A ‘Key Success Factor’: Elucidating the Meaning of Legitimacy for UN Peacekeepers

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Abstract

Legitimacy has become a widespread term within policy documents of international organizations, not least international peacekeeping. But legitimacy is also a contested concept, so it matters greatly how it is understood on the ground. In this article, I ask what meanings the UN Department of Peace Operations attributes to the concept of legitimacy. Using a qualitative content analysis to study policy and training documents published by the department, I argue that the department understands the local legitimacy of UN peacekeeping missions as a (mis-)perception of its international legitimacy and underappreciates how other actors might undermine UN and state legitimacy.

Keywords: *legitimation, Peacekeeping, relationality, International organizations, Department of Peace Operations, United Nations*

Introduction

Legitimacy is a central concept within political science and the study of (global) governance and has been described as ‘the master question of politics’ (Barker 1990,

24). But it is also 'an opaque and elusive concept on the border between empirical and normative social science' (Steffek 2003, 251). Indeed, legitimacy could be described as an 'essentially contested concept' in the sense that its abstract criteria are not only academically contested, but these contested criteria sometimes fulfil different functions for different political actors (Gallie 1955, 168).

States, international institutions and even military organizations rely on and reproduce various conceptions of legitimacy within their own practice to identify policy priorities and shape their implementation (Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu 2014; Nachbar 2012; Walter-Drop and Remmert 2018). Not least within international peacekeeping, legitimacy gained prominence among practitioners. Given the goal within this policy realm to create stable polities, legitimacy has taken hold early on as a concept to explain dynamics of support and compliance (von Billerbeck 2017). The 2008 'capstone doctrine', a document outlining core principles and guidelines to UN peacekeeping operations, has labelled legitimacy one of six 'success factors', arguing that 'in order to succeed, United Nations peacekeeping operations must also be perceived as legitimate and credible, particularly in the eyes of the local population' (DPKO 2008, 36). A similar centrality is attributed to legitimacy in training materials, where legitimacy is taught as a 'key success factor' next to credibility and local ownership (DPKO 2017a, 237).

If this vague and abstract concept of legitimacy – what Geertz (1974, 28) calls 'experience-distant'[1] – is used within the policy processes of international institutions, it matters greatly how practitioners within these institutions understand the concept. In other words, it becomes important to consider 'experience-near'

1. Experience-distant concepts, Geertz (1974, 28) argues, are used by 'various types of specialists [...] to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims.' Conversely, an experience-near concept is 'one which an individual [...] might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine'.

conceptions of legitimacy, the 'ordinary meaning' (Schaffer 2016) of legitimacy in everyday contexts for those social actors drafting, implementing and communicating policies.

Scholarship on international organizations has considered the concept of legitimacy to explore the behaviour of and towards institutions and of the actors within them (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012; Hurd 1999; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Whalan 2013). Legitimacy is said to increase compliance with an actor's governance, render its conduct more efficient, and foster an entity's popular acceptance and support (Grynkewich 2008; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018; Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018; Tyler 2006b). Furthermore, scholars have investigated the legitimation strategies of international organizations (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016; McNamara 2015), how their legitimacy is contested (Tallberg and Zürn 2019) and how different audiences shape legitimation strategies (Coleman 2017; von Billerbeck 2017). However, less has been said about how the concept of legitimacy is used by practitioners of international politics (notable exceptions include Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu 2014; Nachbar 2012; Walter-Drop and Remmert 2018). In other words, while more and more scholarship applies the concept of legitimacy to international organizations, they fall short of problematizing what the concept means to international organizations' staff themselves and their role in the day-to-day policymaking of international organizations. These considerations lead us to turn the often-posed question of the legitimacy of international organizations on its head. Rather than asking what the legitimacy of an international organization *is* or how international organizations *seek* internal or external legitimacy, I ask: how do international organizations themselves *understand* the concept of legitimacy?

Centring on international peacekeeping, this article investigates the under-

standing of legitimacy within the UN's Department of Peace Operations.[2] Building on a qualitative content analysis to study guidance, policy and training documents published by the department, I study how legitimacy is used in internal textual documents and discourse. Based on this 'ordinary language analysis' (Schaffer 2016), I elucidate the meanings the Department of Peace Operations attributes to the concept of legitimacy.

This article makes two contributions to the study of legitimacy and international organizations. First, unlike most studies, I do not assess the legitimacy attributed to an international organization but rather try to uncover how these organizations understand the concept of legitimacy. As such, the article offers an alternative angle to the inquiry of the legitimacy of international organizations that complements the 'evaluative' literature by arguing for the relevance of considering not only how legitimate an organization is but also how an organization uses the concept of legitimacy. Second, I contribute to the literature on statebuilding and peacebuilding by critically assessing the conceptions of legitimacy held by one of the major peacekeeping organizations, the UN Department of Peace Operations. In doing so, the article advances the literature investigating the internal belief systems of the UN and its role in its policymaking (Barnett 1997; von Billerbeck 2020b). I argue that the department understands the local legitimacy of UN peacekeeping missions as a (mis-)perception of its international legitimacy and underappreciates how other actors might undermine UN and state legitimacy.

I advance my argument in three steps. First, I critically assess the literature on the legitimacy of international organizations, specifically the UN, and show that this scholarship has not yet paid sufficient attention to international organizations'

2. Formerly the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO).

own conceptions of legitimacy. Second, I introduce my theoretical approach to concept elucidation and present the research design of my qualitative content analysis. Third, I discuss how legitimacy is used within texts of the UN's Department of Peace Operations and what meanings are attributed to it, interpreting these conceptions in light of recent insights from scholarship on legitimacy.

Legitimacy, international organizations and meaning-making

While many definitions exist, legitimacy generally describes a perceived quality of a power relation between a referent, most importantly rulers such as the state, and an audience, the ruled such as a given population (Schoon 2022). Most commonly, legitimacy is considered the belief among a given group that a rule 'ought to be obeyed' (Hurd 1999, 381). In slightly broader terms, Suchman defines 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' (Suchman 1995, 574).

Within international relations scholarship, the concept of legitimacy has received increasing attention over the last two decades. Scholars have started to investigate the legitimacy of international organizations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Hurd 1999; Scharpf 1999; Schmidt 2013), peacekeeping missions (Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018; Spandler 2020; von Billerbeck 2017; Wajner and Kacowicz 2018) and even rebel groups (Duyvesteyn 2017; Terpstra and Frerks 2017). These strands of research have made interesting headway on the concept of legitimacy and the question of how such actors *become* legitimized.

Where does the legitimacy of actors such as states or international organizations come from? To answer this question, scholars have established various

typologies of 'sources of legitimacy' (Zürn 2018). Where these sources show congruence to certain 'normative benchmarks', the argument goes, a given actor will be considered legitimate (Gippert 2016, 524). First, scholars have investigated the role of an institution's output, such as the effective provision of services, in shaping its legitimacy where they resonate with audiences' ideas of the 'common good' (Scharpf 1999; see also Gippert 2016, 526). Within the context of statebuilding, several studies have pointed towards the primacy of performance as giving rise to a state or institution's legitimacy (Rotberg 2003; Rothstein 2009; Schmelzle and Stollenwerk 2018; for an excellent critique of this approach, see Lemay-Hébert 2013).

Second, studies have shown that an institution's procedures, such as the inclusion of subordinates into the decision-making process, contribute to its legitimacy (Hurd 2008; Schmidt 2013; Tyler 2006a). For example, Nielson et al. (2019) investigate how various procedural layouts of international organizations correlate with perceptions of appropriateness among NGO employees. Within a post-conflict context, Fisk and Cherney (2017) find that fair procedures, more so than service provision, explains people's trust in the state government.

A third group has pointed out that an actor's legitimacy can also be based on the *source* of its authority, its mandate or constitution (Wolfrum 2008, 6). For example, Whalan (2013) has argued how the legitimacy of UN peacekeepers can derive from sources such as the international community but also the legal norms of the host state. Far from being isolated from each other, however, these various sources might interact or even undermine each other (von Billerbeck and Gippert 2017).

Moving away from a focus on institutional conditions altogether, another group of scholars has studied symbolic and discursive sources of the legitimacy of

international organizations, focusing on what international organizations *say* rather than what they *are* and how these discursive structures achieve resonance with a given audience. This literature has investigated the legitimation strategies of international organizations to study how international organizations aim to create feelings of obligation and appropriateness (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Harman 2016; Gronau and Schmidtke 2016; Zürn 2018). For example, Spandler (2020) has recently argued how the UN mission in Darfur was delegitimized through competitive legitimation narratives of the UN and the African Union.

A conceptual and empirical challenge when studying the legitimacy of institutions is the diversity of possible audiences. An international organization might seek legitimacy from audiences ranging from states to NGOs to civil society, and these actors' normative benchmarks will invariably differ (Hurrell 2005, 24). For peacekeeping, scholars have pointed out how the UN seeks legitimacy from local populations, local elites, their own staff, and the international community, all of whom project different expectations onto the institution (Coleman 2007; Whalan 2017). To make matters more complex, audiences may apply different 'benchmarks' to different legitimacy referents such as the host state, UN peacekeeping missions or non-state actors (Sabrow 2017). Finally, how one actor's legitimacy is evaluated might also depend on the actions and appeal of other actors (Schoon 2017; Weigand 2017).

This scholarship has significantly contributed to our understanding of the legitimacy *of* international organizations. They have highlighted the context-dependence of legitimacy and made us aware of the various institutional and discursive factors influencing audiences' legitimacy assessments. However, up until now, there has been relatively limited investigation looking *inside* international organiz-

ations when studying questions of legitimacy. What is more, we do not yet know enough about the usage of the concept of legitimacy by international organizations and how it translates into political practice.

Notably, some scholars have started to tackle such questions. Based on Barker's (2001) work on self-legitimation, some studies have focused their scholarly attention on the legitimacy of international organizations inwards and asked how organizations, and particularly their staff, self-legitimize (von Billerbeck 2020a). They work on the assumption that an internal notion of rightfulness among staff and leaders alike is important to ensure an organization's efficiency. For example, von Billerbeck (2020b) has shown how discourses of exceptionalism are used among UN staff, allowing staff to navigate the different and often opposing pressures of normative and operational challenges and ensure a coherent self-image and a sense of meaning and appropriateness.

Others have directly explored how practitioners use the concept of legitimacy. Mulligan (2006) has provided a genealogical account of the manifold uses of the concept of legitimacy within politics and international relations scholarship. Walter-Drop and Remmert (2018) explain why organizations' use of legitimacy might shift for the case of the German Bundestag's use of legitimacy during its military stabilisation mission in Afghanistan. The Bundestag initially catered its conception of legitimacy to domestic audiences but, due to functional pressures, subsequently shifted not only the object of legitimacy (from the international mission to Afghan institutions) but also its notion of how such legitimacy was to be achieved (through input rather than output mechanisms) (Walter-Drop and Remmert 2018, 555). This change, the authors note, can be explained by domestic pressures and was facilitated by an alignment of goals among involved stakehold-

ers. Minatti and Duyvesteyn (2021) as well as Nachbar (2012) trace the US Army's understanding of legitimacy within its turn to counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq. They show how the US Army's use of legitimacy was Western-biased, influenced by earlier academic theorisations like modernisation theory and democratisation theory. Such an understanding of legitimacy, they argue, hampered their attempts at garnering support within their counterinsurgency campaigns. Finally, Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu (2014) have investigated how OECD officials and scholar-practitioners have conceptualized legitimacy in reports on state fragility. They find that institutionalist approaches to the concept dominated, as they fit the institution's self-understanding and were reproduced through the selection of the practitioner-scholars writing the reports.

These accounts have proffered valuable insights into how the concept of legitimacy is subject to continuous changes of meaning among practitioners. This article adds to this literature with an empirical case study and investigates what meaning the UN Department of Peace Operations attributes to the concept of legitimacy. In doing so, I expand our understanding of legitimacy as a concept *used by* international organizations in three ways. First, I explore the understanding of legitimacy within the UN Department of Peace Operation, highlighting where its conception is inconsistent or at odds with recent scholarship on legitimacy. Second, I highlight how academic theorisations of legitimacy and the political practice of international organizations interact as abstract insights are translated to – potentially very different – local contexts. Third, by conducting an in-depth study of textual sources of an international organization, including training material and reports, I show ways to uncover 'experience-near' conceptions of legitimacy. Such a research design, I argue, allows us to get a better grasp on the underlying meanings the

concept of legitimacy invokes for members of the international organization under scrutiny.

Elucidating legitimacy for UN peacekeeping

How can we study the ways in which the concept of legitimacy is understood and used by practitioners within international organizations? To answer this question, this section introduces the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) and the research design, combining ordinary language analysis with a qualitative content analysis.

Working within peacekeeping, the DPO itself puts the concept of legitimacy explicitly centre-stage in its policies, making the institution's understanding of legitimacy ideally suited for analysis. Notably, this means that the claims advanced here are not generalizable but deeply rooted in the specific context of the DPO. They do, however, shed further light on the DPO's internal processes and belief systems and thus advance our understanding of UN peacekeeping. Indeed, as the DPO as an organization works not only normatively but also operationally 'on the ground' (von Billerbeck 2017), an exploration of its uses of legitimacy can be highly relevant to analyse and interpret the political processes of peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

To investigate how the DPO understands legitimacy, I combine a qualitative content analysis with Schaffer's ordinary language analysis. Ordinary language analysis is designed to unpack the meaning of social-scientific concepts among social actors. Building on Wittgenstein, Schaffer argues that 'to understand what a concept means [to a given actor] is to grasp the various routinized ways in which the corresponding word or phrase is used in the language games in which it finds

its home' (Schaffer 2016, 32). In that sense, to infer the meaning attributed to the concept of legitimacy among DPO staff, we need to look at the use of 'legitimacy' in the department's discourse, observing the localized use of the concept and the semiotic context it is embedded in. Such an analysis can reveal to which actors and situations legitimacy is applicable (and to which not) in the eyes of the DPO, what sources or conditions are seen as giving rise to or subtracting from legitimacy, and what effects the legitimacy of a given actor is presumed to have. I consider such meanings deeply embedded in organizations and influenced by institutional histories, organizational demands, and academic theory.

Following Schaffer's approach, I conduct an exploratory qualitative content analysis of key internal DPO documents to elucidate the DPO's conception of legitimacy (Hermann 2008). The qualitative content analysis allows for 'extracting meaning from communication' systematically, enabling me to find 'patterns in larger bodies of materials' (Boréus and Bergström 2017, 40). As such, I trace how the DPO writes about legitimacy, how they use the concept and what they understand it to mean.

In terms of data, I focus on policy, guidance, and training materials of the DPO. The rationale behind this focus is that such guidance and training documents are widely read among DPO staff and introduce important operational concepts, such as legitimacy. Hence, elucidating an understanding of legitimacy from these documents approximates a localized understanding of the concept within an arguably large and heterogeneous organization. The corpus of analysed documents was gathered in 2021 and stems from the DPO's official website and guidance and training materials available at the Dag Hammarskjöld Library Repository. I draw on publicly available material for practical concerns such as access. Nevertheless,

these documents are designed for internal circulation and training and thus offer a solid account of the core guidelines and policies used by the organization.

To select the corpus of documents, I conducted a computer-assisted word search to find texts which discuss the concept of legitimacy. For the word search, I have used the search term *'legitim*'*. The * acts as a wildcard, thus capturing all semantic variants that share the root word with legitimacy, including variants such as legitimation, legitimate, or legitimising. While in the case of the DPO's website, I downloaded all publicly available reports and documents and then did a local-text search, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library allowed for a full-text search online, allowing me directly download those documents using *'legitim*'*. For this reason, an analysis of those documents not discussing the concept of legitimacy is outside the scope of this article. The text search gave 544 hits in a total of 29 documents, which are listed in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here.]

Within the selected documents, each mentioning of *'legitim*'* was closely read and coded inductively, drawing on the larger context within the text. Codes included the actor and audience that is invoked using the term, as well as the ways legitimacy is conceptualized to come about. Finally, these codes were aggregated into larger themes and consequently analysed.

Who is responsible for the knowledge production about legitimacy in these 29 documents? Like any international organization, the DPO is not a unitary actor, but instead, its guidelines and reports are authored by diverse staff while also drawing on external experts. The data selection process resulted in three types of documents. First, there are reports and studies which are (co-)authored

by external consultants, often scholar-practitioners (7 documents). Second, there are guidelines and policy documents written by staff within the DPO, mostly from specialized divisions (15 documents). Finally, training materials and manuals are authored by the DPO's own *Integrated Training Service* (7 documents).

Do these different types of documents capture a common understanding of legitimacy? As internal guidelines and training materials are authored by DPO staff, it is reasonable to assume that they mirror an understanding of what legitimacy means to DPO staff. With regard to the third of documents (co-)authored by external consultants, it bears saying that most consultants in the sample have long-standing affiliations with UN institutions. Moreover, Lemay-Hébert and Mathieu (2014) have noted how such external consultants tend to tailor their reports to their audience, in this case the organization and its staff, and thus are part of an epistemic community in which a common culture is reproduced (See also Barnett 1997). As such, I argue that the sample of documents analysed here provides a solid base to study the conceptions of legitimacy among DPO staff.

Nevertheless, this research strategy remains limited in three aspects. First, my approach focuses on explicit mentions of the root word of legitimacy and thus excludes instances where synonyms were used. However, focusing on legitimacy specifically is important for analytical clarity in the sense of ordinary language analysis, as different terms or concepts might bring with them other meanings and, indeed, could be used differently altogether. Moreover, it avoids rendering legitimacy a 'catch-all' term. Second, the article does not conclusively analyse how the concept of legitimacy is used in DPO documents over time. As the selected sample is focused on current training materials and guideline documents, it allows for all but precursory conclusions about whether and how the way DPO staff used

the concept of legitimacy changed over the years. This being said, key documents in the sample show considerable continuity in how legitimacy is discussed. For example, training materials from 2017 and 2020 use the same tripartite listing of legitimacy, credibility and local ownership as does the capstone doctrine from 2008 (DPKO 2017a; DPO 2020a; DPKO 2008). Third, this article focuses only on textual sources and does not investigate actors' speech. While textual and oral discourse might indeed differ and bring to light added complexity in analysing the meaning attributed to legitimacy, I have sought to account for this shortcoming by casting my net widely in terms of which documents I have analysed. Specifically, the inclusion of training material can give insight into which usages of legitimacy new DPO staff is being socialised into.

The meaning of legitimacy for the DPO

Legitimacy has become an increasingly widespread term within guidance and policy documents for the Department of Peace Operations. But when and how is legitimacy used?

Analyzing DPO documents reveals two major areas where legitimacy as a concept is featured. First, legitimacy is discussed with regard to the host state and the challenges of fostering support for local state structures. Second, legitimacy is talked about with regard to UN peacekeeping operations themselves and the question of increasing effectiveness and support for them. Next to those two entities, the concept of legitimacy is used rather sparingly, a point I will return to later. As such, the DPO's conceptualisation of legitimacy is twofold and has to be analysed as such.

The legitimacy of the state

DPO documents frequently use the concept of legitimacy with regard to the host state and one of the DPO's main operative tasks, namely the extension of state authority (ESA). These ESA missions are generally UNSC mandates to the UN, which 'include measures to re-establish or extend the authority of the state, government or nation' (SIPA 2015, 3). In a 2017 report on ESA missions, for example, legitimacy is defined as one of three 'components' of successfully fostering state authority next to presence and capacity. It goes on to note that there is a 'need to focus on all three components of the extension of state authority while prioritizing legitimacy' (DPKO 2017b).

The DPO documents on state legitimacy rely on the conventional typology of legitimacy sources, where legitimacy is theorized to stem from performance and procedures. As one study published by the DPO summarizes,

> legitimacy is enhanced as a result of multiple factors [...] Process legitimacy is shaped through dialogue and other political processes that create space for political participation [...] performance legitimacy is also measured by the state's performance and its ability to organise itself in a way that allows it to provide political goods as well as deliver public goods (10).

A handbook for civil affairs notes that '[g]ood performance improves service delivery, increases people's sense of legitimate governance and increases their willingness to cooperate with local government and pay tax' (DPKO 2012, 108). However, many DPO documents make clear that an exclusive focus on service provision falls short of grounding legitimacy: 'Strengthening a government's control over its territory

through greater presence and the delivery of basic security and justice services', one study notes, 'will not be sufficient alone to enhance the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the population' (DPO 2019, 32).

The current Peace Operations Pre-Deployment Training focuses on procedures to ground state legitimacy by arguing that '[g]ood governance and inclusive political processes give legitimacy to the state's institutions' (DPKO 2017a, 707; See also DPKO 2012, 186). Inspired by democratic institutional design, procedural legitimacy is presented as stemming from, on the one hand, the fostering of the rule of law and anti-corruption efforts as legitimacy 'is greatly influenced by perceptions of corruption or exclusionary politics' (DPO 2019, 26). 'Genuine accountability', a guideline for police operations adds, 'is a pathway to [state] legitimacy'. On the other hand, procedural legitimacy is conceptualized to stem from representation through free and fair elections. As one handbook notes,

> A government whose power is weakened, for whatever reason, needs to go back to the source of that power – the citizens – to re-establish its legitimacy [...] most frequently this occurs through an electoral process (DPKO 2012, 188).

The capstone doctrine echoes this point, arguing that 'the holding of free and fair elections [...] represents a major milestone towards the establishment of a legitimate State' (DPKO 2008, 28). Other documents mention the inclusion of women in political processes and the integration of local and traditional authorities as meaningful ways of legitimising the state (DPKO 2017b, 34; 2008, 89).

DPO documents make clear that both performance-based and procedural sources of legitimacy need to adapt to the local situation as 'extending the authority of the state is fundamentally a sovereign national process which, to be legitimate

and successful, must be context-specific' (DPO 2019, 10). Expectations about performances and procedures are thus local. Even more, as one report notes, 'there is not necessarily an expectation that the state should occupy this space [of service provision]' (DPKO 2017b, 9). 'Following the local customs', one handbook for civil affairs notes, 'will help to generate credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of local people' (DPKO 2012, 134).

The DPO's performance-procedures dichotomy of legitimacy sources reproduces insights from notable scholarship, which has argued that legitimacy is derived from input and output sources (see Scharpf 1999; Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Mostly, however, these scholars have investigated liberal states or international organizations. And indeed, especially when it comes to procedural legitimacy, we see a tension between the DPO's use of the typology and their frequent emphasis on local ownership and 'context-specific' approaches to building state legitimacy, which should ensure 'congruence with locally accepted customs, norms and traditions' (DPO 2019, 39). Consider, for example, a 2017 best-practice report on ESA efforts which states first that '[t]here are multiple sources of legitimacy and their importance varies from society to society' only to, immediately afterwards, argue that '[l]egitimacy is also based on a state's ability to provide political goods, namely political rights, personal security and the rule of law' (DPKO 2017b, 9). Another report on lessons learned from ESA missions urges peacekeepers to acquire 'a deep understanding of the concerns, needs and aspirations of the people' but, in the next paragraph, categorically states that 'recognizing women's meaningful representation helps to measurably strengthen ESA processes and accelerate the process of legitimization' (DPO 2019, 33–34). The capstone doctrine gives an example of a mission accomplished in situations where 'legitimate political institutions' have

been established ‘following the holding of free and fair elections where women and men have equal rights to vote and seek political office’ (DPKO 2008, 89).

Hence, although DPO documents emphasize adaptation to the local context, its conception of state legitimacy in reports and training manuals carries underpinnings of democratisation theory (Jahn 2007). People in conflict zones, it implies, will inherently value institutionalized inclusive political processes or a formalized justice system living up to international standards of accountability, transparency, and human rights support. A reliance of the UN on universalist notions of the state has been voiced for a long time (Barnett 2006), but it seems especially questionable with regard to legitimacy. For example, reflecting on Afghanistan before the US intervention, Roy notes that in Afghanistan ‘legitimacy is not linked with immediate elections: it has more to do with continuity in terms of history, respect of traditional rules of exercising power and of ethnic and clan-based balance’ (Roy 2004, 175).

This contradictory approach might be rooted in what von Billerbeck calls the multiple identities of the UN (von Billerbeck 2017). Being, on the one hand, a ‘developer and diffuser of norms’ and on the other hand ‘maintaining international peace’, the UN needs to show tangible results of peacekeeping while also upholding and fostering international norms in its legitimation practices. As such, a consequent appreciation of ‘the local’ might run counter to what the DPO and many in the international community see as the UN’s fundamental key function when engaging in ESA missions, namely its role as a norm diffuser (on this point see von Billerbeck 2020b, 487).

Consequently, DPO documents’ use of the concept of legitimacy regarding the state shows tension. The performance-procedures dichotomy pre-specifies what

grounds state legitimacy, while peacekeepers are also reminded that legitimacy depends on the local context. But the DPO is significantly more precise in what grounds legitimacy when it comes to ‘good governance and inclusive political processes’ than local norms (DPKO 2017a, 707). However, when norms and beliefs relevant to the legitimacy of any actor are fundamentally local and shaped by the specific context of the peacekeeping mission, the DPO’s conception will likely face difficulties in doing justice to this complexity.

The legitimacy of UN peacekeeping missions

The 2008 Capstone Doctrine describes legitimacy as one of six ‘success factors’. It emphasizes that ‘in order to succeed, United Nations peacekeeping operations must also be perceived as legitimate and credible, particularly in the eyes of the local population’ (DPKO 2008, 36). The current Peace Operations Pre-Deployment Training also considers legitimacy a ‘key success factor’ next to credibility and local ownership (DPKO 2017a, 237).

When using the concept of legitimacy to talk about UN peacekeeping missions, DPO texts acknowledge that different audiences judge UN peacekeeping operations differently. Consequently, they differentiate between international legitimacy toward the international community and local legitimacy toward the host state’s population.

Regarding international audiences, DPO documents predominantly list two sources of legitimacy as giving rise to UN peacekeeping missions’ legitimacy. On the one hand, the DPO considers the mandate of the UN Security Council, along with the ‘uniquely broad representation of Member States’ as legitimising its missions (DPKO 2008, 35), invoking what Whalan (2013) calls source (or legal) legitimacy.

Moreover, it emphasizes procedural legitimacy, such as the missions' impartial constitution and conduct. As a training manual states, '[b]eing impartial and universal make [sic!] the UN legitimate' (DPKO 2017a, 81). In other words, the DPO understands its missions' *international* legitimacy to arise from the mission's mandate and its enactment following due process.

With regard to local audiences of the host state, one handbook notes that local legitimacy stems from

> the perceived impartiality with which the mission exercises its mandate; how it uses – or does not use – force; the conduct of its personnel and the respect they demonstrate for the culture, customs and people of their host country; and the visibility of actual peace dividends (DPKO 2012, 15).

As such, the DPO's conception of the legitimacy of peacekeeping missions focuses on both performance and procedural legitimacy, such as impartiality, peacekeepers' conduct and security provision. Regarding procedures, one training document states that a mission's 'ongoing perceived legitimacy is directly related to the quality and conduct of its military, police and civilian personnel' (DPKO 2015, 43; similarly, see DPKO 2008, 2017a). National and local ownership 'reinforces the perceived legitimacy of the mission' (DPKO 2017a, 234; 2008, 37; 2015, 43). Regarding performance, DPO documents highlight the effective provision of civilians or 'peace dividends' as a 'mission's legitimacy and credibility rely on the consistency of its support to the human rights agenda and its ability to meet protection expectations' (DPO 2020d, 27; DPKO 2017a, 946). 'Failure to protect civilians', one training manual warns, 'undermines the legitimacy and credibility of field missions, and the UN overall' (DPO 2020a, 3).

Finally, DPO documents tend to conceive of international legitimacy (particularly its source legitimacy) to translate into local legitimacy, giving peacekeepers an initial advantage that consequently must be maintained. For example, one training document states that '[p]eacekeeping operations tend to start with legitimacy because of the international recognition of the UN' and to ensure that perceptions on the ground do not change, 'behaviour must meet the highest standards of professionalism' (DPKO 2015, 43). The idea of a 'legitimacy credit' is invoked, which stems from the international level and needs to be sustained locally, with one handbook warning staff to 'spend it carefully' (DPKO 2012, 213).

However, there are two assumptions embedded in this notion of the UN's international source legitimacy providing a credit for local legitimacy, which are worth unpacking further. First, there is little reason to assume *a priori* that a vote by the UN security council will resonate with local populations or do any good in convincing them of the appropriateness of an expansive international mission. Indeed, as Whalan (2017, 314) has argued, 'what legitimizes peacekeeping internationally will not necessarily legitimize it locally'. This is not least because the peacekeeping mission and peacekeepers themselves remain – by definition – foreign to their context of deployment (Whalan 2017, 316). Not only might this make it more difficult for peacekeepers to understand and tap into local norms of appropriate governance, their foreignness might also be a reason for illegitimacy on its own. Peacekeepers are frequently perceived as imposing norms and ways of thinking onto local societies, severely influencing their perceptions on the ground (Autesserre 2014, ch. 3). Notably, even efforts of making the peacekeeping footprint more local have failed to effectively counter this problem, for example, the UN partnership with the African Union in Darfur which resulted in half-hearted compromises of

burden-sharing due to an unwillingness to delegate peacekeeping entirely (Spandler 2020; Williams and Boutellis 2014). More pointedly is the case of Afghanistan, where the foreignness of intervention forces allowed competing forces, primarily the Taliban insurgency, to tap into a discourse of foreign independence that has a long trajectory in the country (Berdal and Suhrke 2018; Roy 2004). In that sense, the assumption apparent in DPO documents that international legitimacy, grounded in international law and impartiality, will trickle down and shape local legitimacy evaluations risks to ignore the audience-dependence of legitimacy. Instead, it projects certain values and norms, such as impartiality and member state support, as having general appeal.

Second, when zooming into the specific wording used in DPO documents, we see that texts frame international legitimacy as 'actual' legitimacy. In contrast, local legitimacy is referred to as 'perceived' legitimacy (DPKO 2015; DPO 2020d). For example, one training manual states that a 'UN peacekeeping operation *has* international legitimacy because it is based on the UN Charter and international law [and] it is popularly accepted by Member States [...] Conduct of an operation influences how those on the ground *perceive* its legitimacy' (DPKO 2017a, 229; my emphasis). Similarly, the capstone doctrine outlines sources of the UN's international legitimacy and, in a second step, warns that perceptions of the UN's legitimacy can change through peacekeepers' actions. For example, local ownership is stated to 'reinforce the perceived legitimacy of the operation' while misconduct of personnel can detract from this 'perceived legitimacy' on the ground (DPKO 2008, 36).

However, in differentiating between actual international legitimacy and perceived local legitimacy, DPO documents reduce the latter to a (potential) 'misper-

ception' of the former (see Sending 2009, 16 for a related point). But scholarship on legitimacy holds that legitimacy is *always* a perception, and thus, by its very nature, cannot be *mis*-perceived. By introducing this differentiation between *having* legitimacy when talking about the international and being *perceived* as legitimate in the local context, the DPO implies that a given peacekeeping mission can never really be illegitimate but is only ever misperceived as such – which in turn runs the danger of neglecting local expectations and agency. In other words, DPO documents frame local legitimacy as stemming not so much from fulfilling local expectations but from avoiding local *misunderstandings*.

To summarize, DPO documents consider peacekeeping missions' international legitimacy to derive primarily from its international mandate, member state support and its impartial role in world politics. At the same time, this international legitimacy is understood to work as a 'credit' on which to build local engagements. This conception is certainly in line with recent scholarship, which has noted that missions' legitimacy can arise from different sources, which might have different effects for a given audience (Barnett 2021). However, the idea of legitimacy credit reproduced in DPO documents fails to acknowledge that *source legitimacy* in the form of international law might not enjoy universal prestige. Moreover, the differentiation between actual international legitimacy and perceived local legitimacy runs the danger of patronizing local audiences by reading their preferences as misperceptions of the mission's 'actual' legitimacy.

Relational legitimacy and interaction effects

So far, I have discussed the DPO's conception of legitimacy with regard to the host state and its UN peacekeeping missions. As the preceding two subsections have

shown, the legitimacy of both the state and the peacekeeping mission is primarily understood to be a consequence of the institution's own source, performance and procedures. However, recent scholarship has noted that the legitimacy of such institutions cannot be understood as isolated but as relationally embedded in broader governance networks (Schoon 2017; Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Instead, their legitimacy will often be influenced by the actions or discourses of other (non-state) actors, such as civil society and even rebel groups.

To what extent do DPO documents depict such interaction effects? First, the DPO notes that customary institutions can confer legitimacy to both the national state or the UN, for example 'informal or traditional justice' systems (DPO 2019, 39; DPKO 2017b). The integration of local authorities and traditional or community leaders is repeatedly echoed throughout DPO documents, calling to structurally involve local actors and to connect state efforts to those on a regional and local level in order to complement the state's legitimation efforts (for example DPO 2020c, v; DPKO 2008). One report even criticizes that 'traditional institutions are not always taken into account when implementing ESA projects' although they are 'perceived as legitimate' (DPKO 2017b, 10–11). Consequently, DPO documents call to integrate these institutions into ESA efforts in order to enhance the state and the mission's legitimacy (DPO 2020b, 58–59).

Second, DPO documents discuss the possibility of the UN conferring legitimacy to local actors, most importantly the state. For example, one document points out that peacekeepers can 'help create strong positive expectations of host State police, foster popular confidence in the police, and engender legitimacy in the eyes of local populations' (DPKO 2014b, 7). Likewise, a training manual notes that UN peacekeepers can 'support the development of political space at the local level that

will contribute to legitimate and representative [state] governance' (DPKO 2014a, 52).

Third, DPO documents discuss the problem of the UN's ability to involuntarily legitimize certain parts of society through talks. For example, one UN handbook warns that '[i]n all engagements with armed groups, efforts must be made to ensure that such activities do not give the impression that the United Nations condone or legitimize any armed group' (DPO 2020b, 104). With regard to local interest groups, another handbook notes that peacekeepers should '[t]ake care not to support or otherwise lend legitimacy to specific interest groups by virtue of whom the UN peacekeeping mission chooses to work with' (DPKO 2012, 171).

However, DPO documents remain surprisingly silent when it comes to potential clashes between the legitimacies of the mission, the state and other actors. But the availability of alternative governance models and the possibility to compare them is a crucial characteristic of the conflict settings in which peacekeepers are deployed (Schoon 2017). For example, the Taliban's mobile courts in Afghanistan have long been elemental for the group's legitimacy and directly undermined the legitimacy of the state's judicial system, which was portrayed as slow and dragging in comparison to the Taliban's (Rubin 2007; Weigand 2017). Hence, different actors, including the host state and the UN, might undermine each other's legitimacy. In some cases, an increase in UN legitimacy might hurt the legitimation efforts of the host state, for example when the former is seen as more capable than the latter. Egnell (2010) makes this point for the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in rural Afghanistan, which flew the national flags of sponsoring countries, and thus undermined rather than strengthened the legitimacy of the Afghan state.

Consequently, we see that DPO documents use legitimacy mostly with re-

gard to the host state and the UN peacekeeping missions. This focus is certainly understandable given the DPO's primary objective of extending state authority. When thinking about how the legitimacies of different actors interact, DPO documents account primarily for interaction effects, where one institution bolsters the legitimacy of another. However, they remain silent on the possibility of one actor, including the UN, *undermining* the legitimacy of another actor. Thus, they forgo considering a crucial element of conflict dynamics, namely the contestation for legitimacy among various actors involved in a conflict, all vying for the support of the population (Gawthorpe 2017). In doing so, the DPO's conception of legitimacy misses important dynamics that empirically shape the legitimacy of both host states and peacekeeping missions.

The 'key success factor'?

How does the UN Department of Peace Operations understand the concept of legitimacy? In this article, I have argued that legitimacy, being a vague and 'experience-distant' concept, allows for varied interpretations and political usages. At the same time, more and more international organizations, particularly within the realm of peacekeeping, draw on the concept of legitimacy to develop their policies. Consequently, I have turned the question of the legitimacy of international organizations on its head: Rather than investigating whether the DPO or a particular peacekeeping mission *is* legitimate, I studied how the DPO *understands* the concept of legitimacy.

I conducted a qualitative content analysis on guidance and training documents as well as policy reports of the DPO to show that the department uses legitimacy primarily with regard to its peacekeeping missions and the host state.

I highlighted three tension within the department's use of legitimacy. First, while the importance of local expectations for state legitimacy is repeatedly emphasized, documents nevertheless often focus on pre-specified performance-based and procedural sources and particular institutional designs inspired by democratization theory as giving rise to legitimacy. But as people's expectations about the UN's legitimacy are fundamentally local, the DPO's understanding will likely encounter challenges in adequately addressing them.

Second, DPO documents portray UN peacekeeping missions as seeking both international and local legitimacy, primarily emphasizing source legitimacy next to procedures. However, texts differentiate between 'actual' international legitimacy and 'perceived' local legitimacy, thereby constructing the latter as a misperception of the former. Hence, DPO documents' conception of legitimacy fails to give full credence to local expectations and legitimacy standards: local expectations are framed as needing to be 'managed', and the diversity of local audiences' expectations is insufficiently depicted.

Finally, when considering the interplay of legitimacy among various actors, DPO documents only emphasize interaction effects where one actor enhances the legitimacy of another. However, they do not address the potential scenario where one actor, including the UN, could weaken the legitimacy of another actor. Hence, how the DPO perceives legitimacy overlooks the likely scenario in a (post-)conflict context that various actors might contest for legitimacy, which in turn can influence the legitimacy of both host states and peacekeeping missions.

This analysis has sought to map the DPO's understanding of legitimacy while also unpacking its underlying assumptions in light of legitimacy scholarship. I have started to problematize the usage of legitimacy in policy discourse as the

DPO's understanding of legitimacy carries political implications by focusing predominantly on the state and its peacekeeping mission as legitimacy seekers and considering audiences' expectations subsidiary to international standards of legitimacy.

This article forms a first attempt to unpack the different understandings of legitimacy held by international organizations and particularly the UN Department of Peace Operations. As further avenues of research, studies should, first, go beyond textual analysis in the usage of concepts of legitimacy and investigate how international organizations' staff, and particularly peacekeepers, talk about or perform the concept of legitimacy in everyday life. Such an approach can reveal more about what an 'experience-near' concept of legitimacy entails for practitioners on the ground.

Second, the analysed conceptions of legitimacy in DPO documents, some authored by scholar-practitioners, others by DPO staff themselves, are certainly not independent of scholarly debates on legitimacy. State-centric or liberal biases have equally been observed in the 'content-independent' models of legitimacy marking much of political science and international relations (Hurd 2019; Lemay-Hébert 2013). In that sense, this analysis also calls attention to reconsider our 'folk theories' of legitimacy to be clear about their impact on knowledge production and policy design, a line of inquiry which can be fruitfully expanded upon in future research.

Third, the analysis here can be applied to other international organizations. While peacekeeping is certainly a policy area where legitimacy has received much attention, questions of legitimacy also become more pronounced for international organizations elsewhere, not least due to the frequent contestation and problematisation within the Global North of previously accepted international arrangements

of global governance (Zürn 2018). Pushing our understanding of legitimacy as used by international organizations further not only helps us understand better the policy practices of these institutions but also their relation to scholarly models of legitimacy and the way they translate into everyday usage.

Within peacekeeping, a recognition of legitimacy as a 'key success factor' for peacekeeping is certainly called for. But as this analysis has suggested, its usage within policy thinking might need updating to account for the complexities of conflict dynamics and peacekeeping.

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Table 1: Documents analysed for the Qualitative Content Analysis

Document Name	**Year**	**Hits**
United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines	2008	29
Civil Affairs Handbook	2012	56
Integrated Assessment and Planning Handbook	2013	4
Predeployment Training Modules for Corrections Officers	2013	8
Tactical Level Mission-Specific Training Modules on Protection of Civilians	2013	8
Policy: United Nations Police in Peacekeeping Operations and Special Political Missions	2014	5
United Nations Civil-Military Coordination Specialized Training Materials	2014	17
Guidelines: Police Capacity-Building and Development	2015	17
Guidelines: Police Command in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Special Political Missions	2015	4
E-Guide: A Resource for New Staff at Headquarters	2015	11
Guidelines: Police Operations in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations and Special Political Missions	2015	9
Policy: Justice Support in United Nations Peace Operations	2016	1
The Military Aide Memoire: United Nations Measures against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse	2017	1
Core Pre-deployment Training Materials	2017	128
Presence, Capacity and Legitimacy: Implementing Extension of State Authority Mandates in Peacekeeping	2017	110
Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials – Military	2017	4
United Nations Peacekeeping Brochure	2018	1
Extension of State Authority in the Areas of Justice and Corrections	2019	82
Policy: The Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping	2019	2
Manual for Child Protection Staff in United Nations Peace Operations	2019	2
The Handbook for United Nations Field Missions on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence	2020	3
Protection of Civilians in United Nations Peacekeeping Handbook	2020	9
Going further together: The contribution of human rights components to the implementation of mandates of United Nations field missions	2020	3
Strengthening UN peace operations support to gender-responsive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and security sector reform: Leveraging opportunities and lessons learnt	2020	2
United Nations Infantry Battalion Manual	2020	4
Gender Equality and Women, Peace and Security: Resource Package	2020	2
Comprehensive Protection of Civilians Training Materials – Police	2020	11
Preventing, Mitigating & Resolving Transhumance-Related Conflicts in UN Peacekeeping Settings	2020	10
UN Support to Local Mediation: Challenges and Opportunities	2020	5