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ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Talk from the Top: Leadership and Self-Legitimation in International Organizations

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How do leaders create legitimacy in international organizations (IOs)? It is widely acknowledged that legitimacy matters to IOs, but little research examines internal self-legitimation—the creation of legitimacy for staff, rather than for external audiences—and who specifically undertakes these self-legitimation activities in IOs. This paper fills these gaps by examining the particular role of leaders in self-legitimation and I develop a theoretical framework that shows (1) how leaders have a unique role to play as legitimators due to their high social status within the IO and their access to discursive resources for legitimation, (2) how leaders create internal legitimacy through the introduction or reintroduction of narratives and the creation of self-referential language, and (3) how leader-led self-legitimation entails three potential risks. I illustrate these points with three case studies, one from the World Bank and two from the United Nations. I conclude by proposing a new research agenda for this underexplored area of IO and legitimacy scholarship.

¿Cómo los líderes crean legitimidad en las organizaciones internacionales (OI)? Se reconoce de manera amplia la importancia de la legitimidad para las OI. Sin embargo, son pocos los estudios en los que se analiza la autolegitimación interna, es decir, crear la legitimidad para el personal y no para el público externo, y quiénes llevan a cabo de manera específica estas actividades de autolegitimación en las OI. En este artículo, se abordan estas cuestiones al examinar la función determinada de los líderes en la autolegitimación y se desarrolla un marco teórico que incluye lo siguiente: (1) cómo los líderes tienen una única función como legitimadores debido a su alto estatus social dentro de la OI y su acceso a recursos discursivos para la legitimación; (2) cómo los líderes crean la legitimidad interna mediante la introducción o reintroducción de narrativas y la creación de un lenguaje de autorreferencia y (3) cómo la autolegitimación dirigida por los líderes implica tres posibles riesgos. Estos puntos se explican mediante tres estudios de caso: uno del Banco Mundial y dos de la ONU. La conclusión incluye una nueva agenda de investigación para esta área poco investigada de los estudios sobre la OI y la legitimidad.

Comment les dirigeants des Organisations internationales (OI) se créent-ils de la légitimité en leur sein? Il est largement reconnu que la légitimité a de l'importance pour les OI, mais peu de recherches examinent l'autolégitimation interne—la création d'une légitimité aux yeux du personnel de l'OI plutôt qu'aux yeux des publics extérieurs—et les personnes

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qui entreprennent spécifiquement ces activités d'autolégitimation dans les OI. Cet article comble ces lacunes en étudiant le rôle particulier de ces dirigeants dans l'autolégitimation et je développe un cadre théorique qui montre : (1) la mesure dans laquelle les dirigeants d'OI ont un rôle unique à jouer en tant que légitimateurs du fait de leur haut statut social dans l'OI et de leur accès aux ressources discursives pour la légitimation, (2) la manière dont ces dirigeants se créent de la légitimité interne en introduisant ou réintroduisant des discours et en créant un langage autoréférentiel, et (3) la manière dont l'autolégitimation menée par ces dirigeants englobe trois risques potentiels. J'illustre ces points par trois études de cas, l'une portant sur la Banque mondiale et les deux autres sur l'ONU. Je conclus en proposant un nouveau programme de recherche pour ce domaine sous-exploré des recherches sur les OI et la légitimité.

Keywords: self-legitimation, international organizations, leadership
Palabras clave: autolegitimación, organizaciones internacionales, liderazgo
Mots clés: autolégitimation, organisations internationales, direction

Introduction

How do leaders create legitimacy in international organizations (IOs)? It is widely acknowledged that legitimacy matters to IOs: if the various constituencies with whom they interact—member states, populations, donors, civil society organizations, and beneficiaries—view them, their objectives, their activities, and their rules and procedures as fair and worthwhile, then they are more likely to accept and comply with the authority of IOs, rendering the latter more effective and successful (Suchman 1995). A growing body of scholarship traces how organizations seek to cultivate such legitimacy by examining the sources of legitimacy for IOs (including procedural, performance, and source legitimacy) and their legitimation practices (Suchman 1995; Scharpf 1999; Steffek 2003; Clark 2005; Gronau and Schmidtke 2016; Tallberg, Bäckstrand, and Scholte 2018).

This literature has two gaps. First, it conceives of legitimacy as an attribute that characterizes the relationship between an IO and an external audience only, thus neglecting self-legitimacy—the degree to which the staff of an IO themselves view the organization, its objectives, and its rules and procedures as fair and worthwhile (von Billerbeck 2020a). These internal views matter because how staff view themselves and what they consider to be sources of legitimacy shape the legitimacy claims that they subsequently make to external audiences.[1] Accordingly, IOs engage not only in external legitimation but also in internal self-legitimation, using discourse to develop and reaffirm a cohesive organizational identity that centers on a set of particular IO traits and shared normative values (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016; von Billerbeck 2020a, 2020b). This is particularly true for organizations with multiple or fragmented identities.

Second, in the literature on legitimation, little attention has been paid specifically to *who* does legitimation, that is, which specific agents make legitimation claims. In the case of IO self-legitimation, legitimators are actors within the organization who use discourse to produce a cohesive organizational identity that is considered

[1] The reverse is also true, though not the focus of my analysis here: the legitimacy standards of various external audiences will undoubtedly inform those to which IOs hold themselves.

normatively appropriate and aligned with organizational values and principles.[2] While actors at all levels of an IO will engage in self-legitimation, making claims about the value of their work, the uniqueness of their role, and their alignment with organizational principles and goals, senior officials play a particularly important role due to their high social status within the organization, their access to resources for communication, and their resulting ability to spread and embed their claims among staff. This means that self-legitimation by leaders will subsequently shape those made by other staff within the organization, at different levels of seniority and in different functions, thus contributing to overall cohesion. However, we know little about how IO leaders produce such self-legitimacy beliefs and, accordingly, about the risks and challenges of self-legitimation from the top.

This article fills these gaps through an examination of leaders as self-legitimators in IOs. First, I discuss the concept of self-legitimation and apply it to IOs, especially those with multifaceted identities, drawing on literature from a range of disciplines, including international relations, sociology, and management and organization studies, and I explore the specific content of IO self-legitimation. Second, I develop a theoretical framework that explains the particular role and practices of leaders as self-legitimators in IOs. I show not only how their position and resources enable them to introduce or reintroduce narratives and language to create a cohesive sense of identity and legitimacy among staff, but also how leader-led self-legitimation entails a set of particular risks, including impermanence, hypocrisy, and stasis. Third, after discussing my methodology and case selection, I present three heuristic examples of self-legitimation by leaders from the World Bank and the United Nations (UN) to illustrate these points. Last, I conclude by outlining a new research agenda on IO self-legitimation and showing how this internal focus can enhance our understanding of legitimacy, legitimation, and IO behavior more broadly.

This analysis makes three contributions. First, while scholarship on legitimation is growing, study of the specific agents who undertake this important function lags behind analysis of practices and sources. This article thus develops new theories about the mechanics and microprocesses of legitimation. Second, I contribute to the emerging scholarship on self-legitimation in IOs. Third, I add a new dimension to scholarship on IO leadership, which tends to take a historical-descriptive approach and focuses on individuals and their personalities, disregarding their embeddedness in IO institutional environments (Reinalda and Verbeek 2014).

Self-Legitimation in IOs

Most definitions of legitimacy posit that it exists when an actor or its actions are aligned with a shared, socially constructed set of norms and principles about what is right and appropriate (Suchman 1995; March and Olsen 1998; Hurd 2007). These definitions are relational and based upon perceptions: legitimacy exists when one actor assigns or grants it to another actor or its actions because they perceive them to comply with shared norms and principles.[3] Legitimation, then, entails efforts to demonstrate or claim such alignment and therefore receive judgments of legitimacy. Such efforts usually take a discursive form, involving the use of language and narratives to explain, persuade, and convince (Berger and Luckman 1966, 112; Pfeffer 1981; Barker 2001, 41, 51; Van Leeuwen 2007, 19; Steffek 2009, 315).[4]

[2] Other forms of legitimation include institutional and behavioral (Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018), but I focus here on discursive legitimation.

[3] This is known as sociological legitimacy. Normative legitimacy, in contrast, considers legitimacy to exist when a set of external, objective criteria are met. For a discussion of these two types of legitimacy, the extent to which they can be distinguished, and the implications of their differences for researchers, see Agné (2018).

[4] Legitimation can also take symbolic, performative, physical, or behavioral forms, but the focus in this article is on linguistic legitimation.

However, actors not only want to be seen as legitimate by others, but also need to see themselves as legitimate. Indeed, prior to the projection of legitimacy externally, an actor must be convinced of its own rightness: it needs to view itself as having a coherent, stable identity, occupying a role that is useful and normatively good, and undertaking actions that are appropriate to the social environment in which it operates (Claude 1966; Weber 1978; Weick 1995; von Billerbeck 2020a). As Weber (1978, 213) has pointed out, actors with authority "feel the never ceasing need to look upon [their] position[s] as in some way "legitimate"", and Thiessen and Thomson (1975, 1) comment on the need of "dominant group[s] [to] justif[y] to themselves their privileged position." Similarly, Tankebe (2010, 203) notes that those in power have a need to "justify to themselves the rightness of their authority, and develop self-confidence in the moral rightness of [their] power." They do this through the development, projection, and reiteration of a well-defined and coherent identity, one that shows that their particular role and their degree of power are appropriate and valuable.

This need for an enduring, clear, and normatively good identity exists equally for organizations. Scholars of organizational theory and management studies argue that organizations require a degree of "sameness or continuity over time"—indeed, the features that remain unchanging are what constitute an organization's identity in the first place (Albert and Whetten 1985, 265).[5] Accordingly, organizations will engage in "organizational identification": they will take actions that "intentionally perpetuate their central and distinguishing features" (Whetten 2006, 224) in a bid to reaffirm a clear identity to which staff feel connected.[6]

Such organizational identification in turn "positively influences organizational performance" because staff perceive and are motivated by the organization's "compliance with the institutional mission" and alignment with its foundational and enduring values (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Herman and Renz 2004; Zollo et al. 2019, 114, 118). As Weick (1995, 20) notes, staff in organizations have an "intrinsic desire to sense and experience coherence and continuity," and an organization will therefore "[act] conservatively to preserve its identity" (Brown and Starkey 2000, 104) Doing so creates a "cultural understanding [of the organization] as an autonomous actor with a distinctive programme of action" (Gollant and Sillince 2007, 1153). In contrast, where organizations do not undertake actions to (re)assert a coherent identity and where organizational identification is weak, staff may succumb to "apathy and lack of commitment" (Gioia et al. 2013, 134). This in turn can cause the organization to lose its distinctiveness, clarity of purpose, and therefore perceived relevance, and ultimately render it less effective through low staff motivation.

Legitimacy and Fragmented Identities

The ability to delineate and reaffirm an enduring and appropriate identity is complicated in many IOs because their key distinguishing features, values, and functions are often inherently contradictory. While some IOs have coherent focuses and operate within a limited functional area (e.g., the World Customs Organization or the Universal Postal Union), many—including the World Bank and the UN, examined here—have multifaceted and complex identities, both functionally and structurally.[7]

[5] Gioia et al. (2013, 129–30) note that organizational "self-concept[s] must meet three. . .criteria of core, enduring, and distinctive."

[6] Mael and Ashforth (1992, 104) define "organizational identification" as the degree to which a person feels a sense of "oneness with or belongingness to an organization."

[7] Foreman and Whetten (2002, 621) describe this as a dichotomy between normative and utilitarian systems within organizations, where the former emphasizes tradition and ideology and the latter financial efficiency, profit maximization, and self-interest; they characterize organizations that exhibit this split identity as "hybrid-identity organization."

Functionally, many IOs fill operational roles, undertaking a diverse range of tasks including peacekeeping and military operations, food distribution, refugee assistance, public health activities, poverty alleviation, economic development, and infrastructure construction. At the same time, IOs also play a normative role, developing, disseminating, and mainstreaming standards for appropriate behavior in the international system and attempting to create a community of states around agreed normative principles and goals. Structurally, IOs are state-established and -owned entities, created to fill particular technical functions at the global level, address transnational problems, share costs, and provide spaces where states can come together to discuss topics of mutual concern. At the same time, they are autonomous actors that develop preferences, take decisions, and (sometimes) act independently.

Because of these coexisting functional and structural identities, creating and maintaining a sense of internal legitimacy is not straightforward: the expectations, tasks, and approaches considered appropriate to an operational organization and a normative one will differ and sometimes clash, as they will for an organization that is primarily a forum for states and one that enjoys a greater degree of autonomy. This means that many IOs face situations where values and behavior appropriate to one side of its identity clash with values and behavior appropriate to another; as a result, they are sometimes forced to act in ways that are at least partly illegitimate or inappropriate (von Billerbeck 2017). In this way, the key distinguishing features of IOs, characteristics that are constitutive of them and that comprise key elements of their organizational identities, make it particularly difficult to maintain the kind of continuity and sameness organizations seek. As Foreman and Whetten (2002, 619) note, "the process of organizational identification may be complicated by the presence of multiple organizational identity claims." Ultimately, instability, fragmentation, and ambiguity in organizational identity are a source of distress within organizations, and where they exist, there is an increased danger that organizational identification is too weak to enable staff to feel secure, motivated, and legitimate, and thus for the organization to perform effectively.[8]

As a result, staff turn to self-legitimation, which entails attempts to reaffirm a cohesive identity, one that reconciles, diminishes, or ignores contradictions and serves to assure staff that their organizational identity is appropriate to the institutional environment in which they operate (Hall and Taylor 1996; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; von Billerbeck 2020c, 37). Such self-legitimation yields numerous concrete benefits to organizations. First, a coherent organizational identity helps organizations to manage complexity and conflicting pressures by acting as a filter that enables staff to prioritize, compartmentalize, or detach themselves from contradictory demands (Greenwood et al. 2011, 347–38, 349–40). Second, as noted, it helps staff identify with the organization, to feel secure that it is right and useful, to understand their work as a coherent and distinct program, and thus to remain committed and motivated. Finally, through the management of complexity and the establishment of clear purpose, it can boost organizational performance and effectiveness. Importantly, this process of self-legitimation is internally rather than externally directed: self-legitimation responds to an internal need on the part of organization staff for continuity and consistency, and is a distinct process from that of cultivating a certain image for external audiences (though they may sometimes overlap).[9]

Self-legitimation efforts occur primarily through discourse, involving the use of language and narrative to construct and reiterate a cohesive and legitimate organizational identity.[10] Weick (1995, 41, 128) asserts that "[w]ords induce stable connections [and] establish stable entities to which people can orient," while

[8] It is worth noting that effective IO performance is of course the result of numerous factors, such as support from state principals and others or financial and material means; organizational identification by staff is only one.

[9] Organization theorists consider identity to be internally defined (Gioia et al. 2010), in contrast with outside perceptions, which they call images. The latter "affect identity, but are not identity per se" (Gioia et al. 2013, 136).

[10] As noted, language is not the only a medium for legitimation but it is the focus in this article.

Gioia et al. (2013, 143) stress the importance of "labels and meanings" in organizations (Gustafson and Reger 1995; Chreim 2005; Ravasi and Schultz 2006; Clark et al. 2010). Referring specifically to self-legitimation, von Billerbeck (2020b, 482) asserts that discourse enables actors in IOs to "construct a version of reality in which the contradictions they face are minimised or ignored and their actions are necessarily good." Vaara, Sonenschein, and Boje (2016, 497) similarly argue that "narratives provide an essential means for maintaining or reproducing stability. . .in and around organizations." Where identities are unstable or fragmented, as they are in most IOs, discourse can thus provide cohesion, or at least the appearance of it, and an internal sense of rightness and legitimacy.

The Content of IO Self-Legitimation Claims

To achieve such stability and cohesion, self-legitimizing discourse in IOs appeals to values and overarching organizational objectives at their broadest level, IO history or origin, and institutional autonomy, all of which constitute key elements of IO identities, in a bid to "rise above" contradiction. First, numerous studies of leadership and management have affirmed that values are vital to individuals' self-conceptions and that congruence between values and objectives can lead to enhanced professional satisfaction and performance, and thus legitimacy (Meglino and Ravlin 1998; Bono and Judge 2003; Judge et al. 2005; Cha and Edmondson 2006). In organizations, this process takes place on a collective level, where staff are most motivated and effective when action and the pursuit of goals align with *shared* values that define an organization's mission, core purpose, or distinctiveness and that constitute "valuable identity referents" for the organization (Gioia et al. 2013, 164).

For IOs, this emphasis on values focuses specifically on the normative content of IO work at its broadest level, and self-legitimizing discourse portrays their overarching goals and missions as morally correct and beyond reproach (von Billerbeck 2020b). Indeed, the goals of most IOs, and certainly the two examined here, are difficult to rebuff: the UN seeks to end war and the World Bank to eradicate poverty. Even if there is disagreement about how to reach such objectives, it is difficult to find fault with the objectives themselves. Accordingly, IOs built and repeat narratives, phrases, and stories that focus on these unassailable objectives and the values that underpin them, and in particular, they use language that "simplifies and exceptionalizes" in order to explain away trade-offs and portray IO activities as unique, special, and irrefutably good (von Billerbeck 2020b).[11] Importantly, they do not tell themselves such stories once or twice, but instead on an ongoing basis. Indeed, self-legitimizing discourse is most effective when it is repeated, when stories are told over and over, and self-legitimation thus tends to be a frequent and time-consuming activity in IOs.

Second and relatedly, self-legitimizing discourse in IOs focuses on stories about the origin or founding of the organization. Gabriel (2017, 213) calls these "nostalgic narratives," which construct the past as "heroic, romantic, happy, free, [or] communal," a framing that need not be grounded in fact and that is instead more often than not "a past of fantasy and myth." Founding stories or origin myths portray the mission and purpose of an organization as a response to a preceding time that was worse in some way—violent, unjust, impoverished, or otherwise deficient—thus emphasizing the establishment of the organization as inherently good, as symbolic of progress, and as the advent of a new or better time. In discourse, leaders attempt to link these founding stories and myths to their current and future work and in particular to their own vision for the organization to demonstrate both

[11] Such discourse also helps staff to identify their work and mission as unique in relation to other actors in the international environment.

ongoing fidelity to foundational values and continuity of organizational identity over time, showing that the specific programming and priorities they propose are aligned with the organization's identity and legitimate within the institutional environment. McWhinney and Batista (1988, 46) refer to the telling and retelling of origin stories as "remythologizing," a process that entails "summon[ing] back to consciousness the founding ideals and the oft-told tales that helped establish and maintain an organization's identity, thus linking the primal energy with present conditions." Where those present conditions are complex or ambiguous, "invoking an IO's history in a 'return' to fundamental principles and foundational objectives [can be] a way of generating self-legitimacy" (von Billerbeck 2020a, 216).

Third, internal discourse emphasizes institutional autonomy vis-à-vis member states. As noted, IOs often face tensions between courses of action that staff, as impartial international civil servants with expertise in particular functional areas, deem best and courses of action that member states prefer. Bowing to the narrow interests of member states can risk contravening the values, missions, and foundational purposes of the IO, and staff therefore tell themselves stories that reemphasize their autonomy, expertise, and special status as international civil servants, what Barnett and Finnemore (2004, 21) refer to as "a myth of depoliticization."[12] Indeed, the idea of being an impartial international civil servant not beholden to any one nation is central to the self-perceptions of most IO staff, and they "frequently emphasize their neutrality, impartiality, and objectivity in ways that are intended to contrast their universal concerns with the self-serving claims of states" (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 23). Such narratives thus "pitch. . .expertise against formal authority. . .[and] compassion against ruthless efficiency" (Gabriel 2017, 209), enabling staff to consider themselves legitimate, working in the interests of all, and detached from biased state preferences of, despite the fact that they often must do as instructed by member states and may have limited scope to "push back" against them (von Billerbeck 2020a).

The focus on and repeated invocation of the general or "meta" level of an IO's identity socializes the staff of the organization—that is, it delineates a clear institutional setting in which there is agreement on appropriate values, history, and roles; situates the IO within it; and affirms that the organization's objectives and behavior align with those values, history, and roles. Self-legitimizing discourse thus ignores or discounts the contradictions IO staff face in their daily work and creates shared meaning and language among them. This in turn enables them to construct a common and cohesive institutional identity that is positive, rightful, and appropriate, rather than fragmented, unstable, or illegitimate. While the creation of this kind of institutional identity through self-legitimation is important for and undertaken by all IO staff, leaders play a central role in shaping it, and staff often look to their leaders for guidance, example, or instruction.

Leaders as Legitimators: Opportunities and Risks

Leaders fill multiple roles and have considerable authority within IOs, which not only gives them a particular ability to engage in effective self-legitimation but also brings a particular set of risks. Here defined as the heads of IO secretariats, senior managers of units within secretariats (e.g., Under- or Assistant-Secretaries-General or Directors-General), or heads of special missions (such as peace operations) (Reinalda and Verbeek 2014), leaders sit at the junction between the member states that have created the organization (and usually appointed the individual) and the

[12] Of course, IO staff are a self-selected group of people who choose to work for IOs because of a shared professional background and because they already believe in the values of the organization (von Billerbeck 2020b, 488).

organization itself, its staff, and its bureaucratic structures; they thus play roles that are outward-facing, inward-facing, and mediating between the two (Claude 1966).[13]

Outwardly, IO leaders fill both a representative function—advertising the IO to external audiences, demonstrating its ongoing relevance, and gathering material, financial, and rhetorical support—and an executive function, in the literal meaning of executing the directives of member states. This outward-looking role is not, however, just a passive one: IO leaders can influence member state preferences and policymaking and shape the overall strategic direction of the organization (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Reinalda and Verbeek 2014). Indeed, according to Cox (1969, 205), heads of IOs have been "the most critical single determinant of the growth in scope and authority of international organization" in the contemporary global environment. In this sense, they also play a key strategic role, setting programming and other priorities, and positioning the organization or building partnerships in an at times competitive organizational landscape.

Leaders in IOs also fill crucial internal management functions, helping to maximize efficiency and achieve stated objectives. In this regard, some of their key responsibilities include human resources management, budget oversight, and other back-office functions. Indeed, officially at least, the heads of most IOs are their "Chief Administrative Officer," a designation that stresses their bureaucratic function above any political or public role.[14] At the same time, IO leaders are also expected to inspire, unite, and motivate staff, demonstrating and celebrating the IO's relevance and the value of staff members' work to an internal audience (Burns 1978). In this way, while IO leaders must promote member state interests and campaign for external support, they must also defend their staff and protect organizational values from dilution or suspension. In other words, they must engage in self-legitimation.

Self-legitimation, of course, takes place on multiple levels of an IO. All staff members, from the most junior to the most senior, tell themselves narratives about the importance of their mission, their autonomy, their impartiality, and their unique roles as international civil servants and technical experts, and employees are not simply "passive receptacles or carriers of discourses" (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 628). However, leaders are organizational elites who have a special role in IO self-legitimation for three reasons. First, they have high social status within the organization and second, they have greater access to discursive resources for self-legitimation. Third, these two factors combine to enable leaders to attract "followers" through narrative-telling and the creation of meaning and self-legitimizing language within an organization. Rank-and-file staff, therefore, tend to look to leaders for coherence and guidance regarding the functional and structural contradictions within their work (Burns 1978; Cha and Edmondson 2006). At the same time however, leader-led self-legitimation also entails several potential risks, namely impermanence, hypocrisy, and stasis. In the remainder of this section, I explore these opportunities and risks in turn.

Social Status in IOs

One of the primary reasons leaders play a critical role in organizational self-legitimation is that they have high social status within IOs. This status comes from

[13] Leaders also exist on other levels, either formally—as heads of departments or subunits—or informally—as thought leaders or organizers—although scholars note that it is important to distinguish between managers and leaders at these levels (Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff 1991, 531–32; Kille 2006; Bode 2015, 3).

[14] The UN Secretary-General is the "senior executive officer" (United Nations 1945, Ch. XV, Art. 97). The World Bank President is the chief of the operating staff of the bank and is responsible for its daily business (United Nations 1944, Art. V, Section 5(b), 69).

numerous sources.[15] First, it derives from the office they hold. Leadership is in part a passive characteristic bestowed upon an individual through their appointment and their title. Although it may seem that this would do little to give them real influence within the organization, because IOs are usually highly hierarchical organizations, formal office is an important source of status within them. As a result, "[i]nternally. . .[IO] staff will expect leadership from their top officials" (Blondel 1987; Verbeek 2009, 237, 238). Moreover, senior positions in IOs tend to have exclusive competencies attached to them. For example, in the UN, the Secretary-General has the unique authority to bring items to the attention of the Security Council, and in the World Bank, the President chairs meetings of the Board of Directors and has the deciding vote when the Board is split (Verbeek 2009, 239; World Bank 2018). More generally, the access and influence that leaders enjoy because of the nature of their duties—presiding over meetings, allotted speaking time in meetings and committees, agenda setting, and high-level contacts—give them "asymmetrical control over negotiation procedure" (Tallberg 2006, 29; Reinalda and Verbeek 2014, 600). Office thus imbues IO leaders with authority (Verbeek 2009, 237).

A second source of status for IO leaders is their moral authority. As described, most IOs play, at least in part, a normative role: they embody and are mandated to promote particular principles at the international level, and the reiteration of these values is, as discussed, a key focus of self-legitimizing discourse. Again, while the promulgation of norms and values is an obligation of all staff within an IO, leaders tend to be viewed as "symbols" of these principles and values (Pfeffer 1977; Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff 1991; Kille 2007). As Cha and Edmondson (2006, 58) note, "leaders often invoke values or higher ideals as part of their compelling vision for an organization." In the UN, this role is in fact explicit, and the Secretary-General is expected to "uphold the values and moral authority" of the organization and serve as "a symbol of United Nation ideals" (United Nations n.d. (a)). One Secretary-General, Trygve Lie (1954, 42) asserted that "[t]he Secretary-General might be the symbol of the Organization as a whole—the symbol, in other words, of the international spirit." Accordingly, IO staff look to their leadership as bearers of the moral standards that they are expected to promulgate in the global system.

A third source of elevated status for IO leaders is their individual personalities. While a diffuse characteristic that is empirically difficult to capture systematically, and one that is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that particular qualities—for example, charisma, authoritativeness, capacity to lead, and the ill-defined catch-all concept of "people skills"—are also usually considered important to the status and effectiveness of leaders in organizations (Cha and Edmondson 2006; Reinalda and Verbeek 2014; Bode 2015, 595–96). Equally, the background, professional experience, training, and education of individual leaders can elevate their profiles and standing within an organization, for example, by establishing a track record of upholding norms valued within the organization or of effectiveness in delivering stated objectives in other contexts. Scholars have attempted to categorize and measure such "leadership qualities" and have demonstrated how they interact with institutional environment, organizational structures, and individual practices to affect organizational outcomes (Cox 1969; Schechter 1987; Kille 2006; Verbeek 2009, 240–41; Reinalda and Verbeek 2014; Bode 2015, 4–5). For the purposes of this article, it suffices to note that the social status of leaders can be boosted by their temperaments and personal qualities.

Access to Resources

In addition to their high status, the second reason that leaders play a special role as organizational self-legitimators is that they tend to have the material, informational,

[15] This is a partial list, intended to illustrate the high social status of leaders in organizations. For comprehensive discussions of sources of leadership authority, see Verbeek (2009), Reinalda and Verbeek (2014), and Bode (2015, 3–4).

and communication resources necessary for self-legitimation at their disposal. As described above, self-legitimation occurs through discourse, including speech, text, and symbols. Senior officials usually have much greater access to these elements, as well as the ability to create, replace, or modify them, than other staff members. As Butcher (2005, 145) points out, in most social settings, "elites are likely to have greater access to and control over symbols" and other discursive objects; in fact, "this is a part of what makes them elites." Where language or symbols are lacking or deficient, leaders enjoy information resources that allow them to craft new ones or replace old ones, thus enabling them to verbally and visually associate the organization with legitimate actions and objectives (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975, 127).

Equally, leaders have greater access to the communication resources for the effective dissemination of self-legitimizing discourse. These include the ability to convene meetings (such as town hall meetings, consultations, and summits) and organization-wide ceremonies (such as commemorations and anniversaries), platforms and visibility for giving speeches, and access to communication systems whereby they can quickly and frequently reach all staff or subgroups of staff (e.g., by email) (Reinalda and Verbeek 2014, 600; Tallberg 2006; Verbeek 2009). These resources are not available to most staff in organizations or are available only in limited fashion, and thus, together with their high social status, leaders have a particular ability to create self-legitimizing discourse and to have that discourse seen or heard. Leaders can initiate, amend, or highlight certain narratives; introduce language or phrases; and diffuse them throughout an organization in ways that other staff cannot. Because of this, IO staff expect the heads of their organization to play a leading role in the development and deployment of self-legitimizing discourse that reiterates their organizational coherence and emphasizes the appropriateness and goodness of their work, discourse that they themselves can subsequently repeat and further disseminate.

Creating Shared Meaning and Language

In addition to their position and discursive resources, leaders' power to generate self-legitimacy is also about their unique ability to give sense and meaning to discourse. According to Ravasi and Schultz (2006, 449), leaders and managers can make identity claims and (re)emphasize organizational legitimacy by using "familiar stories, objects, and practices" to demonstrate adherence to "values and attitudes" and alignment with key identity elements. Gioia et al. (2013, 146) note that "leaders can rely on language and rhetoric to guide. . .*de-identification* and *re-identification* processes" in organizations. Cox (1969, 213), similarly, asserts, the head of an IO "must define an ideology which gives clear goals to the organization" and "build a bureaucracy committed to this ideology and having a sense of its own independent international role." In doing so, leaders construct a social reality within IOs that create cohesion of meaning and identity and enable self-perceptions of legitimacy, removing or resolving, discursively at least, contradiction and identity fragmentation. Similarly, Corley and Gioia (2004, 194) assert that leaders and managers face a "sensegiving imperative" whereby they attempt to counter "identity ambiguity" with "appropriate meaning."

While self-legitimation can take numerous forms, language is critical to these efforts. Vaara, Sonenschein, and Boje (2016, 548) assert that narratives establish a coherent and understandable identity in organizations, and they highlight "particularly the role of the top leader's narratives" in this regard. Shotter (1993, 152) notes that managing entails "creating from a set of incoherent and disorderly events a coherent 'structure' within which both current actualities and further possibilities can be given an intelligible 'place'." He stresses that this is best done via "a sharable linguistic formulation," and he characterizes managers in organizations "as authors" (Shotter 1993, 149, 150; Cunliffe 2001). Similarly, Smirich and Morgan (1982, 257)

conceptualize leadership in organizations as "the management of meaning." Such "authoring" can entail either the introduction of new language or discourse or the reintroduction and revitalization of existing language and discourse. These must subsequently be mainstreamed throughout and embedded into the organization, "so that they can become the common currency for communicational exchanges" (Chia 2000, 513).

Risks: Impermanence, Hypocrisy, and Stasis

Despite the particular authority and capacity of IO leaders to act as narrative builders, self-legitimation from the highest levels is not without risk. I identify three in particular: impermanence, hypocrisy, and stasis. First, because the senior leaders of IOs serve fixed terms, there is a risk that the introduction of a particular narrative constitutes a "pet project" of a particular leader and is therefore impermanent and not sustained after their departure. In the World Bank and the UN, for example, Presidents and Secretaries-General are limited to two five-year terms. Even where initiatives continue after a leadership change, there is often less dedicated attention to them and no "champion" for them at the most senior levels. As a result, narratives will be less frequently repeated, the meaning behind particular language can become less consistent, and narratives can become distorted, taken over by new narratives, or challenged by counternarratives. In particular, when new leaders take office, they are often keen to introduce their own initiatives, narratives, and slogans, as a way of putting their "stamp" on the organization. They thus purposefully move away from the language of their predecessor in order to assert and demonstrate their own authority. Importantly, this implies that the sooner a narrative is introduced during a leader's tenure, the longer it has to become embedded in the organization's discourse and thus to last beyond them.

Second, the introduction or reintroduction of discourse by leaders in IOs can leave them open to accusations of hypocrisy.[16] IO leaders are, as described, the heads of the organization and its staff *and* political appointees selected by member states, and are therefore answerable to both. As a result, while they may speak to their staff in grandiose, moralistic terms, celebrating their work as aligned with and promoting international ideals, they will at times behave in ways that satisfy the interests, directives, and whims of member states, which may be pragmatic, narrow, and calculating. The resulting mismatch between their rhetoric and their actions means that staff may view them as hypocritical or disingenuous. Indeed, if leaders portray the organization as socialized, aligned with common norms and values, and working for the greater good, behavior that is self-serving and self-interested will come across as artificial and insincere (Pye 2005; Cha and Edmondson 2006). This further implies that discourse from leaders that is too operational or programmatic will have less traction with staff than discourse that focuses on purpose and values.

Moreover, the two risks discussed thus far—impermanence and hypocrisy—can combine to create cynicism among staff, who may view new discursive initiatives as yet another set of fleeting buzzwords not backed up by action. Indeed, where turnover in self-legitimizing discourse is high, staff must continually familiarize themselves with new or unknown language, a process that tends to erode the meaning attached to it and that certainly does not contribute to a cohesive or stable sense of purpose or legitimacy. In fact, it can do just the opposite, irritating staff and leading to negative views of leadership. In this way, over time, impermanence

[16] Numerous scholars have examined the scope for hypocrisy in organizations. In his seminal work on the topic, Brunsson (2002) developed the concept of "organized hypocrisy," which entails a "decoupling" of organizational structures and practices and the ways "in which organizations respond to conflicting pressures in external environments through contradictory actions and statements" (Lipson 2007, 5; Krasner 1999, 66). More recently, Weaver (2008, 7–8) has explored organized hypocrisy in the World Bank, noting in particular the gap between "talk" and "action" regarding reform.

and hypocrisy can lead staff to regard discourse from the top not as a source of self-legitimation but one that is shallow, devoid of meaning, and divisive.

A final risk associated with leader-led self-legitimation is stasis. As described, leaders may initiate narratives and introduce language to repeat and sustain them, but through repetition, may sideline counternarratives or new narratives, and ultimately, disincentivize innovation and creativity in substantive work. As Alvesson and Willmott (2002, 636) point out, "the domination of managerially orchestrated identities implies limited space for critical reflection, places constraints upon ethical judgement and exerts a strong corporate grip over people's lives." Meyer and Rowan (1977, 359) concur, pointing out that in most organizations, "evaluation accompanies and produces illegitimacy" by "violatin[ing] the assumption that everyone is acting with competence and in good faith," which in turn "lowers morale and confidence." In this way, narratives from the top can lead to inertia in IOs, entrenching self-referential language so deeply that it is rarely revisited. This in turn decreases the need for self-assessment and devalues innovation in the activities of the organization. Indeed, because the self-legitimizing discourse in IOs focuses on normative appropriateness, there is little incentive for scrutiny of existing narratives or the construction of counternarratives, either by leaders or by the staff that repeat narratives.

This does not mean that there is no disagreement among staff or between units within IOs, nor does it mean that narratives do not wax and wane, particularly with changes in leadership as discussed. However, the discourse of self-legitimation, with its emphasis on the objectives and values of IOs at the broadest level, the mythologized founding of the organization, and the independence and expertise of its personnel socializes the organization and its staff, a process that can lead to standardization and stagnation and result in a focus on narratives at the expense of substantive work (Barker 1993; Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 636).

Impermanence, hypocrisy, and stasis are, of course, not unavoidable, nor do these risks all always exist. The uptake of discourse from IO leaders by staff will depend on the individual leader, the narrative proposed, legitimation efforts by other actors, and mitigation strategies by leaders, and thus the potential for these risks will also vary. For example, a leader can raise the costs of replacing their discourse for their successor by taking concrete actions to back up their self-legitimation claims—for example, by assigning senior officials committed to their self-legitimation narratives into key, visible positions or by challenging member states—thus minimizing the risks of both impermanence and hypocrisy. Equally, the interaction of such factors can affect the potential for these risks to materialize. For example, while a high turnover in leadership combined with the tendency of incoming leaders to introduce new discursive initiatives can lead to irritation in staff, it can also counter the risk of stasis by reinvigorating self-legitimation within the organization. Nevertheless, regardless of the possible risks associated with narratives from the top, they show that leadership in IOs is not just about planning, decision-making, implementing, and reporting, but also fundamentally an interpretive role.

Following an explanation of my methodology and case selection, I present three examples from the World Bank and the UN to illustrate how leaders use their status and resources to introduce or repurpose language and infuse it with meaning to create internal legitimacy. I also show how these efforts had varying levels of success because of the risks just described.

Methodology and Case Selection

Based upon the conceptual discussion above, I illustrate the role of leaders in IO self-legitimation using three examples from two major IOs: the World Bank and the UN. These IOs were selected because they are both large IOs with a diverse staff, wide-ranging mandates, and complex, multifaceted organizational identities; they thus capture the identity ambiguity that makes self-legitimation necessary. They are

also accessible organizations with public-facing leaders and publicly available documentation, including speeches, statements, policy reports, and press coverage, thus providing observable language and discourse for this study. The three examples I present include (1) the reconceptualization of the World Bank's mission by Jim Yong Kim, its president between 2012 and 2019; (2) the UN Leadership Dialogue, introduced by Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General from 2007 to 2016; and (3) Human Rights Up Front (HRuF), also initiated by Ban in the UN. These were selected because they constitute major discursive efforts by the organizations' heads and were either entirely or partly internally directed. They demonstrate how the IO's head used his unique position and access to resources to introduce new meaningful language or repurpose existing language to create self-legitimacy beliefs among staff and to give them tools with which to repeat and reinforce those beliefs. In addition, all three examples illustrate to varying degrees impermanence, hypocrisy, and stasis.

To understand whether and how this language subsequently contributed to self-legitimacy beliefs within the organizations, documentary and textual analysis was supplemented by original data from sixty-three in-depth semi-structured interviews with staff of the World Bank and the UN. These were conducted through five rounds of fieldwork in Washington, DC, New York, and Geneva and by phone between January 2017 and February 2018. Interviewees were purposively selected based upon their knowledge of the discourse examined and to ensure a range of ranks, functions, and lengths of tenure; for this reason, they were in substantive roles, rather than those relating to logistics, finance, human resources, or other administrative functions. All were permanent secretariat staff, not staff seconded by national governments.

Conclusions were drawn based upon data saturation, where "additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes" (Given 2016, 135) or where further interviews and data collection result in "informational redundancy" (Sandelowski 2008, 875). In this study, the importance and role of leaders in creating internal legitimacy emerged as an early pattern in interviews. I subsequently conducted additional interviews with a wider range of individuals to verify that further data or more differentiated sampling did not negate or contradict my conclusions (Glaser and Struass 1967, 61).

Jim Yong Kim and the World Bank's Twin Goals

Shortly after assuming his role in 2012, the then President of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim, restated the mission of the organization as the "twin goals" of ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity. Before he took office, the Bank's goals revolved loosely around poverty eradication, but remained vague and underspecified, particularly as the Bank's mandate had expanded rapidly in the previous two decades. At its founding, the Bank was tasked with disbursing loans to finance the rebuilding of countries devastated by World War II. Its focus then shifted toward development more broadly, and subsequently toward poverty eradication in the world's poorest countries. More recently, its scope has expanded to encompass a range of issues including governance, public health, climate change, migration, and gender equality.

This expanding mandate has rendered the organization's identity more complex and more ambiguous and has introduced a range of trade-offs in its work. For example, should it extend a loan to a country that has a poor record of gender equality? Should it provide budgetary support or fund infrastructure projects in countries where the government engages in fraud? If it does, it may inadvertently undermine women's rights, aggravate corruption, or violate its own normative standards and goals; if it does not, it may penalize populations living in poverty, alienating the government in question and contradicting its own stated objectives. The existence of such conflicting imperatives makes it difficult for staff to maintain a clear sense

of mission, purpose, and legitimacy. As one Bank official noted, such situations "requir[e] a bit of soul-searching about whether you should actually work in those countries or not."[17] This ambiguity in turn increases the risk of weak organizational identification by staff: where staff do not know what they are working toward or for, what principles they should uphold, or which course of action is best, it becomes less likely that they will consider the Bank legitimate or be motivated, collaborative, or innovative.

Kim's reformulation of the Bank's overarching objective as the twin goals tackled this problem head-on. As one Bank official explained, "before Kim came it wasn't really clear what [our mission] was about and he changed that," adding that once "the twin goals were developed and rolled out, people could very easily answer what's the World Bank's position and everybody knew what to say, whereas before. . .you would have gotten a thousand different responses."[18] In this way, although the actual work of the Bank did not change, Kim created cohesion among staff through discursive "packaging." Indeed, another official asserted that the twin goals created cohesion by giving staff a common purpose and common objectives that apply equally to all regardless of their role within the Bank: "it's been helpful to say, these are the specific things we want to do and whenever we're doing anything, let's try to make sure that it's pointing at one of these goals."[19] Another official similarly noted that "the twin goals [are] something that actually everyone buys into, because no matter what you're doing you can somehow link to those twin goals," adding that "the twin goals ha[ve] been a masterstroke. . .of framing."[20]

Moreover, the twin goals are something it is impossible to be against: they are not only operational objectives, they are moral ones. As one official noted in reference to the goals, "people [at the World Bank] are committed to this notion of reducing poverty and making the world a better place," calling their work toward the goals a "vocation."[21] In this way, Kim not only achieved unity through discourse, but did so in a way that associated the Bank with noble, moral pursuits, thus directly contributing to self-legitimacy beliefs.

In addition, Kim also created tools—the language of the twin goals—that staff can use to further perpetuate self-legitimacy beliefs: by referring to ending poverty and boosting prosperity on a repeated basis, staff continually reinforce the self-legitimizing message that Kim initiated. As one official remarked, the twin goals "penetrate our daily discourse so much" and at all levels.[22] Another agreed, specifying that the consistent use of the language of the twin goals is "a way of rallying around the flag."[23] Indeed, several noted the importance of such "internal" language to reiterating self-legitimacy beliefs, stressing that "the language in this institution is important. . .it's definitely a tool" and that "the use of language is important among management."[24] Another official added that such efforts were like "creat[ing] your own secret handshake" for staff, giving them a unique shared identity that they could all understand and that marked them out as special.[25] In this way, Kim's introduction of the language of the twin goals represents an instrumental use of discourse aimed at uniting staff and reaffirming their legitimacy, and giving them the tools with which to further perpetuate those beliefs.

Overall, the twin goals have remained well entrenched since their introduction, including after Kim's departure, and they remain the official overall mission of the

[17] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.
[18] Interview, World Bank official, by phone, November 2017.
[19] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.
[20] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.
[21] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.
[22] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.
[23] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.
[24] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.
[25] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.

organization today. The language of the twin goals has been systematically institutionalized throughout internal documentation, including in job descriptions, annual reports (World Bank 2022b), corporate scorecards (World Bank 2021), the staff code of ethics (World Bank 2020), and implementation completion and result reports (World Bank 2022a), with the latter frequently including a dedicated section detailing specifically to how the project in question contributes to the twin goals.

As explained in the conceptual framework, there are a number of explanations for the durability of this discourse. First, Kim introduced the twin goals almost immediately after taking office, and thus had a period of seven years in which to repeat, reiterate, and embed them within the organization. The twin goals were therefore assured of having high-level buy-in for at least that long, making it more difficult for subsequent leaders to amend them. Indeed, Kim's successor, David Malpass, immediately adopted the discourse of the twin goals when he took office. His inaugural speech to staff was "littered. . .with references to the bank's 'twin goals'" (Edwards and Igoe 2019), which helped not only to signal continuity between presidents but also to reaffirm the strength of the twin goals narrative.

Second, because the twin goals relate to overarching organizational goals rather than specific programmatic initiatives, they are in fact harder to change without disruption to organizational stability and identity. Indeed, while introducing, changing, and manipulating rhetoric is a key ability of IO leaders, there are also risks in changing it too frequently, as noted above. Repeatedly amending overall organizational goals is likely to portray instability and confusion rather than stability and cohesion—both to internal and to external audiences—and therefore is not something leaders will do spuriously. In this regard, the successful entrenchment of the twin goals as an overarching mission can be contrasted with the unsuccessful introduction of numerous lower level internal discourses during Kim's tenure, which not only failed to take hold but in fact led to a high degree of cynicism in staff. These include, among others, "Mirror Sessions," "Gallery Walks," and "Follow the Sun," and language about "agility," "cascading," and "fire in the belly," all initiatives aimed at bringing staff together to share experiences and to create a common identity and language among them.[26] However, these discourses were too numerous and, in contrast to the twin goals, were overly programmatic and did not relate closely to the Bank's overall mission, values, and purpose or the expertise and independence of staff.

One Bank official, enumerating ten such initiatives that began during Kim's tenure, asserted that new leaders "feel [the] need to create artificial ways to bring people to you" but that it was ultimately just "spin."[27] Others concurred, with one noting that there is often so much "abstract new speak" that staff who have been away on mission "may not even know what. . .we're talking about."[28] Another official agreed, remarking that although the twin goals are appealing, there is often a good deal of "eye rolling about the stuff that comes from on high."[29] This effect tends to be exacerbated over time, where long-term staff who have seen multiple leaders come and go and each try to leave their mark on the organization are particularly cynical about leaders' communication efforts. One long-time official stated that incoming World Bank presidents each try to give the Bank "[their] own spin," but protested that ultimately "it's a lot of jargon, and frankly, it's bullshit."[30]

Moreover, the introduction of so much new internal language in an IO can lead to stasis, as described. As one World Bank official explained, "the room for

[26] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.

[27] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.

[28] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.

[29] Interviews, World Bank officials, Washington, DC, and by phone, November 2017.

[30] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.

innovation has disappeared [because] the amount of spin we have to swallow all the time is huge," and since "management is self-consumed by its own self-justification," staff also become consumed by "political alignment" and "internal positioning."[31] In other words, in striving to demonstrate their alignment with the latest discourse, staff may forget to think creatively, propose new activities, areas of operation, or ways of thinking and working, and fail to push the boundaries of what is imaginable for them and for the organization. In this way, while the discourse of the twin goals took hold as a powerful and sustained source of self-legitimacy beliefs due to its emphasis on the Bank's work at the highest level and the long period for entrenchment, the plethora of other discursive initiatives that ensued and in particular those that failed to stress the lofty goals and values of the organization had the opposite effect.

Ban Ki-moon and the UN Leadership Dialogue

Like his counterpart in the World Bank, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon introduced two initiatives that attempted to reinvigorate old narratives or start new ones in order to build internal legitimacy through the creation of a strong and coherent organizational identity. First, in 2013, he launched the Leadership Dialogue, an annual exercise in which all personnel with management responsibilities host a structured discussion with their staff on a theme relating to the challenges faced in their work. The first Dialogue was on the topic of "What does it mean to be an international civil servant," and sought to "remind [staff] of the standards [they] promised to uphold," even where they encounter "situations in which [they] may experience pressure to compromise [their] integrity or act against [their] obligations as international civil servants" (United Nations 2013, 5, 6). In this way, the Dialogue directly acknowledged the conflicting pressures faced by staff, pressures that derive from the fragmented and contradictory nature of the UN's organizational identity.

The inaugural Dialogue attempted to overcome these tensions by appealing to the principles and values of the UN at the highest level and in particular through a revitalization of the UN Oath of Office that staff sign when they begin employment with the UN, thus reviving and elevating an existing organizational narrative. The oath states:

> I solemnly declare and promise to exercise in all loyalty, discretion and conscience the functions entrusted to me as an international civil servant of the United Nations, to discharge these functions and regulate my conduct with the interests of the United Nations only in view, and not to seek or accept instructions in regard to the performance of my duties from any Government or other source external to the Organization. (United Nations Ethics Office n.d.)

After a discussion of what the oath means and case studies simulating situations where staff might be compelled to violate it, staff were asked to reaffirm their commitment to it by re-signing it.[32] Managers moderating the discussion were instructed to remind staff that they must "be loyal to the UN above all" and "put the best interests of the UN first," thus attempting, rather bluntly, to instill loyalty and a sense of common purpose and shared identity among them (United Nations 2013, 11). The group case studies were also built around core founding values associated with being an international civil servant, in particular loyalty, impartiality, independence, and accountability (United Nations 2013, 12), in an attempt to remind them of this unique shared identity and the moral obligations that come with it.

The annual topics of the subsequent Dialogues varied, but they were all inward-facing, and referred to the oath, the UN Charter, and core principles of the

[31] Interview, World Bank official, Washington, DC, November 2017.

[32] Interview, former UN official, Geneva, February 2017.

organization (United Nations 2014, 2015). In this way, the early Dialogues reintroduced and reaffirmed an existing narrative, both "returning" to UN's founding history and making it relevant to the contemporary context, and thus providing a coherent identity that is above operational dilemmas and new challenges (United Nations Ethics Office n.d.). Moreover, like the World Bank's twin goals, the initiative reminded staff of language that they could replicate to sustain self-legitimacy beliefs at all levels of the organization. One long-time UN official remarked that pausing to re-read and reaffirm one's commitment to the oath was "kind of emotional really,"[33] and another asserted that the Dialogue "reinforce[d] that spirit of belonging to something normatively good, of legitimacy."[34] In this way, the Dialogue, at least initially, helped to reinforce a shared identity among UN staff as members of an organization that adheres to the highest standards of integrity and works for the good of all people, while also providing them with the language to re-declare that legitimacy on an ongoing basis.

Notably, the feasibility of such an initiative depends on access to material and communication resources within the organization that only someone at the highest levels has, such as all-staff emails or global town hall meetings with staff.[35] Indeed, only the Secretary-General has the authority to mandate such an exercise (it is indeed mandatory for all staff), to have it trickle down through the hierarchy in a systematic way, and to authorize the use of staff time for its completion. Other staff members, in contrast, could only engage in such exercises in a limited or ad hoc way, and thus would be unable to mainstream any sense of shared legitimacy or organizational purpose they might generate.

However, although the Dialogue initially drew on powerful language from the oath and the UN Charter, the self-legitimizing function of the exercise began to diminish not long after it began. First, the inclusion of such lofty language has decreased and has been replaced with more technical language of compliance and efficiency, which as noted tends to have less traction with staff due to its operational tone and lack of reference to values and mission. Second, in contrast to the World Bank's twin goals, Ban initiated the Dialogue when he only had three years remaining as Secretary-General, and thus had a much less time to entrench the discourse involved. Since his departure in 2016, the Dialogue has evolved into more of a technical exercise in which staff are trained in procedures and regulations, rather than a substantive discussion surrounding the challenges, trade-offs, and fundamental purposes of their work. Accordingly, although the Dialogue initially represented a moment for discursive self-legitimation, it is now more of a "tick-box" exercise that staff conduct primarily because they are required to.[36]

For example, the 2018 Dialogue, "Speaking Up: When Does It Become Whistleblowing," is largely a training in procedure rather than an attempt at generating cohesion and legitimacy based on shared values and norms. In the guidance document, the current Secretary-General, António Guterres, suggested that the Dialogue's aim is to create an "organizational culture of transparency, integrity and accountability" and "of innovation and civility," but he goes on to couch the exercise in terms of ongoing structural management reforms, rather than the normative content of the UN's work (United Nations 2018).[37] This is not surprising, since Guterres has made UN reform the centerpiece of his tenure as Secretary-General and thus has framed the Dialogues in terms relevant to his agenda. However, as noted, self-legitimizing discourse is most effective when it

[33] Interview, former UN official, Geneva, February 2017.

[34] Interview, UN official, New York, February 2017.

[35] Interview, UN official, Geneva, January 2017.

[36] Interview, UN official, New York, November 2017.

[37] Upon taking office, Guterres introduced plans for large-scale management reforms including the reorganization of departments, the simplification of procedures, and the strengthening of performance management (United Nations n.d. (b)).

is repeated over time. Changes to the language used in the Dialogues between leaders have, therefore, diminished rather than entrenched its salience. Ultimately, even if the procedural and technical discussions that the Dialogues currently entail are useful in their own right, the Dialogue process more broadly has largely failed to sustain ongoing self-legitimation efforts. One official lamented that in recent years, the Dialogue has been "squandered on issues that are important but just don't. . .meet that sniff test."[38]

Second, even under Ban himself, staff perceived a gap between the values being espoused by the Dialogue and the behavior of the Secretary-General, whom they accused of catering too much to political interests and of "undermin[ing]" the values of the UN because of his "tendency to. . .listen to member states [and] appoint political leadership."[39] Staff emphasized that the power of the Dialogue "has to come through what you do,"[40] and where words were not backed up by actions, they felt less engaged, inspired, and legitimized. One official said that, after its initial success, the Dialogue had become "an enforced conversation."[41] Another concurred, admitting that the exercise now engenders "an enormous amount of cynicism"[42] and describing how perceptions of hypocrisy mean that the Dialogue now fails to "continuously reinforce a sense of a culture that to work in the UN is to belong to an international caliber of civil servants."[43] Taken together then, the failure to sustain discourse focused on overarching goals, bureaucratic independence, and impartiality and the perceived divergence between the words and the actions of the Secretary-General have meant that the Leadership Dialogue has broadly failed to capitalize on its early success to reaffirm a coherent and appropriate organizational identity and generate sustained self-legitimacy beliefs among staff.

Ban Ki-moon and Human Rights Up Front

A second initiative by Ban, also introduced in 2013, was HRuF, a scheme aimed at mainstreaming the promotion of human rights throughout the UN system, making it a necessary and omnipresent element in the planning for and implementation of all programs and activities. While the initiative had an operational dimension in that it seeks to improve human rights outcomes around the globe, its primary aim was to create a "new organizational culture" surrounding human rights within the UN (Kurtz 2015, 6). It was "largely about how the UN operates internally" and about "integrating human rights into the lifeblood of all staff," and thus attempted to unite staff around a common mission and shared identity (Humanitarian Response 2014).

Indeed, Ban's speech introducing the initiative used broad and lofty language drawn in particular from the UN Charter to impress upon staff the centrality of human rights to the organization and the inherent legitimacy of human rights promotion. He reiterated the UN's obligation to "reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights," declared a "renew[ed] commitment to 'We the peoples' of the UN Charter," and stressed the importance of "[a] coherent United Nations" (Ki-moon 2013). He emphasized that all staff must take prompt action whenever they see abuses, exercise due diligence when planning programs and activities, and consider human rights "in their daily work" in order to prevent and end atrocities (Ki-moon 2013). Like with the World Bank's twin goals, it is hard to disagree with the initiative. The defense of and promotion of human rights, and the associated mitigation of conflict

[38] Interview, UN official, New York, February 2017.
[39] Interview, UN official, New York, February 2017.
[40] Interview, UN official, New York, November 2017.
[41] Interview, UN official, New York, November 2017.
[42] Interview, UN official, New York, February 2017.
[43] Interview, UN official, New York, February 2017.

and suffering, are necessarily good, moral, and appropriate objectives, ones that are aligned with the founding principles of the UN.

Not only did Ban use moralistic language in his speech, appealing to the Charter and the foundational values of the UN, he also portrayed it as the advent of a new approach to human rights in the organization, one perhaps necessitated by recent failures to protect human rights at the time, in particular in Sri Lanka.[44] Human rights, however, is not a new operational area for the UN; on the contrary, it is one of the organization's original three pillars of action, along with peace and security and development. In this way, Ban's narrative here entailed a form of discursive repackaging of existing language, drawn largely from the UN Charter, to show continuity of mission with the UN's origins and to draw upon the legitimacy associated with human rights promotion.

Moreover, HRuF created a narrative that minimized the dilemmas that frequently surround the implementation of human rights programs in the field. The protection and promotion of human rights is among the most politically sensitive of the UN's activities, because it entails holding the behavior of member states up to scrutiny, investigating individuals and groups, publicly and privately denouncing them, and sometimes employing coercive measures against them. Such actions clash with the UN's commitment to sovereignty and noninterference in the affairs of member states. It can alienate states accused of abuses, prompting them to cease cooperation with the UN in other areas, such as peace operations or sanctions implementation. In the worst cases, it can result in grave harm to UN staff responsible for human rights monitoring and investigation.

Yet, the discourse of HRuF avoids these dilemmas, urging staff to *always* stand up for human rights, with little discussion of the risks, challenges, and potential political costs of doing so, and instead focusing on the moral imperative of defending human rights. In this way, even where staff face difficult choices about how to promote human rights in practice and must sometimes interact with and even appease known abusers in the interests of achieving some other political objective, they can rest assured that their larger goals remain appropriate. In a sense, the discourse "relieves" the UN of its dilemmas—or at least downplays them—and thus enables staff to perceive their work as coherent, logical, and feasible. As one former official described, even where there is tension between human rights and other political considerations, "the respect for human rights at all costs," as specified in HRuF, is "in UN DNA."[45]

Following the introduction of HRuF in 2013, the Secretary-General wrote to all staff affirming this renewed collective commitment to human rights (Interagency Standing Committee 2015, 2), and the language of human rights was incorporated into texts and communications throughout the UN, from speeches and policy documents to job descriptions (Kurtz 2015, 19). In 2015, Ban again wrote to the heads of every entity in the UN system reminding them that the initiative "offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help ensure that the UN meets the aspirations of the Charter" and stressing the need to actively "internalize and implement" it (Interagency Standing Committee 2015, 2). The continual appeal to this language at all levels in turn helped to create a shared and cohesive identity among staff by ensuring that it was repeated across entities, levels, and settings and by giving staff

[44] The 2012 *Report of the Secretary-General's Internal Review Panel on United Nation Action in Sri Lanka* (the Petrie Report) found systematic failures by the UN to prevent widespread atrocities and killings of civilians in the final stages of the Sri Lankan conflict in 2008–2009 and noted that the organization "lacked an adequate and shared sense of responsibility for human rights violations" (United Nations 2012, 28). Additionally, the UN was facing intense criticism for its failure to accept responsibility for the cholera outbreak in Haiti in 2010, caused by poor sanitation practices by UN peacekeepers. The outbreak resulted in at least 10,000 and as many as 30,000 deaths (Pilkington and Quinn 2016).

[45] Interview, former UN official, Geneva, February 2017.

the discursive tools to reinforce that identity more locally within the organization—as one staff member put it, this conveyed the idea that "we're a family."[46] Again, as with the other examples presented here, few would have the ability to dictate that particular language be mainstreamed across documentation throughout the entire organization, from the most mundane to the most elevated, or to contact staff in the way that the Secretary-General did, highlighting the importance of leadership for the creation and affirmation of a collective organizational identity.

Compared to Ban's Leadership Dialogue, the language of HRuF has endured better, although it too has also suffered somewhat. Like with the Dialogue, HRuF was only introduced three years before Ban left office, leaving only a short time for it to become entrenched under his leadership. Since taking office in 2016, Guterres has repeatedly referred to the initiative in speeches, and human rights discourse fits nicely with his organizational priorities,[47] which initially boded well for the continued self-legitimizing potential of the initiative. Still, changes to organizational culture and the deep entrenchment of narratives take time, and enthusiasm at senior levels of the UN for the initiative has waned slightly since Ban's departure (Norris 2018). As a result, less senior members of staff who are supposed to adopt the discourse are often left without clear direction about how to do so and about how the discourse should relate to other narratives within the UN, such as, for example, the Responsibility to Protect (Strauss 2018, 56–57). As one UN official noted, the strength of HRuF at the level of middle management ebbs and flows much more now than previously and depends very much on individuals: "You have a new head of the Human Rights Section, [and] the whole thing falls apart."[48] Over time, such confusion may lead to the dilution of the narrative, causing it to lose its power to sustain self-legitimacy beliefs within the organization.

Indeed, despite initial references to HRuF, Guterres invocation of HRuF has "dwindled" over the course of his tenure and "its official status within the UN [has become] unclear" (Lilly 2021, 8). Moreover, in 2020, Guterres announced a new initiative, the Call to Action for Human Rights. This initiative, like HRuF, puts forth a vision of human rights as central to the work of the UN and calls for the UN to "enhance [its] organizational culture" at all levels surrounding human rights (United Nations 2020, 6). However, like with the Leadership Dialogue, staff have begun to observe a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of both HRuF and the Call to Action. Indeed, in light of failures by the UN to prevent or address serious violations such as the cholera outbreak in Haiti or the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, accusations of hypocrisy among staff have risen again due to a perceived tendency by their leaders to cater to member states or narrow political interests, rather than the higher ideals they are meant to promote. As noted above, turning away from this higher purpose necessarily diminishes the traction of discourse intended to reiterate and reaffirm a cohesive and normatively good organizational identity, and the introduction and reintroduction of lofty narratives is increasingly seen as a deflection tactic, rather than a reaffirmation of values.

Conclusion and a New Research Agenda

As can be seen from these examples, the leaders of IOs introduce new or use existing language to create unity in the face of operational and institutional contradictions, to demonstrate alignment with organizational values and missions, and to emphasize appropriateness, thus reiterating to staff the extent to which they can consider themselves and their work legitimate. Importantly, because the dissemination of narratives and the extent to which staff will pay attention to and

[46] Interview, UN official, Geneva, February 2017.

[47] Guterres has emphasized three priorities: conflict prevention, including promoting human rights, reforming the development agenda, and management reform (Guterres 2016, 2019; Strauss 2018).

[48] Interview, UN official, Geneva, January 2017.

repeat them depend on the social status of the "narrator" and the latter's access to discursive resources, this kind of narrative building and dissemination "requires leadership from the top" (cited in Kurtz 2015, 14). Numerous staff emphasized the special role of organizational leaders in this regard, with one World Bank official noting that discursive efforts to "reinvigorate the mission" are undertaken "at the very top," while for mid-level management they are "not a consideration."[49] Staff at the UN concurred, noting that where such initiatives were led by senior leadership, they were more effective because they enabled the leader to demonstrate that they embodied the values of the organization. One official, reflecting on the Leadership Dialogue, asserted that "seeing [that] this guy is motivated, is devoted to [our values]. . .makes a big difference."[50] In addition, by introducing or reintroducing specific language, leaders gave staff "shared cultural resources" (Gioia et al. 2013, 165) that enabled them to take up those narratives and repeat them throughout the organization, thus setting off a self-reinforcing cycle of internal legitimacy beliefs.

At the same time, such self-legitimation practices entail risks. First, term limits for leaders and subsequent shifts in discourse by new leaders or the introduction of too many new narratives at once can lead to narrative impermanence and cynicism. Second, efforts to simultaneously cater to internal and external constituencies or that are not backed up by concrete actions can cause staff to view narratives as hypocritical. Finally, repeated self-referential narratives can lead to stagnation and a lack of innovation. Success or failure of self-legitimation efforts by IO leaders is thus likely to depend on a number of factors, including individual charisma, follow-through, listening to and interacting with staff, and leading by example. In addition, it is important to note that senior officials are not the only "authors" in an IO, and narratives, counternarratives, and organizational language can also come from below (although these are likely to be less visible and more ad hoc). Finally, competing narratives will also come from outside, with the media, member states, beneficiaries, and others weighing in—often vigorously—on the relevance, utility, and appropriateness of an IO. While internal narratives are likely to try to "shut out" or counteract external criticism, they will inevitably respond to them, implicitly or explicitly, and external "authors" will thus influence the form and substance of internal narratives.

Despite this cacophony of voices and storylines, many IO officials still look in particular to leaders for self-legitimation narratives to guide them in situations of complexity and contradiction, and IO leaders play a key role in defining and affirming organizational identity on an ongoing basis. They do this not only through the more "typical" forms of management, such as human resources management or staff development, but also through the creation and interpretation of meaning and language within the organization. As such, leadership in IOs involves a crucial discursive element that is often overlooked, in studies of both IOs and leadership.

These conclusions suggest an important new research agenda, one that complements and goes beyond the existing research on IO legitimacy and legitimation. As noted, the literature in this area is rapidly expanding, and scholars have explored the various reasons IOs seek legitimacy, the diverse ways they undertake legitimation efforts, and the numerous and sometimes fragmented audiences at which they direct these efforts. However, internal self-legitimation has been largely omitted from these studies. Yet, as shown here, self-legitimation is a crucial and constitutive activity for most IOs, one to which they dedicate significant time and resources. This suggests that IO staff themselves consider their legitimacy as encompassing both internal and external dimensions, and therefore it is important to study to gain a full understanding of both the legitimacy and the legitimation of IOs. Specific studies in this regard should examine (1) self-legitimation as undertaken by a range

[49] Interview, World Bank official, by phone, November 2017.

[50] Interview, UN official, Geneva, January 2017.

of IOs, including those with more or less fragmented identities, different substantive foci, or different institutional structures; (2) the kinds of legitimacy demands and standards IO staff have; and (3) the form and content of self-legitimation, including discursive practices as analyzed in this paper, but also behavioral (such as symbol and ritual) or institutional (such as the creation of new structures or procedures) ones. Research in this area will help to demonstrate that the behaviors, institutional design choices, and cohesion of IOs are influenced not only by the legitimacy demands of external audiences, but also by internal ones, and thus will further develop the idea that IOs are in fact autonomous actors in the international system, with their own preferences and interests. More broadly, this will not only challenge principal–agent frames that construe IOs primarily as instruments of member states, but also deepen these theories by further conceptualizing and unpacking the agent side of this relationship.

Second, and more closely related to the subject of this article, it is necessary to determine the precise conditions under which leader-led self-legitimation efforts are effective or not, particularly in light of the risks identified. All three cases presented here suggest that the bar for leader-led discursive initiatives to result in increased or sustained self-legitimacy beliefs is high and that successes are easily lost with changes in leadership, poor timing, overly operational content, or an "overcrowded" discursive environment. Closer study of the ways in which these risks do or do not materialize, how they interact, and strategies for mitigating them will add empirical and theoretical richness to understandings of self-legitimation. These insights will have implications for our understandings of external legitimation and legitimacy as well, given that it is likely that frequent narrative changes or unsuitable content are also risky for legitimation efforts directed at external constituencies.

Third, as mentioned in the introduction, while many studies examine overall legitimacy needs, audiences, and practices, few engage with the microprocesses of IO legitimation. In particular, they rarely identify who specifically within an IO designs and issues legitimacy claims and with which specific means. This article, by zeroing in on leaders, partly fills this gap, but as noted earlier, legitimation takes place at all levels of an organization, including junior and mid-ranked staff, and legitimacy demands and the means available for legitimation will vary by group. Future research should therefore identify other legitimators within IOs to more fully understand how "talk from the top," while crucial and unique, is or is not countered by discourse from other agents within an IO. Equally, further research should examine the conditions under which counterclaims and counternarratives can displace dominant narratives from the top, and the implications this has for overall identity cohesion and stability in IOs.

Finally, as noted, internal legitimacy views matter because they partly shape the legitimacy claims that IO staff make to external audiences. The reverse is also true, and the standards to which IO staff hold themselves are affected by external views, both on an ongoing basis and in response to particular crises or scandals. Future research should therefore map the interaction between internal and external legitimacy standards and practices to more fully understand IO legitimacy as a dynamic, iterative process.

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