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How Morally Contested Innovations are Legitimized? Insights from the Case Study of the  
Cardboard Coffin's Introduction in the French Funeral Services Field

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates how morally contested innovations emerge and spread within an organisational field and how entrepreneurs utilize strategies to legitimize them. Building on the insight derived from a case study of the cardboard coffin's introduction in the French funeral services field our findings show that proponents of morally contested innovations rely on three legitimation strategies: (1) they commit themselves in pragmatic legitimacy through targeting the peripheral players and the public, (2) they cope with cognitive legitimacy challenges by adapting the design of their product and by educating product users, (3) and they respond to moral concerns by reducing moral revulsion and re-enchanting the consumption practices. This study also highlights the importance of the interplay between these mutually reinforcing strategies in the adoption and the diffusion of morally contested innovations.

**Keywords:** innovation, legitimation strategies, morally contested fields, funeral services

## **Introduction**

Economic and technical superiority are not sufficient conditions for the diffusion and adoption of an innovation (Garud and Rappa, 1994). Indeed, innovations have to espouse and meet established institutions. They are therefore socially embedded and face challenges of legitimacy rather than technical superiority (Das and Van de Ven, 2000). From the neo-institutional theory standpoint, “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” (Suchman, 1995: 574). Extant literature considers that innovations are deemed legitimate as far as the audience perceives them as comprehensible and as they gain political support from the audience that evaluates them (Das and Van de Ven, 2000; Garud et al., 2002). Comprehensibility refers to cognitive legitimacy whereas political support points to pragmatic legitimacy (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001). These two facets of legitimacy are considered central to innovation diffusion.

In addition to comprehensibility and political support, innovations must fit with moral evaluative imperatives of the audience that determine “what is wrong to do and what is right to do” (Quinn, 2008). These imperatives refer to what Suchman (1995) terms the moral legitimacy. Moral legitimacy is particularly acute when entrepreneurs seek to introduce new products or services that could be contested by some stakeholders on moral grounds, especially in organisational fields that are infused with values of holiness such as those related to life and death (Zelizer, 1978; Quinn, 2008), body commodification (Almeling, 2007) and science commercialisation (Peifer et al., 2017).

Surprisingly, how morally contested innovations diffuse within organisational fields and how entrepreneurs respond to cognitive, political and moral challenges of social acceptance received scant attention in the literature. We contend that restraining innovation’s social embeddedness

to political support and to comprehensibility (cognitive) straitjackets (see Garud and Rappa, 1994; Hargadon and Douglas, 2002) could hinder a rich and complete understanding of the process of innovation adoption and diffusion.

Therefore, we know little about how a market and a set of transactions are established around morally contested issues such as life insurance (Zeilzer, 1978) or cadavers (Anteby, 2010), how practices evolve over time and how novelty is brought into such morally contested activities. One explanation of viewing organisational fields formed around morally contested activities seen as highly conservative is their institutional inertia (Anteby, 2010). Although being very conservative such fields cannot be sheltered from technological disruptions and from diffusion of ideas across countries and cultural contexts.

In order to study how morally contested innovations diffuse and how entrepreneurs respond concomitantly to cognitive, political, and moral imperatives of legitimacy, we conducted a longitudinal qualitative study of the emergence of the cardboard coffin in the field of funeral services in France during the last decade.

Our findings show that proponents of morally contested innovations perform pragmatic legitimacy strategies through targeting the peripheral players and the public, they answer to cognitive legitimacy challenges by adapting the design of their product and by educating product users, and finally, respond to moral concerns by reducing moral revulsion and re-enchanting the consumption practices. Our findings also highlight the importance of the interplay between these mutually reinforcing strategies in the adoption and spread of morally contested innovations.

Our paper is organized as follows. First, we start by reviewing the literature on legitimacy imperatives of innovation and morally contested innovations. Second, we introduce our research context and describe our methods. In the following section, we will sketch out our

findings. Thereafter we discuss our contributions to the literature on innovation and to the literature on morally contested activities.

### **Innovation and legitimacy imperatives**

How the superiority of an innovation over rival alternatives is established and how a market comes to a settlement when several technologies compete with one another remain a central issue in innovation management research. According to Das and Van de Ven (2000) the literature distinguishes among two paradigms that can answer the thorny issues of innovation selection and diffusion.

The first paradigm is based on the thesis of technical performance superiority. Innovations are selected and diffused when their superior technical performance compared to other alternatives is acknowledged and valued by the audience (Christensen, 1992). Accordingly, customer expectations drive technological improvement and innovation trends by choosing products and services that perform specific functions better than rivals based on known and existing evaluations criteria.

The second paradigm contradicts the technical performance superiority thesis and considers that innovation superiority is shaped by social interactions among a variety of agents. Das and Van de Ven (2000) designate this paradigm as institutional. Established technologies can hardly be dislodged by alternatives because they are socially embedded and entrenched in institutionalized practices and habits. Switching from a technology to another requires a cognitive engagement from users and leads to cognitive sunk costs (Oliver, 1997).

The main arguments that support the institutional paradigm rest on the idea that actors who sponsor and support an innovation must solve a twofold issue. First, they must de-institutionalize the old practices and second, they must work on the social acceptance of their innovation and on embedding it in established institutions (Hargadon and Douglas, 2001).

Seminal essays on institutional theory have opposed technical environments to institutional environments (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The importance of economic performance, resources and material aspects of organizational and social arrangements are therefore downplayed by symbolic and cultural dimensions of the institutional environment. Within an institutional environment, social acceptance and the compliance to rules and norms are vital elements for the survival of organizations (Baum and Oliver, 1996).

Actors who support and sponsor innovation must elaborate and implement institutional strategies (Das and Van de Ven, 2000; Garud et al., 2002) in order to gain the audience support and acceptance and legitimize their innovation. Legitimacy and legitimation strategies are therefore determinants for the success and the diffusion of innovations (Hargadon and Douglas 2002; Munir and Philips, 2005). Legitimacy refers to the perception by an audience of how an organizational form or artefact is viewed as proper and appropriate, and how it fits with general cognitive and cultural framing carried by the audience (Deephouse et al., 2017). According to Suchman (1995), three types of legitimacy can be identified in the literature which might be termed pragmatic legitimacy, cognitive legitimacy and moral legitimacy.

Pragmatic legitimacy rests on the self-interest calculation of the audience that evaluates organizational activities, behaviours, and forms. The audience grants legitimacy to the organization when it perceives that it can profit from the legitimized activity or organizational form, or that somehow the organizational activity or form, the object of legitimacy, are aligned with general and established interests. In other words, pragmatic legitimacy is granted as long as the major players' interests are preserved and enhanced, and as long as the novelty introduced by the organization is perceived as sustaining the political and power equilibrium in the field.

The second type is cognitive legitimacy. The main contribution and cornerstone of neo institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) hinges on the idea that legitimacy equates to

“taken-for-grantedness”. Legitimacy refers, therefore, to the extent to that the audience understands the object of legitimacy which must be perceived as familiar and comprehensible (Hargadon and Douglas, 2002). This echoes what DiMaggio (1997) defines as “automatic cognition”, that lies in the capability of actors to put the object of legitimacy in a given category automatically. Making sense of novelty and innovation doesn’t occur in a vacuum because actors use their existent schemas to understand and to categorize novelty and innovation. This is one of the most important paradoxes of innovation; being perceived both as familiar and as new at the same time (Garud et al. 2002; Hargadon and Douglas 2002).

Moral legitimacy is the third type and refers to how an audience perceives the organization’s activities and arrangements as “right” or “wrong” according to a set of values shared by the audience. The moral legitimacy judgment bases are entrenched in culture and in the wide socially constructed value system (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, the audience has to judge whether “the means” and “procedures” used by the organization to perform the “ends” are wrong or right.

According to Deephouse et al. (2017), the literature on legitimacy falls neatly into two camps: strategic and institutional explanations. From a neo institutional theory standpoint legitimacy is socially constructed by actors at the level of the society and the organizational field. Institutional dynamics produce institutional pressures that define norms, rules, and taken for granted patterns that an organization must espouse (Scott, 1995). For institutional theory, legitimacy is conferred by the audience to the organization when the audience perceives a cultural and cognitive congruence between cognitive schemas and cultural framing and the organization. This view of legitimacy as a perception (Suddaby et al., 2017) by the audience casts a shadow over actors’ agency and their ability to shape and disrupt the institutional basis of legitimacy judgments.

From the strategic perspective, legitimacy is viewed as a resource that skilled and resourceful actors can acquire from the audience (Deepphouse, 1999). Thanks to the integration of agency to institutional theoretical apparatus, organizations considered as actors with freedom and leeway to behave strategically according to their self-interests can therefore shape the institutional basis of judgment (Fligstein, 1997).

Legitimation strategies designate those efforts that actors perform in order to secure the legitimacy of their activities, forms, and innovations (Vaara et al., 2006). As legitimacy is continually challenged by multiple actors in the organisational field, “participants act to obtain, maintain, and defend the legitimacy they have acquired, while also seeking to deny legitimacy to the other members of the shared community” (Miller, 2008: 162). Therefore, legitimation strategies became the most powerful vector of institutionalization (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005).

In one of the most eloquent and insightful works on legitimation strategies of innovation, Hargadon and Douglas (2002) used the concept of dominant design to depict how entrepreneurs, by adapting the design of their technologies and by gaining political support from central players in the market, embed their innovation into the established institutions. The success and the diffusion of an innovation depend therefore on the extent to which the innovation meets institutions (Hargadon and Douglas, 2002). For instance, the authors showed how Edison’s success in promoting electric lighting as a substitute for gas lighting was heavily indebted to choices in the design of the technology such as maintaining the gas meter device and installing the electric cables below the grade. The main idea behind these design adaptations was to present the electric light as very close to the gas technology in regard to the taken-for-granted schemes carried out by users. The challenge of comprehensibility, and cognitive legitimacy as its main consequence, is crucial to the success of innovation. Hargadon and Douglas (2002) portrayed how an innovation’s failure can stem from lack of cognitive



legitimacy since users were not able to comprehend the new offer. When technologies are too far from familiar schemes of users and when entrepreneurs fail to anchor innovations in the cognitive schemes of users, cognitive legitimacy cannot be achieved.

Hargadon and Douglas (2002) portrayed Edison not as a mere innovator but rather as a skilful and talented “institutional entrepreneur” (DiMaggio, 1988) with sharp political skills. Indeed, thanks to the active support of the banker Morgan Stanley and the cooptation of several major players from the gas industry, the electric lighting technology gained pragmatic legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy is very important to the success of innovation as shown in the work of Garud et al. (2002) when Sun Microsystems gained the battle against Microsoft over network interoperability technologies through the mobilization and support of a wide community of freelance developers. In a nutshell, major legitimacy innovation challenges hinge on pragmatic and cognitive dimensions.

It is fair to point out here that the moral facets of innovation receive scant attention in the literature on legitimation strategies of innovations. Moral judgments are indeed most prevalent in specific fields that are confronted with contestation because of their unethical character (Vergne, 2012) or activities imbued with a sacred character that must be kept out of the market and far from commoditization such as blood or organs transplantations (Zelizer, 1978). More broadly, we know little on how innovations are sponsored and defended within the particular context of morally contested market activities (Quinn, 2008). We contend that morally contested activities/commodities are insightful sites to study the legitimation strategies of innovation.

### **Innovation in morally contested market activities**

In many societies, some activities such as life insurance, blood, human organs, cadavers, female eggs, and sperm donation are kept out of the market because of moral judgments (Almeling,

2007). Indeed, moral judgments and the lack of moral legitimacy trigger market-excluding boundary work that define which human activities can be included to market or not (Peifer et al., 2017). Central to morally contested activities is the idea that market and commensurability desacralize those activities and downgrade them to the vile status of a commodity (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013). Market and commerce have always been conveyors of progress, peace, and civic-mindedness among society as portrayed by the expression “*le doux commerce*” coined by Montesquieu, the French philosopher of the Age of the Enlightenment (Fourcade and Healy, 2007). Indeed, because of contracts and formal rules and the idea that market can enhance the interest and social fair of all (Ben Slimane and Lamine, 2017), the enrolment of actors in market transactions and exchanges prevent them from fighting each other and shed a meaning of cordiality over them. Yet despite the civilizing mission of the market, moral judgments put limits on the expansion of the market and give the impetus of boundary-excluding work performed by activists (Peifer et al., 2017) and moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963).

However, several morally contested activities related to life, death, human body, and human organs have been steadily introduced to the market thanks to the including boundary work of entrepreneurs and other stakeholders (Zeilzer 1978; Quinn, 2008; Trompette, 2008). For instance, Quinn (2008) showed how the exchange of life insurance gained a moral acceptance as its promoters and sponsors performed legitimation strategies that allowed diffusion and wide acceptance of the new offer. The exchange of life insurance emerged and gained a toehold in the US when HIV patients number increased. The deal was that HIV patients sell their life insurance before dying and the buyer will get the money after the patient's. This practice was heavily criticized for moral reasons at the outset, triggering what Quinn (2008) termed sacred revulsion. Buyers of life insurance engaged in strategies responding to moral concerns such as crafting the meaning of a decent death that can be granted to the sellers of their life insurance who can then pay their debts or have a comfortable end of life.

Therefore, the determinant of whether morally contested activities can be included in the market is the outcome of the struggle between two contradictory boundary works: one excluding boundary work that resists against commodification and one including boundary work that promotes market exchanges around those activities. Accordingly, in addition to cognitive and pragmatic legitimacy required for any innovation and novelty, entrepreneurs promoting morally contested innovations have moreover to perform an including boundary work.

Literature on morally contested fields didn't yet address the three facets of legitimacy together. One explanation to this fact is probably the temptation to consider that once established, morally contested fields are seldom subject to change and innovation because of their inertia. Indeed, the role of entrepreneurs in promoting morally contested innovation had always been limited to the creation of the field and rarely to the introduction of innovation in such fields. We therefore formulate the following research question: what are the legitimation strategies of innovations in morally contested fields?

### **Case description**

In order to investigate the legitimation strategies of innovations within morally contested fields, we've conducted a qualitative study based on the case of the introduction of cardboard coffins into the French funeral services field. We contend that this case fulfils the main criteria of what Pettigrew (1990) terms an "extreme case" which are transparency and the compelling character of the observed phenomenon in regard to theory. Indeed, funeral services had been acknowledged as being a morally contested field in previous studies (Trompette and Lemonier, 2009). Funeral services had been established as a market in France during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and many private interests started handling a set of activities that had been the prerogative of the Church (Trompette, 2008).

The funeral service market is organized around the activities of handling the body after the death, transportation of the body, and burial or cremation. All the services around the funeral rites and the handling and transportation of the body are performed by funeral homes for the families of the deceased. Cemeteries and crematoriums facilities belong to the municipalities. Crematorium management is established as a type of mixed public and private interest company. In France, there are two kinds of funeral homes. The first category include funeral homes that are a part of larger networks of branded funeral homes (ex: Funecap, OGF, Roc Eclerc, Le choix Funeraire). They share many assets and commonalities such as central purchasing groups that provide them with coffins and other products. Those funeral homes have little latitude deciding which suppliers and products they can offer to families since those decisions are made at the network level. The second type of funeral home in France is the independent funeral home and they have more latitude and autonomy in selecting suppliers and products.

The coffin plays a central role in the funeral rites in France as well as in the funeral services market. From the French law standpoint, a coffin is mandatory for the handling and the burial or the cremation of the deceased. The coffin in France had always been made from wood for burial as well as for cremation. The price of a coffin made from wood goes from 500€ to more than 8000<sup>1</sup> € depending on the type of wood used.

The last decade witnessed the emergence of a challenging alternative to the institutionalized coffin made from wood. This innovation hinges on the cardboard coffin. Two entrepreneurs, AB Crémation and Eco-Cerc, entered the funeral services market during the end of the last decade with a coffin made from cardboard. The cardboard coffin, they argue, is cheaper and more ecological than a wood coffin. They've faced a strong resistance from the main players in

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://meilleures-pompes-funebres.com/conseils/choisir-un-cercueil>

the market pushing them to perform specific legitimation strategies in order to answer to legitimacy challenges and to defend their innovation.

## **Method**

### ***Data collection***

Our study is based on a single case study (Yin, 1994) that is suitable for theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989). Our data cover an extensive period of time, starting from the introduction of the cardboard coffin in France. We look backward to better understand the context of the funeral services field and look forward to grasp the moves and strategies of the different actors. We chose the empirical site of cardboard coffins in France because it shows in a compelling manner the moral struggles around the introduction of a novelty in a morally contested field.

As we've mentioned above, our study is based on qualitative data. Our main goal is to achieve a deeper understanding of both the context of the French funeral services field and the strategies and interactions among the main actors triggered by the emergence of the cardboard coffin.

Therefore, we collected data from various types of sources. We conducted 24 interviews that lasted between 15 to 90 minutes. Twenty-one out of 24 interviews were recorded and transcribed. Among our interviewees, are two founders of the cardboard coffin companies (AB Crémation and Eco-Cerc), several funeral home owners and managers (both network and independent), two journalists working for the main specialized media covering the funeral services market in France, wooden coffin manufactures, incinerator manufacturers, and representatives from the French federation for cremation.

We also collected secondary data such as press articles, internal documents provided by the interviewees, specialized press in the funeral services field, customer and public views on

forums, videos released on the Internet and notes we took during a visit to an industry fair dedicated to the funeral services field that had been held in Paris on November 2017.

### *Data analysis*

Our data analysis follows three steps. First, we elaborated on an event database of “who did what” following the recommendations of Van de Ven and Engleman (2004). The event database enhanced our understanding of the case and allowed us to identify the critical issues in the introduction of the innovation and the major interpretative struggles (Hardy and Maguire, 2008) over the social meaning attached to the market practices of using a coffin in France. For example, one of the major criticisms made by incumbents to the cardboard coffin hinged on its disrespectful character to the deceased person since cardboard is viewed as vile whereas wood is deemed noble.

In the second step we look into the moves and discourse of the cardboard coffin proponents and identify how they addressed the three major legitimacy challenges previously identified in the literature by Suchman (1995): the pragmatic, the cognitive and the moral legitimacy. We use three codes to point to each of the three facets of legitimacy. In order to identify the pragmatic legitimacy strategies, we ask the question of how the proponents of the cardboard coffin worked at gauging the interest of the audience in accepting the innovation. In the same vein of the seminal work of Hargadon and Douglas (2002), the cognitive pillar was grasped through the investigation of how the proponents of the cardboard coffin made their new product understandable and how they worked at embedding their product in the institutionalized beliefs about what a coffin should look like. We pinpointed the moral legitimation strategies by identifying how proponents of the cardboard coffin addressed the main critics about what was wrong with using cardboard in manufacturing coffins. Mainly, they had to challenge and address the critics of disrespecting the deceased because of the vile character of cardboard.

In the third and last step, we look into the three legitimation strategy facets aimed at identifying more fine-grained strategies and moves by the innovation proponents. We started an axial coding (Strauss, 1987). We coded the excerpts according to how the cardboard coffin proponents address legitimacy challenges and lumped together the different codes until reaching a satisfying stability of coding and saturation of data (Table 1). For instance, we identified two strategies of moral legitimation: the reduction of the moral revulsion and the re-enchantment of consumption practice.

## **Findings**

Our analysis shows that sponsors of morally contested innovations perform legitimation strategies at the three facets of legitimacy: the pragmatic, the cognitive, and the moral. Each of these strategies consists of substrategies. In this section, we develop each of those strategies and substrategies.

### *1-Pragmatic legitimation strategies*

According to Suchman (1995) pragmatic legitimacy refers to the extent the audience would accept a given practice according to their self-interest calculation. By performing pragmatic legitimacy strategies, the proponents of the cardboard coffin will try to gain political support and endorsement for their innovation.

Table 1: Illustrations of Coding

Type of legitimacy	Legitimation substrategies	Illustrations of evidences of legitimation strategies	
Pragmatic Legitimacy	-Targeting the peripheral players	The majority of my customer are independent funeral homes because those who are part of networks are stuck. What make transacting with independent easy is that they choose their suppliers (Interview with Mrs Sabatier, CEO of AB Crémation)	Since January 2015, I've been working with some funeral homes who welcomed such product because they are independent funeral homes who don't belong to big players (Interview with Mr Saussol, Co-founder of Eco Cerc)
	-Targeting the public	Funeral homes are aware that if families want and ask for a cardboard coffin they cannot sell to them a wooden coffin. Families are very knowledgeable thanks to Internet and customers critics (interview with Mrs Sabatier, CEO of AB Crémation)	I sell directly to the families who are interested in the concept. You have the right to choose this alternative (the carboard coffin) for a cremation. (Sabatier Forum (02 11 2017).
Cognitive Legitimacy	-Adapting the product design to the established beliefs	At the outset coffin had no handles. Now, cardboard coffins had handles made with woven cotton (interview with Mrs Sabatier, CEO of AB Crémation).	We've asked Mr. Michaud-Nérard (the CEO of the Crematorium Père Lachaise) what are the conditions to be able to sell our product? Thereafter we started adapting our product we added the reinforcement on the back of the coffin and handles (Interview with Mr. Dupont co-founder of Eco Cerc)
	-Educating and training users	I've been very well informed by Mrs. Sabatier before choosing my funeral insurance. Thanks to her, I will avoid traps and introduce originality in my funeral (customer 29 09 2017).	The Kit includes several planks (pedestal, sides, cover) that must be joined following the advice of the method of assembly delivered with the different parts. Grooves and holes facilitate the joining of parts, walls and handles, screws provided with the pack finalize the attachment of the assembly. Once in place, the inside of the box is covered with a sheet-shroud in natural organic cotton, with a matching pillow. The whole thing is contained in a cardboard pack of around thirty kilos. (Blog:, consulted on 07 06 2018)
Moral legitimacy	-Reducing the moral revulsion	We have this model in imitation wood that looks like wooden coffin (Interview with Mrs. Sabatier, CEO of AB Crémation)	But I can guarantee you that when customers see our casket, it does not look like a cardboard casket. You really have to tell them it's one of them. That's why we do not call it cardboard casket [cellulosic alveolar complex] and to prevent people from posing a moral problem. Problem that should not happen, because our coffin is quite in tune with a beautiful coffin. (Interview with Mr Dupond, Co-founder of Eco-Cerc)
	-Re-enchanting the consumption practices	I have 3500 pictures of poppies. As much to tell you that families have the choice. Rather than opt for an eternal wooden coffin, they can buy a coffin almost unique, ". (Interview with Mrs Sabatier, CEO of AB Crémation)	For some ceremonies with children, it can be interesting to have this type of casket, because it allows them to draw on the coffin of the grandfather or the grandmother. This allows a personalized tribute to a loved one (Interview with Mr. Gentil, Owner of an independent funeral home)



As we explained above, in the French market of funeral services, coffin producers sell their coffins to the independent funeral homes and to the central purchasing groups of the funeral home networks. At the outset, the majority of funeral homes resisted the cardboard coffin for different moral reasons related to disrespect to the deceased person, to issues of product design, and also because of more interest-driven reasons. Indeed, as we mentioned above, the coffin plays a central role in the funeral rites in France and wood coffins are quite expensive. The cardboard coffin is proposed at a lower price ranging from 400 to 1300 Euros (Source: Interview with the CEO of AB Crémation). A lower priced coffin would therefore harm the profit of funeral homes (Source: interview with the CEO of AB Crémation). Facing the resistance of funeral homes belonging to branded networks, the pragmatic legitimacy strategies of the proponents and sponsors of the cardboard coffin had been focused on two different audiences: the independent peripheral funeral homes and the families of the deceased.

#### *Targeting peripheral players in the field*

An actor's position in the field has always been recognized as an important factor that explains an actor's strategy vis-à-vis the change (Leblibici et al., 1991). Peripheral actors, because of their position further from the centre, are less socialized to the institutionalized practices and have few or no vested interests in the status quo. In our case, the earlier funeral home adopters of cardboard coffins were small, independent funeral homes. They've seen cardboard coffins as a way to differentiate themselves. This excerpt shows vividly the position of a small, independent funeral home owner in the North of France:

Offering the cardboard coffin is a way to differentiate my business from my competitors who only offer coffin from wood (Interview with Mr Henard, owner of an independent funeral home).

Another argument for adopting the cardboard coffin is its low price and the opportunity to target a new clientele who are price sensitive. During the last decade, a new consciousness has

emerged in France that criticizes the high cost of funeral services and pointing to funeral homes as greedy. The following excerpt underscores this idea:

At the outset, many funeral homes were very enthusiastic about the cardboard coffin, they told themselves that they would be able to buy the coffin at 50 € and sell it to families at 200 €. They would propose the coffin as kind of appealing product (Interview with Mrs Bailly, owner of an independent funeral home)

The audience constituted by peripheral actors, small, independent funeral homes, were the first target of cardboard coffin manufacturers since their interests were aligned.

### *Targeting the public*

This strategy aims at targeting the end customer, here, the family of the deceased or persons who arrange their funeral in advance, is more disruptive to established practices of the funeral services market. Indeed, establishing a direct connection between the coffin manufacturers and the end customer is a new practice in France. By bypassing the funeral homes, this direct connection has a disruptive character. Targeting the families was an answer to the resistance of the funeral homes as described by Mrs Sabatier, the CEO of AB Crémation:

I had to find out a solution to the resistance of the funeral homes. I told myself that I had to do like in Great Britain where families order coffin directly from the manufacturer (Interview with Mrs Sabatier, CEO of AB Crémation)

Families have to order the cardboard coffin from the website of the company that will send out the coffin as a kit. Then, the family brings the coffin to the funeral home for the transportation and handling of the body. The cardboard coffin entrepreneurs turned their communication strategies toward the families and the persons who would arrange their funeral in advance putting to the fore the argument of low price and the argument of being environmentally friendly and caring. The cardboard had been framed as having a lower footprint than wood. Both the economic and the environmental arguments were appealing to families who prefer cardboard to wood. Mrs. Sabatier, the founder of AB Crémation, published in April 2016 a

petition and opened a forum to allow interactions with the public. The following excerpts from the forum hosted on her website shows how the public has welcomed the cardboard coffin:

It is fantastic, in addition the price is decent, because I shall say that one has to be rich to die (posted 11/19/2017)

I think that this is very good and ecological, it is fantastic to have a tree planted in one ashes; what a nice idea to reforest our planet (posted 01/11/2017)

Facing the resistance of central actors in the field of funeral services in France who had seen their financial interests threatened by the introduction of cardboard coffins, promoters of this innovation choose to target the peripheral players and the public by implementing legitimation strategies aiming at gaining political support and achieving the audience acquiescence.

### **Cognitive legitimacy**

Innovations that diffuse and succeed in markets are those that are understandable and that appear familiar to the audience (Hargadon and Douglas, 2002). The cardboard coffin raised many concerns and questions when it emerged in France. The main concerns hinged on the design and material properties of cardboard in comparison to wood. Since the cardboard coffin is sold as a kit, questions about how the coffin has to be unpacked and assembled had been also raised.

Addressing both issues of design and providing a user manual, the cardboard coffin manufacturers performed two legitimation substrategies: adapting the design of their product and educating the users.

#### *Adapting the product design*

The main issues raised by the cardboard coffin design are twofold. First, the early version of the cardboard coffin had been released without handles. The absence of handles was striking for the actors in the market who cognitively associated a coffin with handles even though in the

case of cremation, handles are not mandatory for handling the coffin. In other countries, handles are not installed on coffins used for cremation. The version without handles had been refused by the crematoriums as shown in this excerpt when the CEO of the Parisian crematorium of Père Lachaise (one of the largest actors in the market) refused the first version of the cardboard coffin:

Once we had the coffin in our hands to test it, we noted that there was a problem. The main problem was the absence of handles. It was dangerous to manipulate the coffin without handles. (Interview with Mr Michaud-Nerard, Père Lachaise Crematorium)

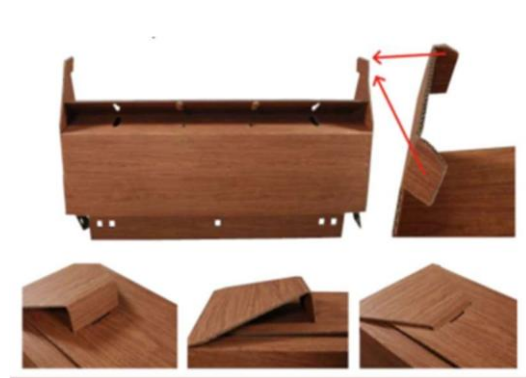
The second source of issues related to design stems from the technical properties of cardboard related to resistance. Even though the proponents of the cardboard coffin always insisted that their cardboard coffin has satisfying resistance properties, they did add a backing plate made from wood on the back of the coffin. Indeed, during the cremation, the coffin is handled by a loader that uses a mechanical arm to push the coffin inside the oven. Because of the assumed technical properties of the cardboard and mainly its lack of resistance, crematoriums were afraid that the back of the coffin would be pierced by the mechanical arm. Even though there was no evidence of such a risk and no incidents had occurred, this belief was widely shared among crematorium operators and managers. Those modifications of the design are justified by the expectations of the crematoriums and their beliefs of what a coffin should look like as highlighted in this excerpt from Mrs. Sabatier.

The first cardboard coffin model that we've released were not equipped with handles. It seemed useless, indeed for cremation handles are not used to carry the coffin. For cremation, coffins are handled with hands put below the coffin. However, the absence of handles was destabilizing for people working for crematorium. (Mrs Sabatier, Funéraire info – 18/04/13)

These modifications of the design guaranteed acceptance of the cardboard coffin the by crematoriums and, consequently, their legitimation as an accepted product.

## *Educating users*

The concerns of the crematoriums was not the only the hurdle facing the acceptance of the cardboard coffin. An important issue was the instructions provided for using the coffin. Indeed, the coffin is sold as a kit and the families have to bring it to the funeral home to be assembled. The cardboard coffin manufacturers published many internet videos and tutorials to educate and train users on how to build the cardboard coffin. In one of the videos, we can even see the founder of AB Crémation being handled like a dead body and put in the cardboard coffin. The picture below is an excerpt from the instruction manual that AB Crémation provide their customers. The manual describes 17 steps for assembling the coffin.



Picture 1 : Step no. 7 from the instruction manual of cardboard coffin of AB Crémation.

The cardboard coffin manufacturers have also attended many professional fairs and exhibits dedicated to the funeral services market and organized training sessions of how to unpack and assemble the coffin.

The second issue faced by the cardboard coffin is also related to the user. Selling coffins directly to the end user disrupts the institutionalized interactions between funeral homes and families. Until now the family of the deceased only needs to pay for a complete funeral package and the funeral home delivers all the services and interacts with the different constituencies engaged in the cremation process. Families who choose a cardboard coffin are placed in a new situation that raises many questions, especially the risk of the funeral home refusing to use a cardboard coffin. AB Crémation took this issue very seriously and dedicated a lot of time and effort in

informing families on how they should behave once they order their coffin and what arguments they should make if the funeral home refused to handle the cardboard coffin. Such a strategy contributes to educating customers to the new transactions and interactions with the funeral homes emerging as a consequence of the direct sale of coffins by cardboard coffin manufacturers to the general public.

### *Moral legitimacy*

The introduction of the cardboard coffin into the French funeral services market raised many moral concerns. The main criticism hinged on the perceived disrespect by the family to the deceased person. Indeed, the cardboard coffin had been compared by its detractors to “a shoe box” (Interview with a funeral home owner). In such sacred fields, the economic calculation is kind of taboo and actors often use strategies and tactics to mystify and hide their interest calculation when dealing with activities that raise moral concerns (Zelizer, 1978). Choosing the noblest type of wood is viewed as the final homage the family can give to the deceased person (interview with a funeral service network manager). The cardboard coffin manufacturers had to face and answer to the critics of disrespect. To do so, they performed two legitimization substrategies. The first substrategy aimed at reducing the moral revulsion. The second substrategy consists of re-enchanting the practice of using a deemed vile material such as the cardboard.

### *Reducing the moral revulsion*

In order to answer to the critics of the “shoe box”, the company Eco-Cerc launched a new version of the cardboard coffin covered with a thin layer of plywood board (2 millimetres). The new coffin looks like a coffin made from wood.

When I used to sell the 100 % cardboard coffin, people used to tell me that “it is a shoe box”. However, with the new coffin with the plywood board, we cannot make any difference between cardboard coffin and wooden

coffin and people can even celebrate funeral ceremonies in the church. I'm not attached to the plywood board, but it has the virtues to answer to some concerns regarding the demeaning character of cardboard (Interview with Mrs Saussol, Co-founder of Eco-Cerc).

With this new version of the cardboard coffin the family can avoid suffering from the criticisms of their close circles and relatives who may accuse them of depreciating the deceased person and failing to show respect and recognition. As argued by Mr Henard, a funeral home owner, with this kind of coffin, only a few people will know that it is made of cardboard and they can save face and avoid attacks on choosing such cheap and vile material.

A second substrategy of reducing the moral revulsion hinged on replacing the word cardboard with “coffin made of complex cellulose in honeycombed shape” or “ecological coffin”. By removing the word cardboard, the company Eco-Cerc tried to avoid its negative connotation and attract more people as assumed by his co-founder and manager:

“the word cardboard conveys a negative meaning, that's why we abandoned this term. We don't talk about cardboard coffin anymore but rather «coffins in alveolar celluloisic complex”. We broke the codes of the cardboard coffin which considered as cheap and disrespectful. We chose this reformulation to shock less” (Interview with Mr. Dupond, Co-founder of Eco-Cerc).

These two strategies contributed to reducing the moral revulsion around the cardboard coffin and challenged the critics' claim of disrespect and depreciation.

### *Re-enchanting the consumption practice*

The AB Crémation Company's main advantage lies in the opportunity to customize the coffins through using paintings or different images to cover the coffin. A thin film is therefore put on the coffin and families have a wide selection of styles to choose from: flowers, music, animals, fashion, etc. The aim here is not to reduce the revulsion of the cardboard but rather to re-enchant it by opening new possibilities of customization of the coffin. Mrs. Sabatier, the founder of AB Crémation, entered the funeral services business in the aftermath of her husband's the death.

She still regrets not being able to offer her deceased husband a distinguished and unique funeral ceremony and complained about the limited choices imposed by funeral homes. Offering the possibility to customize the coffin and to select an image that could make a final homage to the deceased person had been presented as a way to re-enchant the funeral rites and ceremonies as stressed in the excerpt below.

We all have different cultures, different backgrounds and I don't understand why funeral homes would impose us the same things to all of us.... A last wink to the deceased person may help us mourn the beloved person. The customization allows to refer to a passion or to a corporation. It is unique. I don't just sell coffins. There is creative and artistic features in the story. When we chose customization, we forget about the material [the cardboard] (interview with Mrs. Sabatier, CEO of AB Crémation).

People interested in such customization also highlighted the idea that with such new possibilities “*death became affordable and poetic*” (posted on the forum on the 09/27/2017).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

In this paper we attempted to answer the following research question: What are the legitimation strategies of innovations in morally contested fields?

Our starting point was the observation that both literature on innovation and on morally contested activities fail to capture the complete picture of the legitimation strategies of innovation in morally contested fields. Our work aimed at filling this void and producing new and fresh knowledge about how innovations diffuse in the specific context of morally contested fields.

Our findings show that proponents of innovation within morally contested fields commit themselves in pragmatic legitimacy through targeting the peripheral players and the public, they answer to cognitive legitimacy challenges by adapting the design of their product and by



educating users of the product, and finally, respond to moral concerns by reducing moral revulsion and re-enchanting the consumption practice (see table 2).

Table 2: The legitimation strategies of innovation in morally contested fields.

<b>Type of legitimacy</b>	<b>Legitimizing substrategies</b>
Pragmatic Legitimacy	-Targeting the peripheral players -Targeting the public
Cognitive Legitimacy	-Adapting the product design to the established beliefs -Educating and training users
Moral legitimacy	-Reducing the moral revulsion -Re-enchanting the consumption practice

Our study makes a threefold contribution to the literature of innovation and morally contested market activities. First, it makes room for moral legitimation strategies and shows how to articulate with pragmatic and cognitive strategies in the complex process of the promotion and diffusion of innovations. Second, it highlights the role of targeting peripheral players and the public in gaining acceptance and bypassing the resistance of central actors in the field. Third, our study points out the role of strategies in reducing moral revulsion and re-enchantment in answering moral concerns and critics.

*Articulating the three types of legitimation strategies to promote innovations in morally contested fields*

Our study of the introduction of cardboard coffins in the field of funeral services in France allowed us to build a more comprehensive picture of the legitimation strategies for innovations in morally contested fields. Previous research documented the importance of legitimation strategies for the diffusion of innovation (Das and Ven de Ven 2000; Hargadon and Douglas

2002). However, they restricted legitimacy strategies in the straitjacket of cognitive and pragmatic legitimation strategies.

Moral legitimacy refers to the perception that an activity or a social arrangement is deemed as the right thing to do. Morally contested activities and fields, because of the inner nature of the transactions around them, are infused with values of sacredness and holiness, and are therefore excluded from market. Few researches in innovation have paid sufficient attention to innovation dynamics in such fields. The case of the introduction and diffusion of cardboard coffins in France offers an ideal empirical site to study the three legitimations strategies - cognitive, pragmatic and moral - at play. This case shows that sponsors of innovations in morally contested activities and fields have to consider the legitimation strategies from a broader perspective and commit themselves in the three types of strategies at the same time. Even though morally contested innovation raises important and strong moral concerns, pragmatic and cognitive challenges shouldn't be neglected. As we have demonstrated, both pragmatic and cognitive legitimation strategies play an important role in the acceptance and diffusion of innovations in morally contested fields. Those two elements had been neglected in previous studies on moral issues in the marketplace. Our study sheds light on the importance of political support as well as on understandability and comprehensibility of the product from the user standpoint.

Our study also underscores the challenges of comprehensibility for innovations in morally contested activities. We argue that even when moral concerns are raised by users and market actors, issues of comprehensibility must be tackled. Actors may not understand how they can use and interact with the new arrangements of practices and innovations. Sponsors of those innovations have to adapt the design of their product to established beliefs and expectations and have to also educate and communicate with users. The absence of handles in the early versions of cardboard coffins destabilized users and stakeholders. Even though handles are not

functional and are useless from a practical point of view, they are part of the institutionalized features of a coffin in the French culture.

In previous studies of morally contested markets, those cognitive issues have rarely been studied (see Quinn, 2008). Moral issues cast a shadow on cognitive features of innovation. Our study challenges this idea and places into the fore the importance of cognitive legitimacy for innovation in morally contested fields.

#### *Targeting peripheral players and the public to overcome resistance*

Our findings show that political support in the case of innovation in morally contested fields doesn't come from the cooptation of central players and incumbents as stressed in previous studies (Hargadon and Douglas, 2002; Rao et al., 2003). Central players in the field are powerful and resourceful players and for this reason their endorsement and support of an emerging innovation is vital (Ben Slimane and Leca, 2014). Often, entrepreneurs develop strategies to target and enroll powerful players in their project as a way to reduce risk of failure (However, central players are deemed more conservative and show more inertia than peripheral players who are more inclined to embrace the change as they are less attached to the status quo (Leblibici et al., 1991). Our findings show that whereas networks and big players of funeral homes showed resistance to cardboard coffins, independent funeral homes were among the early adopters of the innovation. This early adoption greatly impacted the cognitive legitimization of the cardboard coffin as the number of users increased and the knowledge shared between peripheral and central players enhanced the comprehensibility and acceptability of the innovation. In line with the findings of Sapir et al. (2016), this case study demonstrates the capacity of peripheral professional communities to create and transfer knowledge that can bring change to the whole organisational field.

We also find that enrolling peripheral players is facilitated by two inner features. The first is their flexible and simple decision-making process. Often, peripheral players are small companies where the decision is made by a single person. This is not the case with big players and network members. Second, peripheral players' survival according to the resource partitioning theory (Soule and King, 2008) depends on their ability to seek out niches of specialisation and differentiation. Adopting such morally contested innovations is, therefore, in line with the resource partitioning theory.

Our findings also show that gaining political support may also come from directly targeting the public. Establishing a direct connection with the public and influencing it can be an effective solution to overcome the inertia and resistance of incumbents. In the same vein as the work of Garud et al. (2002), we show how community and grassroots targeting can be an effective solution to bypass the inertia of incumbents. One explanation of the efficiency of such strategy is that once adopting the arguments and the thesis of the entrepreneurs, the public can act as a source of pressure on incumbents and on the market in general. This strategy is successful as it can transform passive customers into active players (Scaroboto and Fisher, 2013). Enrolling the public requires a discourse that conveys the meaning of emancipation of consumers from the domination of incumbents. This is one of the discursive strategies that our entrepreneurs used in the cardboard coffin case. Indeed, they framed their discourse toward the freedom of choice.

*Reducing moral revulsion and re-enchanting the consumption practice to respond to moral concerns.*

Our study of the introduction of cardboard coffins in the field of funeral services in France contributes to the literature of innovation and morally contested market activities by adding two novel strategies that can be used by entrepreneurs and innovation sponsors when facing moral challenges.

The first strategy is the reduction or the alleviation of moral revulsion. Previous studies showed that including morally contested activities produce moral revulsion. According to Quinn (2008: 756) revulsion is a feeling that combines “sacrilegious impropriety with concerns about economic exploitation”.

We show that entrepreneurs can work on reducing this revulsion rather than performing strategies of rationalizing consumerism (Quinn, 2008). Indeed, in Zelizer’s work (1978) and also in Quinn’s study of life insurance as a secondary market (2008), it showed how actors can rationalize morally contested activities. Rationalizing includes the development of logical arguments that can compensate the negative social judgment. Our study shows a different strategy that is based on reducing moral revulsion.

Reducing moral revulsion occurs when innovation’s shocking features and its propensity to trigger moral concerns is downplayed by material and symbolic artefacts brought to the design of the product or to the communication accompanying the product by the sponsors of the innovation. In our case, hiding the cardboard visually by applying the plywood film and hiding its significance and meaning by using other words like “alveolar celluloisic complex” instead of “carboard” offer good examples of tactics contributing to reducing the moral revulsion.

The reduction of the moral revulsion in our study points to an important and original phenomenon. Indeed, we show that moral revulsion is also a relational concept. People may feel the moral revulsion because of the judgment of others. Allowing people to escape and avoid judgment of others is also an important way to reduce the moral revulsion. In the same vein as the works of Hudson and Okhuysen (2009) we show that hiding morally contested activities from other’s judgments can contribute to the reduction of moral revulsion and as a consequence add to its moral legitimization.

Our findings also highlight the strategies of re-enchanting the new practices as a way to gain moral legitimacy. Far from rationalization, this case study offers a novel strategy to answering moral challenges. By re-enchanting, we refer to those strategies that infuse a consumer practice with new values and symbols. According to Thomson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) “enchantment is theoretically linked with experiences of magic, wonderment, spontaneity and transformative feelings of mystery” (p 280).

The possibilities of customization that they offer and the new practices that they allow, such as leaving a message or a drawing on the coffin, fit into the definition of enchantment thanks to the new experience of funeral ceremonies offered to the family. By so doing, the moral revulsion due to the use of a vile component such as cardboard for the coffin is balanced by new values and symbols of wonderment and spontaneity. Among the main values attached to the cardboard coffin is the personalization of the coffin and the uniqueness of the funeral ceremony. Indeed, the cardboard coffin offers the opportunity to customize the coffin according to the deceased’s passions and referring to experiences that he/she valued highly. Such customization can be considered a form of homage to the deceased.

This feeling of uniqueness enabled by the cardboard coffin creates a sort of enchantment that balances the feeling of disrespect that one can have when putting a family member in a “shoe box”. The re-enchantment of consumer practices deflects the attention of the audience from negative and moral concerns and projects them into a universe made with new values of enchantment.

Finally, our contributions are derived from a single case study. The case study method offers a unique opportunity for a thick description of the studied phenomenon; however, they fall short in generalizing the contributions to other contexts. Future research must put more efforts into testing the relevance of those strategies in different markets characterized by moral questioning.

This research used a single case study with the aim of building new knowledge on the legitimation strategies of morally contested innovation. Whereas, single case studies are suitable methods to build new knowledge about understudied phenomena, generalization must obviously be drawn with care. Therefore, it would be the duty of the upcoming research on this topic to work on comparing and confronting our results with different and new empirical contexts.

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