Article

Twenty-five years of accountability research in public administration: Authorship, themes, methods, and future trends

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Abstract

There is extensive literature on accountability, yet systematic research on the state of the art in the field of public administration is lacking. This research is essential to understand the aspects of accountability that have been studied and identify the primary findings and areas that require further investigation. This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a systematic literature review of 277 articles on accountability published in 15 leading public administration journals between 1996 and 2021. This review aims to answer the following questions: What types of accountability have been examined? To what extent has accountability been investigated as a dependent or an explanatory variable? Which methodological approaches dominate, and which cases are more commonly examined? What are the current challenges and future research trends?

Points for practitioners

Two dimensions to consider when examining accountability are supply-side accountability, which centers on traditional government models, and demand-side accountability, which underscores the role of citizens and multiple forums. The interaction between the supply and demand sides leads to various types of accountability, encompassing vertical, horizontal, hybrid, and social accountability. Core approaches used for measuring accountability include formal, informal, voluntary, and felt accountability.

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Introduction

Accountability reforms have become increasingly central to democratic governance in recent decades. Consequently, political science and public administration scholars have made significant efforts to examine accountability. Public administration scholars have extensively examined the accountability of public organizations (e.g. Brandsma and Schillemans, 2013; Overman et al., 2021), independent regulatory agencies (e.g. Busuioc, 2012), third-sector organizations (e.g. Schwabenland and Hirst, 2020), non-profit service providers (e.g. Romzek et al., 2014), and public–private partnerships and private agents (e.g. Thomann et al., 2018). These studies have significantly contributed to our understanding of the complex accountability mechanisms that operate daily in the public sector.

Our study contributes to the research on accountability by providing a systematic assessment of scholarship, research designs, methods and cases used in the existing literature. Some authors have conducted state-of-the-art analyses of specific topics. For instance, Schillemans and Busuioc (2014) provide a critical review highlighting the shortcomings of principal–agent theories. Aleksovska et al. (2019) examined five decades of experimental and behavioral research on accountability through a systematic review of 266 experiments presented in 211 articles. Similarly, recent studies (e.g. Schillemans et al., 2021) provide a systematic review of articles that explicitly mention issues related to the multiplicity or conflictuality of accountability, and Papadopoulos (2023) provides an analysis of accountability from various angles by conducting studies on democratic theory, voting behavior, public administration and social psychology, among other lenses. In a complementary manner, this study provides a general synthesis of the current scholarship with the aim of identifying possible gaps and serving as a baseline for further empirical research.

This study provides a systematic review of research on accountability over the past 25 years, addressing the following questions: (i) What types and models of accountability have been examined in public administration literature? (ii) To what extent has accountability been investigated as a dependent or explanatory variable? (iii) Which methodological approaches dominate, and which cases are more commonly examined? (iv) What are the current challenges and future trends in accountability research?

This study presents a systematic review of 277 articles on accountability published between 1996 and 2021 in 15 top public administration journals. The list of papers and journals referenced is provided in Appendices 1 and 2, respectively.

From our original dataset, we provide descriptive data on the authors, their genders, and their institutional affiliations. Our findings indicate that most of the published work on accountability covered in our study was concentrated in five journals: *Journal of Public Administration, Research, and Theory* (JPART), *Public Administration* (PA), *Public Administration Review* (PAR), *Public Management Review* (PMR), and *International Review of Administrative Sciences* (IRAS). Of the articles reviewed, 39% were single-author

contributions and 61% were collaborative studies. We also observed an underrepresentation of studies published by female authors, with only 21% of the articles authored by women. In terms of gender balance, 50% of the articles were published by male scholars (as sole authors or co-authors) and 29% by mixed-gender collaborations. Additionally, we identified a predominance of authors affiliated with American and European institutions, particularly in the Netherlands and the UK.

Our study makes a valuable contribution by exploring the types of accountability examined in the literature, the extent to which accountability has been investigated as a dependent or explanatory variable, dominant methodological approaches, and the most commonly examined cases. For instance, we identified the conceptualization of accountability used by the studies examined, which is mainly understood as a social relationship between actors (who inform and justify their conduct) and forums (who evaluate and sanction such conduct). Two broad types of studies were identified. The first group focuses on the supply side of accountability, wherein some studies examined traditional models of government accountability, whereas others examined accountability provisions in new modes of collaborative governance. The second group focuses on the demand side of accountability, mainly the demands of citizens and multiple forums that interact in accountability relationships. This review also discusses the different approaches used to measure accountability, namely, formal, informal, voluntary and felt accountability.

Regarding methodological approaches, our review shows that scholarship is predominantly empirical, as 83% of the articles are based on empirical analyses, whereas only 17% are theoretical and/or conceptual. We also found that although scholarship on accountability is predominantly empirical, 50% of the articles are qualitative, 5% use mixed methods, and 28% use quantitative methods. Both female and male scholars generally rely on qualitative approaches. Regarding geographic focus, most accountability studies examine cases in the USA or Europe, with a limited number of large cross-country analyses. Likewise, there is a notable absence of empirical research in non-democratic countries, as well as in the context of instability and crisis.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The following section describes the search strategy and codification process employed. We then present descriptive data on accountability scholarship, including information on gender, authorship, and institutional affiliation. The next section examines the different types of accountability investigated. Next, we discuss approaches to measuring accountability. The following section presents the methodological approaches used in the literature on accountability. Finally, we discuss challenges and future trends in accountability research.

Research strategy and codification

This literature review examines 277 articles on accountability published between 1996 and 2021 in 15 peer-reviewed international journals in the field of public administration. These journals were published in English and ranked by the ISI Web of Knowledge. The 15 journals were selected based on their consistent relevance, as measured by their impact factor across the years and their generalist approach to the study of public administration.

In the first stage of our research, we used the search functions on each selected journal's website to identify all papers that include the words "accountability" or "accountable" in their titles and were published between 1996 and 2021. We also conducted a confirmatory search on the Web of Science database using the same keywords and restricted our search to the 15 selected journals in the research area of public administration. Only articles written in English were included in our search. In addition to academic papers, special issues, and symposium introductions were also included (two published in *IRAS*, three in *PA*, and two in *PMR*). Four theoretical counterpoints published in *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* and three counterpoints/responses published in *PAR* were excluded from the analysis because of their short lengths. Commentaries, replications, and book reviews were also excluded from the analysis. We also identified and included early access articles in our dataset. In the second phase, we downloaded all articles into a personal repository and conducted a full-text reading of each article. We then manually created a dataset by codifying our variables of interest. The search strategy and codification processes are described in detail in Appendix 2.

Descriptive data of accountability scholarship: Gender authorship and institutional affiliation

Our data show that of the 277 articles examined, most were published in five journals, which together accounted for 67% of the total: *PMR* (16%), *PA* (11%), *PAR* (13%), *JPART* (9%), and *IRAS* (18%) (see Table s1 in Appendix 2). In addition, we analyzed the growth of accountability studies over time. Cucciniello et al.'s (2017: 5) review of the literature on transparency showed a low number of publications between 1990 and 2002, an increase between 2004 and 2010, and rapid growth since 2011. Given the theoretical and empirical connection between transparency and accountability, which can be viewed as a core dimension of accountability, we anticipate similar trends for the latter. However, the number of publications on accountability grew steadily between 2000 and 2019, with an average of 10 new articles per year. Moreover, a surge in accountability literature emerged only in 2020 and 2021, with the publication of 18 and 29 articles, respectively, some of which were released as online first versions. Figure 1 shows the distribution of articles over time. Figure 1 shows the distribution of articles over time (see online).

Concerning the authorship of this research, 39% of all articles were produced by a single author, while 61% were co-authored, indicating an increase in collaborative research in recent years (see Table s1 in Appendix 2). However, there was a significant imbalance in authorship in terms of gender, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. Female sole authors and all-female coauthors accounted for only 14 and 7% of all articles, respectively, whereas single-authored and coauthored papers written by male authors represented 50% of all articles (26% as sole authors and 24% as coauthors). The remaining 29% of the articles resulted from mixed-gender collaborations. Considering that in some cases, collaborative publications included authors' surnames in alphabetical order, we identified that in 43% of them, the first author was a female. This gender

imbalance was observed across all periods examined, with a small increase in the number of female-author publications in the last four years. (Figure 2 see online).

Our data confirmed the gender gap between publications produced by men and women in science and academic publishing (Ross et al., 2022). Teele and Thelen (2017) highlight a significant gender-based publishing disparity in their analysis of 10 prominent political science journals published between 2000 and 2015. In the field of public administration, Slack et al. (1996) examined articles published in *PAR* over a 56-year period (1940–1995) and found that 88% of articles were authored by men, whereas only 7% were written by women. The consistent underrepresentation of female authorship in studies on accountability may reflect and perpetuate the "lack of credit" and acknowledgment of women scholars, which could also impede their advancement in governance studies (Ross et al., 2022).

Regarding institutional affiliation, most accountability studies during the period examined were conducted by scholars based in the USA, the UK, and the Netherlands. Individual scholars from these countries contributed approximately 48, 24, and 21% of the total research output examined, respectively.

Conceptualization and types of accountability: Vertical, horizontal, hybrid, social, and innovative

In the articles analyzed here, accountability is commonly defined as a social relationship and mutual exchange between at least two parties—an actor and a forum. Account givers are responsible for providing information and justifying their actions, whereas account holders or forums possess the power to assess and sanction the conduct in question (Bovens, 2007; Mulgan, 2000). Although accountability is primarily understood as a mechanism, some studies have viewed it from a normative perspective. For example, Considine (2002: 22) defines accountability as "the legal obligation to be responsive to the legitimate interests of those affected by decisions, programs, and interventions." Against this backdrop, some authors argue that the absence of accountability as a normative property of agents, organizations, and governments makes it difficult to properly investigate accountability deficits and overloads (Rock, 2020). Overall, the normative approach remains empirically underdeveloped and requires further exploration.

Within the framework of studies that view accountability as a social relationship, some authors have pointed out that the involvement of "many hands" and "many eyes" in decision-making and organizations does not always engender a clear understanding of the actors and forums involved (Brandsma and Schillemans, 2013; Thompson, 1980). In fact, this complex network of multiple forums and agents has been argued to lead to conflicting situations that may result in what Koppell (2005: 94) refers to as "multiple accountabilities disorder."

Generally, in the studies examined, accountability involves both supply- and demand-side mechanisms. The former refers to the mechanisms put in place by governments, public officials, and policy and service providers (in their different typologies) to inform and justify their conduct, whereas the latter relates to the mechanisms for evaluation and sanctions demanded and exercised by different types of forums and monitoring

bodies (such as audit offices, citizens, the media, independent agencies, legislative bodies, and private actors).

Different configurations between the supply and demand sides assign varying roles to the actors involved and create different types of accountability: vertical or hierarchical accountability (Brandsma and Schillemans, 2013), horizontal accountability (Overman et al., 2015), hybrid accountability (Mattei et al., 2013), social accountability (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001), and innovative accountability (Schillemans et al., 2013). As Bovens (2007) argues, these typologies are not mutually exclusive and do not replace each other; instead, they coexist in contemporary democratic governance (see Table 1, online).

Vertical, horizontal, and hybrid models of accountability

An important part of the examined articles focuses on the supply side of accountability by investigating vertical, horizontal, and hybrid arrangements. Regarding vertical mechanisms, some authors have investigated the extent to which different governments, bodies, and agents respond to accountability demands within their hierarchical structures. For example, Brandsma and Schillemans (2013) examined the extent to which Dutch and Danish national civil servants are accountable to their direct superiors for decision-making by European comitology committees. A core contribution of their study is a mapping instrument, the accountability cube, that systematically assesses the performance of the actor/agent and that of the accountability forums. Hong (2016) examined the extent to which the bureaucracies of local and central governments differ in their accountability mechanisms. Bach et al. (2017) studied the accountability relations between the chief executives of autonomous national agencies and their hierarchical superiors. Hupe and Hill (2007) provided relevant insights into how street-level bureaucrats are held accountable, and Lupson and Partington (2011) investigated the notions of accountability for individual performance, fairness, and equity of senior corridor-level bureaucrats in the UK. From a behavioral science perspective, other studies offer important insights into how to measure felt relational accountability in public administration (Ossege, 2012), and how to examine specific dimensions, such as the perceived legitimacy of account-holders (Overman et al., 2021).

There is a growing body of literature on emerging accountability configurations beyond traditional vertical models. The main objective of this study is to examine the repercussions of a higher presence of marketization and business-like arrangements with public sector agencies, an increased role of the private sector in the design and delivery of public services, new forms of collaborative governance (public–private policy networks), and a greater presence of regulatory bodies (independent agencies at the supranational, national, regional, and local levels; Benish and Mattei, 2020).

Against this backdrop, some studies explored horizontal and hybrid arrangements (see Hodge and Coghill, 2007; Michels and Meijer, 2008; Willems and Van Dooren, 2012). Concerning horizontal arrangements, some studies have investigated independent oversight institutions and monitoring bodies. For example, Bovens and Wille (2021) examined the accountability powers and institutional arrangements of independent oversight

institutions, particularly the European Court of Auditors. Reichborn-Kjennerud (2013) investigated national watchdog offices in Norway, while Norton and Smith (2008) examined government accountability offices in the USA and UK. Rosa and Morote (2016) studied the impact of financial audit reports on accountability at the local level in Spanish municipalities. These studies provide a better understanding of the roles of oversight institutions and monitoring bodies in promoting accountability. Some of these studies also highlight the scope and shortcomings of the powers attributed to them, especially those dealing with sanctions (Bovens and Wille, 2021).

From the perspective of new forms of governance, several studies have extended their analyses to hybrid accountability provisions by third-sector organizations that are independent of the government (e.g. Schwabenland and Hirst, 2020). Other studies have explored accountability in social service contracts (Girth, 2017), networks of collaborative service providers (Romzek et al., 2014), charity accountability delivered by fundraising charities (Connolly and Hyndman, 2013), and public–private partnerships (Forrer et al., 2010). To better understand the complexity of accountability in hybrid arrangements, these studies incorporate dynamics derived from multiple accountabilities from multi-level and multi-actor perspectives (Ewert, 2020). These studies primarily examine the constraints, intricacies, and tensions that hybridization entails in different dimensions, such as those related to organizational structures, practices, and workforce identities/roles at the individual level. A core argument of these studies is that in the context of hybridization, contracting, and other forms of liberalization, public managers/organizations lack the power to use control and sanction owing to several difficulties, such as those derived from the organization's dependence on the contractor (Girth, 2017). These studies provide core insights into accountability performance in different contexts of multi-agency/multi-actor collaborations within and across networks wherein different organizations/actors follow different logics, rationalities, and incentives (Thomann et al., 2018).

Studies on accountability in regulatory regimes have focused on the formal and de facto arrangements of accountability in independent agencies operating at the national, regional, and European Union levels (Busuioc, 2012; Koop, 2014). For instance, Koop (2014) examined voluntary accountability in regulatory agencies in the Netherlands, Overman et al. (2015) analyzed the available ex-post accountability mechanisms of 342 semi-autonomous agencies in six European countries, and Bach et al. (2017) investigated the perceived accountability patterns of chief executives in national agencies across four European countries (Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria). Others have also extensively debated the interaction between accountability and legitimacy in delegated agencies (Wood, 2015). A core aspect of these studies is the theoretical debate and empirical assessment of different control mechanisms and governance practices of non-elected bodies.

Social and innovative accountabilities

Literature on the demand side of accountability revolves around social accountability configurations. Some studies focus on citizens' engagement through non-governmental

organizations, whereas others examine citizens' and their organizations' engagement in holding public officials accountable. Using the case of citizens' efforts in India to engage with public sector oversight functions, Goetz and Jenkins (2001) emphasize the importance of accountability arrangements, whereby citizen groups engage with administrative accountability institutions and challenge official auditing systems by developing parallel accounts of local spending. Mizrahi and Minchuk (2019) examined citizens' willingness to monitor public officials' accountability in Israel. Regarding accountability in service delivery, Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2016) examined the effect of demand-side factors, which refer to citizen characteristics, and supply side factors, which refer to aspects related to contextual factors, state structures, and processes. In this regard, van Slyke and Roch (2004) examined citizens' ability to accurately identify the actors responsible for the accountability of services when different private non-profit and public providers participated, and Piatak et al. (2017) examined whether citizens are more likely to attribute service delivery failures to local governments or private contractors.

In the digital governance era, changes resulting from the adoption of open government initiatives as well as the integration of social media and digital technologies have transformed public accountability. Consequently, vertical, horizontal, hybrid, and social models of accountability exist alongside innovative modes of accountability (Schillemans et al., 2013). Some studies concentrate on innovative accountability based on digital openness and accessibility, where open data are available to the public, as well as internal and external stakeholders who hold the government accountable using social media and digital technology (Schillemans et al., 2013). Within this context of innovation and digitalization, some studies emphasize that the use of big data, algorithmic decisions, and artificial intelligence also requires accountability mechanisms and rights for their proper functioning (Busuioc, 2021).

Measuring accountability: Formal, *de facto*, voluntary, perceived and felt accountability

Many scholars have addressed the complex task of measuring accountability, resulting in various measurement approaches. Public administration research focuses on accountability at both organizational and individual levels, including public servants at different hierarchical levels, such as top- and street-level employees (Papadopoulos, 2023). Some authors have examined the three dimensions of accountability, namely, information, justification, and sanctions (Brandsma and Schillemans, 2013), whereas others have investigated specific dimensions and elements, such as the information phase of accountability (Font and Pérez-Durán, 2022), as well as managerial and financial accountabilities (Bach et al., 2017; Cuganesan, 2017). However, most studies have focused on measuring the scope of the supply side without clearly measuring the consequences and deficits of accountability.

One of the most widely used approaches to measuring accountability is the analysis of the formal or *de jure* dimension, which assesses the extent to which formal provisions incorporate specific accountability mechanisms (Koop, 2011). Other studies measure *de facto* accountability through oversight mechanisms (Font and Pérez-Durán, 2016),

whereas others assess informal processes and norms, along with inter-organizational and interpersonal expectations and behaviors that facilitate accountability (Romzek et al., 2012). From the perspective of voluntary accountability (see, for instance, Koop, 2014), the scope of practices that actors and organizations voluntarily pursue is measured, such as those carried out in self-initiated consultation procedures, websites, press releases, and conferences (de Boer, 2023).

Other measurement approaches assess individual perceptions of and attitudes towards accountability. For instance, Bovens and Wille (2021) measured the perceived accountability powers of institutions with independent oversight. Similarly, Bach et al. (2017) examined the perceived accountability of agency chief executives in a comparative analysis of four countries: Switzerland, The Netherlands, Germany, and Austria. Drawing on psychological research, "felt accountability" is a novel approach that has been adopted by scholars of public administration. Felt accountability is defined as "the impression that account givers have that they will be held responsible for their actions and performance in the future" (Overman et al., 2021) by a capable accountability forum with authority (Schillemans et al., 2021: 894). This conceptualization by Overman et al. (2021) and Schillemans et al. (2021) is not disruptive to previous conceptions of accountability, but is novel in that it focuses on "an individual's expectations of future accountability." To measure this, Overman et al. (2021) proposed evaluating the behaviors and perceptions of the expertise and legitimacy of decision-makers at the micro-level as the primary unit of analysis.

Methodological approaches: Exploring accountability as a dependent or independent variable

Studies have examined the effect of various factors on accountability, with some focusing on macro-contextual variables such as country-specific administrative regimes (Overman et al., 2021), administrative traditions, and reform ideas (Bach et al., 2017). Others have examined meso-level factors, such as performance budgeting (Cuganesan, 2017), policy issue salience (Koop, 2014), managerial autonomy (Overman et al., 2021), and formal organizational autonomy and resource availability (Bach et al., 2017). Studies focusing on (regulatory) agencies have found that organizational features play a greater role than contextual aspects in determining accountability. For instance, salient issues, organizational resources, and agencies with more staff are related to voluntary accountability (Koop, 2014), whereas formal accountability mechanisms, along with mechanisms for the inclusion of scientific expertise, positively affect *de facto* accountability (Font and Pérez-Durán, 2022). Other studies have explored the impact of information and communication technologies by investigating web-based technologies implemented by regional and local governments in the European Union (Pina et al., 2007).

In the context of collaborative governance, researchers have investigated the effect of the participation of diverse actors, such as public, private, and non-profit organizations, in accountability processes for decision-making, policy implementation, and service provision (see Benish and Mattei, 2020; Jantz and Jann, 2013; Lægreid and Rykkja, 2022). These studies have involved various institutional arrangements, including marketization,

public–private partnerships, and third-sector organizations (Thomann et al., 2018; Willems and Van Dooren, 2012). In general, these studies have highlighted the potential negative effects resulting from both formal and informal dynamics, and the logic surrounding the involvement of these actors. From an organizational perspective, and as a response to the dominant principal–agent paradigm, Busuioc and Lodge (2016) show that reputational concerns drive the interaction between account givers and account holders. This approach places reputational concerns of different audiences as a core element for explaining accountability relationships. By focusing on individual-level variables, studies on social accountability by Mizrahi and Minchuk (2019) find that citizens are more likely to engage in monitoring when they believe that many others are also doing so, and that the performance indicators being monitored will have a positive impact on their lives.

In addition, accountability has been examined as an independent or explanatory variable to explain its impact on the behavior of public managers (Ossege, 2012), outcomes in public sector negotiations (Bouwman et al., 2018), and agency performance (Hong et al., 2020). For example, in a study on the USA during George W. Bush's tenure, Han (2020) showed that three accountability mechanisms—information provision, assessment, and consequences—positively influence agency performance. However, nuances may exist in the effects generated by accountability, depending on the characteristics of the organizations. For instance, Hong et al. (2020: 1240) found that providing performance feedback has a positive effect on low-performing organizations and organizations that operate in jurisdictions that face greater competition in local elections. On a grayscale, Ossege (2012) found that accountability can have both positive and negative effects, since process accountability is more likely to stimulate desirable behavior among public middle managers, whereas outcome accountability seems to have a negative effect. Additionally, Wood (2015) showed that agencies achieve political legitimacy by implementing accountability mechanisms aimed at external stakeholders (see Figure 3 online).

Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches

Our review also identified the main methodological approaches used in the literature on accountability. Based on our analysis, we find that the scholarship on accountability is predominantly empirical, representing 83% of all papers, whereas theoretical and/or conceptual studies only account for the remaining 17% (see Figure 4). Among the empirical studies, the majority employed qualitative methods (134 articles), whereas others used quantitative or mixed methods (91 articles). These findings align with other studies in the field of public administration, which also note the predominance of qualitative methodologies in the field (Schillemans and Busuioc, 2014).

Our analysis also explored potential gender-based differences in the methodologies applied by scholars studying accountability. Our findings indicate that women are underrepresented in theoretical contributions and that both male and female scholars generally rely on qualitative approaches. Although we observed that both male and female authors tended to use more qualitative than quantitative research methods, we also found that

25% of articles published by female authors employed quantitative methods compared with 30% of articles by male authors (see Figure 4). These results align with Teele and Thelen's (2017) finding that men tend to use statistical methods more frequently than women in leading political science journals. Additionally, we note methodological differences between the literature on accountability and transparency. According to Cucciniello et al. (2017), scholars studying transparency make equal use of quantitative and qualitative methods. Finally, our analysis suggests that novel methodological tools based on experimental research are becoming more prevalent in collaborative projects involving both female and male scholars (see Aleksovska et al., 2019). The differences across journals are presented in Appendix 2 (see Figure 4 online).

Qualitative studies rely primarily on interview-based inductive and interpretative approaches (e.g. Schwabenland and Hirst, 2020). For instance, studies have explored hybrid arrangements of accountability in different policy domains (Benish and Mattei, 2020), the accountability of third-sector organizations providing services to citizens (Schwabenland and Hirst, 2020), and the accountability of intergovernmental networks (Saz-Carranza et al., 2020).

Quantitative studies in the literature on accountability mainly rely on surveys that enable the analysis of the individual characteristics and motivations of public managers (e.g. Ossege, 2012; Overman, 2021). In the agencification literature, some studies use quantitative data to examine accountability arrangements. For example, Overman et al. (2015) analyzed survey data on 342 agencies in six countries to examine the types of accountability arrangements, while Bach et al. (2017) investigated accountability patterns and tensions across chief executives of national agencies in four countries that follow a Rechtsstaat administrative tradition. Surveys are also commonly used to study social accountability by examining the effects of both individual and contextual variables on citizens' perceptions of and attitudes towards accountability (Bauhr and Grimes, 2014). Mizrahi and Minchuk (2019, 2020) used surveys to assess citizens' willingness to monitor the accountability performance of public management systems, Ali and Pirog (2019) assessed citizen oversight agencies for police agencies, and Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2016) examined the interaction between demand- and supply-side factors.

Our review reveals that there is an increasing use of behavioral and experimental methods in public management research, which is consistent with the systematic review of the experimental literature on accountability in the behavioral sciences by Aleksovska et al. (2019). Recent studies use experimental designs, such as Piatak et al. (2017), who use experiments to examine blame attribution to both public and contract employees at the local level. Ossege (2012) used a quasi-experimental design to examine the positive and negative effects of accountability on the work behavior of public managers. Bouwman et al. (2018) conduct a face-to-face classroom experiment to examine the effects of accountability on negotiation outcomes among public servants. Using conjoint experimental research, Aleksovska et al. (2022) investigated the prioritization choices made by civil servants when faced with diverse forum demands. Experiments are also used to assess studies on the supply side of accountability. For example, Mizrahi and Minchuk (2020) used survey experiments to explore citizens' perceptions of the information they received about the performance of public organizations.

Finally, when assessing the geographic focus of the reviewed literature, we identified that most cases focused on the USA and European countries (see Appendix 2). For example, some studies have assessed a wide range of cases in the USA, including cases on federal governments, municipalities, central government programs, non-profit/third-sector organizations, inspection bodies, private prisons, and higher education institutions, whereas studies focusing on Europe extensively examine public servants' perceptions, public organizations, and non-majoritarian institutions in the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Spain, and Germany, as well as welfare services and policies such as health and education in the UK and Spain. Research on accountability also includes studies on European Union (EU) bodies and topics such as accountability dimensions in EU legislation, decision-making at the Commission, EU agencies, and the role of the European Court of Auditors.

Challenges and future trends in accountability research

Studies on accountability provide a solid theoretical foundation for understanding its conceptualization and dimensions. Based on our review, we have identified four major challenges in the research on accountability, as well as two future trends that are expected to emerge in the coming years.

First, a consequential step in accountability studies would be to analyze both sides of the exchange relationship: the multiplicity of actors who provide accountability and the forums that receive and control it. Recent studies have begun to examine the numerous and multiple forums or stakeholders that interact at the same time, including citizens, users, oversight bodies, public servants at different levels, political bodies, and societal actors. These interactions can lead not only to multiple but also to potentially conflicting and competing demands (Aleksovska et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, it is important for further research to elaborate on the complexity posed by different account-providers, such as public–private partnerships and transgovernmental networks, as well as audiences or forums involved in accountability, such as citizens, policy beneficiaries, experts, and bureaucrats.

Second, we also need to improve the specification of policies and practices that are subject to accountability. For example, in transparency studies, certain aspects on which information can be provided have been clearly established, such as those dealing with decision-making, results, and procedures. Although various accountability studies have analyzed some dimensions, such as management and financial aspects (Bach et al., 2017), further research could benefit from establishing the substantive aspects of decisions, services, public policies, organizations, or even perceptions that can be subject to accountability. Hence, a core next step is to investigate specific elements of accountability exchanges. Further research could explore interactions between core actors by considering accountability processes in different elements and policy areas.

Third, there is a need for more (large-N) comparative studies seeking to identify causal relationships. In particular, there is a gap in bringing together the analysis of contextual, meso-, and individual-level variables across a wide range of cases. Jilke et al. (2019: 245) emphasize the need to disaggregate micro-level variables, which focus on individual-

level attributes such as socio-economic characteristics and policy preferences, meso-level variables that refer to attributes of groups or organizations such as institutional characteristics of public organizations and agencies, and macro-level variables which refer to the political-administrative environment such as welfare regimens and administrative traditions. By including these multilevel factors, we can improve our understanding of the variables that explain accountability dynamics. A comparative perspective would also enable us to include a cross-temporal dimension in the study of accountability. Additionally, our review shows that accountability research has mainly focused on democratic and stable contexts, with limited attention to non-democratic countries and contexts of crisis. Therefore, further analysis is needed to explore accountability performance in non-Western cultural and political contexts.

Fourth, more research is necessary to understand the role of accountability as an independent variable, specifically its effect on crucial aspects of democratic governance, such as government trust and service quality. This analysis is needed because the relationship between governance dimensions, such as transparency, and citizens' trust in government organizations, is not always straightforward (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Furthermore, more empirical studies are needed to examine the effects of accountability on the quality and equality of policies and services provided by public, private and hybrid organizations.

As for trends in the field, in recent years, studies on accountability have been adapting psychological research and experimental methods, with the aim of expanding our knowledge about individual and behavioral issues of those who participate in accountability relationships (Bouwman and Grimmelikhuijsen, 2016). The application of experimental research on accountability, however, is not exempt from shortcomings. Aleksovska et al. (2019: 12) find that the majority of experiments conducted in the last five decades were conducted in a 'stylized context', that is, in laboratories and/or with student samples. As a result, the authors urge researchers to conduct behavioral experiments in real public sector contexts. Some recent studies are paying more attention to psychological research in real contexts by measuring felt accountability held by account givers, specifically through the analysis of perceived expertise and legitimacy, which are two core dimensions of accountability (Overman et al., 2021). Additionally, some scholars are also employing experimental research by examining citizens' attitudes towards accountability in service delivery. As we show in this review, the majority of the studies have contributed to the understanding, under analytical rigor, of substantive and *sine qua non*-aspects of accountability, yet further improvements could enhance the explanatory power of its independent variables.

Another emerging trend is the analysis of accountability discourses, messages, and strategies used by various actors. This analysis is necessary because the language used to communicate and engage with citizens and beneficiaries has not been thoroughly explored in the literature. Recent studies in political science and public administration have provided crucial insights into the differences in linguistic patterns and topics used by politicians, political parties, and core actors in policy debates. However, more analysis is required regarding the language used to provide accountability about policies and services. Understanding the language used to communicate with citizens and beneficiaries is

essential for improving accountability relationships and ensuring that citizens have access to meaningful information. Hence, a core aspect that needs to be re-conceptualized and empirically examined is the communicative dimension of accountability.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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