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AN EMPIRICAL TEST OF LEGITIMATION AS A STATUS PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Legitimation includes authorization of position occupants by external authority figures or their endorsement by members of task groups. Endorsed authority figures are more likely to direct interaction and influence the actions of group members than authorized authority figures. Interaction dynamics that lead to legitimation in groups are explored in this paper. We examine transcripts to determine whether speeches that contain organizing content vary by the history of the group and its gender composition.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of legitimation focus on how group members come to accept patterns of interaction, hierarchical arrangements of power and authority, and patterns of reward as fitting and proper. Some researchers concerned with macro social processes focus on the creation of legitimate cultural processes and products. Others focus on the generalization of micro social processes such as the effects of status on legitimation. Observable consequences of legitimate social orders vary depending on whether members of social groups endorse the legitimate order or are in a group where legitimation is authorized by an external agent (cf. Johnson, Dowd, and Ridgeway 2006).

We focus on how legitimation unfolds in face to face task groups. This situation, with its emphasis on a jointly produced outcome, is common in everyday life and involves features identified by researchers who study legitimation in micro social situations. Status generalization may occur in circumstances in which individuals with social advantages in the larger society define what is legitimate and acceptable interaction behavior. In circumstances where preexisting hierarchies do not exist, interaction dynamics lead to the development of legitimate rules of behavior and interaction patterns. These patterns are observed in juries, work teams, and

classroom groups. They reinforce both emergent and existing patterns of interaction inequality and are accepted as right and proper by both advantaged and disadvantaged members of groups.

The emergence of legitimation may be due to three distinct features of social interaction. Interaction dynamics may affect who gets to make contributions to the group, how these contributions are evaluated by other members of the group, and how approval and esteem are allocated to members of the group. Interaction content may also contribute to the development of legitimated social orders. Contributions by an actor seeking to organize group activity by suggesting a sequence of decisions may be an attempt at legitimation. Requests for clarification of task expectations may lead to legitimate definitions of potential success and failure for the group. Assigning roles to members of the group establishes a legitimated order of roles which may be ranked to control who, when and how often someone may talk.

We analyze transcripts of interaction in task groups to examine how actors legitimate patterns of interaction. We identify interaction content evident in attempts to organize group action or clarify the nature of the task confronting the group. We denote these interaction activities as the legitimation process which leads group members to see their actions and those of others as proper and valid in the task setting. Our objective is to identify thematic patterns in verbal records of group activity which legitimate status, roles, and actions of group members.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORY

Research and theory focused on the study of legitimation in face to face groups has at least two foci. On the one hand, investigations have focused on how social orders and social objects accepted as proper and valid in the eyes of members of a social system organize behavior by system members. Other work has focused on how social forms and social objects come to be accepted as proper and valid in the eyes of system members. Our interest is in the latter approach to the study of legitimation. We briefly review theories and results of investigations in the former tradition for insights regarding the effects of legitimation. We then focus on theories and research which focus on legitimation of social forms and social objects.

Legitimation is "...the process by which activity in specific, concrete situations of action are justified in terms of the norms, values, beliefs, practices and procedures of pre-given structures " (Zelditch 2001, p. 14). Its product is the legitimacy of the social order within which the process takes place. Two processes lead to the assignment of legitimacy. One is the social culture established by actors in the situation about how to accomplish goals and define behaviors as normatively appropriate. The other is the social structure in the situation which assigns individuals to roles and positions of advantage and disadvantage.

The collective consensus that governs behavior of actors in a social situation is referred as its validity. Beliefs of individuals that actions, norms, values, and beliefs expressed in a situation are normative and appropriate, are referred to as propriety. A distinction is also made between legitimacy that emerges from the joint actions of the actors, referred to as endorsement, and the imposition of a legitimate role by an external agent such as a superordinate, referred to as authorization (Dornbusch and Scott 1975). Investigations have focused on how validity, propriety, endorsement, and authorization affect actors' willingness to comply with directives

from superordinates, accept allocations of rewards, respond to influence attempts, and justify violations of expected resource allocations (cf. Zelditch 2006, Massey, Freeman, and Zelditch 1997).

Theoretical accounts of legitimation processes have focused on two underlying mechanisms. One is a generalization process based on either power or status (Ridgeway and Berger 1986, Ridgeway and Berger 1988, Berger, Ridgeway, Fisek, and Norman 1998). The other identifies actions that serve as accounts or justifications for the violation of expected patterns of interaction bounded by specific norms, values, and beliefs (Massey, et al. 1997, Zelditch and Floyd 1998). Each of these accounts presumes that an established social order acquires legitimacy as a result of either endorsement of the existing structure through a process of generalization or as a result of the authorization by assignment from an external source of authority.

Neither theoretical account addresses how actors come to endorse a set of norms, beliefs, and practices if a preexisting structure is not present in the situation. Such a process is likely to unfold in ad hoc task groups, or in groups with established interaction patterns where the task demands or leader incumbents shift from session to session. Bales and Strodtbeck (1951) consider this aspect of the social organization of group activity. Their research divided the sequence of interaction into three phases with the earliest phase devoted to identifying the problem, resolving normative issues about who could talk when, and activating decision making rules. Subsequent research by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) and Tuckman (Tuckman 1965, Tuckman and Jensen 1977) identified three distinct problem solving patterns. This research identified "forming, " or attempts to identify who would occupy various roles in the group, "storming, " or attempts to identify the problem, "norming, " or attempts to define rules of behavior, problem solving activity, and criteria for group success as the elements defining the emergence of group structure.

An unexamined significant issue is how legitimation unfolds so that all of the members of a group come to accept its result as right and proper. We became sensitized to this concern while examining interaction transcripts in a study linking interaction content to the emergence of social inequality in ad hoc and continuing groups. Shelly and Shelly (2009) explicitly compared speeches characterized as attempts to organize the group, attempts to solve the problem, and attempts to reduce group tension. Each of these different types of content contributed in unique ways to patterns of interaction inequality.

METHODS

Data from ad hoc problem solving groups were collected at the University of South Carolina in 1982 and have been extensively analyzed (cf. Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989; Smith-Lovin, Skvoretz, and Hudson 1986; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Six person groups were asked to generate a task to be employed in another study of discussion groups. The researchers varied the gender composition of the groups from no males and all females to all males and no females. Discussions averaged about thirty minutes in length and were recorded and transcribed.

Groups of students working on class decision tasks or presentation projects at two Midwestern Universities comprise the continuing groups in our data analysis. These groups varied in size

from three to seven in number. Three of the groups were all female. The others were mixed gender; none were equal in their male and female membership. Discussions varied in length from ten to forty minutes for these groups. Data were transcribed from video tapes.

We analyze transcripts from both sets of groups for initiation of verbal activity focused on organizing the group, structuring the task, and smoothing group tension. This analysis is designed to identify the frequency of the various types of activity observed in the groups, whether or not these activities vary by the gender of the participants in the groups, and whether or not the activity varies by the type of group.

We focus only on verbal utterances. Rules for "chunking " verbal activity and for categorizing these chunks identify the fundamental units of observation in our analysis (Bartholomew, Henderson, and Marcia 2000; Smith 2000). We focus on a coding scheme that employs an entire speech turn as the unit of observation (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). The coding scheme is designed to identify how actors attempt to organize a group to accomplish a task, how they try to define the task to be accomplished, and how individuals try to smooth tensions in the group. Four categories of verbal activity are coded in an attempt to identify how groups legitimate their social structure.

Coding which employs the speech turn as the chunk unit has been profitably employed in other analyses of interaction (Sacks, et al. 1978; Shelly and Troyer 2001a, 2001b; Shelly and Shelly 2004). Classification rules are described in Appendix 1. A sample of the transcripts was coded independently by one of the investigators and a trained (but inexperienced) coder. Agreement between the two coders for four transcripts was approximately 75%.

Activity that is completely off task, such as conversations about members' social life or extraneous activities unrelated to the task are coded as *noise*. We do not analyze this behavior in detail as it does not focus on organization of the group or efforts at task solutions.

Activity that attempts to assign roles or call the group back to solving the task is coded as *facilitation*. The goal of activity coded in this category is to keep the group moving toward a task solution. Examples include assigning roles with comments such as, "Why don't you keep a record of the ideas we come up with? " or comments such as, "Let's focus on the task. " Or, "Ok, so it meets that #2 [quotes "judgment " clause] " which invoke task focus for the group.

Activity that attempts to organize task activity such as listing task requirements, identifying how much time is left, or focusing the group on task completion is coded as *task organization*. A key distinction in coding this activity is that the focus is on process and not on identification of a task solution. Examples include, "Ok, I got it. One. " or. "We have to give a solution, right? " or, "Interactivity. You do get that when you go. Who's writing? "

Group members often find humor in some aspect of the task or tell one another jokes as they work together. This activity is coded as *social environment (grease)* as it often softens tensions in the group or builds cohesion within the group. Laughter (by the whole group) and generalized agreement constitute a large percentage of this activity. Examples include such things as, "What

should she do if she walked in here and we weren't here, or had ducked under the table? " and, "This group's---I'd hate to be alone in here with that question, wouldn't you? "

Our exploratory analysis determines the frequency of each type of activity, the extent to which each varies by the gender of the speaker, and the extent to which they vary by type of group.

RESULTS

We examine results for total interactions, *noise*, *facilitation*, *task organization,* and *social environment* speeches. The number of speeches for the sample task groups ranges from a low of 74 to a high of 366. The total number of speeches is 4327 with a mean of 228. The percent of legitimation speeches ranges from 15% to 38% of group activity.

Noise was observed infrequently with a range from zero to 56 speeches with a mean of 15. The percent of noise ranges from zero percent to 15%. We do not pursue an analysis of this activity.

The range for total legitimation speeches is from 16 to 105 with a mean of 59. The percent of speeches for all legitimation speeches ranges from 15% to 38%. Some skew in the data results from a small number of task groups who spent little time on task. For these groups a lack of task focus raises the possibility that the group did not meet a key scope condition for the study of task groups. We retain the groups in this analysis as no effort was made by earlier investigators to ascertain the extent to which task focus was present. Legitimation activities represent a vital set of activity for most of the groups.

Facilitation speeches range in number from 11 to 48. These speeches move the group toward solving the problem and are a relatively significant part of the legitimation activity. The number of facilitation speeches was about 42% of total legitimation speeches. *Task organization speeches* range from 5 to 35. These actions focus on completion of the task and are a significant part of legitimation activity. The total number of task organization speeches was 401, or about 29% of the legitimation speeches. *Social environment focused speeches* range from 5 to 39. These are actions by group members that lead to group cohesion are also significant part of legitimation activity. The total number of social environment speeches was about 30% of total legitimation speeches. These results are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequencies of Legitimation Speeches for all task groups

Total	Frequency	Percent
FA	586	41.8
TO	401	28.6
SE	416	29.7
Total	1403	100.0

We correlated social environment, facilitation, and task organization speeches with one another to determine how these verbalizations are related to one another within the groups. All of the correlations are strongly related to one another at the group level with values above .95 for the twenty eight groups we analyzed for this report. This analysis is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between categories of legitimation activity

	Facilitation	Task Orientation	Social Environment
Facilitation		.995	.989
Task Orientation			.990

An analysis of data related to gender as a factor in legitimation speeches shows that, where gender is identified, there is no difference in the frequency with which males or females initiate this activity. See Table 3. Although gender has been identified as a potentially significant factor in legitimation (cf. Johnson 2003, Johnson et al. 2006, Lucas 2003, and Ridgeway et al. 1994), the data from these groups do not show a significant relationship for either facilitation or clarification ($t = .368$ for Facilitation, $p = .714$ and $t = .787$ for Orientation, $p = .432$). Legitimation speeches are not related to gender of participants in these groups.

Table 3. Gender and the initiation of legitimation speeches.

Gender of the participant	Mean Facilitation	Mean Orientation
Male	4.200	5.872
	(5.551)	(5.221)
Female	4.564	5.872
	(7.649)	(6.051)

Comparing the activity of members of ad hoc groups with that of members of continuing groups, we found significant differences for both Facilitation and Orientation. There are substantially fewer continuing groups than ad hoc groups.

Table 4. Type of group and initiation of legitimation speeches.

Type of Group	Mean Facilitation	Mean Orientation
Continuing Groups	9.058	6.692
	(10.231)	(6.657)
Ad Hoc Groups	2.292	5.087
	(2.452)	(5.218)

Continuing groups existed before, and continued after, the recorded task and ad hoc groups were brought together only for the specified task. Table 4 reports the data for these analyses. For both areas of analysis, a comparison of the means shows that there were statistically significant differences between ad hoc and continuing groups. The large differences in variability require

the use of unequal variance t-tests and we assume direction for these tests. For Facilitation $t = 5.057$, $p < .005$ and for Orientation $t = 1.670$, $p = .049$.

We highlight five outcomes from our analysis. First, there are apparently three types of activity in groups that we can characterize as legitimation activity. Behavior we characterize as facilitation, task orientation, and social environment occurs in nearly all of the groups. Second, a plurality of legitimating behavior facilitates group organization, with task orientation and social environment roughly equally dividing the remaining volume of legitimation activity. Third, the patterns of legitimation activity do not vary by gender in the groups we studied. This result contradicts earlier research on legitimation and is worthy of further investigation. Fourth, we analyzed the data to determine if a history of interaction with group members affected the extent to which group members engage in legitimation activity. We found significant differences between groups with a history of interacting with one another and ad hoc groups on the legitimation measures.

DISCUSSION

Our ultimate goal is to determine whether legitimation in task groups is the result of a status generalization process or is a separate social process characterized by its own dynamic and outcomes. This exploratory analysis is a first step in this direction. We have been able to show that it is possible to code behavior to capture features of legitimation in which actors attempt to organize the group, establish mechanisms to solve the task, and create a social environment conducive to accomplishing group goals. These patterns of behavior do not vary by the gender of group members and whether or not the groups are assembled as one time ad hoc problem solvers or are part of a continuing pattern of relationships. We wish to be cautious about this last point as facilitation of group organization appears to occur more often in groups with a continuing history of interaction together.

As our coding progressed the possibility became apparent that some individuals take on specific roles in the group by initiating only one form of legitimation activity or whose behavior is dominated by one form of activity. At the present time, this should be treated as an anecdotal observation, but we expect to pursue this more thoroughly in subsequent analyses. Such role behavior may inform observations made by Bales nearly sixty years ago. While he identified only two roles, our results suggest that there may be as many as three more. If this is the case, we may be able to strengthen the case for legitimation as a separate social process.

In addition to the points raised above, we are interested in developing a means to analyze the dynamics of legitimation and status behavior in task groups. We think this will be possible when we are able to sequence behaviors observed in groups to determine whether legitimation activity occurs most often in particular parts of the interaction history of groups, or if it is uniformly distributed across time. The former outcome might make for an easier answer to our question about the relationship between legitimation and status. The latter is likely to make finding an answer to our question difficult.

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APPENDIX 1. Coding rules for legitimation activity.

Legitimation: The category includes statements and/or behaviors that are focused on the movement of the group toward completion of the task or that facilitate the development of group norms.

Facilitation: Actions by members that move the group forward in organizing its activity.

Task Organization: Actions by members that focus on completion of the task.

Noise: Meaningless or off task behaviors by group members.

Socio Environmentmotional ("grease "): Actions by member that lead to group cohesion.

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