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"Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall": Self-Legitimation by International Organizations Introduction

Sarah von Billerbeck

In a farewell speech to UN staff in 2016, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon praised the "courage and resilience" of staff, the "global solidarity of the UN" with war-torn countries, and the organization's embodiment of a "common humanity" (United Nations Web TV 2016). While a focus on positive contributions is expected for an outgoing leader, what is notable about this grandiose discourse is that it was aimed at UN staff—not at skeptical external observers who need convincing of the UN's legitimacy, but internally, at those who, one would expect, are already convinced of it.

Across the social sciences, most analyses of legitimacy and legitimation focus on perceptions of the legitimacy of one actor by another. In so doing however, they fail to account for *self-legitimation*, where an actor undertakes legitimation not for external audiences, but internally, as a way of developing, defining, and (re)confirming its identity. Moreover, many understandings of legitimacy neglect the fact that identities are rarely uniform but instead are multiple and conflicting, and thus that legitimacy must be conceived of as variable, inconsistent, and contested.

This article addresses these omissions by examining self-legitimation by international organizations (IOs) and in particular how self-legitimation functions for IOs with multiple institutional identities. I draw on literature from several disciplines, including international relations (IR), organization studies, and sociology, and on three case studies—the UN, NATO, and the World Bank—to develop a theory of self-legitimation in IOs. I show that self-legitimation is a time-consuming, defining, and constitutive activity for IOs and that the concept of self-legitimation has explanatory power regarding IO behaviors that otherwise appear puzzling.

I argue that organizations that have less cohesive and more contradictory identities and whose multiple identities do not exist in a clear hierarchy face a greater need to self-legitimize. Few IOs have uniform, cohesive identities: most are at once operational actors that participate actively in global political and economic processes *and* normative actors that develop and promote international norms (von Billerbeck 2017; Lipson 2007); additionally, most IOs are both autonomous entities composed of technical experts and international civil servants and intergovernmental bodies controlled by member states (Rittberger et al. 2012; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Reinalda and Verbeek 1998).

These different identities sometimes dictate contradictory goals and practices, forcing the organizations to "violate" the principles and activities considered appropriate to one of their identities, thus complicating legitimation. Where IO staff find themselves faced with such contradictions, they must either "select" one identity or prioritize one set of appropriate behaviors and values above another. Where they lack the ability to select or prioritize, they engage in self-legitimation, which entails the use of discourse, communication, and symbols to affirm a coherent institutional identity. Put simply, these practices allow IO staff to look in the mirror and like what they see. However, this implies that IOs often say one thing and do another, and these contradictory discursive and operational practices have a number of broader effects, including reduced legitimacy perceptions by external audiences, resistance to reform, and decreased risk aversion.

My contribution is four-fold. First, I fill a gap in theories of legitimacy in IR, which focus on external legitimacy, neglecting internal legitimacy needs and their importance for the cohesion and efficiency of various actors. Second, I fill a gap in our understanding of IO behavior. By unpacking practices of self-legitimation, I show how behaviors that may appear inefficient or unnecessary actually constitute essential practices aimed at maintaining a cohesive identity and purpose in the face of conflicting imperatives. Third, I contribute to a growing body of research that integrates scholarship on IOs from IR and organizational sociology.[1] Finally, I provide a rich empirical look into the inner workings of the three IOs under study.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I explore the concept of self-legitimation, situating it within theories of legitimacy, legitimation, and organizational behavior. Second, I apply the concept to IOs, describing how self-legitimation is both relevant for and complicated by the multiple identities of IOs. Third, drawing on the case studies, I posit a

[1] On the gap between these fields and the extent to which it has been closed, see Ness and Brechin 1988 and 2013.

theory of self-legitimation. I argue that self-legitimation needs are determined by the degree of identity coherence and identity hierarchy in IOs, and I distinguish two temporal dimensions of self-legitimation—ongoing and specific—identifying three sets of circumstances when self-legitimation is especially necessary for IOs. Fourth, I identify practices of self-legitimation in IOs, including narratives, internal communications, and symbols and events. Fifth, I discuss the wider repercussions of self-legitimation. The final section concludes.

Legitimacy, Legitimation, and Self-Legitimation

Early definitions of legitimacy in IR considered it a feature that marks the relationship between rulers and ruled based upon shared normative standards (Clark 2005; Coicaud 2002; Franck 1990; Hurd 2007). In organizations, Dowling and Pfeffer define legitimacy as "congruence between the social values associated with or implied by their activities and the norms of acceptable behavior of the larger social system of which they are a part" (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975: 122). Suchman (1995: 574) similarly defines legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." More recently, scholars have recognized that legitimacy is not just a static characteristic, but one that is contested, fluctuates, and used strategically. Actors seek legitimacy through legitimation—actions designed to generate legitimacy in the eyes of particular audiences—because they believe it to support the achievement of their goals (Suchman 1995; Wilén 2009). These analyses, however, fail to account for self-legitimation, where an actor undertakes legitimation internally, as a way of developing and reinforcing its identity and maintaining a sense of its own appropriateness (Barker 2001).

This focus on external constituencies persists despite the fact that there are references to internal legitimacy as far back as Weber's examination of legitimacy and the state. Weber (1978: 213) noted that while legitimacy characterizes the ruler-ruled relationship, rulers themselves "feel the never ceasing need to look upon [their] position as in some way 'legitimate.'" Claude (1966: 368) echoed this: "power holders…cannot comfortably regard themselves as usurpers or tyrants but require some basis for convincing themselves of the rightness of their position." More recently, Barker (2001: 112, 41) argued that "legitimation is an activity which serves to confirm the identity of the legitimator" and that is "carried on by rulers for their own benefit." Self-legitimation, then, involves an endogenous process in which actors hold up mirrors to reinforce and remind themselves of their own normative correctness.

That actors in the international system should care about their own identity and legitimacy, separately from concern for how they are perceived externally, derives from a basic human need for a cohesive sense of self, well-documented in sociology and social psychology.[2] Originally developed by pyschologists, the concept of ontological security holds that individuals require a "stable sense of self-identity" (Giddens 1991: 54) within a "predictabl[e] social order" (Ejdus 2017: 2).[3] Ring and Van de Ven (1989: 180) note that there is a "need within individuals to have a sense of identity—that is, a general orientation to situations that maintain esteem and consistency of one's self-conceptions." In this way, people need not only a clear sense of identity, but also a perception that that identity is good, appropriate, and aligned with the norms of their social setting.

While this is a deeply individual cognitive and emotional need, identities also exist at the collective level and thus so does the need for ontological security, a point stressed by organizational theorists. Cheney (2000: 135) asserts that identities "remain crucial as points of reference, anchors for the self and for groups." Bradford and Quinton (2014: 1026) similarly argue that "a positive social identity in relation to [a]…group can serve several important psychological functions for the individual, such as fostering self-worth, helping them to make sense of people and situations."

Within an organization, the individual staff member's identity is a product of interactions in the social or cultural setting of that organization (Weick 1995: 20), and it is thus at least partly distinct from his or her non-professional identity. Additionally, because it is a result of ongoing interactions in the organization, it can be said to be, first, similar to others within the organization, and second, representative of the broader identity of the organization. This is how we can say that an organization has "an" identity, even though it is made up of numerous individuals, who are all unique.[4] Indeed, observers of organizations *do*

[2] See Morris 2013; Burke and Franzoi 1988; Erez and Earley 1993.

[3] See also Laing 1960; Giddens 1991; Lebow 2016.

[4] See Dutton and Dukerich 1991: 548. Some scholars criticize the tendency to slip between individual and organizational levels of analysis. However, I posit that this reflects the fact that individuals project their identities onto collectives and, in turn, adopt elements of their collective identities into their individual ones. See Lebow 2016: 35-36; Maitlis and Christianson 2014: 94-96; Edjus 2017: 3; Weick 1995: 20-23.

characterize them in particular ways—as normative or bureaucratic, for example. Though organizations are not people, they do have personalities, and it is unsurprising that their staff care about the cohesion and stability of that institutional identity.[5] From a research perspective, this also means that organizational identity and identity needs can be studied by observing the behavior and views of individual staff acting in their professional capacities.[6]

To maintain a cohesive identity, organizations engage in what organizational theorists call sensemaking, a process by which staff retrospectively make sense of unexpected events that challenge their conception of their organizational identity by constructing a version of reality in which the event and their reactions to it can be understood and rationalized (Weick 1995). Weick (1995:21) specifies that sensemaking involves the creation and sustaining of a consistent identity, one that "reflects favorably on the organization and one that also promotes self-enhancement, efficacy, and consistency," and Garfinkel (1967, in Weick 1995: 67) notes that such "constructed" rationality "is used to legitimize what has occurred."

That staff in organizations should face such discrepant situations is not surprising. According to Krasner (1999) and Lipson (2007), who draw on Brunsson's (2002) theories of organized hypocrisy, organizational environments are characterized by conflicting material and normative demands, similar to the incoherence I describe below. To manage these inconsistencies, organizations must be hypocritical—that is, they must comply with normative demands symbolically while simultaneously undertaking actions that contradict those norms, a process Meyer and Rowan (1977) call decoupling.[7] These scholars specify that because such hypocrisy arises from features inherent to organizational environments, it is indispensable to their survival.[8]

At the same time, hypocrisy can also threaten organizations' legitimacy because it shows them to be incoherent. As Lipson (2007: 22) notes, "if…an organization [is] seen to be

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[5] On ontological security in IR, see Ejdus 2017; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010.

[6] In this sense, this research falls within and contributes to the "practice turn" within IR, which understands social realities as being "constituted by human beings acting in and on the world" (Cornut 2017) and considers it possible to understand global phenomena by "zoom[ing] in on the quotidian unfolding of international life" (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 1).

[7] Meyer and Rowan here build upon earlier work by Weick (1969).

[8] Lipson 2007: 19; Krasner 1999: 65-66. Farrell and Finnemore (2013) also note the "utility" of hypocrisy, but warn that where the gap between rhetoric and reality becomes too blatant, hypocrisy loses its instrumental value.

talking and acting in inconsistent ways, the organization's coherence as an actor, essential to its legitimacy, can be called into question." Consequently, organizations will engage in activities that attempt to demonstrate consistency between discourse and behavior in a bid to assert their legitimacy. Brunsson calls this meta-hypocrisy, that is, "the posture that a hypocritical organization is not a hypocrite" (2007: 125). Such posturing is similar to the idea of sensemaking, where organizations attempt to portray themselves "as being consistent with regards to what is said, decided, and done" (Brunsson 2007: 125), even where in fact they are saying and doing different things.

Analyses of meta-hypocrisy usually focus on its external dimension: it is a response to societal norms that consider hypocrisy unacceptable and that demand that an organization's talk, decisions, and actions align (Brunsson 2007: 124). Efforts to "cover up" hypocrisy are therefore largely undertaken in the interests of not being discredited in society. Similarly, organizational sensemaking is at least partly intended to project a consistent and legitimate identity to external audiences. However, attempts to demonstrate consistency by staff are also *for* staff, and there is a strong endogenous character to sensemaking: staff hold up "mirror[s] in front of which [they] primp, evaluate, and adjust the self that acts, interprets, and becomes committed" and "sensemaking occurs in the service of maintaining a consistent, positive self-conception" (Weick 1995: 21, 23).

According to organizational theorists, this "primping" relies on discourse, communication, and symbol. Pfeffer argues that language, symbolism, and ritual are used to legitimate decisions and maintain belief systems in organizations (Pfeffer 1981), and Weick (1995: 3, 41) asserts that sensemaking rests on organizations' "own languages and symbols" and their "talk, discourse, and conversation." [9] Indeed, organizations are sometimes understood *primarily* as discursive systems, in which narratives are constitutive of organizational identities, give meaning to events, construct reality, and disseminate and entrench norms and values (Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009; Boje 1991; Vaara, et al. 2016; March and Olsen 1976).

Self-Legitimation in IOs

In spite of these analyses, studies of IO legitimacy within IR have focused on external legitimacy—whether they are considered legitimate by states, beneficiaries, and others (Tallberg et al. 2013; Zaum 2013; Steffek 2003; Suchman 1995). This is surprising given that

[9] See also Barker 2001: 6.

recent scholarship acknowledges that they have autonomous identities and agency and have the capacity to define themselves, identify themselves with particular principles and norms, and question the appropriateness of their actions (Rittberger et al. 2012; Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Reinalda and Verbeek 1998). Indeed, staff in IOs do have perceptions of their organizational identities—what they stand for and what their duties are—that are more than simply external projections and that constitute powerful self-images relating to the rightness and legitimacy of their work. It is, indeed, questionable how IOs could successfully project legitimacy *externally* if they lack a cohesive sense of legitimacy *internally*.[10]

Very few scholars have considered this internal dimension of IO legitimacy. Gronau and Schmidtke (2016: 544) point to what they call an "administrative turn in IR" when they include staff as a legitimacy audience in their study of the G8 and the IMF. They note that "[o]nly if staff dispose of a pool of legitimacy beliefs can they be expected to form a sufficiently reliable basis for the authority of the institution, making it well equipped to operate" (2016: 544-545). In her examination of MERCOSUR, Oelsner (2013: 117) notes that "organizations possess identities and identity requirements" and a cohesive internal institutional identity is critical for effectiveness. Nelson and Weaver (2016: 921) concur that internal identity perceptions help to explain certain IO behaviors, because they are aimed at "maintain[ing] a consistent view of the world and the organization's role in it" (Weaver 2008: 37). Sarfaty (2009: 649) insists that "theories of international institutions should account for the internal dynamics within organizational cultures." Barnett and Coleman (2005: 599-600) also emphasize the need to understand organizational culture, which they define as the ways in which organizational identity determines how an organization conceives of problems and appropriate solutions, in order to understand the organization's interactions with its environment. However, these studies are not connected under any broader theoretical umbrella; accordingly, how self-legitimation in IOs works, when it is needed, and what it entails remain underspecified.

In the next sections, I present a theory of self-legitimation in IOs. After introducing my methodology, I show that self-legitimation needs are determined by the degree of identity cohesion and identity hierarchy within IOs, and I identify two temporal dimensions of self-legitimation, three categories of self-legitimation practices, and three broader repercussions.

Methods and Case Selection

[10] See Bradford and Quinton 2014: 1027.

This paper undertakes inductive theory-building, drawing upon three in-depth case studies: the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO),[11] NATO's International Staff, and the World Bank's International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. These organizations were selected because they all have both operational and normative identities and are intergovernmental organizations composed of member states and international secretariats; they thus display multiple organizational identities and represent spaces where self-legitimation practices can be observed. At the same time, they diverge in the degree to which they are more or less operational or normative and the way in which they interact with member states, allowing me to compare whether and how intensively they engage in self-legitimation.

The empirical work is based upon 87 semi-structured interviews with IO staff, conducted between January 2017 and February 2018. Interviewees were non-randomly selected for their familiarity with the differing obligations and duties of the organizations and were chosen to represent a range of ranks, functions, and duration of tenure. All interviewees were secretariat staff, not seconded national officials.

I drew conclusions and developed my theory of self-legitimation once data saturation was reached (Fusch and Ness 2015: 1409). In this study, patterns emerged early within each organization; I then conducted additional interviews to verify and confirm my findings. Purposeful interviewee recruitment provided added protection against bias by ensuring that I recorded the views of a diverse range of individuals within each case (Bernard 2012).

Identity (In)coherence

While many scholars recognize that IOs operate in contexts marked by uncertainty, contradiction, and complexity and often attribute inefficient behavior to these factors, they often fail to recognize that uncertainty, contradiction, and complexity also derive from within, from the multifaceted and contradictory identities of these organizations, and that some of their behavior is therefore the result of internal factors (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Nelson and Weaver 2017; Lipson 2007; Brunsson 2002). Indeed, if self-legitimation entails efforts to delineate and reaffirm a cohesive organizational identity, then entities with multiple, divided, and conflicting identities should have a particular need to self-legitimize.

[11] For convenience, I use "UN" to refer to DPKO. In 2019, DPKO was renamed the Department of Peace Operations (DPO).

I conceive of incoherence as entailing the existence of contradictory elements within an IO's mission, purpose, or mandate. Incoherence can range from fully aligned to mutually exclusive. In the former, an organization is perfectly coherent and never faces situations where its values, tasks, and methods conflict; in the latter, an organization is fully incoherent and frequently faces situations where two or more obligations are incompatible. While these contradictions can exist along a number of vectors, two areas of tension are particularly important.

First, most IOs have both operational and normative identities. IOs are proactively involved in the management of a range of international processes like peacekeeping and economic development *and* the projection of values. As March and Olsen have argued, IOs are "not only decision-making institutions but also institutions for…creating meaning and for promoting specific concepts of the nature and role of the state, markets, human rights, and international organizations" (March and Olsen 1998: 964). As discussed, Brunsson (1989; 2007) concurs, asserting that organizational environments are marked by conflicts between values and actions. Lipson (2007: 7) notes that organizations face both "constraints related to competitive efficiency…and societal expectations of conformity with external normative and cultural…standards."

The three organizations examined here all display both operational and normative identities, though to varying degrees. The UN is the most "divided": it is both an actor dedicated to the development and dissemination of international norms and principles and one that deploys nearly 100,000 personnel globally and plays a leading role in international conflict management (United Nations Peacekeeping 2019). NATO (1949) has a more strictly operational identity focused on military action, but it was founded by a group of liberal states "on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law," a values-based identity of which its staff remain keenly aware. Additionally, since the end of the Cold War, NATO has substantially diversified its areas of activity to include *inter alia* governance, anti-corruption, and counter-terrorism, thus "becom[ing] a normative organization."[12] The World Bank was similarly founded with a narrow operational identity as a bank for developing countries, but it has grown to take on a variety of normative tasks, such as environmental protection, gender equality, and anti-corruption (World Bank Group 1944).

These diverse identities sometimes prescribe goals and ways of working that conflict, compelling staff to "violate" the principles and activities considered appropriate to one of

[12] NATO official, January 2018.

their identities. For example, DPKO officials noted that missions are often forced to choose between respect for host country sovereignty and demands for self-determination by marginalized or minority groups.[13] Others highlighted the "tension over…the UN's normative commitment to human rights [and]…the realities [of ensuring security] on the ground."[14] Nearly all agreed that the UN has "very much…a split personality"[15] and "an identity crisis [about] what [we're] actually trying to achieve."[16] Similarly, NATO and World Bank staff noted the dilemmas caused by working with "regimes and governments…[that] are dictatorships or [that] are guilty of inflicting human rights violations."[17]

Second, most IOs are structurally dichotomous in that they are both instruments funded and mandated by member states *and* independent secretariats composed of international civil servants with specialized expertise relating to one or several functional areas. Indeed, while IO staff recognize that they are the implementing arm of their state principals, as highly experienced practitioners in peacekeeping, security, and development, they also want conduct assessments, strategize, and implement activities.[18] However, courses of action preferred by staff based upon their expertise may contradict those preferred by member states based upon their interests. States may therefore not always permit autonomous action and may oblige IO staff to undertake activities that they consider inappropriate for their identity as international civil servants and technical experts.

This divide is most evident in the UN, where DPKO staff admitted that they disliked being "micromanaged by member states,"[19] but recognized equally that they are "at the service of [those] states."[20] NATO staff asserted their status as independent experts but strongly considered themselves as "at the service of [the] nations,"[21] demonstrating a lesser degree of incoherence. The World Bank was also less divided, with staff adamant about their

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13 Former DPKO official, January 2017.

14 DPKO official, February 2017.

15 DPKO official, November 2017.

16 UN official, November 2017.

17 World Bank official, November 2017; NATO officials, May 2017, January 2018.

18 On international staff and expertise in IOs, see Barnett 2012: 508-509; Autesserre 2014: 75-76.

19 UN official, January 2017.

20 UN official, January 2017.

21 NATO official, January 2018.

identities as world-leading technical experts; still, they too recognized that their work is driven by member states, either in their capacity as clients or as board members.[22]

Most IOs thus have operational, normative, and institutional—that is instrumental-autonomous—identities that are fragmented and often contradictory, though to different degrees. This, in turn, renders it difficult for IO staff to maintain a sense of their own legitimacy: if they are compelled to violate principles or behaviors appropriate to one side of their identity in order to comply with those appropriate to another, they are unlikely to feel an overall sense of the rightness or appropriateness of their work.

Of course, not all identities within an organization will conflict, nor will those that conflict always conflict, and the analytical categories described here are not absolute. Operations have normative content and normative standards have operational manifestations; equally, the dual structure of IOs can lead to convergence rather than tension between IOs and member states.[23] Indeed, ideally an organization's structure, operational goals, and values align, maximizing identity coherence and self-legitimacy. However, where they do not, they generate contradictory obligations and compel staff to engage in self-legitimation in a bid to maintain a sense of "stability, consistency, and meaning" (Nelson and Weaver 2016: 923).

Identity Hierarchies

It is not only the presence of multiple, conflicting identities that creates a need to self-legitimize in IOs, but also a lack of clear hierarchy among those identities. Organizations whose identities dictate contradictory duties but that have a clear idea of which obligations must be prioritized experience fewer "legitimacy crises" than those where various obligations are considered equally important and there is no guidance on which to prioritize. Indeed, multiple identities in an organization could theoretically introduce a kind of adaptability that facilitates the management of incongruous obligations, a "menu" of appropriate behaviors to choose from, thus rendering it less likely that an IO would encounter situations in which it does not know how to behave.

[22] World Bank official, November 2017.

[23] Wiener (2008) demonstrates that norms are not stable but that their meaning is constructed through use. While this leads to contestation because actors bring different interpretations to norm implementation, it also shows how actors advance normative agendas through operational behavior.

However, only where there is a well-defined hierarchy among identities do multiple identities help to navigate contradiction. Where there is no guidance regarding which identity to "adopt" in a given situation, multiple identities instead cause confusion, stress, and uncertainty in IOs, leaving staff with no clear idea of which course of action is the most appropriate. Social psychologists call this identity salience: "[i]dentities get ranked in a hierarchy" according to which different identities are more or less salient and thereby more or less likely to be "activ[ated] across situations" (Morris 2013: 24). Where this hierarchy is vague, inconsistent, or nonexistent, and where various organizational identities are considered equally salient in the same situation, then the presence of multiple identities means that the risk of an organizational "identity crisis" and negative self-perceptions of legitimacy is high, and the need for self-legitimation even greater.

In this regard, the organizations examined here vary significantly. The UN displays a high degree of uncertainty about how to prioritize, sequence, or select among its identities because staff view them all as equally important. One lamented, "how do you…compromise on values that are in the UN Charter if the actors on the ground don't play according to the rules?"[24] Similarly, many bemoaned instances where they were compelled to implement policies from member states with which they disagreed—one called this "the member state battle."[25] Several concluded that "it's always a choice amongst bad options in peacekeeping."[26]

By contrast, NATO and the World Bank have clearer identity hierarchies. For NATO, its operational identity and its identity as a service provider to its members take precedence over its normative identity. Though its mandate has changed, NATO's history as a defensive alliance means that staff continue to view collective defense, deterrence, and security as their "core business" and activities with a more normative character as "secondary."[27] Moreover, while many staff self-identified as independent experts, they also described themselves as "supporting the member states in their policy…[but] not driving [it]."[28] This does not mean that NATO does not have a normative identity or that staff don't attempt to influence the nations. As described, the self-perception of NATO as an alliance of democracies promoting

[24] UN official, January 2017.

[25] DPKO official, February 2017.

[26] UN official, November 2017.

[27] NATO officials, May 2017, January 2018.

[28] NATO official, January 2018.

individual rights, freedom, and rule of law runs deep among staff. They do therefore encounter situations where behaviors appropriate to this identity conflict with those appropriate to one concerned with military activities, and, though to a lesser degree than the UN, they engage in self-legitimation.

The World Bank, similarly, has a clearer identity hierarchy, with its operational identity usually outranking its normative one and its identity as a body of independent experts outranking that of a secretariat at the disposal of member states. Staff self-identify strongly as technical experts in economics, engineering, and governance, much more than as promoters of norms, and they view the organization as a technocracy, where decisions are taken on the basis of expertise rather than political interest.[29] Again, this is not because they don't have a normative identity. Indeed, staff were insistent that their mission is poverty eradication and that at heart they are "idealistic"[30]; but their approach to poverty eradication focuses on achieving operational outcomes through technical means, rather than the promotion of pro-poor norms. Additionally, Bank staff interact with governments not only as shareholders but also as clients who are explicitly seeking their expertise, so they consider it their duty to push states towards particular actions. Still, they acknowledge that funding and strategic direction come from states and they are sometimes constrained in what they can do, and they thus occasionally find themselves torn between behavior appropriate to different identities.

The degree to which organizational identities exist in a clear hierarchy thus has important implications for the need to self-legitimize. Where one side of an IO's identity ordains behavior that is inappropriate to another and where there is little direction about which obligations to prioritize, staff self-legitimize. They attempt to restate, redefine, and reaffirm a cohesive identity that renders their behavior acceptable, appropriate, and legitimate across *all* identities.[31]

Temporal Dimensions of Self-Legitimation

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[29] World Bank officials, November 2017.

[30] World Bank official, November 2017.

[31] Importantly, hierarchies can vary across functional area and role, implying that staff within a single organization can experience the need to self-legitimize differently. Compared to those in substantive policy departments, staff in, for example, logistics or facilities management are more likely to view their role as purely operational and less likely to encounter situations where they must violate institutional values.

The varying self-legitimacy needs of organizations suggest that self-legitimation takes place on two temporal dimensions. It must both occur on an *ongoing* basis in order for organizations to continually develop and affirm a cohesive identity and in *specific* instances where an organization faces discrepant, acute clashes between different sides of its identity.[32]

Ongoing Self-Legitimation

Because IOs are constantly faced with uncertainty, contradiction, and complexity, their identities require constant definition and (re)affirmation. IO self-legitimation must thus occur on a continuous basis (Brown et al. 2015: 267), undertaken not only to restore meaning where it has broken down, but also to "produce, negotiate, and sustain a shared sense of meaning" that can protect organizational identities against future breakdown (Gephart, Topal, and Zhang 2010: 285). Accordingly, self-legitimation can entail "mundane" (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015: S26) or "unremarkable" (Brown et al., 2015: 271) activities that focus on telling and retelling a story that reinforces the underlying values and beliefs of an organization and that stresses the positive, good, and legitimate in those values and beliefs.[33] Indeed, it would be inefficient for an IO to reevaluate its legitimacy with each decision, action, or outcome; maintaining a baseline of legitimacy means that IO staff can consider themselves legitimate *in general*.

Key to these efforts is the creation of an in-group identity or identity "apart," in which IO staff conceive of themselves as special and as the holders of a particular—and particularly good—position in the international system. Barker (2001: 35) contends that internal perceptions of legitimacy relate strongly to feeling "special, marked by particular qualities, [and] set apart from other people." Ongoing self-legitimation efforts in IOs therefore rely on a number of distinctive IO characteristics to create an identity that is exceptional and exclusive: their multilateral and international nature, the normative content of their goals, and the specialized nature of their work.

First, IO staff derive self-legitimacy from their multilateral character. Multilateralism is commonly associated with legitimacy, because it diminishes the ability of any single actor to promote a narrow agenda (Barnett and Finnemore 2004: 23). IO staff have internalized this idea and view their legitimacy as tied to the fact that they work for multilateral organizations and renounce, professionally at least, national affiliations. This is partly due to self-

[32] See Weick 1995; Maitlis and Christianson 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015.

[33] See Clegg et al. 2011: 221.

selection—these individuals believe in the advantages of international cooperation on matters of peace, security, and development and so choose to work for IOs. Nevertheless, they view multilateralism as an institutional characteristic that sets them apart from others in the international system.

One DPKO official explained that "the legitimacy of peacekeeping…stems from being the… impartial external voice of a global community."[34] Another asserted that the UN's multilateral nature gave its peace operations "a level of legitimacy that *nobody else can claim*."[35] NATO staff similarly identified themselves as international and the organization as one that works according to a "principle of internationalism," something they alleged made them distinctive in international affairs.[36] World Bank echoed these sentiments, with one asserting that "you are working internationally, you're working for…the greater good," and "you represent the institution and not your country."[37] Another concurred: "everyone prides [themselves on and] sees themselves as international."[38]

Second, IO staff derive self-legitimacy from the normative content of their work. IOs often take on the "big questions" of international affairs and thus have grandiose, moralistic missions. The UN (1945) purports to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war"; NATO (2010:6) seeks to "safeguard the freedom and security" of members and defend "individual liberty, democracy, human rights and rule of law"; and the Bank aims to "end extreme poverty" and "promote shared prosperity," the so-called "twin goals."[39] It is difficult to argue against these ambitions, and IO staff consider their work morally unassailable.

DPKO officials called peacekeeping "self-evidently right…self-evidently legitimate,"[40] and one declared that "[t]he reason that you get up in the morning is because you tell yourself you're going to deliver peace, security, and participatory development."[41]

[34] DPKO official, February 2017.

[35] Former DPKO official, January 2017, emphasis mine.

[36] NATO official, May 2017.

[37] World Bank official, November 2017.

[38] World Bank official, November 2017.

[39] These were introduced by President Jim Yong Kim in 2012, but represent a variation on the Bank's general goal global poverty eradication.

[40] Former DPKO official, February 2017.

[41] UN official, February 2017.

Similarly, a NATO official asserted that "NATO generally has the moral high ground,"[42] and another insisted that its "higher ideals [mean] that NATO stands for something that is bigger than the institution itself."[43] World Bank staff, despite their largely technocratic identity, similarly invoked moral language in describing their mission. One stated that "people are committed to…reducing poverty and making the world a better place."[44] Another stressed that poverty eradication is "much more than a mantra or slogan…we buy into a mission."[45]

A third source of exceptionalism is the specialized nature of IO's work. As mentioned, IO staff regard themselves as experts with distinctive experience, which further boosts their self-perceptions as unique. One described UN peacekeeping as "the body of 70 years' worth of experience and 70 odd missions…that we've directed."[46] While that expertise is sometimes blocked by member states, DPKO staff derive an enormous amount of self-legitimacy where it is not. As one official put it, "the UN's ability to influence [the policy making process] is *all* about legitimacy."[47] In spite of the greater constraints they face from member states, NATO staff equally view themselves as "substantive expert[s] in defense sector reform, in training, and in building professional democratically-inspired armed forces" who can provide specialized input into policymaking.[48] As one official described, "sometimes you need the international staff, who have the long experience and history of working within NATO…[to] drive allies into a particular place."[49] World Bank staff were even more adamant about their expertise as a source of legitimacy. They emphasized that staff are highly-educated, most to the doctoral level, and can provide expert advice across a range of sectors, making them "more than a bank" and "part of [a] greater vision."[50] This was widely echoed, with some confessing to a certain collective arrogance and to being "a bit snobby."[51]

[42] NATO official, January 2018.

[43] NATO official, May 2017.

[44] World Bank official, November 2017.

[45] World Bank official, November 2017.

[46] DPKO official, November 2017.

[47] DPKO official, February 2017, emphasis in original.

[48] NATO official, May 2017.

[49] NATO official, May 2017.

[50] World Bank official, November 2017.

[51] World Bank official, November 2017.

Clearly, all three IOs have strong in-group identities that enable staff to view themselves as special, superior, and thus legitimate, regardless of any conflicting obligations they face, and they reiterate this through ongoing self-legitimation.[52] One DPKO official described peacekeeping as a vocation, remarking that "being an international civil servant…gives you a sense of purpose, it's quite inspiring."[53] NATO staff likewise called their work a "vocation,"[54] asserting that "we are the best organization in the world"[55] and NATO is "probably the gold standard."[56] World Bank staff also consider their work a "vocation" and the organization "top-notch,"[57] adding that "we tend to think of ourselves as the best in the business."[58]

Specific Self-Legitimation

While ongoing self-legitimation is crucial to creating a reserve of legitimacy, sweeping references to missions and values are not always helpful in navigating acute instances of ambiguity or contradiction. In such discrepant episodes, staff are forced to engage in behavior that, while aligned with one organizational identity, contradicts what is appropriate for another, and they thus require specific self-legitimation efforts to justify, excuse, or dismiss these violations. There are three such "moments": when normative and operational obligations conflict; when member states overrule or ignore staff input; and when success rates are low.

First, when IO staff face normative and operational obligations that clash, they must either sacrifice principles for outputs or delay results in favor of norm compliance. For DPKO, these instances often involve tensions between rapid, low-cost delivery against targets and host state sovereignty, the promotion of human rights, or local ownership. Though NATO and the World Bank have clearer hierarchies between normative and operational objectives, officials also described situations where the "right thing to do" conflicted with the

[52] See Gephart, Topal, and Zhang 2010: 281.

[53] DPKO official, February 2017.

[54] NATO official, January 2018.

[55] NATO official, May 2017.

[56] NATO official, May 2017.

[57] World Bank official, November 2017.

[58] World Bank official, November 2017.

"efficient thing to do"—for example, working with governments marked by autocracy, corruption, and human rights abuse.[59]

A second set of circumstances in which IO staff face acute self-legitimation needs is when they feel that their expertise is being sidelined by member states. Though they acknowledge that they must do as instructed by members, they question their legitimacy if what is asked of them contradicts their expertise or is aligned with a particularistic agenda. Many DPKO staff explained that they feel they "have a duty to stand up to the P5"[60] because "[w]e're the UN, we're not from a member state, and we need to maintain a distance from the national."[61] Similarly, NATO staff declared that it was "refreshing and reassuring" when they could influence decision-making, and that moments where they could not were frustrating because it contradicted their idea of themselves as "highly educated and highly competent people."[62] World Bank officials likewise stressed that they "bridle when there's political interference…in our work," when a member state "starts to needle around in what we're doing…for political reasons."[63]

A final set of circumstances where staff question their legitimacy is when operations are going badly, in terms of poor results, backsliding, or internal scandals. Staff across all three organizations closely tied their sense of legitimacy to "seeing results…and having [a] sense of achievement"[64]; where these were missing or slow to come about, or where they felt their involvement had made matters worse, they questioned their identity as valuable and moral actors in the international system. Similarly, in cases of staff misconduct or corruption, they asserted that their "sense of legitimacy [was] shaken"[65] and they experienced "moments of very, very severe self-doubt"[66] and "soul-searching,"[67] because these scandals contradicted their self-identity as actors operating on a higher moral plane.

[59] NATO officials, May 2017, January 2018.

[60] DPKO official, February 2017.

[61] DPKO official, February 2017.

[62] NATO official, May 2018.

[63] World Bank official, November 2017.

[64] DPKO official, February 2017.

[65] UN official, November 2017.

[66] World Bank official, November 2017.

[67] NATO official, January 2018.

The UN experiences more such acute self-legitimation "crises" than NATO and the World Bank due to its more chaotic organizational identity.[68] Still, staff in all three described moments where normative and operational obligations clashed, where staff expertise was ignored, or of failure and scandal. In such instances, the need to reaffirm the appropriateness of the organization and its work becomes particularly acute.

Self-Legitimation Practices

IO self-legitimation, both ongoing and specific, relies on a variety of practices that are primarily discursive and symbolic in nature. Suchman (1995: 586) argues that "legitimacy management rests heavily on communication," including discourse and "a wide range of meaning-laden actions and nonverbal displays." Such acts of communication, ritual, and symbol are important because "people read into things the meanings they wish to see; they vest objects, utterances, actions and so forth with subjective meaning which helps to make their world intelligible" (Frost and Morgan 1983: 207). Nelson and Weaver (2016: 925) point to "the meaning-laden symbols, myths, stories, and rituals" of IOs, and Barker (2001: 41, 51) holds that self-legitimation occurs through ritual, performance, and ceremony. I identify three categories of self-legitimation practices in IOs: narratives, internal communications, and symbols and events.

Narratives

The first category of self-legitimation practices in IOs consists of narratives that reinforce an IO's ongoing legitimacy and explain or resolve specific contradictions. These narratives are self-referential and positive; they can be told individually, within units or departments, and at various levels within an IO; and they occur on an ad hoc basis, woven throughout the quotidian life of the organization. They serve several purposes. First, they reinforce the impression of a cohesive organizational identity and either construct a version of reality in which IO behavior, even where contradictory, is appropriate and compliant with shared norms and values, or convey the situation as one in which those norms and values are

[68] The tumultuous reform process carried out in the World Bank under President Kim may constitute an exception to the relative clarity that exists there, but my empirical findings nevertheless strongly support the existence of relatively cohesive organizational identity. Still, it is not surprising that periods of organizational change or transition, even if pre-planned, threaten the stability of organizational identities.

not relevant (Shannon 2000: 300). To do this, narratives emphasize missions and values at the broadest possible level, allowing staff to disregard the operational and ethical difficulties encountered in practice and instead focus on the moral incontestability of their work.

Several DPKO officials asserted that because they were working for peace, security, and human rights, they could "assum[e] that [their work] was legitimate."[69] One senior official claimed that though staff struggle with normative and operational trade-offs, they matter less "if your heart is in the right place."[70] Another opined that, "[o]ne of the things that you tell yourself to get yourself up in the morning is that you are working for an organization that is working for the good."[71] In this way, regardless of any dilemmas they encounter, they can consider themselves "good intrinsically."[72]

NATO officials likewise suggested that their broader democratic mission was what mattered, even if how to realize it in practice was sometimes unclear. In cases where, for example, they were compelled to put narrow member state interests above impartial or normative objectives, they needed to "find a narrative…a legitimate explanation" for their actions.[73] Similarly, Bank staff frequently invoked their overarching poverty eradication mandate, because justifying actions in these terms makes them above reproach. One official asserted that "the 'twin goals' is something that actually everyone buys into, because no matter what you're doing you can somehow link to [them]."[74] Others noted that "use [of the phrase] consistently is…a way of rallying around the flag…[and] of making sure that staff are constantly reminded of…the goal of this institution."[75] By talking about their work in ways that minimize or omit trade-offs and instead highlight overarching goals, IOs can consider themselves legitimate, even where their actions may "speak differently."

Second, narratives highlight operational successes or, where there are none, redefine success to emphasize criteria not linked to outputs, including agenda-setting, advocacy, and persistence.[76] A DPKO official suggested that peacekeeping staff "measure our success…in

[69] Former DPKO official, February 2017.

[70] DPKO official, February 2017.

[71] DPKO official, November 2017.

[72] DPKO official, February 2017.

[73] NATO official, January 2018.

[74] World Bank official, November 2017.

[75] World Bank official, November 2017.

[76] UN official, November 2017.

terms of [being] witness to, advocates for, and somewhat ineffective but sometimes partially effective at preventing the absolute worst happening," rather than in terms of "what we actually achieve."[77] Another asserted that, "[o]ur result is not zero fatality, our result is taking risks and having the right mechanisms to mitigate those risks to be able to make a difference and deliver results," thus making the benchmark for success less concrete, harder to measure, and easier to claim.[78]

NATO staff described a tendency to avoid scrutiny of failures—"we don't talk about this, we close the chapter"[79]—and, like the UN, to focus on their intentions, regardless of outcomes. As one described, "when we…take a step back and look over the last 10, 15, 20 years, you can see things that NATO did that maybe didn't work out as intended, but I think people would still argue that they were done for the right reasons."[80] World Bank staff likewise emphasized that, "we go into all these difficult places and we roll up our sleeves and we are really working to help things happen for the better, we are there for the long haul."[81] Others asserted that "there is a culture of reinforcing and applauding and celebrating."[82] By focusing on inputs and intentions, rather than outcomes, IOs can thus nearly always claim success and can remain assured of the appropriateness of their actions.

Third, IO narratives portray the goals and values of the organization as universal and therefore incontrovertible. Claims to legitimacy often appeal to supposedly universal values, because this "detach[es] them from any particular view," thus enhancing the degree to which they can be considered widely shared and therefore appropriate (Pouliot and Thérien 2017: 58). In IOs, universalistic narratives enhance staff self-legitimacy because they align with their self-identification as international actors not promoting any particularist agenda. One DPKO official described "a set of beliefs we all share that is core, irrespective of culture," and that "[t]hinking of this made me feel less conflicted about some of [our] actions."[83] Another asserted that "there is something about the UN as an idea, an ideal…an organization that still speaks to people in such a powerful way that when it comes to the big picture,

[77] DPKO official, February 2017.

[78] DPKO official, November 2017.

[79] NATO official, January 2018.

[80] NATO official, January 2018.

[81] World Bank official, November 2017.

[82] World Bank official, November 2017.

[83] DPKO official, February 2017.

people are on the same [page]."[84] In NATO references to the alliance's foundational association with democracy took for granted that democracy is universally considered the best form of governance. Staff described "a lot of normative language [about the] community of values" within the organization, and many of its actions as "not just about expanding a protective umbrella to somebody, [but] also about bringing someone into a norm-based community."[85] The World Bank's twin goals, similarly, are portrayed as universal and therefore applicable and valued everywhere. By couching the Bank's work in such terms, staff can consider their actions universally legitimate and above contradiction.

Two further points on narratives deserve elaboration. First, the self-legitimation function of narratives requires that they be retold continually, in order to repeatedly refill the reserve of self-legitimacy perceptions in an IO (Cheney 2000: 135). Geiger and Antonacopoulou (2009: 432) note that "so-called success stories…tend to be told over and over again, thereby becoming self-legitimizing." Consequently, most IOs have an internal language that is used and often only fully understood by their own staff. As one Bank official noted, staff "create [their] own language"[86] and DPKO staff referred to a "UN language."[87] This linguistic exclusivity further reinforces the in-group identity within IOs.

Second, the fact that narratives are self-referential, repeated, and self-reinforcing means that they also tend to be unexamined and thus can be divorced from reality or from external perceptions of legitimacy (Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009: 432; Weick 1995: 60-61). Indeed, narratives in IOs must be plausible and immune to refutation much more than they must accurately capture complexity, nuance, or ambiguity; in fact, they should do just the opposite: they should provide a simplifying account to enable staff to maintain a cohesive identity and sense of legitimacy (Thiessen and Thomson 1975: 12; Bottoms and Tankebe 2012: 162; Weick 56-58). As Weick (1995: 87) remarks, narrative-telling entails "seeing what one believes and not seeing that for which one has no beliefs."

Internal Communications

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[84] Former UN official, February 2017.

[85] NATO official, May 2017. This was particularly true with regards to the NATO enlargement process, in which NATO grow from its 12 founding members in 1949 to 29 in 2017, with the largest single expansion of seven new members in 2004.

[86] World Bank official, November 2017.

[87] Former UN official, February 2017.

A second category of self-legitimation practices consists of more formal internal communication exercises that are pre-planned and specifically resourced, in contrast to the ad hoc nature of narratives. These range from routine communications to one-off initiatives designed to bring staff together around particular issues, and they can take a variety of formats, including writing, speech, and film. However, they, first, are all inward-facing and not visible to external constituencies, and second, like narratives, focus on restating the organizations' overarching goals and values and celebrating successes.[88] While mission statements and institutional values are, of course, partly for external consumption, they are equally important for creating a cohesive organizational identity internally because they infuse staff with a sense of their own normative validity and legitimacy. Internal communication efforts of this kind also bring staff together physically or virtually, further reinforcing the in-group mentality of staff, and helping to create a shared language and identity.

One of the most commonplace forms of internal communication occurring in IOs on a regular basis is townhall meetings. Townhall meetings are a relatively mundane organizational activity, and though they often entail discussions about benefits and conditions of service, the initial address by managers is used to remind staff of the organization's overarching strategic and normative goals, its values, and its achievements—that is, to reinforce its positive narratives.[89] Townhalls also provide an opportunity to gather staff with different remits and at different levels of seniority in one physical place, thus providing a visual symbol of unity.

In DPKO, staff admitted that townhalls reinforced their "sense of being an international civil servant and sense of purpose" and helped to remind them that "peacekeepers are supposed to be the elite and to hold [themselves] to a higher standard."[90] NATO officials noted that they are a good way for staff to feel that they are part of one team,[91] and for NATO "to celebrate itself as a community of values."[92] Similarly, in the

88 See Dowling and Pfeffer 1975: 127.

89 UN officials, January and February 2017; DPKO officials, February 2017; NATO officials, May 2017; and World Bank officials, November 2017.

90 DPKO official, February 2017.

91 NATO official, January 2018.

92 NATO official, May 2017.

World Bank, despite some "eye-rolling" about townhalls,[93] staff turn up for the initial "pep talk"[94] from senior management, in which the latter highlight "what we can celebrate…look at these great things we did."[95]

IOs also undertake one-off communication initiatives aimed at boosting internal legitimacy. In 2013, then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched the Leadership Dialogue, an exercise in which managers hold an annual discussion with their direct reports on a topic relating to dilemmas they may encounter in their work. The inaugural Dialogue was entitled "What does it mean to be an international civil servant," and aimed to "remind [staff] of the standards [they] promised to uphold," even when faced with "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), and it sought to reaffirm the UN's identity as an organization of "loyalty, discretion and conscience" (United Nations Ethics Office n.d.). Similarly, the Human Rights Up Front initiative, launched in 2013, seeks to create a "corporate culture" within the UN system that prioritizes human rights and reinvigorates staff members' "awareness of their wider responsibility to support the UN Charter and overall UN mandates" (United Nations Secretary-General n.d.).

NATO has made similar efforts. In 2017, it developed a brand guide, aimed at making communication more effective through consistent imaging and messaging. While the guide primarily targets external audiences, it was also "meant as an…internal tool…to encapsulate[e] some of the character of the organization,"[96] and unify staff around the alliance's commitment to freedom and security, its diversity, and its effectiveness (NATO 2017a: 14, 42). Similarly, the *Towards One NATO* initiative, a staff-led consultation in 2017, examined organizational culture in NATO and sought to reinforce "a common understanding of shared key principles and goals" (NATO 2017b: 9). The report, though not yet mainstreamed within the organization, employs remarkably lofty language to characterize NATO, calling it "a public service for a greater good" and "the greatest and most successful military Alliance in history" (NATO 2017b: 47). Finally, in 2018, NATO moved to an upgraded headquarters building. NATO's Executive Management Office used the transition to create an internal communications program to challenge staff "to think about NATO's role

[93] World Bank official, November 2017.

[94] World Bank official, November 2017.

[95] World Bank official, November 2017.

[96] NATO official, May 2017.

in the world, about what NATO represents."[97] The program included the production of a series of videos and interviews, not for public broadcast but for NATO staff, in order to "create [a] sense of identity and [a] sense of purpose associated with the transition."[98]

The World Bank's dedicated internal communications team, the Employee Engagement Team, is tasked with "helping to connect staff with…corporate level campaigns…[and] helping to create a sense of community."[99] There is also an internal blog for staff, where, as one official put it, "[w]e're only talking to ourselves,"[100] and the Bank's current CEO, Kristalina Georgieva, posts a weekly video blog, called "Keeping You Posted," which is widely watched by staff, who admit that it helps create a sense of connectedness within the organization.[101] These internal communication activities, while diverse across the three IOs, are notable for their shared inward focus, their appeal to broad objectives and lofty principles, and their attempts to create a common organizational identity around an "idea" of the organization or of what it "represents."

Ceremonies, Symbols, and Spaces

The third category of self-legitimation practices is performative and material, and includes symbolic events, spaces, and objects. These practices are important for self-legitimation because they visually associate the organization with legitimate and noble pursuits, deeds, and values (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975: 127). Easton (1975: 446) asserts that "rituals," "official ceremonies," and "symbols of office" contribute to a "reservoir" of support, and Burke and Franzoi (1988: 561) highlight the role of physical space, noting that, "[p]eople spend much time managing 'place'…that is, providing the right atmosphere by managing appropriate symbols…for the proper playing out of roles and identities." Again, while some symbols, events, and spaces are externally visible and indeed externally directed, many are hidden from public view and intended instead for an internal audience (Barker 2001).

DPKO holds numerous ceremonial events intended to reinvigorate a sense of purpose and principle among staff, such as International Peacekeepers Day or, in mission settings,

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97 NATO official, January 2018.

98 NATO official, January 2018.

99 World Bank official, November 2017.

100 World Bank official, November 2017.

101 World Bank officials, November 2017.

medal parades and funerals. One official declared that "those moments are very important because there is an internal reaffirmation of why we do this" and because they reinforce the idea that "there is a common understanding of what it means to be part of the UN and how important it is."[102]

NATO also holds ceremonies around events both related to the alliance and external to it, such as terrorist attacks. One official described how "[i]t seem[s] like every other week we were laying wreaths" and "having moments of silence."[103] Such rituals are a visceral way of associating NATO with principled values and global solidarity and reminding staff of the alliance's continued importance. NATO also holds "internal ceremonies or events…centered on…important anniversaries of events in NATO's history."[104] In this way, symbolic events can also take a retrospective form, invoking an IO's history in a "return" to fundamental principles and foundational objectives as a way of generating self -egitimacy.

The Bank also has internal ceremonies, in particular for its numerous staff award schemes. These recognize performance and innovation, reiterating the intellectual excellence of staff and reaffirming the in-group identity as leaders in their fields.[105] They also provide an opportunity for senior leadership to congratulate staff on their work, which are "very important moments for staff…to feel celebrated and validated."[106]

Symbol can equally take the form of physical spaces and objects, and all three organizations enjoy impressive headquarters buildings that seek to represent their role in the world. The UN flies the flags of all member states outside its headquarters in New York and Geneva, reminding viewers of its multilateral nature, and the complexes are peppered with artworks and images relating to peace, justice, and equality. Much of this is visible to outsiders, but it is not lost on staff, who see these objects every day. Moreover, many are in restricted areas where the public cannot go. Gifts from member states and images of staff in mission settings line the corridors, aimed squarely at DPKO staff themselves. Additionally, staff engage in a remarkable degree of individual branding. Most DPKO offices are decorated with UN flags, posters, and the occasional blue helmet. Surrounding themselves with these

[102] Former UN official, February 2017.

[103] NATO official, January 2018.

[104] NATO official, January 2018.

[105] World Bank officials, November 2017.

[106] World Bank official, November 2017.

symbols reminds staff of their multilateral identity, the importance and legitimacy of their work, and their membership in an exclusive group of people working for world peace.[107]

Space and symbol are also important in the World Bank. The Bank's headquarters is an equally prominent building in Washington, DC, with a soaring glass atrium whose entrance, like the UN, displays the flags of member states and the words "Our Dream is a World Free of Poverty." Staff remarked that, "you see…the slogan as you walk in the door, [but] it's not just a slogan,"[108] it "help[s] remind [us]…of our goals."[109]

Finally, as mentioned, NATO has recently moved to a new headquarters building. The building is designed to look like interlocking fingers "to symbolize Allied unity and cooperation" (NATO 2018), and the internal communications plan created for the move included not only the videos described earlier, but also a highly symbolic art program. Like other IOs, NATO possesses a collection of artworks, mostly gifts from member states or partners, and specific efforts have been made to position these objects so as to "create an atmosphere that reminds people…of what NATO's core values are, of why we're here."[110] While the art program is partly externally-facing, some is remarkably introverted. Pieces of the Berlin Wall and the World Trade Center were placed by the main employee entrance, which "was very deliberate, because we wanted to use those to communicate to our staff why they come to work every day."[111]

Does Self-Legitimation Matter?

While it is clear that self-legitimation constitutes a major activity for IOs, it also has several broader repercussions, including reduced external legitimacy, heightened resistance to reform, and decreased risk aversion. First, IOs are often criticized for being slow and ineffective; however, because these assessments rarely consider self-legitimation, behaviors that may seem puzzling or unproductive may simply be self-legitimation practices. For example, an unquestioning and ritualistic focus on following procedures, maligned among

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[107] Similar branding exists in private sector firms. While it may not have the same normative content as in IOs—not least due to their for-profit nature—it does reinforce a similar in-group identity.

[108] World Bank official, November 2017.

[109] World Bank official, November 2017.

[110] NATO official, January 2018.

[111] NATO official, January 2018.

policymakers who interact with IOs, may actually be behavior that creates time and space for the development and expression of organizational identity and that IO staff deem necessary to engage in because it is appropriate to and affirming of that identity. Indeed, narratives, internal communications, and symbolic events are costly and time-consuming, and while they may seem unnecessary to outsiders, they reflect the internal need to build self-legitimizing discourse into organizational life and ensure that procedures and objectives fit with larger IO self-images. In this regard, while these practices may reduce overall organizational efficiency by consuming scarce resources, they are best conceived of as *necessary* inefficiencies.

Relatedly, what appears to be a failure to measure outputs openly or concretely may actually be the redefinition of success that IOs use to cope with the contradictions they face. For example, an emphasis on advocacy, while frustrating to donors who would prefer to see concrete outputs, may actually be necessary for IO staff to feel that they are successful at all given the challenges of otherwise showing results in peacekeeping, defense, and development. While this may constitute a failure to measure outputs in one sense, it reflects measurement of other institutional obligations that staff consider important. Similarly, secretariat pushback against member states may be perceived as intransigence, but reflects the fact that IO staff do not consider themselves only service-providers for states and may signal that they feel that their analysis is being sidelined.

Second, self-legitimation may increase resistance to reform by discouraging staff from accurately assessing their performance. As discussed, what is most important for internal narratives is that they are plausible and that they tell an engaging story that fits with organizational norms and principles, explaining away or minimizing challenges and outlying episodes. The relative irrelevance of accuracy, however, can imply either a lack of self-scrutiny or overly positive self-assessment, in turn suggesting that reform is not necessary or that any problems with performance are the result of external contextual factors, outside partners, or member states.[112] Consequently, support for reforms that could increase efficiency or performance may be decoupled from the political will to actually change, and thus reforms are likely to stall or fail outright.[113]

Additionally, reform efforts can threaten IO identities more fundamentally because they may imply a redirection of the mission or mandate of the organization. Reform thus becomes an existential question, rather than simply one about altering structures or activities.

[112] See Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009: 432.

[113] See Lipson 2007: 15-16.

Indeed, if staff are motivated by "the belief in the mission"[114] then reform efforts that modify that mission are likely to engender anxiety and fear, because they entail changes in identity, in how staff see themselves, and in their sense of appropriateness.[115] In this regard, it is likely that the pace and intensity of self-legitimation will be heightened during periods of reform or when there are divisive debates regarding strategic direction—such as NATO's move or current discussions within DPKO about the future of peace operations[116]—and resistance to implementing any changes will be high.

Finally, self-legitimation may decrease risk aversion. The repeated, self-referential, and positive narratives told within organizations instill a dedication in staff that makes them willing to take on difficult work in difficult places that few others are willing to do. As one UN official described, "the shared sense of identity and purpose…is what in a way allows the UN to deliver on quite a lot, despite all the gaps and the internal and external obstacles."[117] A World Bank official suggested that "if we didn't have that sense of [being] mission-driven, we would not be as interested in working [in] the hardest places."[118] This was echoed by others, who noted that "life is pretty miserable in these places, so I do think there is an element of identity and legitimacy that explains why people keep working…with very little results."[119] In this way, IO narratives, even if they are inaccurate and self-reinforcing, also enable, at least partly, the very work states task to IOs. Ironically, it is often states that are most risk averse in IOs—for example in committing funds or troops to countries outside of their strategic interests—and it is work that they won't undertake themselves that they route through IOs. The willingness of IOs to take risks is therefore a valuable resource for member states.

[114] World Bank officials, November 2017.

[115] World Bank officials, November 2017.

[116] The publication of the Cruz Report (United Nations Peacekeeping 2017) on UN peace operations prompted a vigorous discussion within DPKO about how coercive operations should be. While self-legitimation does not preclude internal disagreement, such internal discussions often force staff to consider changing the way they operate, challenging their self-perceptions.

[117] UN official, November 2017.

[118] World Bank official, November 2017.

[119] UN official, November 2017.

At the same time, self-legitimation can generate and entrench dysfunction within IOs because it facilitates and even normalizes continued discrepancy between discourse and action. Barnett and Finnemore (2004: 35) consider organizations dysfunctional when they act "in ways that are at odds with their stated mission." Defiance towards member states, avoidance of rigorous performance measurement, and resistance to reform can all contribute to such dysfunction by making discursive practices sufficient and acceptable responses to real operational trade-offs. When seen through the lens of self-legitimation, however, these behaviors become acceptable and even expected because the search for a cohesive identity and consistency in organizational life necessitates them. Ironically then, the very self-legitimation that enables IO staff to function also deepens their *dys*function.

Still, despite inefficiency and dysfunction, staff dedication to organizational missions and values instills nearly all staff with immense pride in their work, which constitutes an enormous resource for IOs. One Bank official stressed that staff derive a vast amount of "self-validation [from the fact] that you belong to this crowd of folks who are the global leaders in their respective fields and…do this very impactful sort of work." [120] Others concurred, noting that "the nature of the work we are doing is…a huge component of [our] pride and belief in the organization."[121] NATO officials were also openly proud, explaining that this derives from "working for an organization that means something."[122] DPKO staff were the most fervent, with many speaking in religious terms about the organization. Many described themselves as "believers,"[123] one referred to the Charter as "the Holy Scripture,"[124] and another called DPKO "a cult of devotion."[125] While such sweeping statements were rarer in NATO and the World Bank, all three organizations enjoy an immense reserve of staff dedication deriving from their missions, their values, and their multilateral identities.

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[120] World Bank official, November 2017.

[121] World Bank official, November 2017.

[122] NATO official, January 2018. The Staff Associations of NATO and the World Bank run annual staff surveys. In 2016, 68% of NATO staff felt fulfilled in their jobs and 82.6% felt useful in their jobs (NATO HQ Staff Association 2017). In 2017, 92% of Bank staff stated that they were proud to work there (World Bank Group 2017).

[123] DPKO officials, February, May, November 2017.

[124] UN official, February 2017.

[125] Former DPKO official, February 2017.

Conclusion

The growing literature on the legitimacy of IOs in IR fails to account for self-legitimation and how it works in organizations with multiple, conflicting identities. This article contributes to filling this gap by developing a theory of why, when, and how self-legitimation occurs in IOs. In so doing, I shed light on a range of discursive and symbolic behaviors that may appear unintelligible to external audiences, but that actually constitute enabling, essential, and even existential activities for these organizations. I also demonstrate how the need for and practices of self-legitimation by IOs have a number of broader repercussions: while self-legitimation may make IOs lose external legitimacy and heighten resistance to reform, ultimately generating organizational dysfunction and inefficiency, it also renders them more willing to take on difficult jobs that no one else wants.

However, regardless of whether the overall impact of self-legitimation on IO activities is positive or negative, it is a fact of organizational life, indeed, it is constitutive of it, not only for IOs, but for any collective professional entity characterized by a multifaceted identity. Where identities are incoherent and weakly hierarchized, self-legitimizing practices are likely to exist, albeit with varying content, across organizations ranging from NGOs to private firms. In this way, assessments of both the legitimacy and behavior of a range of actors in the international system and beyond must include self-legitimation, something that has been until now been ignored. By turning the mirror on IOs—as, indeed, they do themselves—our understanding of these unique but crucial actors in international affairs is deepened.

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