

# 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 ...

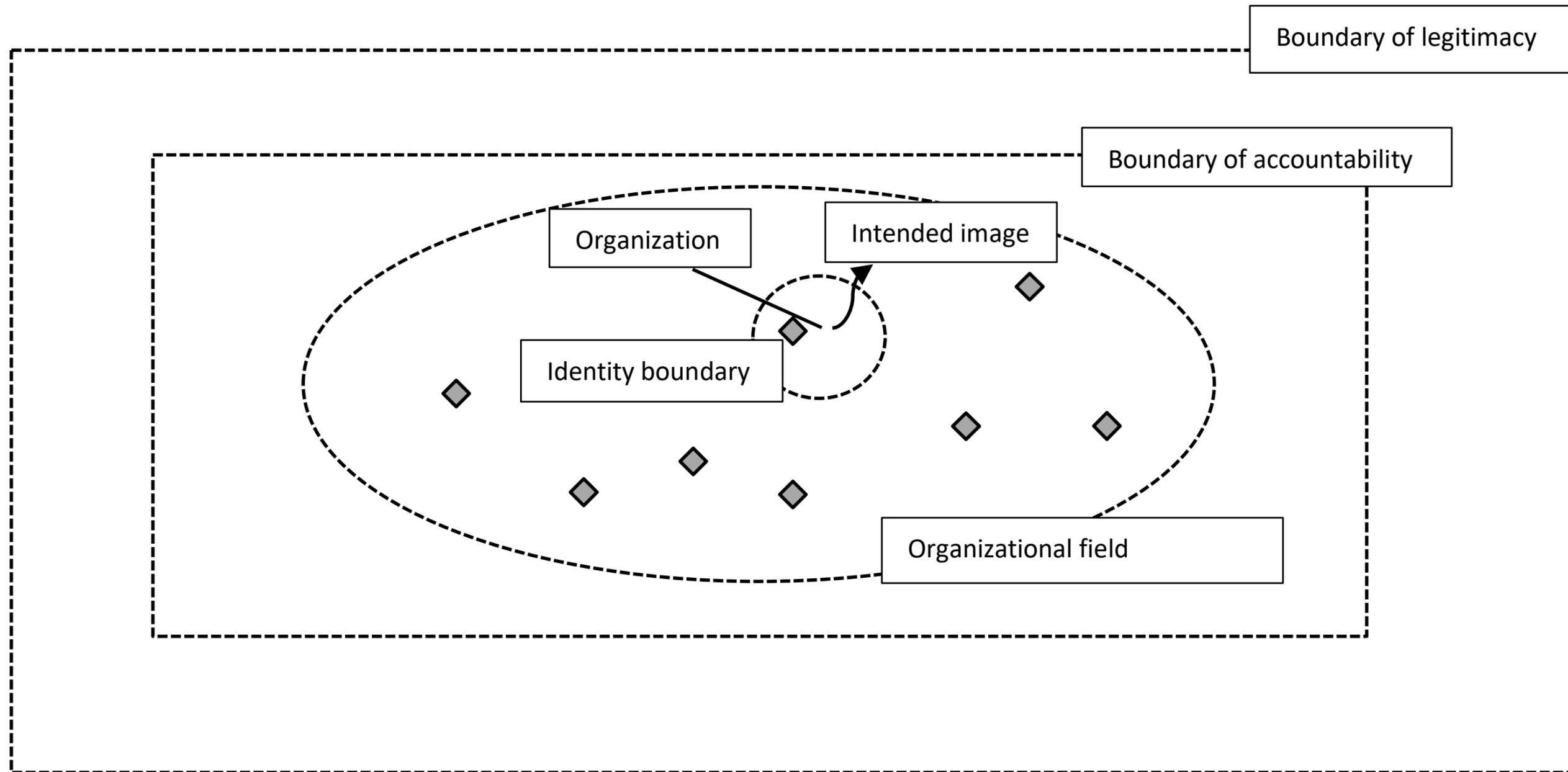


Figure 1: Strategic actorhood in an identity, image, field, accountability and legitimacy context

# 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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