Examining the process of legitimising corporate sustainability within the organisation: towards a Generalised Legitimising Pathway

Abstract
This empirical paper explores the process of legitimising sustainability within the organisation. Using interview data from 51 Heads of Sustainability, it finds that a conformance legitimising strategy is foundational to the process, a selection legitimising strategy is then added, often with multiple selection episodes used, and finally, manipulation is attempted in order to change the environment to accept sustainability. Building from this, a Generalised Legitimising Pathway is theorised providing the first legitimising framework to include both the temporal progression of legitimising and the overlap of strategies.

Track
Sustainable and Responsible Business

Word Count
6,424
Introduction
If legitimacy is a resource at least as important as capital, personnel, and customer goodwill (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002) it stands to reason that the acquisition of this resource deserves significant attention in the management literature. However, while considerable attention has been paid to the constituent elements of legitimacy (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975) and its forms of expression (Suchman, 1995), much less effort has gone into understanding the process of gaining legitimacy (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). This has created an empirical and theoretical vacuum, with the process of legitimising progressing little since Suchman’s (1995) seminal but static, one-dimensional framework which simply presented three legitimising strategies: conform, select, and manipulate. Moreover, the concept of internal legitimacy – defined as legitimacy gained for an organisational strategy from other organisational actors (Drori and Honig, 2013) – has similarly received little attention, and no conceptual understanding of the process of internal legitimising has been developed. In sum, current understandings of legitimising broadly and internal legitimising more specifically, neglect the dynamic, complex, and multi-faceted nature of the process. By empirically researching this process of legitimising, this paper aims to develop a generalised legitimising pathway contributing both to the theoretical development of the area.

Background
Legitimacy has been described as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995: 574). A firms’ legitimacy, and the legitimacy of their business activities and alliances “has a potentially profound impact on their ability to attract resources, potential partners, and opportunities for market growth and sustainable competitive advantage” (Dacin et al, 2007: 183). This evidence from the extant literature supports the description of legitimacy as a resource at least as important as other resources, such as capital, technology, personnel, customer goodwill, and networks (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002).

There are early contributions within the modern study of legitimacy to the process of legitimising (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995). For example, Dowling and Pfeffer (1975: 122) reference “the process of legitimation through which organizations act to increase their perceived legitimacy”, while Suchman (1995) devotes a substantial section of his seminal conceptual article to explore “the challenges inherent in … gaining, maintaining, and repairing legitimacy” (pg. 572). However, despite this early attention the process of attaining legitimacy has received less attention in the subsequent literature, empirically or conceptually, especially compared to the study of the outcomes or typologies of legitimacy. Although considerable attention has been paid to the constituent elements of legitimacy and its forms of expression (Suchman, 1995), less effort has gone into identifying the processual aspects of legitimacy such as understanding how it is acquired, maintained, and lost (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Zelditch (2001) distinguishes between the outcome of legitimacy and the process of legitimising when calling for greater focus on the totality of the construct including the “nature, causes, conditions, and consequences of legitimacy” (p. 7). Castello and Lozano (2011) call for additional work, providing empirical evidence of and a classification for the process or processes associated with attaining legitimacy. Others echo this call for further focus on the process of attaining legitimacy (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002; Lounsbury and Glyn, 2001). Moreover, while the majority of extant theory and empirical research of legitimacy and legitimising takes place at the organisational-level (Suchman, 1995), more recently the concept of internal legitimacy has gained attention in relation to internal organisational strategy (Castello and Lozano, 2011; Drori and Honig, 2013; Tost,
Extrapolating from organisational-level definitions of legitimacy to the intra-organisational context, the following can be stated in relation to internal legitimising: the generalised perception or assumption that a firm’s strategy is desirable, proper, or appropriate (Suchman, 1995); and an organisation’s strategy is said to be legitimate to the extent that its means and ends appear to conform with the organisation’s norms, values and expectations (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). Many authors point to the importance of internal legitimacy research (Tost, 2011) (Drori and Honig, 2013), and Suchman’s (1995) seminal legitimacy paper notes that “managerial initiatives can make a substantial difference in the extent to which organizational activities are perceived as desirable, proper, and appropriate” (p. 585-586) although he goes no further in exploring this internal context. Flynn and Du (2012: 213) argue that “organizational actors obtain legitimacy for themselves and their activities in order to acquire the participation, enthusiasm and commitment from others that is necessary for managing their activities effectively (Pfeffer, 1981; Oliver, 1991), to ensure sustainable support for organizational leadership (Chakravarthy, 1997), to acquire resources for survival and growth (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002), and to facilitate organizational changes (Chakravarthy and Gargiulo, 1998).” Internal legitimising can be understood as the process or processes undertaken by individuals attempting to gain legitimacy for an organisational strategy from internal organisational actors. Drori and Honig (2013) argue that the literature “has not explicitly tackled the formation of internal legitimacy as an agglomeration of individual level strategies, nor has it examined the processes through which internal legitimacy originates, develops and is maintained” (pg. 347).

The paucity of research in this area is somewhat surprising given internal legitimacy is highly relevant especially in the context of new or emerging practices or strategies: it is accepted that where novel strategies are intended to be durable social changes, they must be legitimated (Flynn and Du, 2012). Intraorganisational proponents of a new paradigm need to ‘explain, rationalize and promote’ (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001) the strategy representing the paradigm to reduce uncertainty: that is, they must legitimise it. Drori and Honig (2013) further argue that aspects of legitimacy formation and maintenance are critical for the adoption of new ideas. Suchman’s (1995) conceptual framework has become the most widely used framework to understand the process of legitimising. He presents three strategy choices for legitimising. Conformance involves legitimising by aiming for conformity with the demands and expectations of the existing environment and is often described as the ‘easiest’ strategy (Suchman, 1995). Selection involves some level of conformity to the environment but recognises the heterogeneous nature of the environment, with managers proactively “locating a more amicable venue, in which otherwise dubious activities appear unusually desirable, proper, or appropriate” (Suchman, 1995: 589). Manipulation involves making changes in the environment to achieve consistency between the organisation and its environment: “managers must go beyond simply selecting among existing cultural beliefs; they must actively promulgate new explanations of social reality” (Suchman, 1995: 591). While Suchman (1995) presents these legitimising strategies independently, he acknowledges that each involve “complex mixtures of concrete organizational change and persuasive organizational communication” and that they “clearly fall along a continuum from relatively passive conformity to relatively active manipulation” (pg. 587). Moreover, in his conclusion he suggests further research into the use of legitimising strategies across social locations and through time, lamenting the fact that the field currently says “very little about the nature (or even the existence) of ‘typical’ legitimation progressions” (Suchman, 1995: 602). This paper aims to directly address Suchman’s call and provide empirical evidence to theorise a typical legitimising progression.
Additionally, Suchman (1995) argues that legitimising process choices become particularly relevant when “embarking on a new line of activity, particularly one with few precedents elsewhere in the social order, [as] organizations often face the daunting task of winning acceptance … for the propriety of the activity” (p. 586). One such strategy which lends itself to such examining is that of sustainability. While sustainability has no definitive definition, broadly it reflects the interaction between business and society, and the increasing focus on organisations reducing their negative impacts and increasing their positive impacts. That said, many argue that corporate sustainability has moved away from the original normative concept of sustainable development which focused on inter and intra generational justice (Hahn and Figge, 2011) to the focus on the business case for sustainability and embraces a win-win-win paradigm (Hahn et al., 2010). According to this paradigm “economic, environmental and social aspects of corporate sustainability are - at least partly - in harmony with each other and management should seek to identify those cases in which economic, environmental and social corporate objectives can be achieved simultaneously” (Hahn et al., 2010: 218). However, critics argue that the complexity and interplay of the three facets of sustainability cannot be considered in isolation: “trade-offs and conflicts between [these] aspects in corporate management and performance represent the rule rather than the exception” (Hahn et al., 2010: 218).

This context makes the study of the process of legitimising very interesting and relevant. Emerging sustainability strategy clearly has components which make the process of legitimising both complex and important, as sustainability offers more than a simple portfolio of alternative actions to be evaluated within the framework of existing schemas; “it contradicts and challenges these schemas by proposing a new way of thinking about organizations … in other words, a new schema” (Thomas and Lamm, 2012: 193). That is, sustainability represents an opportunity, but not necessarily an obligation, to reorient the aims and actions of an organisation. On a wider scale, Castello and Lozano (2011) suggest that understanding the process of legitimising “might also shed some light on how managers are currently making sense of the firm’s new role in the globalized society” (p. 12).

Method
The research objective of this thesis was to understand how practitioners legitimise sustainability within their organisation. To address this question exploratory research was conducted through interviews with Heads of Sustainability from organisations. The sampling strategy was neither statistical nor purely subjective, but theoretically grounded and purposive with respondents chosen based on their appropriateness to address theoretical concepts under investigation (Silverman, 2005). A total of 122 potential participants were emailed requesting participation in a study of corporate sustainability, with a final sample of 51 Heads of Sustainability interviewed. Interview transcripts were analysed using a modified version of content analysis (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005) to facilitate the reduction of large volumes of textual data into much fewer content categories (Sonpar et al, 2010). Given the exploratory nature of the research, codes were developed both inductively and deductively. From a deductive perspective, instances of Suchman’s legitimising strategies were coded, while from an inductive perspective other aspects such as facilitators, obstacles, and underlying actions and mechanisms were coded.

In order to address the progression of legitimising strategies a temporal proxy was developed. As the data was cross-sectional evidence of individual progression was not available. However, by categorising each of the 51 respondents into stages of sustainability integration, a temporal proxy could be inferred. While it is acknowledged that sustainability integration
and time aren’t necessarily perfectly complementary or indeed linear, it can be assumed that, in general, sustainability integration progresses over time. Three criteria were established \textit{a priori} to categorise respondent companies into one of three categories relating to the level of sustainability integration: limited, intermediate, extensive. The criteria are listed and defined in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of sustainability integration</th>
<th>Time since introduction</th>
<th>Reporting line of head of sustainability</th>
<th>Formalisation and integration of strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>0-9 years</td>
<td>Low-level manager</td>
<td>None, strategy in early development phase, sustainability treated as ‘add-on’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>10-20 years</td>
<td>Mid-level manager</td>
<td>Formal strategy exists and shows some signs of integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>20+ years</td>
<td>Senior manager</td>
<td>Strategy formalised with Board level approval, used in daily operations and ongoing strategic development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Criteria for categorisation of level of sustainability integration

Transcripts were reviewed, in particular in relation to questions about the history and integration of sustainability within the organisation. Each respondent was categorised based on the level of sustainability integration evident in their organisation: limited, intermediate, and extensive. It should be noted that none of these categories are absolute and they were used as imperfect proxies which provide a guide towards categorisation. All evidence was considered in totality, rather than any one category dominating. For example, where the timing suggested that sustainability was introduced into the organisation 10 years ago, yet other evidence suggested it still showed limited signs of integration, the company was coded ‘Limited’. Moreover, a precautionary principle was adopted as regards the ‘Extensive’ category: where there was some evidence of integration but it was inconclusive as to the level, the company was categorised as ‘Intermediate’.

Results

Evidence of Suchman’s three strategies - conformance, selection, and manipulation - was first examined. Of the 51 respondents, all referenced elements of conformance, 43 referenced elements of selection, and 23 referenced elements of manipulation (See Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of interviewees who referenced</th>
<th>Total episodes referenced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conformance</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Legitimising Strategy References (n = 51)

\textit{Conformance}

Conformance was the most commonly coded legitimising strategy as all interviewees (51) referencing some element of conformance to the existing internal environment when legitimising sustainability, with a total of 143 episodes referenced. This reflected the
dominance of the environment which prioritised economic returns with interviewees stating that ‘money is king’ (7), ‘we wouldn’t do anything unless there was a business case to it … I’ve only pushed stuff that had a core economic benefit’ (12), and ‘given that we’re a high volume, low margin business, the money talks’ (13). One interviewee identified his primary challenge as ‘how do we turn either the positive that someone can gain out of our using our products OR minimising the negative … into euros?’ (8). Moreover, a number of interviewees highlight the importance of economic returns for ensuring the survivability of sustainability in the organisation, especially in difficult economic times: ‘If it’s just for the sake of doing sustainability, once the business gets under pressure the first thing that happens is it’s going to get cuts’ (24).

Selection

The examination of a selection legitimising strategy is particularly interesting given the internal focus of this study. While conformance was a dominant legitimising strategy, limitations and obstacles to this strategy, especially as regards sustainability, were also apparent. The complexity of conformance in relation to sustainability was highlighted regarding the choices and trade-offs individuals face. Such choices provide the context for selection as a legitimising strategy where non-conformance elements are pursued. The data shows 43 interviewees referencing selection strategies, with a total of 100 selection episodes referenced (See Table 2). The selection strategy can be summed up by one interviewee who states ‘what you really have to do is find receptors… [and then] … try to sell it into other businesses’ (4). The concept of an ‘amicable venue’ in an internal organisational context can have a number of connotations as demonstrated in the data. Four main ‘amicable venues’ were uncovered as commonly used venues for selection legitimising strategies in which non-conformance aspects of sustainability are considered desirable or appropriate: groups, individual decision-makers, projects, and programmes. There was also an interesting pattern which emerged in the data relating to individuals using multiple different types of selection strategies. For example, respondent 27 from a micro-electronics company identified that while other geographic locations were not interested in sustainability, Europe was and so she developed a scenario analysis planning project in Europe which in addition to providing an innovative business positioning were also ‘the right thing to do in terms of moving sustainability forward’ (27). To facilitate this she also identified an individual decision-maker, the Chief Technology Officer, who ‘over the course of a couple of years I warmed up … and got him involved [in the project and] he began to see the potential as well’ (27). This demonstrates the integration of multiple selection strategies as part of a more sophisticated and complex legitimising process.

Manipulation

Manipulation legitimising strategies exist where individuals attempt to change the existing environment in favour of sustainability. While manipulation may be less common than the other strategies, successful manipulation has wider ramifications for the organisation and positions legitimising strategy within the change-management field. The data shows 23 interviewees referencing manipulation strategies, with a total of 52 episodes referenced (see Table 2). The most common evidence of manipulation was found in the establishment of organisation-wide sustainability councils, widespread engagement and training programmes, and recruitment policies and strategies. One interviewee talks about the global sustainability council including representatives from the 12 core businesses and geographic locations as well as a ‘representative from corporate communications, public policy, legal, environmental

1 Throughout the paper, bracketed numbers are used to indicate the anonymised respondent number.
compliance that participate’ to form a ‘relatively lean group [with] … the key internal stakeholders’ (4). Evidence of manipulation can also be seen through proactive recruitment strategies such as one interviewee who describes ‘Recruit on Attitude, so if people have the wrong attitude, including you know not taking [sustainability] seriously, they don’t get a job in the first place” (18). Employee engagement and training programmes also target widespread change by allowing ‘employees [to] learn about sustainability and what the company is doing on sustainability … through an e-learning game’ (11).

**Multiple Strategies**

Given the evidence of all three legitimising strategies, it is important to examine the evidence of how they are used in combination. Each respondent was categorised based on all the legitimising strategies they referenced. The only categories evident in the sample were Conformance only (C-only), Conformance and Selection (CS), Conformance and Manipulation (CM), Conformance, Selection and Manipulation (CSM). Table 3 shows the breakdown of the 51 respondents into these categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C-only</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CM</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSM</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>51</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Respondents Categorised by Strategies**

The first thing to note is that only 5 respondents used just one legitimising strategy (all using only conformance). This means that 46 respondents used multiple legitimising strategies, supporting the idea that a wider legitimising process is more complex that a simple choice among three legitimising strategies. In addition to the 5 C-only respondents, there were 23 CS respondents, 3 CM respondents, and 20 CSM respondents. These grouping will now be explored in detail with examples provided from the data.

**Conformance-only**

Five respondents reported only conformance legitimising strategies. A review of these respondents suggests that they lack existing ‘amicable venues’ required for selection strategies to be pursued. Respondents 1 and 7 are both from the rail industry – one rail infrastructure and one a train operating company – and both point out that the industry is traditional, fearful of change, and having very little or only very recent interest in sustainability. Respondent 13 is from a Professional Services firm, where his role is to develop sustainability services as an additional income stream and finds no ‘amicable venues’ within the firm for non-conformance aspect or change management opportunities. Respondents 19 and 31 are both from organisations who do not appear to take sustainability seriously, and as one respondent answered when asked why they had a sustainability department answered ‘just to keep their nose clean’ (31). In all these instances, it is likely that the individuals were unable to identify existing aspects of the organisation – programmes, teams, departments, products, or projects – in which to legitimise sustainability with a non-conformance strategy.

**Conformance and Selection**
CS respondents make-up the largest group (23) and exhibit the use of the conformance strategy as well as the use of one, or multiple episodes of the selection strategy in which they identify ‘amicable venues’ within their organisation to legitimise ‘non-conformance’ aspects of sustainability. Two CS respondents are examined here as exemplars of this category.

Respondent 14 is from a paper-based consumer goods company. He describes decisions being influenced by the requirement to meet ‘quarterly, half-yearly and yearly results’ (14) and how he got ‘environmental’ products approved and launched because of the consumer demand providing a revenue stream, demonstrating legitimising through conformance. However, he also describes legitimising sustainability by selecting the Board as an amicable environment, and getting a longer term vision and ‘Sustainability 2015’ strategy approved. He also selects the paper mills as a location for energy efficiency drives, because of their history of seeking efficient solutions and amenability to such endeavours.

Respondent 12 is from a house-building company, which just survived the economic downturn, and is only now willing to consider the inclusion of non-economic considerations. As such, conformance legitimising is this respondent’s most common strategy, but he also references a project he has selected in which to legitimise non-conformance aspects. ‘Zero Carbon by 2016’ focuses on the fabric of houses. There are instances in which lower carbon materials solutions can increase short-term costs, and possibly the price of a house, but reduce their long term running costs, or improve the liveability of the house. This is the first selection legitimising strategy this respondent is pursuing.

**Conformance and Manipulation**

The CM group has just 3 respondents using conformance and manipulation. That is, they legitimised sustainability by conforming to existing expectations in the environment while at the same time attempting to change or manipulate the environment. This supposed paradox is uncovered again in the CSM group where all strategies are used. Examining the circumstances of all two of these members of the CM grouping may shed light both on the aspects of this combination of strategies as well as this apparent paradox. Respondents 42 and 46 appear to follow the pattern of the C-only grouping and lack access to ‘amicable venues’ within their organisations which are necessary for a selection strategy to be used. However, they do have the support of leadership, unlike the C only grouping. Respondent 42 is from a quarrying and heavy construction industry and, while he has the support of the CEO which allows him to attempt a manipulation legitimising strategy, he faces an internal environment which is not supportive of sustainability. As such, no ‘amicable venues’ such as teams, projects, or programmes exist in which he could legitimise sustainability. Similarly, respondent 46 lacks access to amicable venues, although for different reasons. Coming from an energy company, this respondent has been recently employed with the specific aim of changing the sustainability strategy to make it more widely integrated into the business strategy. This explains both his focus on manipulation, as well as on conformance trying to fit into the existing strategy in some ways, and change it in others. His recent introduction may be an explanation for lack of selection strategy, as he may not – yet – be aware of amicable venues in which to legitimise aspects of sustainability. Moreover, his focus on new strategy development, rather than implementation, may make him less focused on such aspects. As such, lack of access to amicable venues may explain these members of the CM grouping and in particular their lack of selection strategies.

**Conformance, Selection, and Manipulation**
The final and second largest grouping with 20 respondents used all three strategies. This portrays the complexity of the legitimising for individuals attempting such a process. One respondent is presented here as exemplar of this group.

Respondent 9 is from a US-based building materials manufacturer. He is the former Chief RnD officer (now Chief Sustainability Officer) who, in 2002, saw sustainability issues as being important and started legitimising sustainability within his organisation. First he argued and then demonstrated the business opportunity associated with the sustainability attributes of their products, representing a conformance legitimising strategy. Then he enrolled the then-CEO, who was already personally interested in sustainability, in wider non-conformance aspects of sustainability for the organisation, related to seeing the bigger picture of the business’s place in the world as well as place within a future business landscape. This selection strategy, contributed to a second selection strategy where he targeted specific product ranges to address specific sustainability-oriented sectors of their emerging customer-based; specifically, LEED certified buildings. While this may be classed a selection strategy, there are elements of conformance in relation to long-term revenues. From a manipulation perspective, this respondent changed the perception of sustainability and in particular energy use and intensity by establishing a formal networking group across the organisation with virtual meetings monthly to report on innovations within a plant that could be shared across other plants. This changed the focus away from outputs and towards efficiency of outputs, in particular in relation to environment metrics.

**Legitimising Progression**

The next step in the analysis uses the temporal proxy to determine how these combinations are used over time. There is evidence of this temporal component in the following interviewees reflections on their sustainability journey: ‘we’re still at the start of the journey and to think where we were six years ago, to where we are now, it’s huge, so there is light at the end of the tunnel’ (41), and ‘it’s early days still, the system is very much stacked against this longer term comprehensive view’ (2). Each respondent was categorised based on limited, intermediate, and extensive integration of sustainability with results reported in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>51</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: Respondents in Integration Categories**

Eleven (11) respondents were categorised as having limited sustainability integration, 30 as having intermediate integration, and 10 as having extensive sustainability integration. The dominance of the ‘intermediate’ category is immediately evident. This confirms that sustainability, as a strategy, is neither entirely new to business, nor has become universally accepted and integrated. Overlaying these integration categories with the categories of strategy combinations produces the figures in Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LIMITED</th>
<th>INTERMEDIATE</th>
<th>EXTENSIVE</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C-only</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
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</table>
The results reveal that all 5 C-only respondents have limited sustainability integration. That is, no C-only respondents have intermediate or extensive integration. No causal evidence was directly collected and so it is difficult to say if the use of only conformance legitimising caused limited integration, or if limited integration allows for only conformance legitimising. However analysis of the other data provides further evidence towards a conclusion.

The CS grouping is split between limited and intermediate integration with the majority (17) showing intermediate signs of integration. Moreover, of all the intermediate respondents – 30 in total – the CS group makes up the majority, with just 11 and 2 respondents in the CSM and CM groups respectively. This suggests an important relationship between CS and intermediate integration. One explanation for this can be constructed by linking this result to the previous one relating to C-only. Where sustainability has limited integration, a conformance strategy is used. Where that integration is increased and reaches an intermediate level, selection is used in addition to conformance. Again, causality is not proved: is selection added leading to intermediate integration, or does reaching intermediate integration allow selection to be used? The evidence of the 6 respondents from the CS category with limited integration is important. It implies that it is possible, with a limited level of integration to add a selection strategy. This suggests the likely direction of causality is of selection on intermediate integration. That is, where selection is added to conformance in the circumstance of limited sustainability integration, integration increases and reaches intermediate levels.

The final category, CSM, is split between intermediate and extensive integration, with 11 and 9 respondents respectively. A number of points can be raised from these two results. First, all respondents with extensive integration use manipulation. One (1) is in the CM category, and the remaining 9 are in the CSM category. This points to the importance of manipulation in increasing integration of sustainability to reach ‘extensive’ levels. However, it is also important to note that more respondents categorised as CSM have intermediate integration (11) than extensive integration (9). This suggests that manipulation, while important in achieving extensive integration, does not guarantee such increased integration.

Given the apparent importance of the manipulation strategy in the CSM grouping and extensive integration, further analysis is warranted. Dividing the CSM grouping into those with intermediate versus those with extensive integration, the average number of manipulation episodes per respondent can be calculated. Average manipulation episodes for those in the intermediate category was 1.5 episodes, while for those in the extensive category was 3.3 episodes. As such, CSM respondents in the extensive group used manipulation more often than CSM respondents in the intermediate group. Taking into account the indications of causality already discussed, it is likely that increased use of manipulation contributes to achieving more extensive integration of sustainability. Overall, these results support the idea that there is a temporal component to the sustainability strategy legitimising process.

**Discussion**
The results presented above provide evidence of the more complex process of legitimising. The importance of the temporal component and the fundamental nature of a ‘process’ based theory means that a static model or framework was not considered appropriate to depict the process of legitimising evident in the results. To reflect these important aspects a Legitimising Pathway is theorised which incorporates these temporal components, and the cumulative and sequential nature of legitimising strategy combinations. Two potential Legitimising Pathways were found in the data. When sustainability is new to an organisation and has limited integration, a conformance strategy is used. Selection is then added to this and the combination of conformance and selection legitimising contributes to sustainability becoming more integrated and reaching intermediate levels. Manipulation is then added, and as this is used more often it contributes to sustainability reaching extensive integration. However, for those without access to selection options, manipulation may be added directly to conformance without any selection being attempted. In sum, one pathway progresses from conformance to add selection and then to add manipulation. The other pathway progresses from conformance straight to add manipulation.

However, when developing a Generalised Legitimising Pathway, it must be noted that the pathway resulting in the CM strategy combination comprises just three respondents in the data. Moreover, the data suggested that this was not a favoured pathway, but merely represented the reality for individuals who lack access to amicable venues in which to institute the selection strategy. As such, when developing a Generalised Legitimising Pathway, the CM pathway is excluded and the most plausible and appropriate Legitimising Pathway can be depicted in Figure 1.
A number of important elements of the above framework deserve further attention. First, it is clear from the results that conformance forms an important foundational legitimising strategy throughout the entire legitimising process, as depicted in the legitimising framework. Broadly speaking, conformance is used because it permeates acceptance and prevents challenge or questioning. Tost (2011) states that: “to the extent to which a new entity conforms to the expectations carved by existing institutions, that new entity is not subjected to active evaluations but, instead, is passively accepted and unquestioned” (Tost, 2011: 693). From the perspective of the individual, conformance provides the individual with the ability to become an ‘insider’ (Aies and Weiss, 2012) thereby boosting the chances of subsequently introducing new ideas or perspectives: newcomers must ‘fit in’ and respect the current environment before they can legitimately initiate change (Markowitz et al, 2012). Moreover, it is interesting to note that while a conformance-only legitimising strategy may appear relatively static, it may actually represent the beginning of a wider legitimising process which will come to include other strategies, such as manipulation whereby environmental change is attempted. Thus, “being conformant to the environment may boost the chances of introducing new, organisation-transforming ideas as opposed to approaches stating (too) directly how things should be done better” (Aies and Weiss, 2012: 1081). That is, conformance is not the static strategy it may appear to be, but is the first stage of change, and an advisable first step in legitimising a new strategy. However, there are risks to remaining with a conformance-only strategy. The chosen legitimising strategies in relation to sustainability may play a role in how the construct of sustainability is understood. Where conformance to economic returns is chosen, sustainability could be described as part of, but subordinate to economic returns. It can be assumed that individuals are identifying and developing only the aspects of sustainability that provide economic returns: aspects which do not, are not pursued. That is, there is an economic predominance (Hahn and Figge, 2011). Aspects ignored are likely to include some of the ‘broader’ aspects of sustainability prominent in the ‘social’ and ‘environmental’ aspects of the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1997). With conformance-only legitimising, over time, these may be lost from the definition of sustainability. Individuals have opportunities to portray organisational life in ways that not only report, but also shape, reality (Boje, Oswick and Ford, 2004). When organisation members shape reality, they influence how others view and respond to important issues at work (Dutton and Jackson, 1987). It is important to remember that legitimising
processes both delegitimate as well as legitimate: they create pressures for social change, yet they also create stability (Zelditch, 2001). It is likely that if conformance-only dominates it may contribute to the stability of the status quo, and the promulgation of business-as-usual.

A further element of the framework that deserves discussion relates to the combination of legitimising strategies. With the overwhelming majority of interviewees combining two or more legitimising strategies this is clearly considered an appropriate approach to the process of legitimising. Drawing on the entrepreneurship literature, in constructing a legitimate identity for their enterprises entrepreneurs strive for ‘optimal distinctiveness’ (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001): to balance the need for strategic distinctiveness against that of normative appropriateness (Glynn and Abzug, 1998). While entrepreneurs may adjust their accounts in line with the audience to make the unfamiliar familiar (Martens et al, 2007), to disguise the radical elements (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994) or to align one’s mission, identity and resources with key constituents (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001), they must also promote their novel idea, business, product or opportunity. As such, they must “delicately balance their roles as conformists and innovators” (Markowitz et al, 2011: 12). Extrapolating to the sustainability research context, sustainability practitioners must integrate themselves into the conventional business, while framing their strategy as different. That is, they must aim to achieve ‘optimal distinctiveness’ (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). This supports the evidence of combining strategies of conformance, selection, and/or manipulation in order to achieve such ‘optimal distinctiveness’ for sustainability.

The role of the ‘selection’ strategy in the legitimising process reveals its importance. Selection was discussed in the context of the audience, in particular identifying an audience conducive to non-conformance elements of sustainability. However, given the evidence both of multiple selection strategies in use, as well as the role of ‘successful’ selection contributing to achieving intermediate integration, the addition of manipulation strategies, and the eventual achievement of extensive integration, a more subtle and nuanced role for selection can be considered. Selection may be considered a ‘test-run’ for perspectives, within a ‘conducive audience’, which may go on to form the basis of a wider manipulation strategy. That is, practitioners ‘test’ a position within an amicable environment and get traction there, before tackling the more difficult task of manipulation. This makes selection an important pre-cursor to manipulation. A second role for selection in relation to manipulation may be seen whereby a number of different selection strategies are combined forming an informal, disparate, organisation-wide strategy. This may be seen as ‘manipulation by stealth’. That is, one individual selection strategy on its own does not set out to change the organisation, but by combining a number of strategies, such change emerges. This conclusion is supported by other literature that suggest that where strategy introduced into specific parts of the organisation “turn out to be fruitful and first lessons have been learned, this may provide additional legitimacy and lead to a (automatic) diffusion across further parts of the organisation” (Aies and Weiss, 2012: 1082).

Finally, the importance of the manipulation becomes obvious with the overlay of the strategy combinations with levels of sustainability integration. The links between manipulation and extensive integration, as well as the evidence of causality suggesting the manipulation legitimising contributes to extensive integration, demonstrate the importance of the manipulation strategy. Moreover, this strategy situates legitimising within the change management literature. Manipulation is, by definition, part of a change management process. Moreover, one could consider the manipulation process as one where “new levels of awareness are achieved by introducing ideas that resonate with the sentiments of the audience
in ways that generate psychological closure or new avenues of thinking” (Neilson and Rao, 1987: 527). While conformance or selection may be easier strategies to adopt (Aies and Weiss, 2012; Suchman, 1995), these do not suffice when the existing environment prevents broader aspects of sustainability from being introduced, or when wider environmental change is the aim. These factors situate manipulation as the key legitimising strategy to achieve legitimacy for sustainability.

**Conclusion**

In sum, this research generated a framework for understanding the complex and temporally driven progression of legitimising, which involves the dynamic use of multiple strategies. Moreover, it conceptualized a pathway which individuals seeking to understanding the legitimising process may follow. These results provide a welcome focus on the process of legitimising which has received scant attention since Suchman (1995) proposed his conceptual framework. By interrogating all three legitimising strategies individually it provides much needed empirical evidence and theoretical development for each contributing to more rigorous and directed future research. However, the most significant contribution comes from evidence of the interplay between the strategies indicating the complex and dynamic nature of legitimising, and theorising the temporal nature of such a relationship. Moreover, for the sustainability literature, this research makes two contributions. First, it rings a warning bell for the more comprehensive construct of sustainability: where conformance-only is pursued, there is the potential broader aspects of sustainability may be lost entirely from the definition. Interestingly, this may place the choice of legitimising strategy as an important factor in the success or otherwise of durable social change as regards sustainability as an institution. However, the research also suggests that sustainability practitioners are using different legitimising strategies at different times and for different audiences, in order to legitimise sustainability.
References


