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ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Competing for Being the Representative Field-Level Organization: When the Representative Role of A Meta-Organization is Contested by an Individual-Based Organization

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Abstract

How meta-organizations (MOs) can be engaged in competitive settings remains an underexplored issue, largely because scholars have traditionally emphasized MOs' tendency toward monopoly (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005) and focused on potential internal tensions between MOs and their members. However, it is not uncommon for an MO to find itself in competition with other organizations, including nonmember, individual-based organizations. In this paper, adopting an MO theory perspective and drawing on insights from the literatures on competition and representational legitimacy, we investigate competitive tensions within a health policy-related field. Our research question is as follows: *how does representational legitimacy become a central object of competition when the representative role of an MO is contested by another organization in a public-policy-related field?* Our empirical study focuses on two organizations – one an MO, the other an individual-based organization – that compete for status and authority, ultimately seeking recognition by public authorities as the central, if not official, representative of their field. We highlight the importance of representational legitimacy alongside more classical dimensions of authority based on expertise and knowledge. We also emphasize the meta-organizational form as a distinct type of representative structure, owing to its specific membership composition. Finally, we outline the central role played by policymakers as pivotal third and fourth actors in this competition, having created the conditions for its emergence and persistence.

Keywords: *Meta-organizations; Competition; Representational legitimacy; Policymaking; Public service provision*

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Introduction

In many fields, certain organizations are in a position to act and speak on behalf of various actors. The role of external representation is typically carried out by meta-organizations (MOs) – that is, organizations whose members are other organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008) – which claim to represent all actors in the field in the same way they represent their members. MOs are 'associations of organizations' (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008), characterized by their degree of formalization (Cropper & Bor, 2018; Saniossian et al., 2022), heterarchical relationships (Berkowitz, 2018; Dumez & Renou, 2020), and a membership composed of autonomous organizations.

Since member organizations often belong to the same field (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005), MOs are frequently viewed as field-level organizations (Brès et al., 2018) that produce field-level outcomes (Valente & Oliver, 2018). Ahrne and Brunsson (2005) note that very few MOs exist for the same category of members and purpose, suggesting a strong tendency toward monopoly. However, their external representative function is sometimes contested – by nonmember organizations and even by their own members. This may be due to the fact that external representation can provoke tensions around autonomy: an MO claiming to represent its members implicitly challenges their independence (Kerwer, 2013). Therefore, a prominent meta-organizational status does not necessarily imply a monopolistic position in external representation.

This highlights the potential competitive tensions between an MO and other organizations, including individual-based

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organizations that are, or could be, members of the MO. It also raises specific challenges for MOs that seek to play a representative role – challenges that involve engaging in representational claims-making practices (Trenz, 2009) and implementing representation strategies (Johansson & Lee, 2014) to assert and reinforce their capacity to represent an entire category of actors.

In such a competitive context, the issues of representational legitimacy and the role of formal representative structures (Guo, 2007; Guo & Musso, 2007; Warren, 2001) become central. Representation involves both 'acting for' and 'standing for' specific constituencies or broader communities (Guo & Musso, 2007). The representative function of many nonprofit organizations requires the development of adequate 'representational capacities' (Guo, 2007) to engage in external representational activities (Guo & Zhang, 2013). In some cases, recognition as a representative organization may originate from policymakers themselves – particularly when field organizations are not only impacted by public policy but also directly involved in its design and implementation.

This paper addresses the following research question: how does representational legitimacy become a central object of competition when the representative role of an MO is contested by another organization in a public-policy-related field? Drawing on the case of the French addiction field, we explore the forms and stakes of existing competitive tensions. More specifically, we analyze two organizations – one being an MO, and the other an individual-based organization – both competing for status and authority in the addiction field and, ultimately, for recognition as the central, if not official, representative. We emphasize the role of representational legitimacy in addition to the traditional expertise and knowledge-based dimensions of authority (Alasuutari, 2018; Vähä-Savo et al., 2019). As the individual-based organization also seeks to be recognized as a legitimate actor in the co-construction of public policy and to fulfill functions typically associated with MOs, we further underscore the distinctive role of the MO as a representative structure. Finally, we highlight the central role of policymakers as a pivotal third – and even fourth – actor in this competition, having created the conditions for both the emergence and persistence of this competitive situation.

Theoretical background

Competition is a fundamental social phenomenon and a key concept in the social sciences (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). It applies to all types of organizations, including those not directly engaged in classical market competition, such as self-regulatory institutions (Prado, 2013). Despite this, MO scholars have shown limited interest in exploring how, and under what conditions, MOs may operate in competitive settings.

In what follows, we first examine how the issue of competition has been addressed – mostly indirectly – within the existing MO literature. We then consider how the symbolic dimensions of competition help illuminate the competitive interactions among organizations that are not directly engaged in market activities. This analysis leads us to focus on representational legitimacy as a dimension of authority, the role of MOs as representative structures, and the role of public authorities in structuring competition within a given field.

Competition in the MO literature

Few studies have examined competition between MOs and other types of organizations. However, it is not uncommon for an MO to find itself in a competitive relationship with other organizations. While competition can also occur between multiple MOs, this paper focuses on a case of competition between an MO and an individual-based organization. More broadly, two types of competition between an MO and an individual-based organization can be distinguished: the first involves competition between an MO and a nonmember individual-based organization; the second involves competition between an MO and one of its own member organizations.

Although the first type of competition remains largely understudied, the second has attracted more attention due to the high potential for tensions between MOs and their members. MOs and their member organizations typically compete over identity, autonomy, and authority (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008, 2012). One of the main reasons for this lies in the strong similarity in nature – or ontological affinity (Ahrne et al., 2016) – between an MO and its members. Compared to individual members, organizations are more likely to compete for the same resources and to perform similar functions as the MO to which they belong (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005).

Karlberg and Jacobson (2015) also highlight the ambiguous position of civil-society organizations when they form a coalition through an MO: on the one hand, they are eager to cooperate in order to advance shared goals; on the other hand, they seek to remain visible and to assert their own individual importance.

This potential for competition between an MO and its members may lead to internal crises and can also influence an organization's willingness to join or remain within the MO. In order to increase their influence, MOs often strive to establish a monopoly over their membership category and specific mission. This strategy places potential members in a binary situation: either join the MO or remain alone (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Karlberg & Jacobson, 2015). Another possible

configuration is when an organization that is already a member chooses to leave the MO (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022). Such departures may be seen as the ultimate consequence of a conflictual situation or of prolonged competitive tensions between the MO and its members. In some cases, this can even lead to the creation of a new, rival MO. However, this strategy is difficult to implement: founding a new MO would be of limited value unless most members join the new organization (Ahrne et al., 2016).

The objects of competition and the quest for organizational legitimacy and status

Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020) define competition as a relationship among actors centered on something both scarce and desired. They conceptualize competition as a social construction and highlight a central question: what is the 'object of competition' – that is, what are the things competitors perceive as scarce and valuable?

In the context of nonprofit organizations, symbolic goods play a key role in shaping competition (Brankovic, 2018b). These include prestige, reputation, legitimacy, authority, and, most notably, status. The concept of status is particularly relevant because it is inherently relational and possesses a dual nature: it is both an object of competition and a source of competitive advantage (Brankovic, 2018b; Edwards et al., 2018; Sauder, 2006; Sorenson, 2014; Zapp, 2021). On the one hand, status is a desirable asset around which competition may coalesce (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020) and is often pursued as an end in itself (Brankovic, 2018b). On the other hand, it confers privileges (Washington & Zajac, 2005) and benefits (Bitektine, 2011; Brankovic, 2018b; Piazza & Castellucci, 2014) that enhance competitive positioning (Podolny, 1993, 2010) and increase the likelihood of organizational survival (Sauder et al., 2012).

Research on universities provides a compelling illustration of how status functions as a central object of competition among nonprofit organizations. This dynamic has been fueled by the historical transformation of universities into organizational actors (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Whitley, 2012) and by mechanisms of status construction such as rankings and accreditation, which contribute to the formation of status hierarchies within the field (Brankovic, 2018b; Brankovic et al., 2018). Interestingly, the quest for status among universities can foster the emergence of status-driven MOs whose primary purpose is to enhance the status of their members. These 'elitist associations' are less concerned with representational legitimacy or maximizing membership to claim broad representativeness. Instead, they prioritize exclusivity, forming selective clubs of high-status members who collectively aim to position themselves as a distinct and superior subset of the field (Brankovic, 2018a).

Representational legitimacy and MOs as representative structures

Organizations seeking to influence policymaking must 'act as if they were authorized in the strongest possible terms', that is, as official representatives of stakeholder groups (Alasuutari, 2018). This imperative raises the issue of representational legitimacy, which underlies an organization's capacity to symbolically 'stand for' and substantively 'act for' particular constituencies or broader communities (Guo & Musso, 2007; Guo & Zhang, 2013). These issues have been central to research on interest representation organizations such as trade associations (e.g., Barnett, 2013), as well as in studies of public participation in policymaking (Martin, 2008) and democratic or collaborative governance (Guo & Musso, 2007; Mosley & Grogan, 2007).

The various pathways to achieving legitimate representation have been widely debated in political science and public management. A key dimension concerns the role of formal representative structures (Guo, 2007; Guo & Musso, 2007; Warren, 2001), particularly in terms of representational capacity, defined as the organizational ability to channel constituent voices and concerns through appointed or elected representatives (Guo, 2007; Guo & Zhang, 2013). Establishing such structures is a means for organizations to strengthen their legitimacy and better justify their claims to representation (Guo & Musso, 2007).

Alasuutari (2018) notes that many organizations and think tanks established to promote the interests of specific stakeholder groups often join forces in advocacy networks, coalitions, and MOs to strengthen their representative claims. For MOs, broad and inclusive membership enhances their authority and serves as a key source of recognition and support for their actions (Vähä-Savo et al., 2019).

Endorsement by public authorities and their role as third and fourth actors of competition

A key pathway to gaining representational legitimacy involves being certified as an authority by other actors, most notably through endorsement by prestigious institutions. Such endorsement situates the organization within a status hierarchy and contributes to building its reputation (Rao, 1994). This is especially critical when multiple organizations compete to be recognized as the official representative of a field, highlighting the important role played by public authorities as 'third' and even 'fourth' actors in the dynamics of competition.

The notion of a 'third party' underscores that competition is not limited to direct competitors; it also involves external actors who influence its structure and outcomes (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020). Third parties are those who select among

competitors (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020; Simmel, 2008), and whose favor becomes the ultimate object of the competition (Brankovic et al., 2018). Competition occurs when two or more actors are aware that a third is about to choose between them. More broadly, third parties include any actors whose judgments or evaluations shape competitive dynamics – such as external arbiters, critics, ranking agencies, award committees, or credentialing bodies – who observe competitors and communicate their assessments to a broader audience (Brankovic, 2018b; Sauder, 2006; Sauder et al., 2012; Werron, 2015).

In contrast, Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020) introduce the concept of 'fourth actors': external actors who organize others in a way that stimulates competition but do not arbitrate among them. Rather than choosing between competitors, fourth actors structure the field and create the conditions, under which competition emerges. Public authorities often play this role, not only shaping but actively producing competition through policy instruments (Dobbin & Dowd, 1997; Fligstein, 1996). In this sense, competition becomes a tool of governance.

This brief review of the literature leads to the following argument: MOs are particularly sensitive to the symbolic dimensions of competition, notably the pursuit of status and representational legitimacy within their field. Such legitimacy largely derives from their recognition by public authorities, which becomes particularly critical when MOs seek to participate in the codesign and implementation of public policy. Hence, our research question is: how does representational legitimacy become a central object of competition when the representative role of an MO is contested by another organization in a public-policy-related field? In the following section, we examine an empirical case in which the representational legitimacy of a dominant MO is contested by an individual-based organization within a competitive field setting.

Research context and methodology

Research procedures and data sources

We adopted an interpretative case study approach to investigate how representational competition unfolds between two organizational forms – MOs and individual-based organizations – in a regulated, state-embedded nonprofit field. This approach allowed us to capture the evolving interplay between legitimacy claims, structural configurations, and political relationships over time.

Our analysis draws on MO theory and a sociological approach to competition to explore how collective representation is constructed, endorsed, and contested by actors seeking legitimacy not through market dominance, but through public recognition. We selected a case where these struggles were salient and empirically observable.

Theoretical sampling and short case narrative

The French addiction field presents an ideal setting. Deeply shaped by public health policies, it includes both actors rooted in the treatment of alcoholism and organizations active in harm reduction for drug users as well as addressing all addictive behaviors. Recent reforms brought these traditions under a unified legal framework, generating new organizational dynamics and tensions.

We focused on the rivalry between AdFed, an MO created through the merger of two former federations, and Addictasso, a large national association that refused to join the MO despite previous federation involvement. This refusal triggered symbolic and structural competition for field-level representation, particularly in relation to public authorities (Table 1).

The emergence of an organizational field and of an encompassing MO

The addiction field in France was established recently. The historical division that had prevailed until then between alcoholism and drug addiction was abolished in the 2000s, following a deep legal reform and a public-policy shift. Former professionals and organizations have been grouped under a common legal framework and under the broader category of addictions. At a local level, all existing centers adopted the new status and formally abandoned their specialized activities. However, their practices often remained specialized, largely due to local specificities and the policies of the regional health authorities in charge of structuring the healthcare offer. The creation of AdFed in 2011 marked a turning point in the institutional structuring of the French addiction field. It resulted from the merger of two preexisting federations: AlcoFed, focused on alcoholism and mostly composed of hospital-based units and other public centers, and DrugFed, which represented organizations involved in harm reduction and services for illicit drug users.

This merger was both prompted by public authorities and members, aiming to consolidate field representation under a unified framework, following the formal integration of alcoholism and drug treatment into a single public-policy category: 'addictology'. The objective was to simplify institutional interlocution and create a single federative body for the field.

Among AlcoFed's members, it was Addictasso, a longstanding organization combining advocacy and treatment provision. While historically central in the fight against alcohol, it played an active role in early federation efforts. However, its evolving positioning would soon set it apart from the emerging MO, AdFed.

Table 1. Description of the two organizations

Organization	Description	Legal status	Sources of funding (2023)
Addictasso	Largest and oldest organization in the field, originally specialized in alcoholism treatment. This individual-based association broadened its scope of action to all addictions in 2000.	Nonprofit association	Public funding allocation (care centers) (71.8%) Public subsidies (14.5%) Other (13.7%) Total: €138 million
AdFed	Created from the merger of two former federations (Drugfed and Alcofed) previously representing the alcohol treatment and illegal drugs treatment communities. This meta-organization federates most of the organizations managing local centers, except Addictasso.	Nonprofit association	Public subsidies (65%) Service provision (19%) Membership fees (5%) Other (11%) Total: €4.55 million

Source: own elaboration.

Addictasso's decision not to join the new MO

At the time of the reform, Addictasso was the leading individual-based organization in alcohol treatment and prevention. Over the years, it had built a centralized national structure, managing care centers and advocating for stricter alcohol regulation. It notably supported the 1991 law on alcohol advertising restrictions in France.

The creation of AdFed raised concerns within Addictasso about losing its autonomy and voice in public debates. The organization feared being absorbed into a federation with different orientations, especially given its distinct advocacy role. In addition, following the reform, public authorities encouraged mergers among care providers. Addictasso's expansion strategy was perceived as threatening by smaller actors, especially former Drugfed members, creating local tensions and resistance.

Consequently, Addictasso declined to join AdFed, choosing instead to preserve its identity and independence in shaping policy.

AdFed as an MO

AdFed is conceptualized as an MO since its membership base is centrally composed of organizations. If the affiliated organizations are analytically treated as members of AdFed, this does not mean, of course, that individual actors do not play a significant role in the internal functioning of the MO.

First, as in any MO, individuals play an important role not only as 'members of the secretariat' (Roux & Lecocq, 2022) of AdFed but also as individual members of its member organizations. Since AdFed's members are health-related organizations, this MO indirectly involves and represents a number of health professionals and practitioners who are individual members of AdFed's member organizations but who are also closely involved in AdFed's activities. This is all the more true as an important goal of AdFed is to influence the medical practices of health professionals, especially those which are carried out in the daily activities of its member organizations.

However, it should be mentioned that a specific form of direct individual affiliation exists through which health practitioners (especially independent practitioners) are formally represented as such in the governance bodies of AdFed within a distinct college. From this perspective, these individual practitioners could also be viewed as associational members of AdFed, and, consequently, AdFed itself could also be conceived of as a kind of hybrid organizational entity with a peculiar form of mixed individual and organizational membership.

Clearly, this represents a departure from the 'pure' archetypal MO as envisioned by Ahrne and Brunsson (2005, 2008). However, a closer examination of the relative weight of individual and organizational members in the internal functioning of the organization suggests that AdFed is better understood as an MO that incorporates some form of individual membership, rather than as an individual-based organization with affiliated member organizations.

While this may appear to diverge from the classical definition of an MO, such configurations are not uncommon in practice. For example, both international and national sports federations are frequently cited as typical examples of MOs (e.g., Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Berkowitz et al., 2022). While, in the former case, local sports associations play a central role in governance structures, individual practitioners (players, referees, coaches, etc.) are nonetheless commonly recognized as direct members of these MOs – creating a membership relationship that is not merely mediated by associations, but established directly between individuals and the federation itself.

Academic scholarship has also identified MOs in which a distinct group of individuals is formally considered part of the membership base. For instance, in the case of a French MO in the sharing economy, Berkowitz and Souchaud (2019, 2024)

describe an association divided into two clearly defined bodies with equal voting rights: the 'platform college', comprising all platform organizations and embodying the meta-organizational character of the association, and the 'ecosystem college', consisting of a variety of civil-society actors such as civil servants, citizens, investors, researchers, and philosophers.

Data collection

To minimize ex-post rationalization biases – particularly relevant in a study of recent events – we interviewed informants from diverse backgrounds and roles. We asked them to recount the same key episodes and focused on those with intimate knowledge of key developments in the field to enhance recall accuracy. Interviewees were encouraged to describe events as concretely and precisely as possible to improve the reliability of their narratives (Tulving, 2002). Special attention was given to episodes involving Addictasso, the principal individual-based competitor to AdFed.

Our primary data consist of 32 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2016 and 2021 with various field actors: national and regional representatives of AdFed and Addictasso, public authorities, healthcare professionals, and leaders of local organizations (Table 2). Interviews were conducted in three phases between 2016 and 2021 to trace changes over time and identify discursive shifts. In addition to interviews, we collected extensive secondary materials: organizational statutes, annual reports, press releases, policy documents, official websites, audiovisual content, and communications from both AdFed and Addictasso. These documents allowed us to triangulate our data, to validate interview accounts and contextualize strategic developments. The use of a wide array of sources provided a robust empirical base for understanding field-level dynamics and actor positioning (Table 3).

Data analysis

We first contextualized our case within the broader history of the addiction field, reviewing key transformations from the 1970s to the 2000s. This historical backdrop allowed us to situate our study and focus on temporal and processual dynamics at both field and interorganizational levels.

Our analysis combined narrative and temporal bracketing strategies (Langley, 1999). We followed the methodological principle of 'developing the detailed story from the raw data' to reconstruct actors' trajectories and identify pivotal episodes. This strategy also informed the refinement of interview protocols, helping us probe specific moments and conflicts.

Table 3. List of secondary data

Type of document	Number of documents	Number of pages
Activity reports	10	167
Statutes	4	35
Associative and strategic plans	4	31
Website presentations	6	57
Publications for professionals and the general public	18	378

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. List of interviews

Function	Number of interviews	Duration (min)
Addictasso (2)		
Chairman	2	145
Former chairman (3)	1	69
Director	2	173
AdFed (2)		
Director	3	296
Chairman	1	75
Treasurer	1	107
Former AlcoFed chairman (3)	1	54
Representative of general practitioners	1	72
Local representatives (4)	4	186
Other organizations related to the addiction field (among which 5 members of AdFed) (2) (4)	7	332
Public authorities (1) (2)		
Policy officers – Interministerial Mission for Drugs and Addictions (Mildeca)	2	204
Former director – Ministry of Health and Solidarity	1	120
Policy officers – Regional Health Authorities (4)	6	405

Source: own elaboration.

Through this process, we identified three major temporal sequences in the structuring of the field:

1. the pre-reform phase (2000–2007): characterized by coexistence and limited coordination between actors from the alcoholism and drug treatment traditions;
2. the reconfiguration phase (2007–2011): marked by institutional reforms, public policy unification, and the creation of AdFed;
3. the competitive escalation phase (2011–2021): during which tensions between AdFed and Addictasso intensified and crystallized around issues of legitimacy and representation.

In parallel, we analyzed the first set of interviews and secondary data to identify key organizational characteristics. Three interrelated dimensions emerged: organizational identity (including history, doctrine, principles, and professional practices); organizational structure (membership types and territorial organization); and core missions and roles (such as expertise, service provision, advocacy, and service to members).

After completing the two descriptive steps, we adopted an iterative theorizing strategy to explain the competitive tensions observed in the field. This approach, combining theoretical refinement and empirical insights, aligns with iterative content analysis (Miles et al., 2013). Using the constant comparative method, data were broken down, coded manually through open coding by two researchers, and organized into categories, which were then discussed until convergence. This process led to the identification of themes relevant to interorganizational competition. Our analysis evolved through successive inductive and deductive moves (Gioia et al., 2012; Miles et al., 2013), allowing us to refine both our categories and theoretical questioning. Building on MO theory, including literature on their organizational attributes and on theories of symbolic competition and representational legitimacy, we reanalyzed our data, developed a theoretical model, and designed a coding scheme with 12 concepts. As illustrated in Figure 1, this resulted in three aggregate themes: the role of the State in granting representational legitimacy, meta-organizational attributes as representational capacities, and expertise and knowledge production strategies in a competitive setting.

Findings: Understanding competitive tensions in the French addiction field

Tangible competition in the field for representational legitimacy

The French addiction field is characterized by intense competition at both national and local levels, largely rooted in its recent restructuring. Previously segmented between alcoholism and drug addiction, the field was unified under public health policy reforms that gave rise to a new collective category: 'addictology'. Yet, this formal unification did not erase longstanding divides. Instead, they resurfaced in the rivalry between Addictasso – historically dominant in alcoholism – and AdFed, a federation born of AlcoFed and DrugFed's merger.

These tensions are not merely ideological but manifest in overlapping initiatives and competing claims to represent the field. Addictasso's refusal to join AdFed made this divide particularly visible. Its leadership emphasized the need to preserve autonomy and advocacy capacity:

> When we understood that AdFed had the ambition to federate the whole field and absorb everyone… we decided not to join the federation because we thought that we were both a healthcare provider, but also a political actor. (Addictasso chairman)

The head of an AdFed member organization states: 'It is by no way a question of intellectual values or democratic debate, but clearly a question of place'. Tensions are also doctrinal. Addictasso portrays AdFed as the inheritor of DrugFed's activist stance, particularly around harm reduction. Conversely, AdFed actors point to fundamental differences in intervention philosophies:

> We consider that we are here to federate everyone, including Addictasso, and as such it would be natural for them to be a member. […] But I insist on the fact that there not only are slight differences in terms of mission. We really differ in terms of harm reduction actions, professional practices and the refusal to consider abstinence as a professional standard. It is complicated. (AdFed vice-president)

These tensions affect both national campaigns and local practices. For instance, during the 'Dry January' campaign, both organizations participated via a broader coalition – but designed separate visuals and avoided co-branding.

Competitive tensions are also reflected in the revitalization of a previously 'dormant MO' (Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Michel & Defiebre-Muller, 2025), AdLeague. Created in 2000 by three founding member organizations, including Addictasso, AdLeague was initially conceived as a simple forum intended to represent the diversity of actors in the field of addictology, rather than as a fully fledged federation mandated to represent the field. After the public-policy reform, AdLeague remained weakly active, functioning as an occasional space for reflection and debate. However, in response to the creation of AdFed, Addictasso sought to revitalize it with the aim of turning it into a competing MO. AdFed was excluded from the governing board, leading to its withdrawal. Since then, AdLeague has expanded its ambitions: developing regional delegations, setting professional standards, and obtaining recognition as a national professional council.

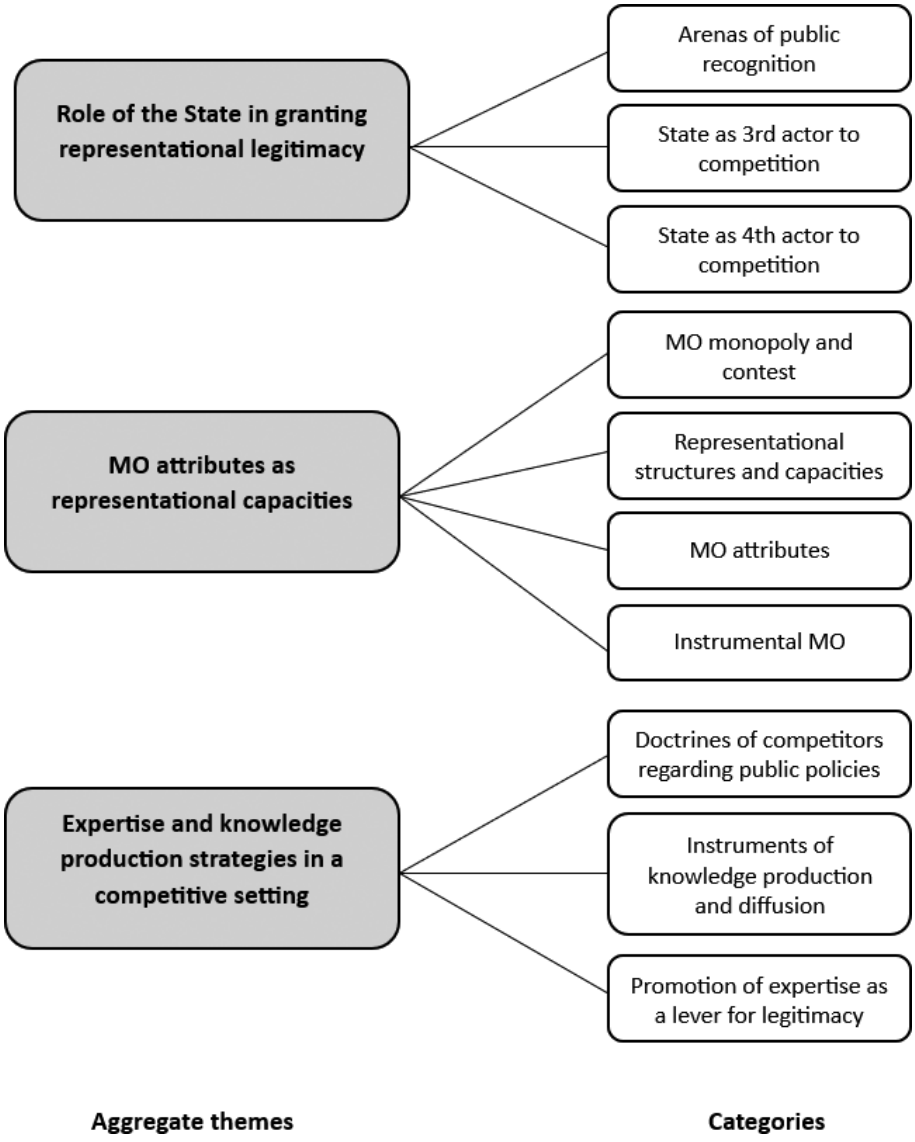

Figure 1. Overview of the data structure.
Source: own elaboration

This move allowed Addictasso to claim federative status outside AdFed. However, many observers, including public authorities, consider AdLeague to be effectively controlled by Addictasso:

> They were told: you're not federative. So now Addictasso says: look, we're in AdLeague. But everything is run by Addictasso's staff. (Public health officer)

Structural characteristics as a driver of representational legitimacy

In the addiction field, where strong public regulation defines both funding and institutional recognition, representational legitimacy largely depends on how organizations are structured and perceived by public authorities, directly and indirectly.

AdFed and Addictasso assert competing claims, but their organizational bases differ markedly. AdFed federates over 500 health and social service organizations and includes independent professionals through a dedicated governance college. It emphasizes its breadth – claiming to represent 85% of the field – and its capacity to structure and diffuse local innovations through a participative and inclusive governance model.

By contrast, Addictasso is composed exclusively of individual members – professionals or volunteers – and lacks the

organization-based federated membership required to qualify as an MO. However, it has developed structural features that mirror those of federations through 22 regional entities coordinated by national headquarters. It also highlights the dual dimension of its members, both volunteers and professionals ('Our project is supported and shared by active members, volunteers as well as professionals'). The reform of Addictasso's statutes in 2015 can be seen as a strategic response to gain representational legitimacy and to be seen as a federative actor. It redefined its geographical structuring and created a new regional level – in charge of administration activities – while local committees (on average 10 per region) would now be dedicated to political action, associative activities, and a more participative approach with local actors.

Apart from this structural difference, Addictasso stresses its historical seniority, territorial reach, and hybrid identity as both care provider and advocacy organization. It presents its dense local network as a key source of proximity to the field and of coherence in service provision. AdFed, on the other hand, highlights its formal federation status and collective representativeness through a 'governance respectful of all its components and capable of carrying their word in public debates' and 'an associative dynamic to spread out local initiatives developed by its members'. 'We represent our members. We are not a managing body; we are a federation of actors' [AdFed Vice-Chairman].

AdFed actors challenge Addictasso's legitimacy by questioning the reality of its territorial claims:

> Very often they just create a local body to put a flag on that territory and publish a brochure. […] It is inefficient, but it makes health public authorities feel they have an organization ready to follow their orders or to answer very quickly to their needs on a whole region. (Manager of an AdFed local member organization)

Meanwhile, Addictasso frames AdFed's approach as exclusionary and politically motivated:

> They decided to meet public authorities and said: 'We are the federative actor of the region'. They ostracized us. (Former Addictasso chairman)

Public authorities hold ambivalent views. Some consider Addictasso's structure too ambiguous to serve as a true federation:

> Addictasso is a 150-year-old machine. It is a national nonprofit organization which presents itself as multifaceted and hybrid. We don't know whether it is a federation … They are everywhere, even where they don't have to be. (Regional policy officer)

Yet, others acknowledge Addictasso's role in ensuring territorial coverage and political visibility of addictology.

Competition and the role of public authorities as third and fourth actor

In a context of financial constraints, Addictasso is often perceived as pursuing an expansionist strategy, favoring mergers with smaller, vulnerable organizations. This dynamic is particularly visible where public authorities encourage consolidation to ensure territorial coverage.

Local variations shape interactions. In some areas, centers from both AdFed members and Addictasso coexist, coordinating informally: 'I check with my colleague from Addictasso if it is not redundant. We act with mutual understanding' (AdFed member).

In some other situations, it might happen that a small and financially vulnerable organization asks AdFed to protect it in order to avoid closure and, 'even worse for them, [to avoid] being absorbed by Addictasso' [director of a regional AdFed delegation]. In any case, the representatives of AdFed and Addictasso agree that the way public authorities are structured and regulate the regional and local level has a great influence on the relationships between actors in the field: 'we cannot behave and organize ourselves in the same way in different territories. If you look at the organizational charts of the different regional authorities, they are not comparable at all' [Addictasso chairman].

Competitive tensions fueled by divergent doctrines

The creation of addictology as a unified policy field did not erase the doctrinal divides between actors rooted in alcoholism and those involved in drug addiction. AdFed and Addictasso have historically promoted distinct visions of addiction, shaped by divergent beliefs, discourses, and doctrines.

AdFed supports a comprehensive, harm reduction-oriented approach to drug use, opposing repressive criminalization policies. It calls for a public debate to shift drug regulation toward health and education. In contrast, Addictasso has focused more on alcohol-related harm, positioning itself against the favorable cultural perception of alcohol in France – especially wine – and pushing for stricter advertising regulations. Contrary to illicit drugs, alcohol products – especially wine – have historically benefited from a 'French paradox', and a positive perception in the general opinion as well as public authorities, whereas it has been characterized as one of the biggest causes of deaths. Addictasso has sought to change this situation by developing public campaigns aiming to change the law and enforcing harsher regulations on alcohol consumption.

These orientations led to different relationships with public authorities and public discourse. Addictasso historically advocated for abstinence and was hesitant to adopt the harm

reduction approach that emerged in the 1990s. However, the integration of harm reduction into national health policies gradually reshaped its positioning. It now openly calls for 'a policy that abandons the criminalization of users and prohibition to open other legal and educational regulatory channels'.

This evolution also led Addictasso to change its name in 2021, placing the term 'addiction' at the forefront to signal its broader scope: 'The identification with alcohol in our name was not totally coherent to our action and to what it had become. We are in the field of addictions, and we chose to clearly display it in our name' (Addictasso chairman).

However, there remain some slight differences in public discourses. Addictasso's documents still insist on the specific role in fighting legally against alcohol advertising and to enforce laws restricting advertising for alcoholic products. AdFed highlights its role in constituting 'a network of professionals accompanying patients in a medico-psycho-social and transdisciplinary approach to addictions'. It also puts forward the need to 'ensure the recognition of drug addicts as free and civic citizens in all decision-making places where they are concerned' and 'to improve their quality of life and their environment, by offering them a global offer of care and support'.

Public authorities are aware of differences in the doctrine and practices as well: 'There are still divergent ideological positions. Addictasso, only talks about abstinence, forgetting harm reduction even if it has evolved enormously' [regional policy officer]. Consequently, Addictasso refuses to take common actions with AdFed linked to moderation and harm reduction: 'In their mouth, this would mean that 'we are going in the same direction as alcohol producers', who have instrumentalized and picked up this moderation message'.

The production of expertise as a central issue for recognition by legitimate audiences

In their institutional communication, both AdFed and Addictasso mention some similar missions: being a federative space, being an influential political actor, developing professional practices, supporting their members, and producing (scientific) knowledge.

Beyond those common missions, however, the focus highly differs. Addictasso emphasizes its advocacy and lobbying role: its main mission consists in 'orienting and following the implementation of health policies in addictology'. Besides, it puts to the fore cooperation with other actors as one of its six strategic objectives being ('to develop partnerships'). AdFed rather not only presents itself as a 'network apex', aiming at grouping all the actors of the field, but also underlines its strong connection with other actors and federations on the national and international levels. Its 'role in the institutional environment' is frequently mentioned in the documents.

The production of knowledge is a key arena of competition. Both organizations publish guides and host events, but their approaches diverge. AdFed promotes horizontal knowledge building by mobilizing its network in internal bodies and working groups. Its collective expertise is based on practice-sharing among members. Addictasso, meanwhile, asserts a more vertical, science-oriented model. Since the mid-2010s, it has emphasized evidence-based expertise, supported by a scientific commission and a national network of practitioners: 'We conceive our organization as part of the scientific field. We don't just do popularization; we also chose the strategic option of being data producers for the field'.

Being involved in scientific work is presented by Addictasso as an oppositional stance to the horizontal doctrine of AdFed. Its knowledge production, based on local members and horizontal processes, would rule out AdFed as a real contributor to current debates about addictions or to public policies, in direct contrast to the actors promoting an evidence-based approach like Addictasso. This approach is perceived as endowing Addictasso with a distinctive and more credible voice, particularly in its interactions with public authorities. Addictasso's internal structuring is designed to ensure the dissemination of knowledge. All the written productions are distributed internally to the professionals working in its network of addiction treatment centers. Dissemination is also the responsibility of Addictasso's local committees, whose role has recently been redefined around advocacy missions. The local volunteers can thus disseminate the produced knowledge within the networks of actors affected by addiction issues (justice, education, local businesses, etc.).

As such, the transfer of knowledge to key public authorities is central in the way Addictasso is structured and practices advocacy. The double dimension of Addictasso, both a care provider managing local centers and an advocacy actor in the field, is key in this regard. Other actors in the field underline that Addictasso's goal is not only to influence policymakers for the common interest of the field or to advance political claims (for example, in their fight against alcohol advertising), but rather to defend the self-interest of the organization, sometimes directly to the detriment of other actors in the field. More specifically, Addictasso critics refer to lobbying activities, aiming at reinforcing their institutional representation, at being granted more public subsidies, and at influencing public authorities in order that they push for the regrouping of local associations in favor of Addictasso.

These lobbying efforts are reflected in relatively technical decisions by public authorities concerning funding and operational authorizations for local associations. Associations in difficulty have thus frequently been absorbed by Addictasso with the support of local authorities. These efforts are also visible in its regular presence in local and national consultative bodies, a privilege not granted to any other individual-based

organizations in the field, even the most prominent ones. This is particularly evident in the development of public addiction prevention campaigns, a process that involves major funding decisions and in which Addictasso is systematically involved. The specific and ambiguous place of Addictasso is confirmed by public authorities and policy officers: 'They have a special place and they play with it, consciously or unconsciously. […] What is sure is that Addictasso follows a line of refusing any contact with colleagues from AdFed'.

Some criticisms are even voiced regarding the inconsistent approach of public administrations toward Addictasso: 'I would like to stress the confusion between the status of an association managing several centers, like Addictasso and many others in the field, and that of a federation. Even in public administrations, the difference is not taken into account. It is not heard because it is Addictasso, which has distinctive features' [AdFed director].

Meanwhile, public authorities seem to keep Addictasso a special place because of its historical role in the fight against alcoholism and alcohol advertising: 'Addictasso is the only association that really has the capacity to be a party to legal proceedings. In reality, Addictasso does its business on its own'. Another one stresses that 'Addictasso should not be overburdened. It has some difficult things to do. Lobbying against the alcohol industry is the specific responsibility of Addictasso and not of other actors. It is a difficult task and Addictasso's involvement is different from others in the field. Everyone can play their part' [regional policy officer].

Discussion

Although MOs often encompass most organizations within a given field, they are not immune to competitive tensions. Competition for symbolic goods such as status and authority can remain strong. A particularly salient form of this competition involves the quest to be recognized as the field's legitimate representative. Our study shows that representational legitimacy operates both as a core object of competition and as a key asset for gaining influence. We examine these dynamics in the context of public health policy, where organizations play distinct yet significant roles in the co-construction and implementation of addiction policies.

At the intersection of three major literature areas – on competition, representational legitimacy, and MOs – our research contributes more specifically to research on the diverse roles MOs play in the realm of public policy. We discuss three key issues related to the enactment of these roles under conditions of interorganizational competition:

1. MOs as a specific type of representative structure;
2. MOs as intermediary organizations between the field and public authorities;
3. MOs as hybrid organizations.

The first two lines of discussion are closely related to the notion of public authorities as third and fourth actors of competition, highlighting the dialectical relationship between MOs and the state: MOs seek to influence public policy while simultaneously relying on state recognition and competing with other organizations for various resources, including institutional endorsement. The third line of discussion, for its part, adopts both an MO theory perspective and a broader organizational studies perspective, as it examines the specific case of mixed individual and organizational membership and considers how the membership composition of MOs often positions them as intersectoral hybrid organizations, bridging different sectors of society (private, public, and nonprofit sectors) and their respective sectoral logics.

MOs as a specific type of representative structure

Our case study illustrates a specific configuration in which both an MO and an individual-based organization claim to be representative actors within their field. In doing so, we contribute to the MO literature by addressing the concept of representational legitimacy. Representation is a key concern for MOs: external representation is central to how they manage relationships with stakeholders. Moreover, by virtue of their membership base, MOs often claim to represent an entire stakeholder group (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018) or to speak on behalf of specific issues or causes (Ahrne et al., 2016).

Although adopting the MO form is not a strict requirement for acting or speaking on behalf of a community, it may constitute an important foundation for representational legitimacy. Guo and Musso (2007) argue that an organization can enhance its representational capacity by establishing representative structures that allow the views and concerns of constituents – and the broader community – to be expressed by those authorized to speak for them. From this perspective, we suggest that the MO form can be understood as a particular type of representative structure, and that the membership base of an MO serves as a specific source of (representational) legitimacy.

In this framework, the formal members of a civil-society representative organization constitute the core of its constituency – even though looser affiliations may exist, including individuals or organizations acting as 'beneficiaries', 'contributors', or 'supporters' (Johansson & Lee, 2014). This also explains why some representative organizations define their constituency primarily through the regulation and formalization of their membership base (Johansson & Lee, 2014). Crucially, however, not all representative actors are MOs. As illustrated by Addictasso, individual-based organizations can also claim to represent a broader community, even when their membership does not clearly correspond to the constituency they claim to

defend (Halpin, 2006), or when they lack a formal membership altogether (Schlozman et al., 2015).

Furthermore, our case highlights the dual relationship between the competing organizations and public authorities. Both Addictasso and AdFed present themselves as advocacy organizations seeking to influence addiction-related public policies. However, AdFed's member organizations, as well as Addictasso itself, are also public service providers – reflecting the growing tendency of welfare states to function as purchasers and regulators of services delivered by private and nonprofit actors (Evers, 2005). In this context, state-dependent organizations may still seek to shape public policy and, at times, may even oppose it (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005). From this perspective, Addictasso – and indirectly, AdFed through its members – can be viewed as hybrid voluntary organizations, simultaneously engaged in public service provision and policy advocacy (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005).

This configuration contrasts with the Czech case studied by Cada et al. (2021), in which migration-related civil-society organizations tend to decouple service provision from advocacy: heavily dependent on state funding, they focus on delivering services, while their advocacy activities are largely delegated to their national MO. In our case, however, the dual nature of the organizations involved contributes to a multidimensional form of competition, with public authorities acting simultaneously as organizers and adjudicators, both when they structure the healthcare offer – especially through the 'organization of contests' (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020) – and when they grant status and legitimacy to competing organizations involved in the co-construction of public policy.

Finally, representational legitimacy interacts with other dimensions of organizational legitimacy. MOs constantly strive for both internal legitimacy – toward their members – and external legitimacy – toward their wider environment (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2015; Garaudel, 2020; Laurent et al., 2020; Laviolette et al., 2022). From this perspective, representational legitimacy is more closely tied to external legitimacy, although internal and external legitimacy are interdependent and tend to reinforce each other (Laurent et al., 2020).

In our case, representational legitimacy also intersects with expertise-based legitimacy. While the internal legitimacy of an MO's secretariat may derive from its technical expertise (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Roux & Lecocq, 2022), expertise can also support the MO's external legitimacy, especially when it functions as an 'expert organization' (Karlberg, 2019; Vähä-Savo et al., 2019). In the French addiction field, this dual source of external legitimacy – representational and expertise-based – is evident in the respective claims of Addictasso and AdFed to field-level status. As an individual-based organization, Addictasso primarily emphasizes its evidence-based expertise. In contrast, AdFed asserts its representational legitimacy by emphasizing the active involvement of its numerous member organizations in its deliberate effort to foster collective expertise.

MOs as intermediary organizations between the field and public authorities

Within a given field, MOs can serve as collective intermediaries in interactions with public authorities. They may act as a protective shield, distancing individual service-providing organizations from direct conflicts with government policies and institutions. Conversely, public authorities may also value the existence of MOs, which offer a centralized and organized interlocutor capable of negotiating on behalf of a broader group of actors within policy networks (Berkowitz & Souchaud, 2017).

Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) note that the creation of an MO may even be encouraged by third-party organizations seeking to streamline their interactions with an entire category of actors. This dynamic is exemplified by Karlberg and Jacobson's (2015) study of the European Women's Lobby, an international MO based in Brussels that requires its members to be representative, nationwide MOs, thereby exerting structuring effects on domestic women's movements.

In contrast, our case illustrates an alternative configuration in which public authorities appear to tolerate – if not encourage – the coexistence of multiple leading actors. They neither offer incentives to promote a unified voice nor grant disproportionate access or authority to a single organization, unlike the dynamic described by Karlberg and Jacobson. This may be partly explained by the fact that both AdFed's member organizations and Addictasso are also public service providers. Additionally, it may reflect a strategic use of competition as a mechanism of control by public authorities themselves (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020).

MOs as hybrid organizations

From a broader organizational studies perspective, it is worth revisiting the hybrid nature of AdFed. Two main forms of hybridity can be identified, both linked to its membership composition: the first is atypical in light of the common understanding of MOs; by contrast, the second is intrinsically connected to the meta-organizational form itself.

The first form of hybridity lies in AdFed's mixed membership, which includes both organizations and individuals. While it is primarily structured as a federation of autonomous member organizations, consistent with the classic definition of MOs, AdFed also formally includes individual members through a dedicated governance body: the college of health practitioners. From an MO theory perspective, it is the statutory – or 'constitutional' (Bor, 2014) – recognition of these individual

practitioners within AdFed's statutes and governance structure that formally qualifies them as individual associational members. Given their presence, and in line with the notion that it is also the associational dimension of their affiliation that qualifies certain organizations as members of an MO – distinguishing them from any other organizations interacting with the MO (Garaudel, 2025) – AdFed itself can be conceived of as a hybrid organizational entity, characterized by a peculiar form of mixed individual and organizational membership. In more practical terms, this atypical configuration enables AdFed to integrate individual-level expertise while preserving its federative identity. It also reinforces its representational capacity in public consultations, where health authorities increasingly value inclusive and multidimensional forms of representation. As such, AdFed offers a compelling empirical case for exploring the flexibility of MO forms within real-world institutional environments.

A second dimension of AdFed's hybridity relates to its intersectoral character with regard to the common distinction between the three ideal-typical 'economic sectors' (Pilon & Mansurof, 2024), 'domains of society' (Brandsen et al., 2005), or 'sectors of society' (Hallonsten & Thomasson, 2024; Seibel, 2015a): the private/market, the public/state, and the third/civil-society sectors. From this perspective, an organization demonstrates intersectoral hybridity (Evers, 2020) when it mixes characteristics (Brandsen & Karré, 2011) and incorporates core structural elements (Billis, 2010) or governance mechanisms (Seibel, 2015a, 2015b) from multiple sectors of society. In the case of Adfed, this hybridity stems from both its activities and its membership composition. Many of AdFed's member organizations can be characterized as hybrid third sector organizations – voluntary public service providers closely tied to public authorities and policies (Billis, 2010; Brandsen et al., 2005; Evers, 2005, 2020; Garaudel et al., 2021; Seibel, 2015a). In this regard, AdFed reflects through its members the broader pattern of intersectoral hybridity described in the third sector literature (Evers, 2005, 2020; Brandsen et al., 2005; Billis, 2010; Jäger & Schröer, 2014; Seibel, 2015b). It also illustrates, more generally, how such hybridity can manifest within the MO form itself, given its overall membership composition.

This form of hybridity can thus be examined from an MO theory perspective, in light of both AdFed's activities – as a civil-society MO actively involved in the design and implementation of addiction policy – and its membership, composed mainly of nonprofit organizations but also including public actors. More broadly, one can argue that the intersectoral hybridity of MOs sometimes arises not only from the diversity of their membership base but also from their associational nature – particularly when their members are not themselves situated within the nonprofit sector, in contrast to civil-society MOs whose membership typically consists of other associational organizations, thereby further reinforcing the 'ontological affinity' (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2016) between the MO and its members. In other words, while multi-stakeholder MOs explicitly bring together organizations from different spheres of society (Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer, 2022), even single-member-type MOs – such as trade associations or intergovernmental MOs – may have an intersectoral dimension when they combine the associational principle inherent to any MO (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Cropper & Bor, 2018; Garaudel, 2025) with member organizations embedded in market or public-policy environments.

Conclusion

In this paper, adopting an MO theory perspective and drawing on insights from the literatures on competition and representational legitimacy, we investigated competitive tensions in the French addiction field. We showed how representational legitimacy can become a central object of competition when the representative role of an MO is challenged in a public-policy context. Our findings highlight that representational legitimacy functions both as a key competitive asset and as a core stake in a competition largely shaped and sustained by public authorities. We also emphasized the MO form as a distinct representational structure, underscoring the role of representational legitimacy alongside more classical dimensions of authority such as expertise and knowledge.

Beyond these contributions, our findings have implications for public policy. While the article focused on the role of public authorities as third and fourth actors in competition, it also raises broader questions about rivalry between representative organizations. Even when an MO stems from public initiatives, monopoly is rarely absolute, and competition may still arise, requiring vigilance. In our case, the MO resulted from field-level changes, but no single representative was officially endorsed. As a result, two organizations claim representational legitimacy, prompting a normative question: can such competition be desirable by fostering pluralism and 'healthy' rivalry? While further research is needed, we may suggest that competition rooted in differing approaches can support pluralism and help prevent excessive standardization. Locally, such diversity can benefit users, provided choices are clear, and organizations remain open to collaboration in the public interest.

This case focuses on a health-related field embedded in French public policy, where strong state–civil society ties have produced an unusual configuration: an MO contested by an individual-based organization that stayed outside it. These traits reinforce its value as a critical or critical case, while also limiting its broader applicability.

Future research could examine other institutional settings – especially where public authorities differ in how they regulate

competition – or fields where competition is more economically driven. It would also be valuable to explore how MOs' involvement in competition relates to their portfolio of functions, and how the pursuit – or contestation – of representational legitimacy influences their broader roles. Overall, the interplay between competitive dynamics and representational legitimacy offers a promising avenue for understanding both the internal functioning of MOs and their role in organizational fields.

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