

# **The foundations of organizational legitimacy**

## **Les fondements de la légitimité organisationnelle**

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## Abstract

Legitimacy, a classic question in political science and sociology for centuries, has recently attracted increased interest in management science. This development stems from the realisation that companies can no longer be viewed in isolation from their environment, and that they now have to justify taking social expectations into account. This interest in legitimacy aims to build and develop this notion in the professional world of business.

Clearly, legitimacy forges social and economic links within the company and between it and its environment. It is an element of the organisation and a key success factor to be considered at the strategic level.

This paper reviews the literature on legitimacy in organisational theories. It defines the foundations of this notion and analyses the emergence of concepts that influence the perception of legitimacy within the organisational environment. The constructed nature of legitimacy is multiplied, given its differentiated aspects and complex natures. Legitimacy has to do with morality, logic, utility, context and the quality of individuals.

**Keywords : Legitimacy; Organisational legitimacy; Foundations of organisational legitimacy; Organisational environment ; Organisational performance.**

## Résumé

La légitimité, une question classique en sciences politiques et sociologiques depuis des siècles, a récemment suscité un intérêt accru dans les sciences de gestion. Cette évolution découle du constat que les entreprises ne peuvent plus être envisagées de manière isolée de leur environnement, et qu'elles doivent désormais justifier leur prise en compte des attentes sociales. Cet intérêt pour la légitimité vise à construire et développer cette notion dans le monde professionnel de l'entreprise.

De manière évidente, la légitimité tisse les liens sociaux et économiques au sein de l'entreprise et entre celle-ci et son environnement. C'est un élément de l'organisation et un facteur clé de succès à considérer au niveau stratégique.

Le présent travail s'attache à réaliser une revue de la littérature consacrée à la légitimité dans les théories organisationnelles. Il définit les fondements de cette notion et analyse l'émergence des concepts qui influent sur la perception de la légitimité au sein de l'environnement organisationnel. La nature construite de la légitimité est multipliée, compte tenu de ses aspects différenciés et de ses natures complexes. La légitimité relève de la morale, de la logique, de l'utilité, du contexte et de la qualité des individus.

**Mots clés : Légitimité ; Légitimité organisationnelle ; Fondements de la légitimité organisationnelle ; Environnement organisationnel ; Performance organisationnelle.**

## Introduction

Recourse to legitimacy has always been desirable and necessary in time and space, regardless of the origin of that legitimacy: super-natural (divine), legal (constitutional) or moral, which appeals to wisdom. The debate on legitimacy is a recurrent one, with this notion being used profusely in different fields and with varied aspects, whether in philosophy, economics, sociology, politics or democracy.

Organizational legitimacy is built through a process of legitimization that draws on different sources and references to establish and ground the organization's legitimacy. This enables the organization to strengthen its position and acceptance within its social environment.

According to Tyler (2006), organizational legitimacy is seen as a "reservoir of resources". This means that legitimacy gives organizations an advantage by enabling them to access certain valuable resources and maintain positive relationships with their environment.

Researchers are interested in understanding how organizations are perceived as appropriate, acceptable and compliant with the norms and expectations of their environment. They examine the processes by which organizations acquire and maintain this legitimacy, as well as the consequences of legitimacy for their survival. Work on legitimacy theory has identified various sources of legitimacy, such as conformity to social norms and values, adherence to accepted practices, commitment to social responsibility, etc. In this context, our research question is as follows: « **What are the underlying foundations and origins that underpin the constructed nature of legitimacy within organisations ?** ». To answer this research question, our work will focus on the legitimacy of the organisation itself by first clarifying the concept of legitimacy by referring to the historical origins of the different disciplinary fields related to the concept of capital, and by analysing the different theories and perspectives that have been developed to study organisational legitimacy, identifying the main factors that contribute to its formation and maintenance. This literature review aims to examine and understand the concept of organisational legitimacy, focusing on its foundations and its importance for an organisation's environment.

### 1. Origin and emergence of the "legitimacy" concept

The concept of legitimacy emerged in the social sciences, particularly in the fields of sociology, political science and management. Its origins can be traced back to the classic work of sociologists such as Max Weber, who developed a theory of legitimacy in his famous work "Economy and Society", published in 1922.

Weber defined legitimacy as the basis of power and authority in society. According to him, legitimacy rests on the collective belief in the rightness and validity of the rules, norms and values that govern the behavior of individuals and organizations.

### **1.1. The foundations of legitimacy**

Over time, the concept of legitimacy has been studied and applied in a variety of contexts, such as organizations, political institutions, social movements and legal systems. It has become a key concept for understanding relationships between individuals, organizations and society as a whole.

#### **1.1.1 The legal basis of legitimacy**

According to the Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française (1986), the concept of legitimacy can be defined as "the character of that which is founded in law or that which conforms to equity, reason, established rules or tradition".

Legitimacy founded in law refers to the dimension of conformity of an action, decision or authority to established laws and legal rules. When an action is in line with established legal norms and procedures, it is considered legally legitimate. This implies that the authorities or actions have been established in accordance with the laws in force. Legitimacy also refers to a fair, reasonable and logically founded action that reveals itself in adherence to the pre-established norms and rules of a society. As well as in a traditional context, legitimacy refers to the recognition and acceptance of a belief because of its roots in the history and culture of a society. Practices or institutions that have existed for a long time and are perceived as an integral part of tradition can be considered legitimate. Historical continuity and institutional stability can reinforce the perception of legitimacy. Legitimacy is a matter of custom, logic, morality, context, utility and personal quality.

In a state of nature where no legal system has been established, natural law is considered the "legitimate authority" for settling disputes between individuals. Natural law is generally regarded as universal, timeless and derived from the essential nature and morality of human beings. It is often associated with fundamental ethical and moral principles considered inherent to human existence (Locke, 1690).

The Petit Larousse Larousse (1852) defines the notion of legitimacy as the quality of what is founded in law, justice or equity. Its definition refers both to the law (positive law) and to reason (natural law), and thus specifies that what is legitimate must satisfy both.

According to Rousseau (1762), individuals can resort to force to defend their rights and freedoms, which is not consistent with the concept of law as such. This reality has led individuals to evolve towards a civil state where the use of force is replaced by respect for a system of law, and they have realized that a functional society requires a legal framework and adequate legitimate authority. This transition from the natural state to the civil state demonstrates that individuals only obey legitimate powers that are established in an equitable manner to guarantee security and stability.

### 1.1.2 Legitimacy as an attribute of power

Both the word and the concept were unknown to the long history of politics, despite the late efforts of Plato and Aristotle to find a remedy for the decline of the principle of legitimacy as a political asphere. The question of the legitimacy of power has always been a central concern of political and philosophical theories.

Indeed, Hannah Arendt, an influential twentieth-century political philosopher, attached great importance to the question of the legitimacy of power in her work. For her, legitimacy is a key concept for understanding the nature and exercise of political power.

Power is often seen as potential. It depends on "the uncertain and only temporary agreement of a large number of wills and intentions" (Arendt, 1994).

Arendt also put forward the notion of political plurality. For her, the legitimacy of power rests on the recognition of the diversity of voices and opinions within society. Legitimate power must allow these multiple perspectives to be expressed and taken into account. She argued that political participation and public deliberation are essential to maintaining democratic legitimacy.

The notion of power is linked principally to the concepts of action and speech, which are strictly relational and intersubjective in nature, and depend on essential aspects of political and social life. Action implies presence, social interaction and mutual recognition of others...and speech signifies an indispensable means of communication and understanding, which are seen as sources of relational strength to better shape the political world and enable power to be exercised collectively.

In conformity with (Arendt, 1972): « *Power can do without justification ... Violence may be justifiable, but it will never be legitimate* ». Power itself can do without justification except in the face of legitimacy. Arendt highlights a crucial distinction between power and legitimacy in her political philosophy, arguing that power can be exercised without the need to provide

rational or objective justifications, but it cannot be considered legitimate without a sound moral, ethical or social basis. While she points out that violence as an example may be justifiable in certain situations, as in the case of the legitimacy of defense or the protection of human life, violence in this context may be justified in certain circumstances, but can never be considered legitimate in itself, as it runs counter to the moral and ethical principles underlying the legitimacy of power.

The sociologist Max Weber develops important reflections on legitimacy and power. In his book "Economy and Society", published in 1922, Weber highlights the intriguing idea that the search for legitimacy can be motivated by a quest for power and authority, aimed at establishing and maintaining domination. This can involve symbolic or political strategies aimed at persuading and convincing others of the legitimacy of established or aspiring power.

According to Max Weber, there are three forms of domination based on different sources of legitimacy. Traditional domination is based on historical norms and customs, charismatic domination is based on the personal charisma of a leader, and bureaucratic domination is based on formal rules and laws. Each of these forms of domination has its own legitimacy, and manifests itself in different social and political contexts.

John French and Bertram Raven (1968), proposed a typology of five attributes of power, also known as the "bases of power". These attributes describe the sources on which a person or entity can base its power and influence over others.

- Coercive power is based on the ability to exert sanctions, on constraint.
- Rewarding power is based on the ability to provide rewards, favors or advantages in exchange for the compliance of others.
- Legitimate power based on norms and rules established in a social or organizational structure.
- Expert power is attributed to those who demonstrate particular mastery or competence in a specific field.
- Reference power, which derives from the social and emotional influence a person exerts on others by virtue of his or her personal qualities.

French and Raven's analysis of power attributes provides an understanding of the different sources on which power can be established and exercised. This typology makes it possible to examine relations of power and influence in various domains, such as politics, organizations and social groups, and to explore how these bases of power can shape social dynamics and individual behavior.

## **1.2. Concepts related to legitimacy**

Legitimacy's neighboring concepts are of great importance in a professional context, as they influence the perception and reputation of a person or organization within its professional environment. These concepts are interconnected and contribute to the construction of an organization's legitimacy. Legitimate authority, legitimately exercised power or perceived justice.

A review of the literature allows us to accept a wide range of notions related to legitimacy, due to its multidimensional aspects. The main related notions identified in the literature are :

- Identity ;
- Image ;
- Reputation ;
- Status.

### **1.2.1 Legitimacy and identity :**

The concept of individual identity, as described by Sartre (1943), raises an interesting paradox. On the one hand, he suggests that each individual seeks to differentiate himself from others, to develop a distinct individuality that distinguishes him as a unique entity. On the other hand, it recognizes that this construction of identity is intrinsically linked to the perception of others. However, this paradox also raises questions about individual freedom and authenticity. Sartre points out that if we define ourselves solely through the eyes of others, we risk losing our autonomy and conforming to social expectations and norms. We therefore need to strike a balance between social recognition and the preservation of our freedom and authenticity.

According to authors such as Sainsaulieu (1988) in the current of comprehensive sociology, professional identity is the product of behaviors and values manifested in actions and the justifications attributed to them. In this context, identity is formed through multiple interactions between individuals.

According to Dubar (2010), the relational process of recognizing individual identity involves the acquisition of knowledge, the construction of self-image and the perception of others. This recognition may be based on the knowledge we have acquired, but also on our own self-perception and on the image others have of us.

### **1.2.2 Legitimacy and image:**

According to Roberts (2005), professional image refers to a set of perceptions coming from key interlocutors such as customers, superiors, bosses, subordinates and colleagues. This definition



underlines the importance of other people's opinions and perceptions in shaping our professional image. Professional image can also be influenced by factors such as our behavior, appearance, skills, communication, interpersonal relationships and reputation.

### **1.2.3 Legitimacy and reputation:**

Reputation is generally the result of a collective judgment made by parties external to the individual or organization. It consists of an evaluation of actions and achievements, built on the social status and perceived desirability of that individual or organization (Shrum and Wuthnow, 1988). It should be noted that an individual's reputation is not static, and may evolve over time as a result of new experiences, subsequent actions and interactions with others. It can also vary according to the individual's context and status.

### **1.2.4 Legitimacy and status:**

According to Weber (1922), status refers to an individual's position within a social hierarchy or ranking system. It is a categorization that ranks individuals according to their social rank, prestige or position in

society. Status can be determined by factors such as birth, wealth, education, occupation, notoriety or other socially valued criteria.

Individuals can also acquire different social status over time through their actions, achievements or interactions with others.

## **2. Legitimacy in organizational theories:**

The concept of legitimacy is widely studied and addressed in the field of management science, particularly from an organizational perspective. Management science researchers are interested in how organizations acquire, maintain and reinforce their legitimacy in their environment.

In organizational theory, legitimacy is often defined as stakeholders' perception of an organization's suitability and entitlement to carry out its activities. These stakeholders, who may be internal or external to the organization, observe, evaluate and assess the organization's compliance with a particular model or standard.

Examination of organisational legitimacy, particularly in the context of the concept of novelty as set out by Singh and al. (1986), reveals findings of clear relevance. The findings of this study indicate that the acquisition of external legitimacy is associated with a significant reduction in the risk of organisational mortality. In other words, when organisations succeed in establishing



their legitimacy within their environment, this immunises them against the dangers associated with their demise (Benhaddouch and al. 2023).

## 2.1 Legitimacy in an institutional context

As defined by Oliver (1991), legitimacy is a matter of perceived conformity and appropriateness in relation to social norms and expectations, it is a general perception concerning the actions of an entity, organization or group of individuals.

Sucham (1995) defines legitimacy as « *the shared impression that the organization's actions are desirable, suitable or appropriate in relation to the socially constructed system of social norms, values and beliefs* ». This perception is based on the entity's judgment of its desirability or appropriateness within a socially constructed context of norms, values, beliefs and definitions, and is constantly influenced by the judgment and expectations of stakeholders, which plays an essential role in an entity's credibility and sustainability.

According to Meyer and Rowan (1991), legitimacy arises within an institutionalized context where social and cultural norms define the roles and expectations of organizations. In this environment, companies must conform to these requirements and maintain an external appearance that conforms to pre-established norms. Legitimacy is therefore primarily symbolic. In other words, when organizations learn to appear legitimate by complying with established conventions and norms, they can benefit from social support and access to resources, even if their actual activities differ from their appearances. This means that legitimacy is often based on external signals and symbols, rather than on an objective assessment of performance.

Legitimacy implies both effectiveness and conformity to the institutionalized myths present within the organization. In contemporary societies, these myths take the form of rationalized, impersonal prescriptions that establish a link between objectives and the means required to achieve them (Capron and Quairel, 2004).

Being legitimate therefore means not only being able to produce effective results, but also conforming to the institutionalized norms and values that guide actions and practices within the organization. These norms are often justified by rational, impersonal discourses that emphasize the rationality and relevance of the choices and methods adopted.

In their study, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three processes of institutional isomorphism that contribute to organizational conformity and, consequently, to the acquisition of legitimacy. These processes are: mimetic, coercive and normative.

The mimetic process refers to the tendency of organizations to imitate the practices and behaviors of other organizations that are perceived as legitimate. This may be due to uncertainty or ambiguity in the environment, in which case organizations seek to align themselves with those deemed successful or legitimate.

The coercive process stems from constraints imposed by actors outside the organization. These can include regulations, laws, government policies, professional standards, etc. Organizations are encouraged to comply with these mandatory pressures to avoid sanctions or negative consequences.

An organization's normative processes refer to social norms and stakeholder expectations. To be considered legal, this normative pressure aims to comply with social norms and expectations, including ethical behavior, social responsibility and sustainability.

## **2.2 Legitimacy in a strategic context**

From a strategic perspective, legitimacy is seen as a state that an organization seeks, maintains or re- establishes in order to ensure its continuity and survival. This perspective recognizes that legitimacy cannot be regarded as permanently acquired, but rather as a dynamic process of construction and interaction between an organization and its institutional environment.

The quest for legitimacy may involve strategic actions such as adherence to professional standards, adoption of socially responsible practices, etc. It is closely linked to the organization's interaction and alignment with its institutional environment,

In the strategic mainstream, legitimacy is seen as an operational resource that organizations manage and integrate into their strategy (Suchman, 1988).

legitimacy is seen as a dynamic resource enabling the organization to cope with its environment. However, this legitimacy needs to be actively managed and preserved, as it can be called into question, with significant consequences for the achievement of the organization's objectives and its viability. (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975).

According to Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), legitimacy is based on the management of interaction with the environment, which consists in meeting the needs of the interlocutor. External players assess the organization's effectiveness and, consequently, its legitimacy. This legitimacy depends to a large extent on the organization's acceptance in its environment, and precisely on the needs of the stakeholders present in that environment.

The analysis of organizational legitimacy in management science provides a better understanding of how organizations interact with their social environment, gain social

recognition and obtain stakeholder support. This is of fundamental importance for the survival, growth and performance of organizations in a competitive and changing context.

### 3. The natures of legitimacy in organizational theories:

According to Beaulieu (2001): « *the legitimation process is the process by which legitimacy is developed, maintained and restored. It is important to understand the dynamics underlying the concept of legitimacy. Legitimacy evolves according to social norms and values, which evolve according to the changing needs of the population. The perception of what is legitimate also evolves with cultural change, so that the definition of legitimacy changes over time and according to circumstances* ». The concept of legitimacy is a complex one, with different dimensions that have been studied and analyzed by many researchers. Instead of classifying them into specific types or dimensions, some researchers prefer to approach them as "natures of legitimacy". This term highlights the fact that each form of legitimacy is associated with a category of frame of reference or criteria to which evaluators refer to judge the suitability and acceptability of an entity or organization. These evaluators, whether internal or external to the organization, are influenced by frames of reference that define what is considered appropriate, desirable and in line with prevailing norms and values.

It is important to note that the nature of legitimacy can vary according to context and sector of activity. For example, one of the properties of legitimacy may be based on economic criteria, notably financial performance and profitability. In this case, the evaluator will examine the organization's legitimacy by assessing its ability to deliver solid financial results. In addition, other types of legitimacy may be associated with social criteria, such as environmental impact, ethical business practices and commitment to social responsibility. In these cases, legitimacy will be judged on the extent to which the organization conforms to these social values and community expectations.

Analyzing the natures of legitimacy enables us to understand the different perspectives and expectations of stakeholders. This understanding is essential for organizations seeking to manage their legitimacy and maintain their social acceptability, by adapting to the changing expectations of their institutional environment.

Organizational theories generally identify three distinct natures of legitimacy for organizations, which we will examine below.

### 3.1 Cognitive legitimacy

Cognitive legitimacy is constituted on the basis of Berger and Luckman's (1967) concept of the self in the sense of "self-evident". This type of legitimacy is based on the beliefs, values and norms prevailing within the organization, and is deeply rooted in social and cultural behavioral constructs.

Cognitive legitimacy, as defined by Suchman (1995), does not necessarily imply a positive or negative evaluation of the organization. Rather, it is seen as inevitable, since it derives from cultural representations and social constructions of the environment in which the organization operates. cognitive legitimacy is based on cultural elements that are socially constructed through symbolic and cognitive representations. These cultural elements provide essential frameworks for shaping individual decisions and perceptions, and are mobilized in the acquisition of this form of legitimacy (Scott, 2010).

In short, social and organizational identities are cognitive rules and categorizations that define the behaviors expected of individuals. They contribute to cognitive legitimacy by influencing the perception of behaviors that conform to established norms and roles. Because of its informal nature, cognitive legitimacy is difficult to determine, and even more difficult to operationalize, as it depends on a number of social and cultural behaviors that influence the perception of this legitimacy.

### 3.2 Moral or normative legitimacy

Moral or normative legitimacy is another form of legitimacy studied in organizational theories. It involves a positive, normative evaluation of the organization and its actions. This evaluation is guided by the dominant values within the organization and the evaluator's personal conviction as to the legitimacy and relevance of the object in question. In other words, moral or normative legitimacy is based on an evaluation that takes into account social norms and values, and the subjective perception of the evaluator (Suchman and Scott, 1995).

Suchman (1995) presents four sub-categories of moral or normative legitimacy:

- Consequence legitimacy, when organizations are judged by what they do;
- Procedural legitimacy, when organizations can gain moral legitimacy by adhering to socially accepted procedures and techniques;
- Structural legitimacy, when organizations have quality control and quality procedures;
- Personal legitimacy, when based on the charisma of individual organizational leaders.

Generally speaking, such personal legitimacy is often transitory and idiosyncratic.

According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy of consequence and procedural legitimacy reflect the rational- legal legitimacy described by Weber (1922). These forms of legitimacy are based on value and instrumentality respectively. Structural legitimacy, on the other hand, is inspired by traditional legitimacy, while personal legitimacy is linked to charismatic legitimacy as defined by Weber.

### 3.3 Pragmatic or regulatory legitimacy:

Pragmatic or regulative legitimacy, identified by Suchman (1995), is the fourth type of legitimacy. This form of legitimacy is inspired by agency theory, as it takes into account the evaluator's personal interest.

In other words, pragmatic or regulative legitimacy is based on the perceived alignment of interests between the organization and the evaluator. It recognizes that individuals may grant legitimacy to an organization on the basis of the satisfaction of their own needs and interests, such as financial advantage, access to resources, enhanced social status, and so on.

Suchman distinguishes three sub-categories of pragmatic or regulative legitimacy:

- ❖ Exchange legitimacy, based on support for organizational policy. In this type of legitimacy, actors support the organization, with the aim of benefiting from favorable interdependent exchanges;
- ❖ Legitimacy of influence, in which stakeholders support the organization with the aim of serving their own interests in the broadest sense;
- ❖ Legitimacy by "*good disposition*". This type of legitimacy is granted by stakeholders who share the organization's values. They rate positively in legitimacy those individuals "who have their interests at heart".

In short, pragmatic or regulative legitimacy considers the evaluator's self-interest as an essential element in the recognition and attribution of organizational legitimacy.

## Conclusion

Legitimacy is the recognition of the right of a person or group to act in the name of a specific principle or value. These principles and values are embedded in social structures, sometimes unconsciously. The organization must therefore be able to understand and conform to these implicit social laws if it is to be considered legitimate.

In developing these ideas, it is important to note that organizational legitimacy is a complex and dynamic social construct. Social expectations and norms evolve over time, requiring

continuous adaptation by the organization to maintain its legitimacy. Lack of legitimacy can have negative consequences for an organization, such as loss of stakeholder trust, difficulties in accessing resources and damage to reputation.

In short, organizational legitimacy is based on an organization's ability to meet and conform to the expectations of social norms and values. This means justifying its actions and demonstrating its right to act according to socially accepted principles. Understanding and respecting these social norms is essential to maintaining organizational legitimacy in a constantly changing environment.

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