

STRATEGIC ACTORHOOD

WHAT ABOUT LEGITIMACY AND

IDENTITY?

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OUTLINE

- Concept of strategic actorhood
- What is missing
- A revised conceptualisation
- Further research

STRATEGIC ACTORHOOD

- Krücken & Meier (2006), universities turning into organisational actors

Four elements:

- Accountability
- Mission statements (communication)
- Elaboration of formal structure
- Professionalisation of management

APPRECIATION

- Concept used by other scholars, > 800 citations

But:

- Accountability as “answerability for performance” comes across as a *post hoc* response, not necessarily ACTORHOOD, neither STRATEGIC
- Mission statement is definitely communication, but often “one direction” and only a part of the portfolio of university communications

REFINEMENT, EXTENSION ...

Hence:

- Plea for broader range of organisational actions
- More attention to dynamics

Enter:

- Legitimacy and identity

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Governance change: New Public Management, autonomy, etc.
- Government tools: quality assurance, research performance, *ex post* versus *ex ante* “control”
- But largely depicts actorhood as response to externally imposed policies

ACCOUNTABILITY

- “answerability for performance” (Romzek, 2000)
- “a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has [*or feels, addition JH*] an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences” (Bovens, 2007, p. 450).

BUT WHY ACCOUNTABILITY?

- Accountability enhances (public) confidence => legitimacy
- Suchman (1995, p. 574): “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”
- positive: to understand accountability, one must understand what counts as “appropriate”, so (1) it is not only about rules; and (2) context matters
- problematic: how do we know?

LEGITIMACY

- Implication: there is scope for negotiation on what is “appropriate, proper, desirable”
- Stakeholders play an important role, but universities themselves as well!
- **KEY POINT:** Accountability then is organisational action, not only responsive, but – from a legitimacy perspective – pro-active and likely strategic
- See also Oliver (1991): from acquiescence to manipulation

COMMUNICATION

- Mission statements: one direction + only part of range of communications
- Suchman (1995, p. 586) “legitimacy management rest heavily on communication”
- welcome addresses, accreditation self-assessments, corporate designs and logos, brochures, strategic plans (Kosmützky, 2016)

COMMUNICATION

By sharing their mission statements (and other organisational narratives) universities:

- ... act (language is action!)
- ... account
- ... but universities may strategically chose what (not) to communicate!

IDENTITY AND IMAGE

- University communications are pro-active self-descriptions, organisational claims, impression management branding,
- These communications are bound by organisational identity (“organisational claims to membership in a social category or collective identity at the level of the organisational field”, Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 346-347)
- While at the same time they are “projected images” (Ravasi, 2016): aspirational, pro-active
- **SECOND KEY POINT:** universities may be acquiescent, but can manipulate as well.

HALFWAY WRAP-UP

- Accountability and mission statements are clearly organisational actions (in agreement with Krücken & Meier, 2006)
- But from the same institutional perspective, now using legitimacy, identity and image as conceptual anchors: accountability and communications are (re)constructed in dynamic interplay with various stakeholders in the universities' organizational field
- Considerable scope for strategic pro-active behaviour

AN ATTEMPT TO MODEL THIS ...

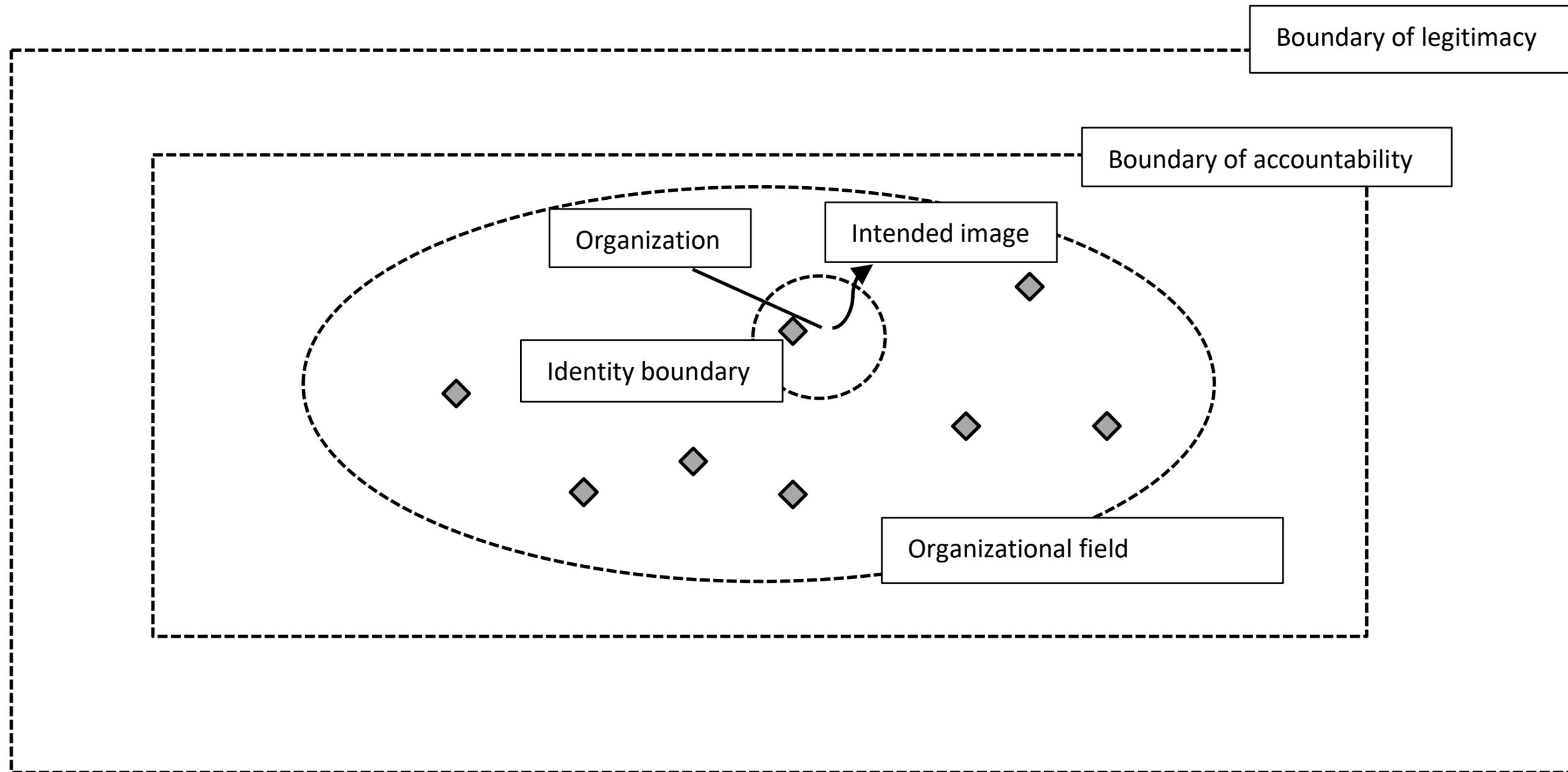


Figure 1: Strategic actorhood in an identity, image, field, accountability and legitimacy context

EXAMPLE: MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY

- “new” university in the Dutch landscape (mid-1970s)
- Need for doctors, unequal dispersion universities
- Various incentives to be different (i.e. regional booster)
- Different pedagogical approach: problem-based learning
- Scepticism other Dutch universities
- From specialised (medicine) to general
- From regional (Aachen, Liege, ...) to transnational to international
- From Rijksuniversiteit Limburg to Universiteit Maastricht

IN CONCEPTUAL TERMS

- Legitimacy: Need for doctors, unequal dispersion universities
- Borderline legitimate through “deviant” identity: problem-based learning
- Other universities copied elements of PBL
- Maastricht/Limburg emulated comprehensive universities
- Borderline legitimate: transnational university (“ahead of the pack”) to successful first mover re internationalisation
- Identity: *Rijksuniversiteit* Limburg to Universiteit Maastricht

NEW PUZZLES ...

- How do accountability, legitimacy and identity relate to each other?
- Different forms of accountability, legitimacy ...
- In a simple world: accountability provides legitimacy (granted by the “forum”), legitimacy contributes to (strong) identity
- But ... different stakeholders have different expectations about appropriate and desirable behaviour
- So, again, actorhood is strategic in that different legitimacy and identity challenges must be handled (in complex institutional contexts)
- May the relationship between accountability, legitimacy and identity then be context-dependent, so is this merely an empirical question?

TAKE-AWAY MESSAGE

- actorhood is more than universities 'just' being accountable
- actorhood is dynamically evolving through engagement of higher education institutions actively and strategically trying to impress (through organizational actions, including communication) their institutional stakeholders
- these stakeholders send messages (back) to the organization, they confirm their agreement with the higher education institution's positioning, profiling, intended image or seriously question the actions and intended image (hence: actorhood is dynamic)
- University strategies and tactics may be responsive, but can also be pro-active and anticipatory

RESEARCH AGENDA

- Continue research on organizational communications (Kosmützky, 2012) as actions of legitimacy, identity and accountability
- Analyse higher education institutions as potentially being different from and similar to other HEIs in the same field (“be as different as legitimately accepted”, Deephouse, 1999)
- Unpack relations between accountability and legitimacy and identity (core and periphery)
- New organizational forms (Ferlie and Trenholm, 2019)
- Higher education institutions being part of interrelated/nested organizational fields?

THANK YOU

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