the behaviors of others. This suggests that it is not only difficult to pinpoint accountability but also that the account giver may affect the audience.

In line with Downs, we could expect that accountability for others, particularly in large organizations, may effectively dilute felt accountability. Psychological studies show that control systems such as accountability can lead to reactance (Ferris et al. 1995, 184): that is, individuals may feel that their autonomy is threatened and they may respond with negative emotions. This may create negative affect and lead to a decline in intrinsic motivation and counterproductive work practices (Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017, 215). As we will discuss in the next section, this process will weigh in strongly for top-level managers, but less so for the street-level bureaucrat and autonomous professional.

Four Archetypical Public Administration Account Givers. The self-conceptions of identities and roles in the public sector are likely to be distinct for individuals with different professional roles. As noted earlier, some roles coincide with the generic account giver in psychology. But several variations are important to note in four highly singular professional roles in the public sector: the mandarin policy maker, the CEO of an arm's-length agency, the highly skilled professional, and the street-level bureaucrat. These roles serve to demonstrate how a public administration theory of felt accountability extends the generic psychological theory. Individuals are socialized into different roles in (public) organizations, which provide varying contexts for felt accountability. As such, these roles provide a contextualized explanation for felt accountability. We discuss these distinctions here.

To begin with, the mandarin policy maker is a senior-level employee at a ministry or department carrying responsibility for the organization and policies on a long-term basis (Aberbach and Rockman 1988; Rhodes and Weller 2001). Their main task is policy making and they delegate the implementation to the operational parts of the public service. This type of civil servant works under the direct authority of an elected official or a cabinet member of the executive, yet, is traditionally part of dense social networks of fellow mandarins, which provides some competition among moral standards. Resulting from an absence of a long chain of delegation, the mandarin's role is more or less similar to the generic model of accountability. At the same time, the competition between peer standards and political standards may be confounding. Also, many feel more accountable to public service than to their

political principal (Van der Wal 2013). Regarding their identity, the mandarin carries a responsibility for a policy field and the organization. In that sense, their identifiability is diminished. Others, including the political principal, may be more identifiable as (formally) accountable and susceptible to blame.

A second archetype is the appointed executive of a regulatory or executive agency who is responsible for a specific task and organization and often operates with considerable autonomy vis-à-vis his or her political principal. Appointed executives are comparable to the mandarin in the sense that they are top-level civil servants; yet, this role differs, as the executive works at arm's length of government. In the past decades of market-based reforms, the *managerial type* of executive was also actively propagated as a substitute for the mandarins who were supposed to be too powerful, or, in our terms, too little politically accountable (Rhodes and Weller 2001). The rise of the executive also meant the rise of a more market-like type of accountability, with strict performance targets and a belief that managers could make a difference and improve policy delivery. This change has implied an inherent conflict of standards between sets of values in this particular role (Hood 1991). Moreover, their formal autonomy limits the accountability to elected officials. Comparative research shows that these executives still feel accountable to their political principal, yet also have a distinctive profile in terms of felt accountability (Bach et al. 2017; Schillemans et al. 2021).

A third archetype is the autonomous, highly skilled public sector professional. The autonomous professional is a highly specialized worker with a technically complicated task. Examples include regulators, central bankers, or researchers in technically advanced government agencies, such as NASA, meteorology institutes, or centers for disease control and prevention. Additionally, classic professionals work in the public service, such as certified accountants, medical doctors, or legal professionals. A classic professional's first and foremost accountability lies with the norms and standards of one's profession, not with the organization (Freidson 2001). As a consequence, the classic, Weberian hierarchy between the political principal and the public employee is restricted when the latter is a professional. Still, there is a formal vertical accountability relationship. At the same time, their autonomy also leads to competition between a diverse set of stakeholders who operate as account holders and, as a consequence, this third archetype of public employees work in dense webs of accountability (Page 2006).

At the end of the hierarchical line in public service delivery sits the street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky 2010) as our fourth archetype. This type of public employee implements specific public policies in direct contact with citizens and other societal stakeholders. Examples include police officers, public school teachers, and welfare officers. They are in direct contact with citizens and decide on individual cases. Their task requires a high level of discretion within specified legal boundaries. With regard to their role, they may increasingly tend to their neo-professional peers (Noordegraaf 2007). In terms of identity, the political principal remains ultimately responsible for their work, but their vertical accountability is organized through the hierarchy of the public service: the street-level bureaucrat generally has a chain of managers reporting upward. Simultaneously, research

finds that they also feel accountable to their clients and the social environment in which they operate (Klingner, Nalbandian, and Romzek 2002; Thomann, Hupe, and Sager 2018).

Table 1 presents an overview of the archetypical roles that extend the theory of felt accountability in their specific ways. The nature of a public employee's role conception is likely to be different for each of the four archetypes of civil servants. These four archetypes are prevalent in public administration, exist in most advanced jurisdictions, and all deviate in important ways from the simple generic model of felt accountability where the agent is supposed to answer to a single principal or account holder. A contextualized theory of felt accountability in public administration needs to take account of the specificities of such archetypical and important roles and identities.

Accountable to Whom?

Next to the account givers' perception of the self, it is important to focus on their perception of the other—the account holder. In the public sector, one-on-one relationships are rare. Instead, account givers take a role in the wider accountability environment, composed of multiple account givers and account holders. Together, these interrelations form "webs of accountability" (Page 2006). These webs of accountability are equilibriums continuously evolving from political debate, managerial reform, and in response to (unexpected) events and crises (Olsen 2013). Account givers face multiple claims of accountability and feel a certain degree of accountability toward each of these account holders; felt accountability toward these account holders may well go hand in hand by trust, a shadow of the future, and a spirit of reciprocity (Romzek, LeRoux, and Blackmar 2012). The psychological theory of felt accountability assumes that the account holder is authoritative and has the capacity and position to judge and sanction the account giver (Hochwarter et al. 2007). As a result, the psychological theory of felt accountability is de facto a theory of hierarchical accountability. The answer to the question to whom one is accountable, then, is: to one's supervisor. This is of obvious relevance to public administration, which is at least partly characterized by clear lines of hierarchy (Han and Perry 2020a; Strøm 2000). However, for mandarins, executives, professionals, and street-level bureaucrats, many accountability relations prevail in which hierarchy is confounded. To understand those public administration forms of accountability, it is imperative to look at the underlying dimensions of authority. In line with Herbert Simon,

we contend that this authority is based on the authority of ideas and the authority of sanctions (Simon 1997). The sanctions refer to the calculative dimension: if sanctions or rewards are used, it is rational for an agent to adapt decisions and behaviors to the account holder. These are among the classic bases of power, as was identified by French and Raven (1959). The authority of ideas refer to expertise and legitimacy. Together with "referent power" (ibid.), these may lead to the willful adjustment of behaviors as a decision maker aligns behaviors to expectations emanating from legitimate expert account holders. We will discuss the latter in more detail below.

Legitimacy. The account giver's perception of the account holder's legitimacy or "moral authority" (Mulgan 2003, 10–11) is a first important part of the relational aspect of felt accountability. As noted before, the focus on moral authority owes to Carpenter and Krause's (2015) conceptualization of transactional authority: the account holder can achieve influence only through sanctioned acceptance of authority. That is, without the (implicit) acknowledgement of the account holder's authority, there is no influence of the account holder in the account giver's actions. One base of the acceptance of authority is the perceived legitimacy of the account holder to hold the actor to account. Using Suchman's (1995, 574) definition, an account holder is legitimate when the account giver acknowledges that the account holder behaves in a desirable, proper, or appropriate way and in line with norms and values of the democratic system of government. Legitimate authority should be seen as a "contingent grant" (Presthus 1960, 88) that requires input based on respect of the actor and, therefore, bears the actor's "willingness to obey" (Simon 1997, 180). In other words, the actor's evaluation of the legitimacy of an account holder relies on the relationship that is built and nourished between actor and account holder and with the consistency of "expectations" (Dubnick and Romzek 1993) institutionalized in their relationship. Psychological studies demonstrated that a more legitimate account holder improves the decisions made by an account giver (Schillemans 2016; Tyler 1997). It is, therefore, expected that the legitimacy of the account holder constitutes a key component of the accountability relationship and that the perceived legitimacy of the account holder improves the quality of decision making.

The perception of an account holder's legitimacy differs per account holder. Previous accountability research acknowledges the multiplicity of the account holders (Koppell 2005)—also described as the problem of many eyes (Bovens 2007)—and their respective logics (Romzek and Dubnick 1987). Looking at the political principal, the legitimacy is expected to be high for the mandarin. Its legitimacy may be lower for the street-level bureaucrat, who will feel that the political account holder's interests may collide with the interests of their clients. The autonomous professional deliberately works on an arm's-length basis, in order to depoliticize the job. As a consequence, it is expected that, for them, the legitimacy of the political principal as an account holder is the lowest.

Expertise. The second important part of the relational aspect is the account holder's authority based on *perceived expertise* of the account holder. The account holder's capacity to oversee the agent and to prevent the agent from "shirking or sabotage" (Brehm and Gates 1999) is a necessary precondition for any accountability relationship to work (Strøm 2000). This is

Table 1 Four Archetypical Public Employees

	Role	Personal or Collective Identity
Mandarin	Guardian of institutionalized values, yet directly accountable to elected politician	Crucial individual, "hidden" inside institutions; accountability for others
Executive	Leader delivering results; directly accountable to elected politician but different norm set	Individual at the apex of large organizations; accountability for others
Professional	Autonomous operator from professional group with professional norms	Individual applying institutionalized values and procedures; accountability for self and others
Street-level bureaucrat	Individual applying rules and local "fitter," strongly connected to client norms and needs	Human face to abstract bureaucracies; accountability for self

particularly important in public administration, where failing—that is, neglecting their account-holding tasks—account holders are frequently observed (Schillemans and Busuioc 2015). This capacity to monitor and evaluate strikes the heart of the principal-agent problem and constitutes the premise of most accountability systems (Gailmard 2014). External control can function only with access to information, based on expertise and processual insight (Bovens 2004). The account holder, thus, needs to possess access to information, as well as some degree of expertise to be able to oversee and evaluate the task delegated to the agent. In modern bureaucracies, most organizations perform specialized tasks that require a degree of expertise. For leaders and other public servants in these organizations, the question whether the account giver perceives that the account holder fully understands the nature and complexity of their tasks may strongly affect how they respond to claims for accountability. In other words, an account giver considering the account holder to be an expert is a key part of the actor's mental image of accountability. The importance is stressed by the psychological effects of expertise and its consequences. Expertise allows an account holder to focus on the process of decision making, rather than on outputs and outcome, potentially increasing decision-making quality (Schillemans 2016).

It is, therefore, expected that more expertise increases the authority of the account holder and, as a consequence, to more felt accountability. Again, let us take the political principal as an example. In case of the autonomous professional, the expertise relies mostly with the account giver. The political principal is likely to have much less substantive expertise in the matter about which an account is rendered, and the professional will perceive it as such. The street-level bureaucrat may be not highly educated, but have a strong socialization of expertise. Police officers, for example, commonly perceive those "who have not been on the streets" as not having sufficient expertise to judge their conduct and performance. In case of the mandarin, it is expected that the expertise rests with both the political principal and the mandarin.

Four Archetypical Public Administration Accountabilities.
Beyond hierarchy, scholars in public administration agree that various civil servants are accountable along different institutional dimensions and to a variety of account holders. We distinguish between four archetypes: bureaucratic, political, professional, and social accountability (Bovens, Schillemans, and Goodin 2014; Klingner, Nalbandian, and Romzek 2002; Romzek and Dubnick 1987; Thomann, Hupe, and Sager 2018).[1] The four types of accountability are associated with different levels of legitimacy and expertise, see also Table 2. Given that public sector employees almost exclusively operate in webs of accountability (Page 2006), not all account holders can be salient. The salience of particular forums is determined within an accountability system (Romzek and

Table 2 Four Archetypical Types of Accountability: Expected Perception of Legitimacy and Expertise

	Bureaucratic	Political	Professional	Social
Mandarin	Medium	High	Medium	Low
Executive	Low	High	Medium	Medium
Professional	Medium	Low	High	Low
Street-level bureaucrat	High	Low	Medium	High

Dubnick 1987). Legitimacy and expertise of the account holder in the respective system determine the saliency of the account holder.

Bureaucratic or administrative accountability is the classic setting of public administration accountability, which fosters unique expectations on the part of the account holders (Romzek and Dubnick 1987). It is a form of in-group accountability where bureaucrats are held accountable to standards shared and explicated within the bureaucratic organization. It is also in essence a form of intra-organizational accountability, administered within bureaucratic organizations. Mandarins, executives, professionals, and street-level bureaucrats are all held accountable according to bureaucratic standards and by bureaucratic account holders. This is evident and important in public administration, yet creates tensions as they also feel accountable to other account holders. This type of accountability is primarily based on legitimacy.

Political accountability is a second type of public administration accountability. All public sector employees are in the end accountable to their elected political principals and, beyond those, the electorate as such. Crucial to political accountability is that it is a form of out-group accountability. The elected politician is part of a different social group and holds the public administration account giver accountable to different institutionalized accountability standards. The political logic of the account holder may clash with the in-group logic of the account giver. Academic research on the political accountability of mandarins (Lupson and Partington 2011), appointed executives (Schillemans et al. 2021), public sector professionals (Overman 2021), and street-level bureaucrats (Thomann, Hupe, and Sager 2018), similarly, suggest tensions in felt accountability. This type of accountability is equally based on legitimacy.

Professional accountability a third important type of public sector accountability, with great relevance to our archetypes. Professional accountability is a very strong form of in-group accountability, yet it is often extra-organizational. Classically, a professional's prime loyalty resides with the profession, not with the organization (Freidson 2001). This is particularly relevant for professionals inside public administration, who may have a hard time coming to terms with the logics of administrative or political accountability. In the same vein, mandarins are in a sense also professionals, who first and foremost feel accountable toward their fellow mandarins (Van der Wal 2013). Professional accountability is mostly based on expertise.

Social accountability is finally the last type we discern here. Social accountability is a broad concept, in essence denoting the accountability of public administration actors to all sorts of social account holders (Brummel 2021). With social accountability, we refer to forms of accountability in which accountability is rendered toward society at large: general citizens, specific clienteles of public agencies, or specific social groups. In public administration, employees generally work for society at large as a matter of principle, even though the meaning of working for society at large may take on an abstract form. In practice, legal practices, organizational hierarchies, and political masters often are the most important account holders for decision makers. Social accountability is maximally divergent from classic hierarchical conceptions of hierarchical accountability, as it is both out-group and extra-organizational. It is particularly relevant for street-level

bureaucrats, whose professional experience is marked by tensions between bureaucratic accountability to their organization and social accountability toward their clients (Thomann, Hupe, and Sager 2018). Social accountability is based on a mix of legitimacy and expertise.

Accountable for What?

The third constituent dimension of felt accountability is substantive felt accountability. Next to the questions *who?* and *to whom?*, the question of accountability *for what?* determines felt accountability of an individual. In most experimental psychological research, subjects had to be accountable of a simple task (Aleksovska, Schillemans, and Grimmelikhuijsen 2019; Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017; Lerner and Tetlock 1999). In such studies, the *for what?* question has not been explored in depth. One important exception should be noted; that is, the distinction between accountability for a process of decision making and an outcome of a decision (Hall, Frink, and Buckley 2017, 215). However, the substantial decision itself has not been evaluated in the light of felt accountability. Public administration research has, however, demonstrated the importance of the substance of accountability. It matters whether an account giver has to give an account of their core task versus a peripheral task (Behn 2001; Overman 2021), and whether the account giver agrees with the evaluation criteria—or has even (co-) developed these criteria (Pollitt 2003). With regard to substance, we distinguish between accountability for tasks and accountability for goals. These distinctions are aspects of felt accountability; they are expected to inform the salience of felt accountability for an individual.

Criteria: Task. The task of the account giver has a central position in the substantive dimension of felt accountability. Scholars in public administration have demonstrated that public sector accountability covers many aspects of performance, some of which are only remotely related to the performance on the organization's core mission (Behn 2001). Instead, accountability is often given about processes, finances, or personal integrity (ibid.). Therefore, a distinction should be made between accountability for core and peripheral tasks of the organization. Agents in public organizations take most decisions on the basis of what they find appropriate (Olsen 2013), and they may anticipate formal accountability in their actual decision making. But managers may also proactively engage in accountability practices, for example, in voluntary accountability, to increase their legitimacy among the administration or the public (Karsten 2015; Koop 2014).

Felt accountability for core tasks is likely to be distinct from felt accountability for peripheral tasks (Overman 2021). The intrinsic motivation to be accountable may be higher for core tasks and those tasks that appeal to public service motivation (Moynihan and Pandey 2007) or stewardship (Dicke 2002). But account givers are well aware that accountability for core tasks carries greater reputational risks (Busuioc and Lodge 2017), and foresee risks, such as the loss of future opportunities to fulfill a task (Romzek, LeRoux, and Blackmar 2012). Moreover, expectancy theory contends that the perceived instrumentality of tasks may increase felt accountability (Vroom 1964). These conditions are important input for the study of task formulation in expert environments. It is, therefore, important to study felt accountability in relation to

a particular task or set of tasks. As with identity, it is important to consider felt accountability separately per individually specified task, as felt accountability is expected to vary accordingly.

Accountability about core tasks is a difficult undertaking, and often governments tend to shift to easier tasks (Behn 2001). Political principals may resort to holding civil servants accountable for processes, finances, or integrity issues, rather than engaging in in-depth discussions about the contribution to public values or goals (ibid.). The latter is even more likely in the case of highly specialized tasks, such as in the case of the autonomous professionals. In turn, the autonomous professional is likely to expect to be held accountable about peripheral, rather than core tasks. This effect is expected to occur with mandarins and street-level bureaucrats, but less so. Moreover, the reputational risk for political principals is likely to be higher for issues that fall within the direct hierarchy of the bureaucracy (Busuioc and Lodge 2017; Overman 2017). Therefore, it is expected that street-level bureaucrats and mandarins expect more accountability about core tasks than their autonomous professional peers.

Criteria: Goals. Goals are the second part of the evaluation criteria for accountability. Goals specify an achievement that constitutes desirable behavior regarding a particular task. In other words: what is the standard of success? In this regard, Lerner and Tetlock (1999, 255) refer to "evaluation" as the observability of the achievement as a sub-dimension of felt accountability. This element of felt accountability is based on the competency of the account giver, as well as on the account giver's perception of their environment. With regard to the former, self-efficacy should be acknowledged: not only in actual outcome but mostly in the account givers' presentation of their achievements (Leary and Atherton 1986). The goals for which an account giver feels accountable vary in difficulty and specificity (Locke and Latham 2002). Goal-setting theory contends that setting a difficulty—a level of achievement—may motivate individuals and lets individuals prioritize tasks (Gilad 2015). At the same time, experiments in psychology demonstrated that felt accountability may be reduced beyond the set level of difficulty, after which conscientious employees have nothing more to explain or justify (Frink and Ferris 1999). These findings demonstrate the need for an evaluation of the role of goal difficulty in felt accountability in public administration. Also, the evaluation of the task can concern the process or the outcomes (Schillemans 2016). Whereas focus on outcomes leads individuals to hit the target and, potentially, game the system, focus on processes leads to better reasoned decisions (Patil, Vieider, and Tetlock 2014).

The specificity of goals also matter. Most goals are specific in experiments, as follows from the experimental logic. But in the practice of public administration, goals are ambiguous (Chun and Rainey 2005) and contested (Waldo 1948). Psychological research distinguishes between evaluation goals at the level of processes or at outcomes of decision making. Some studies have found that accountability for the process of decision making positively influences decision-making quality as compared to accountability for the outcome of the decision (Schillemans 2016; Siegel-Jacobs and Frank Yates 1996; but compare de Langhe, van Osselaer, and Wierenga 2011). The ability of the account holder to focus on the process of decision making depends on

the relevant expertise of the account holder. The role of technical expertise in the implementation of policy is significant, and so is the deference to expertise in public accountability relations (Romzek and Dubnick 1987, 229–30). The economic literature, in turn, demonstrates that individuals vary in their attraction or aversion toward ambiguity (Halevy 2007), which is likely to influence felt accountability under the condition of ambiguity, but which has not been tested. Also, it is unknown what the consequences of goal contestation are for felt accountability.

Lastly, it is important to note that most of the goals in professionalized public environments are not unilaterally prescribed by the principal, but rather the outcome of a dialogue or negotiation between principal and expert agent (Pollitt 2003). It is likely that the involvement of the account giver in the formulation of goals has important consequences for the perceived instrumentality of task and goal, as discussed in the previous section. As a consequence, it is expected that the involvement of the account giver in the formulation of accountability criteria (tasks and goals) has a positive influence on felt accountability. Empirical corroboration of this expectation would have important implications for the practice of negotiations to formulate performance targets.

Research Implications

The current article has established that it is not at all evident for a public sector employee to state: *I* am accountable to *you* about exactly *this*. We have discussed the tensions involved in establishing the "I," "you," and "this" in public administration contexts. This effort aligns with recent studies in public administration making important headway in the introduction of psychological and behavioral findings to the discipline in general (Battaglio Jr et al. 2019; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017), and to the study of accountability in particular (Aleksovska, Schillemans, and Grimmelikhuijsen 2019; Han and Perry 2020a). The current article adds a further important element with the translation of the concept of felt accountability and provides a more integrated approach to the application of this concept to public administration research. By acknowledging the particularities of public administration roles, the current article extends and translates the generic theory of felt accountability to the public administration context. As such, the article facilitates the development of a comprehensive understanding of public accountability that connects its individual micro-foundations to the meso- or organizational level (Jilke et al. 2019).

This article extends the generic model of felt accountability that was developed in psychology. We conclude that some archetypical roles of account givers in the public sector may adhere largely to the generic model in specific contexts. This includes the mandarin bureaucrat in their accountability relation with the political principal, when following the logic of political accountability about a core issue of the mandarin's responsibilities (see Tables 1–3). But deviations from that model are found at all three levels: roles vary and may overlap, the type of accountability varies with each account holder, and accountability is demanded and provided about other issues than core responsibilities, too.

A thorough theoretical understanding of felt accountability in public administration is relevant as such, yet, also helpful for research on the design and effects of accountability mechanisms,

Table 3 Tasks and Goals in Public Administration

	Task	Relative task complexity	Goal	Performance criteria
Mandarin	Broad task portfolio	Medium	Generic	Ambiguous
Executive	Performance-focused task	Medium	Specific	Targets
Professional	Professional task	High	Generic	Self-maintained
Street-level bureaucrat	Meticulously prescribed task	Low	Specific	Detailed

and also helps to broaden the methodological toolbox of accountability studies. First of all, an understanding of felt accountability will help in the study of the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms. Accountability mechanisms that are insufficiently aimed at achieving felt accountability bring about affective consequences, including an increased administrative burden for public servants, without actually improving the behavior of the account giver (among many others: Power 1999). Therefore, an often heard critique about accountability is that it is "just" red tape without clear functionality. A better and more specific alignment between mechanisms and the attitude of the account giver to the account holder can, therefore, reduce red tape while improving behavior and, potentially, organizational performance. Other affective consequences include the emotional effects of accountability. These include negative emotions, such as frustration, and anxiety, with major detrimental effects on judgment and decision making (Lerner et al. 2015). On the other hand, also positive emotions may result from accountability, including the desire for social approval (Tetlock 1992). In future research, the current theory may also be expanded to additional aspects of the accountability relationship: "through which processes is an individual held accountable?," and "with what effects?" (Mashaw 2006).

Secondly, the antecedents of felt accountability for public sector employees are at present uncharted terrain. Potential influencing factors can be found on the personal level, including personality traits and public service motivation. Other influencing factors may be found at the institutional level (Lægreid and Verhoest 2010), and in the contact and interaction between account holder and account giver. It is an important challenge to unravel the interplay between the separate constituents of felt accountability. This article has put forward expectations of how these configurations might be constructed for several archetypes of public sector employees. The tables in this paper serve as generic, testable hypotheses for these expectations.

Lastly, the special context of public organizations calls for methods beyond lab experiments, and require in vivo studies of the micro-foundations of accountability. Felt accountability results from an internalization of professional norms *par excellence* (Juncos and Pomorska 2011). The socialization of accountability norms leads to specific context-bound expectations by individuals and the (in)formal rules of the game that Romzek and colleagues discuss (Romzek, LeRoux, and Blackmar 2012). Such professional socialization undermines the validity of conclusions from laboratory experiments with students and call for a diverse set of methodologies to continue the study of accountability in public administration.

Acknowledgments

Note

1   These authors also mention legal accountability and market accountability. However, while these are of major importance in the public sector, we exclude them here, as these types of accountability do not feature clear account holders in the same way that the other four types do.

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