Voluntas (2020) 31:39–55
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00091-x

ORIGINAL PAPER

Legitimacy as Property and Process: The Case of an Irish LGBT Organization

Sheila M Cannon[1]

Published online: 31 January 2019
© International Society for Third-Sector Research and The Johns Hopkins University 2019

Abstract This study provides insight into the changing normative judgements of civil society organizations over time through the concept of legitimacy. A case study of an LGBT organization in Ireland over the past 40 years shows how a process of legitimation took place in five steps: refuge, advocacy, formalization, impact, and organizational survival. The initial stigmatization of the organization's core purpose created opportunities for social capital to grow, which, ironically, helped to initiate the process of legitimation. In the end, pragmatic legitimacy waned after the organization achieved impact and was successful in its mission. This organizational perspective on civil society and on a history of LGBT rights contributes to understanding the legitimacy of civil society organizations, actors which influence change in normative judgements over time. Treating legitimacy as both a property and a process highlights how these organizations can be simultaneously subjects of normative judgement and also agents of change.

Keywords Civil society organization · Legitimacy · Legitimation · LGBT movement · Process study

Introduction

In the 1980s and 1990s, Ireland was considered to be a conservative Catholic country, and homosexual acts were a criminal offense from 1861 until 1993. Just 12 years later, in May 2015, the Irish public made the country one of the most liberal in terms of homosexual rights through a public referendum on marriage equality. This is quite an extraordinary journey from conservative to liberal, from demonizing and criminalizing homosexuality, to accepting it with open arms in such a short space of time, and thus provides a unique context in which to study legitimacy in civil society. The civil society organizations (CSOs) actively involved in that journey of social change transformed from being considered suspect, radical, and even damaging to society, to being held up as progressive, modeling values to celebrate, and for the rest of the world to emulate. These organizations transition from "illegitimate" to "legitimate" due to the social change that they were actively working toward. What is the process of legitimation by which CSOs can influence the normative judgement of their own purpose or mission? In order to answer that question, this research explores the role and activities of one CSO that promotes and protects the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people in Ireland: Rainbow Umbrella (RU).[1] The findings present the organization's 40-year history in five phases, as it transitioned from radical and suspect, to legitimate and respected.

Much of the extensive and diverse literature on civil society, broadly defined as the collective actions of individuals between the state, market, and private spheres (Edwards 2004), has a normative approach to its constituent organizations (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014), viewing the very existence of CSOs as positive (Clemens 2006). This study provides an empirical example of civil society as a space in which normative judgements are contested by those organizations (Reuter et al. 2014). The

Special Issue: CSOs as sites for Legitimizing the Common Good.

✉ Sheila M Cannon
cannonsh@tcd.ie

[1] Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

[1] The organization and individuals have all been anonymized.

concept of organizational legitimacy from the neo-institutional literature (Deephouse and Suchman 2008) provides a useful way to understand normative judgement from the perspective of organizations and their changing contexts. According to Suchman's oft-cited definition: "Legitimacy is 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" (1995, p. 574). In particular, the process of legitimation in CSOs can be understood as part of the contestation of different values, ideas, and beliefs in civil society. This research contributes to understanding legitimacy as both property and process (Suddaby et al. 2017). The presence or absence of legitimacy as a property, asset, or resource influences CSO activities; the legitimation process reflects the agentic role of the CSOs that seek to influence macro-level changes over time providing insight on how these processes begin, evolve, and wane.

This dual approach, legitimacy as both property and process, provides some original insights into how CSOs respond to, promote, influence, and contest normative judgments in civil society. From a legitimacy as property perspective, negative normative judgement reflects illegitimacy, or stigma attributed to the organization's core purpose (Hudson and Okhuysen 2009), that influences an organization's activities and even provides unintended benefits: solidarity between members and focus for the organizational mission. This shared rejection and condemnation creates opportunities for social capital, the value of the connections made between people involved in the CSO (Edwards 2004). Additionally, being an illegitimate CSO provides a clear mission to fight this negative judgement; when this status is lifted, the organizational focus diffuses, posing a survival challenge. From a legitimacy as process perspective, five phases in RU's history: refuge, advocacy, formalization, impact, and organizational survival, reflected changes in the macro-level context that the CSO both responded to, but also tried to influence.

Background

This literature review covers two concepts that are the subjects of extensive research and literature—civil society organizations (CSOs) and legitimacy—to provide a useful and relevant background for analyzing the empirical data.

Civil Society Organizations

The contested concept of civil society has a wide range of different meanings in diverse areas of literature (Edwards 2004). In this paper, I take an associational approach to civil society, an area of literature that is in itself extensive, including studies of nonprofit organizations (NPOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social enterprises, social movements, and grassroots associations (Edwards 2011b). Much of the diverse literature on civil society has normative underpinnings, depicting its organizations as positive (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014; Reuter et al. 2014; Seligman 1995). From a broad sociological perspective, for example, civil society is the worth and inherent value of collective endeavors, which unify individuals around a cause or shared interest (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, pp. 185–193). From one political science perspective, the neo-Tocquevillian approach focusses on how CSOs benefit democracies by creating social capital when interpersonal bonds are formed, and skills are learned, such as networking, communicating, and organizing (Clemens 2006; Putnam 2000). The associational approach is criticized for focusing exclusively on the micro, ignoring contextual, or macro, issues (Edwards 2011a), and treating all associations as equivalent, missing out on important differences (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014). An alternative consideration of civil society treats this sphere as an appropriate space to promote, contest, debate, and advocate for different values and beliefs (Edwards 2011a), with the winners of these ongoing contests determining the boundaries of legitimacy (Reuter et al. 2014). Thus, we move away from CSOs as legitimate per se, but as *actors in the contestation of normative judgements.*

Some studies divide civil society into "good" and "bad" CSOs, explaining the basis on which CSOs should have legitimacy or not. Chambers and Kopstein elaborate on "bad" civil society: organizations that do not uphold the value of reciprocity, which is recognizing others, even opponents, as deserving of civility (2001, p. 839). So far in the extant literature, "bad" CSOs are those that are still considered unequivocally illegitimate, and about which there is a general consensus that they lack legitimacy as CSOs, usually due to violent actions, or lack of reciprocity (e.g., Blee 2002; Mann 2005). Chambers and Kopstein use the examples of Nazism in Germany, the Nation of Islam, and World Church of the Creator to illustrate that even though the messages of these groups advocate hate and intolerance, the members could still learn skills valuable to democracy such as networking, communication, and advocacy (2001). Edwards uses the examples of Al-Qaeda, the Mafia, and the Interahamwe (the name given to the Hutu killing group in Rwanda, meaning, "those who attack together"); he argues that these groups can be dismissed as violent criminals, without bringing down the whole argument about the normative nature of civil society (2004, pp. 44–45). The Klu Klux Klan is provided as an example of "bad" civil society that promotes volunteerism,

participation, inter-group trust, and other positive values, while the content of their ideology is the antithesis of tolerance, reciprocity, and understanding (Edwards 2004; Putnam 2000). I have not found studies of organizations whose normative status has transformed that used to be considered illegitimate but is now considered legitimate. This remains a significant gap, because the implication is that judgements of "good" and "bad" CSOs are permanent and indisputable.

Organizational Legitimacy

Neo-institutional theory provides a basis for conceptualizing the norms, beliefs, taken-for-granted assumptions, and values that shape and stabilize organizational life (e.g., Scott 2008), and thus provides a way of understanding what is meant by "good" and "bad" CSOs. In short, a "bad" CSO is one that is considered illegitimate because it does not conform to the norms, regulations, beliefs, and assumptions of its environment. This is a much more relativistic approach than appears in some of the CSO literature, as described above. Legitimacy, as a general perception of appropriateness, can be: pragmatic—manipulated by actors and is based on self-interest; moral—based on normative judgement; and cognitive—the taken-for-granted assumptions that shape and inform how people interpret their surroundings, including organizations and their purposes (Deephouse and Suchman 2008; Suchman 1995). Therefore, "good" CSOs are those with pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy within their specific context of time and place. The primary focus of this research is the organizational or meso-level, but the macro-level context is also considered: the normative judgements and taken-for-granted assumptions in the organizational environment.

This research focusses on legitimacy as a change process, but also treats legitimacy as a property in conceptualizing illegitimate versus legitimate CSOs. As a property, legitimacy is an asset or resource that is contingent on how well the organization "fits" its environment (Hannan and Freeman 1989; Pfeffer and Salancik 2003; Scott and Davis 2007, pp. 258–261). Conforming to institutional rules, norms, and expectations confers legitimacy, thus enhancing chances of organizational survival (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Singh et al. 1986). Legitimacy as property can be a bipolar construct, with legitimacy as the opposite of illegitimacy (Elsbach and Sutton 1992; Glynn and Marquis 2004), and stigma as a strong form of illegitimacy (Hudson and Okhuysen 2009). Legitimacy as property is a structural approach, while legitimacy as process emphasizes the agency of actors involved who can deliberately manipulate legitimacy through their actions (Suddaby et al. 2017).

Legitimacy as Property in CSOs

Much of the research on CSO legitimacy takes an instrumental approach, treating legitimacy as a property by examining transparency, accountability, performance, and representativeness (e.g., Atack 1999; Lister 2003). For example, for a CSO to have legitimacy in a post-conflict setting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the "ethnicness" of the organization must be considered (Plujek-Shank and Verkoren 2017); thus, representativeness is a property that reflects and confers organizational legitimacy. For a CSO to have legitimacy in a development context, the extent to which it undermines or supports the local government is crucial; thus, upward accountability can confer legitimacy (Popplewell 2018). Whether or not, and the extent to which, NGOs have legitimacy can be analyzed by examining references in popular media (Marberg et al. 2016). Some of the recent literature is in response to a decline in trust of NGOs and tries to re-establish the basis on which NGOs should have legitimacy (Brown 2008; Sternberg 2010). In these examples, legitimacy is conceptualized as an asset or resource that can be present or absent depending on the certain features, actions, and role of the CSO.

Another way that civil society research treats legitimacy as property is in analyses of whether the CSO creates opportunities for bonding or bridging capital (Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Edwards 2004; Gabbay and Leenders 1999; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Putnam 2000; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). According to early theories, social capital consists of relationships or connections that can translate into value, or capital, i.e., the value created by social relationships (Bourdieu 1986). Bonding social capital is exclusive, includes the connections between similar people, and can be an important source of psychological support in certain circumstances, like ethnic minority enclaves, but can also be the source of "bad" civil society, excluding "outsiders" such as those who are perceived as different (Edwards 2004; Putnam 2000). Bridging social capital is inclusive, refers to connections outside ones immediate network of people similar to oneself, and can be key to success and progress, to gaining resources, and to new opportunities. Therefore, bridging social capital is seen as a basis for legitimacy in CSOs. When a group is disparaged and hated because of their identity, how are they to begin the process of forming bonding or bridging social capital to start with? This research helps to address that question.

Legitimacy as Process in CSOs

While much is written on CSO legitimacy as property, there are fewer accounts of legitimacy as process—the ways in which organizations actively seek to gain

legitimacy (Meyer et al. 2013). Research on legitimacy as process considers socially constructed multi-level, multi-actor phenomena (Greenwood et al. 2002; Johnson et al. 2006) often involving those who want to bring about social change (Golant and Sillince 2007), i.e., an agentic approach. For example, organizations can narrate their organizational identity multiple times to regain legitimacy after environmental change illustrating how two concepts, legitimacy and identity, interrelate at different levels: generic, individual, institutional, and organizational (He and Baruch 2010). Discourse in CSOs can be part of a process that legitimizes managerialism in nonprofit organizing (Meyer et al. 2013). Values are found to have performative power in changing institutions, such as ending violent practices (Vaccaro and Palazzo 2015). New organizations that address challenging and feared social issues (care for AIDS patients in the 1980s) can gain legitimacy by telling persuasive stories from various perspectives with a taken-for-granted narrative structure (Golant and Sillince 2007). Thus, organizational actors can strategically use identity, discourse, values, and stories to manipulate public perceptions, values, and judgements of various stakeholders to influence the process of legitimation.

There is a lack of research into legitimation processes where the starting point is illegitimacy (Hudson and Okhuysen 2009; Zuckerman 1999). For example, business studies literature provides examples of the legitimation processes strategically employed to launch new products, such as the minivan (Rosa et al. 1999), or satellite radio (Navis and Glynn 2010), new service offerings by accounting firms (Greenwood et al. 2002), and new practices in business consulting (Clegg et al. 2007) and in the automobile industry (Rao 1994), which all reflect shifts in already legitimate areas of products and services. Illegitimacy is a fundamental lack of pragmatic, cognitive, and moral legitimacy. On the individual level, illegitimacy can be experienced as shame (Creed et al. 2014), and on the organizational level, illegitimacy can appear as "core stigma," a negative evaluation of an organization's core purpose (Hudson and Okhuysen 2009). Hudson and Okhuysen show how men's bathhouses survive and thrive despite their complete lack of legitimacy by engaging in boundary work to carve out a space in which stigma can be contained (2009, p. 150). It is not clear, however, whether and how illegitimate organizations can become legitimate, the focus of this study.

Conceptual Framework

This paper focuses on the legitimation process of the CSO content or mission, LGBT rights, which gained legitimacy in part due to the organization's actions. Conceptualizing legitimacy as both property and process provides two ways of understanding how an organization changes over time in the transition from illegitimate to legitimate. Legitimacy as property allows for consideration of organizational fit with its context—the aspects and features that are considered legitimate by various constituents, such as social capital, representativeness, accountability, and transparency. Considering legitimacy as process highlights the agentic role of the CSO and its efforts to effect change over time, to influence its environment, upon which organizational legitimacy depends. Legitimation processes play out in phases or stages, which reflect macro-level change (Greenwood et al. 2002; Johnson et al. 2006). The process in this case begins with illegitimacy, or core stigma for the content, aims, and purpose of the CSO (Hudson and Okhuysen 2009). The phases refer to the active role of the CSO to bring about the social change upon which the organization's legitimacy relies. This relativistic approach to the concept of CSO legitimacy provides an empirical example of the process of legitimation that is the contestation of normative judgements, values, beliefs, and ideas in civil society.

The object of legitimation in existing studies encompasses a wide array of factors: organizational activities (Greenwood et al. 2002), the organizational form (Johnson et al. 2006), practices (M. Meyer et al. 2013), and the content or purpose of the CSO (Hudson and Okhuysen 2009). All of these aspects are included because by definition legitimacy is the general sense of appropriateness, the taken-for-granted assumption that the organizational form, role, activities, and purpose are valid. In this study, the object of legitimation is the content, mission, or purpose of the organization, and not the organizational form. The specific purpose of this CSO, promoting LGBT equality and rights, was reflected in its activities, practices, and very existence, all of which gained legitimacy over time.

Method

This research was motivated both by the uniqueness of the empirical context and by the gaps in the literature in understanding how CSOs respond to shifts in normative judgements in their environments, particularly when starting from a position of illegitimacy. The aim of the research was to document the specific case of RU and to contribute to two conceptual areas: CSO legitimacy, and legitimacy as property and process. A single case study supports the building of theory primarily at a meso-level, but also draws in micro- and macro-levels. I collected primary and secondary data from 2013 to 2018, which included interviews with 14 stakeholders who have been active in RU at various times from 1979 until the present.

Research Setting

Rainbow Umbrella

The organization, RU, emerged out of the Irish Gay Rights Movement and was founded by some of the leaders of that movement in 1979 (Ryan 2006). RU describes itself as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee with charitable status, and the oldest LGBT NGO in Ireland. At the time of data gathering, the only staff were those producing Rainbow Umbrella News (RUN), a monthly, free, glossy color magazine that is distributed widely in Ireland and online. The board are voluntary and actively engaged in delivering RU programs: Annual LGBT Person of the Year Awards; hosting a weekly nightclub called "Sister"; conducting and disseminating research based on opinion polls of the LGBT community in Ireland; and a traveling exhibition entitled "Journey to Equality," documenting the journey to the successful marriage equality referendum. There are six board members, three of whom are newly appointed. Thus, it is evident that the organization is in a time of transition. The mission is stated as: RU "is an Irish community organization striving to advance equality and end the discrimination of LGBT people in Ireland and internationally" (3-year Strategic Plan Sept 2014–August 2017).

When RU was founded in 1979, being gay was condemned and criminalized in Ireland (*Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act,* 1993, 1993), such that setting up a national association for homosexual people was a brave and controversial act. The history of LGBT rights in Ireland from decriminalization in 1993 shows that there were many actors, both individuals and organizations, and various key events culminating in the marriage referendum in 2015. In February 2008, Marriage Equality, a single-issue advocacy organization, was set up and was instrumental in bringing about a change in the law from Civil Partnership in 2010 to full Marriage Equality in 2015. It grew out of an advocacy initiative by two women, Drs Katherine Zappone and Ann Louise Gilligan, who had married in Canada, and wanted to file joint tax returns as a married couple living and working in Ireland (O'Carroll and McDonnell 2010). The formation of the organization, Marriage Equality, was supported by several LGBT organizations, including RU ("Our History" RU Web site, accessed 2017). The YES Equality campaign was created by three organizations coming together: Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN), the Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL), and Marriage Equality (ME). RU and others also supported and participated in the campaign, which is documented and described in detail in the book, "Ireland Says Yes" (Healy et al. 2015). Even though the movement from criminalization to equality took place in steps and stages, the referendum itself was a real watershed moment, as Ireland became "a beacon to persecuted LGBT people across the globe" (Toss Golden-Bannon, Board member, Marriage Equality, Web site 2015). In other words, marriage equality was experienced as a huge success and achievement by the whole LGBT community, including by RU.

Research Design

Operationalizing the concept of legitimacy as both property and process is not straightforward as this approach bridges two different ontological perspectives (Suddaby et al. 2017). Analyzing a property, which is a feature or element of focus, requires a substance-based view of reality, whereas a process that continually evolves as a social construction such that an organization is a temporary collection of attributes is a phenomenological perspective (Langley et al. 2013, pp. 4–5). Treating legitimacy as subject and phenomenon simultaneously requires gathering multiple sources of data.

In order to operationalize legitimacy as process, I relied on a range of data to construct a process of change over time that focused on the role and activities of the organization, included multiple actors, focused on the organization and its environment, and drew on eclectic data (Langley 1999). This data included personal accounts in interviews, books, organizational documents, the organizations Web site, and social media. I employed a "temporal bracketing strategy" by making sense of the data by assembling it into discrete phases that have some discontinuity at the boundaries (Langley 1999, p. 703). The value of this strategy is that these phases have more than just descriptive utility, but contribute to sense making and theorizing. Consistent with other temporal bracketing process research, changes and features of one phase contribute to actions in the next phase (Langley 1999, p. 703). For example, the advocacy accomplished in Phase 2 helped bring about the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993, which in turn allowed for formalization of the organization in Phase 3.

Legitimacy as property is not consistently operationalized in the literature (Suddaby et al. 2017, p. 458). I used the following factors to represent legitimacy as property: having charitable status and board members (Singh et al. 1986), as well as having a mailing list, Facebook page followers, and the receipt of public grants and private donations. The factors that can be manipulated by stakeholders represent pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman 1995). Illegitimacy is the lack of these properties or features, plus incidences of hate-crimes and hostility toward the organization and its members. Interview data and textual accounts reflect moral and cognitive legitimacy; I asked about and examined attitudes and opinions of the general

public and how they changed, but I focused on the perspectives of the actors involved, rather than outside observers, as is consistent with a sense-making approach. The positive marriage equality campaign outcome was a significant indication that the organization and its wider cause gained legitimacy.

Data Collection

I collected primary and secondary data from 2013 to 2018; thus, most of the process analyzed in this study, which begins in 1979, is viewed retrospectively, and not as it was happening. I conducted two preliminary interviews with the advocacy organization, Marriage Equality, in April and July 2015, before and after the marriage referendum in May that year. A presentation made in 2016 by a former employee of Marriage Equality showed how they achieved success, who was involved, and what it meant for people. I coordinated MBA consultancy projects with RU in 2016 and 2017. This involved MBA students meeting with RUN staff as well as RU board members, taking observation field notes, and gathering organizational documents such as strategic plans, and annual reports; these data were compiled into two comprehensive reports as well as two presentations. As per the requirements for ethical approval that governed this research, the student teams were informed and agreed that their work would also serve as data in a wider research project. The organization agreed to take part in the research. While the organization and individuals have all been anonymized, it is also clear that due to small population and specific context, those involved could be identified; this was discussed and participants agreed to take part despite the limitations of anonymization in this case.

Organizational documents included several RUN publications, and two "Key Issues" reports on important themes for the LGBT community in Ireland based on opinion polls and focus groups conducted by RU. I conducted, transcribed, and analyzed interviews with RU board members, RUN staff, external stakeholders, including staff members and a donor of different LGBT organizations, who were familiar with RU, thus providing an outside but informed perspective on RU and its context. I also acquired two videos in which RU board members and other stakeholders were interviewed (Table 1).

Data Analysis

There were six steps in the data analysis. First, I conducted an initial round of data gathering, including preliminary interviews, gathering documents, and the MBA consultancy projects. I journaled about emerging themes and used writing to help analyze and situate the themes in extant literature. Second, I wrote up the history of the organization, dividing it into phases, which roughly corresponded with RU's own phases as they present their history on their Web site. In this research, Phases 2–4 are presented as one phase by RU. I divided this time into three phases to get a more fine-grained understanding of what was happening in the organization during that time and the roles that it played. Third, I conducted a second round of data gathering that consisted primarily of interviews. These interviews remained fairly open so that the interviewees could tell their own version of the story of the organization and its history. I concentrated on finding out whether the five phases corresponded to the interviewees' understanding of the organization's history; then, for each phase, I explored: what was the mission, role, and message of the organization; what drew people to the organization; what was the context like at the time; and what role does/did RU play. All interviews were coded manually; I used color coding to highlight themes that emerged, and clustered original quotes and other data around those themes.

Fourth, I read about the history of the LGBT movement in Ireland (Healy et al. 2015; O'Carroll and Collins 1995; Rose 1994; Ryan 2006) to understand the context in which RU operated and attitudes toward homosexuality in Ireland. I interviewed people from three other LGBT organizations in Ireland to see whether attitudes toward those organizations were similar, thus indicating a more macro-level lack of legitimacy, and not a lack of pragmatic legitimacy limited to RU. I asked questions around what changed in RU as the LGBT movement progressed, i.e., when the mission or cause gained legitimacy. Fifth, I returned to the case story and filled in some aspects. I returned to some of the key informants and checked my findings with them; at this point, I made a few adjustments based on their feedback. Notably, Phase 3 was initially called "formalization and professionalization," but one key interviewee stated that it was important to distinguish RU as primarily a voluntary organization, as opposed to other newer ones which were begun by professional managers (Fig. 1). Therefore, I removed the term "professionalization." Using the concepts that emerged in the data analysis, I crafted the process model of legitimation, Fig. 2. Sixth and finally, I returned to the theory and again used writing to draw out the contributions of this case.

Findings: The Story of Rainbow Umbrella

The five phases that make up the organization's history are presented in Table 2. For each phase, the activities of the organization reflect the role that it played at that time in the process of legitimation. I present a snapshot of the context in which it operated from a range of data sources, which

Table 1 Data collection

Data Type	Role	Description
Interviews	Board Member 1 (founding member and 1st Chair, 1979–1987)	Interview, October 2017. Transcript
	Board Member 2 (second Chair 1987, member from 1979, Founder RUN)	Interview, RUN video, 2013. Transcript
		Interview, April 2018. Transcript
	Board Member 3 (third Chair and co-Chair, 1999–2013)	Interview, RUN video, 2013. Transcript
		Interview, July 2018. Transcript
	Board Member 4 (2015–2017)	Meetings for RU MBA project in 2016 and 2017. Notes
		Interview, May 2017. Transcript
	Board Member 5 (served as Acting Chair in 2016–2017; staff member of RUN 1997)	Meetings for RU MBA project in 2016 and 2017. Notes
		Interview, April 2017. Transcript
		Meeting notes, September 2017.
	Editor RUN	Interview, RUN video, 2013. Transcript
	Director youth LGBT org	Interview, RUN video, 2013. Transcript
	LGBT Donor	Interview, May 2013. Transcript
	Former Marriage Equality (ME) Staff Member	Interview, July 2013. Notes
		Interview, April 2015. Notes
		Presentation on ME 2016. Notes and slides
	Former staff member, other LGBT org1	Interview, March 2017. Transcript
		Interview, June 2017. Notes
	Staff member, other LGBT org2	Interview, October 2017. Transcript
	Staff member, other LGBT org3	Interview, donor video, 2015. Transcript
	RUN staff members	Interview, February 2017. Notes
Observations	Attended RU nightclub event, February 2017	
	Field notes, 2013, 2016, and 2017	
Organizational documents	3-year Strategic Plan 2014–2017	
	Two consultative reports and presentations, 2016, 2017	
	Annual reports 2014–2016	
	Brochures from other LGBT organizations including donors, 2014–2015	
Publications	RUN publications 2016 and 2017	
	Two RU "Key Issues" reports, based on opinion polls and focus groups of LGBT community in Ireland, 2009 and 2016	

elucidates whether it had legitimacy, to what extent, and what type: pragmatic, moral, or cognitive (legitimacy as property).

Phase 1: Refuge (1979–1987)

Organizational Role

In the first phase of the organization's history, RU provided an underground, safe meeting place for gay men in Ireland in the then derelict area of Temple Bar in Dublin offering a range of activities, which seeded other later activities and other organizations. RU served as a hidden resource and social outlet in response to the hostile environment. The RU founders set up the first gay venue in Ireland with a meeting space, café, library, small cinema, and disco hall ("Our History" RU Web site, accessed 2017; interviews). "We also had a library, we had counselling rooms, and we had the telephone counselling service" (Board Member 1, October 2017). It was set up as an association of local gay organizations and served as a meeting point for the gay community in Ireland.

> It was the gay hub of Dublin (Board member 4, April 2017).

> People regarded [RU] as a refuge. They were delighted to have it (Board Member 1, October 2017).

> RU was like family. It was so so important to members, many of whom had been rejected by their own families (Board member 3, July 2018)

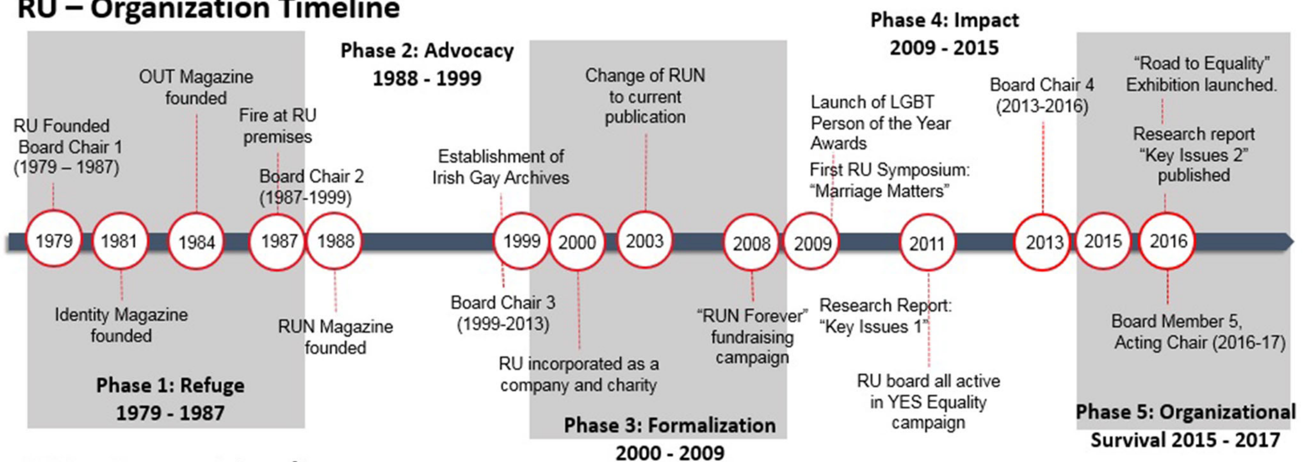

Fig. 1 RU timeline: organization and context

Table 2 Five phases in RU's history: becoming a legitimate CSO

Phase in RU history (process of legitimation)	Time period	Legitimacy as CSO property	Context
1. Refuge Protecting, providing safe social outlet and familial support	1979–1987	Illegitimate	Homosexuality condemned and illegal. Physical attacks on individuals and on CSO premises
2. Advocacy Connecting the community, giving voice to the cause	1988–1999	Mostly illegitimate	Decriminalization achieved.
3. Formalization Formal organization delivering a valued public service	2000–2009	Pragmatic legitimacy	Financial growth and recession. Court case for marriage recognition. Reports into clerical abuse led to condemnations of the Catholic Church
4. Impact Successful campaign for change. Provided leadership and was a respected voice.	2009–2015	Pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy	Growth of marriage equality movement
5. Organizational survival Struggling to re-orient	2015–2017	Losing pragmatic legitimacy	Sense that full equality has been achieved, even though there are still needs

> People came from all over Ireland, all walks of life. It was the only place where they could be openly gay (Board Member 5, February 2017).

RU identifies this time as a distinct phase in the organization's history, which they describe as "pre-legal" (RU Web site), reflecting a lack of pragmatic legitimacy.

Mission Focus

In the beginning, they had a clear and simple mission: "We were all committed to equality for gay people, which was a radical idea at that time" (Board Member 1, October 2017). "The mission in the beginning was clear: equality for gay people" (Board Member 5, February 2017).

During this time, RU launched its first publications, which attracted disdain, anger, and criticism, a clear sign that the organization did not have moral or cognitive legitimacy during this phase. The publications were significant to the community, who were not represented at all in the mainstream media. "Identity," published in 1981 until 1984, was the first gay periodical in Ireland and laid the groundwork for Irish LGBT publishing. In 1984, "Out" magazine was Ireland's first commercial gay and lesbian publication, until 1988 when the printers of the magazine refused to publish due to an "offensive" health advertisement. None of the publications were available in newsagents or mainstream shops. One mainstream newspaper described these publications with the headline, "Reckless. Irresponsible. Dishonest" (RUN video, 2013).

> It had a very underground feel to it (RUN video, 2013, referring to 1988 publication).

While the myriad of social activities were underground, the founders also contributed to and participated in international activities; the International Gay Association had its headquarters in RU offices in Temple Bar for several years. In this way, and at other times in the future, RU "punched above its weight" (Board Member 5, February 2017) in the role that it played for LGBT rights. It had a low profile, but a significant influence.

When the Center burnt down in 1987, it was a great loss for the community, and they were not sure that they could re-gain this safe space (Web site and Interview, Board Member 5). It also marked the end of Phase I of the organization's history.

> The RU Centre was badly damaged in a fire – presumed to be accidental – that closed the community centre in the building which had acted as the beating heart of Dublin's lesbian and gay community for over eight years (RU website, Our History, accessed 2017).

Phase 1 Context

During the first phase of the organization's history, the context was very hostile toward its mission and activities. At that time, homosexual acts were illegal, and there was open condemnation as well as physical violence against the community, indicating a complete lack of pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy, and a strong negative stigma. There were court cases against people accused of homosexual activities for whom RU helped to secure legal support (Board Member 1, October 2017). The Catholic Church was very influential in public and private lives during this time, providing the basis for the condemnation of homosexuality in Ireland (Interviews and O'Carroll and Collins 1995).

At that time, our community was very diverse, very fractured, very invisible. (Board Member 2, 2013).

> People had difficult lives at that time. It wasn't easy to be out and gay in Ireland (Editor RUN, video, 2013).

> It can be a very harsh place Ireland for gay people at that stage. You could lose your job; you could be denounced; your family could subject you to electric therapy treatment against your wishes…. Totally 100% different to what it is today (Board Member 1, October 2017).

There were physical attacks against LGBT people at this time, and against RU. The murder of Declan Flynn by a group of young men was deeply disturbing, especially because his attackers all walked free with suspended sentences (Former ME staff member, 2013). One of the bomb attacks against the RU premises involved so much petrol and explosives: "It was cruel but effective and if it had been allowed to go off a couple of hundred people would have been killed" (Board Member 1, 2017).

During this time, there were also some of the first public events advocating for the rights of the gay community in Ireland. In 1981, RU took part in the first National Gay Conference in Ireland, held in Cork city. In 1983, RU took part in Ireland's first Gay Pride Parade in Dublin. Some legal work was done to build up a case against the state to end incrimination of homosexuality; the challenge was that almost no one wanted to openly participate in the legal action (Board Member 1, October 2017). While the burning down of the RU offices was a clear ending point for Phase I, there were also links between the phases; the safe space allowed for confidence building and germination of ideas that would later emerge a more public voice, in the form of advocacy.

Phase 2: Advocacy (1988–1999)

Phase 2 was a step toward legitimation that consisted of the first public advocacy for the cause of gay and lesbian rights and connecting people to the community. Advocacy is giving public voice to the cause and thus building a case for legitimacy for RU and its mission. Decriminalization of homosexual acts also took place in 1993, a legal case which the organization had participated in from the beginning. The first steps of professionalization were evident in this phase as the organization took part in a government labor program that provided work for unemployed people, in this case working on producing the RUN magazine. While this reflects some pragmatic legitimacy,

there were almost no signs of moral or cognitive legitimacy during this phase, as is clear from the context below.

Following the first almost decade of gathering in a safe place, testing the waters of expressing LGBT thoughts, ideas, and opinions in public, the second phase of RU was one in which the context was still very challenging, but there was a momentum starting enabling some to speak up and advocate for gay rights. They were still decades away from normalizing homosexuality in Ireland. When the Rainbow Umbrella News (RUN) was first published in 1988, "there was no readily accessible digital world to serve as a think-tank and hub for communications," in contrast to the present day (Board Member 4, February 2017). The only way for the community to stay up to date on current events, politics, legislation, and entertainment was through RUN, a tailored hard-copy newsprint available from certain community outlets.

RUN was first published as an eight-page tabloid newspaper and has since been the most important activity of the organization, with paid staff, funding, and continuity to the present day. "RUN was set up in 1988 and the main role of the organization for about 20 years after that was to ensure that RUN survived" (Board Member 5, April 2017).

> Back in the 1990's RUN was a lifeline for relatively sheltered Ireland, nothing really existed so it was just so important (Board Member 5, April 2017).

> The whole purpose of RU at that time was to produce and circulate RUN (Board Member 3, July 2018)

> I set up RUN which would give it [RU] a mouthpiece, a new mouthpiece, a more urgent mouthpiece that it would also be a platform for documenting or celebrating our stories. (Board Member 2, April 2018)

The management and production of RUN reflects a growing level of pragmatic legitimacy. RUN grew into a large operation that was supported by a government employment scheme, covered its own costs through advertising, and also contributed financially to running RU. "When I was there (1997) over 30 people were employed on the FAS (Government Community Employment) scheme" (Board Member 5, April 2017).

In this phase in 1999, RU also began the Irish Gay Archive, another indication of growing pragmatic legitimacy. It began as a collection of all press clippings, publications, and videos related to the gay community in Ireland, and then of the LGBT community more broadly. The latter part of Phase 2 saw the inclusion of lesbian women as part of the community and organizational remit more formally.

Phase 2 Context

Despite the fact that homosexuality was decriminalized in Ireland in 1993, opinion polls preceding the law reform showed that the majority of citizens were against decriminalization (RUN, 1990). Thus, public attitudes toward homosexuality were changing only very slowly, and RU was still far from having moral and cognitive legitimacy. Legal changes that took place during this time were the Employment Equality Act (1998) and the Equal Status Act (2000) that outlawed discrimination in employment and public services based on sexual orientation.

Texts including personal accounts from that time reflect the shame and stigma associated with homosexuality, indicating moral and cognitive illegitimacy for RU mission. Father Bernard J Lynch wrote about his experience of being gay and a priest in Ireland at that time (Lynch 1995). He states that many gay people in Ireland felt that they simply had no other option but to emigrate, and the family did not even want them to return when they were dying of AIDS, as it would bring shame on the family; he expresses just how hard it was for someone to come out as homosexual in the context of Catholic Ireland (1995, pp. 219–220).

Phase 3: Formalization (1999–2009)

Phase 3 represents the tipping point for gaining legitimacy; delivering a valued public service conferred pragmatic legitimacy on the organization. The beginning of this phase is marked by new organizational leadership. In this phase, Board Member 3 took up position as Chairperson and was an outspoken and well-known advocate of LGBT issues and of social change. In 2000, RU became a formal organization and was no longer an association or network of other local organizations. It became a Company Limited by Guarantee with charitable status within Irish Law. Several sources of income were secured at this time, including small private donations and public grants. RU continued to have an active and engaged board, but the only staff were those working on the publications. Through the 1990s, RUN continued to be the only LGBT publication in Ireland and an important source of information and connection point for the community. "Everyone remembers the first time they read RUN… they will know that in the moment of reading their first RUN it was their moment of connecting up to their community in this country" (RUN Editor, 2013).

Professionalization took place at RUN: "It is really interesting to look at through the evolution the development of RUN from those early days from being a newspaper to becoming really the lovely, professional, and very highly respected magazine that it is today." (Board

Member 3, 2013). She points out respect and professionalism, which were not features in the past. In 2003, RUN changed into a glossy magazine in order to attract advertising and compete with other magazines. “The decision to do this was based on the need for RUN to compete in the commercial market and attract advertising in order to survive. At that time, RUN was operating at a loss. In the years following the re-launch of RUN, the magazine made record advertising revenue, branching out from only LGBT advertising into the mainstream” (RU Web site, June 2017).

In 2008, following financial recession in Ireland, RUN experienced financial difficulties as advertisers pulled out and income streams dried up. They launched a fund-raising campaign called, “RUN Forever,” which was successful in attracting donations to keep the magazine alive. While RUN professionalized with the hiring of several staff, RU was still run by the volunteer board, and its main focus was to support RUN (Board member 3, Interview, July 2018).

RU had moved from being an underground refuge, to a confident, public voice for human rights for the LGBT community. The advocacy work done in Phase 2 enabled the organization to formalize and professionalize in Phase 3.

Phase 3 Context

A significant factor for LGBT rights organizations in 2004 was the issuing of “cluster grants” by Atlantic Philanthropies, a private foundation that gave donations to four Irish charities all working toward LGBT equality. Four organizations received a total of 11.5 million USD from 2009 to 2013 (Dragonfly Partners 2014). While RU did not receive Atlantic funding, the sector that it was part of was strengthened and professionalized as a result of these grants.

Another factor in the environment mentioned by several interviewees was the immigration that occurred as a result of the economic boom. Ireland became more diverse and more international, which helped to modernize attitudes and opinions. “While we always had an international outlook for a small country due to our history of emigration, when the trend reversed and multinational corporations brought in people from all over the world, we became more cosmopolitan than we had ever been” (LGBT donor Interview, 2013).

The third factor and final main factor in the environment raised by interviewees were the scandals and abuses within the Catholic Church that were revealed regularly in the media at this time. In 2005, the Ferns Report, one of the first major government inquiries into allegations of child and sexual abuse by Catholic priests was issued, detailing hundreds of crimes. This was followed by several other allegations, inquiries, and reports, revealing widespread abuse. “The hypocrisy and the suffering that was gradually exposed on the evening news, night after night, was very disturbing” (LGBT org1, Interview, 2017). “The Church lost much credibility at this time, and thus its influence in preaching morality, such as homosexuality as a sin, was severely compromised” (LGBT org2, Interview, 2017).

Phase 4: Impact. Marriage Equality (2009–2015)

Phase 4 was the time when the organization, along with other organizations in Ireland, worked extremely hard campaigning for the marriage equality referendum, in which they were ultimately successful, reflecting as well as causing increased pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. It was the final step in the process of legitimation.

In this phase in 2013, Board Member 3 after 14 years stepped down as Chair. This phase was characterized by hard work, particularly on the YES Equality campaign, and significant impact, as several significant events took place. The Annual LGBT Person of the Year Awards was launched in 2009 which is still held annually today; RU organized a symposium on “Why Marriage Matters,” funded by the European Union and the Irish Equality Authority; and the first research report based on opinion polls and focus groups of the LGBT community was published, “Key Issues,” showing that the top priorities were equality in marriage and in the workplace. The RU Web site states: “2009 marked a new stage of development for RU” (History, RU Web site). In the previous three phases, much hard work was done quietly and behind the scenes to prepare the ground for these achievements.

Despite the big impact, the organization still operated fairly quietly under the radar. “Funny though RU doesn’t come into anyone’s radar” (LGBT org2, Interview, 2017). The book, “Ireland says YES,” documents the marriage equality campaign in which RU actively took part; however, RU is not mentioned at all. RUN appears twice, and RU board members are mentioned, but not the organization per se. RU is “like a chameleon… camouflaged, but has more influence than you can see” (Board Member 5, Interview, 2017).

RU had a formal membership from the beginning, but then abandoned that model during this phase. They did not see themselves as representatives of their community, but they were seen as providing leadership and an informed and respected voice, through RUN. “There was a sense of community there which isn’t always the case for an NGO. You know … which also makes it a bit more difficult when people say yeah but you’re not actually answerable to the community are you? So where do you get your legitimacy from? …Well obviously it then comes down to the integrity of the board and the value of what that board is

responsible or not and producing… It was our responsibility to make sure that [RUN] got produced to the highest possible standards and to the benefit of our community every month so that was what we stood by." (Board Member 3, July 2018)

Phase 4 Context

In 2013, a Constitutional Convention was held by the Irish Government to debate the issues around extending equal marriage rights to same-sex couples. RU submitted a thought-piece to this convention and participated in the debate (Field notes, 2016). Following the convention, a report was written up, and then a referendum was called, with the dateset for May 2015. RU participated actively in the Yes Equality campaign, touring the country, distributing leaflets door to door, holding events, disseminating information, and being interviewed in the press (Field notes and interviews). It was described as an exhilarating, exhausting, and often personally difficult time for everyone involved. "RU is not a social movement, but it was part of that social movement, the Yes campaign" (Board Member 4, May 2017).

The impact of the successful YES campaign was profound for individuals, for organizations, and for wider society. "One of the most moving things about [the success of marriage equality] is seeing lesbian and gay couples stand up in front of their families and commit to each other… and to express their love in a public way that's never been able to happen in Ireland before" (Other LGBT org3, 2015).

> We've seen it in other countries where marriage was attained through the legislator and that's great but it doesn't have the same social change as a referendum has. So for you to change a law is one thing, for you to change a nation is another… the change was irreversible (Other LGBT org1, Interview, 2017).

> There was an elation around everything (Other LGBT org1, March 2017).

Phase 5: Organizational Survival (2016–2017)

Phase 5, ironically and surprisingly, resulted in a loss of pragmatic legitimacy, as the organization lost momentum and direction following the great success of marriage equality.

Organizational Role

Achieving marriage equality was a huge success in terms of RU's mission, but organizationally it was a disorienting experience. Since RU, and others, had been so focused on achieving marriage equality, once it was achieved, there was a period of celebration, followed by a feeling of confusion, or a need to re-orient. Firstly, most of the RU board members, including the Chair, stepped down at this time, and some new ones were recruited.

> About half the board left within the year after marriage equality…. Maybe because so much of the LGBT legislative agenda had been achieved and a lot of people had been in the organization for quite a number of years. I think a lot of people just thought it was time, you know time for them. They had made their contribution (Board Member 4, May 2017).

Following the success of the marriage equality referendum, while there was a desire to keep the organization alive, the current stakeholders felt that they could not be the ones to sustain it. There was a recurring theme that RU is the oldest LGBT organization in Ireland, and RUN is the oldest gay magazine in Ireland and maybe the world. They have been around a long time and have managed to reinvent themselves over the years (Other LGBT org1, Interview, 2017).

> There is a new lease of life there, which is different from the other organizations that have closed or collapsed (Other LGBT org2, Interview, 2017).

Phase 5 Context

Similar survival challenges and contractions were experienced at several LGBT organizations at the time, particularly other ones that had significant funding from Atlantic Philanthropies, which also saw a number of staff contracts become redundant. The organization, Marriage Equality, was a single-issue advocacy organization that brought together members from other existing LGBT organizations, and thus closed down in 2015 when the Yes Equality campaign was completed.

During this phase, RU conducted the largest survey of the LGBT community's priorities, needs, and concerns. In 2009, interviews showed that marriage equality was "overwhelmingly the top priority of respondents" and "equality in general … is the second most important priority" (RU, First "Key Issues" Report). In 2016, there were a broader range of issues identified with less consensus around one or two main issues (RU, Second "Key Issues" Report). For example, the surveys showed that the community should work to protect those LGBT people who are still vulnerable, such as older people, migrants, those in rural areas, and homeless. Others felt that they should work toward marriage equality in Northern Ireland. Other "unrelated" issues were identified such as removing religious

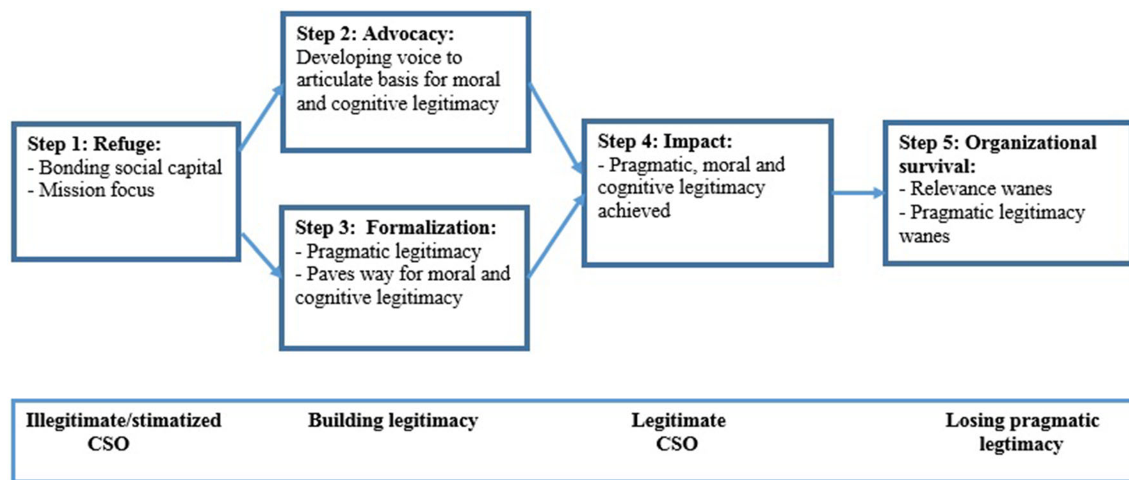

Fig. 2 Model of legitimation process

discrimination in schools. This change indicates that working toward marriage equality gave the LGBT community in general, and RU in particular a magnetizing focus, which, once achieved, left behind a plurality of different opinions on what the priorities should be.

> They have proved that they can bring about social change, so now feel that they should apply themselves to other important equality issues in Ireland and internationally. LGBT rights abroad are really important to them and they are currently in contact with organizations in Chechnya (Field notes, 2017).

Process of Legitimation

This case study depicts five phases of the organization's history that correspond with five steps in the process of legitimation. In the first step of the process, refuge, there were two unintended positive consequences of being an illegitimate CSO: increased opportunities for bonding social capital and a focused organizational mission to oppose oppression and negative judgement. Both of these unintended consequences of being part of illegitimate civil society help to explain how processes of legitimation begin in and around illegitimate organizations. The second step, advocacy, consisted of finding a voice for the cause that is necessary for articulating the basis for its possible legitimacy. The third step, formalization, represents the development of pragmatic legitimacy, which paved the way for moral and cognitive legitimacy. The data showed that advocacy and formalization happened in parallel, and not in succession. Participants were able to advocate partly because of the relationships formed within RU, and partly because they were becoming a formal professional charity. The fourth step, impact, further increased legitimacy, in particular moral and cognitive. And finally, in the fifth step, organizational survival, when the organization had achieved a big part of its mission, it then struggled to re-orient around a new focus as its pragmatic legitimacy waned Fig. 2.

Discussion

This study provides insights into CSO legitimacy as both property and process. CSO legitimacy as property shows the positive effect of social capital and, surprisingly, of negative normative judgement on initiating civil society organizing. Being cast as illegitimate civil society provided motivation and opportunities for bonding social capital, the connections, relationships, and interactions that enhance trustworthiness within a group (Chambers and Kopstein 2001; Putnam 2000). The LGBT community is a diverse group, as one of our interviewees stated, made up of people of all colors and races, nationalities, genders, religions, ages, urban and rural, and political persuasions. When one aspect of their identity, their sexual orientation, was demonized, this provided motivation to unite around that particular aspect of their identity. Therefore, members of this identity group were contributing to bonding social capital in relation to their sexual orientation, which is an unintended consequence of being an illegitimate CSO. Furthermore, being illegitimate and stigmatized encouraged activities on the margins that provided refuge and family-like support for the members of the group. Ironically, these activities provided spaces for bonding social capital to grow. Thus, demonizing a group helps create space for strengthening the bonding capital within that group, thus enabling the process of legitimation to begin.

From an organizational perspective, having a mission or cause that is illegitimate has a unifying effect on the

organization. This singularity of focus was an unintended consequence of negative normative judgement. Mobilizing against oppression provides a clear focus, whereas mobilizing proactively for a positive cause offers up more possible foci as is apparent in Phase 5 of the organization's history. As above, this dynamic helps to explain how the process of legitimation begins, when members mobilize around a clear mission.

The process of legitimation of a CSO mission or purpose in this study consisted of the organizational actions and roles that influenced and responded to changing normative judgement of sexual orientation. CSO legitimacy as process highlights distinct phases of activity. The social movement literature presents the formalization and professionalization of movement organizations as a possible neutralizing of the movement, as the goal of organizational survival becomes more important than the original goals of the movement (Davis et al. 2005). As such, professionalization is a weakening and dilution of the cause (Staggenborg 1988). In the case of RU, however, formalization, i.e., hiring staff to produce the magazine and acquiring legal charitable status, enabled a gain in pragmatic legitimacy (Phase 3). The actions undertaken in Phase 3 led to the impact and success that the organization achieved in Phase 4, with the successful marriage equality referendum. Thus, formalization was a step in the legitimation process with pragmatic legitimacy paving the way for moral and cognitive legitimacy. Elsbach and Sutton's study of radical social movement organizations found that illegitimate actions, if managed well, can lead to positive publicity and support for parts of the cause that were less controversial (1992). The RU study shows the reverse; when illegitimate organizations engage in legitimate actions, they can gain positive pragmatic legitimacy, despite the fact that the cause of advancing the rights of LGBT people was still condemned by large segments of society.

Conclusion

This case study allows exploration of a specific change in the social–political–legal context from an organizational perspective: the changing normative judgement of sexual orientation. While Edwards (2004) does separate the concept of normative judgement (civil equates with good) from associations (forming CSOs) in developing the concept of civil society, I argue that these are not simply two distinct or overlapping elements, but that their interaction is essential for the understanding of the complex and changing nature of civil society and its organizations. Prevailing opinions and attitudes determine and influence whether organizations are deemed legitimate and illegitimate, which are not inherent properties of CSOs that we can assign to organizations as researchers and others do to the KKK or the Mafia (Edwards 2004; Putnam 2000). Rather, those judgements are continuously socially constructed by those same organizations: CSOs. This shift in perspective partly reflects different ontological approaches to processes (Langley et al. 2013), but also implies a different approach to conceptualizing CSO legitimacy as both property and process.

There is inherent value in understanding the continuously changing and socially constructed process of what are considered legitimate CSOs. In the case of RU, it is clear in hindsight that it was valuable to have this illegitimate organization, as it supported and initiated gay rights activism that ultimately contributed to a more diverse and understanding society based on human rights. For organizations promoting terrorism, violence, xenophobia, and any form of hatred, the "extreme cases" (Edwards 2011a), it is hard to imagine a context in which the organization could ever be seen as a legitimate CSO. Considering the changing nature of normative judgements opens up possible difficult discussions on the value of any CSO and how to engage with ones that hold values that clash with other contemporary normative judgements. The Northern Ireland peace process provides an example of "illegitimate" CSOs (violent and intolerant groups) gradually becoming part of legitimate civil society (community groups, part of political party constituents) (e.g., Wolff 2002). Thus, it is impossible to make a blanket statement that what we now consider illegitimate civil society will always carry that label. How to engage with CSOs that are outside the realm of what is considered legitimate is challenging and a subject for further study; so far, peace studies and conflict resolution provide analysis on engaging with illegitimate organizations, and how to approach these difficult dialogues (e.g., Sparre 2001). This study provides evidence that casting an organizational mission as illegitimate can have the unintended consequence of fostering a safe space for building social capital and developing a voice for effective advocacy. Therefore, policies such as the American "War on Terror" might in this way backfire by actually encouraging underground spaces for solidarity and bonding social capital.

Legitimate CSOs can evolve into illegitimate ones for the same reason: because the definition of what constitutes those normative judgements is time and place dependent, is socially constructed and constantly evolving. For example, with the rise of managerialism in nonprofit organizations, the properties of effectiveness and efficiency are recently evolved traits of legitimate CSOs (Meyer et al. 2013). As the context changes, the onus is on the organization to demonstrate its pragmatic legitimacy, or, in the case of LGBT rights, its continued value.

The value of applying an organizational perspective to a complex empirical context is that the meso-level can provide a lens through which to view such a rich and multifaceted history. In this case study, the roles that the organization played in response to its environment (such as refuge and advocate) influenced the steps in a larger process of legitimation: LGBT rights and equality. While the importance of the role and perspective of organizations may be waning (Davis 2016), organizational theory can nevertheless provide rich insights due to its interdisciplinary nature and relevance to ways of organizing (Scott and Davis 2007). This case study depicts the rise and fall of legitimacy suggesting a cyclical and relativistic process; as new causes or concerns arise and gain legitimacy, other ones struggle to survive and lose legitimacy. Future research could take a macro-perspective on the life cycles of social causes, but through an organizational lens. Similarly, further research on the changing attitude toward LGBT rights could also contribute to the field-level concepts of institutional change and legitimation processes (Greenwood et al. 2002).

An empirical contribution that this study makes is drawing together data on RU, documenting the organization's four-decade long history. This case study provides the first organizational perspective on the LGBT rights movement in Ireland. There are studies on the LGBT movement in Ireland from a recent historical documentary perspective (Healy et al. 2015), from a social movement perspective using individual biographies (Ryan 2006), and from a legal and political perspective (Rose 1994). By applying the lens of legitimacy as property and process from the institutionalism literature, I have provided new analysis of the Irish LGBT movement. Gaining moral and cognitive legitimacy takes place in steps and stages, like the five phases in this case study. These steps outline the hard work that takes place prior to social change that is documented in other accounts on the Irish LGBT movement (e.g., Ryan 2006).

A limitation of this study is that I have not distinguished in the context who considers RU and its work legitimate, and who does not, and who has the power to confer legitimacy in this case. A noted weakness of the neo-institutional approach is the neglect of power relations and consideration of who confers or judges legitimacy (Lister 2003). Future studies could focus on uncovering the power dynamics behind legitimation processes and breaking down who confers legitimacy and under what circumstances. Furthermore, the extensive literature on the international LGBT rights movement (Brewer 2003; Kollman and Waites 2009), and how the Irish movement was inspired and supported by it, was not included in this study. Future research could take a more global perspective at changing normative judgements and international versus national influences.

A study of the language or discourse used by the participants would provide a rich social constructionist study of legitimation as process and perception. For example, this case could provide interesting data for a study on identity that would show interrelationship between individual, organizational, and society levels. A field-level study would provide interesting discussion on the macro-level process of change, as well as the institutional changes that were happening at this time, specifically the decline of influence, or deinstitutionalization, of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Finally, given that mission success in CSOs is rare (Cannon and Kreutzer 2018; Hager et al. 1996), this case could provide further reflections on that phenomenon.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank MBA graduates for their work on this project, in particular, Ashley Robbins and Omar Hadidi. A big debt of gratitude also goes to all of the interview participants who gave their time generously for this research.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest. In July 2016 and March 2017 the author coordinated MBA company projects with the LGBT organization that is the subject of this research.

References

Atack, I. (1999). Four criteria of development NGO legitimacy. *World Development, 27*(5), 855–864. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(99)00033-9.

Blee, K. M. (2002). *Inside organized racism: women in the hate movement*. London: University of California Press Ltd.

Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (2006). *On justification: Economies of worth. (C. Porter, Trans.)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In G. J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York, NY: Greenwood.

Brewer, P. R. (2003). The shifting foundations of public opinion about gay rights. *The Journal of Politics, 65*(4), 1208–1220. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.t01-1-00133.

Brown, L. D. (2008). *Creating credibility: legitimacy and accountability for transnational civil society*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.

Cannon, S. M., & Kreutzer, K. (2018). Mission accomplished? Organizational identity work in response to mission success. *Human Relations, 71*(9), 1234–1263. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717741677.

Chambers, S., & Kopstein, J. (2001). Bad civil society. *Political Theory, 29*(6), 837–865. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591701029006008.

Clegg, S. R., Rhodes, C., & Kornberger, M. (2007). Desperately seeking legitimacy: organizational identity and emerging industries. *Organization Studies, 28*(4), 495–513.

Clemens, E. S. (2006). The constitution of citizens: political theories of nonprofit organizations. In W. W. Powell & R. Steinberg (Eds.), *The nonprofit sector. A research handbook* (pp. 207–220). London: Yale University Press.

Creed, D. W. E., Hudson, B. A., Okhuysen, G. A., & Smith-Crowe, K. (2014). Swimming in a sea of shame: Incorporating emotion into explanations of institutional reproduction and change. *Academy of Management Review, 39*(3), 275–301. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2012.0074.

Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act, 1993, No. 20 of 1993 (Acts of the Oireachtas 7 July 1993). http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1993/act/20/enacted/en/html.

Davis, G. F. (2016). Organization theory and the dilemmas of a post-corporate economy. In J. Gehman, M. Lounsbury, & R. Greenwood (Eds.), *How institutions matter!* (Vol. 48B, pp. 311–322). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Davis, G., McAdam, D., Scott, W. R., & Zald, M. (2005). *Social movements and organization theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Deephouse, D. L., & Suchman, M. (2008). Legitimacy in organizational institutionalism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby, & K. Sahlin (Eds.), *The sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 49–77). London: Sage Publications.

Dragonfly Partners. (2014). *Catalysing LGBT equality and visibility in Ireland (Research Report)* (pp. 1–12). Dublin, Ireland: Atlantic Philanthropies.

Edwards, M. (2004). *Civil society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Edwards, M. (2011a). Civil society and the geometry of human relations. In M. Edwards (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of civil society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Edwards, M. (Ed.). (2011b). *The Oxford handbook of civil society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elsbach, K. D., & Sutton, R. I. (1992). Acquiring organizational legitimacy through illegitimate actions: A marriage of institutional and impression management theories. *Academy of Management Journal, 35*(4), 699–738. https://doi.org/10.2307/256313.

Gabbay, S. M., & Leenders, R. T. A. J. (1999). CSC: The structure of advantage and disadvantage. In R. T. A. J. Leenders & S. M. Gabbay (Eds.), *Corporate social capital and liability* (pp. 1–14). Boston, MA: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-5027-3_1.

Glynn, M. A., & Marquis, C. (2004). When good names go bad: Symbolic illegitimacy in organizations. In C. Johnson (Ed.), *Legitimacy processes in organizations* (Vol. 22, pp. 147–170). Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0733-558X(04)22005-5.

Golant, B. D., & Sillince, J. A. A. (2007). The constitution of organizational legitimacy: A narrative perspective. *Organization Studies, 28*(8), 1149–1167. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840607075671.

Greenwood, R., Hinings, C. R., & Suddaby, R. (2002). Theorizing change: The role of professional associations in the transformation of institutionalized fields. *Academy of Management Journal, 45*(1), 58–80.

Hager, M. A., Galaskiewicz, J., Bielefeld, W., & Pins, J. (1996). Tales from the grave: Organizations' accounts of their own demise. *American Behavioral Scientist, 39*(8), 975–994. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764296039008004.

Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. (1989). *Organizational ecology*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

He, H., & Baruch, Y. (2010). Organizational identity and legitimacy under major environmental changes: Tales of two UK building societies. *British Journal of Management, 21*(1), 44–62. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2009.00666.x.

Healy, G., Sheehan, B., & Whelan, N. (2015). *Ireland says yes: The inside story of how the vote for marriage equality was won*. Dublin, Ireland: Merrion Press.

Hudson, B. A., & Okhuysen, G. A. (2009). Not with a ten-foot pole: Core stigma, stigma transfer, and improbable persistence of men's bathhouses. *Organization Science, 20*(1), 134–153. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1080.0368.

Johnson, C., Dowd, T. J., & Ridgeway, C. L. (2006). Legitimacy as a social process. *Annual Review of Sociology, 32,* 53–78. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.32.061604.123101.

Kollman, K., & Waites, M. (2009). The global politics of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender human rights: An introduction. *Contemporary Politics, 15*(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569770802674188.

Langley, A. (1999). Strategies for theorizing from process data. *Academy of Management. The Academy of Management Review, 24*(4), 691–710. https://doi.org/10.2307/259349.

Langley, A., Smallman, C., Tsoukas, H., & Van de Ven, A. H. (2013). Process studies of change in organization and management: Unveiling temporality, activity, and flow. *Academy of Management Journal, 56*(1), 1–13.

Lichterman, P., & Eliasoph, N. (2014). Civic action. *American Journal of Sociology, 120*(3), 798–863. https://doi.org/10.1086/679189.

Lister, S. (2003). NGO legitimacy: Technical issue or social construct? *Critique of Anthropology, 23*(2), 175–192. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X03023002004.

Lynch, B. J. (1995). A land beyond tears. In I. O'Carroll & E. Collins (Eds.), *Lesbian and gay visions of Ireland* (pp. 212–220). London: Cassell.

Mann, M. (2005). *The dark side of democracy: Explaining ethnic cleansing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Marberg, A., Kranenburg, H., & Korzilius, H. (2016). NGOs in the news: The road to taken-for-grantedness. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 27*(6), 2734–2763. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-016-9757-5.

Meyer, M., Buber, R., & Aghamanoukjan, A. (2013). In search of legitimacy: Managerialism and legitimation in civil society organizations. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 24*(1), 167–193.

Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized Organizations—formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*(2), 340–363.

Nahapiet, J., & Ghoshal, S. (1998). Social capital, intellectual capital, and the organizational advantage. *Academy of Management Review, 23*(2), 242–266. https://doi.org/10.2307/259373.

Navis, C., & Glynn, M. A. (2010). How new market categories emerge: Temporal dynamics of legitimacy, identity, and entrepreneurship in satellite radio, 1990–2005. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 55*(3), 439–471. https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2010.55.3.439.

O'Carroll, I., & Collins, E. (Eds.). (1995). *Lesbian and gay visions of Ireland*. London: Cassell.

O'Carroll, I., & McDonnell, F. (2010). *Marriage equality: Civil marriage for gay and lesbian people*. House: O'Carroll Associates and Hibernian Consulting.

Pfeffer, J., & Salancik, G. (2003). *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Plujek-Shank, R., & Verkoren, W. (2017). Civil society in a divided society: Linking legitimacy and ethnicness of civil society organizations in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Cooperation and Conflict, 52*(2), 184–202. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836716673088.

Popplewell, R. (2018). Civil society, legitimacy and political space: Why some organisations are more vulnerable to restrictions than others in violent divided contexts. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 29,* 388–403. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-9949-2.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of american community*. London: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Rao, H. (1994). The social construction of reputation: certification contests, legitimation, and the survival of organizations in the American Automobile Industry: 1895–1912. *Strategic Management Journal, 15*(S1), 29–44. https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.4250150904.

Reuter, M., Wijkström, F., & Meyer, M. (2014). Who calls the shots? The real normative power of civil society. In M. Freise & T. Hallmann (Eds.), *Modernizing democracy associations and associating in the 21st century* (pp. 71–82). New York, NY: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-0485-3_6.

Rosa, J. A., Porac, J. F., Runser-Spanjol, J., & Saxon, M. S. (1999). Sociocognitive dynamics in a product market. *Journal of Marketing, 63*(4), 64–77. https://doi.org/10.2307/1252102.

Rose, K. (1994). *Diverse communities: The evolution of lesbian and gay politics in Ireland*. Cork: University of Cork Press.

Ryan, P. (2006). Coming out of the dark: A decade of gay mobilisation in Ireland, 1970–80. In L. Connolly & N. Hourigan (Eds.), *Social movements and Ireland* (pp. 86–105). Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Scott, R. W. (2008). *Institutions and organizations. Ideas and interests*. London: Sage Publications.

Scott, R. W., & Davis, G. F. (2007). *Organizations and organizing: Rational, natural and open system perspectives*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Seligman, A. B. (1995). *The idea of civil society*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Singh, J. V., Tucker, D. J., & House, R. J. (1986). Organizational legitimacy and the liability of newness. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 31,* 171–193.

Sparre, K. (2001). Megaphone diplomacy in the Northern Irish peace process: Squaring the circle by talking to terrorists through journalists. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 6*(1), 88–104. https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X01006001006.

Staggenborg, S. (1988). The consequences of professionalization and formalization in the pro-choice movement. *American Sociological Review, 53*(4), 585–606.

Sternberg, E. (2010). NGOs vs Civil Society: Reflections on the illiberal, the illegitimate and the unaccountable. *Economic Affairs, 30*(3), 22–28.

Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review, 20*(3), 571–610.

Suddaby, R., Bitektine, A., & Haack, P. (2017). Legitimacy. *Academy of Management Annals, 11*(1), 451–478.

Vaccaro, A., & Palazzo, G. (2015). Values against violence: Institutional change in societies dominated by organized crime. *Academy of Management Journal, 58*(4), 1075–1101.

Wolff, S. (2002). The peace process in Northern Ireland since 1998: Success or failure of post-agreement reconstruction? *Civil Wars, 5*(1), 87–116.

Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (2000). Social capital: Implications for development theory, research, and policy. *The World Bank Research Observer, 15*(2), 225–249.

Zuckerman, E. W. (1999). The categorical imperative: securities analysts and the illegitimacy discount. *American Journal of Sociology, 104*(5), 1398–1438. https://doi.org/10.1086/210178.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.