12 Legitimacy as the Basis for Organizational Development of Voluntary Organizations

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Abstract

In the analysis of voluntary organizations, legitimacy and legitimation are useful concepts because they bring to light the process through which organizational entities justify their right to exist and their actions within a particular normative context (Maurer 1971; Meyer and Scott 1983; Beetham 2013). Theories of legitimacy underscore the moral basis of organizational power as grounded in the relationship between organizations and different kinds of audiences. In this chapter, we look at how those concepts and theories relate to the study of voluntary organizations. Those theories not only help us understand how voluntary organizations establish themselves, strengthen their position and survive over time despite very limited material resources of their own, but also how different organizational claims can directly impact communities, either by publicly projecting particular conceptions of community or by articulating specific interests and needs on behalf of its members In our review of the literature on organizational legitimacy, we focus on three main aspects of legitimacy: conceptualization of the term in organizational sociology, political sociology and studies of non-profit organizations; the constraining role of institutionalized normative contexts and competing audiences in the legitimation processes; the agentic role of organizations within both institutional and strategic contexts.

12.1 Voluntary Organizations and Legitimacy

An *environmental organization* accuses a business corporation of reprehensible pollution and urges industry-wide reform in order to preserve the environment for future generations. A *community-based organization* claiming to represent the interests of disgruntled citizens convenes a town hall meeting to discuss an urban redevelopment project in a city neighborhood. A *501(c)(3) non-profit organization* advocates that state legislators create a fairer immigration system, thereby encouraging volunteers and activists to donate to the organization and help uphold human rights standards. A *social movement group* protests police brutality, calling on concerned citizens to join a demonstration urging greater police accountability. An *ethnic organization* applies for a grant from a philanthropic

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foundation to conduct a series of legal trainings for exploited domestic workers.

Each has its own unique circumstances, yet all these situations are examples of voluntary organizations formulating specific claims on the basis of normative assumptions. One engages to uphold the rights of minority groups, another to represent the interests of concerned citizens. One engages to serve the needs of underprivileged communities, another to fight for advancing social justice. But why should the business corporation feel accountable to a community-based organization or activists donate money to an immigrant rights campaign? Why should citizens decide to join a protest or a foundation grant money to a group conducting training in social justice? More fundamentally, on what grounds do organizations themselves make their claims and on what grounds do audiences evaluate them?

Much—though not all—of what is described above has to do with legitimation. That is, the process of how social entities morally justify their right to exist and their actions to others within a particular arrangement of societal power (Maurer 1971; Beetham 2013). Organizations must constantly offer 'an acceptable theory of themselves' (Meyer and Scott 1983) that rationalizes their existence though still also sanctions the power relations to which they subscribe (Beetham 2013). To themselves and others, organizations continually try to make their goals desirable, their procedures appropriate and their structure comprehensible (Suchman 1995). But who should decide whether a particular organization has the right to exist or engage in particular actions? On which grounds should this right be assessed and by whom? Moreover, why should this justification process matter at all for voluntary organizations and how does this affect communities?

While keeping with the general theme of community that runs through this book, this chapter explicitly adopts an organizational perspective on the issues of legitimacy and legitimation. We focus specifically on voluntary organizations for two reasons. The first is theoretical; organizations play a crucial intermediary role between 'system-level institutions' (including the state and the market) and local communities by both contributing to the allocation and distribution of resources *across* communities and structuring social relations *within* single communities (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009, p. 256; Levine 2016a; Marwell 2004; Small 2006; Milofsky, Chap. 7, this volume). The second reason is empirical; in contemporary urban contexts—where the task of governing has shifted more towards 'governance' and includes a wide range of stakeholders in decision-making—we must pay more attention to the growing role of voluntary organizations in producing (or constraining) social change, particularly in poor areas (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009; Smith and Lipsky 1993; Small 2006). Now more than ever, voluntary organizations are tasked with representing a 'community'. They are supposed to communicate the community's 'real' needs to external audiences and promote its empowerment to an extent sometimes even greater than what is expected of local elected officials (Levine 2016a; Stone and Stoker 2015). Regardless of whether organizations accurately reflect those interests and needs (Levine 2016a), their claims and their potential acceptance by third parties do have a real impact on the 'community capacity' of disadvantaged areas (Chaskin 2001).

In this chapter, we adopt a wide definition of voluntary organizations as being relatively formally organized groups 'that receive substantial contributions of time (volunteering), below-cost goods or services, or money' (Steinberg and Powell 2006, p. 3). We see voluntary organizations as part of a so-called third sector, a domain of organized human action that extends past family, but remains distinct from state and market and in which *most* participants (both individuals and organizations) are not remunerated for their participation (Knoke and Prensky 1984; Knoke 1986; Viterna et al. 2015). We believe this definition adequately encompasses a range of organizational forms, including community-based organizations (CBOs), ethnic and immigrant associations, social movement organizations (SMOs), advocacy groups, recreational and

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neighborhood organizations, and more.[1] We also find the definition suitably inclusive of organizations pursuing various goals, from explicit social and political change to more traditional service provision.[2]

So conceptualized, voluntary organizations may provide a variety of services, such as employment opportunities, trainings (vocational, language), welfare provisions (such as supportive direct services), as well as recreational outlets (Small 2006; Chaskin 2001; Marwell 2004; Fine 2006). However, depending on the limitations posed by their formal legal status, they may also engage in more or less explicit political activities, such as grassroots organizing and advocacy (Fine 2006; Chung 2005). They may do so through the backdoor of institutional politics, influencing electoral politics by virtue of their intermediary role between government institutions and different kinds of communities (Marwell 2004; de Graauw 2016; Levine 2016a), or by explicitly engaging in contentious political activities to spur social change from the outside (Milkman et al. 2010). Regardless, in all those situations, a voluntary organization must consciously construct and negotiate a relationship with particular communities, for example, by establishing claims of democratic representation (representative-represented), interest group representation (representative-stakeholder), or effective need fulfillment (provider-beneficiary) (Knoke and Prensky 1984; Small 2006; Levine 2016a).

Organizational sociologists have long found that organizations generally rely on a combination of three factors to survive and thrive: power (as the capacity to coerce), resources (wealth especially, but also labor) and legitimacy (moral justifiability) (Stinchcombe 1968; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Here we argue that legitimacy is a key factor accounting for ability to operate, notably for voluntary organizations, which often lack the ability to coerce and sufficient resources to mobilize external audiences. As both resource mobilization theorists and scholars of voluntary organizations have regularly underscored, participation in and support of voluntary organizations has a strong normative component (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Knoke and Prensky 1984; Knoke 1986; see also Boyd and Nowell, Chap. 2). If we put it in the terms of rational choice theorists, individuals may join organizations and movements not only for possible 'selective incentives' (Olson 1971)—better wages, services, training, etc.—but also because they may be heeding appeals for solidarity, fairness or social justice (Knoke 1986; Gamson 1992). We can therefore say that much of the power enjoyed by voluntary organizations, in a general sense, has a *moral* basis. As Beetham (2013, p. 275) observed:

> whatever powers they exercise – of internal hierarchy, influence at the national and international levels, power over clients and the distribution of resources – are dependent on their level of voluntary and wider public support, and [particularly on] continually proving themselves to be worthy of support.

In the last few decades, the literature on organizational legitimacy has grown (see Suchman 1995; Deephouse and Suchman 2008; Scott 2014 for reviews in the field of organizational sociology; Collingwood 2005 for a review within international development and NGO studies; Beetham 2013; Netelenbos 2016 for discussions of the concept in political science and political philosophy; Johnson et al. 2006 for its usage in social psychology). In our review, we rely mainly on literature developed within organizational and political sociology. However, when appropriate, we draw on other disciplines' insights to help grasp the concept of legitimacy as specifically applied to organizations. We focus on three main aspects of legitimacy, each

[1]We believe this definition could also encompass national organizational forms, such as non-profit organizations in the US, as well as non-governmental organizations as they are conceptualized in European domestic spheres and international development (Beetham 2013; Collingwood 2005).

[2]Many definitions of 'voluntary organization' exist in academic literature, with debates ensuing as to whether one should be evaluated according to its goals, structures, legal status, or some combination thereof (Steinberg and Powell 2006). Consistent with our findings in this chapter, scholars have emphasized the radical transformation of these organizations throughout history (Robbins 2006).

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explicated under its own heading: conceptualization of the term; definition of the legitimation process; and organizational agency within this context. Two sub-sections come under the second and third headings. The second heading's sub-sections address the institutionalization process of normative expectations about organizational form and action and the identification of relevant audiences for organizations. The third heading's sub-sections describe two approaches we can use to analyze organizational action: one broadly based on long-term managerial responses towards institutional constraints and one focused on everyday strategic interaction.

On the one hand, we note that organizational legitimacy theory has been appropriated by researchers of management and for-profit organizations, with studies in the non-profit area developing more as a by-product of this theory (Walker and McCarthy 2010; Vermeulen and Brünger 2014; Vermeulen et al. 2016b; Levine 2016b). On the other hand, we see how social movement researchers have often found the concept of legitimacy unsatisfactory because of its tendency to emphasize conformity and social reproduction rather than disruption and change (Clemens 2005). Nevertheless, we argue that the theory has much to offer scholars of voluntary organizations and communities. Accordingly, we emphasize three pillars of the theory: the existence of institutionalized expectations that are intrinsically heterogeneous, which problematizes the assumption of broad societal consensus; the existence of different and competing audiences, who may be as interested in social reproduction as in social disruption; the possibility of organizations to purposefully manipulate the environment to legitimate new forms and claims. We argue that, so formulated, legitimacy theory provides a powerful analytical framework to understand how voluntary organizations relate to the contexts in which they operate. Not only does this touch upon the issue of organizations' relationships with their constituencies, but also with vital third parties such as funders, organizational allies, the media, and state institutions. Alongside its theoretical implications, this chapter may provide important insights for community activists and organizers by exposing the complexities and dilemmas organizations face as they come to depend for their survival on a variety of social actors with unique expectations.

12.2 Defining Legitimacy

In its broad usage, legitimacy[3] entails study of the normative dimension of power relations in society (Beetham 2013; Netelenbos 2016; Stinchcombe 1968). Since at least Weber (1978), social scientists have been sensitized to legitimacy's role in justifying a particular institutional hierarchy or power arrangement vis-à-vis a higher order of meaning (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Beetham 2013; Scott 2014; Deephouse and Suchman 2008). Weber (1978) famously elaborated a typology of legitimate authority. He argued that both the existence of a system of power as a 'social fact' and the belief in power holders' legitimacy by subordinates was crucial to understanding why they would accept being under a position of domination, especially when it explicitly countered their self-interest (Netelenbos 2016). Legitimacy is a key feature of any system of power because it 'concerns those ideas and practices that give those in power their moral authority and credibility' (Beetham 2013, p. x). It therefore ensures subordinates' obedience of institutionalized rules without any need for power holders to resort to actual coercion (Stryker 1994).

[3]Unlike moral and political philosophers, social scientists are mainly interested in legitimacy as an empirical and socially constructed process, grounded in specific temporal and geographical contexts as well as embedded in social relations and their associated sets of meanings (Beetham 2013; Netelenbos 2016; Suchman 1995; Berger and Luckmann 1967). Beetham (2013) usefully distinguishes between usages of legitimacy in moral and political philosophy, in one realm, and social science in the other. Unlike social scientists, philosophers are mainly concerned with their own prescriptions of how power relations *ought* to be arranged and according to which justifications.

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Parsons was among the first to introduce the concept of *organizational legitimacy*, conceptualizing it as a force shaping organizations in accordance with the expectations and specific needs of a society (Parsons 1956; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Suchman 1995). Drawing on Weber's insights,[4] Parsons (1956, p. 84) defined legitimacy in terms of organizational conformity to 'the norms of "good conduct" as recognized and institutionalized in the society'. Following this influential reasoning, theorists defined organizational legitimacy as the degree of conformity or congruence of organizational goals, structures and activities to laws, norms, and values embedded in a specific context (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Dowling and Pfeffer (1975, p. 123) were among the first to distinguish between *legitimacy* and *legitimation* in the case of organizations. Legitimacy, they found, should be seen as the potential outcome of a legitimation strategy, which they referred to as the actual dynamic process through which an organization justified its right to exist to a third party within a broader context of changing social norms and values. Coming from a definition of legitimacy that stresses congruence between organizational actions and environment values, Richardson and Dowling (1986, p. 91) defined legitimation as 'those social processes by which this quality of congruence is established or defended'.

Meyer and Scott (1983, p. 201) proposed an alternative though nevertheless compatible definition, which understood legitimacy in relation to the degree of 'cultural support' for an organization—that is, 'the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provide explanations for its existence, functioning, and jurisdiction, and lack or deny alternatives'. This conceptual development has found its 'closure' in Suchman's (1995, p. 574) highly influential definition, which treats legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'. That definition has provided the theoretical anchor for countless studies of organizational legitimacy, including of voluntary organizations, and it is still widely used today (Walker and McCarthy 2010; Deephouse and Suchman 2008; Scott 2014; Vermeulen and Brünger 2014; Levine 2016b).

These definitions and approaches provide a point of departure to understand organizational legitimacy and legitimation as they are commonly treated within the discipline. We can single out a number of properties that characterize those conceptualizations. First, legitimacy is seen as an inherent *relational* process; it is produced in interaction between an organization and an audience (Suchman 1995; Deephouse and Suchman 2008)—i.e. the legitimation process. Second, organizational legitimation processes are to an extent grounded in established normative expectations that transcend the judgment of single individuals, both inside and outside organizations (Meyer and Scott 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Those expectations are rooted in the historical process of *institutionalization* of social and political orders within specific contexts, and social actors often take them for granted without realizing it (Jepperson 1991). Third, organizations may well reflect the expectations of the surrounding environment in their structures and operations, but they also bear their own strategic capacity to adapt, reformulate, and potentially challenge those external expectations (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Ashforth and Gibbs 1990; Oliver 1991). Fourth, through this lens, legitimacy is seen as a strategic *mediated resource* for organizations since it will likely provide access to other resources—i.e. encouraging audiences and stakeholders who accept organizational claims to provide access to their own resources, be they time and labor, funds, or logistical support (Suchman 1995; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Hannan and Freeman 1989; McCarthy and Zald 1977).

[4]Weber (1978) was the first to suggest that respect of norms and procedures, both formal and informal, contributed to legitimating power holders' authority in the eyes of the rest of society (see also Scott 2014; Beetham 2013; Deephouse and Suchman 2008).

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12.3 The Context of Legitimacy: Institutionalization of Normative Expectations and Grounds for Legitimacy

Since at least Parsons (1956, 1960), organizational theorists have grappled with defining where legitimation processes take place and how common normative expectations develop within this very context. We thus ask how actors come to accept certain normative assumptions as valid for some organizations but not for others. How do voluntary organizations come to adopt certain organizational forms, pursue particular goals and activities and formulate some claims but not others? In this section we take a closer look at the production of those normative expectations as a result of different processes of institutionalization.

Parsons (1956) saw organizations as organic to larger societal systems, wherein organizational goals not only aligned with the values embraced by the broader society, but also fulfill some of its needs. Subsequent scholars have shifted away from this functionalist view of legitimacy, though have expanded on the idea that institutions play a key role in shaping the meanings, values, and norms that influence human behavior and, by extension, organizational action (Jepperson 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Zucker 1991; Sewell 2005; Clemens and Cook 1999; Scott 2014). In their seminal text on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1967) argued that at the most basic level, individuals create institutions by defining an ever-expanding sphere of routines and regularities in their lives. This activity creates a basic background knowledge that can be taken for granted by all those who share it and allows social actors to focus on new tasks. As the stock of meanings, rules, and norms accumulates, the institutional sphere expands. Successive social actors who are born and socialized into specific contexts tend to internalize and reproduce this institutionalized knowledge, which over time is no longer seen as the product of subjective, concrete routines, but rather has become the 'natural' way in which things are done (Zucker 1991).

Institutions, therefore, may be defined as those social patterns that, after being 'chronically reproduced, owe their survival to relatively self-activating social processes' (Jepperson 1991, p. 145). Institutions are important for organizations because they provide 'cultural definitions [that] determine how [an] organization is built, how it is run, and, simultaneously, how it is understood and evaluated' by different audiences (Suchman 1995, p. 576). These cultural definitions generate requirements and social expectations that individuals incorporate into their organizations and ultimately legitimate the organization within a specific context (Galaskiewicz 1985). Certain requirements may generally apply to a vast array of organizations, such as having an organizational mission, hiring and paying employees, satisfying tax agency, health, and labor regulations. Others may instead apply to specific organizational domains—consider, for example, the membership structure and democratic decision-making of labor unions or the money-making logic embedded in for-profit organizations.

Broadly speaking, neo-institutionalists have traditionally considered state and market as two major forces shaping organizational life (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Jepperson 1991; Scott 2014). In particular, they encourage establishment of separate spheres of social activity and organizational domains (e.g. health care, education, business)—or *organizational fields*—which are consequently governed by specific understandings and rules of the game. Large or pioneer organizations, regardless of rationale, have a major part in establishing a field and compelling subsequent organizations to comply with their set expectations. DiMaggio and Powell showed that corporation subsidiaries often adopt the accounting, performance indicator and budgetary practices of their parent company, and these practices easily spread through the actions of just a few established consulting firms. As fields develop, organizations also tend to *professionalize* while struggling to 'define the conditions and methods of their work… and establish a legitimation for their occupational autonomy' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 152).

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As DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued in their influential theory of the 'institutional cage', organizations may come to resemble each other not so much out of concern for efficiency, but rather because they develop a shared understanding of how things 'should be done'. Meyer and Rowan (1977, pp. 351–352), for example, found how American public school districts in the 1970s held near monopolies on education as long as they 'conform[ed] to wider rules about proper classifications and credentials of teachers and students, and of topics of study'. While other types of organizations, such as private charter schools, could enter the educational domain, the need to conform to state-enforced standards ultimately deterred the emergence of alternative organizational forms. Organizational ecologists have posited a similar idea in the concept of *organizational population*, noting that organizations come to resemble each other through similar selection processes of externally legitimated properties, which ultimately enhances their survival (Hannan 1986; Hannan and Freeman 1989).

We may trace similar developments in the field of voluntary organizations in the United States by analyzing the move towards standardizing grant reporting procedures across state institutions and private funders. Along these lines, we should note how figures such as 'community organizer' and 'advocate' have come, after decades of institutionalization of the field, to denote specific professional figures regulated by their own technical and normative criteria of evaluation (Chauvin 2007; Walker and McCarthy 2010). Nevertheless, we must recognize that institutionalization of voluntary organizations differs in many respects from other types of organizations, and it is probably much less pronounced than in other sectors. Voluntary organizations tend to have broader, vaguer goals and objectives than, for example, for-profit organizations, and can also assume very different organizational forms (DiMaggio 2006; Alexander 1998). This lack of homogeneity becomes evident when we consider the differences between an advocacy group, a community-based organization, a social movement organization, a worker center, and an informal intermittent group. In this cases, legitimacy of specific organizations may come to rest less on the respect of particular organizational templates than on the charisma of its funders or staff, and their ability to cultivate relations of trust and emotional affinity with different organizational audiences (Weber 1978; Netelenbos 2016; Larsson and Rönnmark 1996).

Unlike for-profit organizations—whose existence is justified by the broad acceptability within capitalist societies of the logic of profit-maximization—voluntary organizations rely on a combination of normative expectations that go beyond simply adopting formal denominations and procedures. For example, a strong *civil society* (or third sector) as a key condition for a healthy democracy is a generally accepted view in many national contexts, especially in the public sphere (Netelenbos 2016; Viterna et al. 2015). For this reason, when organizations claim to cater to or represent disadvantaged and stigmatized groups, such as undocumented immigrants, the homeless or drug addicts, they also carry 'moral weight'. This is mainly because 'the representation of ignored viewpoints appeals to a democratic conception of a pluralist public arena in a context where there is a strong bias towards the voices and interests of the powerful' (Beetham 2013, p. 277). In similar fashion, the idea of community has gained a generally positive connotation in US society, particularly in relation to associational life (see Hunter, Chap. 1, and Milofsky, Chap. 7). For this reason, voluntary organizations often mobilize this concept to justify their goals and activities (not without problems, as Danley, Chap. 5, notes). At the same time, notably as market logics have gained considerable influence over a number of domains of social life (Friedland and Alford 1991), voluntary organizations—especially those that have become government-contracted service providers—are evaluated according to managerial and efficiency standards, as well as in terms of substantive output (Smith and Lipsky 1993). As Alexander (1998, p. 273) stated, voluntary organizations 'are often located in the intersection of competing institutional spheres, as

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nonprofits, traditionally steeped in the rhetoric of charity, religion, or democracy, are increasingly governed by the rhetoric of business'.

Even within a normative context that seems to recognize conflict and incorporates particular conceptions of social change, we must acknowledge that for explicitly political organizations, structural constraints remain. Organizational ecologists, notably those studying contentious organizations and social movements, have directed their attention to how environmental constraints affect voluntary organizations that actively promote radical social change. Analyzing the disbanding of national women's and minority membership organizations between 1955 and 1985, Minkoff (1993) found that those organizations' life chances highly depended on the acceptance or rejection of their political 'blueprints for action' by external audiences, especially supporters and volunteers. The more organizations were perceived to 'follow an accepted course of institutional challenge based on moderate objectives and targeted at nonpolitical arenas', the more their legitimacy increased in the eyes of their constituencies and the overall public opinion (Minkoff 1993, pp. 903–904). Taking this perspective, other researchers have hinted at the strong role that the state still retains in shaping not only the forms of organizations, but also the appropriateness of organizational goals and discursive claims (Koopmans 2004; Koopmans and Statham 2003). In their study of organizations of Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands, Vermeulen and Berger (2008, p. 166), for example, found that Dutch national and local policies helped drive immigrants towards *ethnic* forms of organizations, as they encouraged 'immigrants to integrate in Dutch society and yet retain their cultural identity'.

One of the major contributions of neo-institutional theory has been to conceptualize contexts in terms of fields or population environments. This conceptualization stresses the importance of the nation-state, the institutionalization of professions and templates, as well as of cognitive frameworks in structuring norms and values expressed in organizations and their claims (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). However, when it comes to voluntary organizations, we argue that these abstract dimensions also necessitate being grounded in actual communities.[5] As McQuarrie and Marwell (2009, pp. 259–260) have convincingly argued, communities, particularly spatial ones, are a crucial place where those values and norms originate. Communities are the context where organizations operate, where they pursue many of their objectives, conduct their activities and mobilize a significant share of their resources. For these reasons, organizations can hardly be evaluated exclusively in terms of externally validated properties; they must also relate to the norms and values of the community in which they are embedded and connect (at least in some way) with the everyday experience of community members (Chaskin 2001; Alinsky 1941).

Marquis et al. (2007) showed how the basis of legitimacy for organizations may change across cities and bounded communities, and therefore that organizational legitimacy also has a spatial dimension. Local understandings, norms, and rules can serve as touchstones for organizational activity in a community. In their research, they argue that organizational templates vary from community to community, making some types of organizations more legitimate in one community than in another. Such variation, at least in the US context, stems from a number of historical, demographical, and geographical factors—for instance, the historical migratory and settlement patterns of different ethnic and religious groups, each of whom brings unique frames for what constitutes a legitimate organizational form. Vermeulen et al. (2016b) showed how neighborhood characteristics affect the spatial dimension of organizational legitimacy among voluntary organizations in Amsterdam's neighborhoods. Their article begins by noting that neighborhoods are concrete spaces wherein urban residents can interact, produce social norms and articulate a distinctive social order (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009). The empirical

[5]For an extensive discussion of the different conceptions of community, see Hunter (Chap. 1, this volume).

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analysis, however, leads to the suggestion that for certain immigrant organizations, citywide networks may be more salient than those of neighborhoods. The authors thus underscored the importance of noting how specific organizations, such as recreation or service providers, may be tied to specific neighborhoods (and their specific social configuration) more than general ones that engage in broad advocacy and support. In fact, Vermeulen et al. (2016a) found that the neighborhood is a vital basis of organizational legitimacy for recreational voluntary associations having a relatively strong connection with the neighborhood in which they are located, for instance, football clubs, billiards associations, drama clubs, children's circus groups, and gardening associations. For these types of recreational organizations, certain demographics, such as percentages of immigrants or children in the neighborhood, has an effect on organizational survival rates. The authors accounted for this by referring to the neighborhoods' deeper set of shared frameworks; these concern legitimate organizational forms and behaviors, which accumulate through everyday interactions with other neighborhood residents.

12.4 The Context of Legitimacy: Audiences and Power Inequality

Having examined the construction of normative expectations within specific contexts, we now turn to the audiences of voluntary organizations. We question whose beliefs and norms are relevant when assessing such an organization's legitimacy. Who are the relevant audiences for organizations, and how do organizations decide whom to target? Who has the power to confer legitimacy on an organization by virtue of their position?

As we have so far shown, defining the appropriate normative context of organizational analysis is no easy task. Its complexity lies in the accountability organizations often have to multiple stakeholders; legitimacy, moreover, must be evaluated in relation to the normative expectations of each audience, who may not always be compatible with each other or internally consistent (Elsbach and Sutton 1992; Suchman 1995; Thornton and Ocasio 2008). According to Scott (2014), an organization is less likely to be seen as an overall legitimate actor when it is confronted by competing sovereign authorities, which embed conflicting normative requirements. To assess an organization's legitimacy, Pfeffer and Salancik, as early as 1978, asked not only whose normative expectations should be taken into account, but also which organizational aspects should count in the evaluation. They found that this question could not be answered in general terms. The suggestion was that an organization need not be legitimate for all segments of society, but rather at least for those third parties that contribute to the organizational resources critical to its survival (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Vermeulen and Brünger 2014). In the case of community-based voluntary organizations, those parties may comprise a variety of actors, including members, volunteers, individual donors, community supporters, as well as governmental agencies, private foundations, and federated organizations, such as United Way (a nationwide coalition of community groups chiefly focused on fundraising).

While we broadly agree with those propositions, we raise some additional points. First, we argue that the range of audiences should be expanded and more clearly defined. The interaction between organizations and audiences should be conceptualized more dynamically to include opponents rather than be reduced to strict support. Second, and relatedly, we argue that audience relevance will most likely be based on considerations of both material and symbolic power. Third, we argue that the discussion about an organization's overall legitimacy is largely misplaced. More often than not, an organization's legitimacy, or illegitimacy, is a question of the grounds on which an organization is evaluated by itself and others and if those grounds are

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relevant to people who are invested in the organization.[6] We draw on social movement theory to propose a definition of audiences that we deem suitable for voluntary organizations.

As some of those who study institutions have already conveyed, even small-scale settings are usually governed by competing 'institutional logics'. They are produced by the actions of overlapping institutional domains such as market, state, community, and family, and define what is appropriate, desirable and comprehensible within specific contexts (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 2008). As a result, there will necessarily be different audiences, each with its own normative expectations as well as resources and power endowments, which may or may not be relevant for voluntary organizations (Clemens and Cook 1999; Beetham 2013; McCarthy and Zald 1977).

To reiterate, audiences matter because they provide resources and support. However, their role is often more complex than that. For example, government institutions or grant foundations may also provide recognition to voluntary organizations, particularly when engaged in influencing policy or achieving some strategic objective. As we argued in the introduction, this is particularly important if we consider the role of many community-based organizations in contemporary societies. We observe that urban politics (and politics more in general) can hardly be reduced to the analysis of how state institutions establish legitimate domination, rather should be extended to how a plurality of actors (including a variety of voluntary organizations) develop legitimate governance infrastructures, or to how both state and non-state actors manage strategic conflict within a pluralist society (Smith and Lipsky 1993; Netelenbos 2016; McQuarrie 2013; Jasper 2015; Fliegstein and McAdam 2011). This has also led more resource-rich actors, such as state institutions and private funders, to adopt legitimation strategies similar to those of voluntary organizations. For example, Levine (2016a, b), in his ethnography of urban neighborhood redevelopment found that even city officials, as well as funders, felt compelled to legitimize their role vis-à-vis a community-based organization. And they did so by appealing to an established macro-logic of non-divisive 'partnership', which has replaced the notion of partisan conflict in the governance of contemporary US cities (Stone and Stoker 2015; McQuarrie 2013).

Neo-institutional theorists have traditionally privileged the value of fields and large institutions, emphasizing peer and government recognition in the legitimation process (Galaskiewicz 1985). They also argued that particular actors, such as state institutions,[7] carry greater weight than others in the legitimation process for any type of organization. As Scott (2014, p. 73) stated, those 'whose values define legitimacy is [ultimately] a matter of concerted power' (see also Stinchcombe 1968). The importance of the state cannot be discredited, but we must not neglect the role of other audiences, such as private funders and community-related audiences. This dimension is especially important for voluntary organizations, whose interaction with members, militants, volunteers, or constituents constitutes one of the major axes of

[6]The study by Elsbach and Sutton (1992) showed how certain radical political organizations may be able to gain legitimacy with constituencies through 'illegitimate' actions. However, in equating illegitimacy with noncompliance with the formal state law, the authors focus on a particular type of rule conformity; though generally deemed important, this type may not be relevant for some audiences as a ground for establishing legitimacy. As presented by Scott (2014)—who shows how the mafia is an illegitimate institution according to the normative standards of most citizens in Western liberal democracies while still being legitimate for its members—legitimacy is always a function of a specific point of view.

[7]The state, through its regulatory and certification agencies, and professional orders have become crucial gatekeepers in many domains of organizational life—consider, for example, the accreditation processes required of a hospital and its medical personnel, or how new business ventures may need the local chamber of commerce's approval before engaging in any transactions. Many community-based organizations would hardly even be considered for funding without first providing the legal incorporation documentation (official name, type of corporate structure, organizational purposes, etc.) mandated by federal legislation.

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organizational activity.[8] Communities themselves, however, are stratified along a number of cleavages, including class (Chung et al. 2013). As a result, the endorsement of specific 'community elites' tends to have more far-reaching consequences than that of other members (see Danley, Chap. 5).

Social movement scholars and political sociologists have devoted considerable effort to fleshing out the characteristics and roles of audiences (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Jasper 2015; Fliegstein and McAdam 2011). McCarthy and Zald's analytical schema proved pertinent for integrating voluntary organizations' many functions (in terms of goals and objectives) and forms. Drawing on their framework, we distinguish four types of audiences: *adherents*, who espouse the goals of an organization; *constituents*, who provide material resources to the organization; *bystander publics*, who neither support nor actively fight an organization and its goals; *opponents*, who oppose the organization and its goals. As McCarthy and Zald (1977, p. 1222) determined, one of the primary tasks of an organization is 'converting adherents into constituents and maintaining constituents involvement'. We can further classify those categories according to whether particular actors (adherents, constituents, or bystanders) would directly benefit[9] from the achievement of a particular goal (or provision of a particular service)—i.e. the *potential beneficiaries*—and those who would not—i.e. *conscience adherents* and conscience constituents. We must keep those analytical distinctions in mind when thinking about legitimacy. In empirical terms, those definitions may apply to a wide range of groups as they are identified by organizations in their everyday operations: members, volunteers, activists, militants, communities, allies, donors, private funders, government agencies, inter alia. The saliency of each category and group depends on the specific organization and its characteristics (structure, goals, etc.), but analytically it becomes more useful to assess whether, in a given context, each of these groups does one of two things: (1) provides important resources; (2) becomes directly affected by organizational action.

Depending on the specific context, organizations may direct their claims towards each one of these specific audiences, including opponents.[10] For example, if a voluntary organization is interested in being recognized by a local company—to be seen as an acceptable bargainer on behalf of its workers—it must consider the normative expectations of company staff and the organization as a whole. Similarly, if an organization is interested in developing a representative relationship with the residents of a specific neighborhood, it will have to devote considerable effort to targeting those communities. At the same time, we must recognize that some organizations may refuse to seek recognition (from opponents) or support (from constituents) because of their specific ideological preferences. For example, many social movement organizations do not wish to be associated in any way with government institutions and refuse to apply

[8]A possible explanation for the deficiency may be that early legitimacy scholars developed their theories in the context of service provision organizations (e.g. hospitals, museums, schools) and for-profit organizations, particularly corporations (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Meyer and Scott 1983; Suchman 1995). Up until now, organizational legitimacy theory has been applied primarily to those types of organizations, and examples of such research are mostly found in journals of management and administrative research. Those theories were applied to the field of voluntary organizations as a sub-category of these types of organizations, generating inconsistencies stemming from the dramatically diverging goals and logics among voluntary organizations (notably the most political ones) and other groups.

[9]While the notion of benefit is problematic—especially if we argue that benefits may come in the form of preference (i.e. value-based) satisfaction—we still find it useful to distinguish between a direct tangible benefit and a more abstract preference-based one. This is consistent with our view that the interaction between organizations and audiences is always grounded in normative expectations. However, organizations do not only engage in legitimation, but also provide concrete, tangible offerings.

[10]The literature on non-profit organizations, rooted in a model of politics as consensual, tends to downplay the role of opponents within a perspective of strategic political conflict (Walker and McCarthy 2010). Rather, studies emphasize more opponents as being potential competitors for funds and resources in the same organizational field (Vermeulen et al. 2016b).

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for or receive any government funding for their activities. State legitimation may in fact have a delegitimizing effect on the organization for some of its other audiences, such as activists and militants. Many constituents may therefore provide resources to organizations, but may not be directly affected by their goals. Consider, for example, the role of foundations or government agencies in supporting many voluntary organizations by providing services or organizing under-resourced communities. In certain cases, constituents may be directly affected by organizational goals and goods, and be able to contribute;[11] for instance, community members and volunteers may give donations, organize fundraising, contribute equipment or knowhow, and help plan and run organizational activities (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Walker and McCarthy 2010). However, in other cases, those affected by organizational activities—such as marginalized and vulnerable groups like poor people, undocumented immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities—may lack any substantial resources to contribute to the organization (Fine 2006; Milkman et al. 2010). In fact, their lack of resources and means of power may justify their organizational involvement in the first place (Beetham 2013).

It is therefore important to distinguish between material resources such as money and time and the symbolic resource of audiences. Apart from instances where human numbers can be successfully mobilized as a resource—for example, during public actions such as pickets, demonstrations, rallies and strikes—potential beneficiaries who cannot contribute to resources tend to have a strong symbolic role rather than any substantial one (Jenkins 2002). If we go back to a normative conception of civil society and communities, as described in the previous section, we see that this symbolic role takes on meaning when organizations try to legitimate themselves to funders or local institutions. Whether an organization's primary mission is service provision or political representation, its legitimacy for external audiences then comes to rest, at least in part,[12] on the perceived legitimacy of its relationship with its beneficiaries (Beetham 2013; Walker and McCarthy 2010).

12.5 Organizational Agency in Legitimation Strategies: An Institutional Perspective

In this section, we analyze the legitimation process from the organizations' point of view. We suggest two ways to address the issue of organizational agency in legitimacy. The first draws on an institutional approach examining legitimation and legitimacy crises over long period of times. The second draws on a notion of legitimation as an inherently contested process, negotiated in everyday activity. Both views are consistent with a perspective on organizations as relatively autonomous agents with the capacity to both reproduce and contest existing structures.[13]

The institutional approach generally splits the legitimation process into three phases: (1) the securing of legitimacy; (2) its maintenance; (3) its reparation in case of loss (Suchman 1995; Ashforth and Gibbs 1990; Elsbach 1994). Along these lines, organizational legitimacy is strongly conceptualized in institutional terms, particularly vis-à-vis forms and organizational templates. Through a strict neo-institutional lens, organizations are generally seen as having a relatively limited degree of agency. The only exception is the initial stage of a development of a field, when pioneer organizations led by skilled *institutional*

[11]Certain organizations may also decide to seek no external funding in order to avoid professionalisation and potential bureaucratization. See Kelley (Chap. 29, this volume) for an example of how different organizations debate those issues.

[12]Researchers have found that voluntary organizations in Western societies broadly base their legitimacy on a mix of democratic and technocratic ideals (Beetham 2013; Walker and McCarthy 2010). The second level relates to the organizational staff's claim to knowledge and experience concerning a specific domain of action.

[13]This perspective is grounded in theories that emphasize the 'duality of structure' (Giddens 1984; Sewell 2005; Clemens and Cook 1999). Inasmuch as 'structure shapes people's practices… it is also people's practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures' (Sewell 2005, p. 127).

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entrepreneurs (DiMaggio 1988) are first and foremost engaged in developing a sense that a new sector 'objectively exists independently of specific organizations' (Suchman 1995, p. 586). During this period they also must engage in sustained outreach to publicize their activities, thereby creating a constituency or target audience and persuading legitimate entities to provide support to enhance their overall legitimacy (Suchman 1995). Unlike large political institutions, organizations have to compete for their legitimacy with similar organizations in other domains (e.g. advocacy organizations vs. community-based organizations in the broader non-profit sector), and therefore need to actively *promote* their organizational type as valuable and worthy of support (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). New organizations may also fail to gain recognition because they lack reputational indicators, such as organizational or individual track records, which can often effectively back particular claims with the reasonable promise of appropriate performance. Since some organizational forms may be too different from existing ones within specific contexts, these organizations may initially suffer what organizational ecologists have called the 'liability of newness' (Freeman et al. 1983; Stinchcombe 1965). However, once an organizational field is established, social actors come to recognize certain organizational forms or templates, along with their associated features, as being natural within a given order of arrangements (Suchman 1995). As long as an institutionalized organizational field already exists and it has produced a recognized organizational template, new organizations may achieve a first level of legitimacy by simply adopting this template (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

As Suchman (1995, p. 587) stated, all these strategies 'involve complex mixtures of concrete organizational change and persuasive organizational communication'. Within a more managerial view of legitimacy, organizations are seen as strategic agents purposefully manipulating the surrounding environment (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Dowling and Pfeffer 1975). Organizations retain a certain degree of autonomy within certain dimensions: first, in relation to the level of conformity they may be able to exercise vis-à-vis the environment—be it foundational, superficial, symbolic; second, in relation to their choice of relevant audiences for strategic targeting; third, in relation to potential capacity of organizations to manipulate the very values and beliefs of the environment in which they operate (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990; Richardson 1985). As Meyer and Rowan memorably argued (1977), organizational requirements need not always be substantial and fundamental, as organizations may simply be required to 'adopt certain highly visible and salient practices that are consistent with social expectations, while leaving the essential machinery of the organization intact' (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990, p. 181). Meyer and Rowan's (1977) theory of rational institutional *myths*,[14] which posited a 'loose coupling' between formal structure and actual organizational activities, suggested exactly this type of dynamic. Consider, for example, the widespread diffusion of ethics and corporate social responsibility departments in corporations or the adoption of standards and certifications provided by gatekeepers and labeling institutions in highly formalized and institutionalized environments.

According to this understanding of legitimacy, once legitimation has been successful, it requires relatively less effort to maintain it. Thus, the existence of particular organizations comes to be taken for granted. Legitimation work is therefore mainly directed towards maintaining the appearance that 'business is running as usual' (Suchman 1995), as well as monitoring possible changes in the normative expectations of the different audiences targeted by organizations.

[14]Meyer and Rowan suggested that contemporary organizations develop in societies that are already highly institutionalized. As new types of organization emerge, they tend to incorporate procedures and practices that are already accepted in a specific context. Those procedures and practices are 'defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, p. 340) and adopted by organizations specifically for their legitimating function. Rather than being adopted out of concerns of organizational effectiveness, those organizational features are adopted ceremonially, and function 'as powerful myths' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, p. 340).

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Loss of legitimacy is therefore viewed with a long-term perspective, being tied to an 'unforeseen crisis of meaning' in light of changed values and beliefs of targeted audiences, and *not* in relation to specific issues of performance or decisions (Suchman 1995; Ashforth and Gibbs 1990). For organizational staff, it is therefore crucial to anticipate challenges and be alert to environmental changes, providing reassurances to audiences while simultaneously preparing the terrain for possible changes in strategy. 'Risk assessment' and 'crisis management' are hence new buzzwords in the voluntary sector, mirroring the language of for-profit organizations.

We can see those processes at work in various situations. As already stated, legitimacy is dependent on a relationship with one or multiple audiences, whose values and beliefs may also change over time as a result of a number of structural processes that escape the reach of any single organization (Beetham 2013; Sewell 2005; Clemens and Cook 1999). For example, a community-based organization rooted in a specific neighborhood may witness major demographic changes in the area as an effect of economic downturns or gentrification. The arrival of people of different ethnic or racial backgrounds, age cohorts or income brackets can also significantly affect the viability of specific organizations as they influence the area's prevailing normative expectations.

Responding to these circumstances, organizations thus often employ a mix of substantive changes and strong symbolic management. This may include directly denying the misrepresentation of organizational activities, but also emphasize re-explanations of past organizational activities that retroactively present them in light of the changed system of values (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Typical actions of symbolic management of legitimation include providing *accounts*, which 'are explanations designed to remove one from a situation that may reflect unfavorably on one's image or claims to legitimacy' (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990, p. 181). Those accounts often include excuses, such as the attribution of unfavorable outcomes to unexpected or external events, but also justifications that minimize the negative outcome (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990). Other actions include offering *apologies*, an action that acknowledges the organization's own responsibility while still attempting to maintain some credibility towards target audiences (Ashforth and Gibbs 1990).

As Scott (2014) pointed out, legitimacy is most evident when absent. Open criticism and questioning often signal that an organization has lost—or may be in the process of losing—its legitimacy for some audiences. Lack of legitimacy occurs when an organization has failed to recognize the lost cultural support for its activities (Meyer and Scott 1983). Threatened legitimacy may be hard to overcome, especially if previous legitimation strategies have already been discredited. It may also trigger a cascade reaction, which pushes former organizational allies and supporters to self-distance so as to avoid their own delegitimation. Suchman (1995) finds that organizations may still be able to protect their legitimacy so long as they enjoy even a bit of credibility and support among relevant audiences.

In fact, adaptability to the changing normative contexts is probably the most important quality of resilient organizations. Zald and Denton's (Zald 1970; Zald and Denton 1963) fascinating study of the Young Men's Christian Association in the US showed just that. The authors describe the transformation of the YMCA, from its start in the mid-1800s as an evangelical Protestant organization to its state in the mid-1960s, at which point it had become a more secular- and market-oriented organization largely dependent on membership sales.[15] The study revealed how shifting values and beliefs in society—and particularly in the subgroup of members and related audiences who constituted the bulk of the organization's support—point to patterns of

[15]The organization is still active and has continued to change over the last few decades. In their latest efforts to distance themselves from their initial faith-based character, they have come to embrace issues such as sustainable development, gender equality or racism. As of 2010, the US branch of YMCA has also adopted a new logo and it is now simply known as 'The Y'.

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organizational survival through change and adaptation. As Minkoff and Powell (2006) noted, however, organizations may be limited in their substantial and adaptive efforts to the changing environment by their own historical trajectory, particularly by the original articulation of the organizational mission. This may happen, for example, when organizations refuse to seek legitimacy from certain actors. Consider, for example, a social movement organization that refuses to deal with state institutions for ideological reasons and therefore will not comply with any of their normative expectations. Or, in the same scenario, it could be that adaptation would require complete goal displacement, and that goal is still seen as the only justification for the organization's existence.

12.6 Organizational Agency in Legitimation Strategies: A Strategic Perspective

Without always explicitly incorporating legitimacy, some researchers have grappled with organizational agency being normatively framed from a strategic perspective (Jasper 2015; Fliegstein and McAdam 2011; Netelenbos 2016; Levine 2016b). Their approach emphasizes 'arenas' (Jasper 2015) or 'strategic fields' (Fliegstein and McAdam 2011) as sites of contention, where actors employ strategic repertoires to get others to do what they want them to (Jasper 2015, p. 19). Despite recognizing the existence of specific rules of the game (what might be called the established normative expectations that ground legitimacy), those actors make strategic moves that may reproduce, ignore, or subvert those rules for the sake of accomplishing their goals. Indeed, while form and procedures are important, they are inherently tied to issues of performance—the achievement (or at least its promise) of organizational goals (Netelenbos 2016). Through this lens, actors can be conceptualized collectively, for example, as organizations or fields. However, their own normative consistency should also be seen as the product of internal negotiation and strategic action among smaller units in smaller arenas (the different organizations and the different audiences or the different individuals involved in the same organizations). While the institutionalization of particular organizational dimensions provides insights into what types of organizations will survive or change over time, this view emphasizes the practices of negotiation that take place in everyday political interaction.

Chung (2007), Kwon (2010), and Gnes (2016) described the complex process through which the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA) established its legitimacy for multiple audiences with very different normative expectations. Founded by a South Korean-born activist with a strong Marxist background, the multi-ethnic immigrant advocacy organization in Los Angeles' Koreatown, had to develop alternative rationales for its existence. Which rationale was elicited depended on whether the organization was trying to obtain the support of local US labor unions, immigrant rights organizations or private funders, to recruit members among newly arrived immigrants from South Korea or Latin America or to gain neighborhood recognition and acceptance from the Korean business community. Each strategy required toning down or emphasizing specific aspects of the organization, from its compliance with non-profit regulations to championing the immigrant working class, from its commitment to the Korean community's wellbeing to its rejection of 'Communism'. It also required KIWA to strategically seek different kinds of endorsements to enhance its legitimacy, from the local Korean 'ethnic' media to longstanding activists respected in the local activist scene, from LA politicians to Korean religious ministers working in the neighborhood.

It is important to remember that 'organizations become infused with the norms and values of the people who make them up, rather than simply being the expressions of actors' goals' (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009, p. 260). Organizations are not simply social facts that abstractly conform to external expectations, but rather are sites of everyday normative negotiation and discussion among individuals. Organizations are

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constantly concerned about legitimacy and continually engage in legitimation management in relation to specific audiences. They wonder how changes in goals or activities will be perceived, whether they will affect organizational support and their credibility. However, they also weigh those considerations in relation to the organizational values and those who make up the organization. We see this clearly in Del Valle's (2016) article exploring discussions within the non-governmental organization Doctors Without Borders (MSF) concerning engagement in a search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea. Confronted by a dilemma of whether or not to intervene to help immigrants attempting to enter Europe by boat, some MSF staff argued against launching such action; they felt the operation would make the organization 'too political' and that MSF would be overstepping the bounds of its general mission to provide medical assistance. Those who favored the operation stressed the organization's commitment to humanitarianism, arguing that migrant deaths at sea was a catastrophe demanding a more political intervention. Notably among those who opposed the operation, there was concern about how donors and subscribers, which constitute the bulk of the organization's support,[16] would evaluate its new potential role. The organization eventually decided to launch the operation, despite the prospect of losing members and donors as a result. While MSF lost the support of some members, its new role gave the organization the chance to recruit new supporters who were emboldened by its more politicized commitment.

Lastly, we should not forget that another level in which voluntary organizations become active agents is in the construction of their relationship with a community. In making particular claims, organizations chiefly rely on their relationship with a community—members, volunteers, residents, inter alia—to justify the right to exist (Beetham 2013). However, organizations do not make claims based on their neutral de facto representation of community interests. In doing so, they also contribute to the symbolic construction of this very group and its interests, highlighting some dimensions while downplaying others (Stokke and Selboe 2009). In formulating different claims of community representation—for example by emphasizing class and multi-ethnic solidarities, or rather by encouraging ethnic loyalties—organizations articulate 'political projects' (Chung et al. 2013) that underscore the saliency of certain audiences and their concerns within a particular community (Gnes 2016). This symbolic construction is not unique to organizations. Organizational criteria are rarely formulated from organizational templates or broader institutional categorizations available within specific contexts. They cannot be entirely disconnected from the experiential reality of their constituents. However, organizations have a relative autonomy in selecting and defining their internal audience, emphasizing and over time even changing different criteria among them: ethnicity and race, geographical location, religious affiliation, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, identity, or a combination of these dimensions, and many more (Vermeulen et al. 2016b; Walker and McCarthy 2010).

Considering the LA case study, we observe how Kwon (2010) found that KIWA redefined its constituency as the 'residents and workers' of Koreatown, thus grounding its legitimacy in the neighborhood rather than a specific ethnic community. While this process was not disconnected from wider socioeconomic dynamics of the neighborhood—the increasing heterogeneity of the residents, the rising saliency of issues such as gentrification or affordable housing—it was largely directed by the organization's conscious decision to abandon more confrontational unionization campaigns and focus on urban redevelopment advocacy. Within this process, it also strategically reframed its message to attract support from new audiences, such as leaders of the local Korean business community (Chung 2007).

[16]MSF receives no funds from national governments or supranational institutions.

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12.7 Conclusion

In this final section we recapitulate the relevance and usefulness of the concept of organizational legitimacy for the study of voluntary organizations.

In our introduction, we stated that voluntary organizations play an important mediating role between larger institutions such as state and market, on one side, and communities, on the other. Voluntary organizations are vital for communities because they provide services, engage in political activities and produce social change. In many cases, they are the only means to amplify the political voice of marginalized communities. For all these reasons, how organizations legitimate their claims towards their different audiences, community members included, matters.

Throughout this chapter, we underscored critical points to consider when analyzing organizational legitimacy. We began by reviewing its basic definition, which organizational scholars have broadly defined as the level of cultural congruence of organizations with the environment in which they operate. Organizational legitimacy fulfills its most vital function for organizations as a *mediated resource*, providing access to other resources such as funds or labor. We suggested, however, that the link between legitimacy and access to resources is not always straightforward. Legitimacy may succeed in backing particular claims, but scale of preferences and level of resources—i.e. of audiences—will also matter for determining the level of support that organizations can successfully claim. Moreover, particular organizational claims, for example a claim of representation, are not only directed at securing support, but also at building organizational 'moral' power (such as the power to influence political decisions).

We then examined the importance of the context in which the legitimation process takes place. Borrowing heavily from neo-institutional theory, we argued that organizational claims are largely evaluated according to institutionalized normative expectations. Those expectations dictate appropriate organizational structures and procedures in a given environment and suggest desirable organizational forms to achieve specific purposes. For what specifically concerns voluntary organizations in Western societies, we also suggested that democratic and market logics may both play a role in determining acceptable organizational forms, goals, and activities. We continued our analysis by analyzing the role of audiences and addressed the question of which audiences matter the most for legitimation and why. We drew on the conceptualization of McCarthy and Zald (1977) to identify critical differences among audiences of voluntary organizations. The direction of organizational goals, ideological considerations and resource inequalities all have a major part in directing organizations towards specific audiences.

In the final two sections, we analyzed the process of legitimation from the agentic perspective of the organization. The first section emphasized organizational agency within an institutional perspective. We argued that organizations' managerial autonomy, from a strict institutional view, is limited to the point at which pioneer organizations construct a new organizational field. However, drawing on a more nuanced vision of organizational agency, we argued that organizations have relative leverage in manipulating the environment and reconfiguring the network of audiences with whom they interact. Moreover, through strategic communication—involving appeals to emotions and rational argumentation—organizations are able to construct alternative accounts that are accepted as legitimate. The second section drew on theories of organizations that emphasize strategic action and coordination in everyday political interaction. While those theories are not insensitive to the importance of long-standing rules and norms, they also suggest that legitimacy is constantly appraised in micro-processes of negotiation and conflict. Organizations are constantly doing 'legitimation work' for strategic purposes, not only to legitimate their existence but to achieve concrete political objectives and counter power and resource inequalities.

These dynamics are highly complex, but we can begin to better understand them when we pay

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more attention to how voluntary organizations are affected by their environment, as well as to how they contribute to shaping it. That is, how the quest for resources and legitimacy affects their organizational trajectory and their relationship with their primary constituents, but also how organizations themselves contribute to producing audiences and communities and articulating their interests and needs. As we approach the issue of legitimacy, we must remind ourselves that analyzing legitimacy is not about the evaluation of particular normative expectations that we, as researchers or individuals, may hold or privilege. Instead, it is about how the normative assumptions of specific organizations are justified—or not—within a particular normative context and in relation to the expectations of particular audiences. Much work must be done to better understand how considerations of legitimacy at different levels affect the behavior of voluntary organizations, and we hope this chapter will stimulate more empirical research in this direction.

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