

# PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LEGITIMACY AND LEGITIMATION

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■ **Abstract** Legitimacy is a psychological property of an authority, institution, or social arrangement that leads those connected to it to believe that it is appropriate, proper, and just. Because of legitimacy, people feel that they ought to defer to decisions and rules, following them voluntarily out of obligation rather than out of fear of punishment or anticipation of reward. Being legitimate is important to the success of authorities, institutions, and institutional arrangements since it is difficult to exert influence over others based solely upon the possession and use of power. Being able to gain voluntary acquiescence from most people, most of the time, due to their sense of obligation increases effectiveness during periods of scarcity, crisis, and conflict. The concept of legitimacy has a long history within social thought and social psychology, and it has emerged as increasingly important within recent research on the dynamics of political, legal, and social systems.

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## PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LEGITIMACY AND LEGITIMATION

This review focuses on legitimacy—the belief that authorities, institutions, and social arrangements are appropriate, proper, and just. This quality is important because when it exists in the thinking of people within groups, organizations, or societies, it leads them to feel personally obligated to defer to those authorities, institutions, and social arrangements. Legitimation refers to the characteristic of being legitimized by being placed within a framework through which something is viewed as right and proper. So, for example, a set of beliefs can explain or make sense of a social system in ways that provide a rationale for the appropriateness or reasonableness of differences in authority, power, status, or wealth. This has the consequence of encouraging people to accept those differences. Irrespective of whether the focus is on an individual authority or an institution, legitimacy is a property that, when it is possessed, leads people to defer voluntarily to decisions, rules, and social arrangements.

The focus of this chapter is a new one for the *Annual Review of Psychology*. However, the themes of this chapter are related to those touched upon in prior volumes, including intergroup relations (Hewstone et al. 2002), the psychology of stereotyping (Major & O'Brien 2005), social identity (Ellemers et al. 2002), social influence (Cialdini & Goldstein 2004), and justice (Miller 2001).

### Legitimacy

Throughout the history of social thought, it has been recognized that people can exercise influence over others by possessing power. Power is the ability to shape the gains and losses of others either by threatening or using coercion to deter undesired behavior or by promising rewards to promote desired behavior. A core aspect of social dynamics, therefore, is that power provides a means to shape behavior with the consequence that, as an early social theorist noted, “The strong do what they will, the weak endure what they must” (Thucydides 1982, p. 351), or as a recent political leader, Mao Tse-Tung, opined, “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” The argument that behavior in social settings is linked to the ability to reward and punish is not only central to psychological theories, but is also influential in political science, sociology, and economics as well as in law, public policy, and management.

While accepting the realities of power in social life, early social theorists—including Aristotle and Plato—also recognized that seeking to gain influence over others based solely on the possession of power is costly and inefficient. The use of power, particularly coercive power, requires a large expenditure of resources to obtain modest and limited amounts of influence over others. It is therefore important that under some circumstances people are also influenced by others because they believe that the decisions made and rules enacted by others are in some way right or proper and ought to be followed (Zelditch 2001). In other words,

subordinates also “relate to the powerful as moral agents as well as self-interested actors; they are cooperative and obedient on grounds of legitimacy as well as reasons of prudence and advantage” (Beetham 1991, p. 27).

The classic argument of political and social theorists has been that for authorities to perform effectively, those in power must convince everyone else that they “deserve” to rule and make decisions that influence the quality of everyone’s lives. In other words, “Every authority system tries to cultivate a belief in its legitimacy” (Zelditch & Walker 2003, p. 217). Central to the idea of legitimacy is the belief that some decision made or rule created by these authorities is valid in the sense that it is entitled to be obeyed by virtue of who made the decision or how it was made. While some argue that it is impossible to rule using only power, and others suggest that it is possible but more difficult, it is widely agreed that authorities benefit from having legitimacy and find governance easier and more effective when a feeling that they are entitled to rule is widespread within the population.

Recent social science-based expositions on legitimacy have evoked the same underlying concept to define legitimacy. Psychologists French & Raven (1959) refer to legitimacy as social influence induced by feelings of “should,” “ought to,” or “has a right to,” i.e., by appeals to an “internalized norm or value.” Suchman (1995) argues that “Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (p. 574). Referring to legitimacy as “authorization,” Kelman & Hamilton (1989) argue that when an authority is legitimate, “the duty to obey superior orders” replaces personal morality, with people allowing legitimate authorities to define the boundaries of appropriate behavior in a given situation (p. 16). Or, more simply, legitimacy is the perception that one “ought to obey” another (Hurd 1999). Hence, legitimacy is an additional form of power that enables authorities to shape the behavior of others distinct from their control over incentives or sanctions (Ford & Johnson 1998, French & Raven 1959).

Why is legitimacy important? As noted, seeking to govern a society or manage an organization based upon the possession of power alone first requires enormous expenditures of resources to create a credible system of surveillance through which to monitor public behavior to punish rule violators. In addition, resources must be available to provide incentives for desired behavior, rewarding people for acting in ways that benefit the group. Studies show that these strategies of governance can be successful. For example, recent research suggests that deterrence strategies do shape crime-related behavior (Nagin 1998). However, the same research shows that such instrumental influences are small and come at a high material cost. This leaves societies vulnerable because disruptions in the control of resources brought on by periods of scarcity or conflict quickly lead to the collapse of effective social order. When the public views government as legitimate, it has an alternative basis for support during difficult times. Further, when government can call upon the values of the population to encourage desired behavior, society has more flexibility about how it deploys its resources. In particular, the government is better able to use

collective resources to benefit the long-term interests of the group because the resources are not required for the immediate need to ensure public order.

The roots of the modern approach to legitimacy lie in the writing of Weber (1968). Like Freud and Durkheim, Weber argues that social norms and values become a part of people's internal motivational systems and guide their behavior separately from the impact of incentives and sanctions. As a result, "control by others is replaced by self-control, as social norms and values are internalized and become part of the individual's own desires concerning how to behave" (Hoffman 1977, p. 85). People who internalize social norms and values become self-regulating, taking on the obligations and responsibilities associated with those norms and values as aspects of their own motivation. One aspect of values—obligation—is a key element in the concept of legitimacy. It leads to voluntary deference to the directives of legitimate authorities and rules. Hence, unlike influence based upon the influencer's possession of power or resources, the influence motivated by legitimacy develops from within the person who is being influenced (King & Lenox 2000; Tyler & Huo 2002, ch. 7).

A legitimating ideology is a set of justifications or "legitimizing myths" (Major 1994, Sidanius & Pratto 1999) that lead a political or social system and its authorities and institutions to be viewed as normatively or morally appropriate by the people within the system. A wide variety of forms of legitimation are found through history and across societies and cultures. A classic typology of legitimating ideologies is found in the work of Weber (1968), who distinguishes between legitimacy based upon deference to customs and values (traditional authority), legitimacy based upon devotion to the actions or character of an authority (charismatic authority), and legitimacy linked to the process of rule creation and interpretation (rational bureaucratic authority). Weber's work makes clear that the legitimation of authority and institutions through "the rule of law," while widespread in modern societies, is only one of many ways in which social arrangements might potentially be justified.

## Legitimacy in Psychology

The idea of legitimacy underlies many of the important contributions of American social psychology. The work of Lewin and associates on the dynamics of authority both demonstrates the influence of the legitimacy acquired by leadership style on the willingness to accept the recommendation of authorities and argues for the important role that democratic governance has in the creation and maintenance of legitimacy (Gold 1999, Lewin 1951, Lewin et al. 1939). Similarly, both Milgram's and Kelman's research on deference to authority demonstrates the powerful influence of directives from a legitimate authority on behavior (Kelman & Hamilton 1989, Milgram 1975). In addition, research by Thibaut and colleagues shows that decision acceptance is linked to the fairness of the procedures by which authorities make decisions (Thibaut & Walker 1975). Underlying all of these findings is the implicit impact of the legitimacy of an authority, however derived, on its ability to influence others.

Despite the importance of these implicit studies of legitimacy, the concept of legitimacy itself has not played a central role in social psychology since the era of the group dynamics movement (French & Raven 1959). However, recently there has been a resurgence of attention to issues of legitimacy and legitimation within both social psychology and the social sciences more generally. Although some of this work mirrors earlier research in focusing on the legitimacy of authorities in individual or small group settings, much of recent attention has been directed toward legitimacy as a factor in large organizations and in societies.

## Legitimacy and the Dynamics of Authority

The most concrete influence of legitimacy occurs when people make decisions or create rules designed to shape the behavior of others. The question of whether others will accept those decisions and rules is always a key one in social settings, particularly when decision-makers are not backed up with either credible coercive potential or the promise of rewards. As a result, the ability to secure compliance is often viewed as the litmus test of effective leadership. Consistent with the longstanding arguments of legitimacy theories, recent studies suggest that having legitimacy facilitates the ability to gain decision acceptance and to promote rule-following.

In the legal arena, research on people's personal interactions with police officers and judges indicates that people who view those authorities as legitimate are more likely to accept their decisions, an effect that is distinct from the general finding that people are more likely to accept decisions that are more favorable and/or fairer (Tyler & Huo 2002, ch. 7). Similarly, studies in organizational settings indicate that legitimacy facilitates the personal exercise of authority. Porter et al. (2003) show that, in work teams, the legitimacy of the request for backup behavior from others shapes the degree to which other team members provide backup. In addition, Smith et al. (2003) show that when people are given reasons for injustice within a group (i.e., in this case told that inequality is more legitimate), they identify more strongly with their group and cooperate more fully with it in resolving social dilemmas. In each of these cases, authorities who are viewed as more legitimate have their decisions more easily deferred to by others.

**WHY ARE AUTHORITIES LEGITIMATE?** During the past several decades, a large literature on procedural justice has developed within social psychology (DeCremer & Tyler 2005; Tyler 2000, 2004b; Tyler & Blader 2003; Tyler & Lind 1992; Tyler & Smith 1998). A core finding of that literature is that authorities and institutions are viewed as more legitimate and, therefore, their decisions and rules are more willingly accepted when they exercise their authority through procedures that people experience as being fair (Tyler 2001). This procedural effect is widespread (for recent reviews, see Cohen-Charash & Spector 2001, 2002; Colquitt et al. 2001, 2005).

In legal settings, people are found to be more willing to defer to the decisions of formal and informal legal authorities when those decisions are made fairly

(Hoffman 2005, Paternoster et al. 1997, Shestowsky 2004, Tyler & Huo 2002). One important recent development is the widespread use and study of restorative justice conferences in lieu of trials. These conferences, which are experienced by those involved as procedurally fairer than trials, lead to greater cooperation with the law (Nugent et al. 2003, Poulson 2003, Roberts & Stalans 2004). This finding mirrors the earlier finding that mediation, which is viewed as procedurally fairer, leads to greater decision acceptance by disputants (Shestowsky 2004).

Similarly, studies in work organizations support the argument that those authorities who exercise their authority fairly are more likely to be viewed as legitimate and to have their decisions accepted (Ambrose 2002; Cohen-Charash & Spector 2001, 2002; Colquitt et al. 2001; Konovsky 2000). Further, these studies demonstrate that experiencing fair procedures when dealing with authorities generally encourages people to become committed to organizations, leading to a variety of forms of cooperation, including rule-following and making extra-role efforts to help the organization be effective and successful (Tyler & Blader 2000). In other words, legitimacy both helps within particular situations and encourages more general actions on behalf of the group.

### Legitimacy as a System-Level Attribute

Legitimacy is also an issue on the group, organizational, or system level, where the legitimacy of authorities and institutions is part of the overall climate or culture of a group. Discussions of the stability of social and political systems have long emphasized the importance to effective governance of having widespread consent from those within the system. Such widespread consent enables the more effective exercise of social and political authority, since authorities can appeal to members based upon their shared sense of values. As Kelman (1969) argues, "It is essential to the effective functioning of the nation-state that the basic tenets of its ideology be widely accepted within the population" (p. 278). Hence, effective democratic governance depends upon the legitimacy of the state.

Recent discussions of the dynamics of organizations focus on legitimacy in work organizations (Elsbach 2001, Elsbach & Sutton 1992, Haslam 2004, Kostova & Zaheer 1999, Suchman 1995). Like earlier work on political legitimacy, these discussions stress that organizational viability is enhanced when members view organizational rules and authorities as legitimate and entitled to be obeyed. Studies within work-based organizational settings show that, as predicted by legitimacy theory, employees are more willing to follow organizational rules and authorities when they believe that they are legitimate (Tyler & Blader 2005).

Studies suggest that legitimacy has an important role in securing support for work organizations. Bansal & Clelland (2004) show, for example, that firms viewed as legitimate are more highly insulated from unsystematic variations in their stock prices; Pollock & Rindova (2003) demonstrate that the legitimacy that companies acquire through media presentations of their initial public offerings shapes investor behavior; and research suggests that firms with legitimacy are generally more likely

to survive (Baum & Oliver 1991, Human & Provan 2000, Rao 1994, Zimmerman & Zeitz 2002).

Across all types of organizations, the core argument of legitimacy theory is that legitimacy provides a “reservoir of support” for institutions and authorities, something besides immediate self-interest, which shapes reactions to their policies (Weatherford 1992). Such a reservoir is of particular value during times of crisis or decline, when it is difficult to influence people by appealing to their immediate self-interest, and when there are risks concerning whether they will receive the long-term gains usually associated with continued loyalty to the group. Recent research supports this “reservoir of support” argument.

Studies of the 2000 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore* suggest that in gaining deference for a controversial decision, the Court benefited from the widespread public view that the Court is a legitimate political institution (Gibson et al. 2003). The many recent changes in the government within various societies around the world, including South Africa and the former Soviet republics, have provided additional field settings within which the underlying assumptions of legitimacy theory have been tested. These changes in government have also rekindled interest in understanding how to create and maintain institutional legitimacy, since issues of social disintegration and internal conflict become salient when governments collapse and new forms of social order must be created. This reemphasis on understanding how to legitimate new governments is consistent with the earlier “major preoccupation of political scientists and sociologists [with legitimacy] in the post-colonial, nation-building era after the Second World War” (Sears 2003, p. 323). That preoccupation with establishing legitimacy was fueled by the fear that, without legitimate authorities and institutions, societies would descend into anarchy and chaos.

The political perspective is that when a new government comes into being, a key factor shaping its success is the degree to which it can establish legitimacy among the general populace. As Gibson suggests, “In a new political system few resources are more coveted than political legitimacy. Legitimacy is an endorphin of the democratic body politic; it is the substance that oils the machinery of democracy, reducing the friction that inevitably arises when people are not able to get everything they want from politics. Legitimacy is loyalty; it is a reservoir of goodwill that allows the institutions of government to go against what people may want at the moment without suffering debilitating consequences” (Gibson 2004, p. 289). For this reason, those seeking to solidify their exercise of authority create institutions that they hope will receive public support (Trochev 2004).

Research on emerging governments supports the argument that political institutions, including courts, can legitimate and gain acceptance for unpopular decisions and policies (Gibson et al. 1998, Machura 2003). On the other hand, studies also raise questions about the breadth of such legitimation effects. Gibson & Caldiera (2003), for example, find that the Constitutional Court in South Africa has little power to legitimate unpopular decisions, as reflected in self-reported willingness to acquiesce to unpopular Court decisions.

Although the positive consequences of legitimacy are important, it is important to note that legitimacy can serve as the basis for justifying oppression and harm to others. The potential risks of legitimacy are treated at length by Kelman & Hamilton (1989) and by Kelman (2001). In particular, because people authorize another to make judgments for them about what is appropriate conduct, they no longer feel that their own moral values are relevant to their conduct. Consequently, when directed by that legitimate authority to engage in immoral actions, people are found to be strikingly willing to do so (Kelman 2001, Milgram 1975).

**WHAT LEGITIMATES AUTHORITIES AND INSTITUTIONS?** Recent research suggests that the key aspect of authorities and institutions that shapes their legitimacy and, through it, the willingness of people to defer to the decisions of authorities and to the rules created by institutions is the fairness of the procedures through which institutions and authorities exercise authority. This procedural justice effect on legitimacy is found to be widespread and robust and occurs in legal, political, and managerial settings (Tyler 2000, 2001; Tyler & Smith 1998).

In the legal arena, people are found to believe authorities are more legitimate when they view their actions as consistent with fair procedures (Sunshine & Tyler 2003; Tyler & Huo 2002, ch. 4). As a result, when the authorities engage in unfair procedures such as racial profiling (Tyler & Wakslak 2004) or the use of unnecessary force (Seron et al. 2004), they lose public support, whereas acting fairly increases deference (Cohn et al. 2000, Gibson 2002).

Similarly, political authorities and institutions lose legitimacy when they do not adhere to procedural fairness norms (Clawson et al. 2001, Farnsworth 2003, Gangl 2003, Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002, Kershaw & Alexander 2003, Murphy 2004). Recent research on political institutions and authorities in new democracies supports the argument that procedural issues underlie the legitimacy of political authorities and institutions. A study of Eastern European countries by Kluegel & Mason (2004) suggests that both procedural and distributive justice judgments about the economic system shape political support, and other studies show that evidence of procedural injustice, in the form of corruption, undermines political support (Seligson 2002).

Finally, the legitimacy of the leaders of work organizations, ranging from supervisors to CEOs, is linked to the fairness of the procedures they use to make decisions in work settings (Tyler & Blader 2000, 2005). This research indicates that four aspects of procedures make independent contributions to procedural justice judgments: organization-level decision-making, organization-level interpersonal treatment, supervisor-level decision-making, and supervisor-level interpersonal treatment (Blader & Tyler 2003).

The procedural base of legitimacy has widespread implication for the legitimation of authority in organizational settings. In political processes, the widespread effort to create deliberative political procedures is motivated, in part, by the demonstration that public participation in such procedures enhances political legitimacy (Carpini et al. 2004). The efforts of the legal system to create more informal legal



procedures such as mediation reflect a similar recognition that the public experiences these procedures as fairer, and their use enhances the legitimacy of legal authority (Landsman 2003, Shestowsky 2004). And, in work settings, the use of open and participatory styles of leadership has been linked to the desire to build legitimacy and gain cooperation from employees (DeCremer & van Knippenberg 2002, Keyes et al. 2000, Tyler 2002). Studies in work settings are particularly important because they demonstrate that the use of fair procedures not only encourages deference to authorities, but also motivates a variety of types of voluntary positive efforts on behalf of one's organization.

Hegtvedt et al. (2003) argue that rather than viewing procedural justice and legitimacy as being in a causal relationship, the two can be thought of as joint inputs into the interpretation of outcomes. Their model suggests that both procedural justice and collective legitimacy shape the attributions that people make for the decisions of an allocator. First, people are influenced by how the allocator acts. If the allocator uses fair procedures, people are less likely to make internal attributions for unfair outcomes, and more likely to attribute the unfair outcomes to external contingencies. Separately, people are influenced by what they are told others think about the allocator. If the allocator is supported by either peers or authorities, the allocator is more legitimate (Zelditch & Walker 2000). If people view the allocator as legitimate, they are less likely to make internal attributions and more likely to make external attributions when that allocator makes an unfair distribution.

Hegtvedt et al. (2003) further argue for an interaction between procedural justice and legitimacy and unfair outcomes. They suggest that, when people receive unfair outcomes, they are less likely to react cognitively or behaviorally to that experience of distributive injustice if there is procedural justice or if the authority is legitimate. Hence, the presence of either procedural justice or legitimacy leads unfair outcomes to have less impact upon the individual because they are less likely to be interpreted as being unfair.

Finally, Hegtvedt & Johnson (2000) suggest that legitimacy may have the effect of shaping assessments of the fairness of allocation procedures. They suggest that "subordinates are more likely to tolerate certain levels of procedural injustice by strongly endorsed or authorized allocators" (p. 306). In particular, they argue that when experiencing unfair allocation outcomes from a legitimate authority, people are less likely to interpret the allocation procedures leading to those outcomes as being unfair. Since procedural unfairness leads to losses of legitimacy, this suggests that prior legitimacy may create a cushion of support against the loss of legitimacy in response to receiving an unfair outcome.

Mueller & Landsman (2004) find support for this argument in a study of child welfare social workers who completed questionnaires about their work organization. Consistent with expectations, those respondents who viewed authorities as legitimate were both more likely to evaluate the promotion procedures they used as being fair and to evaluate the outcomes of those procedures as being fair. In research conducted in the legal arena, Tyler & Huo (2002) similarly find that those people who evaluate legal authorities as generally more legitimate evaluate

the fairness of the procedures used by those authorities, as well as the outcomes that those procedures produce, as being fairer. Hence, legitimacy may provide a framework through which actions are evaluated and judged to be just or unjust.

Finally, it is important to recognize that procedural justice is not the only basis upon which authority can be legitimated. Law, as an example, has also been legitimated by reference to its substance, as when legal authorities incorporate scientific and technical experience into a “rationality” that legitimates law (Stryker 1994, 2000). And, more generally, quantification and the ability to compare outcomes on commensurable dimensions legitimates decisions (Espeland & Stevens 1998). So, for example, the use of indices such as the Social Sciences Citation Index to establish reputation and make decisions about promotion and compensation appears rational and, therefore, legitimate.

Rationality is related to ideas of procedural justice because it reflects neutrality and factuality in decision-making. But the type of rationality outlined is also directly connected to the argument that decisions accurately reflect the merits of a case. Hence, while much of procedural justice research has focused on producing “justice,” this aspect of procedures is related to their ability to produce “truth” (Thibaut & Walker 1978). In a trial, for example, the “true” innocence of the defendant is typically unknown, so the legitimacy of the verdict is established by the fairness of the trial procedures. However, the legitimacy of the verdict can also be established by evidence that compellingly reveals the truth, as when DNA tests have recently been used to exonerate those wrongly accused or convicted of crimes.

## Legitimacy and Societal Mechanisms of Resource Allocation

In addition to recognizing that the decisions and rules enacted by authorities or institutions are judged against criteria of legitimacy, people also judge the legitimacy of social arrangements such as economic markets and/or the social or economic standing of people or groups. Whenever there are differences in social or economic standing between people or between groups, issues are raised about the legitimacy of those differences and of the processes through which they arise. As an example, the differences in the economic and social status of white and minority group members in the United States raise questions about the legitimacy of our economic and social system. In other words, legitimation and the acceptance or rejection of legitimizing myths occurs more broadly than just with decisions and rules promulgated by authorities and institutions. One important example of such a broader institution is the economic system—the primary system for the allocation of social benefits and burdens. Within the American economic system, the primary allocation system for economic outcomes is the market (Dye 1990).

People are found to accept a variety of types of legitimating myths about markets. They uncritically accept meritocratic explanations for economic inequality (Jost et al. 2003), they focus blame for failure on individuals, not the system (Kluegel & Smith 1986), and perceived societal status predicts judgments of competence (Fiske et al. 2002). As suggested by theories of legitimation, people do not simply accept economic markets as efficient and effective systems of allocation.

They further believe that the market system is a normatively appropriate and fair system for resource allocation (Jost et al. 2003). Consequently, they believe that people deserve the outcomes they receive from markets and they resist governmental interventions in the economic sphere through policies such as affirmative action (Tyler 2004).

**THE PROCEDURAL LEGITIMATION OF MARKETS** As was true with authorities and institutions, recent evidence suggests that societal allocations are legitimated through the procedures that produce them (Jost et al. 2003, Tyler & McGraw 1986). That is, people defer to individual and group-based inequities because they believe that the use of markets to make economic allocations is a fair, and therefore legitimate, procedure for determining who receives what in society. People are found to focus first on the fairness of market procedures and to use these procedural judgments to determine whether they support government controls over markets or government corrections for market outcomes via procedures such as affirmative action (Tyler 2004). If people view market procedures as fair, they give little weight to evidence of potential distributive unfairness in the form of individual or group-based outcome differences.

## Legitimacy and Intergroup Relations

Zelditch (2001) points out that the range of what might potentially be legitimated is broad, and includes authorities, institutions, politics, status hierarchies, and inequalities of wealth or status. An example of system-level legitimation that has received considerable attention in recent research is support for or opposition to the previously noted group differences in economic or social status, i.e., for inequalities. Large and persistent group-based differences in social and economic status are found in societies throughout the world. In the United States, these differences are found to be linked to ethnic group membership, with minority group members being less well off in terms of both economic and social status.

American legitimating myths justify these differences through reference to stereotypes about the characteristics of the members of groups. For example, minority group members are argued to deserve subordinate economic status because they are “lazy” or “not intelligent,” and holding higher status is associated with possessing more favorable traits, such as competence (Fiske et al. 2002). These legitimizing myths often reflect basic cultural beliefs about what is “natural.” For example, Mahalingam (2003) demonstrates that core beliefs about the “essential” features of the members of different castes support existing social inequalities in India by suggesting that different lifestyles best fit the essential characteristics of the people within different castes. Similarly, evaluative judgments about cultural practices are used to legitimate the power of doctors in hospitals (Latimer 2004).

Central to recent discussions of intergroup relations is the argument that the reactions of the members of groups are influenced by their views about whether group status is legitimate or illegitimate (Tajfel 1974). Ellemers et al. (1993) support

this by demonstrating that low-status group members view their low status as more acceptable and identify more strongly with the low-status group when they judge status to be the result of a legitimate procedure for allocating people into groups. Additionally, when the assignment of low status to a group is illegitimate, people within the low-status group are dissatisfied with the position of their group and show competitive behavior toward the other group.

Other studies suggest that high-status group members may also be influenced by perceived legitimacy, with those who view their high status as illegitimate being less likely to engage in discrimination toward low-status group members (Turner 1999). Recent experimental research confirms that illegitimacy judgments increase people's tendency to express bias toward the members of other groups (Hornsey et al. 2003). And Levin et al. (2002) show that among low-status group members, ideologies justifying inequality are linked to favoring the high-status group only when status differences are viewed as legitimate.

In the context of American intergroup relations, Major (1994) argues that the degree to which people view existing social arrangements as legitimate is central to their reaction to those arrangements. If race-based discrepancies in outcomes are viewed as legitimate, people do not take action. If they are not, they lead to anger and to various forms of social action. Major (1994) further argues that people "tend to legitimate the status quo, even when it is disadvantageous to the self" (p. 309). They do so through the manner in which they structure their attributions for the causes of success and failure. For example, people locate cause in people, rather than in social systems; view themselves as having exaggerated control over their own outcomes; and believe that the world is a just place in which people get the outcomes they deserve. Major refers to these beliefs as legitimizing myths because they legitimate the existing social system.

In more recent research, it has been shown that legitimacy of group status leads differences in ability among groups to be less threatening. Schmader et al. (2001) examine the tendency of people to devalue a domain in response to information that their group is worse in that domain than another, higher-status, group. They found that when group status is legitimate, those in a low-status group do not devalue a domain because a legitimately higher-status group is better at it than their group is. When group status is illegitimate, they do. Similarly, when differences in group status are legitimate, people are less likely to interpret the negative outcomes they receive from high-status group members as reflecting discrimination (Major et al. 2002). Hence, when the high-status group holds its status legitimately, its attributions and actions are less threatening to low-status group members. Similar findings emerge in a study of nation-based soccer teams in Europe (Leach et al. 2003).

Major & Schmader (2001) also argue that legitimacy shapes the motivations that are engaged when people are involved in understanding the social world. When the system is legitimate, people are motivated to interpret their experiences in ways that justify existing conditions, finding reasons for the appropriateness of existing social arrangements. Hence, they do not attribute responsibility to factors such as discrimination that undermine the perception that the system is just. When the

system is not legitimate, on the other hand, people are motivated by ego-defensive attributions, i.e., they seek to protect their sense of self and their feelings of self-worth, and they are more likely to engage in system-based attributions such as discrimination. Hence, the existence of legitimacy leads to event interpretations that provide further support for the status quo, whereas an illegitimate system encourages patterns of attribution that further undermine legitimacy.

Recent studies provide insights into the origin of perceptions of the legitimacy of group status. Weber et al. (2002) use both laboratory and field studies to demonstrate that groups that view their status as linked to holding distinct prototypical attributes are more likely to view group differences as legitimate, and to feel less guilt about their advantages. For example, the members of the dominant group may be viewed as prototypically hard working. In contrast, those lacking in such legitimacy for their status show more guilt about their advantages, as well as displaying more negative intergroup attitudes. These findings suggest that increasing the perceived prototypicality of subgroup norms is one approach to improving the legitimacy of subgroups.

A meta-analysis of the influence of membership in high-status groups finds that reactions to high-status group membership consistently are shaped by assessments of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of that status (Bettencourt et al. 2001). High-status group members identify more with their in-group than do low-status group members when group status is legitimate, but not when it is illegitimate. Further, on relevant dimensions, favorable in-group bias and unfavorable out-group bias is stronger among high-status groups when group differences are legitimate. In other words, people in high-status groups are more likely to think in self-serving ways when their high status is legitimate.

The psychological dynamics of high- and low-status groups are further developed in social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto 1999). According to social dominance theory, the struggle for status among groups is played out through competition to gain acceptance for ideologies that support or undermine the legitimacy of the status of dominant and subordinate groups. Dominant groups encourage the acceptance of hierarchy-enhancing ideologies that legitimate their dominant status, whereas subordinate groups support hierarchy-attenuating ideologies, which endorse greater equality among groups. In addition, because dominant groups control existing social institutions, those institutions act in ways that support and maintain existing group-based inequality, such as advocating hierarchy-enhancing policies (Sidanius et al. 2001, 2004; Sidanius & Pratto 1999, ch. 5–8). Not all institutions support the status quo. Some institutions, for example, universities, are hierarchy attenuating, i.e., they act in ways that undermine existing group-based inequalities.

A key empirical argument developing from social dominance theory is that those people who are more highly motivated to accept group-based dominance will be more accepting of ideologies that legitimate existing group-based inequality. The desire to accept group-based dominance is indexed by social dominance orientation.

Further, the social roles to which individuals are drawn will be shaped by their social dominance orientation. Those high in social dominance orientation will be more accepting of legitimating myths and more likely to be found in institutional roles that involve supporting the status quo—for example, the role of a police officer (Dambrun et al. 2002, Pratto et al. 1997, Sidanius et al. 1994). Opposition to social dominance leads to support for antisystem roles, such as radical, terrorist, and college professor (Levin et al. 2003). Recent research suggests that this occurs both because people self-select into roles consistent with their ideologies (Sidanius et al. 2003) and because people are socialized by the institutions that they join (Sinclair et al. 1998).

Two additional mechanisms are also proposed. One is institutional selection, with people whose ideologies match their institution's objectives receiving higher institutional rewards (Pratto et al. 1997). The other is differential attrition, with those whose values conflict with institutional objectives hypothesized to be more likely to drop out of the institution (van Laar et al. 1999).

Using data collected in the National Election Study, Federico & Sidanius (2002) explore the influence of political sophistication on the relationship between prejudice and attitudes toward affirmative action. The authors argue that the desire of whites to maintain group-based advantages by acting on legitimating stereotypes that support the dominance of their group (i.e., prejudice) conflicts with the American ideal that racial equality is a key element of the American creed. They explore whether respondents who are more sophisticated and more aware of this conflict are less able to maintain legitimating myths supporting their group's interests, and therefore show a weaker influence of legitimating stereotypes (prejudice) on their policy views about affirmative action. Their findings suggest that sophistication does not change the relationship between prejudice and policy support, with whites at all levels of political sophistication showing a similarly strong influence of their legitimating stereotypes on their policy positions (also see Sidanius et al. 1996).

The suggestion that people are motivated to justify the current social system is also a key hypothesis of system justification theory. System justification theory focuses directly on the argument that stereotyping is a form of system justification through which existing social arrangements are legitimated by reference to the characteristics of different groups (Jost & Banaji 1994). For example, the members of dominant groups are viewed as intelligent and hard working, which justifies their possession of economic wealth and social status, whereas the portrayal of subordinate group members as lazy and weak seems to justify their lack of possession of wealth and status. More generally, the theory focuses on "system-justification [as] the psychological process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest" (Jost & Banaji 1994, p. 2), and the authors note that "stereotypes serve for their adherents the function of preserving the status quo" (p. 10).

Studies support this argument by showing that if people are primed with social status information, they develop stereotypes to justify that social ordering (Jost

2001, Jost & Burgess 2000, Jost et al. 2001). Most recently, studies of implicit attitudes suggest that both the members of disadvantaged and advantaged groups show evidence of such justifications. The members of disadvantaged groups are found to exhibit favoritism toward other groups (i.e., the advantaged), especially on implicit measures that minimize self-presentational issues. Members of advantaged groups, in contrast, are found to exhibit favoritism toward their own group (the advantaged) on implicit measures. Hence, both the advantaged and the disadvantaged support stereotypes justifying the position of the advantaged in studies using measurement strategies designed to minimize social desirability in responding (Jost et al. 2004).

Recent research argues for a more nuanced view of stereotypes by suggesting that both the advantaged and the disadvantaged will be stereotyped in ways that are favorable in some respects, but that also support existing social arrangements (Kay & Jost 2003). For example, the disadvantaged are presented as poor but happy, whereas the advantaged are depicted as rich but miserable. Similarly, men are viewed as agentic but not communal, whereas women are viewed as communal, but not agentic (Jost & Kay 2005). These complementary stereotypes “psychologically offset the one-sided advantage of any single group and contribute to an image of society in which everyone benefits through a balanced dispersion of benefits” (Jost & Kay 2005, p. 498; also see Kay et al. 2005). This argument is also made by Glick & Fiske (2001), who suggest the importance of “ambivalent” stereotypes that combine both positive and negative characteristics when describing out-groups.

Other types of research also support the basic argument that people are motivated to justify or legitimate the status quo. For example, Robinson & Kray (2001) show that those defending the status quo make little cognitive effort to understand the arguments of those urging changes, leading to frequent misinterpretations of their arguments. In addition, when people make arguments that challenge a person’s representations of the status quo, they are more likely to be perceived to be acting out of personal self-interest (O’Brien & Crandall 2005). Finally, people are found to be motivated to believe that (1) existing social arrangements are just; (2) they have not personally suffered from discrimination; and (3) harboring emotions such as resentment is socially inappropriate (Olson & Hafer 2001). These cognitive and motivational factors generally encourage deference to existing social conditions.

**WHY ARE PEOPLE MOTIVATED TO ENGAGE IN SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION?** Studies suggest that system-justifying ideologies decrease anxiety, uncertainty, guilt, frustration, and dissonance, and increase satisfaction with one’s situation in life (Jost & Hunyady 2002). Interestingly, this is true for both the disadvantaged and the advantaged (Chen & Tyler 2001). Although research has focused upon the reactions of the disadvantaged to their plight, theories of justice suggest that those who have “too much” also have a psychological problem to resolve. Studies of the advantaged suggest that they are also motivated to create “legitimizing myths” to

make their advantaged status seem appropriate (Chen & Tyler 2001). For example, those who attain their positions through family connections often create periods of “internship” that allow them to legitimize their subsequent rapid advance to the top of family firms, whereas those who gain admission to elite colleges through legacy admissions try to cloak such procedures in a merit-based framework. This idea is captured very well in the comment that “Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple” (Switzer 2005).

These findings suggest that the motivation to justify is a general one, with justifications of one’s position serving palliative psychological functions for both the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Among the advantaged, one consequence of such justifications is diminished support for both social change and assistance to the disadvantaged. If, after all, the advantaged believe that they made it on their own, then they might reasonably expect others to do the same.

## Distinguishing Legitimacy from Morality

Legitimacy is an internal value that is linked to personal feelings of obligation and responsibility to others. In these ways, it is similar to the moral values that are also an internal motivational guide to behavior. The influence of moral values upon behavior is like the influence of legitimacy in that both are internalized values that are taken on by individuals as a personal responsibility—i.e., to obey legitimate authorities and to act in ways consistent with personal moral values.

Although legitimacy and morality are similar in many ways, they are also clearly differentiable. Legitimacy is a perceived obligation to societal authorities or to existing social arrangements. Moral values are personal standards to which people attempt to align their behavior. Often moral values and legitimacy work together. For example, with most everyday laws, people obey the law because they feel that they ought to obey legitimate authorities and because they believe that the conduct prohibited by law is morally wrong (Tyler 1990, 2003). However, they do not always work in concert. In his work on obedience to authority, Kelman argues that morality operates as a check against following immoral orders given by legitimate authorities (Kelman & Hamilton 1989). He finds that when people deal with legitimate authorities, they authorize those authorities to make decisions about what is right and wrong. Hence, they suspend their normal motivation to keep their behavior in line with their moral values. In settings of this type, only legitimacy shapes behavior.

Recent studies suggest that people’s moral values also shape their reactions to rules (Darley et al. 2003) and to public authorities such as the police (Sunshine & Tyler 2003a). Past studies show that people follow rules when they think those rules accord with their moral values (Robinson & Darley 1995). Recent studies indicate that people’s views about appropriate sentencing decisions in criminal cases are driven by their morally based desire to give wrongdoers the punishment they deserve, and not by the instrumental goal of preventing future criminal activity either by the criminals themselves or by others whose actions might be shaped by the



punishment the criminal receives. People punish based upon the moral wrong reflected by the level and type of crime committed (Carlsmith et al. 2002, Darley et al. 2000).

## The Normative Status of Legitimacy

Past social psychological research has focused on legitimacy as a form of influence and has explored when legitimacy shapes people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. However, the recent emphasis of legitimacy research on societal-level institutions highlights the importance of social theories in shaping the normative perspective that is taken on legitimacy as a topic of study. That perspective, of necessity, must be rooted in political and sociological theories about the social nature of societies (Parkin 1972).

The views of the classic social theorists already noted are linked to the underlying assumptions of "consensus" views of society (Dahl 1956, Easton 1965, Lipset 1959, Parsons 1967, Sears 2003). Those views argue that all members of society benefit from the social and political stability that is facilitated by widespread beliefs that existing authorities and institutions are legitimate. Hence, there is no fundamental societal conflict underlying the study of legitimacy. Legitimacy is a valuable attribute for an institution if it promotes acceptance of its decisions and the rules it promulgates, and stability and institutional effectiveness are virtues that benefit all members of society.

The primary question of concern from a consensus perspective has been when and to what degree legitimacy actually shapes behavior—i.e., does legitimacy work as an influence strategy? The focus of rational actor models on the influence of rewards and punishment on behavior has led an emphasis in recent years on those instrumental factors rather than upon the development and maintenance of values such as legitimacy as part of an overall model of governance linked to political culture (Green & Shapiro 1994). Writers in an earlier era argued that the key to a stable society was the widespread development of such supportive values (Easton 1965), leading to a focus in earlier research on the socialization of values such as legitimacy and support for legal and political authority (Easton & Dennis 1969, Hess & Torney 1967, Hyman 1959, Sears 1975).

An alternative view of the society develops from conflict theories of society, models rooted in Marxism (Parkin 1972), but equally consistent with both realistic group conflict theory (Taylor & Moghaddam 1994) and social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams 1988). These models argue that groups within society are in conflict over valued resources and favored identities. Each group seeks to gain dominance over others, with the result that institutional arrangements and legitimizing ideologies favoring one group are often not beneficial to those within other groups.

This view of society leads to the argument that the process of legitimation favors the dominant group over others. It is not in the interest of subordinate groups to

defer to the authorities and institutions that dominant groups have created to serve their interests. Hence, from this perspective, widespread deference to legitimate authorities is beneficial only to those in the dominant group who seek to perpetuate their privileges by using their hegemonic control over culture to create ideologies, myths, and rituals that legitimate their favored position. Subordinate groups would be better off rejecting existing authorities and institutions and challenging the status quo by seeking social change (Tyler & McGraw 1986).

Such conflict-based models of society underlie many of the contributions to a recent volume on the psychology of legitimacy (Jost & Major 2001). In a review of this work, Sears argues that “The idealistic hope behind much of [the work in this volume] is that subordinate groups will see through the illusory legitimizing myths fostered by dominant groups to a ‘true’ consciousness more in harmony with their own real interests, and will then mobilize collectively to pursue them” (Sears 2003, p. 320).

As the literature reviewed suggests, there is substantial evidence that legitimacy encourages a wide variety of forms of public cooperation in many, but clearly not all, social settings. In particular, those who support authorities and institutions defer to their decisions and to the policies and rules they create (Elsbach 2001, Tyler 2001, Tyler & Huo 2002). Hence, the central empirical premise of legitimacy is well supported—legitimacy is an effective influence strategy—and those who view system stability as a valuable attribute can and do benefit when they are able to create and maintain this supportive value. Therefore, the question of how to view these findings is a socially important one. Consensus theorists regard them as positive, conflict theorists as disturbing.

One approach to reconciling these different approaches to legitimacy lies in understanding how legitimacy is created and maintained. The findings reviewed consistently suggest that the legitimacy of authorities and institutions is linked to the fairness of the procedures by which they exercise their authority. Hence, the pursuit of public support requires institutions and authorities to adhere to lay principles of procedural justice. The effort to create and maintain legitimacy, in other words, leads institutions to have a focus upon those who are being led, and their conceptions of justice and fairness. Widespread legitimacy will exist only when the perspectives of everyday members are enshrined in institutions and in the actions of authorities. This suggests that a focus on legitimacy empowers the members of organizations and societies.

The risk, pointed to by conflict theorists, is that justice judgments themselves will be the result of “false consciousness,” with the members of subordinate groups adopting the legitimating myths put forward by the dominant class (Fox 1999, Haney 1991). An example of this type of myth acceptance has been noted already in research on economic markets. Belief in the procedural justice of markets is widespread within American society, even among those who benefit the least from their operation (Jost et al. 2003). Further, this belief generally is not influenced by evidence that the market operates in ways that lead to wide group-based differences in economic outcomes (Tyler 2004). These results are consistent with the

argument that in at least some instances the justice judgments shaping assessments of legitimacy may reflect the perspective of a particular social group. The extent to which this is the case awaits future research.

## Overview

The idea of legitimacy has a long history within social thought and is important across the social sciences. The research reviewed shows the breadth of recent research on legitimacy and the depth of support for the basic argument of legitimacy theory. The concept of legitimacy is an ancient one, and the contribution of recent research is to test empirically its utility in a variety of social settings.

Consistent with the arguments of legitimacy theory, research shows that people are not influenced simply by the possession and use of power. Those authorities who seek to lead groups through incentives and/or coercion find it difficult to shape behavior effectively through these mechanisms, and they have difficulty creating and maintaining their influence over others. Therefore, those leading groups, organizations, and societies benefit when they have legitimacy among the members of their groups. Leaders have legitimacy when people view their authority as being appropriate and proper, with the consequence that they feel obligated to defer to the decisions made by leaders with legitimacy and the policies and rules they create.

What are the implications of the empirical findings outlined in this chapter? Dominant models of social control currently focus upon two ways that authorities can gain cooperation from the public. One way is via the threat of punishment, which promotes rule following. The other is via demonstrating competence in managing community problems, which encourages the public to help authorities. However, research findings are not consistent with these models. For example, the police have made dramatic improvements in the objective quality of their performance in recent decades, but that has not led to increases in public support for the police (National Research Council 2004, Skogan & Meares 2004). Why not? Because research suggests the public primarily views the police as legitimate, and cooperates with the police, when they experience the police as exercising their authority fairly. Hence, changes in the objective performance of the police in the control of crime and disorder do not strongly connect with public cooperation. For the police to gain cooperation, they need to focus on the fairness of police procedures, since fairer procedures would increase police legitimacy (Tyler 2004a). Similar arguments apply to the courts (Tyler 2001).

This review of recent research further suggests that legitimacy is important far beyond the prototypical case in which people defer to particular decisions made by authorities or rules created by institutions. The development of legitimizing myths that legitimate social arrangements is ubiquitous through society and is found with the justification of mechanisms for allocating economic and social status as well as with group-based differences in economic and social status. A number of studies in recent years document the pervasiveness and importance of the human desire to make sense of existing social arrangement by endowing those

arrangements with the assessment that they are appropriate and reasonable. This motivation is found among those who benefit from and, more paradoxically, those who are disadvantaged by those arrangements.

Finally, research also suggests what creates and sustains legitimacy. Authorities and institutions are legitimated by the manner in which they make decisions and exercise authority. Unlike a more instrumental perspective, which suggests that authorities gain influence over others when they can either deliver desired outcomes or credibly threaten others with harm, recent research demonstrates that people's deference to others is also based upon factors other than the ability to deliver rewards or punishments. To at least some extent, legitimacy derives from judgments about how those others exercise authority, judgments not based upon the favorability or even the fairness of the decisions the authorities make, but upon beliefs about what are fair or ethical procedures for exercising authority. Hence, the exercise of authority via fair procedures legitimates that authority, and encourages voluntary deference.

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