THE "MACRO" AND THE "MICRO" OF LEGITIMACY: TOWARD A MULTILEVEL THEORY OF THE LEGITIMACY PROCESS

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The distinction of macro- and microfoundations of institutions implies a multilevel conceptualization of institutional processes. We adopt the evaluators' perspective on legitimacy to develop a multilevel theory of the legitimacy process under ideal-type conditions of institutional stability and institutional change, and we explore the dynamics of institutional change—from destabilization of the institutional order to return to stability in legitimacy judgments expressed by evaluators. We argue that through the process of institutionalization, legitimacy judgments of evaluators are subjected to social control and describe an institutional stability loop—a cross-level positive-feedback process that ensures persistence of legitimacy judgments and stability of the institutional order. Viewing institutional stability as a state of suppressed microlevel diversity, we draw researchers' attention to "silenced" legitimacy judgments and to judgment suppressor factors that induce evaluators to abstain from making their deviant judgments public. The removal of such factors leads to the (re)emergence of competing judgments in public communications and creates an opportunity for institutional change. We explore competitive strategies that address propriety or validity components of legitimacy and describe the process through which organizational fields return to a state of institutional stability.

Institutional theorists' attention to microfoundations of institutions (Jepperson, 1991; Powell & Colyvas, 2008) implies a multilevel conceptualization of institutional processes and, thus, requires "specifying relationships among variables at different levels" (Rousseau, 1985: 8). It has been observed that "levels issues pervade organizational theory and research. No construct is level free" (Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994) and that a "comprehensive explanation of organizational phenomena must, necessarily, include concepts from multiple levels of analysis" (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Despite early institutional theory scholars' attention to microlevel psychological and sociocognitive aspects of institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zucker, 1977), the organizational research of the

last two decades has focused primarily on organization- and field-level units of analysis (Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006). Researchers have addressed organizations' efforts to establish and protect their legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), institutionalization and diffusion of new practices (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983), or deinstitutionalization of old ones (Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004; Sine & David, 2003).

The little attention that institutional theorists have paid to level issues is particularly striking, given that the key questions of institutional theory—questions about sources of institutional stability and change (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005)—are essentially questions of cross-level interactions within the social system (Barley, 2011). The exploration of level interactions is critical for understanding the duality of macrolevel institutional processes, which are enacted by individuals (Powell & Colyvas, 2008), and microlevel processes, through which actors

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create, alter, and destroy institutions. The issue of levels and level interactions is therefore fundamental to institutional theory, and both conceptual and empirical research are required to explore cross-level interactions within the social system.

In this article we seek to develop a multilevel theory of organizational legitimacy, one of the key concepts of institutional theory (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Tost, 2011). We approach organizational legitimacy from the evaluator's perspective—that is, we approach it not as a property or an asset owned by an organization but as a judgment, with respect to that organization, rendered by individuals at the micro level and by collective actors at the macro level (Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011; Walker, Thomas, & Zelditch, 1986; Zelditch & Walker, 1984). The approach focused on legitimacy judgment formation requires attention to evaluators' cognition, which manifests itself in the communication and the nonverbal actions of these actors. We regard cognition and communication among evaluators as essential elements of the cross-level legitimacy process and, thus, extend discursive and rhetorical approaches to legitimacy (Green, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2008) to the exploration of social influence and institutional strategies that competing actors use to change legitimacy judgments of individual evaluators.

In the sections that follow we address questions of how a multilevel approach can explain why actors at the micro level are still capable of changing institutions, despite the "iron cage" of institutional norms and collective beliefs, and how competition among judgments in an unstable institutional environment leads to judgment institutionalization, suppression of "deviant" legitimacy judgments,[1] and eventual stabilization of the institutional order. First, we draw attention to fairly distinct processes that unfold at the macro and micro levels. We then develop a multilevel theory of the legitimacy process under conditions of institutional stability and institutional change and describe the social dynamics

of institutional change—from destabilization of the institutional order to return to stability in evaluators' legitimacy judgments.

LEGITIMACY AT THE INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE LEVELS

Organizational Legitimacy

The definition of legitimacy has been the subject of many debates in organizational theory (Berger, Ridgeway, Fisek, & Norman, 1998; Hannan, Carroll, Dundon, & Torres, 1995; Suchman, 1995). The extant literature converges on Suchman's definition of legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (1995: 574). An important aspect of legitimacy is that it is a "generalized," collective perception, which, although composed of subjective legitimacy judgments of individuals (Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011), is aggregated and objectified (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) at the collective level. Since it reflects the degree of collective approval of an organization (Johnson, 2004; Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006; Suchman, 1995), legitimacy is often regarded as an objective organizational resource or attribute independent of the endorsement of single individuals (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002).

Legitimacy Evaluators

Nevertheless, although legitimacy can be viewed as an asset "owned" by a certain actor—an individual, organization, or category of organizations—it still remains a social evaluation made by others. Those actors that confer legitimacy (hereafter *evaluators*) can be individuals or collective actors—namely, groups, organizations, or field-level actors, such as the media or regulators. Evaluators make judgments about the social properties of an organization or a category and, through their actions, generate positive (or negative) social, political, and economic outcomes. Although ontologically it is individual evaluators who perceive, analyze, and make judgments (Jepperson & Meyer, 2011; Watkins, 1952), it is often collective actors (organizations, associations, interest groups, governments, etc.) who act upon some "collective"

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[1] It is important to note that while we treat conformity versus deviance as a categorical distinction throughout this article, such an assumption represents an analytical simplification. The degree of a judgment's deviance is also determined by perceptions and may vary across evaluators and contexts.

legitimacy judgment. For instance, by entering into exchange relations with another actor or by establishing an alliance or partnership, an organization (as a collective actor) renders a judgment about the appropriateness of such a relationship, given the legitimacy of the prospective partner. Similarly, government and judicial authorities arrive, through a set of internal procedures, at a legitimacy judgment with respect to the focal organization or category, and they then disseminate their judgment as an official verdict. Thus, legitimacy evaluation does not exclusively take place at the *micro level*—that is, within the bounds of the mental operations of individuals (Tost, 2011)—but also encompasses sensemaking of collective actors (Daft & Weick, 1984), who act upon some collective, *macrolevel* legitimacy judgment.

Propriety and Validity

Since both individual and collective actors render legitimacy judgments and interact with each other, it is important to recognize that legitimacy is a fundamentally cross-level construct consisting of two components present at different levels: individual-level propriety and collective-level validity (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975; Johnson et al., 2006; Tost, 2011; Zelditch, 2011).

The first component, *propriety*, represents an evaluator's approval of the organization, its actions, or its practices as desirable and appropriate (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975; Johnson et al., 2006). The second component, *validity*, refers to "the extent to which there appears to be a general consensus within a collectivity that the entity is appropriate for its social context" (Tost, 2011: 689). Thus, propriety is an individual evaluator's own judgment of social acceptability—a microlevel construct—whereas validity represents a collective consensus about legitimacy that is present at some higher level, such as the group, organization, organizational field, or society.

As individual evaluators observe other actors and receive messages from them conveying the validity judgment, they form a *validity belief*—a judgment about what the validated "consensus" is. Thus, legitimacy is present at the macro level in a form of validity, while at the micro level evaluators use two perceptual inputs to form their legitimacy judgments: (1) they assess propriety based on perceptions of the organization, its behaviors, and characteristics, and (2) they form validity beliefs, which are based on their perception of the macrolevel validity—that is, on the perception of consensus opinion about that organization that exists at the collective level (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975; Tost, 2011; Zelditch & Walker, 2000).

The construct of validity describes the primary mechanism through which collective legitimacy judgments at the society, field, or organization level influence individual evaluators. As noted by Weber (1978/1924), evaluators comply with rules, values, and beliefs that they consider valid, even if they privately disagree with them. Social psychologists have accumulated strong evidence that subjective judgments are profoundly influenced by authority and majority opinion (Asch, 1956; Erb, Bohner, Hewstone, Werth, & Reinhard, 2006; Gould, 2002; Milgram, 1974; Muchnik, Aral, & Taylor, 2013). Validity thus represents one of the most powerful legitimacy judgment heuristics, since individuals rely heavily on the collective "validity" opinion in making their own propriety assessments. There is also experimental evidence of the effect of validity not only on the evaluators' assessments of propriety but also on their propensity to protest or seek change to the existing social structure (Walker, Rogers, & Zelditch, 1988).

Sources of Validity

As multiple evaluators express the same propriety judgment and observe others expressing it too, they gain greater reassurance of the validity of their judgment, in that it represents a consensus opinion shared by others. Majority opinion is thus one of the basic sources of validity cues for evaluators. However, validity is affected not only by the majority opinion. Some institutions of society—*media, government*, and the *judicial system*—have evolved into critical sources of validity that fundamentally influence other evaluators' judgments. Each of these judgment validation institutions provides some form of forum for debates over legitimacy and a mechanism for debate resolution. They process multiple and often conflicting legitimacy judgments of evaluators, select and codify in written texts the most "appropriate" judgment, and, by communicating it back to evaluators, provide

them with an important validity cue that guides evaluators' future judgments and behaviors. Judgment validation by the media, the government, or the judicial system is usually a competitive process. Each of these three judgment validation institutions has its own rules of competition and practices of contest resolution, as well as its own genres of judgment validation texts—that is, written documents in which the validated judgment is recorded. Thus, in the media it is the share of voice that determines the evaluator's perception of validity; with the government it is the regulators' and legislators' decisions that confer validity to the winning judgment; and in the legal domain it is the judgments of judges or juries (the "delivered law"; LoPucki & Weyrauch, 2000) that set precedents and, thus, establish validity for future judgments on similar cases. These judgments are then communicated to other actors in legal opinions and other texts that constitute the body of "written law" (LoPucki & Weyrauch, 2000).

It should be noted that it is individuals who participate in the judgment formation process within these institutions—journalists, bureaucrats, elected officials, jury members, or judges. Hence, the observations on legitimacy judgment formation by individual evaluators (see below) will also apply to these individuals. However, collective decision making within these judgment validation institutions adds additional complexity to the judgment validation process that they perform. The research on power, politics, and decision-making processes (Daft & Weick, 1984; Hardy & Clegg, 1996; Kaplan, 2008) can inform our understanding of legitimacy judgment formation in organizations and other types of collective actors.

In addition to the media, the government, and the judicial system, some validation functions are also assumed by trade associations (Barnett, 2006; Lawrence, 1999; Rao, 2004), watchdog organizations (Rao, 1998), and actors in "subject positions" with the "right to speak" (Maguire et al., 2004; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004), such as representatives of interest groups, experts, opinion leaders (Pollock & Rindova, 2003), or stock analysts (Certo, 2003). However, these actors influence judgments of others through one of the three judgment validation institutions—the media, the government, and the judicial system.

The sections that follow present a multilevel model of the legitimacy process and describe how macrolevel validity influences evaluators' propriety judgments and how, in turn, evaluators' judgments of propriety together create macrolevel validity.

A MULTILEVEL THEORY OF THE LEGITIMACY PROCESS

Institutional Stability and Change

Institutional theory emphasizes the enduring nature of institutions: once established, they tend to last (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1977). Nevertheless, they do not last forever. Old institutions decline and new ones are created through the efforts of individual and collective actors. The literature on institutional entrepreneurship (David, Sine, & Haveman, 2013; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire et al., 2004) and institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009; Maguire & Phillips, 2008) has explored how institutions, organizations, and categories gain or lose their legitimacy and how new practices and organizational forms are legitimated and diffused. The concepts of legitimation (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Pollock & Rindova, 2003; Vaara & Tienari, 2008), delegitimation (Sine & David, 2003; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), and relegitimation (Vaara & Tienari, 2011) refer to periods of high instability of legitimacy judgments and contestation of the social worth of the organization. Therefore, it is analytically important to distinguish between the legitimacy process under conditions of institutional stability and the legitimacy process under conditions of institutional change. This distinction affects not only theory but also methods and measures that can be meaningfully used to explore relationships in the legitimacy process.

Following the logic of institutional theory development over the past three decades, in the sections below we proceed from the exploration of sources of stability and isomorphism in legitimacy judgments to the exploration of legitimacy construction and contestation in unstable institutional environments. We then address the dynamics of institutional change—from destabilization of the institutional order and the legitimacy judgments that it prescribes to the return to stability—and explore the role of communication in stabilizing and destabilizing legitimacy judgments.

The Legitimacy Process Under Conditions of Institutional Stability

Berger and Luckmann (1966) observed that institutions, once created, tend to persist even when they have lost their functionality. By rendering organizations and practices widely accepted and even taken for granted, institutionalization plays a crucial role in transmitting social order to a new generation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zucker, 1977) and in ensuring isomorphism and conformance in individual actors' judgments and actions (Zucker, 1977). "To say that a segment of human activity has been institutionalized is already to say that this segment of human activity has been subsumed under social control" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 55). We argue here that evaluators' activity of rendering legitimacy judgments is subject to institutional pressures, as is any other form of social activity. Below we explore the mechanisms of social control of legitimacy judgments through validity and propriety.

Institutionalization effects on validity. While propriety assessment is performed by individual evaluators (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975; Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011; Zelditch & Walker, 1984), validity is the result of a process of aggregation of individual propriety judgments into some "collective" judgment. As propriety judgments are "externalized" through the actions and discourse of evaluators, the repeated judgments are habitualized, "cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 53). In other words, they become a part of objective reality—they become *institutionalized*.

Since institutionalization subsumes judgments under social control, in highly institutionalized environments there are judgments that are appropriate to express and judgments that are suppressed as socially unacceptable. The institutionalization of a legitimacy judgment implies that the stability of the social order is protected by two separate mechanisms: (1) by the institutionalization of an organization, structure, or practice and (2) by the institutionalization of the legitimacy judgment about it. That is, under conditions of institutional stability, the evaluated entity is legitimate not only because it is perceived as congruent with social norms (i.e., has propriety) but also because the institutionalized collective legitimacy judgment (i.e., valid-

ity) pressures individual evaluators to express a positive legitimacy evaluation and suppress the public expression of negative judgments about it. For example, in local hockey fan subcultures, it is often inappropriate to express a negative judgment with respect to the local team, even if the team chronically underperforms and is plagued with scandals. As a result, an organization can remain legitimate even if it deviates from individual evaluators' expectations (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Suchman, 1995). Thus, as is the case with other institutional processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the more institutionalized the legitimacy judgment (i.e., the greater the validity), the greater the conformity and isomorphism in legitimacy judgments openly expressed by evaluators.

This double protection of the existing social order suggests that institutionalization of a positive legitimacy judgment about an entity confers substantial social benefits. In effect, it is validity, the institutionalized part of the legitimacy judgment, that gives legitimacy its "resource" properties. It is this part of the legitimacy judgment that organizations "own," preserve, and use as an "asset" to facilitate the mobilization of resources, to reduce resistance, and to ensure the stability of their social and economic ties (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Suchman, 1995). In contrast, the institutionalization of a negative legitimacy judgment—illegitimacy— may become an important liability for an organization, as is the case with tobacco, fast food, or arms companies (Vergne, 2012).

Institutionalization effects on propriety. Individual evaluators assess propriety, the normative acceptability of an organization, by benchmarking the organization's perceived properties and behaviors against a set of social norms (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975; Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011; Zelditch & Walker, 1984). Thus, one of the cognitive operations that an evaluator needs to perform in order to assess propriety is selection of the appropriate set of social norms to be applied in the evaluation of the organization. The propriety judgment outcome heavily depends on the set of norms against which the evaluator chooses to benchmark the organization.

In macroinstitutional research, Ruef and Scott (1998) were among the first to draw attention to different sets of norms (managerial and technical) that can be used in legitimacy assessments.

Microlevel evidence corroborates their findings: Lamin and Zaheer (2012) showed that in judging organizational legitimacy, different types of stakeholders (called "Wall Street" and "Main Street") use different sets of norms (drawn respectively from economics and ethics) and arrive at different judgments about the legitimacy of a firm. Also, the research on framing and media effects (Scheufele, 1999) shows that in public debates over social issues, opponents promote competing sets of norms in their discourses, such as "environmental protection" versus "economic development," "free trade" versus "job protection," "cost-effectiveness" versus "quality of care," and so on. Depending on which set of norms is selected, an evaluator can arrive at different legitimacy judgments about an organization.

As opposed to unstable institutional environments, where multiple sets of norms advanced by their proponents compete for the minds of evaluators (see discussion below), in a stable institutional environment the choice of norms is "obvious," since it is taken for granted that a particular set of norms (e.g., an established technological or environmental standard) applies to a given type of organization. Thus, under condi-

tions of institutional stability, evaluators' legitimacy judgment activity is subject to social control through the process of institutionalization of the practice of applying a particular set of norms to a given type of organization (see link E in Figure 1 below). This, in turn, implies that the more institutionalized the legitimacy judgment (i.e., the greater the validity), the greater the conformity and isomorphism in the selection of norms to be used in propriety judgments about a given organization.

The effects described above suggest that institutions are socially constructed templates not only for action (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) but also for legitimacy judgments. Institutions control both which norms evaluators should apply in judging propriety and what the final expressed judgment should be (validity). Thus, under conditions of stability, DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) "iron cage" of institutional constraints extends to legitimacy judgments made by evaluators.

The legitimacy process model under conditions of stability. The discussion above suggests that under conditions of institutional stability, there is a substantial isomorphism in evaluators' publicly communicated propriety judg-

FIGURE 1
A Multilevel Model of Legitimacy Under Conditions of Institutional Stability
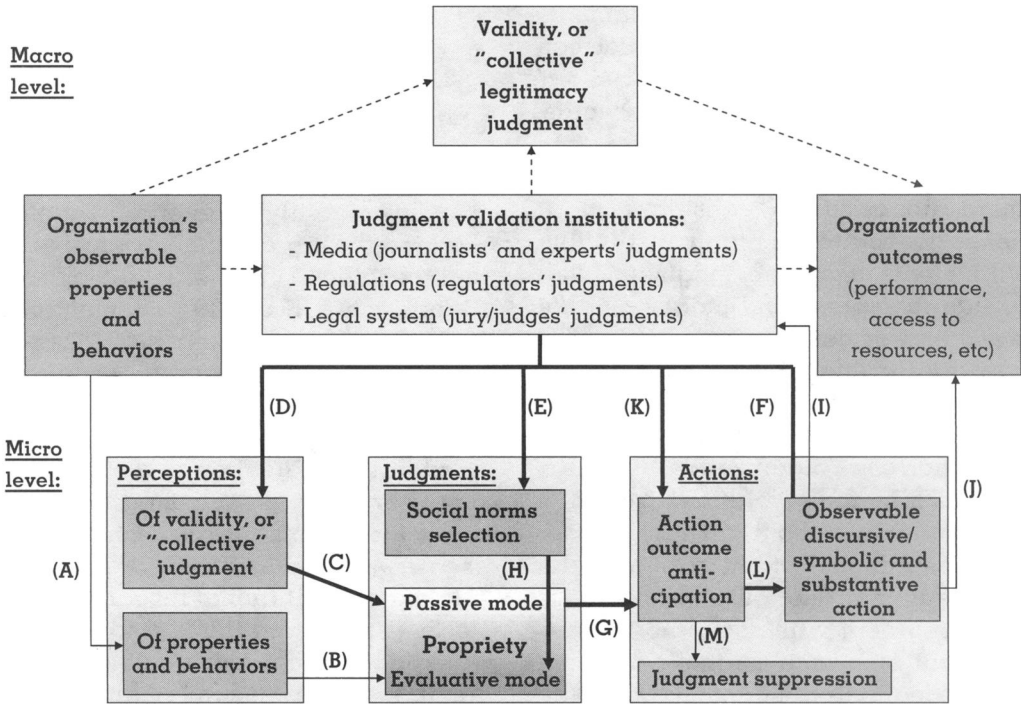
ments. The legitimacy judgment institutional-
ized at the organization or field level (i.e.,
validity) creates a conformity pressure on indi-
vidual evaluators. Those evaluators who, be-
cause of their professional obligations (e.g., au-
ditors, rating agencies, stock analysts, some
government regulators) or social vocation (e.g.,
consumer watchdogs and activists; Rao, 1998),
still rely on their own propriety judgments are
cognitively bound to apply the taken-for-
granted set of norms that yields the same, al-
ready institutionalized judgment. And those
who make a different, independent legitimacy
judgment are a small minority and are often
under social pressure to suppress the expres-
sion of their deviant opinion (Centola, Willer, &
Macy, 2005; Zhu & Westphal, 2011). Thus, under
conditions of institutional stability, the legiti-
macy process is dominated by top-down influ-
ences—from higher levels down to the level of
individual evaluators (links D, E, and K in Fig-
ure 1). The expressed judgments and actions of
evaluators at all levels only reinforce the "con-
sensus" and contribute to the perpetuation of
the institutionalized legitimacy judgment (i.e.,
validity), as other evaluators receive stronger
and more consistent validity cues about the "so-
cially approved" judgment.

The legitimacy process described above is il-
lustrated in Figure 1, which presents a multi-
level model of legitimacy judgment formation
and reproduction. Given that legitimacy is a
latent construct, the multilevel model reflects
the social mechanism through which macroorga-
nizational antecedents of legitimacy translate into
macroorganizational outcomes, and it highlights
the role and effect of lower-level, microorganiza-
tional processes that interact with macrolevel
antecedents and outcomes. While the model
presented in Figure 1 can be applied to the le-
gitimacy process both under conditions of sta-
bility and under conditions of institutional
change, the importance of causal effects out-
lined in the model differ for the two conditions.
The bold arrows in Figure 1 highlight the most
important elements of the legitimacy process
under conditions of institutional stability.

Perceptions. Individual evaluators at the mi-
cro level receive two perceptual inputs—
perceptions of the entity's properties/behaviors
(link A in Figure 1) and perceptions of validity
(link D)—which they form from observations
over judgments aggregated and communi-

cated by the media, regulations, and judicial
opinions, as well as from observations over
actions and communications of other evalua-
tors in their immediate social surrounding.
Evaluators use those inputs (links A and D) to
make a propriety judgment (links B and C).
However, under conditions of institutional sta-
bility, perceived validity (link C) has an over-
whelming effect on the individual evaluator's
propriety assessment, and the evaluation path
going through link B plays a minor role or is
inactive.

Judgments. The adoption of the validity judg-
ment (link C) requires little mental effort (cf.
"passive mode" of judgment formation in Tost,
2011) and amounts to a conformity with the judg-
ment that the evaluator perceives as the most
widely accepted. In contrast, the formation of an
independent propriety judgment based on ob-
served properties and behaviors of the organi-
zation (link B) requires greater mental effort (cf.
active or "evaluative" mode in Tost, 2011). In this
evaluation the available information on proper-
ties and behaviors of the organization is bench-
marked against some set of social norms (link H)
in order to determine whether the organization
is "desirable, proper, or appropriate within
some socially constructed system of norms, val-
ues, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995:
574). Since multiple sets of applicable norms
may coexist in an organizational field (Kaplan,
2008; Lamin & Zaheer, 2012; Ruef & Scott, 1998),
evaluators in the active, evaluative mode may
face the task of selecting among several sets of
norms that can be applied in a propriety judg-
ment (link H). However, under conditions of in-
stitutional stability, institutionalization affects
not only the judgment that evaluators are ex-
pected to make (link D) but also the set of norms
they should use if they are to do an independent
propriety evaluation (link E). Often, such norms
are institutionalized in a form of certification
programs established by governments or indus-
try associations (AACSB, ISO, etc.) and stan-
dards created by private and public actors
(GAAP, GRI, UN Global Compact, etc.). These
programs and standards specify normative ex-
pectations and ensure organizations' formal
compliance with them.

Thus, under conditions of institutional stabil-
ity, even if the evaluator makes an independent
propriety assessment based on his or her own
observations (link B), the evaluator's bounded

cognition dictates the application of the same institutionalized set of norms suggested by the media, regulators, judges, or other actors (link E). Under conditions of stability, these two evaluation paths—through links D-C and through links E-H—are equifinal (Fiss, 2007; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), since the perceived validity (link D) and the suggested set of applicable norms for propriety evaluation (link E) lead the evaluator to the same, already institutionalized legitimacy judgment.

Actions. Not all judgments are necessarily publicly expressed in the discourse and actions of evaluators. Individuals are capable of anticipating the social and personal consequences of public expression of their judgment (link G) and may have important reasons to suppress the expression of their opinion (link M). This may occur especially if their opinion is different from the institutionalized judgment—validity (Zelditch & Walker, 1984)—and they have reason to anticipate social sanctions for deviant judgment expression (link K). The fear of sanctions is particularly present in countries with totalitarian regimes (Kuran, 1995), where any criticism of the government's actions may lead to accusations of lack of patriotism, questionable moral values, and even treason (see the following section for a detailed discussion of judgment suppression).

Thus, before expressing a judgment in actions, evaluators will assess the degree of perceived deviance of their judgment, as well as the probability and severity of sanctions they may be subjected to for doing so. As multiple individual evaluators proceed to express the conforming legitimacy judgment in discourse and actions (link L), they produce macroorganizational effects: a *direct effect* on the organization (e.g., formation of exchange ties; see link J) and/or an *indirect effect* through discursive influence on the media, regulators, and/or judges (link I), as well as on other individuals in their immediate social surrounding (link F). However, under conditions of stability, the evaluators' expressed judgments are isomorphic and will only reinforce the institutionalized consensus judgment (validity) and further contribute to stability of the social order in the organizational field.

As a result, the evaluators' influence on judgment validation institutions (link I) is not significant under conditions of institutional stability; in the absence of contestation and controversy, the media, regulators, and the judicial system

do not require constant reaffirmation of their validated judgment, and, as long as the institutional environment is stable, they are not subjected to challenges by individual evaluators. Media attention is low, since there is nothing "interesting" or "media worthy" about something that is already routinely acceptable. The attention of regulators is also low, since the regulations pertaining to the issue have already been adopted and are not contested by anyone. The judicial system does not have to intervene much either, since most members of society routinely conform to the institutionalized norm, and judicial decisions, if any, are routine in a sense that they do not require any revisions to the institutionalized norm established in the written law and set legal precedents. Thus, under conditions of stability, the judgment validation institutions are still present to communicate the validity judgment (link D), to prescribe which set of norms should be used in evaluation (link E), or to apply sanctions for deviant judgment expression (link K), but microlevel actors do not produce any significant bottom-up impact on these institutions.

In contrast, link F under conditions of institutional stability remains active, since individuals expressing the institutionalized norms in their actions and discourse continue to influence other people around them. Such influence plays an important role in the socialization of new members of society, who learn by observing others. It is primarily through this link that institutionalized social norms are transferred to a new generation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Judgment validation institutions. An organization's validity is not directly observable, since there is rarely a single measure or authority that can pronounce the validity judgment for the whole society or an organizational field. Validity is inferred by individual evaluators (including researchers) from judgments aggregated and communicated by macrolevel judgment validation institutions (media, regulators, and judicial system) and from observable behavior and discourse of other actors. This macro-to-micro influence process is represented by link D in Figure 1. Under conditions of institutional stability, the three judgment validation institutions are usually in agreement with each other; in the absence of a controversy, the media coverage of a legitimate organization tends to be low in volume and positive in tone (Green, 2004; Green, Li,

& Nohria, 2009), the organization's properties and behaviors are recognized by authorities as conforming to the existing regulations (Deephouse, 1996), and attempts at litigation against it are less likely (Edelman & Suchman, 1997; Koh, Qian & Wang, 2014).

In summary, the judgment validation institutions and collective actors in evaluators' immediate environment produce effects on perceptions, judgments, and actions of individual evaluators. They play a major role in shaping perceptions of validity (link D), they affect independent propriety judgments by prescribing which set of norms should be applied in evaluation (link E), and, finally, if the evaluator still performs an independent assessment and renders a deviant judgment, they are ready to apply sanctions (link K) to discourage the expression of the deviant opinion (see discussion below).

The institutional stability loop. The bold arrows in Figure 1, which highlight the dominant effects under conditions of institutional stability, form a loop that circles between micro and macro levels. This loop has a positive-feedback mechanism that produces stability in the legitimacy process: the greater the institutionalization of a legitimacy judgment (validity—link D), the more the norms applied in propriety judgments made by individual evaluators are taken for granted (link E), and the more the deviant judgments are suppressed (link K), the more isomorphic the expressed legitimacy judgments are. The more isomorphic the judgment expressed by multiple evaluators, the greater the perception of validity of that judgment (link D). Hereafter we refer to this circular legitimacy process as the *institutional stability loop*.

We can further discern three macro-to-micro influence paths within the institutional stability loop. Along the *passive-processing path* (links D-C), evaluators operate in the passive mode of judgment formation and draw on validity cues to reduce mental effort (Tost, 2011). Along the *active-processing path* (links E-H), evaluators operate in the active, evaluative (Tost, 2011) mode of judgment formation and invest mental effort to reach a judgment. The active-processing path is engaged if the influence through the passive-processing path has failed to control the evaluator's propriety judgment and the evaluator has chosen to make an independent judgment based on the observed properties and behaviors of the organization (link B). The cross-

level influence through the active-processing path ensures that the evaluator selects the institutionally prescribed set of norms, which drives his or her independent propriety assessment to the same, already institutionalized legitimacy judgment. Finally, if a deviant judgment is formed despite the social influence through links D and E, the *coercive path* (through link K) penalizes the public expression of the deviant judgment. The more severe and regular the sanctions for deviance (link K), the greater the evaluators' fear and the greater the probability they will suppress the deviant judgment expression (link M).

It should be noted that the ability to impose sanctions on other actors is not the exclusive prerogative of regulators or the judicial system; media attacks, ostracism by peers, and terrorism by individuals or groups are just a few examples of sanctions by actors with no authority that can be used to silence an unwanted judgment expression. The intensity of coercive path utilization by judgment validation institutions and other actors reflects the degree of instability of the institutional order. On the one hand, in particularly stable institutional environments where the institutionalization has reached a taken-for-granted state (Sine & David, 2003; Suchman, 1995), most of the social influence occurs through the passive-processing path, with minimal involvement of the active-processing and coercive paths. On the other hand, the more individual evaluators privately disagree and are forced through the coercive path to suppress the expression of their deviant judgment, the more the social environment is prone to destabilization, such as sudden revolutions (Kuran, 1995) or other forms of disruptive institutional change (Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

The Legitimacy Process Under Conditions of Institutional Change

While in some time periods the legitimacy process can be stable and the stable social order can recursively reproduce itself (Giddens, 1984), in periods characterized by major environmental jolts (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002; Sine & David, 2003) or successful institutional entrepreneurship by some actors (Maguire et al., 2004; Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000), the institutional environment can be in turmoil, caused by changes in social norms, values, and

judgments. In Figure 2 we present a model of the legitimacy process under conditions of institutional change.

Under conditions of institutional change, multilevel relationships, such as the ones outlined in the process model above, may prove bidirectional (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), and a different set of causal relationships may dominate the legitimacy process. The bold arrows highlight the most influential effects under conditions of institutional change.

In these conditions the influence of the passive-processing path of the institutional stability loop (links D-C), which further reinforces validity, is weakened or suppressed. The perception of validity (link D) is particularly weak in the presence of conflicting legitimacy judgments at the macro level. This occurs when there is a major debate over issue interpretation in the media (Hoffman, 1999) or a disagreement between judgments validated by the media, regulators, and/or the legal system. Common to these contexts is that more critical legitimacy judgments openly contradict the status quo and, thus, create a sense of illegitimacy of the institutionalized order. In the absence of a perceived "consensus" in the field, evaluators are less

trusting of the contradictory validity cues they receive from the environment (link D) and are therefore more likely to rely on their own independent propriety assessment (cf. the evaluative mode of judgment in Tost, 2011). Since these independent propriety judgments are less affected by the validity, they can become a major driver of institutional change, problematizing the status quo, creating the sense of illegitimacy of the old validity judgment, and offering a more legitimate alternative to the established institutional order. It has been observed that perceptions of illegitimacy can motivate evaluators to actively resist a social order and engage in institutional change efforts (Haack, Pfarrer, & Scherer, 2014; Tost, 2011).

Thus, under conditions of institutional change, the institutional stability loop that circles through link D in the model is inactive or substantially weakened by the presence of deviant judgments, whereas the path encompassing an individual evaluator's own perceptions (link A) and a propriety judgment based on the assessment of those perceptions (link B) against a selected set of applicable norms (link H) becomes more prominent and influential.

FIGURE 2
A Multilevel Model of Legitimacy Under Conditions of Institutional Change
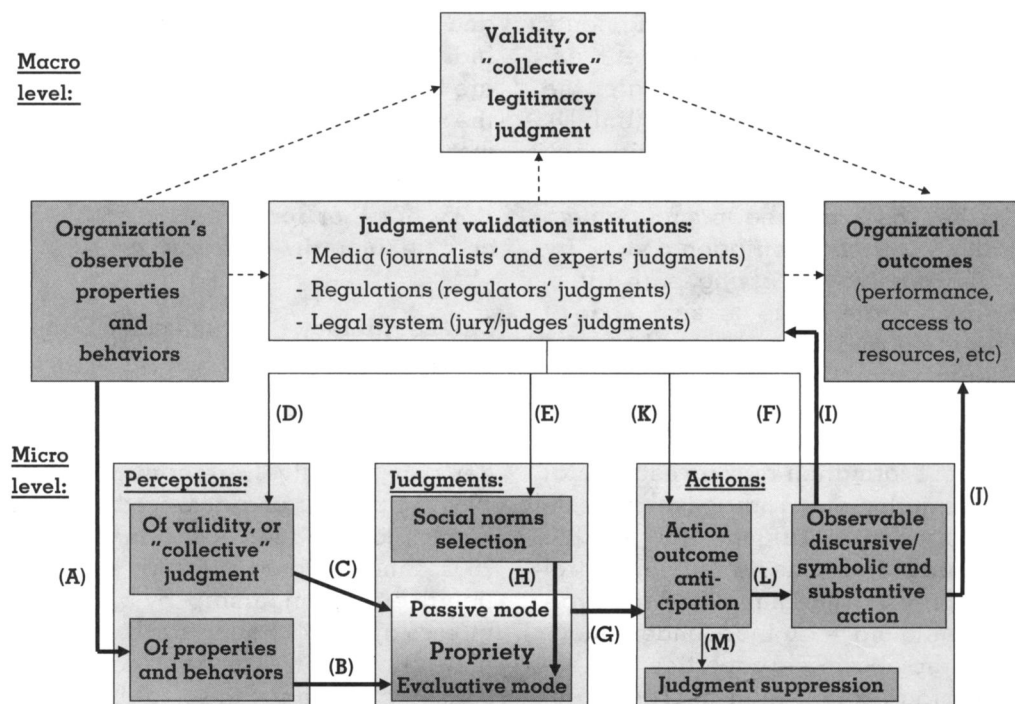
While in laboratory experiments (e.g., Walker et al., 1988; Zelditch & Walker, 1984) evaluators are usually exposed to a single validity cue, the real-world social environment undergoing change comprises multiple collective actors (organizations, interest groups, trade associations, etc.), each advancing a particular perspective formed through aggregation of interests and judgments of lower-level actors. In the case of a controversy or contestation of an organization's legitimacy in society, evaluators are exposed to multiple and often conflicting validity cues. Thus, the multilevel theory of legitimacy needs to account for the existence of multiple "validities" and to describe sociocognitive mechanisms for resolving conflicting validity signals from the environment.

Changes in perceptions. At the micro level, a particularly large incongruence between the new information about the organization (coming through link A) and the established validity (link D) prompts evaluators to attend more to their own propriety judgments (link B). In a study of evaluations of political candidates, Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson (2010) identified a "tipping point" at which increased anxiety caused by negative information about a candidate prompts an evaluator to revise the initially favorable judgment. At this point the mismatch between the established collective validity and the incoming information triggers a "mental alarm" (Tost, 2011) that cannot be dismissed on the strength of the entrenched validity judgment. As multiple evaluators approach this tipping point and render independent propriety judgments based on the new information, the accumulation and diffusion of divergent propriety judgments erode the perception of consensus around validity.

At the macro level, the perception of consensus can be manipulated by creating an additional "independent" public voice that expresses the desired opinion. This strategy is known as *constituency building* (Barley, 2010; Keim & Zeithaml, 1986). The voice consistent with the institutionalized legitimacy judgment creates a perception of greater consensus and thereby strengthens the effect of the institutional stability loop that perpetuates the status quo. In contrast, a contradicting voice, especially a prominent one, weakens the perception of consensus, reduces the effect of validity on individual evaluators' judgments (link C), and

stimulates evaluators to perform their own independent propriety assessments (link B). The disruption caused by the contradicting voice creates an opportunity for changing the institutionalized legitimacy judgment.

Changes in judgments. Another process that is activated in the absence of institutional stability is the selection of a set of social norms to be used as a benchmark in propriety judgments (link H). Under conditions of institutional stability, it is largely a taken-for-granted practice (see link E) that a certain norm (such as an industry standard; Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002) applies to a given type of organization or practice. However, in institutionally unstable contexts, evaluators tend to be less constrained in their selection of the sets of norms to apply, and several sets of norms may be in competition for the evaluator's mind. Thus, as firms sponsoring different technological standards compete for dominance in an industry (e.g., Sony's Betamax versus JVC's VHS) and other firms choose which of the two standards to follow, interest groups promoting application of different sets of norms to the issue (e.g., environmental protection versus economic development) compete for the minds of individual evaluators and the evaluators choose which set of norms to use in their propriety judgments. The presence of an alternative competing set of norms weakens the effect of the institutional stability loop, since the evaluators have a choice among several sets of norms, and depending on the set they choose, they may render and express a "deviant" propriety judgment that can undermine the established validity. Since application of different sets of norms (link H) can yield substantially different legitimacy judgments, competing actors opportunistically promote the sets of norms that, when applied to the focal entity, yield the desired judgments. Thus, by suggesting which set of norms should be applied to an entity as a benchmark in propriety assessments, actors can lead an evaluator to a judgment that reflects their own preference or interest.

Changes in actions. The legitimacy judgments formed by evaluators become consequential to the organization when they are expressed in evaluators' discourse and actions (link L). The actions of evaluators can have direct consequences for the organization (link J), such as changes in the availability of resources provided by evaluators, employee motivation, or

investor support. Evaluators' actions can also have indirect consequences, which are associated with the evaluators' influence on the judgments of other actors and on judgment validation institutions—the media, regulators, and the judicial system (link I). While under conditions of institutional stability evaluators' influence on judgment validation institutions (link I) is not significant (see discussion above), under conditions of institutional turmoil the expression of individuals' judgments at the micro level can produce a major effect on judgment validation institutions. The public controversy attracts media coverage, and the media coverage, in turn, attracts the attention of an even greater number of individual evaluators. These evaluators become more informed and are more likely to make their own propriety judgment (link B), since the presence of competing judgments in the media weakens the focal organization's perceived validity (link D) and creates a sense of illegitimacy. The attention of regulators rises as well, since open public questioning of the judgment validated in laws and regulations may warrant regulatory change. Regulators in such situations are subject to influence by multiple competing interests (see discussion below). The judicial system under conditions of turmoil can also become an important battleground for competing legitimacy judgments. It has been observed that "the outcomes of cases in which the applicable norms differ from the written law demonstrate that the norms, not the written law, are the driving force" (LoPucki & Weyrauch, 2000: 1435). Thus, when the validity of the written law is openly questioned, judges' subjective perceptions of what judgment is the most valid may change, leading to new legal precedents.

THE DYNAMICS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE: DESTABILIZATION

The two multilevel models of legitimacy process presented above describe ideal-type conditions of institutional stability and institutional change. However, also of interest to institutional theorists are the social dynamics that lead to the destabilization of an established institutional order (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Sine & David, 2003) or the stabilization of an institutional environment in turmoil (Maguire et al., 2004; Rao et al., 2000).

The Paradox of Embedded Agency

As explained above, under ideal-type conditions of institutional stability, evaluators' publicly expressed judgments are isomorphic and tend to reinforce the institutionalized consensus judgment, which further contributes to stability of the social order. The presence of institutionalization implies that the legitimacy process under conditions of stability is subject to the paradox of embedded agency: "If our norms and collective beliefs are institutionally determined, how can human agency be a factor in institutional change?" (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009: 67). While this paradox presents an important challenge for macroinstitutional research, the multilevel approach can help us reveal the microlevel assumptions behind this paradox and identify the factors that enable change in legitimacy judgments.

From the multilevel perspective, the critical assumption of the paradox of embedded agency is the existence of isomorphism in propriety judgments at the lower, individual level. Nevertheless, the observed macrolevel "unanimity" does not necessarily imply that everyone at the micro level agrees: while some individuals may willingly agree with the institutionalized judgment (validity), others, for various reasons (see Table 1 below), may have to suppress the expression of their "deviant" opinions. Similarly, it has been observed that actors may adopt institutionalized practices for different reasons (Tolbert & Zucker, 1983) and may hold the same attitudes for different reasons, too (Cameron, 2009). As a result, the observed macrolevel consensus around the institutionalized judgment may conceal not only the diversity of privately held yet suppressed propriety judgments but also the diversity of motives for why those judgments were not publicly communicated.

This concealed diversity suggests that the paradox of embedded agency exhibits properties of what multilevel theorists describe as *ecological fallacy*—a situation where a researcher "wrongly infers relationships at the lower level based on either observations or analysis only at the higher level" (Slater, Snyder, & Hayes, 2006: 378). In relation to legitimacy judgments, this means that observations on macrolevel validity cannot be used to infer that evaluators actually judge that entity as proper: their *private* propriety judgments may differ, as may the reasons for

TABLE 1
Some Examples of Factors Preventing Expression of Deviant Judgments

Factor	Mode of Action	Observations in the Literature	How the Factor Can Be Removed
Lack of interest/knowledge	• Prevents active, evaluative (Tost, 2011) mode of judgment formation (links A-B) • Increases the influence of perceptions of macrolevel validity (links D-C), thereby promoting the status quo	Voters in a democracy may have little incentive to become informed about most policy-making issues and therefore may follow the opinions of others (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Kuran, 1987).	Wide dissemination of information: media attention (Pollock & Rindova, 2003), vocal issue champions (Maguire & Hardy, 2009); use of agenda-setting strategies (Kingdon, 1984), creation of crises (Alford, 1975)
Censorship of communication channels	• Prevents evaluative (Tost, 2011) mode of judgment formation (links A and B) by withholding important information • Limits opponents' access to the media (link I), thereby constraining the diffusion of competing judgments; creates a perception of their low validity (D)	Cascades of false enforcement of an unpopular norm depend on the spread of misinformation about the distribution of support for the norm (Centola, Willer, & Macy, 2005).	• Democratization and liberalization of society, abolition of censorship • Emergence of new uncensored communication channels (e.g., internet and social media)
Threat of sanctions by an authority	Suppresses deviant judgment expression (link M) since the cost of sanctions to the evaluator exceeds the benefit that can be expected from judgment expression	"Social sanctions are aimed not just at actions against the system but also at expressions of disagreement" (Kuran, 1987: 662; see also Milgram, 1974).	Democratization and liberalization of society, international support for dissidents
Peer pressure/threat of social disapproval	As actors in the evaluator's immediate surrounding uniformly express a particular "valid" judgment (link F), they create social pressure on the evaluator (link D) to conform to their opinion. Ostracism and other forms of social disapproval can be regarded as "sanctions" imposed by these actors on those who express a deviant judgment. This causes a suppression of a deviant judgment expression (link M) by individual evaluators.	• "People who believe that they hold a minority opinion tend to conceal their views in public" (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004: 541). • Experiments reported by Asch (1956) show that subjects conform to a consensus judgment they know to be false rather than risk social isolation. • Unpopular norms diffuse because actors, while privately disapproving of these norms, publicly endorse and enforce these norms to signal conformance (Centola et al., 2005; Willer, Kuwabara, & Macy, 2009).	• Cultural shifts toward greater tolerance of diversity and nonconformity • Establishing strong ties: cascades of self-reinforcing support for a highly unpopular norm cannot occur in a fully connected social network (Centola et al., 2005)
Threat of legal action by affected actors	Causes suppression of deviant judgment expression (link M) since the cost of litigation and potential legal sanctions exceeds the benefit that evaluators can expect from judgment expression	Legal action to suppress individuals' public discourse has been termed SLAPP. Such litigation loads vocal activists with costs of legal defense. This tactic is used by many corporations to silence opponents (Abrams, 1989).	• Media coverage of violations of the right to free speech by SLAPP plaintiffs discourages SLAPPs and/or predisposes judges to favor defendants • Anti-SLAPP laws: in California a defendant can file a motion to strike a complaint when it arises from actions that fall within the rights of petition or free speech
Threat of criminal attacks	Causes suppression of deviant judgment expression (link M) since the private cost to a victim of a politically motivated crime exceeds the benefit the victim can expect from the deviant judgment expression	Actors expressing a particular discourse may get targeted in criminal attacks by their opponents: death threats, crimes against property, murder attempts, etc.	Reduced crime, antiterrorist measures, witness protection, restraining orders, law enforcement
Reputational concerns	Causes suppression of deviant judgment expression (link M) since the expression of a deviant judgment creates an opportunity cost of foregone career opportunities, membership in a higher-status group, or lost respect by peers	Individuals who occupy (or seek to occupy) a certain subject position (e.g., experts, regulators, or reporters) may follow other influential actors, going against their private preference, not as a result of ignorance but, rather, to earn professional and social approval or to avoid disapproval (Bonardi & Keim, 2005).	Actors with low or high status (as opposed to those with middle status) may have a lesser incentive to conform (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001) and, hence, are more likely to express deviant opinions. For this reason it is usually high-status actors (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006) or peripheral players (Leblebici, Salancik, Copay, & King, 1991) who initiate institutional change.
Perception of futility	Suppresses deviant judgment expression (link M). When probability of success is perceived as low, the invested effort and the personal costs of sustained sanctions exceed the expected benefits from judgment expression	Individuals who do not believe that their actions can produce the desired change will likely abstain from futile action. "Numeric strength" is required to attain change (Kuran, 1995).	Establishing strong ties: people are more informed of the judgments of others in a fully connected social network (Centola et al., 2005; Zhu & Westphal, 2011)

why these judgments are not expressed. Below we explore the role of judgment suppression and judgment communication in the legitimacy process.

Suppression of Legitimacy Judgment Expression

As mentioned earlier, not all legitimacy judgments are openly expressed by evaluators (Asch, 1956; Kuran, 1987; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004). The understanding of factors suppressing evaluators' expression of deviant propriety judgments is important both for explaining the stable state of the social order and for describing the process of social order destabilization. The social science literature has identified a number of factors that can prevent the expression of a deviant opinion. Table 1 provides examples of commonly encountered suppressor factors.

The suppressor factors work either by maintaining the passive mode (Tost, 2011) in evaluators' judgments (link C), thus preventing active cognitive processing in propriety judgments (link B), or by discouraging the expression of an already formed deviant judgment (link M).

Preventing active cognitive processing. As discussed above, in the passive mode evaluators avoid mental effort and rely on validity cues (link D) and other heuristics to render a legitimacy judgment. The passive mode has been found to constitute the baseline mode of mental operations (Kahneman, 2011). In contrast, in the evaluative mode (link B) evaluators put forth an effort to actively deliberate and reassess their previous legitimacy judgment (Tost, 2011). Contextual factors, such as public discussion (Druckman & Nelson, 2003), evaluators' accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999), and absence of time pressure (Svenson & Maule, 1993), increase the likelihood that evaluators will form their judgment in the evaluative mode (link B), whereas in the absence of these factors, independent evaluative mode propriety judgment is less likely (Haack et al., 2014). Furthermore, evaluator-specific characteristics, such as personal interest and previous knowledge, increase the likelihood that evaluators will engage in active processing (Zaller, 1992). As mentioned earlier, the more individuals are kept in the passive mode of judgment formation (through the path D-C), the more stable the institutional order will

be. Therefore, efforts directed at maintaining the passive mode, which prompts evaluators to adopt the institutionalized judgment (i.e., validity), play an important role in preventing institutional change. Such prevention is accomplished through interventions at link A, either by withholding critical pieces of information that can trigger a "mental alarm" (Tost, 2011) in multiple evaluators or by distracting the evaluators' attention with unrelated "sensational" news—that is, creating "noise" in the evaluators' information channels.

Discouraging the public expression of deviant judgments. The public expression of deviant judgments (links F and I) diminishes the validity of the dominant institutionalized judgment, which, in turn, may lead to destabilization of the existing institutional order and, thus, create an opportunity for institutional change. If the prevention of active cognitive processing has failed and the evaluator has formed a deviant judgment (through link B), the maintenance of the status quo requires recourse to suppressor factors to prevent the public expression of this judgment. Table 1 shows a wide variety of suppressor factors that prevent deviant judgment expression, as well as the diversity of events, environmental changes, and individuals' actions that can weaken or remove these factors. Given that most evaluators are motivated more by the anxiety of a loss than by the hope for a potential gain (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), most suppressor factors present a prospect of a substantial loss to the evaluator for having expressed a deviant judgment. Such suppressor factors create a situation where the expected private benefits of judgment expression are much smaller than the private costs or punishments the evaluators will have to sustain. Because evaluators can anticipate the negative outcomes of judgment expression (link G), such suppressor factors reduce the likelihood that evaluators will choose to express their deviant judgment in public.

Judgment suppression can work not only through sanctions but also through incentives. The silence of influential actors can sometimes be "bought" with economic rewards, as was the case between Enron and its auditor, Andersen Consulting, or with social rewards, such as enhanced reputation, high-status affiliation, or improved career prospects. Judgment suppression with rewards is often accomplished through "co-

optation" (Selznick, 1949). This arrangement improves validity by silencing the opposition, and it also benefits the co-opted individuals.

It is important to note that not all evaluators are equally sensitive to each of the suppressor factors. Therefore, in the population of silenced evaluators, one can discern segments on the basis of the factor that motivated them to suppress the expression of their deviant propriety judgment. These segments may overlap since an evaluator may have more than one reason to suppress his or her propriety judgment. The simultaneous presence of several suppressor factors that an evaluator is sensitive to provides even greater incentive to keep silent or to pretend to adopt the institutionalized judgment. Thus, institutional stability can be described as a state of suppressed diversity where one or several suppressor factors create a selective pressure on evaluators' judgments, silencing deviant opinions and encouraging the expression of the institutionalized one.

From time to time the dissemination of new information (e.g., scandals, crises, accidents, etc.), cultural or political changes (e.g., liberalization, transition to a democracy, or removal of censorship), and microlevel changes in actors' circumstances (changes in economic interests, social ties, or power dependencies) may remove one or more suppressor factors, freeing these actors to openly express their private propriety judgment. As different types of events remove different types of constraints on the judgment expression (see Table 1), they free up different segments of the suppressed evaluators' population to publicly express their deviant judgments. The emergence of an alternative judgment in public communications signifies the beginning of competition among judgments and, hence, the emergence of contradictions (Tost, 2011) and destabilization of the institutional order, which, in turn, may result in institutional change.

Thus, under conditions of stability, evaluators are strongly influenced by the established validity, and judgment suppression factors are sufficiently effective to deter deviant judgment expression, which helps maintain the illusion of unanimity and isomorphism. In contrast, under conditions of institutional change, validity is eroded by the public presence of competing judgments, suppression factors are weakened or removed, and agency and strategic behaviors of

individuals and collective actors play a prominent role in the legitimacy process.

THE DYNAMICS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE: RETURN TO STABILITY

It should be noted, however, that not all debates and turmoil result in institutional change. On the one hand, the positive-feedback institutional stability loop described above favors the status quo, since it gives an advantage to the most valid (i.e., most widely accepted) judgment. On the other hand, evaluators may lose interest in the issue in question as time passes or as new unrelated events draw away their attention (Mahon & Waddock, 1992). In this case they are likely to automatically revert to the judgment that has the greatest perceived validity—that is, to the same old institutionalized judgment. As a result, at the macro level there are a number of recurring issues that from time to time become controversial, but this does not lead to any significant changes in institutionalized judgments or practices (Alford, 1975; Mahon & Waddock, 1992).

Yet despite these macrolevel factors promoting institutional stability, changes in judgments and institutions do occur, and the microlevel behaviors of individual evaluators can give rise to new macrolevel validity. As we describe below, microlevel influences on macrolevel validity are realized through a nondeterministic competitive process where the proponents of two or more judgments on the issue compete for diffusion and institutionalization of their judgment using a diverse array of institutional strategies.

Strategies Influencing Legitimacy Judgments

For an evaluator, each message that he or she receives serves as a cue suggesting the validity of the judgment it conveys (Rao, Greve, & Davis, 2001; Tost, 2011). The greater the relative number and credibility of such cues that an evaluator receives and the greater the diversity of message sources that communicate the same judgment, the greater the probability that the evaluator will infer validity of this judgment. As mentioned earlier, it is not the overall "abstract" validity that every evaluator is exposed to that influences the evaluator's own propriety judgment; rather, it is the perceived validity, or validity belief, that does so.

Microlevel validity beliefs naturally exhibit substantial diversity, since not all evaluators are equally exposed to the messages of a given source and, as studies in persuasion research suggest (Crano & Prislin, 2006), messages can produce different effects on different evaluators. The perceptual nature of validity cues, together with the strong effect of validity on propriety (Johnson, 2004; Tost, 2011; Walker et al., 1986; Zelditch, 2006), creates opportunities for strategic manipulations of actors' judgments. One can distinguish strategies that influence evaluators' validity beliefs and propriety judgments (1) by means of rhetoric, (2) by increasing the credibility of speakers, (3) by "staging" a consensus for the targeted evaluator, and (4) by recourse to coercion and inducement.

Rhetorical strategies. Rhetorical strategies address the content of messages used for persuasion. The literature on discourse and framing has identified multiple rhetorical strategies that can be divided into those addressing validity beliefs (link D in Figures 1 and 2) and those addressing propriety or, more precisely, the selection of norms used in rendering the propriety judgments (link E in Figures 1 and 2).

Rhetorical strategies influencing *validity beliefs* (see examples in Table 2) are used by judgment proponents to inform the evaluator that many other actors have adopted their preferred judgment or to persuade the evaluator that there are no alternatives to this judgment—that it is the only valid choice available. By relying on validity cues, evaluators can save mental effort

TABLE 2
Rhetorical Strategies Promoting Validity

Strategies Promoting Validity	Subtypes and Examples
Strategies emphasizing endorsement—that is, stressing that a majority or an increasing number of actors approve of the entity	• Bandwagon discourse—supporting the material spread of management techniques (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Kieser, 1997; Zbaracki, 1998) • Commitment discourse—emphasizing the strong support of the entity by the evaluator—for example, announcing the future implementation of management practices in financial institutions (Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012)
Strategies emphasizing authorization—that is, stressing that the entity is approved and supported by regulators or other influential actors	• Authorizing actors to speak on behalf of less powerful actors (Hardy & Maguire, 2010) • Authorization as referring to the authority of law, regulations, or persons holding expertise or power (Elsbach, 1994; Vaara & Monin, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006)
Strategies stressing that a development or an entity is inevitable and natural	• Cosmological theorization—presenting change as a natural (and hence valid) development (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), rendering something natural by discursive means (Vaara & Monin, 2010)—for example, an antenarrative stressing the inevitability of globalization (Vaara & Tienari, 2011) • Teleological theorization—suggesting that certain events must occur within the context of some ultimate valid objective (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005)
Strategies promoting favorable categorization	• Ontological theorization—stressing what an entity is versus what an entity is not and which entities can or cannot coexist (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). This theorization enables entities to position themselves in favorable categories and benefit from legitimacy spillover from the category to the individual member.
Strategies centered on storytelling and historical narrative	• Historical theorization—appealing to history and tradition as a source of validity (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) • Mythopoesis/narrativization—increasing validity through storytelling, creation of myths and histories (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Suddaby, Foster, & Mills, 2014; Vaara et al., 2006; Van Leeuwen & Wodak; 1999)
Strategies based on tropes (mostly on metaphor)	• Analogical reasoning as legitimizing unknown entities by connecting them to a familiar source domain (Cornelissen & Clarke, 2010; Etzion & Ferraro, 2010; Lakoff, 2004; Sillince & Barker, 2012; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) • Framing the new in terms of the familiar (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Navis & Glynn, 2010)

(Rosch, 1978) and remain in a passive mode of judgment formation (Tost, 2011). While some strategies promote validity by emphasizing judgment adoption by multiple peers (cf. endorsement in Tost, 2011; see also Zelditch, 2006), others emphasize judgment adoption by actors in positions of authority (cf. authorization in Tost, 2011; see also Zelditch, 2006). A set of validity-promoting strategies also makes reference to authorizations that the judgment received in the past. This is accomplished by appeals to the tradition and creation of historical or mythological narratives (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). The set of validity-promoting strategies also includes strategies that encourage the evaluator to infer the judgment's validity from the lack of conceivable alternatives to it (e.g., cosmological

and teleological theorizations in Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), or from analogy with already familiar valid categories (Etzion & Ferraro, 2010; Lakoff, 2004).

Rhetorical strategies that directly influence the *propriety judgments* of individual evaluators (see examples in Table 3) appeal to emotions, normative beliefs, and the rational calculus of evaluators to promote the appropriateness of applying a given set of norms to the issue in question. Such strategies emphasize the positive outcomes of adopting a given judgment (Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012; Vaara, 2002; Zbaracki, 1998) or the negative aspects of the competing alternatives, such as the status quo (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). The positive outcomes of advocated judgment adoption can be both pragmatic—that is,

TABLE 3
Rhetorical Strategies Promoting Propriety

Strategies Promoting Propriety	Subtypes and Examples
Strategies emphasizing the success of an entity—for example, that a practice offers an appropriate and efficient solution to a problem of societal concern or that it fails to offer such a solution (theorization)	• Success and failure narratives—for example, to make sense of the spread of management practices (Haack, Schoeneborn, & Wickert, 2012; Zbaracki, 1998) or postmerger integration (Vaara, 2002) • Problem discourse and solution discourse—for example, in the spread of quality circles in the United States (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999) • Problematizing the ineffectiveness and injustice of existing practices (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Maguire & Hardy, 2009) • Rationalization—providing rational arguments and references to utility to establish propriety (Green, 2004; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006; Zbaracki, 1998)
Strategies creating resonance with normative beliefs of evaluators	• Frame alignment—the process to make issue interpretations congruent with prevalent local accounts (Benford & Snow, 2000; Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Gamson, 1992; Meyer & Höllerer, 2010). Frames in communication need to match frames in thought (Chong & Druckman, 2007) in order to recognize common sense categories or scripts to rationalize collective experience (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Lakoff, 2004; Scott, 1995) • Value-based theorization drawing on appeals to norms from wider belief systems (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), from reference to institutional norms and logics (Elsbach, 1994; Ruef & Scott, 1998), and from linking discourse to orders of worth—that is, to higher-order principles that define appropriate forms of behavior (Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011)
Strategies constructing identities to confer or destroy the propriety of an entity	• Valorizing and demonizing actors (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) • Idealizing a construction of an actor's identity as conditional on carrying out ideal behaviors (Hardy & Maguire, 2010)
Strategies emphasizing the moral value of the focal entity	• Ethos justification stressing the importance of considering the important role of justice and ethics in judgments (Green, 2004) • Moralization as strategy establishing propriety by moral arguments (Vaara & Monin, 2010)
Strategies addressing emotions	• Pathos justifications characterized by passionate appeals (Green, 2004; Sillince, 1999)

providing greater utility to the evaluator(s) (Green, 2004; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006; Zbaracki, 1998)—or moral— that is, ensuring fairness or better congruence with social norms and belief systems (Elsbach, 1994; Ruef & Scott, 1998; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

Credibility strategies. Not all message sources are equally credible and influential (Cameron, 2009; Hardy & Clegg, 1996). Individuals occupying particular *subject positions* (Maguire et al., 2004; Mantere & Vaara, 2008), such as a position of authority (regulators, legislators, and judges) or positions with greater access to communication distribution channels (journalists, media companies' executives), as well as experts (Bonardi & Keim, 2005), celebrities (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006), and high-status actors (Gould, 2002; Ridgeway, Boyle, Kuipers, & Robinson, 1998), have a disproportionately large influence on other evaluators' perceptions of judgment validity. The more influential these actors are, the stronger the validity cue their messages convey. For this reason, an important part of institutional competition is the competition for occupation of such influential subject positions (Maguire et al., 2004) and the competition for creation of expertise and authority (Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012) allowing actors to increase their credibility and influence on the judgments of others.

"Staging" a consensus for influential actors. The effects of credibility described above imply that the more influential the evaluator, the harder the proponents of competing discourses will strive to win his or her mind. Although some influential actors, such as celebrities, can sometimes be paid to promote a specific judgment, most actors in influential subject positions are expected to form their own independent propriety judgments, and they therefore require persuasion. Since validity has a strong effect on individual evaluators' propriety judgments (Zelditch & Walker, 2000), the persuasion of a single influential actor can be accomplished by creating a perception of validity of a given judgment by means of focused communication to this actor through multiple channels and on behalf of different sources.

Regulators and legislators, who are among the most important grantors of validity in society, often find themselves targeted with communications by competing interest groups (Baron &

Diermeier, 2007). The political strategies literature (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Hillman & Hitt, 1999; Keim & Zeithaml, 1986) has described a number of specific strategies of such validity staging that are used to manipulate a regulator's perception of the majority's preferences on a given issue. Lobbying or direct communication to a regulator (often by multiple lobbyists), constituency building (communication through mobilized third parties to create an appearance of an "independent voice"), and advocacy advertising (discourse communication through mass media), as well as petitions, demonstrations, and mail campaigns, have been identified as means to influence regulators' judgments (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Hillman & Hitt, 1999; Keim & Zeithaml, 1986).

There is some evidence that judgments of other actors in influential subject positions are also affected by such validity staging strategies. Thus, LoPucki and Weyrauch (2000) have observed that judges are sensitive to media coverage, which prompts some lawyers to argue their cases in the media before courtroom hearings. Similarly, researchers have shown that judgments of stock analysts and investors are influenced by the media (Pollock & Rindova, 2003; Tetlock, 2007; Zhu & Westphal, 2011).

If successful, these validity staging strategies create a bias in how an influential evaluator perceives the normative preferences of other constituents (Keim & Zeithaml, 1986), and this, in turn, can influence his or her own propriety judgment on the issue. When an influential evaluator communicates his or her strategically manipulated propriety judgment through discourse and actions (link D), other actors receive a strong signal of validity of that judgment. As this signal prompts evaluators to accept the validity judgment (link C) and, thus, follow the passive-processing path (Tost, 2011), the institutional stability loop creates a cascading effect of this judgment adoption by others. As more and more actors adopt the judgment and express it in their discourse, the validity of this judgment grows, until the opposition to it ceases to exist or is coerced (link K) to suppress the expression of their opinion (link M).

Coercion and inducement. Persuasion works not only through the quality and quantity of communication, as described above, but also through coercion and inducement. There are costs and benefits associated with public ex-

pression of a particular judgment, since expressed opinions create positive or negative reputational effects and other social consequences for those who express them (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Kuran, 1987). While the use of coercive means is mostly associated with authorities, minority activists promoting their discourse also find ways to punish their opponents and reward supporters (Kuran, 1987) by creating judgment suppressor factors (see Table 1 above) for those who publicly disagree with them. Public shaming and media attacks to cause reputational damage, legal action (such as a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation [SLAPP]; see Table 1), and even terrorist threats are sometimes used by minority judgment proponents to suppress the opposition.

It should be noted that all actors, including the government, are vulnerable to coercive influence. Even for the government the costs associated with judgment expression (and, hence, validation of it) can be prohibitive. Validation of an unpopular judgment erodes the legitimacy of the government's authority and makes it vulnerable to attacks and criticism from other actors in society (including the media and the legal system). This is why politicians often avoid expressing judgments on issues that strongly divide the electorate (Downs, 1957). And this is why regulators, even if they are very friendly with the companies they regulate, are limited in what they can do to serve industry interests on widely salient issues (Bonardi & Keim, 2005).

Stabilization of the Legitimacy Process

The instability of the legitimacy process does not last forever. Once one judgment, propelled by the support of the majority or by the strategies described above, takes the substantial lead in validity, the positive-feedback mechanism built into the institutional stability loop creates further and further advantage for this judgment. The perception of its greater validity (link D) translates, in turn, into its increasingly stronger influence on the evaluators' propriety judgments. As a result, controversies over legitimacy of a given organization or organizational category subside over time, and one judgment emerges as the "consensus" opinion of most members of society. Thus, the positive-feedback mechanism of the institutional stability loop re-

turns the legitimacy process to the state of stability.

As we mentioned earlier, validity can be created not only by persuading the majority but also by obtaining validation from influential actors, especially those in subject positions associated with the media, regulators, and the legal system. The deployment of influence strategies described above to target those influential actors may lead to a situation where the judgment that is perceived as most valid is not the judgment of the majority but, rather, the judgment advanced by a well-organized and/or well-financed minority group. In other words, the judgment advanced by such a minority can dominate the unorganized majority's judgment. The literature on collective action (Olson, 1965) and political strategies (Bonardi, Hillman, & Keim, 2005; Hillman & Hitt, 1999) describes multiple situations where the policy preferences of a minority group dominate the interests of the unorganized majority. In the domain of legitimacy judgments, such domination creates "preference falsification" (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Kuran, 1987) or "pluralistic ignorance" (Zhu & Westphal, 2011)—a situation where the majority of evaluators suppress the expression of their propriety judgment on the false assumption that it represents a minority opinion (see also Centola et al., 2005). Although this process results in institutional stability and in the institutionalization of the minority's judgment, suppressed judgments do not disappear completely: like seeds in the soil, they remain invisible until an opportune moment arises when the suppressor factor(s) silencing evaluators is (are) removed, and a new period of institutional turmoil and contestation begins. Thus, an institutionalized order exerts a powerful influence on evaluators' judgments, yet it is inherently fragile since it is "inhabited" by evaluators who have the capacity to reassess and eventually change this social order (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Stinchcombe, 1997).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Multilevel Nature of Institutional Processes

The theoretical framework proposed here emphasizes the multilevel nature of institutional processes. Although the recent call of institu-

tional theorists to explore the microfoundations of institutions implies a multilevel conceptualization of institutional processes (Jepperson, 1991; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), the issue of levels has received surprisingly little attention in institutional research. Yet the processes of institutionalization, maintenance, and demise of the institutional order cannot be fully understood without attention to communication and cognition of individuals at the micro level and without exploration of interactions between individuals and macrolevel institutions.

An important contribution of this article to the advancement of research on social judgments (Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011) is the development of a multilevel theory of the legitimacy process. The process model presented in Figures 1 and 2 illustrates the cross-level mechanisms that maintain stability and isomorphism in legitimacy judgments and the mechanisms that promote legitimacy change. Recognizing that institutions are socially constructed templates not only for action (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) but also for legitimacy judgments, we have shown how, under conditions of stability, DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) "iron cage" extends to legitimacy judgments made by evaluators. We have described a cross-level institutional stability loop, which, through a positive feedback mechanism, ensures the stability and persistence of the institutional order.

The Legitimacy Process Under Conditions of Institutional Stability and Change

We have drawn researchers' attention to fundamentally different social processes that unfold under conditions of institutional stability and change. Under conditions of stability, the legitimacy process is dominated by top-down, macro-to-micro influences that reinforce validity—the institutionalized legitimacy judgment—and inhibit the development and public expression of deviant propriety judgments by individual evaluators. In contrast, under conditions of institutional change, validity is weakened by the presence of competing judgments, and microlevel processes play a prominent role in reshaping the social order.

The distinction of these two conditions affects not only theory but also methods and measures that can be meaningfully used to explore relationships in the legitimacy process. Thus, the top-down, macro-to-micro influence processes, which prevail under conditions of stability, are amenable to quantification, and a number of measures, such as media tone (Deephouse, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Vergne, 2011), regulator's certifications (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Deephouse, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005), or ties with other actors (Bitektine, 2011; Singh, Tucker, & House, 1986), can be used to capture the validity component of legitimacy at the macro level. However, under conditions of institutional change, these measures may reflect outdated social norms and falsified preferences (Kuran, 1995), which may not provide an adequate representation of the diversity of competing judgments held by members of society. In exploring the legitimacy process under conditions of institutional change, qualitative case studies can shed light on the process of social construction of a new validity, and experimental research can establish factors and conditions that prompt evaluators to openly express their deviant judgments. Furthermore, agent-based modeling—the computer simulation of "the behaviors of adaptive actors who make up a social system and who influence one another through their interactions" (Harrison, Lin, Carroll, & Carley, 2007: 1237)—can help us explore the complexity of interactions between actors that leads to the institutionalization of a new judgment and the creation of a new validity.

The Dynamics of Institutional Change

The explanation of the dynamics of institutional change poses an important challenge for institutional theory. This challenge was summarized in the paradox of embedded agency (Battilana et al., 2009; Green & Li, 2011; Seo & Creed, 2002): how can actors conditioned by institutions enact change to those institutions? We have argued that from the multilevel theory perspective, the paradox of embedded agency is grounded in the assumption of isomorphism at the micro level. However, the observed macrolevel consensus around the institutionalized norms may conceal a large diversity of suppressed judgments, unobserved actions, and clandestine practices. An important implication of the proposed multilevel approach to the paradox of embedded agency is that in order to avoid ecological fallacy (Slater et al., 2006) in institutional theory research, observations over

macrolevel homogeneity should not be used to automatically infer homogeneity of individual actors' judgments and actions.

Our observations on legitimacy judgment expression by individual evaluators suggest that even if individuals conform to the institutionalized norm (such as the validity judgment), their privately held propriety judgments may vary substantially, as may the reasons for suppressing the expression of these judgments (see Table 1). Furthermore, as soon as the factors preventing deviant judgment expression are sufficiently weakened, the evaluators will publicly express their deviant judgments, thereby contributing to the destabilization of the institutional order. Our observations on judgment suppression and suppressor factor removal lay the groundwork for the development of a *theory of institutional suppression.* Approaching institutional order as a state of suppressed diversity, researchers can explore factors that induce individual evaluators to suppress the public expression of their private propriety judgments (or abstain from actions), as well as ways to remove or mitigate the effect of those factors and thereby encourage deviant judgment expression.

Our conceptualization of judgment suppression also draws attention to the coercive nature of institutions. Through the process of institutionalization, legitimacy judgments of evaluators are subjected to social control. We suggest that institutionalization of legitimacy judgments (i.e., the formation of macrolevel validity) operates not only through rhetoric (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) and discursive construction (Vaara & Tienari, 2011) but also through coercion (by punishing evaluators for deviant judgment expression; see Table 1), inducement (by rewarding conformance), and selective diffusion of information (by withholding information that can negatively affect evaluators' propriety judgments). Thus, the macrolevel "consensus" around the institutionalized validity judgment is driven not only by evaluators' cultural beliefs and value systems (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Suchman, 1995) but also by their fear, greed, and ignorance. These overlooked factors play an important role in both the maintenance of a stable institutional order and the competition among judgments in periods of institutional turmoil, when different interest groups use multiple strategies and coercive means to advance their preferred judgment and silence their opponents.

Propriety, Validity, and Institutional Strategies

While the extant institutional theory literature is concerned primarily with the effect of institutional strategies on macrolevel institutions and organizational outcomes (Battilana et al., 2009; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Phillips et al., 2004), the multilevel approach to institutional processes, which we propose here, calls for attention to the effects of institutional strategies on individual evaluators and their legitimacy judgments, which, in turn, affect observed macrolevel outcomes.

Our theory adds important insights to previous work on legitimation and institutional agency by distinguishing institutional strategies that influence individual evaluators' validity beliefs and propriety judgments—the two fundamental elements of legitimacy judgments (Dornbusch & Scott, 1975; Tost, 2011; Zelditch & Walker, 2000). We have described how rhetorical strategies and validity staging, as well as coercion and inducement, are used to create a perception of a judgment's greater validity and, through the effect of validity on propriety, to manipulate an evaluator's propriety judgment. We also have shown how multiple rhetorical strategies identified in the literature on discourse and framing (Green & Li, 2011; Kaplan, 2008; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2008) affect validity beliefs and propriety judgments of evaluators (see Tables 2 and 3).

Future Research Directions

The theory presented here opens up important avenues for future research. We have identified a number of cross-level interactions in the legitimacy process that can be explored in empirical research using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Specifically, future qualitative research on social judgments could explore the competitive processes of judgment validation, where microlevel communication and action yield macrolevel outcomes reflected in judgments expressed by the media, government authorities, and judges.

The cross-level social dynamics can also be explored using quantitative methods. Macrolevel measures of legitimacy judgments validated by the media (Barron, 1998; Deephouse, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Lamertz & Baum, 1998; Vergne, 2011), government agencies

(Baum & Oliver, 1991; Deephouse, 1996; Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Singh et al., 1986), and self-regulatory bodies, such as industry and professional associations (Ruef & Scott, 1998; Westphal, Gulati, & Shortell, 1997), can be complemented with microlevel measures of individual legitimacy judgments obtained through surveys and experimental studies. Such studies can provide important insights into the interactions between propriety and validity and can build the empirical foundation for the multilevel theory of the legitimacy process.

Of particular interest for future research is the exploration of discourse suppressor factors that discourage the expression of deviant judgments and create the impression of consensus in the organizational field. The processes of deployment and removal of such factors have received little researcher attention, yet understanding these factors is essential not only for maintaining the social order but also for creating favorable conditions for institutional change. Our conceptualization of suppressor factors opens up interesting research opportunities at the micro and macro levels. Specifically, at the macro level, there is the question "What do institutional entrepreneurs, regulators, and other actors do to remove the suppressor factors from the social environment?" At the micro level, fundamental questions for conceptual and empirical research are "How do evaluators assess the degree of deviance of their judgments? How do they interpret environmental signals as a suppressor factor removal? How do they make a decision to speak up?" The psychology research on positive anticipation and trust (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998), research on issue framing (Kennedy & Fiss, 2009), and research in economics on preference falsification (Kuran, 1995) can inform our understanding of the sociocognitive processes that prompt individual evaluators to speak up and express their deviant judgments. Future research in this direction should examine mental and behavioral thresholds of individual evaluators—that is, the points at which evaluators switch from passive-mode to active-mode processing (Tost, 2011) and the points at which they decide to engage in action and express their privately held judgments. Another issue that merits further scrutiny refers to the question of generalizability

of our theory to different cultural contexts. Future research should explore whether actors in collectivist and individualist societies (Hofstede, 2010) react differently to suppressor factors. Comparative, cross-cultural studies will shed light on this important issue.

Finally, while we focus here on processes driving stability and change in microlevel legitimacy judgments and in macrolevel organizational legitimacy, the proposed multilevel theory has broader implications for institutional theory and communications, since similar cross-level processes control stability and change of other types of institutions in society. Exploration of other institutional processes, such as institutional work and institutional entrepreneurship, using a multilevel approach and the conceptual framework developed here offers another important avenue for future research stemming from this article.

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