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Multiple legitimacy narratives and planned organizational change

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Abstract

This article explores the cultural narratives through which members of organizations define legitimacy during prolonged periods of change. We view legitimacy work as a cultural practice and interpretive process that takes the form of organizational narratives. We show how the shifting configurations of internal power relations shape both the choice and the meaning attached to the varied legitimacy narratives. We investigate the construction of legitimacy through a longitudinal case study based on participant observation of Gamma, a government Research and Development (R&D) organization, during a process of intense change. We provide theoretical insights into the construction and deconstruction of the legitimacy by analyzing the narratives in play during a process of planned change. We claim that legitimation narratives not only evolve in accordance with functional need or, in a sense, that older narratives give room to newer, more updated or relevant narratives, but also that multiple narratives are used by different organization actors alternately and interchangeably as part of internal contestation over legitimation of change.

Keywords

conflict, employee voice, ethnography, identity, narrative, organizational culture

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Introduction

How to make planned organizational change legitimate is an intriguing question for scholars and managers. Change processes are marked by the need to alter and cater for multiple practices, routines and tendencies that alternately and interchangeably shift from core to periphery and vice versa (Kanter et al., 1992). Such processes have implications for several challenges that management scholars attempt to address. Indeed, issues associated with best practices of implementing and leading change often take supremacy over the organizational endorsement or rejection of change (e.g. Kotter, 1996). This article takes a different approach to the study of implementation of planned change. Our objective is to explore narrative strategies of legitimacy and how and why different narratives respond to claims made by various constituents of the organization, and what role legitimacy narratives play in facilitating management control over the change process. In this article, the use of narratives entails an attempt by organization members to confront a change process that disrupts taken-for-granted practices and values through social construction of historical accounts. In addition, we build on extant research (Erkama and Vaara, 2010; Mantere et al., 2012, 2013; Vaara and Monin, 2010; Vaara and Tienari, 2011) that extensively deals with the different facets of legitimation narratives demonstrating the way that stakeholders react to and shape mergers and acquisitions through social construction.

Organizations must make ongoing efforts to create and maintain organizational legitimacy. Legitimacy, or the recognition that an organization's actions are desired, appropriate and acceptable 'within some socially constructed systems of norms, beliefs and definitions,' determines 'how the organization is built, how it is run and simultaneously, how it is understood and evaluated' within a certain constructed social context (Suchman, 1995: 576). Legitimacy consists of taken-for-granted cultural objects that are shared by members of an organization or society (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Johnson et al., 2006; Meyer and Scott, 1983; Scott, 1995; Sillince and Brown, 2009; Suchman, 1995). Studies of legitimacy have also paid attention to the positive evaluation of the organization by its stakeholders while the organization is seeking their endorsement and support (e.g. Baum and Oliver, 1992; Golant and Sillince, 2007; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Thus, achieving and sustaining legitimacy is a crucial managerial task particularly during periods of change because the organization may shed taken-for-granted characteristics such as structure, products, services or even identity, while seeking to retain stakeholders' endorsement, support and resources.

Despite the prevalence and importance to practice of narratives during periods of change (e.g. Dunford and Jones, 2000), relatively little research addresses how social actors use multiple narratives to construct legitimacy during processes of change (Mantere et al., 2012). Narratives are social constructs that consist of meaning that expresses content and rules while representing an event or a series of events (e.g. Rudrum, 2008). Fiol (1989: 279) claims that narrative consists of 'subject in search for an object, a destinator (an extra-textual force, the source of the subject's ideology), and a set of forces that either help or hinder the subject in acquiring the desired object.' Accordingly, during a change process, multiple narratives compete over ideas, designs or processes in an attempt to overcome or confront potential adversaries. Furthermore, during

organizational change, cultural incoherencies may inhibit change due to inertia, internal conflicts over vision and identity, or more pragmatic issues of coordination and control (Jelinek and Schoonhoven, 1990; Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996; Zilber, 2006). However, there is a gap in the literature in understanding how legitimation processes are actually defined, contested or endorsed during a transformative change process (Drori and Honig, 2013). Accordingly, we argue that, during planned change, managers engage in the construction of multiple narratives for achieving both external and internal legitimacy for the change. This assertion calls for unpacking the processes that explore the inter-organizational responses that either support or confront change. Thus, we address two interrelated questions: How do managers meet the demand for legitimacy from the members of the organization during a controversial change process? And, how is legitimacy reconciled in multiple and conflicting narratives that reflect practices and values of social actors with varying positions and resources (e.g. Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007)?

We claim that through each member's promotion of his/her own preferred narrative, organizational members reconstruct internal legitimacy that, in turn, facilitates his/her comprehension of the meaning of change in organizational structure, routines and mission. In so doing, narratives guide the interpretation of organizational experience by referring to its main cultural characteristics and frames (e.g. Daft and Weick, 1984). Multiple narratives shape internal legitimacy in three ways. First, legitimacy is constituted by narratives that use different plots to translate events, practices and values that reconcile different interpretations and meanings of the organization's past and present and help members to accept future changes (Bartel and Garud, 2009). Second, internal legitimacy is constructed through the ability of social actors to endorse the change by developing alternative narratives that interpret the social context differently. Third, seeking legitimacy entails mobilization of narratives from which symbols and practices are selected, composed and applied to generate legitimacy and to delegitimize opponents (e.g. Hudson and Okhuysen, 2009; Mizrachi et al., 2007). Our study highlights the fact that legitimation narratives not only evolve and reconstruct in accordance with functional need or in a sense that older narratives give room to newer more updated or relevant narratives (e.g. Mantere et al., 2013), but also that multiple narratives are used by different organization actors alternately and interchangeably as part of internal contestation over legitimation of change. In this vein, legitimacy narratives take into account not only the tangible or instrumental characteristics that have a direct impact on change, but also those that are an embodiment of the organization's legacy (Anteby and Molnár, 2012).

We document and analyze social reconstructions of alternative legitimation narratives, and their main symbols, rhetoric and ethos (Brown et al., 2012) as seen by contesting stakeholders. The focus on the narratives and their content represent Gamma members' understanding and interpretation of the organization's mission and strategy of the desired change. The narratives thus provide institutional discourse that translates the various competing interpretations of interests and means that accompanied the change process, reframing their positions and attitudes towards the change (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007; Zilber, 2009, 2011). We investigate the construction of legitimacy through a longitudinal ethnographic case study of Gamma, a government R&D organization, during a process of structural change − specifically,

change in its vision, mission and corresponding organizational structure. The next section elaborates on our conceptual framework of legitimacy and narrative repertoire in relation to the theory of practice, exploring how varied narratives can address legitimation strategies during a period of change. We then present our methodology and findings of Gamma members' narratives that related to change, survival and legacies of research, national security and the Kibbutz. We conclude with a discussion of implications for theory and future research.

Theoretical framework

Scholars of legitimacy have pointed out the ways that legitimacy assures stakeholders that the organization's practices, values or contributions are aligned with stakeholders' interests (Golant and Sillince, 2007; Suchman, 1995). For example, Lounsbury and Glynn (2001: 545) demonstrate how entrepreneurial stories facilitate the forming of organizational identity. Zott and Huy (2007) show how new entrepreneurs perform various strategies of impression management to achieve legitimacy and eventually to generate financial resources. Drori et al. (2009) use a cultural script approach to demonstrate how legitimacy work secures the endorsement of internal members and external stakeholders to scrap a multimedia business and become a 'pure' internet venture (see also Drori and Honig, 2013).

A different approach to studying the legitimation process is micro-institutionalism, which focuses on 'institutional work,' described as 'the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions' (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006: 215). The focus in this approach is on intentional actions through which institutions are created and changed. As Lawrence et al. (2009: 1) explain, this approach offers 'a broader vision of agency in relationship to institutions, one that avoids depicting actors either as "cultural dopes" trapped by institutional arrangements or as hypermuscular institutional entrepreneurs.' One stream of criticism on this relatively new approach concerns the conceptual vocabulary that is claimed to rely upon reified categories of individual and institution dualism (Zundel et al., 2013) and to express 'a particular, modern (cultural) representation of reality in which powers of institutional work are attributed to individuals' (Willmott, 2011). Kaghan and Lounsbury (2011) also warn against research that is too 'agent centered' and may be advocacy for methodological individualism. Kraatz (2011) wonders about the pragmatic importance of this approach and which institutions and workers would constitute a proper focus for research. In this vein, the notion of institutional work may reveal the mechanism of legitimation that describes the ways in which sufficiently well-equipped actors can shape institutions according to their own interests despite structural pressures from the external environment (Drori and Honig, 2013). However, as mentioned, studies dealing with institutional work have drawn criticism from various directions, for reasons including the positioning of agents as heroic entrepreneurs, ignoring institutional pressures and constrictions (Cooper et al., 2008; Delmestri, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009), or focusing on 'founding tales,' which usually end once an institution has been established. Indeed, the framework of institutional work provides a partial solution for understanding the dynamics of the legitimation process.

Narratives embody symbolic manifestation that may endorse or create social reality through a mechanism of 'how well the story hangs together' (narrative probability) and 'how fully it rings true with experience' (narrative fidelity) (Weick and Browning, 1986). Furthermore, managers employ narratives as a signaling mechanism, using symbolic action and impression management to portray their organizations as appropriate and worthy by virtue of its actions, stature or alignment with its organizational field (Elsbach, 1994; Pfeffer, 1981; Zott and Huy, 2007). Relevant stakeholders are attracted by the ways narratives convey taken-for-granted symbols and resonate with the organization's attributes, be it a novel idea (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001) or the need for capital resources (Zott and Huy, 2007). In this way, narratives serve as a reification mechanism that, for example, assures stakeholders that the organization planning and intention to change are meaningful, appropriate and necessary, thereby justifying bestowed legitimacy (Shaw et al., 1998). Thus, organizational narratives may portray the intentions and implementation of those characteristics that can be translated by external and internal stakeholders as aligned with environment demands and accepted norms (Lounsbury and Glyn, 2001). Narratives facilitate communication and understanding through the creation of a common context among varied stakeholders (Carlile, 2002; Henderson, 1991; Maclean et al., 2012; Star and Griesemer, 1989).

Following March (1999: 48), narratives reflect various 'preferences, expectations, identities and definitions of situations [that] are seen as arising from interactions within a social system, thus as embedded in social norms and cultural conventions of discourse.' By using and understanding the 'principles' of narrative, the members endorse various activities and practices during change that enhance the legitimization process (March, 1999).

Bartel and Garud (2009) outline three ways through which narratives are used as translation, which we believe are relevant to the construction of legitimacy during periods of change. First, narratives may be used as means of translation of ideas, allowing new interpretation of organizational activities. Second, narratives enable the translation of problems associated with uncertainty in a way that promotes desired solutions. Third, narratives enable people to translate ideas that are grounded in the past into insight or information about the present.

In this vein, studies on the legitimation processes of merger and acquisitions (Erkama and Vaara, 2010; Mantere et al., 2012, 2013; Vaara and Monin, 2010; Vaara and Tienari, 2011) shed light on the way social actors reconstruct their reactions to a merger. For example, Mantere et al. (2013) contend that 'narrative attributions' provide strategies of action, such as grief recovery or self-justification, which are an alternative explanation for failure. Furthermore, in a study on an attempt of reversing merger strategy, Mantere et al. (2012) claim that managers employ organizational 'sensebreaking' by symbolic destruction of strategies that may block new strategies. However, the notion of 'new replacing the old' may be one alternative. Managers may practice both advocacy and contestation of the path to change in a way of providing 'voice' to those who are overtly opposed to the change.

Another aspect of narrative is structure, which is used by various actors for their respective purposes. For example, Ricoeur (1983) depicts the narrative as comprising chronological and configurational information that is reflected in the story plot

(see also Boje, 2001; Bruner, 1986; Ochs, 1997). The former refers to plots that portray events according to their emergence, while providing meaning to these events from the telling actor's point of view. The configurational narrative provides structure to an unfolding event, reflecting coherent processes that capture the required course of action (Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997; Riessman, 1993).

Studies on the strategic use of narratives focus our attention on the fact that associated 'speech acts' instantiate the structuring features of a discourse genre. The structure provides both coherency constraints and semantic context (Golant and Sillince, 2007; Robichaud et al., 2004). In this vein, Golant and Sillince (2007) identify four modalities: obligation, desire, competence and know-how. The first pair refers to the need for having a context for action 'and quest for a set of objectives for the protagonist in order to respond to this context' (Golant and Sillince, 2007: 1153). The latter refer to the necessary competence to fulfill the first phase through mobilizing stakeholders and overcoming obstacles and constraints.

As Czarniawska (1997, 2004) suggests, narratives structure our social reality by providing us with the opportunity to present our knowledge, intention and discourse to others. In this vein, 'to narrate and follow a story is to "reflect" upon events with the aim of encompassing them in successive totalities' (Ricoeur, 1983: 279). The organization can therefore be read at the surface from the text of the stories (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004). The ability of one's preferred narrative to structure the social reality of others is a manifestation of power. Lukes (2005: 109) describes this as the third dimension of power: 'securing the consent to domination of willing subjects − against two kinds of objection: that such consent is non-existent or very rare, and that it cannot be secured.'

In addition, narratives reflect the historical path of the organization. There is growing attention to the role of history in shaping an organization's institutional arrangements and strategic trajectory (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Hargadon and Douglas, 2001). Drori et al.'s (2013) study of the genealogical evolution of the Israeli high technology industry demonstrates how initial conditions of founding, including the main narratives associated with socio-economic ideology, influence the sector's growth trajectory. Note that an important aspect of narrative as historical accounts is not necessarily a reconstruction of key or constitutive events, but rather the reconstruction of ethos or justification of institutional logic (Brown et al., 2012) for a concrete purpose, such as advocacy, power game, resistance or endorsement of change (Drori and Ellis, 2011). Thus, historical perspective is especially relevant to the construction of narratives that advocate or contest the institutional base of the organization. This is because narratives reflect the context over time as well as the path of embeddedness of values, practices and structures (Greenwood et al., 2010; Scott, 2008).

In sum, narratives embody the specific ontological understanding of the self and the other and imply an interaction of multiple voices that trigger thoughts, practices and intentions. In this vein, narratives are voices that are not merely the sum of the ideas, practices and stories of those who participate in their creation, but rather a construct emerging from negotiation, contestation or search for consent. In this article, the various narratives are a 'meeting point' in which different groups in the organization engage in dialogical interaction that must take into account the potential advantages and shortcomings of each other's narratives while defending their stance towards planned change. The

different narratives may lead to certain tensions, which can be described as conflicts between the various actors, who simultaneously distinguish themselves from the others and claim to convince others in the organization that their narratives are authentic and legitimate. However, as we demonstrate in this study, although conflict does arise between various narratives during planned change, the emergence of the different narratives nevertheless enables the creation of a social space that eventually allows each group in the organization to have its legitimacy claim taken into account.

Methods

The research setting

The case presented in this article is fit to the objective of studying multiple legitimation narratives because of the nature of the organization. Gamma (pseudonym), a governmental R&D lab, is embedded in the context of Israel's nation-building by being part of the effort to develop new applied science for the well-being of the country. Such organizations are highly ideological and consequently have distinct identity and critical attitudes towards change that may challenge their mission (Gusterson, 1998). We study the organization during the years of designing and implementing a planned change that aimed at altering its mission. Thus, issues of legitimacy during this 'unsettled time' (Swidler, 1986) appear to be crucial and appropriate for our objectives of understanding how various social actors construct legitimacy narratives while contesting or endorsing change.

Gamma was established in 1958 by the Israeli Nuclear Energy Commission for the purpose of serving as a national laboratory for basic and applied research, and is considered an integral part of Israel's research establishment. Since its founding, Gamma's basic mission is the development of a technological infrastructure in nuclear power and technology, as well as to further the use of nuclear energy in industry, medicine and agriculture. In the early years of operation, Gamma resembled an academic research institute in both organizational and cultural terms. Most of Gamma's activity revolved around the research reactor, and yielded a rich flow of publications in international scientific journals. Since the 1970s, Gamma has constantly reassessed its goals and basic assignments. The first signs of change were the outcome of that process of self-examination, and since the 1980s Gamma has experienced a gradual move from basic research toward more applied and business-oriented activity.

Data collection

We collected data at Gamma[1] in three chronological periods spanning 10 years (1995–2005). Gaining entry and permission to conduct research within an organization bound by strict secrecy was not an easy endeavor. The opportunity arose when we were invited to participate in a consulting and research project aimed at designing an organizational change process. With the consent of Gamma's management, the project was designed, at its inception, to involve a long phase of ethnographic data collection. Gamma's executives preferred the 'vagueness' of long-term ethnographic fieldwork to more 'concise'

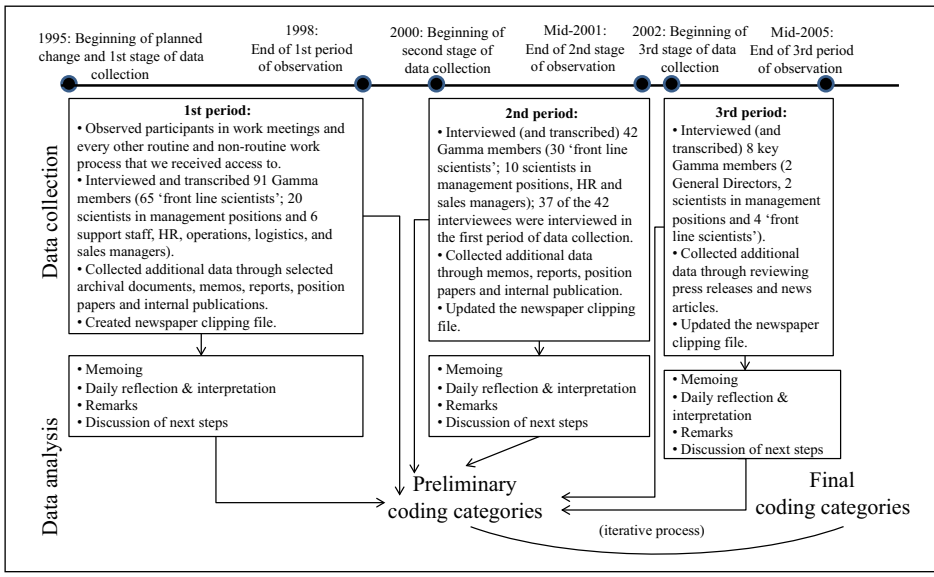

Figure 1. Data collection and analysis process.

consulting methods focused on clear-cut terms of time and content. Gamma's general manager explained that the organization decided in favor of the anthropological method because scientists appreciate thorough and detailed research. Also, the organization's conception was that Gamma is one-of-a-kind, and it is impossible to comprehend the organization instantaneously. This exposure was expected to provide extra input that would eventually enable the design of change as well as its successful implementation. Figure 1 presents our data collection and analysis tools during the three chronological periods: the first period (1995−1998) focuses on advocacy and planning of the change, including the formation of a new vision; the second period (2000−2001) encompasses the actual implementation of changes in the organization's structure; and the third period (2002−2005) assesses the aftermath of the organizational change.

As shown, we interviewed scientists, including those with managerial positions (hereinafter labeled as 'managers' or 'management'). This is because in this R&D organization the core workers are scientists and, somewhat similar to academia, managerial or administrative positions are kept within the organization and traditionally held by the scientists. The leading objective of the participant observation in Gamma was to gain a 'holistic' perspective of the organization's history, culture and structure from the scientists' point of view. Thus, our goal was to develop an emic perspective from the point of view of social actors, and describe the scientists' explanations and interpretations of various organizational behavior and processes (Morey and Luthans, 1984). To understand and learn from an 'insider' point of view requires a direct firsthand involvement in the field. The participant observation methodology enabled us to conduct a naturalistic, nonmanipulative and non-controlling study (Guba and Lincoln, 1981). During our first data

collection period (1995−1998), we spent approximately three full days a week at Gamma, observing and interviewing scientists and managers. We visited the laboratories, watched the work process, participated in meetings, and lunched regularly in the cafeteria. Because the scientists were familiar with Gamma's values and culture, insiders' views and perspectives that were offered provided suggestions for various aspects of the research, including relevant questions to be asked and interpretations of various events.

Ethnographic interviews were semi-structured in nature and lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Because the scientists were familiar with the nature of science work, we greatly benefited from their knowledge of Gamma's values and culture and the ongoing change process, thus following Locke (2001) in covering both practical and conceptual issues. As such, interviews tended to offer insiders' views and perspectives (Bartunek and Reis-Louis, 1996), while also giving suggestions regarding various aspects of the research, including relevant questions to be asked and interpretations of various events in their organizational lives. Thirty-seven interviewees from the first period were interviewed in the second period.

During the entire period of our field work and interviews, we devoted extra time for memoing (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We reflected on our daily data, provided interpretation and remarks, and contemplated what was missing and should be asked in further interviews. In a daily meeting, we discussed our memos and generated action items such as what additional data were needed and whom we should approach or revisit to retrieve the necessary information.

In analyzing the data, we followed procedural principles common in qualitative, ethnographic research (see Fetterman, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1994). This involved moving from concrete descriptions and documentations made in the field to more abstract and conceptual descriptions, and searches for meaning through a process of categorization (Van Maanen, 1979).

The process of categorization was multi-step, during which we refined and updated the categories several times, identifying emergent themes as major 'categories.' We then compiled the data according to chronological accounts and used triangulation methods by intersecting our varied sources of data and methods of data collection to achieve greater reliability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2004). We first divided the data in accordance with the research period. In the next stage, before starting the coding process, we further sub-divided the data based on chronological dimensions. As shown in Figure 2, the first 'Narratives of the past' is further divided into two periods: the 'Early days' from founding (1958) until 1973, and the 'Rough days' cover the late 1970s up the mid-1990s. We chose 1973 based on testimony from both veteran scientist and managers, substantiated by internal archival documents that suggested that a watershed of Gamma history was the period after the Yom Kippur War (1973). Following the war, the Israeli government pressured Gamma to focus on applied research. We compiled narratives that described the dilemmas of those years, which marked the worldwide crisis of the national weapon laboratories, including Gamma. Our second chronological file, 'Narratives of change,' is subdivided into two periods: (i) actual events and narratives related to the time of our field work, marked by the preparation and implementation of organizational change (1995−1998); and (ii) issues related to the consequences of the change taking place in 1997−1998 and in the early 2000s. The third period of data collection included 'Narratives

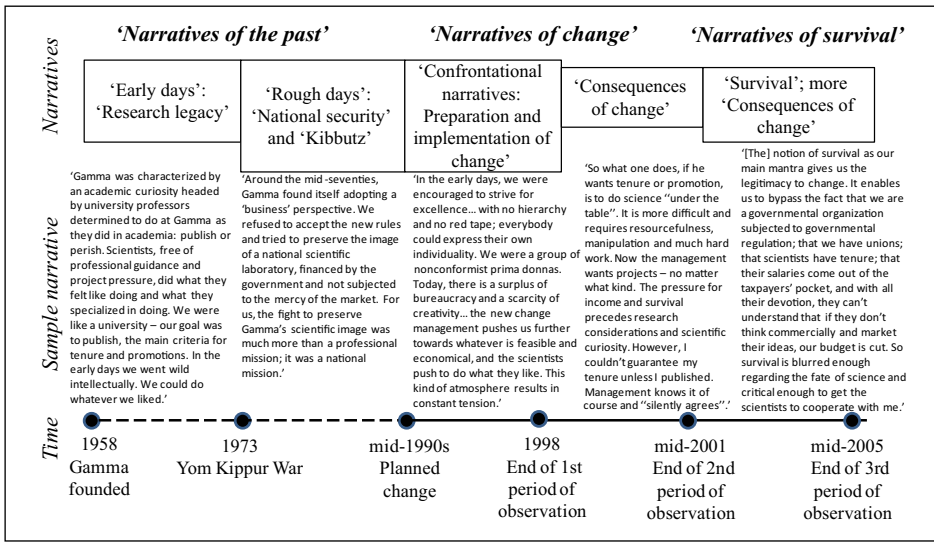

Figure 2. Sample narratives.

of survival' as well as narratives that discussed the earlier periods. Within each chronological period, we established a common model of coding, while separating between the different sources of our data (participants observation notes, interviews, documents). The coding rationale stems from our purpose to study the construction of legitimacy. Through narratives we initially aimed at elaborating theory rather than testing or generating new theory (e.g. Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Thus, coding followed the principles used in grounded theory methodology (Locke, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). We searched all our records for data related to legitimacy. We compiled segments of data from all sources (narratives, events, documents), constantly looking for manifestations that related to legitimacy incidents. We were able to identify the key issues associated with the nature of science work at Gamma and the experiences during the prolonged change. Hence, by defining key topics involving archetypal organizational dilemmas, we conducted a more focused process of data reduction (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Using iterative processes carried out individually by each of the authors, we compared and contrasted broad issue domains prevalent in the data. We then compared our individual inferences of the key conceptual issues stemming from the core categories and modified our key constructs. The resulting preliminary data organization categories dealt with various issues such as: diversification and decentralization; compartmentalization and secrecy; academic legacy; strategy and structure; innovation and change; and egalitarianism and survival.

The final stage of data categorization and analysis was conducted after leaving the field. This is because an extensive and significant analysis of the field data should incorporate relevant theoretical and conceptual thinking, which requires some distancing from the field. Although, after the first set of interviews, we had already identified some preliminary categories, we felt that delaying categorization until all data had been collected

would provide a less biased picture. This intentional delay in categorizing the data enables us to get a much fuller view of the 'final coding categories.' These categories represent a group of related issues, initially identified as central in 'preliminary coding categories.' Figure 2 outlines preliminary and final coding categories, including text segments that illustrate each category.

The literature on legitimacy offers a wide range of associated constructs that help us to move from our initial categorization to the core categories, as can be seen in Figure 3. Thus, we searched each preliminary category for patterns of interpretation that related to the legitimacy accounts of various organizational issues such as Gamma's legacy and its perceived role in national security issues, as well as the nature of 'pure' versus 'applied' science work. During the analysis, we identified major thematic patterns of narratives associated with contradicting organizational stakeholders, namely scientists, managers and the 'owner' of Gamma, the Israeli Commission of Nuclear Energy. We then organized the data within categories according to who 'owned' legitimacy narratives, and outlined the association between the accounts and actions within which the legitimacy narratives took place. The intensity of the legitimacy accounts and their context served as the basis for grouping them into key final categories. At this stage we iterated back and forth among all our sources, triangulating field notes, interviews and documents, and refining our final categories.

In this stage, we assessed the context of the legitimacy narratives, dividing them according to legitimacy creation, destruction and reconciliation, as well as external legitimacy. We iteratively cross-sectioned the data among categories and fine-tuned the emerging patterns of the narratives that could be traced along the key dimensions presented in the article. We aggregated our major narratives into key dimensions that represent the relationships among concepts and themes that various contesting actors pursued. The key dimensions captured the different legitimation arguments deemed relevant to the nature of the change as advocated by the different actors (see Figure 3 for the analysis of the data moving from first order concepts to themes and dimensions).

We identified three key dimensions: (i) legitimacy legacy, which consists of narratives contextualized as the following: academic research, Kibbutz and national security, reflecting the strong legacy of the organization; (ii) contested legitimacy, which consists of confrontational narratives that outline the contradictions between the legacy practices of Gamma and the current practices and the consequences of change; and (iii) legitimacy of survival, which consists of survival narratives that give semiotic and practical meaning to the change predicament. While contextualizing the different narratives of legitimacy, we encountered a significant methodological problem associated with the timing of the different legacies and the changes that occurred. We particularly probed our entire data for the purpose of reconstructing the processes of change to the extent of establishing the time frame of each cultural theme. We identified two major narratives associated with time and content. The first set of narratives is grounded in Gamma's past and legacy. These narratives focused mainly 'on the good old days' and the core identity of the organization during the formative years of founding. The second set of narratives is contemporary and related directly to the debate within the organization regarding the necessity of planned change and the legitimacy of the change.

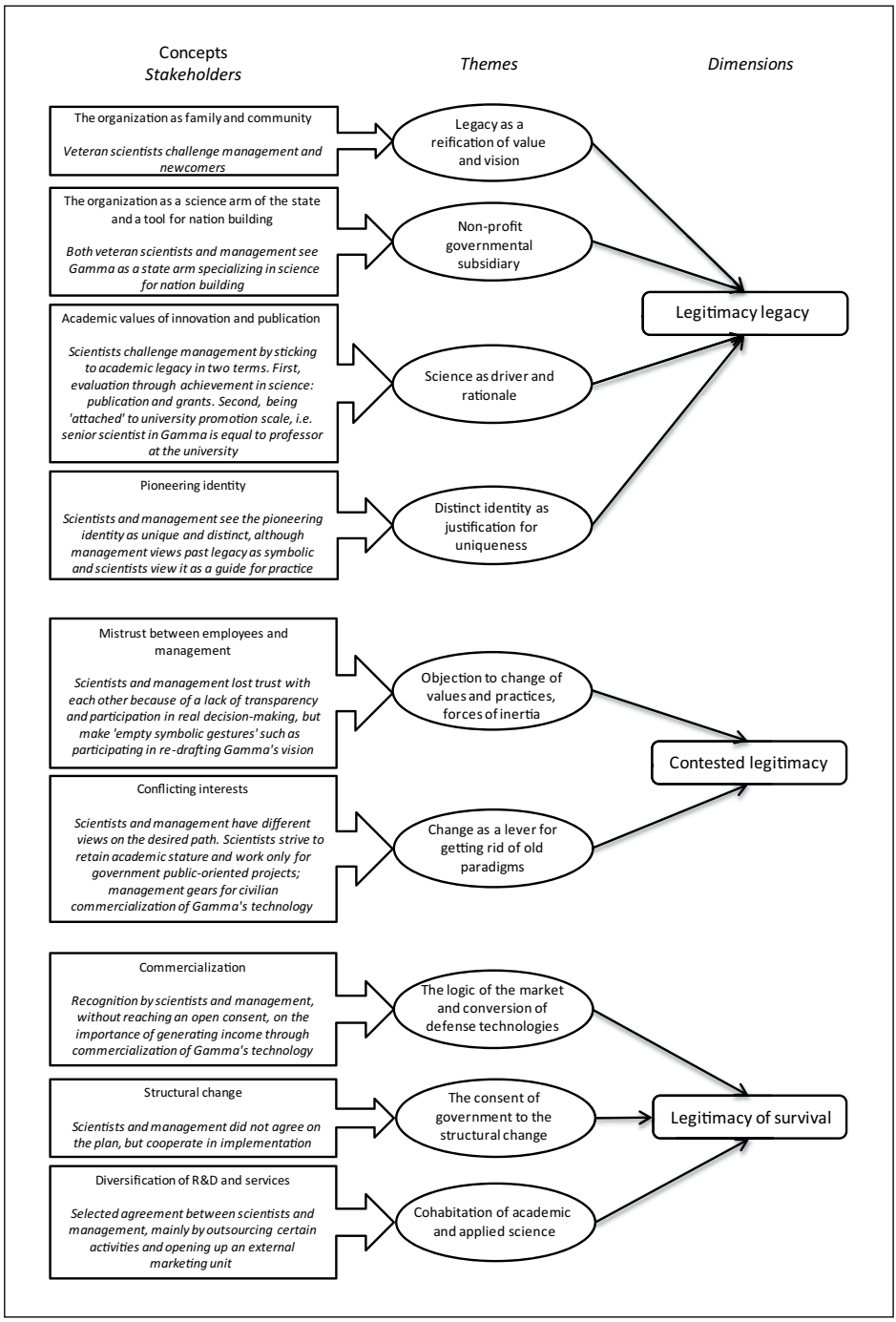

Figure 3. Data structure: Concepts, stakeholders, themes and dimensions.

Findings

Narratives of the past

Early days: Research legacy. The legacy narratives could be defined as alternative accounts for social reconstruction of the organization's history for the sake of mobilizing legitimacy to support or resist the planned change (e.g. Vaara and Tienari, 2011). Gamma's strong identity is grounded in its 'ideological' orientation and role in nation-building through research and development. The legacy narratives emphasize the 'fit' of the organization values, structures and practices, and echo Gamma's raison d'etre. The new threats or opportunities that stemmed from the planned change were judged by different stakeholders through the lens of Gamma's identity as embedded in Gamma's original vision and mission.

The narratives of founding are reconstructions of veteran scientists who reminisce about the 'good old days' or promote those scientists who echo the ideal core values embedded in Gamma's early days (Landau et al., 2006). These narratives were used for two main purposes: first as an attempt to delegitimize the plan for changing Gamma's mission and vision, which were considered as early 'signals' for privatization; and second to legitimize 'academic freedom,' which since 1973 substantially eroded as management shifted towards promoting a policy of applied research, and theoretical research waned through denial of funding or approval of such projects, even if the scientists sought external support.

During the early days (1958−1973), Gamma scientists viewed their professional identities in terms of individual knowledge production. Publishing in respectable, peer-reviewed scientific journals enhanced personal and professional prestige and recognition and also served as the major institutional criterion for tenure and promotion.

Gamma's management supported the view that the best person to decide what research work should be done was the person doing the research. Creativity and freedom were strongly emphasized, and the general atmosphere allowed scientists to do as they pleased, with an almost total absence of deadlines and timetables. Gamma scientists perceived science work as an embodiment of their autonomy and 'natural' right that mandated the organization to provide the resources and conditions needed to promote and produce knowledge.

Gamma's academic legacy meant not only enhancing legitimacy to scientists who excel, but also institutional legitimacy to Gamma, which was seen an integral part of the Israeli scientific community and enjoyed high esteem internationally. For example, publishing in academic outlets was established as the constitutive mechanism of scientists' legitimacy (see Figure 2 for an illustrative quote).

Rough days: National security and Kibbutz. During the 1970s, with the introduction of applied research, a second form of legitimacy was institutionalized. Initial forays into applied research were perceived to be revolutionary by most and traumatic for some of Gamma's scientists. Many scientists refused to abandon the concept of a 'national laboratory' along Gamma's original purpose of advancing basic nuclear science as an agenda in service to national defense interests. They strongly resisted Gamma's new practical orientation and more business-like engagements. Some scientists even left Gamma. To transform

itself successfully, Gamma had to identify new scientific and technological domains beyond the nuclear realm but within the reach of scientists' capabilities and interests. Management emphasized the complementary nature of theoretical and applied research, and the need for the two to coexist. A veteran field manager (in December 1995) explained:

> Pursuing applied science by all means can't hurt our scientific vision, you can't neglect that our contribution to the national security is needed. I remembered, I used to tell my colleagues, we should raise both flags [applied and scientific research].

Scientists who objected to the move presented their own narratives that used, to a certain extent, the same logic as that of management, but for de-legitimization purposes. First, the scientists presented themselves as gatekeepers of the 'true Gamma' and guardians of its original mission. Thus, the idea of 'national mission' as embedded in Gamma's culture and practices serves as justification of reconstructing legitimacy during change (see Figure 2 for an illustrative quote). Both management and scientists view their ideals, commercialization and research as justification for reconstructing and validating legitimation (Zelditch, 2001).

The national security narratives. The 'nation-building' narrative of the early days was replaced by 'national security.' Since the 1970s, Gamma enjoyed an 'aura of sacredness' bestowed by the fact that the organization was perceived as contributing to the nation's assurance of physical protection. Taking into account the post-Yom Kippur period marked by national recognition that the country's ability to survive should not be taken for granted, Gamma scientists developed legitimacy meanings associated with national security in idealistic and collective terms, as illustrated in the following statement from a scientist (in January 1996): 'We knew from the beginning that we were not only pioneers, but also champions of national security. Our work at Gamma was the pride of the whole country.'

Being part of the defense establishment implies an interaction between the organization and the scientist that could be characterized as based on moral legitimacy, and was manifested in resorting to norms that are embodied in the notion of secrecy. For Gamma members, secrecy was first and foremost a reaction to the specific situation of being a champion of national security. The norm of secrecy is considered, in the words of one scientist, as 'an obligation to the Gamma members, the organization, and the nation.' However, the notion of secrecy implies a behavior that guards the organization from the outside world and affects the behavior of the scientists inside the organization. As one scientist argued, 'The culture of secrecy infected our practices and routines. We tend not to collaborate, share information or ideas so easily. We guard our turf and hide behind the cover of national security' (January 1996).

Thus, secrecy provides legitimacy-based 'instrumental mechanism' (Stryker, 1994, 2000) or pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) – a situation in which a scientist adopts behavior that serves self (or unit) interest. The secrecy narratives spilled over to the organization that justified compartmentalization and eventually, as evident in numerous comments by the scientists legitimizing the lack of information sharing, led to inter-organizational collaboration. Such collaboration is perceived as a potent tool for commercialization at the expense of pure research.

Some scientists claimed that the tendency towards strong secrecy was management's tool for exerting power and control, evading accountability and transparency – a practice that contradicts the strategy of commercialization. However, most scientists we interviewed rejected such claims, and one scientist commented decisively, 'In matters of national security, it is better to know less' (May 1995). It seems that the value of secrecy was embedded in Gamma's legitimacy, embodying Gamma as a critical component of Israel's national security ethos. In addition to the institutional logic of secrecy, narratives also highlighted functional legitimacy. Secrecy was used to justify resistance to change and underscore management claims for changing Gamma's structure and culture. Gamma members shunned cooperation and resource coordination among various divisions.

The kibbutz narratives. From Gamma's inception, its members saw themselves as a close family with distinct norms of togetherness and cooperation. The Kibbutz narratives describe altruism, solidarity and mutual help, not only at work but also in social life. As one scientist shared, 'We were together at work and in our living rooms on Fridays and holidays' (October 1996). The mix of work and social life is associated with a strong identity that transcends material or individual consideration at the expense of the collective. For example, personal achievements were underplayed and recognition of any scientific or applied projects was always given to the group. For example, Gamma members learned from the media about the group of scientists that won a prize for developing an explosive detector devise. Gamma's manager explained the 'low profile' by stating that he did not disseminate the information because it is a collective effort and all members are part of this effort. Thus, the Kibbutz legacy enhanced a sense of legitimacy for the organization and its mission as long as it 'acquires' by the collective and not as an individual effort or achievement.

At Gamma, the Kibbutz narrative entails 'democratic management' such that management roles are considered a mission and not as a sign of promotion or excellence. Often management positions were appointed in rotation. As one scientist explained, 'it was like at the university where at one point of your career you should take the role of the department chair. It is a duty not a privilege' (January 1996). Thus, management positions were considered altruistic acts, a service for the community, and signal an egalitarian approach that views those in management position as 'one among equals.' Taken together, the Kibbutz legacy narratives help Gamma members to establish 'universal' legitimacy. The justification for an inclusive and ideal workplace is that it provides a utopia-like working environment. Like the ideal Kibbutz, the narratives depict Gamma as a haven of equality and solidarity that provides its elite members with a sense of meaning and mission.

Narratives of change

Confrontational narratives during preparation and implementation of change. Following changes in the institutional environment of national labs in Israel and particularly the reductions in the government budget during mid-1990s, Gamma's management initiated planned change. The main thrust of the change was grounded in management's decision

to exploit Gamma's technological clout and further commercialize its technologies and services, including privatizing a few of its activities. Gamma's management envisioned a structural change that would challenge Gamma's mission, vision, culture and practices (Landau et al., 2006). Management strategic plans soon encountered resistance that echoed the old debates over legitimacy through using science work as the constitutive narrative plot. Symptomatic of these narratives was the tendency to present a dualistic sensemaking account (Weick, 1995; see also Mantere et al., 2013; Monin et al., 2013) rooted in the assumption that scientific work and change are mutually exclusive. However, scientists perceived the change as a direct threat on their identity as research workers. As one scientist argued (in February 2006), 'We publish in academic journals, we deal with theoretical issues, and we are even promoted and paid like university professors. With the suggested change we lose the sense of who we are.'

Reconstruction of scientific legitimacy implies resorting to confrontational narratives that challenge the basic rationale of the change. The confrontational narratives follow a discourse that link Gamma's legacy and its future demise once the change takes place (see Figure 2 for an illustrative quote). As another example, according to one scientist (in January 1996),

> [t]he research in Gamma was its raison d'etre. We worked very closely with Weitzman Institute [internationally renowned Israeli research institute in exact and biological studies] and hosted several academic conference. Now the management plan to kill our research, and force us to betray our profession and everything that Gamma stands for.

Consequences of change

The change creates a social distance between management and scientists, in particular because of the marginalization of scientific research and publishing. Furthermore, it should be noted that one of the criteria for tenure and promotion in Gamma was based on evaluating the science work, namely through publications in peer-reviewed academic journals. Following the change, management strove to reduce the importance of publication as a promotion criterion for the sake of more subjective evaluation based on management assessment of overall performance. However, management was bound by a collective agreement that prohibited the elimination of publications as promotion criteria. Thus, publications in academic journals remained an evaluation criteria, compelling scientists to continue and pursue legitimacy through publication, albeit without management consent or encouragement (see Figure 2 for an illustrative quote). As another example, one scientist commented (in July 2000), 'We publish now under the table; [we] do both pure research and at the same time search for tangible and "sexy" results in the lab, so management may start with patenting and commercializing.'

Legitimization of such an anomaly by obtaining management's authorization echoed Walker's claim that: 'organizations can use existing accepted legitimating elements to legitimize their non-legitimate regimes' (Walker, 2004: 255). Thus, legitimacy is not a unidirectional strategic action pursued by social actors with certain norms and ideals. Gamma scientists searched for varied avenues for gaining legitimacy, even if that entailed juggling or providing wide interpretation to values. As one scientist claimed (in November 2000), 'For me, publishing my work is crucial − doing and not publishing

is not doing. So whatever excuse I come with is relevant and true, even if it is not consistent with management.'

Thus, during change, confrontational narratives of legitimacy reflect a breach of Gamma's practices and values. However, scientists justified their contestation, particularly with regard to science work, by referring to Gamma legacy – the 'true' Gamma that cherishes scientific excellence, academic freedom and community. In contrast, the planned change implies scrapping research, individualism and normative and bureaucratic control. Seeking legitimacy through contestation allows the scientists to expand the repertoire of legitimacy possibilities. Management did not contest the right of the scientists to retain their values, as long as the objective of commercialization was accepted as a legitimate path of action. As one Gamma manager confessed (in January 2002), 'I was once a scientist, and I fully understand their point of view. Pluralism is a good way of letting steam off, as long as the change is moving forward.'

Another form of undermining management legitimacy was associated with management's attempt to develop commercial projects based on inter-organizational cooperation, thus utilizing the diverse skills and expertise of Gamma's scientists and engineers. To break the legitimacy of management's intentions, scientists referred to the inherent need for compartmentalization and secrecy in Gamma and hinted that management's intentions would compromise Gamma's secrecy.

The confrontational narratives of breaking management's legitimacy during the change provided a solution to the difficulty of the new conditions by sticking to the old practices of Gamma's science work. The confrontational narratives presented an active attempt by managers and scientists to influence the meaning and the course of the legitimation process (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). In advancing claims regarding Gamma's true nature, management and scientists were involved in pursing their preferred strategic lines of action through continued contesting of legitimacy. The next section, 'Narratives of survival,' presents a more conciliatory, 'middle of the road' mode of legitimacy narratives in which varieties of a legitimacy repertoire developed, to a certain extent in conjunction with one another, for the purpose of reconciling between the narratives that make and break legitimacy in Gamma.

Narratives of survival

Although management was tolerant of the scientists' contestation, still during change, a distinct narrative was promoted. Termed by the general managers as 'survival,' this narrative transcended both Gamma's legacy and the vision of the planned change (see Figure 2 for an illustrative quote). The survival narrative considered as a pragmatic, last resort option for Gamma. As one field manager explained (in April 2002),

> We can go back to the past and allocate all our resources for pure research. If we do it, we let more than half of the scientists go. And we won't do it. We can change the culture in a day and tomorrow morning every scientist becomes a champion of commercialization. What we are doing is that we preach the 'no choice' (in Hebrew: 'Ein Brera'). Everyone in Israel understands this. This is how we grow up. This is our survival. When you talk with scientists in these terms, they understand and compromise.

From the scientists' perspective, the survival narratives allowed them to 'hold the stick on both sides,' and continue to believe in Gamma's legacy as its source of legitimacy, and at the same time accept the logic of management as legitimate (e.g. Hill et al., 1992).

The adoption of survival narratives allowed the creation and recognition of both scientist and management commitment to the organization. This mutual recognition was critical to the smooth implementation of change. By recognizing the Kibbutz, national security and science narratives as legitimate, management reduced conflicts and objections while restructuring the organization, reassigning scientists and redefining job roles and priorities within a framework of survival narrative. Scientists described their adherence to management's survival narratives as 'conducting a retreat war without burning the field behind us.' Furthermore, the survival narratives allow managers and scientists to 'save face' and to agree on common goals that represent a consensual legitimacy. It is not that the scientists accept the management planned change as is, or that management agrees with scientists on the extent of pure research, but rather that both sides choose a middle ground interim solution that ensures Gamma's survival (see Figure 2 for an illustrative quote).

Discussion and conclusions

This study addressed legitimacy as composed of diverse and dynamic narratives that are actively promoted by social actors striving to reiterate their actions during organizational change. The legitimacy narratives presented and analyzed are characterized by the actors' recognition and knowledge of the multiple combinations of cultural repertoires and the structural circumstances faced by Gamma. This, in turn, enhanced and expanded the opportunities for constructing legitimization processes based on multiple narratives and consequently pursuing the desired strategies of action that were based on notions of survival.

We have shown that, although legitimacy narratives supported change, by legitimizing change on the grounds of survival, these narratives were still confined with Gamma's legacy. Thus, the process of legitimacy narratives can be seen as an ongoing attempt to call for change or to contest it, based on alternative organizational and cultural schemas. Each group (management, scientists) strives to promote its own narrative of what is legitimate according to its 'way' of what the change should mean (i.e. applied vs pure science; commercialization of products and inventions for the market vs directing invention only for the public good) and its respective rules, procedures and practices (e.g. Ruef and Scott, 1998).

The presence of competing legitimacy narratives, such as the one that symbolizes the predominantly academic and egalitarian nature of Gamma, the one that portrays Gamma culture as confrontational theatre, and the narratives that portray various manifestations of survival, does not represent a linear predetermined path of legitimacy. Instead, these legitimacy narratives constitute a 'repertoire' from which social actors drew their preferences and resources for the purpose of pursuing and promoting their notion of legitimacy. Thus, the process of change in Gamma, as reflected in the construction of legitimacy, was characterized by a cohabitation of wide narratives − those that relate directly to the change and those that reflect 'memories' or legacy that

enabled Gamma's members to make sense of the change (e.g. Anteby and Molnár, 2012; Mantere et al., 2013).

Overall, each of Gamma's varied legitimacy narratives portrays different symbolic ideas and meanings, and focuses on distinct thematic issues regarding science work and commercialization. For the scientists, the 'legacy' narratives became evident in the use of underlying themes that represented distinct ideological and moral legitimacy positions such as altruism, solidarity, family or national security in contrast to profit-seeking and opportunism. For management, such narratives were also part of their heritage and as such were not discarded. However, management tended to endorse the 'legacy' narrative only within the context of the pragmatic need for change (Suchman, 1995). The ideal view of the past, which was promoted by both the management and the scientists through confrontational narratives, was not intended to reverse the trend and bring back the 'good old days' of pure science. Rather, for the former, the past reiterates the need for radical change because the circumstances and the institutional environment have changed, and for the latter the past is still a compass not only for maintaining Gamma's identity, but also for challenging any change.

All narratives appeared to contribute to the change process either by relating to it directly or referring to the organization's past. Narratives at Gamma take the legitimacy stance by shaping and reshaping its symbolic content and context of action. For example, the 'legacy' narratives represent the resentment of change and the past symbolic logic that was based on the organization's rationale of being state-owned and of contributing to the state's well-being and scientific innovation. The confrontational narratives support the symbolic rationale for skepticism (rejection) of the change towards commercialization. The reconciling and external narratives provide symbolic rationale to comply with change objectives and processes.

We argue that Gamma's legacy became the constitutive mechanism of legitimacy narrative that enabled Gamma's members to accept the change towards commercialization and to comply with it. In contrast to Anteby and Molnár (2012), Gamma's members 'resurrect' their past by emphasizing its contribution to the current identity. Past narratives were used interchangeably for both the contestation and the negotiation of the meaning of change.

The survival narratives reflect the symbolic cultural meaning through which the accepted reality was rationalized within two contexts: the internal context of Gamma and the external institutional context of government ownership and the market. In addition, we argue that Gamma scientists were able to mobilize those 'past' resources, falling back on their legacy and history as constitutive principles of the present. Following Sewell (1992, 2005), we claim that the Gamma legacy has served as a 'deep' overreaching cultural script that enabled both scientists and management to use it for legitimization of the rationalization, acceptance and eventual active participation in the process of change.

We offer a multiple narrative approach in which legitimacy is constructed through providing social actors' choices and opportunities to test varied strategies of action and organizing their capacity of action in a way that would cater to their personal and organizational needs (e.g. Swidler, 2001). Thus, the choice of a legitimacy narrative of survival was aimed at voluntary compliance with the requirements of the changing reality. Both management and scientists realized that the new strategies of action had to be reconciled

with the strong ideological stance of the past. In sum, legitimacy is embedded within the contradictions of the different spheres of the organizational life. It is the task of the social actors to create, contain and navigate through the various narratives of legitimacy. Our research indicates that layers of legitimacy narratives serve as building blocks with which actors create their organizational lives.

We demonstrate that internal legitimacy during change is reconstructed through contestation (Drori and Honig, 2013; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). Internal legitimacy in Gamma reflects an open contest between managers and scientists and relies upon their interpretations of the organization's history, values and desired future strategy. The confrontation presented through narratives results from the position and role of actors who possess different resources and responsibilities, as well as vision and values (Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007). This stands in opposition to internal legitimacy that stems only from management perspective and action. For example, Schein (1983: 14) claims that managers who are the contenders of building culture and vision emphasize a 'pattern of assumptions that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.' This implies that internal legitimacy is always in a state of consent. In this article, we demonstrate that internal legitimacy is usually in a state of contestation (Drori and Honig, 2013), and the clash of different ideologies and practices is a terrain that is constantly challenged by different social actors. In this vein, the legitimacy narratives are the 'manifesto' of the contestants and a symbolic asset that retains and justifies the need and acceptance of change.

Focusing on Gamma, a unique R&D organization, enabled us to provide a multiple legitimacy narrative model. We demonstrate how two types of legitimacy narratives are reconstructed by social actors in their attempt to interpret, contest or justify the change. In this case study, scientists and management actively engage in pursuing distinctive logics aimed at both maintaining and disrupting the key values and practices (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Thus, our model depicts the way social actors cement selective legitimacy attributes by pursuing conflicting narratives as a strategy of action that confronts 'internal others.' The narratives of legitimacy are advocacy in the sense that they are not presented in vacuum, but are grounded in the embedded institutional environment and history. The narratives also provide recognition of the role and position of the contesting actors and, at the same time, are based on the organization's legacy of equality, cooperation and participation. It is clear to all contenders who own respective narratives that consent is the unavoidable outcome. In this vein, the legitimacy narratives are a way through which organization members defend their turf, values and vision to ensure that the change would be a fit to those values that are considered as symbolic or even sacred. In sum, legitimation narratives evolve in accordance with functional need. Older narratives give room to newer, more updated or relevant narratives (e.g. Mantere et al., 2013), and multiple narratives are used by different organization actors alternately and interchangeably as part of internal contestation over legitimation of change.

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1. Other data from Gamma were published in Landau and Drori (2008) and Landau et al. (2006).

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