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BMJ Open
What can we learn on public accountability from non-health disciplines: a meta-narrative review

Sara Van Belle,¹ Susannah H Mayhew²

ABSTRACT

Objective: In health, accountability has since long been acknowledged as a central issue, but it remains an elusive concept. The literature on accountability spans various disciplines and research traditions, with differing interpretations. There has been little transfer of ideas and concepts from other disciplines to public health and global health. In the frame of a study of accountability of (international) non-governmental organisations in local health systems, we carried out a meta-narrative review to address this gap. Our research questions were: (1) What are the main approaches to accountability in the selected research traditions? (2) How is accountability defined? (3) Which current accountability approaches are relevant for the organisation and regulation of local health systems and its multiple actors?

Setting: The search covered peer-reviewed journals, monographs and readers published between 1992 and 2012 from political science, public administration, organisational sociology, ethics and development studies. 34 papers were selected and analysed.

Results: Our review confirms the wide range of approaches to the conceptualisation of accountability. The definition of accountability used by the authors allows the categorisation of these approaches into four groups: the institutionalist, rights-based, individual choice and collective action group. These four approaches can be considered to be complementary.

Conclusions: We argue that in order to effectively achieve public accountability, accountability strategies are to be complementary and synergistic.

BACKGROUND

In health policy and systems scholarship, accountability has since long been acknowledged as a central dimension. It is at the core of healthcare professionalism¹ and community participation in health systems,²–⁶ as well as of governance.⁷–⁹ Many health system (performance) frameworks include accountability as part of the leadership and governance function⁸–¹⁰. A closer look at the public health literature shows us that accountability emerges under (at least) four major themes.

First, accountability has been related to strategies to ensure quality of care. Clinical audits, for instance, are often used in efforts to reduce maternal mortality and near miss events and are framed in terms of negotiating accountability with health service providers.¹⁷–¹⁹ Second, accountability has been part of ‘community participation’, framed recently as strengthening the community’s voice in order to improve accountability in health service delivery.²² The effects of decentralisation on participation were explored by Bossert and Mitchell.²³ Third, accountability is a major theme in global health policy. Interest in tracking funding in order to improve ‘donor accountability’ has seen an upsurge, especially in maternal, neonatal and child health.¹⁵ ²⁴–²⁷ Finally, accountability is framed in the ethics and human rights perspective. Daniels,²⁸ for example, focused on procedural mechanisms for accountability in a health system priority setting. Human rights advocates focus on

Strengths and limitations of this study

▪ This is the first meta-narrative review of the concept of accountability in the disciplines of political science, public administration, organisational sociology, ethics and development studies, summarising knowledge with a view to improving public and private-non-profit sector health service management and service delivery.

▪ Our meta-narrative review fits the research objectives well, given the wealth of differing interpretations in the literature on accountability (across disciplines).

▪ Monographs and readers constituted a primary reference source. Since there is no specific book database covering monographies and readers in the disciplines included here, the review could not be entirely comprehensive.

▪ On the basis of the results, we propose a multi-dimensional framework of accountability that covers the dimensions of professional, organisational, social and political accountability.
accountability in relation to healthcare and health policy, including the obligation of states to ensure the right to health and improving equity in access. Recently, the UN resolution on Universal Health Coverage argued that efforts to improve universal health coverage could only succeed if values such as transparency, equity and fairness are at the basis of decision-making. This should be supported by efforts to build accountability capability and fairness in process and results.15 29

In the public health literature, strategies to improve accountability have been described at the macrolevel of global governance and policymaking, the mesolevel of health system management, participative decision-making and priority setting, as well as at the microlevel of service delivery, where it is considered part of professional ethics and an element of quality of care.

While the concept of accountability is widely used in the public health literature, it remains an opaque concept. To start, it is not easy to differentiate between accountability and related concepts such as responsibility and responsiveness. Moreover, the literature on accountability in fact derives from different disciplines and research traditions. ‘Many authors have been writing about accountability in a variety of contexts but there has been little agreement, or even common ground for disagreement, over the general nature of accountability or its various mechanisms’.30

Most authors do tend to agree, however, on the most basic of definitions. Accountability is a derivative of ‘being accountable’, a quality or state of being where one accepts—or is obliged to accept—responsibility for one’s actions (or inactions) towards another.31 It thus presupposes a relationship between two actors where one actor (the agent or duty bearers) has to account for his actions to another actor (the principal or claims holder), because the actions of the agent affect the principal or because they have been carried out on behalf of the principal.

Although some authors in the field of public health draw on concepts from other disciplines, there has been little systematic exploration of how accountability is treated in disciplines such as political science, public administration, organisational sociology, ethics and development studies. As a result, there has been little cross-fertilisation between these disciplines and public health.

To address this gap, we set out to identify the main schools of accountability across disciplines and to trace the current developments and debates. More specifically, we aimed at identifying the range of definitions of accountability and the frameworks that are being used in these different disciplines with the aim of countering the fragmentation on accountability—identified by Mulgan30 as a major problem. We also intended this review to inform the development of a comprehensive view on accountability in healthcare. In order to do so, we adopted the meta-narrative review method.

This review was part of a doctoral research project on public accountability in public health service delivery, in which we adopted the definition of Mulgan: ‘Public accountability is the obligation or moral imperative of public institutions and private-not-profit institutions involved in health service delivery to answer questions regarding their decisions and actions to the public, which is the source of their mandate, authority and legitimacy’.30

Below, we present the methodology of the meta-narrative review, provide an overview of the main findings and present some issues for discussion, including a multidimensional framework of public accountability.

**METHODS**

The discussion of accountability as a concept and as an intervention is dispersed among different disciplines and fields. Theory mining in other relevant research traditions is therefore a good starting point in developing an understanding of accountability in health. Methodologically, the meta-narrative review is most appropriate in such cases, as it allows one to map concepts and definitions across research traditions, to trace the evolution over time and to identify any overarching conceptual approaches.32 We applied the meta-triangulation principles described by Lewis and Grime33 to further improve the quality of the review and followed the guidance developed by Wong et al.34

Both the meta-narrative review and meta-triangulation are geared towards learning from different research traditions and use paradigms as heuristics to build a richer, more comprehensive picture of a complex topic area. Paradigms can be defined as ‘tightly coupled ideologies, ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies’ that guide different categories of action such as interventions or research.35 The meta-narrative review aims at making sense of ‘complex and heterogeneous literature disagreeing about epistemology, ontology and research approaches’,36 and focuses on the theoretical and conceptual basis of empirical studies. As such, it is a relevant approach for the broader study on accountability in local health systems, given the heterogeneous literature on accountability. Meta-triangulation reviews look for ‘bridges’ between concepts, theories and frameworks and explore tensions between different paradigms in order to build more comprehensive theories. ‘It is a strategy of applying paradigmatic diversity to foster greater insight and creativity’.37 Both approaches use similar synthesis techniques, that is, narrative synthesis of findings on the basis of exploration of commonalities, differences and tensions in assumptions underlying the different research traditions, followed by higher level abstraction.32

As mentioned above, we selected political science, public administration, organisational sociology, ethics and development studies as the disciplines to be covered, because these are the disciplines at the origins of theory-building and conceptual development on accountability. The lead author is a political scientist and
anthropologist, with a PhD in public health, and has research and professional experience in the domains of development studies, political science, policy and public health in low and middle income countries (LMIC) in Africa. She is currently working at an institute of development studies and a tropical medicine research institute. Similarly, the coauthor has rich experience in research and policy development, including accountability, in LMIC and in global health institutions, and is working at an institute of tropical medicine.

The review questions were formulated as follows (see table 1):
- What are the main approaches to accountability in the selected research traditions?
- How is accountability defined?
- Who is to be accountable to whom, for what and why?

The search covered peer-reviewed journals, monographs and article readers published in the period 1992–2012. To identify monographs and article readers, we searched the academic database ISI Web of Knowledge, did manual searching for online full-text collections of Wiley InterScience, SpringerLink, Sage and Elsevier and used snowballing (referencing of references). As theory-building and conceptual development were the key review interests, monographs and readers constituted a primary reference source. In addition, we reviewed journal top 10 rankings in each discipline (table 1). For each of the aforementioned disciplines, we selected the journals on the basis of expert advice or because we found relevant articles published by these journals as a reference in other articles pertaining to accountability in LMIC. In addition, much-cited journals of renown without Journal Impact Factor scores were selected.

### Table 1: Overview of journals selected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>JIF</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political science/public administration</td>
<td>Governance</td>
<td>1.604</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development studies</td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>1.546</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development studies</td>
<td>World Development</td>
<td>1.527</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational sociology/management</td>
<td>Academy of Management Review</td>
<td>7.475</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organisation Science</td>
<td>4.338</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voluntas-International Journal of Voluntary and Non-Profit Organisations</td>
<td>0.881</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Profit and</td>
<td>1.490</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voluntary Sector</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Health Ethics</td>
<td>0.788</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quarterly of</td>
<td>0.846</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Healthcare Ethics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Papers that contribute to theoretical development of the accountability concept in one of the aforementioned disciplines were included. When finding both, the theoretical model was chosen as the source instead of its empirical application. Critiques that do not offer an alternative or theoretically different model were excluded. Papers presenting empirical studies without conceptual framework, and papers focusing exclusively on global governance or global policymaking, on financial accountability or which were only applicable to high-income countries, were also excluded (figure 1).

The Google Scholar or Google (monographs) citation frequency is mentioned in table 1 and was used as an additional criterion of appraisal of the article’s importance in the research tradition, next to other authors’ citation of the article and its alignment with the research question. It should be noted that citation frequency is just one criterion used in a meta-narrative review. Indeed, the aim is not to search just for the most popular publications, but also for the breadth of approaches within each discipline.

Thirty-four publications were retained for in-depth analysis (box 1).

We analysed the constituent elements of the frameworks and theories presented in these papers as follows in table 2:
- The authors’ definition of accountability
- The accountability relationship (who is accountable to whom?)
- The accountability dimension (what is one accountable for?)
- The basis for the accountability claim (why is one accountable?)
- The causal model: what are the processes and instruments, the contextual conditions and (expected) outcomes?

We would like to indicate some limitations in the application of the methods. Monographs and readers constituted a primary reference source. Since there is no specific book database covering monographies and readers in the disciplines included here, the review could not be entirely comprehensive. Another limitation is that we may have inadvertently ignored specific journals and some key authors, some of whom inevitably published after the timeframe included in the review.

### RESULTS

We present here the main themes we identified within the literature of each reviewed discipline, based on the overview in table 2. The first section presents an overview of disciplinary approaches, the second section traces the concept of accountability, and the third section provides a final summary presenting four main paradigms.

1Google Scholar citation tracing was conducted in October 2013.
Disciplinary approaches

In the discipline of political science/public administration, the publications reviewed focused mainly on the accountability relationship between different categories of actors involved in public policy, often referring to the multitude of actors involved in public policy (as accountors), and to the notion of ‘citizens’ or ‘stakeholders’. For these authors, public policy actors are accountable to citizens for performance and compliance with regulations, as they possess delegated power or authority on behalf of the citizens. Financial accountability is separately mentioned by most authors. Processes to improve accountability focus on the supply side and include: reporting, public investigation and the verification of standards.

The publications reviewed in the discipline of development studies show various influences. Newell and Bellour[^47] and Newell and Wheeler[^48] consider accountability as grounded in citizens’ rights, which can be enforced through empowerment of citizens and their collective action. As such, social justice can be achieved. On the other hand, for Paul, the accountability claim is grounded in a power relationship: the customer can ‘voice’ his concerns over bad performance and can ‘exit’ the service, that is, no longer make use of the services in question.[^49] In Ackerman’s view, accountability in service delivery can only be improved via ‘co-governance’—actual participation of citizens in decision-making.[^50]

The works reviewed in the field of organisational sociology are concerned with accountability within and of organisations. Accountability is mainly considered as a function of organisations, which, if managed well, contributes to gaining the public’s trust. Kearns[^51] adheres to the view of accountability as a function directed towards the organisation’s external environment. In this view, proactively maintaining accountability relationships is an integral part of the organisation’s strategic management and leadership function. In contrast, Frink and Klimoski[^52] view accountability of an organisation as an internal function, which they relate to organisational culture.

[^47]: Newell and Bellour
[^48]: Newell and Wheeler
[^49]: Paul
[^50]: Ackerman
[^51]: Kearns
[^52]: Frink and Klimoski
Social justice and equity grounded in fair decision-making is the outcome envisaged in the discipline of ethics. For Daniels, accountability is part and parcel of a democratic culture that counters unbridled power. The Rawls-inspired ‘Accountability for Reasonableness’ framework developed by Daniels focuses on the fairness of the accountability process. For Daniels, supply-side measures such as enforcing compliance to rules, transparency and involvement of stakeholders can only work when these are supported by a strong demand from an empowered civil society.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Accountability definition</th>
<th>Who is accountable to whom?</th>
<th>For what?</th>
<th>Why?</th>
<th>Processes</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Contextual conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political science/public administration</td>
<td>Steets,95</td>
<td>Partnership accountability (partnership: voluntary arrangement between public, and/or private and/or civil society actors)</td>
<td>Multitude of organisations involved in public policy to formal and informal principals and legal and fiscal authorities</td>
<td>Finances compliance with rules and processes performance</td>
<td>Delegated authority</td>
<td>Information enforcement—clarifying roles and expectations of principals and agents</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Collaboration between actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mulgan,96 Mulgan,30</td>
<td>Plural accountability in modern democracies</td>
<td>Government and public institutions to citizens or organisations that act on citizen’s behalf (networks of accountability)</td>
<td>Performance compliance with rules and regulations</td>
<td>Delegated power, retributive justice and public deliberation</td>
<td>Reporting, justification effective rectification: sanctions, remedial action</td>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behn,60</td>
<td>Mutual compact accountability</td>
<td>Public managers to multiple stakeholders/citizens</td>
<td>Finances, fairness through rules and processes performance</td>
<td>Flexibility in management</td>
<td>Verification of standards for processes and trust regarding performance</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Cooperation, collective action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boin et al87</td>
<td>Political accountability</td>
<td>Political actors and institutions to stakeholders</td>
<td>Goal achievements</td>
<td>Name and shame</td>
<td>Public investigation</td>
<td>Improved performance public institutions</td>
<td>Vibrant media, civil society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedler58</td>
<td>Public sector accountability</td>
<td>Public institutions to citizens</td>
<td>Political, financial, administrative, legal, professional</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Answerability and/or enforcement</td>
<td>To curb or control political power</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development studies</td>
<td>Newell and Bellour,47</td>
<td>Rights-based accountability</td>
<td>Institutions to citizens</td>
<td>Empowerment through collective action</td>
<td>Strengthening demand side accountability: ‘enforcing rights over resources’</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newell and Wheeler48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devas and Grant59</td>
<td>Political accountability at multiple levels (central-decentralised levels)</td>
<td>Multiple accountability relationships between government, decentralised government agencies, public administration and citizens</td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Information central level leadership</td>
<td>Public trust</td>
<td>Political will government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Accountability definition</td>
<td>Who is accountable to whom?</td>
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<td>Why?</td>
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<td>Outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisational sociology</td>
<td>Frink and Klimoski</td>
<td>Organisational and self-accountability (internal)</td>
<td>Employee to organisation</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kearns</td>
<td>Organisational accountability (external)</td>
<td>Organisation to the public</td>
<td>Compliance with rules, laws and regulations + answering the public's expectations</td>
<td>Organisation needs to be deserving of the public's trust</td>
<td>Social norms and norm expectations, evaluation, sanctions</td>
<td>Long-term organisational viability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Daniels</td>
<td>‘Accountability for reasonableness’</td>
<td>Institutions to citizens</td>
<td>Resource allocation of primary social goods that support human capabilities</td>
<td>Collective action curbs power</td>
<td>Fair decision-making processes</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>Common value of fairness in process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moncrieffe</td>
<td>Relational accountability</td>
<td>Democratic institutions to citizens</td>
<td>Dependent on the actor and the context</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Equity based democratic institutions and decision-making</td>
<td>Human development, democratic stability</td>
<td>Democratic culture, institutional context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paul 49 Microlevel exit and voice accountability Public sector institutions towards citizens Service delivery Customer power Strengthening demand mechanisms exit and voice based on information, organisational incentives Participation in decision-making Service performance improvement Perceived advantages and costs of using exit and voice

Ackerman 50 Social accountability Not mentioned Service delivery Co-governance or empowered participatory governance Authority Not mentioned Not mentioned

Organisational sociology Frink and Klimoski 52 Organisational and self-accountability (internal) Employee to organisation Not mentioned Authority Social norms and norm expectations, evaluation, sanctions Long-term organisational viability Not mentioned

Kearns 51 Organisational accountability (external) Organisation to the public Compliance with rules, laws and regulations + answering the public's expectations Organisation needs to be deserving of the public's trust Social norms and norm expectations, evaluation, sanctions Monitoring organisational standards of accountability Public trust Not mentioned

Ethics Daniels 28 ‘Accountability for reasonableness’ Institutions to citizens Resource allocation of primary social goods that support human capabilities Collective action curbs power Fair decision-making processes Social justice Common value of fairness in process

Moncrieffe 53 Relational accountability Democratic institutions to citizens Dependent on the actor and the context Power Equity based democratic institutions and decision-making Human development, democratic stability Democratic culture, institutional context

Tracing the evolution of the concept of ‘accountability’

The emergence of New Public Management in the 1980s and its uptake in health policy and systems led to an active interest in governance and improved state accountability. During this period, development and donor agencies like the World Bank argued that states were failing their citizens and that governance systems were weak and non-responsive towards their citizens. It was argued that traditional public administration, grounded in hierarchy and rules, no longer provided fitting answers to rapidly changing environments. In response, the World Bank focused much on state-building interventions and ‘good governance’. In practice, health policies were reoriented towards decentralisation, provider-purchaser split, deregulation and contracting. The latter was considered as a central strategy to increase accountability of state actors, combined with deregulation and development of the private sector.

The World Bank followed the ideas of Paul, who proposed to strengthen both ‘exit’ (only a viable option for patients if alternative services exist) and ‘voice’ mechanisms to bolster accountability of public sector agencies. Paul, following Hirschman, argued that supply sideisms to bolster accountability of public sector agencies. State administrative regulation. Accountability to an issue, which can be solved by adherents of New Public Management for reducing and monitoring systems exist. Later, Roberts criticised enabling voice are effective only when they are bolstered by organisational incentives and adequate information and monitoring systems exist. Later, Roberts criticised adherents of New Public Management for reducing accountability to an issue, which can be solved by administrative regulation.

The much-cited monograph ‘The Self-Refraining State’ by Schedler et al offers insights on how public administration looked at accountability from a different perspective. It provides an early comprehensive conceptualisation of accountability that was intended to shape public sector reform policy in Africa and Latin America. Schedler et al consider accountability deficiencies as a failure of institutional arrangements to constrain power imbalances. The authors developed a two-dimensional concept of accountability, grounded in answerability and enforceability. Answerability is the obligation of civil servants to explain their actions, and enforceability is the capacity to sanction any wrongdoing of public officials or violation of the public service orientation.

In the late 1990s, public administration scholars acknowledged the increased plurality of society and the effects of globalisation. They argued that in an interdependent world with multiple centres of decision-making, the relationships between state, civil society and the market become increasingly complex and opaque. Authors like Mulgan, Devas and Grant and Behn see contemporary accountability relationships as plural and dispersed among many actors and policymaking levels. However, multiple relations lead to multiple types of accountability, which in turn give rise to competing demands. Also, international organisations and partnerships between the public sector, private sector and civil society were considered to be surrounded by networks of accountability relations.

Three consequences of this hyperconnectedness were identified. First, organisations were seen to suffer from ‘multiple accountability disorder’, unable to respond to potentially conflicting demands for accountability. Second, Ackerman urged moving beyond mere ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ mechanisms and to provide new space for participatory mechanisms. Informal accountability in the form of enabling public dialogue was seen as a potential reinforcement of more traditional hierarchical accountability mechanisms. Third, attention was given to the mechanisms underlying accountability. While Schedler et al had identified answerability and enforceability as conditions for accountability, Dubnick pointed to three main processes that constitute account-giving behaviour: ‘reporting’, ‘mitigating’ and ‘reframing’. He identified the desire for approval or the urge to conform as mechanisms underlying accountability.

Four main paradigms to accountability

Table 2 shows how the authors we reviewed present a diversity of views and ideas on accountability. Yet, four distinct paradigms of accountability emerge: the institutionalist, the rights-based, the individual choice and the collective action paradigm.

The institutionalist paradigm proposes to use formal procedures and instruments and social norms in organisations and institutions to improve accountability. Accountability is mostly based on hierarchical relationships that are embedded in a ‘command and control’ bureaucratic structure and culture. It is enforced through verifying compliance with procedures, rules, laws and policies. Most of the frameworks within this approach have improved performance as the intended outcome. Institutionalist strategies sometimes entail community or stakeholder participatory processes as part of the stakeholder engagement or the monitoring and evaluation function of an organisation.

The rights-based paradigm starts from the premise that accountability relationships rest on individual human rights or entitlements. Citizens delegate power and authority to government and public sector institutions, which in turn are accountable for the progressive realisation of citizens’ rights and entitlements. Accountability is considered to be a value on itself; it is the key to curbing power differentials and bringing about more equitable relations through resource redistribution. Legal procedures can be a basis for enforcing accountability. Authors representing this line of thinking include.

The individual choice paradigm regards accountability from a client perspective and relies on competitive market behaviour to explain accountability relationships. It considers that clients, as individual actors, make rational choices by weighing the perceived advantage and cost of all options. If the public sector institution is not delivering the appropriate service to the client, the
latter can exercise his/her power as client and exit the service. Strategies to strengthen client power are based on verification of performance measures.49 63 73–75

In the collective action paradigm, accountability is seen as the product of groups of citizens. Individuals, organisations and institutions are considered to be connected by multiple accountability relationships. Actors can thus be account holder for some actions and accountor for other at the same time. The meaning of accountability is considered to be socially constructed and dependent on a given context. Actors can demand accountability through investigation and audits, ‘naming and shaming’ (through channels such as the media) and civil society protest. Alternatively, accountability is negotiated in a dialogue between the organisation and the public.17 22 48 50 53 76–81

Each of these paradigms differs in how accountability is defined and how it can be ensured. In the rights-based paradigm, improved accountability is an end in itself, while in the institutionalist paradigm it is a means to an end, that is, improved performance. The institutionalist paradigm primarily proposes measures on the ‘supply’ side to improve accountability, while the individual choice and collective action paradigms consider that accountability needs to be enforced by the account holders.

On the basis of the review of the literature and our professional background, we argue that the paradigms complement each other as in health services, accountability can be improved by taking measures both on the ‘supply’ and the ‘demand’ side.

DISCUSSION: RELEVANCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY APPROACHES AND CONCEPTS FOR HEALTH SYSTEMS

The importance of accountability is now generally acknowledged in the fields of health policy and systems and global health, but it remains an elusive concept. Our meta-narrative review of current theories and frameworks in political science, public administration, organisational sociology, ethics and development studies indeed confirms that there is a wide range of approaches and definitions of accountability. This contributes potentially to the perception that there is no coherent body of knowledge. This in turn explains in part the research difficulties concerning accountability.22 73 Certain authors were not picked up by our search, such as John Gaventa and Anne Marie Goetz.82–85

Our analysis shows that four paradigms of accountability can be identified: the institutionalist, the rights-based, the individual choice and the collective action paradigm. Each of these emerged in reaction to specific challenges, which is reflected in the focus on specific relations and actors from either a professional, political, social or organisational perspective. This reflects Lasker’s view that accountability approaches appear to suffer from the same predilection as work on community participation: ‘Practitioners and researchers (...) come from a variety of contexts, initiatives, and academic disciplines and few of them have integrated their work with experiences or literatures beyond their own domain’.86 While the disciplines here reviewed do not exist in silos, some accountability strategies remain limited to particular relations and actions and to ignoring the complex relationships between the multiple state and non-state actors in the current mixed health systems’ landscape in LMIC.

We argue that the four paradigms should be considered as complementary, that accountability may require action on both the ‘demand-side’ and ‘supply-side’, and that accountability can be both considered as a means to improve performance of health systems and as an end in itself. We thus propose to integrate the four main approaches to accountability in one comprehensive operational framework (figure 2).

This model has four dimensions: a provider, organisational, social and political dimension (box 2). The dimensions are not mutually exclusive and closed. Rather, the provider dimension is embedded in the organisational dimensions, which in itself is part of the social and political dimension.

The provider dimension focuses on the provider–patient relationship, in which one would use accountability measures and processes as an instrument to enhance quality of care. Examples include clinical audits. The organisational dimension focuses on responsiveness of the organisation to its stakeholders. Symptom boxes, ombudsman services and client satisfaction surveys can be used here. In the political dimension, one focuses primarily on regulatory processes in institutions to protect the public interest and to enhance the outcome of citizen trust. Finally, in the social dimension, strengthened public accountability is perceived mainly

Figure 2 Multidimensional frame of public accountability in health systems.
as an instrument to enhance equity and social justice grounded in community self-organisation.

This multidimensional frame has a number of advantages. First, it reflects the current multirelational nature of health systems and can help in identifying which accountabilities play out in which dimension. For instance, at the local level of health systems, district health managers might need to ensure accountability in the professional, the organisational and the political dimension, all at the same time. In effect, they might be accountable to standards set by a professional association, be accountable to the public for the use of public funds. Third, it could inform the development of a tool to assess gaps in accountability. Finally, the frame points to the need for developing comprehensive accountability strategies that span the dimensions in which the organisation needs to be accountable. Indeed, if accountability has four dimensions, accountability interventions have to consist of bundled strategies that act on the different dimensions to be effective, taking into account the multiple relations of actors in the local health system.

Of course, numerous questions remain as to the applicability of this frame and how it could be translated into practical tools to assess the degree of public accountability.

CONCLUSIONS

Our meta-narrative review found that the literature on accountability in political science, public administration, organisational sociology, ethics and development studies displays a wide variation of definitions and concepts. Four main groups of approaches emerge: the institutionalist approach, the rights-based approach, the individual choice approach and the collective action approach. These four approaches can be integrated in a comprehensive accountability framework with professional, organisational, social and political dimensions.

Contributors

SVB conceived the review, carried out the search and the analysis and wrote the manuscript. SHM contributed to the review design, commented on the analysis and contributed to the writing of the final manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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