

LEGITIMACY AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

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■ **Abstract** To gain an in-depth understanding of legitimacy as a general social process, we review contemporary approaches to legitimacy within two areas of sociology: social psychology and organizations. A comparison of these distinct approaches allows us to explain the process, both in implicit and explicit ways at different levels of analysis, through which a social object is construed as legitimate. This comparison also suggests four stages in the process by which new social objects, both individual (worthy/unworthy individuals) and collective (organizational forms), gain legitimization: innovation, local validation, diffusion, and general validation. We then show how legitimization of the status quo—that is, the acceptance of widespread consensual schemas/beliefs in the larger society—often fosters the stability of nonoptimal actions and practices that are created as a result of these new individual and collective social objects. Finally, we discuss how consensual beliefs such as status beliefs and cultural capital fuel the reproduction of inefficiency and inequality in groups and organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Legitimacy has long been recognized as a fundamental process that is basic to social organization (Zelditch 2001). Yet understanding the general processes that underlie legitimacy has remained a difficult and persistent problem. The goal of this review is to gain an in-depth understanding of legitimacy as a general social process that can act at different levels of social analysis. In our attempt to unmask the legitimacy process, we examine the relevant literature articulated in two broad areas of sociology: (a) social psychological approaches that focus on the legitimization of status characteristics, group status structures, organizational authority structures and practices, and stratified orders; and (b) institutional approaches in the organizations literature that examine the legitimization of organizational forms, practices, and stratification. Theories in social psychology show how legitimacy processes occurring in interaction help to create and maintain inequality within

organizations and within labor markets (e.g., Berger et al. 1998, Ridgeway 1997, Ridgeway & Berger 1986, Zelditch & Walker 1984). Theories in the organizations literature emphasize that organizational survival and success depend on legitimacy (e.g., Meyer & Rowan 1977, Scott et al. 2000). In both areas—social psychology and organizations—legitimacy processes are a cornerstone of theories that attempt to explain group and organizational behavior, respectively.

We limit our focus to the literature in these two areas because promising theoretical connections exist between them through works such as Dornbusch & Scott (1975), Suchman (1995), and Zelditch & Walker (2003, Zelditch 2004), and because of space limitations. We leave to the future the task of examining whether our analysis of legitimacy can be applied to other important areas such as the seminal work in political science and political sociology that addresses the legitimacy processes of political structures, new nations, and postrevolutionary societies (e.g., Bendix 1964, 1978; Lipset 1963).

Our preliminary investigation of various sociological approaches in social psychology and institutional analysis led us to the conclusion that some approaches emphasize the creation and legitimation of new social objects, whereas others focus more heavily on the maintenance of legitimacy of a social object once created. In addition, most pay attention to the consequences of legitimation at either the group, organizational, or societal level. Therefore, we have organized our investigation of legitimacy in the following way.

First, we delineate the fundamental similarities contained in the numerous definitions of legitimacy proffered in contemporary research in the two areas. Second, we show how work in both areas explains the process, both in implicit and explicit ways, through which a social object is construed as legitimate. Third, we address how new social objects, both individual and collective, are created and legitimated, that is, how they become widely accepted into the broader cultural framework. A comparison of the two areas suggests four stages in the process by which new objects gain legitimation: innovation, local validation, diffusion, and general validation. To illustrate and explain these four stages, we show how socially recognized characteristics of individuals may become widely accepted as indicators of social status in society and how organizational forms, such as the for-profit corporation or the nonprofit arts organization, are created and become widely adopted in the broader cultural framework.

Finally, we show how the legitimation of the status quo—that is, the acceptance of widespread consensual schemas/beliefs and patterns of behavior—often fosters the stability of actions and practices that are created as a result of these new individual and collective social objects. For example, we see how practices, such as modern personnel systems and conduct in decision-making groups based on status characteristics, become taken-for-granted features in a wide variety of organizations, even when they are inefficient and inequitable. We explain as well why potentially optimal ideas often disappear. And we examine how widespread consensual beliefs, such as status beliefs and cultural capital, fuel the reproduction of inefficiency and inequality in groups and organizations.

DEFINITIONS OF LEGITIMACY

Weber argued that a social order is legitimate “only if action is approximately or on the average oriented to certain determinate ‘maxims’ or rules” (Weber 1978 [1924], p. 31). He notes that even though individuals may not always hold the same norms, values, and beliefs, their behavior nevertheless becomes oriented to an order that is in accord with rules or beliefs that they presume are accepted by most others. Because individuals perceive that others support this social order, the order seems like a valid, objective social fact. Consequently, the individuals act in accord with that order themselves, even if they privately disagree. Thus, the Weberian formulation offers the central insight that legitimation occurs through a collective construction of social reality in which the elements of a social order are seen as consonant with norms, values, and beliefs that individuals presume are widely shared, whether or not they personally share them. Consequently, legitimacy is indicated by actors’ compliance with a social order as either (a) a set of social obligations, or as (b) a desirable model of action (Walker 2004).

Dornbusch & Scott (1975) explicated Weber’s classic ideas in a manner that has influenced social psychological theories of legitimacy. They separated the dual aspects of legitimacy described by Weber into validity and propriety. Propriety is an actor’s belief that a social order’s norms and procedures of conduct are desirable and appropriate patterns of action. Validity, in contrast, is an individual’s belief that he or she is obliged to obey these norms and procedures even in the absence of personal approval of them. Norms are valid if they observably govern the behavior of actors in an organization. The views of others in the social context enhance the validity of rules. In particular, validity is buttressed by authorization, which is the support of higher authorities, and by endorsement, which is the support of an actor’s peers and subordinates.

Like Weber’s original description of legitimacy, Dornbusch & Scott’s further development of his ideas combines a definition of what legitimacy is with an implicit account of how legitimacy secures compliance with a social order. In their theoretical research program on the legitimacy of formal authority structures, Zelditch & Walker (1984, 2003; Walker & Zelditch 1993) separate out a definition of legitimacy and then independently analyze authorization and endorsement as processes that produce the compliance that behaviorally demonstrates the legitimacy of an order. Following Weber, Zelditch (2001, p. 33) argues that “something is legitimate if it is in accord with the norms, values, beliefs, practices, and procedures accepted by a group.”

Ridgeway & J. Berger (1986, Berger et al. 1998) not only draw on Zelditch & Walker but also on P. Berger & Luckmann (1967) in their social psychological theory of the legitimation of informal status hierarchies. They define legitimacy as a “process by which cultural accounts from a larger social framework in which a social entity is nested are construed to explain and support the existence of that social entity, whether that entity be a group, a structure of inequality, a position of

authority, or a social practice” (Berger et al. 1998, p. 380). This approach explicitly distinguishes an object of legitimation at one level of analysis and a framework of beliefs, values, and norms that actors in the situation presume are broadly accepted at a more encompassing social level. Thus, the maxims or rules toward which behavior is oriented in Weber’s account are understood here to reside in a community broader than the local situation of action such as an encompassing organization or society. Following Weber, the presumption that others accept the broader framework of beliefs, values, and norms is key, not the actor’s personal endorsement of these cultural accounts.

Weber’s formulation of legitimacy is echoed by organizational scholarship of the present. Organizational ecologists, for instance, define an organizational form as legitimate when its existence and prevalence are taken for granted (Hannan & Carroll 1992). When a new organizational form first emerges, its legitimacy is low, as its numerical rarity and novelty both mean that it must find a constituency and resources. Increasing numbers, in turn, denote rising legitimacy, as the proliferation of this form signifies success in securing support and resources. However, once its numbers reach a certain ceiling (i.e., carrying capacity), legitimacy is less of an issue; instead, competition now matters, as the sizable numbers of this particular organizational form now tax available support and resources. Thus, for ecologists, legitimacy refers to the facticity of a particular organizational form that occurs when it becomes a “blueprint for organizing and conducting social action” (Dobrev 2001, p. 420).

From an institutional point of view in the organizations area, Meyer & Scott (1983, p. 201) define legitimacy as “the degree of cultural support for an organization.” Some conceptual slippage can occur between the definitions of institutions and legitimacy, as both are seen as leading to stability in social action (Hybels 1995). As a result, we find it wise to draw on the conceptualization of Douglas (1986, p. 45–46), who treats institutions as legitimated conventions: “To acquire legitimacy, every kind of institution needs a formula that founds its rightness in reason and in nature. . . . For a convention to turn into a legitimate social institution it needs a parallel cognitive convention to sustain it.” Note that this definition, too, describes legitimation as a process by which institutions are linked to a broader cultural framework of beliefs, here fundamental beliefs about reason and nature that are presumed to be so consensually accepted that they are objective social facts. The objectification of these beliefs and the formula that links them to the convention give them and the convention the character of cognitive beliefs about social reality, of how things are, as well as a normative quality of how things should be. (Of course, legitimate for whom is an important question, as some institutions—such as organized crime—can be legitimate for particular actors but illegitimate for the broader society; see Jepperson 1991.)

In the organizations literature, one of the best-known definitions of legitimacy is Suchman’s (1995, p. 574): “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.” Note that, similar to social psychological approaches, his conceptualization understands legitimacy as a shared cognitive construal of an entity as consistent with a cultural framework of beliefs, norms, and values that are generally accepted by the group as a whole. Suchman (1995, p. 574), as well, notes the collective nature of legitimacy in that,

when one says that a certain pattern of behavior possesses legitimacy, one asserts that some group of observers, as a whole, accepts or supports what those observers perceive to be the behavioral pattern, as a *whole*—despite reservations that any single observer might have about any single behavior, and despite reservations that any or all observers might have, were they to observe more.

In addition, Suchman (1995) and others further delineate types of legitimacy such as pragmatic legitimacy based on interest, moral legitimacy based on what is perceived as right, and cognitive legitimacy based on taken-for-granted cultural accounts. Although each rests on a different set of behavioral dynamics, all three types involve a generalized perception that the activities of the organization are appropriate and desirable within a taken-for-granted system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (see Aldrich 1999 and Dobrev 2001 for other ways to delineate types of legitimacy).

As this examination of social psychological and organizational definitions shows, approaches differ slightly in the aspects of legitimacy that each emphasizes. Importantly, however, all the definitions share fundamental similarities: (a) Legitimacy is a problem in the construction of social reality. It consists of the construal of a social object as consistent with cultural beliefs, norms, and values that are presumed to be shared by others in the local situation and perhaps more broadly by actors in a broader community (e.g., the organization or society). Through this construal process, what is becomes what is right. (b) Although legitimacy is mediated by the perceptions and behaviors of individuals, it is fundamentally a collective process. It comes about through and depends on the implied presence of a social audience, those assumed to accept the encompassing framework of beliefs, norms, and values, and, therefore, the construal of the object as legitimate. (c) Legitimacy depends on apparent, though not necessarily actual, consensus among actors in the local situation that most people accept the object as legitimate. (d) As a collective construction of social reality, legitimacy has both a cognitive dimension that constitutes the object for actors as a valid, objective social feature and a normative, prescriptive dimension that represents the social object as right.

The next question we ask is how the construal of a social object as legitimate comes about, according to social psychological and organizational accounts. Are there similarities and differences between these accounts that reveal core aspects of the process of legitimation?

THE LEGITIMATION PROCESS

The social psychological approach that deals most explicitly with the processes through which a social object is construed as legitimate is Ridgeway & Berger's (1986, Berger et al. 1998) account of the legitimation of interpersonal status hierarchies. [Della Fave (1980) offers an account of how inequality is construed as proper, but both because this account does not address the validity aspect of legitimacy and because empirical support for it is equivocal (Stolte 1983), we do not discuss it here.] This account argues that actors have referential beliefs about the social categories or types of people (e.g., those from higher status social groups, the more able, and the more successful) that typically hold higher status positions in interpersonal influence hierarchies in society. These referential beliefs are descriptive beliefs about social reality, about the way things are, that actors presume are widely shared and, therefore, socially valid, regardless of whether they personally approve of them.

Ridgeway & Berger argue that when these referential beliefs are evoked in a situation by the characteristics of the actors present, they create implicit expectations for the types of social actors that will become influential in the situation. Because actors hold these expectations and assume that others present also hold them, then when those types of actors do in fact become influential, there is a likelihood that one of them will treat this status order as legitimate by displaying honorific deference to the influential actor (e.g., respectful praise, verbal and nonverbal gestures of deference). If this display of deference is validated by the reactions of others in the situation who either respond in kind or do not contradict the behavior, then the status order becomes legitimated.

In this account, then, legitimation is largely an implicit process in which widely shared cultural beliefs from the surrounding society create strong expectations for what is likely to occur in the local situation. Strong expectations that it will be so drive behavioral indications of acceptance when it is so, and the appearance of consensual acceptance of these behavioral demonstrations legitimates the status order, making it seem normative. Thus, the emphasis is not on the explicit justifications of the status order that link it to widely accepted cultural accounts. Instead the status order is linked to accepted cultural accounts by the apparently consensual acceptance of actions that treat the status order as appropriate according to those accounts. In addition to its implicit approach, this social psychological account is distinctive for its emphasis on the local situation of action as the site in which social objects are actually constructed as legitimate.

Organizational scholarship has a long tradition of dealing with legitimacy (e.g., Weber, Parsons, resource dependency), with the new institutionalism in organizational sociology (DiMaggio & Powell 1991) providing a recent exemplar in this tradition. The work of W. Richard Scott is particularly important, as he is an institutionalist who has reviewed organizational approaches to legitimacy, offered a synthesis of such approaches in an institutional vein, and demonstrated this synthesis in empirical research. He notes that organizations need more than material and

technical resources to remain viable, they also need ongoing cultural endorsement (Scott 1995, p. 45). Hence, like Ridgeway & Berger (1986) (as well as Suchman 1995), he locates the source of legitimacy beyond the boundaries of an individual organization in supraorganizational beliefs about social reality that are widely held (or, at least, held by powerful actors).

In Scott's (1995) three-part conceptualization, the construal of an organization or procedure as legitimate comes about through the authorization or endorsement of particular actors in the surrounding environment. Regulative legitimacy flows from actors who have some sort of sovereignty over organizations—such as regulatory agencies associated with governments—and who thus define the range of what is legally or procedurally acceptable via requirements and sanctions. Normative legitimacy stems from actors who define what is morally desirable (rather than legally required), with professions and their associations providing a notable example of those that stipulate standards and values. Finally, cognitive legitimacy flows from the prevalence of comparable organizational actors, thereby providing templates for organizational structures and actions. Scott and colleagues (2000) demonstrate the utility of this conceptualization by showing how, net of organizational performance and other factors, the survival rate of hospitals is augmented when they receive government funding (regulative legitimacy), when they garner professional accreditation (normative legitimacy), and when the number of hospitals is initially on the rise (cognitive legitimacy).

Scott's approach points both to implicit and explicit processes by which organizations receive legitimacy. Once established, for instance, legal requirements, professional mandates, and especially the prevalence of certain types of organizations define the taken-for-granted view of the world that organizations confront. Such taken-for-grantedness is a hallmark of the new institutionalism in organizational sociology (see also DiMaggio 1997), as tacit assumptions about the nature of the world spur organizations to adopt similar practices and structures (i.e., isomorphism). Yet, there is more than this implicit process. The establishment of legitimacy is a contested process that unfolds across time. A stream of institutional research addresses how various actors initially propose what they deem to be legitimate—noting the accounts and efforts such actors offer when they pursue new legal and professional requirements and when they unveil new types of organizations. This stream of research, as Scott summarizes, shows that the implicit nature of legitimacy at one point in time is built upon initially explicit roots. The shift from the explicit to the implicit, in turn, is another hallmark of institutional sociology (see also Dobbin & Dowd 2000, Leblebici et al. 1991).

CREATION AND LEGITIMATION OF NEW SOCIAL OBJECTS (INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE)

Both social psychological and organizational accounts emphasize a widely shared cultural framework of beliefs about how things should be or typically are done as the basis from which legitimacy in the local situation of a group or organization

is established. In this section, we take one step further to examine how new patterns of behavior or beliefs become widely accepted into the broader cultural framework in the first place so that they become taken-for-granted social features. When comparing legitimacy work in social psychology with institutional work in organizations, four stages in the legitimation of new social objects become apparent: innovation, local validation, diffusion, and general validation. We begin by describing these stages as we have derived them from the literature. Then we illustrate them with examples from the social psychological and organizational literatures.

In the first stage, a social innovation is created to address some need, purpose, goal, or desire at the local level of actors. Examples are small groups developing new ways of thinking to accomplish their tasks or organizations developing new procedures to meet federal policies or new ways of organizing/doing business to increase profits and/or improve performance. As we shall see, new social objects are often created in response to structural conditions, such as access to or the distribution of valued resources, that create strategic interests or contingent events for actors in local contexts. Clearly, some new objects never acquire legitimacy (e.g., subscription financing for commercial radio in the United States; see Leblebici et al. 1991), whereas others do successfully become part of the broader cultural landscape, readily available and acceptable to other actors outside of the initial local context. In addition, sometimes the same innovation pops up in several local situations simultaneously.

For an innovation to be accepted locally, our review of the literature suggests that local actors must construe it as consonant with and linked to the existing, widely accepted cultural framework of beliefs, values, and norms (Walker 2004, pp. 253–54; Zelditch 2001; Zelditch & Walker 2003). At the local level where the innovation is initiated, actors may explicitly justify this link (e.g., through accounts/justifications of how the innovation addresses the immediate need/goal in a way that is consistent with the already accepted cultural landscape). Or it may acquire local consensus simply by not being implicitly or explicitly challenged. As a result of being successfully justified or implicitly accepted, the innovation acquires local validation. A new prototype or cultural schema is born as the acceptable way of doing things to meet local needs/goals.

Once this new prototype is locally validated, it may be diffused into other new, local situations. Because the innovation has been construed as a valid social fact, it is now adopted more readily by actors in other local contexts as mere fact. This is partly a result of actors' perception and expectation that it would also be accepted by others in other local contexts. And this expectation is more likely when the innovation is perceived to meet goals/purposes that are consonant with already widely accepted goals (e.g., efficiency) (Walker 2004). The new prototype then becomes a useful and even necessary cultural schema for making sense of how we do things. As the new social object spreads, its adoption in new situations often needs less explicit justification than it may have needed in the first local context in which it was adopted. Indeed, one theme of institutional

research concerns those arrangements and factors that facilitate the diffusion of an innovation among particular types of actors (e.g., Mezas 1990, Palmer et al. 1993). In addition, whereas the initially created innovation often does address immediate goals, purposes, or problems in the original local context, it may eventually become less useful in later adopter contexts yet still be perceived as the acceptable practice. Another theme in institutional scholarship addresses how early adopters of an innovation are driven by technical concerns, whereas later adopters can be driven by the legitimacy that comes from emulation (see Roy 1997, Tolbert & Zucker 1983, Zbaracki 1998).

Over time, as a result of the diffusion of the new social object across contexts, actors eventually take on the belief that most actors believe that the innovation is acceptable (and sometimes better than other potential innovations, although this is not necessary). Once this occurs, the new social object acquires widespread acceptance, becoming part of society's shared culture. The new prototype, initially validated either in one local context or in a few spontaneously, becomes generally validated, i.e., becomes part of the status quo, and is used to frame the future behavior of actors in many contexts. Obviously, there is room for new social objects to appear that may challenge the original innovation, but once a prototype/cultural schema becomes generally validated, it is not easily replaced compared to objects that only remain locally validated.

To illustrate and explain these four stages in more detail, we first draw from status construction theory in social psychology to examine how newly emerging status beliefs (i.e., cultural schemas about which categories of individuals are thought to be worthy or unworthy) may become widely accepted as part of the broader cultural framework. That is, we look at how the transformation of a mere difference into a widely accepted status characteristic may create a new type of worthy/unworthy actor in society in which some categories of people (e.g., whites and men) are perceived as more worthy and competent than other categories of people (e.g., blacks and women) in general. Then, drawing upon institutional work in organizations, we show how two organizational forms, the for-profit corporate form and the nonprofit form in the arts, emerged in local contexts and then became part of the larger cultural framework. Although these new social objects, status beliefs and organizational forms, are studied at two different levels of analysis, their legitimation processes show similar paths. This similarity, although not perfect, is important because this may indicate a more general legitimacy process, regardless of the level of analysis of a particular social object.

The Illustration of Worthy and Unworthy Individuals

Let us assume that the following structural conditions exist for a population: cooperative interdependence between people in two categories of a widely recognized but not consensually evaluated social difference, an economic or other such advantage of one category of the difference characteristic that we call *A* over the other category, *B*, and the percentage of the population in each category (Ridgeway

1991, Webster & Hysom 1998). These extant features of the social order create strategic advantages and contingent events, such as who encounters whom (Blau 1977, Blau & Schwartz 1984, Skvoretz 1983), and who is advantaged in those encounters.

Under these conditions, people who differ in the characteristic must regularly interact with one another to achieve what they want or need, as is common for subgroups within a given population or area (Ridgeway 1991, 2000). As in virtually all contexts in which people work on a shared task, a status hierarchy is likely to emerge among participants in these intercategory encounters in which some are more directive and influential and are thought to be better at the task than others (Berger et al. 1977, 1980).

These status hierarchies will be shaped by the structural conditions that frame the encounters, such as, for example, the resource advantages that *As* have over *Bs*. Consequently, status hierarchies will be repeatedly created in encounters between *As* and *Bs* in which both *As* and *Bs* experience *As* as participating more, being more directive and influential (i.e., acting leader-like), and appearing to be more competent than *Bs*. This pattern of behavior creates a new, implicit correspondence between the *A/B* difference and already widely accepted cultural schemas about high-status/low-status, leader/follower behavior (Ridgeway 2000). This correspondence, then, appears to local actors to be consistent with already accepted notions in society that high-status people act leader-like (i.e., assertively) and low-status people act like followers (i.e., deferentially).

Once this new social pattern emerges, it may become locally validated. In our example, as long as the apparent correspondence between the difference characteristic and position in the status hierarchy is not explicitly or implicitly challenged, this correspondence appears to participants to be socially accepted and consensual. This appearance of consensus makes the association between the characteristic and cultural markers of status and competence seem like an objective social reality in the encounter that is accepted by others as a valid social fact (Ridgeway 2000). The local validity of this correspondence pressures both *Bs* and *As* in the situation to accept that most people would see *As* as higher status and more competent than *Bs* and, thus, to form a shared status belief about the *A/B* characteristic (Ridgeway & Correll 2006). This shared status belief forms regardless of whether any particular individual privately agrees with this correspondence. And this correspondence appears to be efficient to achieve goals in encounters and is consonant with widely accepted schemas of high-status/low-status, leader/follower behavior (Walker 2004). Thus, this locally created status belief is in effect accepted as a new cultural schema, a prototype, about a new type of worthy or unworthy actor.

Once these emergent status beliefs are locally validated, they are carried into new situations. Because this correspondence appears to be a valid social fact, individuals perceive that it would be accepted as valid by others in other encounters. "Repeatedly experiencing *Bs* cast as less able and worthy in encounters with *As* gives the appearance of a broader reality in which *As* in general are held to be more competent and worthy" (Ridgeway & Erickson 2000, p. 584). If others will accept a status belief about *As* and *Bs* as valid, then the belief becomes a useful and

even necessary schema for making sense of others in future encounters (Ridgeway 2000). As a result, the actor is likely to treat others in subsequent encounters according to the new status belief (i.e., either deferentially or assertively), creating the diffusion process that teaches the belief to others across repeated situations. The acceptance of the new status belief in new local contexts may occur even if the individual actors do not accept this belief as proper or right, or even if this belief actually hinders the group's efficiency. Over time and repeated encounters, even *Bs* in the population eventually accept that most people believe that *As* are superior and better than *Bs*, so that the *A/B* characteristic acquires widespread status value and becomes part of the society's shared culture.

Once they are broadly shared, new status beliefs become part of the status quo. That is, they become part of the implicit, taken-for-granted social framework of beliefs that individuals bring into situations and use to frame their behavior (Ridgeway 2000, p. 97). Once generally validated like this, status beliefs become very difficult to challenge on any broad-based scale in society (see several studies that support these arguments: Ridgeway & Balkwell 1997, Ridgeway & Correll 2006, Ridgeway & Erickson 2000, Ridgeway et al. 1998).

The Illustration of Organizational Forms

Whereas Ridgeway and colleagues are interested in the process by which certain categories of people come to be perceived as more competent and worthy than others, organizational scholars are keenly interested in another category—the social object known as the organizational form. The work of Roy (1997) and DiMaggio (e.g., 1982b, 1987b, 1991, 1992) shows that organizational forms with decidedly different concerns (i.e., commerce versus aesthetics) developed through a similar legitimation process.

The innovation of both the for-profit corporation and nonprofit arts organizations began when local actors discovered that existing organizational forms were ill equipped to address particular needs and, in response, they created what eventually would become widespread organizational forms. Regarding the origins of the corporate form, Roy (1997) documents that local governments in the United States of the late 1700s and early 1800s were concerned with building their respective economies and infrastructures (see also Dobbin & Dowd 1997, Dunlavy 1994). However, they faced notable challenges: Some endeavors required more funding than could be raised by taxes yet were seen by entrepreneurs as too risky. As a result, local governments incorporated canals, bridges, banks, and railroads, thereby offering an alternative to the organizational forms of the day in business (e.g., family-owned enterprises). These early business corporations were thus quasi-government entities. Despite *laissez-faire* critics (see also Sciulli 1999), they were persuasively cast as the embodiment of self-rule at the local level that resonated with the political culture of the day (see Dobbin 1994). Government funding and limited liability attracted once hesitant entrepreneurs to the new form. For example, numerous railroaders eagerly targeted locales that provided funding, with possibly half of antebellum railroad capital coming from local governments (see Dobbin

& Dowd 1997, Dunlavy 1994). In turn, corporate charters, elected officers, and boards of directors were meant to promote accountability to the public interest.

Regarding the origins of the nonprofit arts organization, DiMaggio (1982b) points to developments in Boston during the late 1800s. Although art (i.e., high culture) that flowed from Europe was held in esteem, there were no viable organizations that offered only such works for sizable audiences in the United States. Commercial organizations that dominated concert and theatrical life and exhibitions typically sought the largest possible audiences by offering a mixture of serious and light fare (see Levine 1988). This situation would change owing to efforts of Boston's old-money elite (i.e., Brahmins). In the late 1800s, they faced an influx of immigrants and *nouveaux riches* that challenged their control over Boston's social and political life. They responded, in part, by establishing the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) and the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) as nonprofit corporations that they controlled—creating a new form that diverged from the associations, cooperatives, and for-profit venues of the day.

After this innovation stage, both the corporate and nonprofit arts forms entered a stage of local validation, as powerful actors cast each form as superior in some fashion, and the content of this validation shifted in the process. The corporation was first represented as superior for managing risk for public benefit, but this reasoning later shifted, Roy (1997) demonstrates, to deeming it superior because it accrues wealth for private interests in a legally-sanctioned fashion. Initially, politicians endorsed the emergence of business corporations in particular locations (e.g., New England) and particular industries (e.g., banking, transportation)—touting corporations as superior in terms of the already accepted social value of managing financial risk and serving the greater good (see Perrow 2002, Sciulli 1999). This initial type of local validation encountered limits, however. Economic downturns and well-publicized corporate graft caused local governments to turn away from public ownership, thereby heeding critics who touted *laissez-faire* (see also Dobbin 1994, Sciulli 1999). Subsequently, local validation emphasized private wealth, large-scale economic activity, and the control of competition when maintaining the superiority of this innovative form. State governments eventually routinized the incorporation process while expanding the rights afforded to corporations: Entrepreneurs could incorporate via general charters rather than on a case-by-case basis requiring legislative acts; investors in one corporation could hold stock in another—a right not extended to individually owned businesses—and limits to capital accumulation were eliminated in New Jersey (see Sciulli 1999). Thus, the corporate form morphed fully into private property, with the notable example of railroad corporations that grew into giant entities that dwarfed local and state economies (see Dobbin & Dowd 1997, 2000).

The local validation of the nonprofit arts organization occurred not only as the Boston museum and orchestra survived and thrived, but also as this new form allowed trustees and managers of the BSO and MFA to cordon off exalted works from entertainment (DiMaggio 1982b). Because the new form relied more on debt reduction and largesse rather than profit maximization and box office revenues,

the BSO and MFA faced greatly reduced financial difficulties compared with their commercial counterparts. Henry Higginson, for example, spent nearly \$1 million to offset the losses that accrued while the orchestra played only the great masterworks (Levine 1988). Initial validation efforts sometimes stressed the importance of education and cultural uplift, whereby these arts organizations could edify the community as a whole; however, local validation eventually came to emphasize the repository role, whereby the greatest works were provided to a knowledgeable audience. Consequently, both the MFA and BSO were able to develop (and train) a refined audience that would eventually expect what Bourdieu (1984) calls “legitimate culture” and that would not look lightly on the intrusion of mere entertainment into the offerings. Out of this local validation, the nonprofit arts organization was cast as superior to other forms in terms of an already existing social value—that of esteemed art (see Beisel 1997). Thus, cultural capitalists insulated high culture from the marketplace by pairing it with a new nonprofit form (DiMaggio 1982b).

The global diffusion of both forms occurred as actors—including those with much power—saw the forms as answers to their respective problems. Roy (1997) compellingly demonstrates that financiers played a key role in the diffusion of the corporation. As the financial institutions that once handled government funds for corporations came into their own (i.e., Wall Street), they provided a key source of funding for the privately owned (rather than publicly funded) version of the corporate form. Following the depression of the 1890s, financiers encouraged manufacturers to reorganize as corporations and to grow by acquiring competitors; following Supreme Court decisions in the 1890s that forbade cooperation among competitors (e.g., cartels) but allowed combination among competitors (e.g., mergers), financiers also brought together their assets under a single corporate entity (see Dobbin & Dowd 2000, Fligstein 1990). Corporations did not initially diffuse to industries marked by rapid growth and high productivity, as efficiency proponents argue. Indeed, manufacturing corporations arose in those industries that had a history of ties with financiers such as J.P. Morgan and that routinely interacted with railroaders.

The diffusion of the arts organizations occurred both by geography and by artistic domain (DiMaggio 1991, 1992). Urban elites who accepted as valid the innovation of the Brahmins adopted the nonprofit form for their own orchestras and museums. By the 1930s, nonprofit symphony orchestras and museums were commonplace across the United States, as regional differences gave way to a national system of high culture (see Blau 1995, Dowd et al. 2002). Regarding other artistic domains, the nonprofit arts organization eventually diffused to American dance, opera, and theater. Each of these domains was previously dominated by commercial enterprises and, as a result, was hard pressed to offer only exalted works (see also Martorella 1985, Poggi 1968). With the arrival of the nonprofit form, DiMaggio (1992) argues, each of these domains was able to construct and uphold a canon of esteemed work, while leaving popular fare for commercial organizations (e.g., Broadway).

The general validation of each form resulted from its respective prevalence and the constructed accounts regarding its general superiority. Once the success of corporations was demonstrated in certain industrial sectors, the corporate form eventually diffused to other manufacturing sectors and beyond. Indeed, Roy (1997) argues that the corporate form was now generally validated as finance and industry came together, becoming the taken-for-granted template for organizing businesses in the United States throughout most of the 1900s (see Fligstein 1990, Perrow 2002, Zucker 1986). Meanwhile, the spread of nonprofit arts organizations (see Blau 1989) would rest on the widespread acceptance of the high culture classification (DiMaggio 1987a,b). Whereas colleges and universities had previously paid relatively little attention to the arts—especially to music—their curricula began to emphasize the very classification touted by the nonprofit arts organizations (see Bauman 2001, Corse & Griffin 1997, Dowd et al. 2002). Meanwhile, emergent media industries—including radio and recording—sought to demonstrate the worthiness of their enterprises by offering high culture works in addition to their popular fare (see Dowd 2003).

In summary, many parallels exist between the legitimization of organizational forms and the development of status beliefs about categories of people. As with status beliefs, structural conditions matter in the innovation and local validation of particular forms, with the economic resources of the state prompting the corporation and those of the Brahmins spurring the arts organization. Again, as with status beliefs, the diffusion of both organizational forms relied on locally valid representations of the form as superior in terms of some already accepted value as well as on the forms' growing prevalence. State officials, and later entrepreneurs, came to view the corporation as superior to the individually owned business, initially because it was deemed as less risky and later because it shielded investors from liability, if not from ruinous competition; urban elites viewed the nonprofit arts organization as superior to other forms—especially commercial arts organizations—because it did not have to cater to the whims of the audiences and, hence, could offer exalted works despite poor box office returns. Once both forms proliferated, they seemed to be generally valid and therefore inevitable, despite examples from other countries in which organizational forms drove economic growth (Dobbin 1994) and aesthetic hierarchy (DeNora 1991) in a different fashion than found in the United States.

Legitimation of the Status Quo

MAINTENANCE OF PRACTICES Once these new social objects (i.e., organizational forms and status beliefs) become generally valid in society, they imply certain practices and actions, such as modern personnel systems in corporations and conduct between status differentiated actors in decision-making groups. These practices and actions tend to be adopted in organizations and remain relatively stable, even when they are inefficient or unfair. Zelditch & Walker's (1984, Walker & Zelditch 1993, Zelditch 2004) work on the effects of legitimacy provides an explanation for

this stability. Their argument assumes an organization that has an existing valid authority structure with norms, practices, and procedures in place and sanctions differentially available to particular actors. They argue that although existing practices of the authority structure may be incompatible with the actual running of the organization and have the potential to create considerable tension, dissatisfaction, and pressure to change the structure—there are also countervailing factors owing to legitimacy effects that dampen the likelihood of attempts to change the structure in which these practices are embedded.

The appearance that organizations' practices are generally valid—that they are accepted by others—is especially important for actors' continued compliance with them and even more important than actors' personal sense that the practices are proper (i.e., fair or efficient) (Walker & Zelditch 1993, Zelditch & Walker 1984). Implicit or explicit endorsement and authorization help to sustain the validity of practices and procedures as consistent with the existing cultural framework of schemas for how things are done. When practices are strongly authorized and endorsed, individuals are more likely to comply even if they do not personally agree with them because they expect formal sanctions from superiors or informal sanctions from peers. In addition, strong authorization and endorsement may eventually create more favorable private perceptions of these practices (i.e., propriety), even when private acceptance of an inequitable structure was initially low. A consequence of these legitimating forces is the suppression of reactions by individuals who feel themselves improperly treated (see Thomas et al. 1986; Walker et al. 1986, 1988).

Drawing upon Zelditch & Walker's analysis, Johnson & Ford (1996, Johnson et al. 2000) show that subordinate workers' beliefs about what others think of their superior affect the workers' tactics and emotional responses when they are unfairly treated by the superior in a conflict situation. Hegtvædt & Johnson (2000, Hegtvædt et al. 2003) also draw upon this analysis to make explicit the connection between collective sources of legitimacy and individual perceptions of and responses to unfair distributions. They argue that when a situation is objectively unjust, such as when a worker receives a smaller raise than a coworker with equal rank, experience, and productivity, then endorsement and authorization of the outcome distribution or of the allocator will attenuate perceptions of unfair treatment and suppress behavioral responses and negative emotional expressions because of the likelihood of sanctions (see Mueller & Landsman 2004 for supporting evidence).

In sum, Zelditch & Walker describe a four-stage process by which legitimacy effects within organizations maintain the status quo of taken-for-granted practices and the authority structure through which these practices are implemented. First, as the existing status quo that visibly governs others' behavior within the organization, the authority structure and its associated set of practices appear to have general validity for organizational members, and this appearance of validity is sustained by authorization and endorsement. Second, as a result of the appearance of general validity, members continue to engage in widespread compliance with these

taken-for-granted practices. Third, this compliance is backed by the threat of formal and informal sanctions that often have a material base. Fourth, and as a consequence, actors often accept nonoptimal (i.e., inefficient and/or inequitable) procedures and practices as the way things are, while new practices that may be more efficient but are not embedded in the status quo often disappear. (See also Zelditch 2004 for a discussion of institutional effects on stability of authority.)

Organizational scholars are likewise interested in the spread and stability of practices implied by accepted social objects such as the law, often noting the homogeneity of practices across (rather than within) organizations (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Lauren Edelman, Frank Dobbin, and colleagues, for example, address how particular employment practices have diffused and become taken-for-granted features among a wide variety of organizations. In their research, sources of legitimacy for these practices lie beyond individual organizations; authorization flows from the federal government that spurs the adoption of various practices, whereas endorsement results from professionals (e.g., managers, lawyers, consultants) who develop practices that satisfy vague or complex federal mandates. The United States's federal law, they argue, typically offers broad requirements for what organizations are and are not to do (e.g., do not discriminate against certain types of workers) rather than specific instructions about how they should meet these requirements (Edelman et al. 1992, 1999; Kelly & Dobbin 1999). Consequently, professionals are left to divine new practices that alleviate operational uncertainty while meeting the spirit of the law (but see Kelly 2003). In the face of evolving requirements associated with such things as equal opportunity (EEO), affirmative action (AA), and sex discrimination, professionals innovated such practices as job descriptions and performance evaluations (Dobbin et al. 1993), grievance procedures for nonunion employees (Edelman 1990, Sutton & Dobbin 1996), EEO/AA offices (or officers) (Dobbin & Sutton 1998), and maternity leave policies (Kelly & Dobbin 1999). Courts and legislatures responded to these and other innovations by deeming certain practices as appropriate, with the existence of some practices actually informing subsequent court rulings (Dobbin et al. 1993, Edelman et al. 1999).

Widespread compliance with these various practices rests on evolving cultural conceptions regarding the nature of workers and the workplace (see also Barley & Kunda 1992). By the end of the 1900s, workers not only have an (expanding) array of rights and distinctions, but they also have some recourse when those rights are aggrieved (Dobbin & Sutton 1998, Dobbin et al. 1993, Edelman 1990, Edelman et al. 2001, Sutton & Dobbin 1996). Meanwhile, emergent conceptions of the workplace also stress its legalization—with managers urging executives to adopt law-like organizational practices to resolve workplace disputes (Edelman et al. 1999, Sutton & Dobbin 1996).

Compliance is also shaped by sanctions. Regarding informal sanctions, for example, organizations apparently adopted maternity leave policies to avoid negative press coverage, despite the fact that the legal standing of federal guidelines regarding this topic was less than certain in the 1970s (Kelly & Dobbin 1999).

Regarding formal sanctions, managers tout grievance procedures and other practices as ways to avoid prosecution and litigation. Shifting legal interpretations mean that courts now view grievance procedures as an appropriate practice for addressing discrimination; ironically, the presence of such procedures contributes to a heightened number of discrimination complaints within organizations and does not deter litigation (Edelman et al. 1999).

This research does not discount that efficiency plays a role in the general validation of employment practices (Sutton & Dobbin 1996); however, it routinely demonstrates that symbolic concerns and vested interests of professionals lie behind the diffusion of various practices (Kelly & Dobbin 1998). By conforming to the expanding array of personnel practices, organizations secure legitimacy by espousing notions of equality and justice and by pursuing practices that are eventually cast as efficient (e.g., the promotion of qualified workers and the creation of goodwill among employees), including practices that were once deemed costly and inefficient in an earlier time period (Edelman 1990). Small wonder, then, that organizations that are most hard-pressed to demonstrate efficiency (i.e., non-profits and public agencies) and those with formalized personnel departments are among the most likely to adopt grievance procedures (Sutton et al. 1994, Edelman 1990).

REPRODUCTION OF INEQUALITY Just as the acceptance of taken-for-granted organizational practices often leads to inefficiency and inequality, so too does the acceptance of widespread cultural beliefs/schemas. We discuss just two types of such beliefs: status beliefs and cultural capital.

Status Beliefs and the Maintenance of Inequality Once a recognized characteristic acquires status value (i.e., creating diffuse status characteristics such as race and gender) and has general validation in society, the status beliefs associated with the characteristic have far-reaching effects, ranging from who is more likely to have influence in decision-making groups to biases in organizational and labor market practices (Ridgeway 1997). For example, group members with diffuse status advantages are likely to be more assertive and influential in decisions and become leaders than are members with diffuse status disadvantages. Yet this consequence often leads to inefficient decision making because members who are in fact more competent are not always those who are status advantaged and most influential (see Webster & Foschi 1988, Wagner & Berger 2002). (For the specific example of gender status beliefs, see also Ridgeway (1997) on how these beliefs create a preference for male workers, expectations for the relative rewards that male and female workers deserve, and a decline in rewards and status of female jobs and specialties.)

Ridgeway & Berger (1986, Berger et al. 1998) note that individuals with diffuse status disadvantages sometimes do achieve high status in groups and become leaders as a result of other characteristics related to expectations for performance, such as expertise or seniority. Female or black managers are examples. When such

individuals gain a position of influence, however, studies show that they are more likely to face resistance from others if they become “too directive” (e.g., Eagly & Karau 2002). Drawing on their theory discussed earlier, Ridgeway & Berger argue that this resistance faced by leaders with diffuse status disadvantages is a problematic effect of the legitimation processes that typically maintain a group’s status structure. They suggest that widespread status beliefs associated with diffuse status characteristics provide more outside cultural support (i.e., authorization) for status hierarchies that consist of leaders with diffuse status advantages than of those with diffuse status disadvantages (Correll & Ridgeway 2003, p. 43). When diffuse status disadvantaged individuals become high-status members, however, they do not have the advantage of such added cultural support because it is not typical or usual that they occupy high-status positions. As a result, members’ endorsement of their leadership is weaker, as are normative expectations for compliance with their directives. Consequently, such individuals gain influence because of their demonstrated skills, but they are more likely to face resistance when they go beyond persuasion to exercise directive power [see Ridgeway et al. (1994, 1995) for supportive evidence].

Note that Ridgeway & Berger describe a four-stage maintenance process that is similar to that outlined by Zelditch & Walker. First, status beliefs appear to have general validity for group members. Second, as a result of this general validity, members engage in patterns of deferential behavior that support status structures consistent with accepted status beliefs, in effect maintaining the status quo. Third, these patterns of deference are backed by threat of informal sanctions from group members. Fourth, and as a consequence, leaders with diffuse status disadvantages often face more obstacles in their leadership positions than those with diffuse status advantages [see also Foschi’s (2000) work on double standards and Lucas’s (2003) work on how to legitimate female leadership in organizations].

Cultural Capital The cultural capital literature addresses, among other things, how general (and tacit) beliefs about aesthetic preferences and competencies legitimate existing inequality (Holt 1997, Rubtsova & Dowd 2004). Because this sprawling literature lies at the intersection of organizational and cultural sociology, we focus here primarily on its organizational variant—that which emphasizes the roles of schools and that emanating from DiMaggio’s institutional project on high culture.

In both the educational and cultural realms, the organizational variant of the cultural capital literature stems from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. He (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron 1990) makes the important argument that schools are not neutral sites in which meritocracy and performance decide student success; instead, they are sites that favor the disposition, styles, and proficiencies (i.e., *habitus*) of middle- and upper-class students. Consequently, such students enter school with an initial advantage over their working-class counterparts, and their advantage increases

across the years, as academic success and advancement come more easily to those with affluent backgrounds and as those from working-class backgrounds disengage from school. Given the mantra of meritocracy, such differential success is attributed to individual performance rather than class advantage.

Regarding the aesthetic realm, Bourdieu (1984) argues that preferences and competencies are ultimately class based. The material conditions of the upper class—which are removed from the struggle for survival and the pressures of necessity—lead members of this class to appreciate the form and style of art (e.g., art for art's sake) in contrast to the underprivileged class' appreciation for its function (e.g., entertainment); both classes, in turn, model and pass on their respective aesthetic dispositions to their children. Meanwhile, less-affluent individuals may not appreciate legitimate culture (i.e., high culture), but they may find themselves at fault for this—given the so-called natural superiority of legitimate culture. Such class-based differences come to the fore in the educational system and in daily interaction, whereby people associate with those who share similar tastes (i.e., those in the same class). Like the social psychological work discussed above, then, Bourdieu emphasizes (*a*) a general validation of particular traits that receive advantages, (*b*) a deference accorded to those possessing such traits, (*c*) the social enforcement of such deference patterns, and (*d*) the implicit reproduction of such (dis)advantages via interaction.

Sociologists have applied Bourdieu's theory to educational success in U.S. schools. One camp, which includes DiMaggio, conceptualizes cultural capital as familiarity with, proficiency in, and/or involvement with high culture on the part of students and/or their parents, arguing that such fluency in this universally validated resource legitimates inequality (see DiMaggio 1987a). In particular, schools reward those individuals who both know and enjoy high culture, even though such fluency is not always part of the formal curriculum (e.g., DiMaggio 1982a). Although this scholarship is marked by debates regarding operationalization and mixed results (e.g., Holt 1997, Kingston 2001), its survey research shows that, net of other things, fluency in high culture can facilitate success in secondary education (e.g., high grade point averages, high scores on standardized tests) and can foster subsequent success (e.g., conferring with counselors, progressing to the next educational level, attending elite colleges) (e.g., Aschaffenburg & Maas 1997, DiMaggio 1982a, DiMaggio & Mohr 1985, Dumais 2002, Kaufman & Gabler 2004, Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell 1999). Another camp conceptualizes cultural capital more broadly, focusing on such things as interactional styles between parents and teachers. Its ethnographic research finds that legitimated modes of comportment, among other things, facilitate success in the educational setting (e.g., Lareau & Horvat 1999, Weininger & Lareau 2003). Taken together, both camps suggest that those possessing cultural capital—who often (but not always) come from favored backgrounds—can exchange it for economic capital, social prestige (symbolic capital), and connections (social capital), thus supporting and legitimating their social position.

CONCLUSION

We have drawn on contemporary approaches to legitimacy within two areas of sociology, social psychology and organizations, to examine legitimacy as a general social process. Although both areas use similar definitions of legitimacy, their approaches to its investigation are remarkably distinct. Legitimacy theories in social psychology are more formal in nature, and the hypotheses derived from them are tested most typically in experiments. Legitimacy research in institutional approaches to organizations, on the other hand, usually involves testing of hypotheses with longitudinal analyses that take into account the historical context of the object of legitimation. Even though these areas seek to understand legitimacy from strikingly different points of view and methodologies, we derive from them several core elements of legitimacy as a social process that apply regardless of the level of analysis or the type of social object.

Specifically, we found that the construal of a social object as legitimate in a local situation involves an implicit and sometimes explicit process in which widespread consensual beliefs about how things should be or typically are done creates strong expectations for what is likely to occur in that local situation. We also discovered that the creation and legitimation of new social objects seem to involve four stages. First, social innovations are created at the local level of actors in response to structural conditions that create strategic interests or contingent events for actors in the local situation. Second, for social innovations to acquire legitimacy, they must be initially locally validated. This requires that these new objects must be construed as consonant with and linked to the existing broader cultural framework. In doing so, they may be either explicitly justified or implicitly accepted by actors in the local situation. Third, once social objects are locally validated, they are carried and diffused into new local situations. Because the innovation has been construed as a valid social fact, it is much more readily adopted by actors in other local situations as mere fact. This acceptance as mere fact is more likely when the innovation is perceived to meet the goals that are consonant with already widely accepted goals. Here, the new object often needs less explicit justification than when it was initially socially validated. Finally, over time as a result of this diffusion process, the appearance of consensus in multiple local situations eventually creates a widespread general consensus in society—that is, a general validation of the social object. Studies of the creation and legitimation of status beliefs and two organizational forms, the for-profit corporate form and the nonprofit arts form, demonstrate these four stages.

Once new social objects become part of the status quo, legitimacy processes maintain their stability so that they are not easily challenged. Compliance within and across organizations to taken-for-granted practices that stem from these social objects is commonplace, and it results from these practices' appearance of general validity. Two sources of this general validity are authorization and endorsement, that is, the implicit or explicit support of parties who occupy higher, equal, or lower positions either within or outside the organization. Within organizations, actors

often accept nonoptimal (i.e., inefficient and/or inequitable) procedures as the way things are, either because they really do believe that these practices are proper, or because they believe that others believe this and anticipate formal or informal sanctions if they do not comply. Across organizations, actors often adopt generally validated practices such as grievance procedures or modern personnel systems—even if they suspect that they are inefficient—because of federal and state mandates (i.e., authorization) and because professionals (i.e., managers, lawyers, and consultants) are conforming to expectations regarding rationalized management (i.e., endorsement). In addition, by complying to the expanding array of personnel practices, organizations secure legitimacy in terms of the broader cultural framework: Adoption of these practices gives the appearance that organizations stand for equality and justice for the worker.

Just as acceptance of taken-for-granted practices often leads to inefficiency and inequality, so too does the acceptance of widespread cultural beliefs/schemas, such as status beliefs and cultural capital. In our analysis, we show the consequences of this acceptance in decision-making groups, in leadership processes in organizations, and in the reproduction of inequality in the educational system.

Obviously, not all legitimated social objects remain so. New practices emerge as the legitimacy of old ones is challenged. For example, a group's status hierarchy may become delegitimated when an authority outside the group evaluates the leader's work negatively and ceases to provide resources (Berger et al. 1998). Also, noting new developments in contemporary business (see Davis et al. 1994), Roy (1997, p. 284) writes, "the taken-for-granted nature of the large-scale, vertically integrated, socially capitalized corporation is being called into question. What once appeared inevitable and omnipotent is now being seen as contingent and vulnerable." And indeed, high culture may be currently facing a legitimization crisis of sorts (DiMaggio 1991). Urban elites who once supported it seem less involved in recent years. Faced with funding difficulties and declining audiences, nonprofit arts organizations appear less insulated from commercial concerns than previously. Exalted works have lost their sway in university curricula, as courses and programs devoted to expanding the canon have proliferated.

Our review, in addition to outlining the legitimization process, also suggests certain questions that might begin a systematic analysis of delegitimation as a social process. For example, our analysis suggests that the process of delegitimation of a social object might begin with a change in the structural conditions that currently undergird the social object (even if these are different from the founding structural conditions at innovation). Also, does a social object need to be replaced by a new social object for it to become delegitimated? For example, must new organizational forms and practices be created and legitimated for old forms and practices to fall out of favor? Or can a social object lose widespread acceptance by an audience even though nothing is there to replace it? Can, for example, the taken-for-granted notions of gender or race eventually disappear without being replaced by other taken-for-granted notions? We leave the reader with these questions.

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