
The Psychology of Legitimacy covers much of the recent research on legitimacy processes. Its range extends beyond academic psychology to encompass work from several other disciplines. The introduction describes a book organized around five substantive sections that contain the work of 50 authors in 17 chapters. Yet, the book succeeds in defining most problems inherent to edited collections. Papers within sections display remarkable coherence, and there is reasonable coherence across sections.

Newcomers wanting or needing a broad introduction to the subject will find the first two substantive chapters (Zeiditch and Kelman) informative and enlightening. Zeiditch’s research provides two thousand years of cross-cultural, empirical, and theoretical writings on legitimacy. Kelman reviews Zeiditch’s conceptual discussion and sets his own research (e.g., on desegregation and the My Lai massacre), to illustrate the empirical range of legitimacy studies. Both chapters present the importance of legitimacy as a foundation for moral society.

Several chapters focus on the legitimacy or obfuscation of inequality (Robinson and Korn, Oliner and Hafez, Major and Schneider, and Ellger) oaths and Hafez, and Major and Schneider are particularly interested in understanding why members of disadvantaged groups attribute legitimacy to systems of resource inequality.

Hillgartner introduces a theory of status beliefs and shows how status beliefs legitimate existing resource distributions and support the reproduction. Others (Glick and Fiske, Sidanius, Levin, Rudesdick and Pratto, Spieg, Jelen, and Doore) also present the idea of legitimating ideologies to show how systems of inequality acquire legitimacy.

Eisbach uses her research in Searle’s response to early 1900s auto repair scandal to show how organizational legitimacy facilitates the achievement of organizational goals. Other discussion also complements Tyler’s discussion of procedural legitimacy as a key component of institutional legitimacy. This book will be useful for graduate courses, and some chapters are suitable for advanced undergraduate students. The authors minimize the use of jargon and carefully define terms that might be unfamiliar to readers outside of their particular discipline. Authors describe empirical studies briefly but clearly and avoid statistical formalism. In short, the book satisfies the editors’ goal of effectively and efficiently portraying the most recent and important conceptual and theoretical developments. It maintains this advantage at a price.

Despite substantial coherence, the volume wants and needs one or more integrative chapters. Filling that desertion probably falls too much of the editors, who undoubtedly worked nervously as the manuscript crept toward 1,000 pages. Moreover, asking the editors to create such a chapter is presumptuous. Nonetheless, I point to chapters that seem to cut out for integration or raise questions for which at least partial answers can be found in companion chapters.

The idea that bad people deserve bad treatment is a linchpin of several discussions (Grendall and Bradley, Oliner and Hafez, Sidanius et al.). Following Kelman and Zeiditch, groups clearly legitimate (and glorify) ideas and also the patterned inequalities on which other writings focus. More important, it is unlikely that such ideas could generate the motive force the writers describe without legitimation. One wonders whether Hillgartner’s theory or Eisbach’s analysis of legitimating processes in organizations offers insights into how ideas acquire legitimacy.

As a second example, chapter by Ehrmen and Wright show how limited social mobility (obedience) can legitimize the status quo and reduce the likelihood that groups with subordinate status will initiate conflict. Other writers (Robinson and Katz, Johnson, Burgess and Musso, and Tyler) also explore the facets of this issue. Lipset’s effectiveness hypothesis (Zeiditch) and ideas that connect interpersonal reinforcement and endorsement seem particularly useful as starting points for further research.

The final chapter (Jackson) raises the debate about the role of institutional violence in expressive relationships. It expands the idea of violence to understand the apparent ‘content of the governed’ in systems mediated with violence. The chapter describes two extremely important phenomena. First, legitimated institutional violence can coerce with stability. Second, other (forms of violence e.g., lynching or surgical surgery) can become standard social prac (to Jackson’s contrast legitimate i.e., acceptable or moral), and hidden violence as methods for maintaining consent. Alternatively, the idea of system-level (collective or ‘constitutive’) legitimacy (Zeiditch and Kelman) implies that systems can maintain stability without consent. Gottleber dis-proved the use of force to keep satellite states in the ‘nuclear orbit. The closeness of force stepped its use of system-level or constitutive legitimacy and left the regime hand-cuffed in the face of democratization movements. Chinese citizens confronted legitimated force and suffered a serious backlash to Tianamen Square. Similarly, the incidence and visibility of other behaviors (e.g., lynching, charismatic, or terrorist violence) can rise or fall as the behaviors gain or lose constitutive legitimacy.

My desire for more integration aside, this is an important book. Any researcher engaged in the serious study of legitimacy processes and everyone who wants to better understand how legitimacy affects individual and collective behavior should read this book.


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