

## AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF LEGITIMACY JUDGMENTS

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I develop a theoretical framework that specifies the content underlying legitimacy judgments and a model of the process by which these judgments develop and change. I argue that individual-level legitimacy judgments are based on evaluations that fall along three dimensions (instrumental, relational, and moral). I specify three stages of the legitimacy judgment process and two modes by which judgments may be developed or revised (evaluative and passive). I end by discussing implications for the study of institutional change.

The critical role of legitimacy in determining the development and endurance of organizations and other social systems has been documented by sociologists and strategy researchers for decades. For example, Pollock and Rindova (2003) showed that perceptions of organizational legitimacy shape investor behavior, and Bansal and Clelland (2004) demonstrated that organizations with high levels of legitimacy are insulated from unsystematic variations in their stock prices. Indeed, legitimacy seems to provide organizations with a "reservoir of support" that enhances the likelihood of organizational survival (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Rao, 1994) and perpetuates organizational influence by increasing individuals' loyalty to the organization and willingness to accept organizational actions, decisions, and policies (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2005). Similarly, Thomas, Walker, and Zelditch (1986) demonstrated that legitimacy judgments lead to the persistence of inequitable social structures, and political scientists have long argued that legitimacy facilitates effective governance (Gibson, 2004; Weatherford, 1992).

Given this pivotal role that it plays in the survival of social systems, legitimacy has been described as "perhaps the most central concept in institutional research" (Colyvas & Powell,

2006). Legitimacy is critical in institutional research because it is a necessary component of institutionalization, which occurs as an emerging social entity gains a taken-for-granted quality that leads it to be perceived as an objective and natural reality. Consequently, institutional theorists increasingly specify illegitimacy as a critical driver of the pursuit of institutional and organizational change (e.g., Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Suchman, 1995). That is, changes in organizational forms, practices, and policies require that new arrangements be viewed as more legitimate than existing ones (Oliver, 1991; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

The process of institutional change necessarily involves shifts in individuals' judgments of the legitimacy of existing social entities and, consequently, shifts in individuals' behaviors with respect to those entities. Recognizing this implication, in research on institutional change, scholars have recently begun to focus more attention on the microlevel processes involved in institutional change (e.g., Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004; Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Zilber, 2002). Research in this area has focused on understanding how interactions among individuals constitute social reality and determine what is deemed acceptable within social systems.

However, institutional theorists have paid relatively little theoretical or empirical attention to the intraindividual dynamics of legitimacy judgments (i.e., the content, formation, and change of the judgments themselves). While legitimacy is ultimately a collective-level phenomenon, an understanding of the microlevel dynamics of legitimacy judgments is crucial be-

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cause individuals' judgments and perceptions constitute the "micro-motor" (Powell & Colyvas, 2008) that guides their behavior, thereby influencing interactions among individuals, which, in turn, coalesce to constitute collective-level legitimacy and social reality. Therefore, an understanding of the individual-level dynamics of legitimacy judgments can help scholars to better understand not only the dynamics of institutional change but also the critical role that individuals play in those change processes.

The lack of attention to individual-level judgments of legitimacy does not stem from a lack of interest in the individual-level dynamics of institutional change. Indeed, calls for more integration of microlevel and macrolevel research on legitimacy have become commonplace in the institutional literature (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Zucker, 1991). However, the development of a model of the individual-level dynamics of legitimacy judgments requires an integration of the social psychological research on legitimacy with institutional theory, and a number of barriers impede such an endeavor. Specifically, the two fields of research use different definitions of legitimacy, situate the construct of legitimacy in different nomological networks, tend to examine different types of targets of legitimacy judgments, and obviously differ with respect to level of analysis.

My goal in this article is to overcome these barriers in order to make two key contributions to the study of institutional change. First, I integrate social psychological and institutional theories of legitimacy to specify the *content* of legitimacy judgments. By "content," I refer to the substantive perceptions and beliefs that underlie the judgment of an entity as legitimate or illegitimate. An understanding of the content of legitimacy judgments helps scholars to answer the question, "What does it mean substantively for an individual to judge an entity, such as an organization or a leader, to be legitimate?" Second, I integrate social psychological and institutional theories of the *process* of legitimation in order to construct a model of how legitimacy judgments develop and change over time. An understanding of the process of legitimacy judgment formation, use, and change can help researchers to understand when, how, and why an individual's judgment of the legitimacy of an entity changes from a judgment of legitimacy to

one of illegitimacy (or vice versa) and, consequently, leads the individual to seek change (or to preserve the status quo). Thus, my central aim in this article is to develop a better understanding of the individual-level dynamics of legitimacy judgments with respect to both the content of those judgments and the process by which they are developed and changed.

I proceed as follows. First, I explore the ways in which the construct of legitimacy has been defined and used in institutional theory and social psychological research. Next, I examine work from both fields on the content of legitimacy judgments, and I specify a typology of the content underlying legitimacy judgments. I then build on this typology, integrating work on the process of legitimation from institutional theory and research on judgment formation and change from social psychology to develop a model of how legitimacy judgments develop and change over time. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this typology and model for research on institutional change.

## DEFINING LEGITIMACY

While institutional theorists primarily have examined the construct of legitimacy in the context of the institutionalization of organizations and organizational fields, social psychologists have examined the construct primarily in the context of group inequality and support for rules and procedures. In this section I review the ways in which institutional theorists and social psychologists have defined and used the term *legitimacy*, and I situate my definition of the term within the broader nomological networks of both fields. In Table 1 I provide an overview of how the two fields have defined, used, and specified the content of legitimacy.

### Defining Legitimacy: Institutional Theory

Scott explains that institutions "consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior" (1995: 33). Similarly, Greif defines an institution as "a system of rules, beliefs, norms and organizations that together generate a regularity of (social) behavior" (2006: 30). Thus, institutions are social conventions that are self-enforcing (Jepperson, 1991; Phillips et al., 2004).

**TABLE 1**  
**Overview of the Use of Legitimacy As a Construct in Institutional Theory and Social Psychology**

Aspects of Legitimacy	Institutional Theory	Social Psychology	Overlaps, Conflicts, and Reconciliations	Current Model of Legitimacy Judgments
Targets of legitimacy judgments	Primarily organizations and organizational forms	Actors (e.g., leaders), social hierarchies (e.g., status beliefs), group procedures and rules	There is substantial overlap; researchers in both fields have examined targets of legitimacy outside their traditional spheres of focus	The model presented here could apply to the approaches and targets characteristic of both fields (e.g., judgments of the legitimacy of leaders, policies, organizations, etc.)
Definition of legitimacy	"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)	"The belief that authorities are entitled to be obeyed" (Tyler, 1997: 323), or, alternatively, "Subjective perceptions of the fairness or justice of the distribution of socially distributed outcomes" (Major & Schmader, 2001: 180)	Voluntary deference is an outcome, rather than the substance, of legitimacy; fairness represents only one of the three dimensions of the content of legitimacy judgments	Consistent with the institutional theory perspective: the judgment that an entity is appropriate for its social context
Content of legitimacy judgments	Focus on instrumental (pragmatic) and moral; also discussion of cognitive and regulative	Instrumental, relational, and moral	Instrumental and moral dimensions overlap; relational dimension unique to social psychology	Institutional, relational, and moral as dimensions of the content of legitimacy judgments; cognitive legitimacy is viewed as the essence of legitimacy; regulative legitimacy represents authorization and is, thus, a validity cue

In this context, early definitions of organizational legitimacy from institutional theorists viewed legitimacy as a function of the congruence or conformity of an organization to social norms or laws (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Parsons, 1956, 1960; Weber, 1978; see Deephouse & Suchman, 2008, for a review of how legitimacy has been conceptualized in organizational institutionalism). Meyer and Scott presented a more extensive definition of organizational legitimacy as "the degree of cultural support for an organization—the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provide explanations for its existence, functioning, and jurisdiction, and lack or deny alternatives" (1983: 201). They emphasized this cognitive function of legitimacy, further arguing that "a completely legitimate organization would be one

about which no question could be raised" (1983: 201). This idea of legitimacy as the presence or absence of questions became a critical aspect of neoinstitutional theorists' views of legitimacy, wherein legitimacy is associated with a quality of taken-for-grantedness. Building on these and other previous definitions, Suchman proposed a broad-based and inclusive definition of legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (1995: 574). Thus, institutional theorists hold that entities are judged to be legitimate when they are seen as appropriate for their social context. This is the definition I adopt in this article.

It is critical to distinguish the construct of legitimacy from the related construct of institutionalization. Institutionalization is both an outcome and a process (Colyvas & Jonsson, 2011). Consistent with the view of institutions as self-reinforcing and taken-for-granted social conventions, an entity can be said to be institutionalized when it obtains both a taken-for-granted status (i.e., a particular variant of legitimacy, which institutional theorists term *cognitive legitimacy*) and the capacity to maintain itself (a capacity distinct from legitimacy). Thus, legitimacy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reaching the outcome of institutionalization. That is, an entity can be said to be legitimate but not institutionalized if it has not obtained a capacity to self-reinforce (Jepperson, 1991). In terms of process, therefore, legitimation (the acquisition of legitimacy) is only one component of the process of institutionalization.

It is also important to distinguish between individual-level legitimacy and legitimacy at the collective level. Legitimacy at the collective level is what Weber (1978) termed *validity*. A social order is considered valid, according to Weber's theory, when two conditions are met: (1) the norms, beliefs, and values that guide the social order are perceived as legitimate by some people, and (2) even those people who do not perceive the order as legitimate at least know that others perceive it as legitimate and understand that it governs behaviors. For example, some individuals may not view a particular organizational policy as appropriate, but if others view it as appropriate and act accordingly, then those individuals who do not see it as appropriate will perceive that others view it as appropriate and will therefore permit it to govern their behavior. Therefore, such a policy can be legitimate at the collective level (i.e., have validity) but may not be viewed as appropriate (i.e., as legitimate) by all individuals in the group. In this way individual-level judgments of legitimacy can differ from the collective-level validity of an entity. Dornbush and Scott (1975) labeled this individual-level form of legitimacy *propriety*. In essence, propriety, or individual-level legitimacy, refers to an individual's own judgment of the extent to which an entity is appropriate for its social context, while validity refers to the extent to which there appears to be a general consensus within a collectivity that the entity is

appropriate for its social context. While the issue of how individual-level judgments of propriety coalesce to constitute collective-level validity is an important consideration, that issue is outside the focus of this article.

Thus, because the focus of this article is on individual-level judgments of legitimacy, I focus on propriety and adopt the definition of individual-level legitimacy judgments as individuals' judgments of the extent to which an entity is appropriate for its social context. In the following section I explain how legitimacy has been defined in social psychology, highlighting areas of divergence relative to institutional theory.

### Defining Legitimacy: Social Psychology

Social psychologists have used the construct of legitimacy to explain the stability of and behavioral reactions to a broad range of social entities, including individuals (e.g., leaders), group procedures, rules, norms, and social hierarchies. Although sociological psychologists have adopted definitions of legitimacy that are consistent with the definitions used by institutional theorists (see Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006, for an excellent review of sociological psychologists' research on legitimacy), in the majority of other work on legitimacy in social psychology, researchers have taken a divergent approach that differs in two key ways from the definitions used by institutional theorists and from the one I adopt here.

First, in a substantial portion of research in this area, scholars have defined legitimacy as deference or obedience to authorities or rules. For example, Tyler defines legitimacy as "the belief that authorities are entitled to be obeyed" (1997: 323). This approach to legitimacy derives from French and Raven's (1959) concept of legitimate power, which refers to a form of power that stems from a subordinate's sense that an authority is entitled to rule. However, while this type of power—and the feelings of obligation to obey that accompany it—may be an outcome of positive legitimacy judgments, the feelings of desire or obligation to obey or provide support do not themselves constitute the legitimacy judgment. In other words, the perceptions and beliefs that underlie the judgment that a leader (to take an example from this level of analysis) is legitimate

produce a perception that the leader is entitled to his or her power. This perception of entitlement to power, in turn, produces a feeling of obligation to comply with the leader's requests. I therefore conceive of the feeling of obligation to comply with the leader's request as an *outcome* of the legitimacy judgment—not as the content of the judgment itself. This is an important distinction, because such a feeling of obligation can come from sources other than legitimacy, as when an individual feels an obligation to comply with a leader's request not because he or she views the leader as legitimate but because noncompliance would produce negative outcomes for others.

Second, some social psychologists have conflated the concepts of legitimacy and fairness. For example, Major and Schmader define legitimacy as "subjective perceptions of the fairness or justice of the distribution of socially distributed outcomes" (2001: 180). Similarly, Weber, Mummendy, and Waldzus define illegitimacy as "the violation of group entitlements to certain outcomes or a certain status position" (2002: 451), while Hornsey, Spears, Cremers, and Hogg define illegitimacy as "the degree to which groups perceive their status relations to conflict with values of justice or equity" (2003: 217). This tendency to conflate the constructs of legitimacy and justice likely stems from social psychological research specifying fairness as the key determinant of legitimacy judgments (e.g., Tyler, 1997; Tyler & Lind, 1992). However, as I explain below, fairness is only one dimension of the content that underlies individual-level legitimacy judgments. Because other dimensions of legitimacy exist, it is critical that scholars differentiate the construct of legitimacy from the construct of fairness.

### THE CONTENT OF LEGITIMACY JUDGMENTS

In this section I review social psychologists' and institutional theorists' research to uncover the three dimensions of content underlying individual-level legitimacy judgments. The content of legitimacy judgments consists of the substantive beliefs and perceptions that influence an individual's assessment of the extent to which an entity is appropriate for its social context. I begin with social psychologists' articulations of the instrumental, relational, and moral dimensions of legitimacy judgments. I then discuss

research from institutional theory on two of those dimensions—instrumental and moral—and I explain why two types of legitimacy commonly discussed in institutional theory are not included within this typology.

### Social Psychology: Instrumental, Relational, and Moral Dimensions

Social psychologists have proposed two models to specify the content of legitimacy judgments at the individual level. Instrumental models hold that individuals react to the instrumental aspects of their experiences with social entities and authorities (e.g., Hollander, 1980; Hollander & Julian, 1970; see also Tyler, 1997). An instrumental perspective on legitimacy predicts that entities will be judged as legitimate when they are perceived as promoting the material interests of the individual. In contrast, relational models of legitimacy hold that legitimacy emerges from the extent to which a social entity communicates to the individual that he or she is accorded respect, dignity, and status within the group context and through group membership (Tyler, 1997; Tyler & Lind, 1992). From a relational perspective, an entity is seen as legitimate when it affirms individuals' social identities and bolsters their sense of self-worth.

Previous social psychological research on instrumental and relational models of legitimacy has proceeded by contrasting the two models to determine which better explains individuals' behaviors (e.g., Tyler, 1997). The implication of this approach, of course, is that the content of legitimacy judgments is entirely (or at least primarily) derived either from instrumental or from relational concerns (but not both). Tyler (1997) has conducted the primary work in this area, examining the impact of instrumental and relational concerns on voluntary deference to authorities when a conflict emerges between authorities and subordinates. His work demonstrates that in cases of conflict between authorities and subordinates, the impact of relational concerns is larger than the impact of instrumental concerns, and he therefore concludes that the content of legitimacy judgments derives from individuals' identity concerns. However, the empirical evidence that he presents indicates a significant, though somewhat smaller, impact of instrumental concerns

as well. Thus, the empirical evidence suggests that both instrumental and relational concerns have some degree of impact on individuals' legitimacy judgments.

Based on this observation, I take a different approach and conceive of instrumental concerns and relational concerns as the bases for two separate dimensions of perceptions or beliefs that underlie the content of legitimacy judgments. For example, rather than examining whether an entity is supported primarily on instrumental or relational bases, I instead advocate examining the independent and interactive effects of both bases of legitimacy. Viewing instrumental and relational concerns as the bases of different dimensions of perception that can simultaneously impact overall legitimacy judgments, rather than as separate models of legitimacy judgments, permits researchers to consider how aspects of the social context or characteristics of the evaluators may moderate when one or the other comes to dominate in the legitimacy judgment process. For example, Tyler's (1997) analyses appear to indicate that relational concerns dominate legitimacy judgments in cases of conflict between supervisors and subordinates, but there may be a number of other situations in which instrumental judgments would predominate.

As another example, consider Reay and colleagues' (2006) account of the introduction of a new work role—nurse practitioner—into an established health care system in Alberta, Canada. Some individuals in the health care system may have viewed the new work role as legitimate, feeling that the new role promoted or protected instrumental needs at either the individual or group level. They may have perceived that the integration of nurse practitioners into the system would benefit them personally (perhaps by increasing the chance they would find employment in the nurse practitioner role—that is, individual-level instrumental concerns), or they may have believed that the change would promote the organizational goal of more effective and efficient health care provision (i.e., group-level instrumental concerns). At the same time, individuals may have viewed the change as legitimate because the new work role promoted or protected relational needs at the individual or group level. For example, individual nurse practitioners may have felt personally validated by being granted new status within

the health care system, and nurse practitioners in general may have felt that their social identity as a group was gaining in status and respect as well.

However, these two dimensions of legitimacy judgments are not mutually exclusive. For example, an individual may view an entity as legitimate on both instrumental and relational grounds. Alternatively, an entity may be viewed as legitimate from an instrumental standpoint and as illegitimate from a relational standpoint. Thus, a given entity may be viewed as legitimate on one ground, both grounds, or neither ground. Viewing instrumental and relational dimensions not as separate *models* of legitimacy but instead as separate *bases* of legitimacy permits researchers to consider the circumstances under which one or another basis of legitimacy will have greater or lesser influence on the overall legitimacy judgment and, consequently, the largest impact on behavior.

While the majority of their previous research on legitimacy has focused on examining the relative explanatory power of the instrumental and relational models, social psychologists have recently begun to espouse a moral dimension to legitimacy as well. Skitka, Bauman, and Lytle (2009) demonstrated that individuals' degrees of moral conviction about an issue on which the Supreme Court had recently ruled predicted perceptions about the Supreme Court's legitimacy. In addition, social psychologists have argued that morality is an important general dimension of evaluation of social entities (e.g., Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Leach and colleagues argued that while both moral and relational concerns can be viewed as consistent with a single concept of benevolence, the two types of concerns are conceptually distinct. In a series of studies they demonstrated that instrumental, relational, and moral concerns constitute distinct factors of evaluation and that in many circumstances morality concerns are actually more important in evaluations than are instrumental and relational concerns.

Thus, research on the social psychology of legitimacy judgments points to three dimensions underlying legitimacy: instrumental, relational, and moral. In the next section I discuss the dimensionality of legitimacy from the perspective of institutional theory.

### Institutional Theory: Instrumental, Moral, Cognitive, and Regulative

Institutional theorists also recognize an instrumental dimension to legitimacy. This basis of legitimacy has been termed *pragmatic legitimacy* (Suchman, 1995) and is viewed as rooted in the self-interested calculations of individuals and groups. In this view, individuals or constituencies may support an entity because its continued existence entails a higher expected value than its absence, or because the entity is seen as being responsive to the individual or constituency's larger interests.

While institutional theorists have not explored the relational dimension of legitimacy, a moral dimension has been studied extensively. Indeed, as Scott (2001) explains, the predominant view of the substantive content of legitimacy among sociologists, including many institutional theorists, is one in which the primary determinant of legitimacy is the moral status of the entity, or the extent to which the entity conforms to moral values and ethical principles. Suchman describes the moral dimension of legitimacy as grounded in "a prosocial logic" and concerned with whether the entity in question promotes "social welfare, as defined by the audience's socially constructed value system" (1995: 579). In this way the basis of moral legitimacy differs fundamentally from the self-interested orientation involved in the instrumental dimension.

Thus, there is considerable overlap between social psychologists' views of the instrumental and moral bases of legitimacy and institutional theorists' views of pragmatic and moral legitimacy. Institutional theorists have also identified two other types of legitimacy that merit consideration in this discussion: cognitive legitimacy and regulative legitimacy. I argue that these two constructs do not constitute substantive bases of the content of legitimacy judgments. Instead, cognitive legitimacy represents the absence of substantive content in the legitimacy judgment (i.e., taken-for-grantedness), whereas regulative legitimacy represents social cues indicating the validity of an entity (i.e., indicators of collective-level legitimacy) but does not represent a substantive domain of judgment content in itself.

The construct of cognitive legitimacy is based on the early neoinstitutionalist definitions of le-

gitimacy involving the absence of questions or challenges regarding an entity. Thus, Suchman (1995) explains that cognitive legitimacy is fundamentally different from moral and pragmatic legitimacy. Specifically, he contends that legitimacy can entail either active or passive support: "Legitimacy may involve either affirmative backing for an organization or mere acceptance of the organization as *necessary* or *inevitable* based on some taken-for-granted cultural account" (1995: 582). Whereas the instrumental, relational, and moral dimensions of legitimacy involve active affirmative backing on the basis of instrumental, relational, and moral concerns, respectively, cognitive legitimacy entails passive support. Cognitive legitimacy is the absence of questions about or challenges to an entity. In the absence of such questions or challenges, there is no need for affirmative backing. Indeed, the provision of any affirmative instrumental, relational, or moral account for an entity with a high level of cognitive legitimacy may backfire (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). As Suchman explains:

Both pragmatic and moral legitimacy rest on discursive evaluation, whereas cognitive legitimacy does not: Audiences arrive at cost-benefit appraisals and ethical judgments largely through explicit public discussion, and organizations often can win pragmatic and moral legitimacy by participating vigorously in such dialogues; in contrast, cognitive legitimation implicates unspoken orienting assumptions, and heated defenses of organizational endeavors tend to imperil the objectivity and exteriority of such taken-for-granted schemata (1995: 585).

Thus, cognitive legitimacy does not represent a dimension of the substantive content of legitimacy judgments. Instead, it represents the absence of content. Indeed, this absence of content is its power: "for things to be otherwise becomes literally unthinkable" (Zucker, 1983: 25). Organizations (or other social entities for that matter) with a high level of cognitive legitimacy require no justification, so there is no need for content to underlie a justification. For this reason Suchman contends that the taken-for-granted nature of cognitive legitimacy "represents the most subtle and powerful source of legitimacy identified to date" (1995: 583).

This description may seem to imply that cognitive legitimacy only applies to fully institu-

tionalized entities (Henisz & Zelner, 2005). However, a key insight of institutional theory is that isomorphism legitimates (Deephouse, 1996). In other words, to the extent that a new entity conforms to the expectations carved by existing institutions, that new entity is not subjected to active evaluations but, instead, is passively accepted and unquestioned. In this way the power of cognitive legitimacy can be applied to the emergence of the rules, norms, and organizations that Greif (2006) calls "institutional elements." For example, Glynn and Abzug (2002) demonstrate that organizations that adopt names that conform to the conventional structures and styles of names within their institutional field benefit from greater legitimacy. Similarly, Deephouse (1996) demonstrates that isomorphism in commercial banks is positively related to legitimacy. This phenomenon may also apply to emergent institutions. Henisz and Zelner describe emergent institutions as institutions that are newly created and, thus, "still subject to evaluation" (2005: 363). However, to the extent that an emergent institution can be constructed in such a way as to be compatible with existing institutions, the evaluation (and implied challenge) that Henisz and Zelner refer to is less likely to occur, and so the emergent institution can begin to accrue the immunity to questioning that is cognitive legitimacy. In essence, isomorphism legitimates because it leads to the absence of questions or challenges and thereby holds substantive, content-based evaluation at bay. Thus, while cognitive legitimacy is typically conceived of as a property of fully institutionalized (i.e., self-reproducing and taken-for-granted) entities, emergent organizations, institutions, and institutional elements can tap into the power of cognitive legitimacy by conforming to cultural expectations and norms.

Regulative legitimacy also emphasizes conformity, but rather than conformity or congruence with cultural expectations (as in the case of cognitive legitimacy), regulative legitimacy emerges from conformity with law or other forms of collective regulation (Greenwood et al., 2002; Greve, 2005; Scott, 1995). In this sense regulative legitimacy is highly related to cognitive legitimacy: organizations (the key target of consideration in research on regulative legitimacy) are expected to conform to regulations, and failure to do so raises questions about the nature of the

organization that the organization would have otherwise avoided. However, regulative legitimacy is also distinct from cognitive legitimacy because regulative legitimacy involves an active external validation of the organization by some agent (e.g., a government agency or a professional association).

Validity, as explained above, refers not to individual-level judgments of legitimacy but to collective-level legitimacy. Researchers have identified two types of social cues that can emerge regarding the validity of a social entity: endorsement of the entity by peers and authorization of the entity by authorities (Dornbush & Scott, 1975). Regulative legitimacy represents a form of authorization. Authorization does not, however, establish a particular basis on which to judge an entity to be legitimate; rather, it merely provides evidence that others have judged it to be legitimate. Importantly, the meaning of regulative legitimacy can vary across contexts. In a democracy, authorization in the form of formal laws supporting an institutional arrangement indicates fairly broad-based endorsement of that arrangement. The same would not be the case in a dictatorship. Thus, while cognitive legitimacy is excluded from the typology of the content of legitimacy judgments because cognitive legitimacy represents the absence of substantive judgment content, regulative legitimacy is excluded because it represents a special case of the use of others' evaluations as heuristic substitutes for individual-level evaluation.

## Summary

In summary, I argue that there are three dimensions of content underlying legitimacy judgments: instrumental, relational, and moral. Specifically, an entity is viewed as legitimate on instrumental grounds when it is perceived to facilitate the individual's or group's attempts to reach self-defined or internalized goals or outcomes. Examples of perceptions or beliefs that constitute the content of the instrumental dimension of legitimacy judgments include perceptions or beliefs related to the effectiveness, efficiency, or utility of the entity. Second, an entity is viewed as legitimate on relational grounds when it is perceived to affirm the social identity and self-worth of individuals or social groups and to ensure that individuals or



groups are treated with dignity and respect and receive outcomes commensurate with their entitlement. Examples of perceptions or beliefs that constitute the content of the relational dimension of legitimacy judgments include perceptions or beliefs related to the fairness, benevolence, or communality that characterizes the entity. Finally, an entity is perceived as legitimate on moral grounds when it is perceived to be consistent with the evaluator's moral and ethical values. Thus, examples of perceptions or beliefs that constitute the content of the moral dimension of legitimacy judgments include perceptions or beliefs related to the morality, ethicality, or integrity of an entity.

It is important to highlight that these three dimensions are not mutually exclusive; entities may be evaluated simultaneously on all three dimensions or on some subset of the dimensions. In addition, the three domains may also overlap—that is, the specific beliefs and perceptions that underlie any given legitimacy judgment may fall into one or more categories. For example, the observation that a particular institutional practice is highly efficient would certainly fall into the instrumental dimension. However, in the context of an organizational culture that places a high value on efficiency (e.g., Wal-Mart), that observation may fall into the moral dimension as well (i.e., the observation that a practice is efficient may constitute both instrumental and moral grounds for maintaining it). In other types of organizational or group cultures, there may be a significant overlap between the relational and moral dimensions. Similarly, in groups that do not have a strong culture or value system and do not recognize relational practices as promoting efficiency, there may be relatively little overlap across the three dimensions. Thus, the degree of overlap among the three dimensions may be moderated by a number of variables, such as group or organizational culture and individual value orientations.

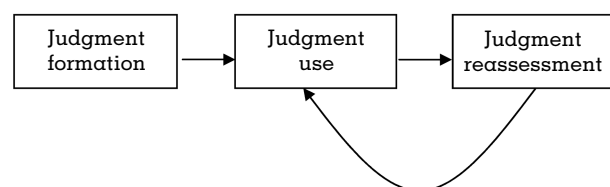
In the next section I build on this typology to construct a model of the legitimacy judgment process, and in doing so I explain that the nature of the relationships between the three dimensions of legitimacy judgments and an overall legitimacy judgment depends on the stage of the legitimacy judgment process.

## THE LEGITIMACY JUDGMENT PROCESS

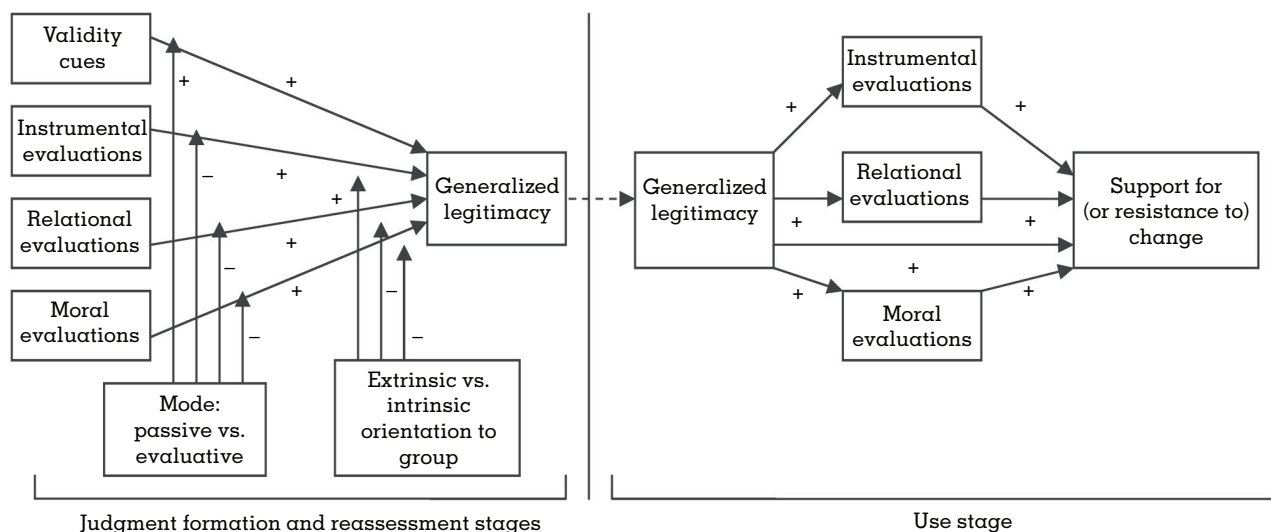
While institutional scholars view legitimacy as the key driver of institutional change, very little research has examined how individual-level legitimacy judgments develop and change over time. Institutional theorists have recently paid increasing attention to microprocesses of institutional change (e.g., Phillips et al., 2004; Reay et al., 2006; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Zilber, 2002). However, much of the research in this area has focused not on individual-level judgments of legitimacy but, rather, on how interactions among individuals constitute social reality and guide institutional change (e.g., Reay et al., 2006; Zilber, 2002; Zucker, 1977) or how rhetoric and discourse are used as tools of influence in the process of institutional change (e.g., Phillips et al., 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006). In other words, institutional theorists have not examined how individuals come to judge existing institutional arrangements as legitimate or illegitimate or how those judgments emerge to motivate individuals to work for change or maintain the status quo.

In this section I build on research from institutional theory and social psychology to develop a model of the legitimacy judgment process that can speak to these issues and, therefore, can contribute to research on the microprocesses of institutional change (e.g., by helping to specify the circumstances under which individuals become motivated to engage in activities for change, as well as the forms and content of rhetoric that are likely to resonate with different audiences). Specifically, I argue that the legitimacy judgment process is a three-stage cyclical process that is characterized by two judgment stages (judgment formation and judgment reassessment) and an additional stage in which the judgment is used (see Figures 1 and 2). In the judgment formation stage an initial legitimacy

**FIGURE 1**  
The Legitimacy Judgment Cycle



**FIGURE 2**  
**Model of the Legitimacy Judgment Process**



judgment is formed either through an evaluative or passive judgment mode. In the use stage the existing judgment is deployed to guide behavior and is bolstered through processes of affirmation and cognitive assimilation. The use stage may continue in perpetuity, or instead individuals may engage or reengage in the evaluative mode in the judgment reassessment stage. In the sections below I explain each of these stages in more detail.

### Judgment Formation

In the judgment formation stage individuals engage in either an evaluative or passive mode of information processing, which leads to a generalized legitimacy judgment that represents the entity as either appropriate (i.e., legitimate) or inappropriate (i.e., illegitimate) for its social context. The two modes of the legitimacy judgment process differ with respect to the sources of information used, the extent of cognitive effort employed, and the effects on the generalized legitimacy judgment reached.

**Evaluative mode.** In the evaluative mode judgments of the overall legitimacy of an entity are constructed on the basis of evaluations of the entity along instrumental, relational, and/or moral dimensions. In addition, the evaluative mode involves effortful attempts at judgment creation. In this mode the individual is actively motivated to construct an evaluation of the en-

tity. It is important to note, however, that this effortful nature characterizing the evaluative mode does not mean that the evaluative mode is immune to cognitive biases. Indeed, extensive research documents that individuals can produce biased judgments despite a motivation for accuracy (Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Kahneman & Tversky, 2000). The effortful nature of the evaluative mode does not imply that judgments are not biased; rather, it simply indicates that individuals are actively engaged in a conscious attempt to construct a judgment. Thus, in the evaluative mode of the legitimacy judgment process, instrumental, relational, and moral evaluations drive judgments of generalized legitimacy.

Consequently, to understand the dynamics of the evaluative mode, it is necessary to understand the circumstances under which one or the other of the three dimensions is likely to be prioritized in the judgment process. Previous social psychological research has demonstrated that the relative prioritization of the three dimensions is driven at least in part by evaluators' social identification with the group that is associated with the entity under evaluation. Social identification with the group refers to the extent to which group members form their identities around their group membership and integrate the group into their self-concepts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In his research Tyler (1997) found

that social identification with the group leads to a greater prioritization of the relational dimension of legitimacy judgments. Specifically, individuals who draw more heavily on the group for their personal sense of identity and who have closer bonds with the group tend to place greater emphasis on relational concerns in determining their evaluations of the legitimacy of authorities and group policies.

This effect likely emerges because individuals having high levels of social identification with the group tend to have an intrinsic orientation to the group such that engagement with the group is a source of identity, joy, and meaning (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994). For these individuals, the relational and moral legitimacy of group policies and practices are highly personally relevant—these policies and practices construct central aspects of their self-concept and personal meaning. Relative to the deeply meaningful implications of the relational and moral status of group-based entities for these individuals, instrumental concerns are likely to be less critical. In contrast, individuals who have a low level of identification with the group tend to have an extrinsic orientation to the group, engaging in group activities not because the group functions as a source of identity, joy, or meaning but because the group can provide valued outcomes (Amabile et al., 1994). For these individuals, the relational and moral status of group-based policies and practices are only meaningful to the extent that these considerations impact the personal outcomes the individual desires (i.e., to the extent that these considerations are instrumental to the individual's personal interests). Therefore, individuals with an extrinsic orientation to the group (e.g., individuals with low group identification) are likely to place primary emphasis on the instrumental dimension and very little emphasis on the relational and moral dimensions in determining their generalized legitimacy judgments in the evaluative mode.

**Passive mode.** In the passive mode, however, rather than engage in effortful information processing, individuals either use validity cues as cognitive shortcuts to reach a legitimacy judgment or passively assume the legitimacy of entities that conform to cultural expectations (or some combination of the two). In the former process individuals observe authorizations or endorsements from others and base their own

judgments entirely on those observations rather than on their own evaluations of the instrumental, relational, and moral status of the entity. In the latter process individuals simply passively accept entities that conform to their expectations. This latter process is consistent with the discussion of how new entities can tap into the power of cognitive legitimacy by merely conforming to cultural expectations. As Johnson and colleagues explain, sometimes legitimacy may be acquired "simply by not being implicitly or explicitly challenged" (2006: 60). Thus, in the passive mode of the legitimacy judgment process, validity cues and/or mere acceptance drives judgments of generalized legitimacy.

**Relationship between the two modes.** These two modes correspond to modes of reasoning identified in a wide range of areas of social psychological research. Dual-process models in social psychology generally distinguish between two modes of cognitive operations: one that is effortful, controlled, and self-aware—that is, an evaluative mode—and another that is effortless, automatic, and quick—that is, a passive mode (e.g., Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002). Social psychological research further suggests that because individuals tend to approach judgment tasks in ways that conserve cognitive energy, the passive mode predominates unless it becomes necessary or desirable for the evaluative mode to intervene (Gilbert, 2002; Kahneman & Frederick, 2002; Lieberman, 2003).

Thus, the passive mode is likely to predominate in the judgment formation stage unless the individual deems it necessary or desirable to use more effort in the judgment process. There are therefore two factors likely to impact which of the two modes predominates in the judgment formation stage: the availability of validity cues and the extent to which the entity that is the target of judgment conforms to cultural expectations. If validity cues are unavailable, as may be the case for a newly proposed entity, the evaluative mode is more likely to be engaged. In addition, if the entity conflicts with some aspect of the individual's culturally based expectations, the evaluative mode is more likely to be engaged. Hence, in most circumstances (i.e., when validity cues are available or when there is a high level of congruence with existing institutional arrangements), the passive mode predominates.

An important implication of the predominance of the passive mode in most circumstances of initial judgment formation is that initial judgments are likely to be biased in a positive direction. Specifically, Ridgeway and Berger (1986) argue that when peers or authorities merely act as though an entity is legitimate, their behavior is sufficient to produce validity cues. This dynamic is referred to as *weak validation* because mere behavioral compliance with the dictates of an institutional arrangement implies collective-level legitimacy, regardless of the actual individual-level legitimacy judgments of the individuals engaging in compliance. The power of weak validation in the form of mere behavioral compliance means that when individuals presuppose a consensus that an entity is legitimate, and they then act on that supposition, their act itself functions as confirmation of their presupposition for other actors, and the fact that other actors do nothing to oppose the initial action provides further confirmation. This dynamic can produce a strong bias in favor of positive perceptions of validity, which, in turn, have a positive impact on individual-level generalized legitimacy judgments.

Regardless of whether the passive mode or evaluative mode predominates in the judgment formation stage, the outcome of the judgment formation stage is a generalized legitimacy judgment that represents the entity as legitimate or illegitimate to some degree. Once such a generalized legitimacy judgment is established, the individual moves into the use stage of the legitimacy judgment process.

### Use Stage

The generalized legitimacy judgment formed in the judgment formation stage is carried over into the use stage, where it guides behavior with respect to the entity. In the use stage legitimacy judgments come to function as pivotal cognitions (Lind, 2001) that can move people between two very different types of behaviors: on the one hand, to the extent that an entity is viewed as legitimate, it is supported, and attempts to change it are resisted; on the other hand, to the extent that an entity is viewed as illegitimate, people actively seek to change it.

Thus, in the use stage the entity is no longer judged; instead, the existing judgment is deployed. Consequently, in the use phase cogni-

tive energy is no longer geared toward judgment formation and is instead focused on assimilating incoming bits of information and stimuli to conform to the initial generalized legitimacy judgment in a process characterized by motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). In this way the generalized legitimacy judgment that emerges from the judgment stage acts as an anchor that guides interpretations of new legitimacy-relevant experiences such that new information is viewed as consistent with the existing generalized legitimacy judgment.

The assimilation process occurs for two reasons (Tost & Lind, 2010). First, this process helps individuals manage the uncertainty associated with their social worlds (Lind, 2001; Tost & Lind, 2010). If each new legitimacy-related experience required individuals to evaluate anew their existing legitimacy judgments, the legitimacy of multitudes of social entities would constantly be called into question. Using the initial generalized legitimacy judgment as an anchor to guide the interpretation of new information ensures that this type of potentially incapacitating ambivalence and uncertainty is minimized. The second reason for the assimilation process is related to the first. Specifically, assimilation minimizes the cognitive energy that must be allocated to legitimacy judgments (Lind, 2001; Tost & Lind, 2010). If assessing the legitimacy of the social environment required individuals to constantly monitor their environments for evidence of illegitimacy, very little could be accomplished. Such a high level of monitoring would require too much attention and cognitive energy and would leave individuals unable to engage in other judgment tasks or activities. Thus, the assimilation process characterizing the use stage reduces the cognitive resources that are necessary for individuals to assess their security within their social environments.

There are three important implications emerging from the nature of the assimilation that occurs in the use stage. First, to the extent that some form of substantive content (i.e., instrumental, relational, or moral concerns) was used to justify the initial generalized legitimacy judgment (i.e., if the evaluative mode was employed in the judgment formation stage), this content dissipates in the use stage. The content dissipates because it is no longer needed—the entity is no longer a target of evaluation along instrumental, relational, or moral dimensions. In-

stead, it is simply viewed as legitimate (or illegitimate, depending on the outcome of the judgment formation stage), and new information relevant to its instrumental, relational, or moral status is interpreted in a manner to be consistent with the generalized legitimacy judgment. As Zilber explains, once institutionalization occurs, the relevant social entities "acquire a realitylike status, and their social origin is forgotten" (2002: 234).

Thus, as the content dissipates, cognitive legitimacy emerges. The idea that more substantive justifications precede the development of cognitive legitimacy is consistent with numerous models of and empirical findings on the process of institutionalization. For example, in their model of the stages of institutional change, Greenwood and colleagues (2002) indicate that pragmatic and moral legitimacy are assessed before cognitive legitimacy emerges. Similarly, Colyvas (2007) demonstrates how substantive legitimacy preceded cognitive legitimacy in the institutionalization of technology transfer at Stanford University (see also Baum & Powell, 1995, and Hoffman, 1999).

As another example, consider an individual who engages in the evaluative processing mode in the judgment formation stage. The individual may conclude that an entity is legitimate on instrumental but not on moral grounds and may further conclude that the instrumental dimension is the most important for consideration in the present circumstance (e.g., the individual may have an extrinsic orientation to the group). In this case the generalized legitimacy judgment will be positive. For some time after the establishment of the judgment, the individual may recall the moral qualms he or she initially held about the entity such that those initial moral evaluations continue to have an impact on subsequent moral evaluations, regardless of the nature of the generalized legitimacy judgment. However, as time passes, the process of assimilation will bias and neutralize that recollection such that the negative moral implications of the entity will be consistently and progressively minimized (as in the process of ethical fading described by Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) and the entity will come to be viewed more favorably on the moral dimension. Thus, over time, the substantive grounds of the original judgment will become blurred and replaced by a noncritical acceptance of the entity. In this

way the assimilation process that characterizes the use stage has the effect of nullifying or neutralizing the initial instrumental, relational, and moral evaluations (or validity cues) that produced the generalized legitimacy judgment in the first place.

This example also points to a second important implication of the process of assimilation: assimilation reverses the causal direction between the generalized legitimacy judgment and the three dimensions of legitimacy judgments. In contrast to the evaluative mode of the judgment stages, in which instrumental, relational, and moral evaluations produce a generalized legitimacy judgment, in the use stage the generalized legitimacy judgment produces the instrumental, relational, and moral evaluations of the entity. In other words, the generalized legitimacy judgments established in the judgment formation stage can actually influence passive perceptions of the entity with respect to instrumental, relational, and moral considerations during the use stage.

This contention that the cognitive legitimacy that emerges in the use stage has a causal impact on the dimensions of evaluation is consistent with extensive research in social psychology. For example, research on system justification theory (for reviews see Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005) shows that individuals have an innate motivation to view highly institutionalized entities as fair and just. Furthermore, researchers in this area have shown that individuals rationalize institutionalized entities by subjectively enhancing their perceptions of the desirability of current institutional arrangements and outcomes (e.g., Kay et al., 2009; Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002).

Thus, the stage and mode of the legitimacy judgment process determine the causal direction of the relationship between the generalized legitimacy judgment and the three domains of content. In the judgment stages (judgment formation and judgment reassessment), when the evaluative mode is employed, the instrumental, relational, and moral evaluations of the entity determine the generalized legitimacy judgment. If the passive mode is used, then validity cues determine the generalized legitimacy judgment. However, once the individual enters the use stage, this dynamic reverses. In the use stage the generalized legitimacy judgment that was

formed in the judgment stage biases evaluations of the entity along the three dimensions and also colors perceptions of the extent of the entity's validity. The implications of this reversal of causal direction are not substantial in circumstances in which a judgment formed in the evaluative mode did not involve conflicts across dimensions. That is, if evaluations across all three dimensions point consistently to either positive or negative evaluations, there is little substantive consequence of the reverse of causal directions. However, if there is conflict across the dimensions in the evaluative mode, as when the entity is viewed as legitimate on instrumental but not on moral grounds, then the reversal of causal direction that occurs in the use stage can result in a shift in perceptions over time, leading the individual to view as moral what was previously viewed as immoral (or to view as instrumental what was previously viewed as noninstrumental).

The third implication of the assimilation process is that the initial legitimacy judgment will be perpetuated throughout the use stage. This implication is particularly important given the positive bias that characterizes the judgment formation stage. This persistence of initial positive judgments is a dynamic familiar to social psychologists (e.g., Klauer & Stern, 1992). Indeed, much of the social psychological research relevant to institutional change has examined the topic of change indirectly, by exploring its absence. Support for the status quo is a key dependent variable in research on system justification theory (Jost et al., 2004; Jost et al., 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2002, 2005) and the just world hypothesis (which holds that individuals are motivated to perceive their social environments as characterized by a high degree of fairness or justice; see Lerner, 1980), as well as in many studies examining the denial of injustice (Crosby, 1984) and victim derogation (e.g., Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). The majority of these theories and approaches share the notion that individuals tend to resist viewing their social systems as illegitimate and, thus, tend to support the status quo. Findings in this area of research provide support for the contention that individuals generally exhibit positive legitimacy judgments of existing institutional arrangements and resist the perception that existing institutions and social systems are lacking in legitimacy.

However, it is clear that there are circumstances in which individuals do come to view existing social entities as illegitimate—circumstances where individuals do not resist change and instead desire and promote institutional change. Thus, any theory of the legitimacy judgment process must not only account for the tendency to justify existing social entities but also specify the circumstances that mitigate this tendency and lead instead to a more critical consideration of the legitimacy of existing institutions and social arrangements. In the following section I describe the judgment reassessment stage of the legitimacy judgment process and then address a critical question in the study of institutional change: Once an individual has entered the use stage, what are the factors that can motivate the individual to reconsider the legitimacy of a social entity?

### Judgment Reassessment Stage

While individuals use motivated reasoning in the form of assimilation processes to bolster initial legitimacy judgments in the use stage, the judgment reassessment stage is dominated by a motivation to make effortful and considered personal assessments of the legitimacy of the entity. This motivation to engage in effortful assessments does not imply that individuals in the judgment reassessment stage are free of perceptual biases or are able to be more objective in their judgments. Instead, they are simply more motivated to engage in the process of judgment formation. In addition, entering the judgment reassessment stage does not necessarily mean that the judgment itself will ultimately be revised; an individual may reassess the judgment and deem that it does not require revision. The key characteristic of the judgment reassessment stage is that the individual is motivated to actively reconsider the existing legitimacy judgment. Thus, in the reassessment stage the evaluative mode predominates, and individuals engage in active attempts to evaluate the entity along the dimensions of instrumental, relational, and/or moral legitimacy, which once again drive judgments of generalized legitimacy. Individuals may also incorporate validity cues into consideration in the evaluative process in the reassessment stage, but the primary emphasis is on their own assessments of the instrumental, relational, and moral status of the

entity because the motive to form a personal judgment becomes paramount.

As the individual engages in effortful consideration of the instrumental, relational, and moral legitimacy of a social entity, he or she creates a new generalized legitimacy judgment. Once a new generalized legitimacy judgment is formed, the individual reenters the use stage, where the newly formed generalized legitimacy judgment will again function as a pivotal cognition, guiding behavior with respect to the entity, and as a heuristic, influencing the interpretation of additional information related to the entity. Moreover, because the evaluative mode (rather than the passive mode) predominates in the judgment reassessment stage, the positive bias that characterizes the judgment formation stage is not present. Consequently, it is at this stage in the legitimacy judgment process that judgments of illegitimacy (and, hence, support for change) are most likely to emerge. A critical issue, therefore, is to determine what leads individuals to transition from the use stage into the judgment reassessment stage. I tackle this issue in the following section.

### Switching from the Use Stage to the Judgment Reassessment Stage

The process of switching from the use stage to the judgment reassessment stage taps into fundamental issues in both institutional theory and social psychology. Specifically, institutional theorists grapple with an issue that has been termed the *paradox of embedded agency* (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Seo & Creed, 2002), which refers to the tension between the idea of individuals as active shapers of their institutional environments and the view of individuals' behaviors as determined by the institutions in which they are embedded. How can individuals change institutions "if their actions, intentions, and rationality are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change" (Holm, 1995: 398)? In other words, how can an individual extract him or herself from the grips of cognitive legitimacy? The paradox, thus, is between individual agency and institutional determinism, and part of the challenge is to determine what makes cognitive legitimacy erode at the individual level. If cognitive legitimacy is the absence of questions, what is it that leads individuals to begin to actively interrogate an existing social

entity and to imagine possible alternatives? To put the issue in the framework of the model of the legitimacy judgment process presented here, what are the factors that lead people to move out of the use stage, where institutional arrangements are passively accepted, and into the judgment reassessment stage, where institutional arrangements are actively interrogated?

At the same time, a critical concern in social psychological research is identifying the circumstances under which individuals will engage in effortful and reflective information processing rather than conserve cognitive energy and resources. Recent research in the area of social cognitive neuroscience provides an interesting response to this issue. Specifically, this research has identified a "neural alarm system" that appears to switch individuals between passive and active judgment processes (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2004; Ullsperger, Volz, & Von Cramon, 2004). Research on the activity of this neural alarm system indicates that the system is activated when the potential for errors in judgments or outcomes is perceived to be high (Carter et al., 1998, 2000). For example, the Stroop task, which requires individuals to identify the color of ink in which a word is written, although the word itself specifies a different color (e.g., the word "red" presented in green ink), has been shown to activate the neural alarm system (Lieberman, 2007). Thus, social psychological research suggests that individuals will move from the use stage to the judgment reassessment stage when this mental alarm is activated.

Integrating insights from social psychology and institutional theory, I argue that a mental alarm is triggered when individuals detect and then examine questions that can be raised about existing social entities. Institutional theorists have posited three sources of such questions: jolts, contradictions, and reflexivity.

**Jolts.** Institutional theorists have argued that major events, such as technological changes, social upheaval, actions of competitors, or regulatory changes, can act as jolts to the institutional field, disturbing the functioning of the field and thereby prompting consideration of the potential for institutional change (Battilana et al., 2009; Greenwood et al., 2002). In disrupting the functioning of the institutional field, this

type of event produces a violation of the expectations that are based on the generalized legitimacy judgment—social entities are no longer able to function as they did before the jolt. This violation of expectations alerts individuals that their current judgments about existing entities are no longer reliable, and (to situate this dynamic in the context of the present discussion) the mental alarm is triggered.

Institutional theorists, however, have said relatively little about the necessary features that must characterize an event in order for that event to constitute a jolt. I argue that for an event to act as a jolt triggering the mental alarm, the event must provide new information or outcomes that preclude assimilation into existing expectations. In particular, this event or new piece of information must be sufficiently outside the realm of expectation that it cannot be assimilated into existing legitimacy judgments without active and effortful consideration of the challenges the jolt presents. In this way the jolt disrupts the assimilation process, preventing it from proceeding, and thereby activates the mental alarm. Consequently, minor expectation violations are not likely to trigger the mental alarm. The contention that violations of expectations can lead people to question their existing legitimacy judgments is also consistent with previous social psychological research demonstrating that violations of expectations produce discontent with existing social entities (e.g., Rasinski, Tyler, & Fridkin, 1985).

Consistent with the notion that expectation violation is necessary for the activation of the mental alarm, I expect that the mental alarm is more likely to be activated when the valence of unexpected events suggests that a switch between positive and negative legitimacy judgments may be in order. I view legitimacy as a continuous variable, with values above a neutral point constituting positive legitimacy judgments and values below a neutral point constituting negative legitimacy judgments (i.e., illegitimacy). While dramatic unexpected events may indicate that an existing positive legitimacy judgment should be increased or an existing negative legitimacy judgment should be decreased, events that suggest a reversal of the valence of the legitimacy judgment are particularly likely to activate the alarm because the contrast in valence between the existing judgment and the event's implications is particularly

likely to catch the individual's attention and disrupt the assimilation process. This suggestion does not imply, however, that these alarm activations will necessarily elicit a change in the legitimacy judgment; they merely elicit an entry into the judgment reassessment stage, where a deliberate reevaluation of the legitimacy judgment takes place.

In addition, it is important to note that while previous institutional theory research has conceived of the jolt at the macro level (e.g., at the level of the institutional field or organization), the model presented here suggests that the jolt can also occur at the individual level. For example, major life changes, such as the loss of a job, a personal illness, or the death of a loved one, can alter the individual's position within and perspective on an institutional field. This altered perspective may create new expectations that may go unmet or may render the current institutional arrangements incapable of meeting preexisting expectations. Similarly, if a respected friend or colleague explicitly challenges the legitimacy of existing social entities that had previously been taken for granted, this challenge can act as an exogenous jolt that is not easily assimilated into the existing judgment. The assimilation process is therefore interrupted, which leads the individual to actively consider the challenge to legitimacy, leading to an erosion of cognitive legitimacy. In such a circumstance the mental alarm will be activated for the individual without any substantial change at higher levels of analysis.

Thus, the experience of a dramatic violation of expectations can function as a trigger for the mental alarm, alerting the individual to the need to reconsider existing legitimacy judgments in a more effortful and reflective fashion. In this sense the function of jolts is to expose the formerly invisible assumptions underlying generalized legitimacy judgments and to motivate the individual to actively interrogate those assumptions previously passively accepted. In this way jolts cause cognitive legitimacy to dissolve or dissipate. In doing so they lead individuals to switch from the use stage of the legitimacy judgment process to the reassessment stage, where they actively question the legitimacy of social entities and, if they reach a judgment of illegitimacy, come to actively pursue change.



**Contradictions.** Institutional theorists have also specified an additional mechanism that can lead individuals to reconsider existing legitimacy judgments. Seo and Creed (2002) have argued that contradictions in institutional logics (the underlying assumptions that shape ways of viewing and thinking about the social world within an institutional field) can lead individuals to question the legitimacy of existing institutional arrangements. This approach recognizes that actors are simultaneously embedded in multiple institutional fields and that conflicts and contradictions can arise between and among those fields (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Hoffman, 1999; Seo & Creed, 2002). From this perspective, when these institutional fields produce contradictions, these contradictions trigger the mental alarm, alerting actors that their existing judgments may be unreliable. At this point the individuals exercise agency by entering the judgment reassessment stage and evaluating (or reevaluating) existing institutions and attributing problems to one or more existing institutions (i.e., specification; see Greenwood et al., 2002).<sup>1</sup> Thus, when an individual detects contradictions among institutional logics, the mental alarm is activated and cognitive legitimacy (at the individual level) begins to erode.

However, given that individuals are embedded in a multitude of institutional arrangements and that such contradictions are pervasive, it remains unclear which contradictions are likely to attract the attention of which actors. I argue that for contradictions across institutional fields to trigger the mental alarm, they must interfere with an individual's goal pursuits. If a contradiction does not have meaningful implications for the individual's ability to pursue valued goals, such as the achievement of desired outcomes or the promotion of closely held values, then the individual is not likely to expend the cognitive energy necessary to engage in the judgment reassessment stage. However, when

contradictions interfere with goal pursuit, they have the effect of revealing and calling into question the nature of existing institutional arrangements and motivating individuals to reexamine their existing legitimacy judgments, because doing so can serve the individuals' goals. Thus, just as jolts can occur at either the macro-institutional or individual levels (or any level in between), contradictions can emerge for single individuals or for collectivities (e.g., organizations), and different contradictions will be evident to different actors depending on the goals and values the actors pursue.

**Reflexivity.** Reflexivity refers to the ability of individuals to consciously reflect on institutional arrangements. In order to do so, individuals must distance themselves from the institutional arrangements in which they are embedded by making deliberate efforts to interrogate those arrangements and consider possible alternatives (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Of course, this is precisely the type of reflective consideration of institutional arrangements that occurs in the reassessment stage. However, some theorists have suggested that there may be certain personality types or traits that will lead some individuals to be particularly predisposed to engage in this type of reflection. For example, Mutch (2007) explored Archer's (2003) concept of the autonomous reflexive, which refers to a type of individual who monitors the social environment and engages in internal debates that serve to challenge arrangements that conflict with individual-level concerns. This approach suggests that there may be individuals who are predisposed by the nature of their personality or personal experience to question existing institutional arrangements. These individuals may have personal tendencies or motivations that function as internal triggers of the mental alarm, thus moving them from the use stage to the reassessment stage without the need for an external jolt or contradiction.

## Summary

In summary, the legitimacy judgment process is characterized by three stages. In the judgment formation stage the individual forms legitimacy judgments using either a passive or evaluative mode of information processing. The passive mode involves the use of validity cues as a basis for a generalized legitimacy judgment, whereas

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the individual can also further exercise agency at this point by formulating a vision for institutional change and mobilizing to achieve that change. However, I focus here on the aspect of agency involved in the legitimacy judgment formation process and leave for future work the task of exploring the role of agency in determining how individuals act on these judgments in pursuit of institutional change.

the evaluative mode involves an effortful consideration of the entity along instrumental, relational, and moral dimensions. The generalized legitimacy judgment that emerges from the judgment formation stage functions as a heuristic in the use stage, guiding perceptions and behavior relevant to the entity. The use stage is characterized by a process of assimilation, which leads to the accumulation of cognitive legitimacy. The use stage persists until an exogenous jolt, contradictions in the institutional field, or reflexivity at the individual level trigger the mental alarm and motivate the individual to move into the judgment reassessment stage. In the reassessment stage the legitimacy judgment process involves a more effortful and deliberate approach to evaluating the legitimacy of the social entity along instrumental, relational, and moral dimensions. It is therefore in the reassessment stage of the legitimacy judgment process that judgments of illegitimacy are most likely to emerge. Those judgments of illegitimacy, in turn, produce the desire for institutional change. Upon forming a new positive or negative legitimacy judgment, the individual reenters the use stage.<sup>2</sup>

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The theoretical framework of legitimacy judgments I have developed here integrates legitimacy research from institutional theory and social psychology. Social psychologists have conceived of legitimacy as a function of instrumental and relational considerations and have only recently come to examine the moral dimension of legitimacy. At the same time, institutional theorists have conceptualized pragmatic legitimacy (i.e., the instrumental dimension), moral legitimacy, and cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) but have generally neglected to consider the importance of the relational dimension and have not examined the formation and change of these judgments at the individual level. The theoretical framework presented here integrates this previous work, highlighting the ways in which research from both fields can inform and complement one another. Moreover, the model of legitimacy judgments presented

here can be applied broadly to help scholars understand legitimacy evaluations of a variety of social entities, including organizations, social structures, organizational policies, procedures, and leaders.

Importantly, this integrative theoretical framework empowers researchers to explore both the content and process dynamics of legitimacy judgments. With respect to the content of legitimacy judgments, I argue that rather than viewing the instrumental, relational, and moral dimensions as competing models for understanding the content underlying legitimacy judgments, these three types of perceptions, beliefs, and concerns should be viewed as three different dimensions of judgment that may simultaneously impact individuals' judgments of the generalized legitimacy of a social target. Viewing them in this way permits scholars to explore the ways in which each of the types of concerns contributes to (or is guided by, as in the use stage) generalized legitimacy judgments. In addition, this perspective empowers researchers to consider the factors that influence which of the three dimensions is prioritized in the evaluative mode. An understanding of the content underlying legitimacy judgments can therefore contribute meaningfully to scholars' understanding of the factors that impact individuals' judgments of the legitimacy of organizations, groups, social structures, policies, procedures, and leaders.

At the same time, with respect to the legitimacy judgment process, the distinction between the use stage and the judgment stages (judgment formation and judgment reassessment) of the legitimacy judgment process provides much-needed conceptual clarity to the relationships between legitimacy and power, on the one hand, and legitimacy and fairness, on the other hand. First, the distinction between the judgment stages and the use stage helps to elucidate when legitimacy is a source of power that produces deference to organizational authorities and rules and when it instead represents a contingent judgment that is under development. Specifically, in the use stage legitimacy judgments guide people's interpretations of information related to social entities and determine individuals' behavioral orientations to those entities. Consequently, a positive legitimacy judgment provides the entity with a cushion of support that promotes deference to institutional

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<sup>2</sup> The cyclical nature of this process is similar to punctuated equilibrium models of change (Gersick, 1991).

constraints. In this sense, a positive legitimacy judgment is a source of power for organizations, institutions, and institutional authorities when evaluators are in the use stage. However, when an individual enters the evaluative mode, legitimacy is contested and can no longer function as a cushion of support; it is instead a developing judgment that is contingent on the individual's evaluations of the entity along instrumental, relational, and/or moral dimensions.

Second, the distinction between the use stage and the judgment stages also helps scholars conceptualize the distinctions between legitimacy and fairness. Specifically, while much previous social psychological research has conflated legitimacy and fairness, there has also been some confusion within the field of social psychology as to whether legitimacy should be treated as an antecedent to fairness perceptions (e.g., Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Degoe, 1995) or as an outcome of fairness perceptions (e.g., Hegtvedt & Johnson, 2000). The process model presented here suggests that, in fact, fairness is both an antecedent to and an outcome of legitimacy, depending on the stage of the legitimacy judgment process. Specifically, in the evaluative mode of the judgment stages, I would expect that procedural and interactional fairness would contribute positively to relational evaluations and that fairness in general (e.g., Ambrose & Schminke, 2009) would have a positive impact on both relational and moral evaluations. However, in the use stage the generalized legitimacy judgment would be expected to guide judgments of the fairness of the entity just as it guides other judgments related to the entity. Therefore, in the use stage legitimacy functions as an antecedent to fairness perceptions, but in the evaluative mode fairness is an antecedent to legitimacy.

### Implications for Institutional Change

In addition, an understanding of how legitimacy judgments develop and change over time can contribute substantially to scholarly understanding of the individual-level dynamics of support for and resistance to institutional change. Specifically, because legitimacy functions as a pivotal cognition that impacts individuals' inclinations to support a social entity or work for change, understanding how and why legitimacy judgments change can help re-

searchers understand how and why individuals' behavioral orientations to social entities may shift and cause them either to support or to resist institutional change.

As explained above, most models of institutional change conceive of the deinstitutionalization process as being preceded by a precipitating or destabilizing jolt to the social or organizational system (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2002; Meyer, Brooks, & Goes, 1990). However, the way in which such a jolt would initiate change processes at the level of individual behavior and the circumstances under which it would do so are rarely addressed in this literature. The present model has implications regarding both the nature of the jolt and its impact. According to the model presented here (but in contradiction to a common assumption in institutional research), the jolt need not occur at the macro level. The mental alarm can indeed be activated by radical environmental changes, such as crises, that occur at the macro level (assuming such environmental changes produce unexpected outcomes). However, the mental alarm can also be triggered by unexpected outcomes at the individual level, leading a single individual to reconsider the legitimacy of existing social entities and, if a judgment of illegitimacy is formed, to take on a change leadership role and work toward change at the group or organizational levels.

Furthermore, the view presented here of the transition between the use stage and the judgment reassessment stage further specifies the circumstances under which institutional contradictions act as a precursor to institutional change. Previous work in this area has explored how an actor's social position may influence the likelihood of detecting institutional contradictions (see Battilana et al., 2009, for a review). I argue that in addition to considering the likelihood of detection, it is also necessary to consider the motivation to examine the questions raised by any contradictions that are detected. If a contradiction is encountered but it does not interfere with the pursuit of desired outcomes or the promotion of personal values, then the individual is not likely to explore the questions that such a contradiction raises about existing institutional arrangements (and, consequently, the cognitive legitimacy of those arrangements remains intact). In order to enter the judgment reassessment stage in response to institutional

contradictions, an individual must have both the opportunity to detect contradictions (e.g., social position) and the motivation to examine the questions arising from those contradictions.

Thus, this model also has important implications for the study of institutional entrepreneurship. Institutional entrepreneurs are individuals who take on leadership roles in institutional change efforts (Battilana et al., 2009; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), using what Fligstein (2001) calls "social skill" to induce others to cooperate in the pursuit of change. Accordingly, institutional entrepreneurs are individuals who have formed a judgment of existing social entities as illegitimate and therefore seek change. Because of their critical role in initiating change and persuading others to support change, Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott (2002: 47) call institutional entrepreneurs "agents of legitimacy." That is, institutional entrepreneurs use influence to persuade others of the illegitimacy of existing social arrangements and of the legitimacy of alternatives, thereby recruiting others to join them in institutional change efforts. The model of the legitimacy judgment process presented here has important implications for understanding the determinants of institutional entrepreneurs' success in their role as agents of legitimacy.

First, the model suggests that institutional entrepreneurs will be most effective in their persuasion attempts if the targets of their influence are in the evaluative mode characterizing the judgment reassessment stage. Therefore, institutional entrepreneurs may be more successful to the extent that they can trigger the mental alarm in their potential followers, thereby moving followers into the judgment reassessment stage. If the targets of influence hold the institutional entrepreneur in high esteem, an explicit challenge to the social entity in question from the institutional entrepreneur will likely be sufficient to trigger the mental alarm. However, if the relationship between the institutional entrepreneur and potential followers is more tenuous, other approaches may be necessary, such as creating circumstances in which the potential followers will experience jolts or institutional contradictions that are personally relevant. This role of institutional entrepreneurs in creating the circumstances that favor the triggering of the mental alarm is particularly important when the institutional entrepreneur seeks to enlist the

help of actors outside the institutional context to work for change.

Similarly, the model suggests that institutional entrepreneurs can inspire motivation for change by influencing the process of judgment undertaken in the judgment reassessment stage. One way of doing this is by influencing followers' perceptions of which social entity should be targeted for change. When followers experience a mental alarm activation, it may not always be immediately apparent what aspect of the social environment is the source. It may be unclear which among many existing social entities is to be blamed or credited for an unexpected outcome or contradiction. Institutional entrepreneurs can thus play a critical role in guiding followers' judgments in the reassessment stage by highlighting specific social entities as the source of the problem or concern, thereby affecting which entities are the targets of reevaluation. In addition, when individuals experience conflicting legitimacy judgments across types of legitimacy (e.g., when an individual perceives a procedure as instrumentally legitimate but as morally and relationally illegitimate), an institutional entrepreneur can have an impact by attempting to persuade followers of which dimension of legitimacy should be prioritized in determining the generalized legitimacy judgment and by acting as a source of validity.

This research also has implications for how institutional entrepreneurs might successfully craft the content of their appeals for support. As Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) explain, how and why particular efforts at institutional entrepreneurship succeed are not yet clear. These researchers contend that a fundamental aspect of successful institutional entrepreneurship involves the establishment of connections between insurgent logics (i.e., alternatives to existing institutional arrangements) and broader discourses that reflect overarching social values. Of course, which sets of values to connect to is another issue, and the present model suggests that the decision to focus on instrumental (i.e., effectiveness and efficiency), relational (e.g., group loyalty), or moral (i.e., ethics and integrity) values can have a critical impact on the effectiveness of persuasion attempts. Specifically, the model presented here highlights that the follower's orientation to the social group that is embedded in the institutional field is a criti-

cal moderator of which of these three dimensions is prioritized in determining generalized legitimacy judgments in the evaluative mode. The framework implies, therefore, that influence attempts focusing on instrumental considerations (e.g., constructing an argument for change that focuses on how the change improves organizational effectiveness or individuals' material outcomes) would be more effective when followers have an extrinsic orientation to the group or organization (such as individuals with low levels of organizational identification), whereas influence attempts focusing on relational and moral considerations (e.g., constructing an argument for change that focuses on how the change may enhance the status of the group or is representative of group values and ethical principles) would be more effective when followers have an intrinsic orientation to the group or organization (such as individuals with high levels of organizational identification). Thus, this model has important implications for understanding the role of rhetoric and discourse in institutional change (Phillips et al., 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara et al., 2006)

Furthermore, it is important to note that institutional entrepreneurs need not occupy formal positions of power or authority within an organization or institutional field. Instead, institutional entrepreneurs may emerge from any level of a group or organizational hierarchy to take up leadership for institutional change. Existing research, however, is ill-equipped to predict which individuals will emerge as institutional entrepreneurs on which issues and why. The present model suggests that one promising avenue of investigation into this important issue is to examine personality measures that may either (1) lead individuals to intrinsically value the questioning of institutional arrangements (thus leading an individual to, in effect, act as his or her own alarm activator) or (2) lead individuals to have relatively more sensitive mental alarms such that the magnitude of events or contradictions required to activate their mental alarm and subsequently lead them to discover illegitimacy in existing social systems is generally lower than average. Mutch (2007) takes initial steps in this direction, suggesting that individuals who have a tendency to take an autonomous stance in social inquiry are more likely to engage in institutional entrepreneurship. Future research should explore other per-

sonality variables and behavioral tendencies that may connect with this tendency, such as cognitive complexity (Carragher & Buckley, 1996), nonconformity (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), and chronic reactance (Hong, 1992). These and similar traits may lead certain individuals to identify social and institutional problems earlier than others and to react to those problems more strongly, thus emerging as institutional entrepreneurs.

Finally, the model presented here suggests that institutional change is most likely to be supported when an individual comes to critically examine his or her generalized legitimacy judgments of existing social entities. This critical examination may result in judgments of illegitimacy, which produce a desire for change. However, a less obvious implication of the model is that the process of assimilation that characterizes the use stage may also promote institutional change—not radical change but a convergent, incremental form of change (Meyer et al., 1990; Nadler, Shaw, & Walton, 1995; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Specifically, it may be the case that the process of assimilation that characterizes the use stage produces small changes in expectations as the individual encounters events and outcomes over time that are not entirely consistent with expectations but that are insufficient in magnitude for alarm activation. Consequently, over time, the magnitude of event that is necessary to trigger the mental alarm shifts, because the individual's level of expectation has shifted. As a result, a social entity may change incrementally without triggering a reevaluation of its legitimacy. In this way small events may effectively recalibrate the alarm to change the magnitude of event or contradiction necessary to activate it.

## Conclusion

The model of legitimacy judgments presented here incorporates research from institutional theory and social psychology to develop a theoretical framework of the content of legitimacy judgments and a model of the process by which those judgments develop and change. The integration of these two views on legitimacy thus lays the foundation for a more nuanced understanding of the construct at both the micro and macro levels and for multilevel theorizing on institutional change.

While institutional theorists have in recent years dedicated substantial scholarly effort to understanding the dynamics of the proactive pursuit of change, microlevel organizational behavior theorists and social psychologists have instead focused primarily on studying strategies of coping with change (e.g., Judge, Thoreson, Pucik, & Welbourne, 1999) or resistance to change (e.g., Agocs, 1997; Bovey & Hede, 2001; Oreg, 2003). From these perspectives, either organizational change is presented as a hindrance to employees' feelings of well-being (i.e., as something individuals must cope with) or employees are viewed as a hindrance to organizational change (i.e., as resistant to the changing needs of the organization as a whole).

While work in both of these areas is important for a broad understanding of the psychological dynamics of organizational change, there is also a need for more social psychological research viewing individuals as potentially active participants in change efforts (e.g., Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001) and examining the ways in which individuals come to view change as desirable and necessary. An integrative theoretical framework for understanding legitimacy judgments can help to fill this gap because illegitimacy is an important precursor of the desire for change (Greenwood et al., 2002; Suchman, 1995). Indeed, recent social psychological research has suggested that judgments that a power hierarchy is illegitimate prompt powerless group members to adopt a more action-oriented mindset (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008); a greater understanding of the process by which individuals construct such legitimacy judgments may therefore help to identify the circumstances under which powerless group members will take action to change social hierarchies. An integrative understanding of legitimacy at the micro level can contribute to an understanding of when, how, and why an individual's judgment of the legitimacy of a given social entity changes from a judgment of legitimacy to one of illegitimacy and, consequently, leads the individual to seek change.

Thus, by using the construct of legitimacy as a linkage between micro and macro literature, this model provides microlevel researchers of organizational change with a much-needed framework for understanding the proactive pursuit of change. At the same time, the model can help institutional theorists better understand

the microlevel roots of the legitimacy-based processes they study, thereby potentially contributing to the development of multilevel theories of institutional change.

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