Advancing the Understanding of Accountability Processes in Collaborative Governance: Lessons from Research on 'Agencification'

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1   Collaborative governance can be defined 'as the processes and structures of public decision making and management that engage people across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private, and civic spheres to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished' (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015, p. 18). This concept denotes the production of collective outputs in a decentered way across the sequences that make up the policy-making cycle. This means that policies are designed and implemented and that services are provided by a wide ecosystem of multiple interdependent public and private actors, including firms, the nonprofit sector, organized representatives of target populations, and sometimes even lay citizens. Such a mode of 'multicentric policymaking' (Cairney et al., 2019) spans both countries and sectors, as bringing 'multiple stakeholders together in common forums with public agencies to engage in consensus-oriented decision making' (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544) is considered necessary for addressing 'wicked' issues that cannot be addressed effectively by public, market, or societal actors alone.[1]

2   Scholarship on collaborative governance has greatly contributed to the discussion regarding political and administrative accountability in established democracies by highlighting the complexity of accountability relations—vertical and horizontal as well as formal and informal—in multi-actor constellations (Romzek et al., 2013; Lee & Ospina, 2022; Sørensen, 2020, pp. 59-69).[2] In particular, such scholarship offers a powerful account of how accountability is redefined 'in a multi-actor governance context where not only governments but also a wide variety of political and social actors play an active and influential role in the policy-making process' (Sørensen 2020, 59). In a recent volume, Ansell and Torfing (2021, pp. 178-184) synthesize the main

challenges for democratic accountability in collaborative governance. They highlight the lack of formal and credible sanctions and the influence of nonelected actors, associate the messiness of accountability relations with a blurring of roles and a lack of clarity about responsibility, and note the limits of external oversight as well as of peer accountability within frequently closed governance networks.[3] In a similar vein, Hansen et al. (2022, pp. 13-15) tease out the following four accountability challenges in their comprehensive mapping of collaborative governance studies that address accountability and legitimacy issues: the lack of formal sanctions that may render oversight toothless; the lack of transparency related to shared responsibility; the tensions and dilemmas associated with 'multi-relational' accountabilities (Waardenburg et al. 2020, 389-390) not only to the 'informal court of public opinion' (Bryson et al., 2020) but also, perhaps more importantly, to various attentive audiences (or 'forums', as they are named in the relevant literature) ; and unbalanced participation and representation (which, in our view, is distinct from accountability).

3   However, this paper suggests that advancing the understanding of accountability processes in collaborative arrangements requires drawing lessons from scholarship that focuses on a different, albeit not completely unrelated, governance transformation: the process of 'agencification.' Therefore, the paper builds on the scholarship on agencification, which – despite certain limitations – elucidates further issues that should be integrated into the research agenda on collaborative governance: the existence of voluntary accountability strategies of rule-makers on the one hand, and the passivity of accountability audiences on the other. Such cross-fertilization is necessary for adequately capturing the sometimes unpredictable dynamics of real-world accountability processes.

Advances in Accountability Research: What Can We Learn from the Counterintuitive Findings on Agencification?

4   Collaborative governance is not the only game in town. While this form of governance is basically associated with more inclusive forms of policy-making and a blurring of the divide between public and nonpublic actors, organizational changes have also taken place within the administrative apparatus, albeit usually for different reasons. In particular, the diffusion of specialized agencies that operate at arm's length from government has been driven by a range of factors, such as the quest for policy consistency and credibility in regulatory matters (Gilardi, 2002); the blame-shifting strategies of elected officials who find lightning rods in increasingly mediatized managers (Hood, 2010); or the influence of 'new public management' (NPM) regarding the disaggregation of public administration for efficiency purposes or the increased flexibility that agency managers supposedly enjoy (Christensen & Laegreid, 2006).

5   Although scholars do not agree on how much collaborative governance and agencification are related, they are not completely unrelated. Most notably, there are incongruent views on the relationship between collaborative governance or related phenomena on the one hand and NPM on the other. Torfing et al. (2020, p. 159) view the paradigm of 'new public governance' (NPG), from which they argue that collaborative governance stems, as 'difficult to combine in practice' with NPM, which is

considered a source of agencification. However, other authors highlight the complementarity or dialectic relation between these trends. Hansen et al. (2022, p. 1) consider collaborative governance to be a 'promising supplement' to NPM (and to 'Weberian-style bureaucracy'), Christensen and Laegreid (2012) conceive of collaborative governance as a post-NPM antidote to the deficiencies of NPM, and Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 544) view collaborative governance as a remedy for the accountability failures of technocratic managerialism. On the related topic of coproduction, i.e., the involvement of users in the provision of public services, Nabatchi, Sancino and Sicilia (2017, p.767) see the original approach to the phenomenon as having flourished 'under the banner of NPM' but also see coproduction as an unintended consequence of NPM. Although Klijn (2012) views horizontal governance and NPM as different approaches to tackling social complexity, he acknowledges that it is difficult to separate them in practice.

6 Therefore, the nature of the connections between collaborative governance and NPM is still debated. That said, we have seen that it is too simplistic to attribute the diffusion of agencies solely to NPM thinking, and we may add that the influence of NPM is perceptible in some embodiments of collaborative governance as well, such as in the establishment of public-private partnerships. Hence, in practice, collaborative governance and agencification do not rely on completely distinct paradigms. These changes in governance also share some core objectives, as they are both expected to increase the epistemic quality and legitimacy of policy-making, albeit through different paths: in the case of collaborative governance, by involving stakeholders to pool local knowledge and facilitate policy acceptance, and in the case of agencification, by delegating to bodies whose trustworthiness relies on their reputation for expertise and impartiality. Moreover, in both collaborative governance and agencification, the traditional governmental-administrative state machine loses part of its steering role: similar to agencies that are independent of government, networks of collaborative governance enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their jurisdictions (Skelcher, 2010). In addition, as with the role of unelected actors in collaborative governance, the 'rise of the unelected' (Vibert, 2007) in agencification through the extended discretion of expert bodies raises concerns regarding the democratic accountability of technocratic rule. However, for analytical purposes, it is useful to treat the reform trends as distinct, as they have given rise to separate literatures that generally fail to engage with each other. We also need to keep in mind that, like the trend toward collaborative governance, agencification has been subject to much variation across both countries and policy sectors, and the same applies to the accountability arrangements of agencies[4].

Proactive Accountability: Why?

7 While the literature on collaborative governance persuasively highlights the different kinds of problems that lead to accountability deficits, the literature on agencification suggests that accountability can be higher than expected or, in other words, that policy-makers' (especially public managers') *de facto* accountability can be greater than their *de jure* accountability. This line of inquiry is a pioneering perspective for understanding the practice of accountability and is thus worth exploring in the context of collaborative governance. Why is accountability greater than expected?

8   The crucial finding is that agency managers *proactively* engage in informal (non-mandated) accountability. Certainly, scholarship on collaborative governance also highlights the existence of informal accountability relations, for instance, among participants in networks or between professionals and their peer communities. However, the scholarship of interest on agencification has a different focus. This scholarship highlights the *self-imposed* dimension of accountability relations, most notably to stakeholders and the public. It delves into actors' motivations, explaining why it is profitable and thus rational for agency management to voluntarily seek to become accountable. There is no reason why such a hypothesis should not be tested on actors other than agency executive staff.[5]

9   Many studies suggest that agency managers make calculated use of accountability for strategic purposes, such as reputation management, credit claiming and the creation of constituency support (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017; Koop, 2014)[6]. At the organizational level, agencies develop public relations departments that select channels and audiences (the public at large through the media, specific target groups of affected stakeholders, MPs, etc.) that seem most suitable for enhancing agency credibility and advancing regulatory goals (Apaydin & Jordana, 2020). For instance, Koop and Lodge (2020) found that with economic regulation becoming increasingly politicized because of the financial crisis, British regulators in the financial markets, competition, and utilities sectors had to cope with more intense and critical media reporting and with parliamentary scrutiny. They reacted by extending their communication to broader audiences and adapting their tools for that purpose. Boon (2023) reached similar conclusions about the Belgian financial regulator in the same period. Similarly, a technocratic institution such as the European Central Bank recently opted to be more proactive in communicating with the public, the media, and the markets in the context of increased media coverage, the politicization of its role, and lower levels of trust (Heldt & Müller, 2022; Tesche, 2019).

10   In other words, this body of research views accountability not only as a constraint but also as a resource; playing the 'game' of accountability contributes to a good reputation. Reputational authority, in turn, is expected to delegitimize action against entities that are highly regarded by socially significant audiences and to thereby act as a shield from criticism and threats (Bertelli & Busuioc, 2021).[7] Such an instrumental view of a discretionary and essentially 'explanatory' (Tucker, 2018, pp. 263 and 451) accountability that is not accompanied by formal sanctions contrasts with the more traditional view of accountability as a control mechanism.

11   It may be hypothesized that managers – and other governance actors – also seek to become accountable for less instrumental reasons, such as receiving valuable feedback for learning purposes (epistemic function)[8] or out of a sense of moral obligation. In the latter case, their action is guided not by a consequentialist logic based on cost-benefit calculations but rather by a logic of appropriateness, in which actors adopt the behavior that they consider suitable according to the codes of conduct that they have internalized as legitimate (March & Olsen, 2013). This option was envisaged by Busuioc and Lodge (2016, p. 251), and Koop added: 'The question of which causal mechanism prevails will have to be addressed in research of a more qualitative nature' (Koop, 2014, p. 574). However, the bulk of research on voluntary accountability continues to maintain a strategic view of it. The hypothesis of normative considerations driving self-imposed accountability has not been further explored, and the vision of possible

reputational rewards and damages is itself rather narrowly utilitarian. Indeed, if we fear reputational damage, it is not always because it makes us more vulnerable but can also be because it gives us a bad image of ourselves (or of the organization with which we identify) when we are confronted with the 'looking glass self' (Cooley, 1902, pp. 179-185). Therefore, research on voluntary accountability may overemphasize strategic considerations as a driver of self-imposed accountability.

Forum Passivity: Why?

12   The research on agency accountability also highlights accountability deficits but for reasons that the scholarship on collaborative governance does not explore in depth, although they would also be relevant for that mode of governance. The scholarship on collaborative governance identifies both structural problems, such as fuzziness, and actors' strategies (e.g., blame-shift) that lead to accountability gaps. However, much less is known about how the conduct of those who hold policy-makers accountable plays out, despite the relational nature of accountability processes. Shifting the focus to the actual practice of accountability forums, research on agencification aptly describes another phenomenon that is surprising at first glance: forum inaction, either out of necessity or out of choice.

13   In fact, if the accountability activity of agencies is *more* intense than expected, the monitoring activity of forums can be *lower* than expected. Holding someone accountable implies power, but it is also demanding; therefore, accountability forums may be ill equipped in terms of oversight capacity or may simply lack the willingness to perform their task. Research on collaborative governance suggests that the involvement of multiple actors coupled with the low visibility of networks and their lack of codification impedes external scrutiny (Cristofoli et al., 2022); however, the inactivity of accountholders may also derive from their lack of expertise (Schillemans et al., 2021) or denote paralysis due to goal conflicts and collective action problems (Benjamin & Posner, 2018). Moreover, forum passivity may be intentional on the part of accountholders if they did not initially delegate the tasks or if they have more pressing priorities and limited time and energy to invest in scrutiny (Schillemans & Busuioc, 2015; see also Maggetti & Papadopoulos, 2018, pp. 174-176).[9] As a result, forum activity and account-holding intensity depend on agency visibility and issue salience, which are variable (Koop, 2011; Leidorf-Tidå, 2022). In such a view, accountability deficits originate less from the attempts of agency management to evade accountability and more from the lack of capacity or motivation of those who are supposed to hold agencies accountable.

14   The activism and passivity of accountability forums can also be explained by potential reputational rewards and losses, as suggested by recent research linking forum activism to the quest for visibility (Tidå, 2022). For instance, as forums have limited resources, they would naturally opt to act when their passivity entails costs, namely, when 'visibility makes it increasingly reputationally risky for a forum to neglect its account-holding' (Leidorf-Tidå, 2022, p. 6). However, accountability forums do not always act in a fully rational way: bias and motivated reasoning may cause accountholders to either strongly distrust or blindly trust policy-makers and, as a consequence, lead to either excessive or insufficient scrutiny. Moreover, normative considerations can also be important for forums. For example, Maggetti and

Papadopoulos (2023) argue that some parent ministries limit their oversight of regulatory agencies in Switzerland out of esteem for the expertise of these bodies. More studies on the logics of forum (in-)action are needed to advance our understanding of accountability interactions in the various areas of governance.[10]

Conclusion

15   Research on the democratic anchorage of collaborative governance has greatly contributed to a realistic understanding of accountability issues in established democracies. Undoubtedly, this research uncovers the limits that arise from several inhibiting factors, such as potential deficiencies in either hands-on participation or hands-off oversight by politicians[11] or the facilitation of blame shifting by shared responsibility ('many hands') and through 'organized hypocrisy' (Brunsson, 2007) in the presence of conflicting expectations ('many eyes'). Nevertheless, other important issues remain unaddressed because, surprisingly, the bodies of work that study the implications for accountability posed by changes in the architecture of governance seldom interact with each other.

16   An important issue that needs to be integrated further into the collaborative governance research agenda is the unexpected passivity—for various reasons—of those who should hold governance actors accountable. This has primarily been highlighted by research on 'agencification', the innovative findings of which challenge conventional wisdom, such as 'agency drift' being the major source of accountability deficits. These findings potentially concern the political accountability forums of collaborative governance, which are essentially the same: elected officials and representative assemblies. Moreover, since collaborative governance aims to address complex and messy issues and entails the involvement of multiple actors of different natures, the task of accountability forums can be particularly daunting: both wickedness and shared responsibility accentuate informational asymmetries and make monitoring more difficult (Peters, 2017).

17   On the other hand, accountable behavior can be attractive even when it is not mandated, again for a variety of reasons that apply not only to agency management but also more generally to the diverse actors that are involved in collaborative governance arrangements. They need to develop their 'communicative capability' through persuasive argumentation (Bryson et al., 2020), especially as such arrangements are usually *sui generis* interorganizational constructs in search of legitimacy. For instance, when policy-makers convincingly demonstrate their willingness to be accountable, this willingness is expected to enhance others' trust in them, which is, in turn, necessary for the output performance of collaborative networks (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Klijn et al., 2010). Although this may sound intriguing at first glance, research on agencification suggests that actors may view their accountability either positively as a resource or as normatively appropriate (or just taken for granted) behavior. Much emphasis has been placed on the gaming strategies that actors develop to evade accountability (Jakobsen et al., 2017). However, actors may purposely seek to become accountable, while those who should scrutinize them may not only be unable but also unwilling to do so. In sum, policy-making actors can be *more* accountable than expected, while accountability holders can be *less* watchful than expected.

18   Finally, we also call for critical scrutiny of the existing findings in agencification research. There is potentially an excessive emphasis on strategic considerations regarding the motivations of both account-givers and account-holders. In addition to the normative and functional considerations already mentioned, path dependency, entrenched routines, and the 'logic of habit' (Sarigil, 2015) can be expected to shape the behavior of both types of actors.[12] Thus, we conclude with an invitation to seriously consider the rational expectations, values, and rules of thumb that guide the behavior of both accountable power-wielders and those holding them accountable.

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NOTES

1. Many cases of collaborative governance are inventoried in the Collaborative Governance Case Database: https://collaborativegovernancecasedatabase.sites.uu.nl/ (accessed February 18, 2024). See also Voorberg et al. (2015) for a systematic review that needs some updating.

2. Accountability is usually conceptualized as a formal or informal relation in which one agent can be held accountable by another agent. This 'involves establishing facts and assigning causality and responsibility, formulating and applying normative standards for assessing conduct and reasons given, and building and applying capabilities for sanctioning inappropriate conduct' (Olsen, 2015, p. 425).

3. For more positive assessments, see the essentially prospective papers by Ansell et al. (2021) and Sørensen and Torfing (2021) on the democratic and participatory potential of collaborative modes of governance. Klijn and Skelcher (2007) suggested that there are multiple perspectives on the compatibility between governance networks and democracy.

4. Using survey data from 342 organizations in six European countries, Overman et al. (2015) identified four types of accountability arrangements in semiautonomous agencies, which are largely aligned with four trajectories of administrative reform: maintaining, modernization, marketization and minimization (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). In a similar vein, Bianculli et al. (2015) not only showed the diversity of the formal accountability regimes of regulatory bodies but also highlighted the complexity of the informal accountability relationships in which their executive staff was embedded (see also Bach et al., 2017).

5. Ironically, psychological research on individuals who are held accountable views them as behaving like politicians (Tetlock, 1991), but how policy-making actors experience accountability has long remained a blind spot. Recently, Han and Perry (2020) discussed the microfoundations of employee accountability, and Aleksovska et al. (2022) provided experimental evidence on how managers internalize accountability pressure.

6. Busuioc and Lodge (2016, p. 248) draw inspiration from Erving Goffman's sociological work on the importance of self-presentation and of giving the impression that one is successfully performing one's social role (Goffman, 1959). The literature on managerial reform emphasizes the rising importance of 'social' accountability to different kinds of stakeholders, which is also frequently not mandated. However, its (proclaimed) aim is usually different: to improve public performance and enhance responsiveness to the needs of target populations (Brummel, 2021, pp. 1063-1064). See also Karsten (2015) on the self-imposed accountability of local politicians.

7. Nevertheless, it is uncertain if reputation produces the desired effects, as the (still quite fragmentary) available evidence is mixed. On the one hand, reputation may protect one from criticism even if it is not deserved: studying the media reporting on governmental agencies in Denmark and Belgium, Salomonsen et al. (2021) show that negative and positive reputational histories of agencies largely condition the negative or positive valence of newspaper coverage. On the other hand, studying EU agencies, Leidorf-Tidå (2022) found that those subject to more positive comments on Twitter are not subject to a lower account-holding intensity.

8. On 'learning forums' in collaborative governance – such as interorganizational performance summits that can be seen as instances of peer accountability – see Douglas & Ansell (2021).

9. Schillemans & Busuioc (2015, p. 200) provide a long list of empirical works suggesting, among other things, that accountability forums do not care about the tasks that are carried out, neglect their monitoring duties, or fail to rectify failures.

10. Accountability forums in governance research are usually treated as collective and organized actors, but our knowledge would also benefit from electoral studies on the shortcuts that individual citizens use to hold their representatives accountable. There are both optimistic (Arceneaux & Wielen, 2017) and pessimistic (Achen & Bartels, 2016) accounts of the capacity of citizens to effectively hold elected officials accountable.

11. These are considered the core legitimizing features of the democratic 'anchorage' of collaborative governance: elected officials must act as network managers or 'metagovernors' (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005). Although independent agencies should be shielded against the risk of hands-on interference by politicians, who are perceived as self-interested and driven primarily

by short-term electoral calculations (Miller & Whitford, 2016), this is not to say that they should remain unaccountable.

12. March and Olsen (2013) include in their 'logic of appropriateness' actions based on what is perceived to be not only right but also natural. However, 'taken-for-grantedness' should be treated as a source of action or inaction that is different from normative considerations.

ABSTRACTS

Collaborative governance and the delegation of tasks to independent agencies are among the most important governance trends in recent years. However, these trends have given rise to separate literatures that do not engage with each other. Research on collaborative governance shows the complexity of accountability relations and uncovers the factors that undermine accountability. However, it fails to consider some relevant findings from research on 'agencification' that should be incorporated into its research agenda. Governance scholars should consider more thoughtfully that, for a variety of reasons, accountability holders may be *less* watchful than expected, but also that accountable behavior can be *more* attractive than expected, again for diverse reasons. Policy-makers' strategies for avoiding accountability have been emphasized, but to advance the understanding of real-world accountability processes, we must consider that control deficits can be caused by the passivity of accountability 'forums', while policy-makers may find their accountability valuable.

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