

# A MODEL OF RHETORICAL LEGITIMATION: THE STRUCTURE OF COMMUNICATION AND COGNITION UNDERLYING INSTITUTIONAL MAINTENANCE AND CHANGE

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We develop a model of rhetorical legitimation that specifies the communicative and cognitive structure underlying the maintenance and change of institutions. To do so we draw on Toulmin (1958) and his idea that social actors can use two structurally distinct forms of rhetoric: *intrafield rhetoric* and *interfield rhetoric*. We use this distinction to develop and advance novel arguments about the role of rhetoric in legitimation processes. Specifically, we theorize how the use of intrafield and interfield rhetoric shapes and reflects social actors' assumptions of legitimacy at two different levels. We then theorize how the use of intrafield rhetoric relates more to institutional maintenance, whereas the use of interfield rhetoric relates more to institutional change.

Legitimacy, defined as a generalized assumption of desirability or appropriateness of an action or idea (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990: 177; Suchman, 1995: 574), is critical for social action and is at the core of institutional theory (Elster, 1989). Given that legitimacy can constrain and enable people in thought and action (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), scholars have argued that it plays a fundamental role in the maintenance and change of organizations and institutions (Scott, 2001, 2008). Although legitimacy is critical to institutional arrangements, we know much less about the processes of legitimation. Specifically, we lack a clear understanding of how legitimacy or assumptions of desirability and appropriateness emerge, reproduce, and change (Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006; Zucker, 1977).

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Attempts to address this concern have led to a growing body of research emphasizing the role of communication in legitimation processes (Hardy, 2011; Lammers, 2011; Suchman, 1995; Suddaby, 2011; Zucker, 1977). Researchers working in this area have explored and described various communication strategies social actors (e.g., organizations, investors, the media, etc.) use to shape their own as well as other social actors' assumptions about what is or is not legitimate (Elsbach, 1994; Green, 2004; Lamin & Zaheer, 2012; Lefsrud & Meyer, 2012; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara et al., 2006; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). This work improves our understanding of the role communication plays in the processes of legitimation, yet despite this progress, we know remarkably little about how communication actually relates to the underlying assumptions of legitimacy that make up institutions.

Specifically, the concrete way in which communication strategies both shape and reflect social actors' assumptions of legitimacy remains underspecified (Green, Li, & Nohria, 2009; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Zucker, 1977). This underspeci-

fication is problematic because institutional theorists have long argued that changes in legitimacy assumptions are associated with changes in institutions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011). Without a clearer explanation for how communication strategies relate to social actors' assumptions of legitimacy, our understanding of how communication relates to institutions will remain limited (Phillips et al., 2004; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008; Suddaby, 2010).

The cause of and solution to these concerns may rest, at least in part, with how scholars currently conceptualize communication strategies. In particular, while in past work scholars have primarily examined different types of communication strategies, their work has overlooked differences in the underlying structure of such strategies. This oversight is critical because scholars of rhetorical theory argue that the structure of communication is essential for understanding social action (Burke, 1969). More specifically, Toulmin (1958) developed a model that clarifies how the structure of rhetoric can help scholars better understand and explain the dynamics of contestation and struggle between multiple social actors in public debate.

In this article we draw on Toulmin (1958) and his arguments about rhetorical structure to develop new insights into the role of rhetoric in legitimation processes. Toulmin identified the primary structural components of rhetoric (i.e., data, warrant, claim, and backing) and proposed the idea that social actors can use two structurally distinct forms of rhetoric: *intrafield rhetoric* and *interfield rhetoric* (Toulmin, 1958: 235; Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik, 1984: 277). We use this distinction to reconceptualize how rhetorical strategies relate to social actors' assumptions of legitimacy at two different levels. At one level, intrafield rhetorical strategies shape and reflect social actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of an action or practice within a given context. At another level, interfield rhetorical strategies shape and reflect social actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of the context itself. Within our framework, social actors use intrafield rhetoric to defend or challenge the legitimacy of particular actions or practices within a given context and interfield rhetoric to establish or disrupt the legitimacy of the context itself. As such, the presence of intrafield rhetoric reflects that social actors question the legiti-

macy of certain actions or practices but agree on the definition of the present context. In contrast, the presence of interfield rhetoric reflects that social actors question the deeper-level assumptions that define the institutional context. Our central argument is that by examining the dynamics within and between the intrafield and interfield rhetorical levels, we can develop new insights about how rhetoric relates to social actors' assumptions of legitimacy and, thus, the maintenance and change of institutions.

In what follows we first discuss rhetorical theory and Toulmin's (1958) original ideas regarding the structure of rhetoric. We then leverage these ideas to develop a model of rhetorical legitimation that advances novel arguments about the role of rhetoric in the legitimation processes that undergird institutional maintenance and change. We conclude with a discussion of the potential contribution of our model and propose opportunities for future research.

## RHETORICAL THEORY AND THE STRUCTURE OF RHETORIC

### Rhetorical Theory

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion (Aristotle, 1991). As a theory of communication, the study of rhetoric has a long history across the humanities and social sciences (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990). Early rhetorical theory, often referred to as *classical rhetoric*, emphasizes the speaker's available means of persuasion and views rhetoric as a source of inspiration and invention in the production of social action (Aristotle, 1991; Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990; Herrick, 2004). More recent rhetorical theory, often referred to as *new rhetoric*, extends classical rhetoric by placing a greater emphasis on the role of the audience and how social actors other than the speaker also affect the way rhetoric shapes social action (Burke, 1969; McCloskey, 1998; Perelman, 1969). Contemporary rhetoricians build on both of these traditions to explore how social actors use language as symbolic action.

The concept of language as symbolic action suggests that language, whether written or spoken, both shapes and reflects the assumptions (e.g., attitudes, values, ideologies, etc.) of social actors within a given community (Burke, 1966). Specifically, a rhetorical view suggests that language operates in a performative role, shaping

the underlying assumptions of both the speaker (Billig, 1989, 1996; Isocrates, 1929; Nienkamp, 2001) and other social actors (Burke, 1969). This view also proposes that social actors' use of language reflects their underlying assumptions about the desirability or appropriateness of the present social arrangements (Burke, 1966, 1969; Mills, 1940). From a rhetorical perspective, language is a dynamic and reflexive tool that both reveals the underlying assumptions of a community and provides a motor for social change.

### Rhetorical Strategies of Legitimacy

Recently, institutional scholars have started using rhetorical analysis to examine legitimation processes. This growing body of work has focused primarily on how social actors use rhetoric to justify actions (e.g., Green, 2004), construct legitimacy (e.g., Alvesson, 1993; Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Green, Babb, & Alpaslan, 2008; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara et al., 2006), and institutionalize practices (e.g., Covaleski, Dirsmith, & Rittenberg, 2003; Green et al., 2009; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Sillince, 1999; Sillince & Barker, 2012; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008). These efforts have identified different types of rhetorical strategies social actors use to legitimate or delegitimize certain actions or ideas.

For instance, Green (2004) built on Aristotle (1991) to suggest that social actors commonly use three types of rhetorical strategies—*pathos*, *logos*, and *ethos*—to shape other actors' assumptions of legitimacy regarding new managerial practices. In addition, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) showed how social actors vary their rhetorical strategies to correspond to different teleistic proofs for how change unfolds—teleological, historical, cosmological, ontological, and value based—to make sense of and define a new and emerging organizational form. More recently, Erkama and Vaara (2010) examined how social actors use a combination of these rhetorical strategies—*pathos*, *logos*, *ethos*, *cosmos*, and *autopoiesis*—to legitimate or resist industrial restructurings (e.g., plant closure decisions) during organizational negotiations.

Although this body of work increases our understanding of the "meaning-making processes through which organizational phenomena . . . are legitimated in contemporary society" (Vaara

et al., 2006: 789), some scholars suggest that our understanding of rhetorical theory and rhetorical strategies remains underspecified (Green & Li, 2011; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008; Suddaby, 2011). For example, Green (2004) describes how rhetorical strategies shape social actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of certain practices *within* a particular institutional context. In contrast, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) show how rhetorical strategies shape social actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of the institutional context itself when there is disagreement *between* two or more ways to define that context. While both of these theories suggest that rhetoric shapes assumptions of legitimacy, they appear to describe different roles for rhetoric in legitimation processes.

Rhetorical scholars, however, have long argued that rhetoric used within and between contexts is structurally distinct and that its conflation potentially hides important insights about the relationship between and among communication, cognition, and institutions (Goodnight, 1993; Toulmin, 1958). We extend these insights into organization and institutional theory by arguing that a deeper understanding of rhetorical structure may improve our knowledge of the role rhetoric plays in legitimation processes.

### Rhetorical Structure

The importance of rhetorical structure was first articulated in the classical rhetoric of Aristotle. Prior to and for much of the twentieth century, rhetoricians drew on Aristotle's initial ideas to examine the structure of language in terms of formal logic. This early work on rhetorical structure assumed language was a tool to prove deductively the formal validity of claims (Aristotle, 1991). In the middle of the twentieth century, in his landmark study *The Uses of Argument* (1958), Toulmin critiqued and extended Aristotle's initial ideas. Toulmin's model shifted this entire paradigm by focusing instead on rhetoric in use, or, rather, the informal or practical use of language in public debate and everyday argumentation. This shift opened up space to begin exploring the contingencies and social risks actors face when making arguments. This shift also encouraged scholars to stop viewing rhetorical argumentation as a manifestation of formalized truth and, instead, to begin examining arguments in terms of prob-

abilistic outcomes that involved struggle and contestation in institutionally complex contexts.

Toulmin's model describes an argument as containing three basic components: an argument moves from *data* (i.e., the evidence social actors use to support the claim) to *claim* (i.e., the conclusion whose legitimacy social actors are seeking to establish) by virtue of a *warrant* (i.e., a reason that authorizes the link between data and claim). In addition, attached to any argument is *backing*. Backing provides "the grounds for regarding a warrant as generally acceptable" (Toulmin, 1958: 106). Consider Toulmin's now famous example that describes these key components. A lawyer might argue that his client was born in Bermuda (data) to persuade the courts that this client is a British subject (claim). The connection between the data and claim rests upon a basic assumption—that a person born in Bermuda is typically a British subject (warrant). Although the warrant indeed links the data to the claim, the audience makes this implicit assumption because social actors in a courtroom context will generally accept the grounding of arguments on statutes and other legal provisions (backing). In this sense backing provides the reasons, whether implicit or explicit, that ground the general acceptability of the present institutional context and, in turn, authorizes the use of certain data and warrants to justify a claim (see Figure 1).

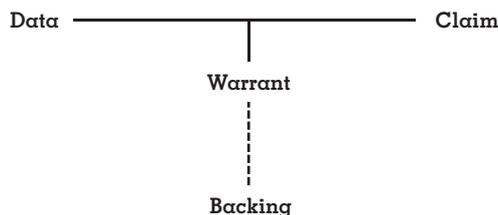
Toulmin's model—especially the concept of backing—makes an important contribution to the study of rhetorical argumentation. In particular, the concept of backing implies that argument is not abstract or universal, as Aristotle suggested. Instead, argument depends heavily on what Toulmin called the "argument field." Argument fields are the shared institutional contexts in which social actors reside and constitute the rules that make arguments in those contexts convincing (Toulmin, 1958; see also

Goodnight, 1982). As a result, while the structural relationship between the three basic components underlying an argument (i.e., data, warrant, and claim) does not vary by field, the backing or grounds on which this argument rests do (Toulmin, 1958: 103–104). Toulmin and his colleagues (1984) elaborated on this idea by examining how arguments differed across the fields of law, science, art, management, and ethics. They proposed that each argument field is associated with a different backing that alters the underlying goals of the argument and, in turn, affects the types of data (Toulmin, 1958: 16) and warrants (Toulmin, 1958: 100) that are generally acceptable in order to support a claim. For example, while social actors generally accept the use of statistical analyses as data to support claims of truth in the sciences, legal precedent and previous case law are typically preferred to support claims regarding guilt or innocence in courts of law (Toulmin et al., 1984).

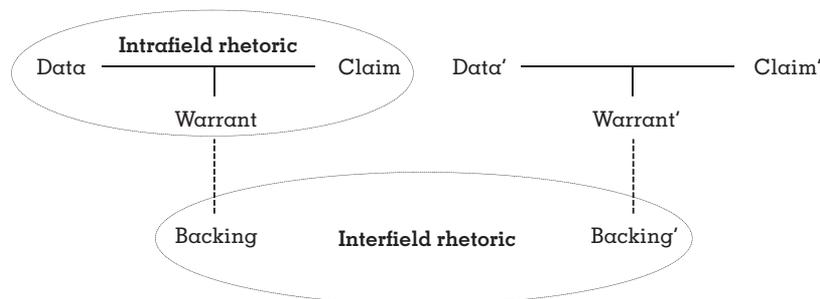
This insight into the "field dependency" of rhetorical argumentation led Toulmin to conclude that social actors can use rhetoric in two structurally distinct ways—what he called *intrafield rhetoric* and *interfield rhetoric* (Toulmin, 1958: 235; Toulmin et al., 1984: 277). Social actors use intrafield rhetoric to argue about ideas and issues *within* an agreed upon argument field or backing, whereas they use interfield rhetoric to argue *between* argument fields or backings to determine which shared understanding of the context should apply in the present case. Toulmin proposed that intrafield rhetoric thus occurs when social actors engage the structural components of rhetoric that relate to the basic argument (i.e., data, warrant, and claim) while not explicitly justifying or challenging the agreed upon institutional context (i.e., backing; Toulmin et al., 1984: 277). In contrast, interfield rhetoric occurs when social actors provide explicit justifications that challenge or defend the appropriate grounds of the argument (i.e., backing; Goodnight, 1993, 2006; Toulmin et al., 1984: 277; see Figure 2).

More recently, rhetoricians have made this distinction between intrafield and interfield rhetoric more useful for examining different forms of contestation by moving beyond Toulmin's original definition of argument fields as "locations or forums" in which arguments occur (Toulmin et al., 1984: 14). Specifically, scholars now generally consider the concept of argument

**FIGURE 1**  
The Toulmin Model



**FIGURE 2**  
Two Structural Levels of Rhetoric



field or backing to be synonymous with the collective definition of an institutional context (Bouwmeester, 2013; Goodnight, 2006; Simosi, 2003; v. Werder, 1999). We thus use this definition when we refer to argument field or backing because it encompasses a broader array of intrafield and interfield rhetorical dynamics and is consistent with a view that social actors are both active and passive participants in concrete and often complex institutional contexts.

### Rhetorical Legitimation

To show how we might leverage Toulmin's ideas to begin developing new insights into institutional analyses on legitimation, we provide the following illustration, which relates to the legitimation processes surrounding a hypothetical organizational merger. We chose to base our illustration on an organizational merger because mergers are commonly examined by institutional scholars (e.g., Mantere, Schildt, & Sillince, 2012; Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Monin, Noorderhaven, Vaara, & Kroon, 2013; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara et al., 2006). We should clarify that the specific content of the rhetorical strategies deployed by social actors is not the primary focus of this illustration and merely represents plausible examples of arguments actors might make in a similar context. The primary purpose of this illustration is to clarify Toulmin's two structural levels of rhetorical argumentation in order to provide a basis upon which we can develop a new understanding of legitimation processes.

**Intrafield rhetoric.** Imagine that a U.S. organization merged with a foreign company one year ago. Over that first year stakeholders came to view the merger as successful and legitimate.

However, the government of the country in which this foreign company operates recently changed, prompting some securities analysts and investors to question the continued viability and legitimacy of the merger. The organization may try to persuade its stakeholders that this merger remains legitimate by arguing that the change in government will have no impact on the firm's forecasted increase in profitability of 25 percent within the next two years. Securities analysts and investors, however, may disagree about the strength of this evidence. For instance, securities analysts could rebut or contest the organization's data, arguing that the organization is grossly exaggerating when it suggests that the merger will still produce a 25 percent profit increase because its risk-related financial model inputs are now incorrect. In addition, investors may rebut or challenge these data in a different manner, arguing that the 25 percent projection now does not take into account the uncertainty of unexpected foreign expenditures. The organization might respond to the first rebuttal with more data to support the risk-related inputs used to construct its financial projections. The organization might respond to the second rebuttal by arguing that it has enough available cash on hand to address the types of unexpected contingencies investors are suggesting might occur.

Despite the fact that these social actors disagree about the legitimacy of the merger, their use of rhetoric reflects that they appear to agree implicitly on financial measures as the dominant and generally acceptable backing for this context. Specifically, the organization provides financial data to support the legitimacy of the merger. Although investors and securities analysts seek to challenge the merger's legitimacy by questioning this financial data, they do so

using the same financial grounds. Thus, the key to intrafield rhetoric is that while contestation and struggle can take place, these dynamics occur *within* an agreed upon institutional context or backing (e.g., financial measures) that establishes the criteria for which data and warrants are admissible in the present context.

When the institutional context is straightforward and social actors' interests are reasonably aligned, as in the illustration thus far, the choice of backing is unproblematic (Toulmin et al., 1984). However, multiple backings are often relevant to organizational phenomena such as mergers. Moreover, these different backings may not support the same course of action, creating an institutionally complex environment (e.g., Goodnight, 2006; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). When these conditions emerge, the nature of the argument is likely to change (Goodnight, 1993); the selection between available backings becomes paramount, and social actors will begin to engage in rhetorical argumentation at a different structural level in order to determine or define this backing.

**Interfield rhetoric.** For instance, while some social actors (e.g., organization, investors, and securities analysts) may judge whether the merger is still legitimate based on financial backing, other social actors (e.g., special interest groups) may judge this issue as a primarily political matter. Although the financial data (e.g., a 25 percent profit increase) may generally support the ongoing legitimacy of the merger, the political data may challenge the merger on entirely different grounds. A special interest group, for example, may claim that the merger has provided technological capabilities to this foreign company, and now, with a change in government underway, this merger potentially puts U.S. national security interests at risk. When an alternative backing for the present institutional context is invoked, social actors are more likely to set aside the intrafield rhetorical components (i.e., data, warrant, and claim) and instead provide explicit justifications that challenge or defend the appropriate grounds of the argument (i.e., backing; Toulmin et al., 1984: 277).

The organization, for example, may draw on existing cultural understandings, such as history or tradition (e.g., Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara et al., 2006), to argue that organizations have historically used financial measures

to ground merger discussions. If the organization is successful in convincing the special interest group that using financial measures to evaluate the net benefits of an ongoing merger is a common and respected approach to ground such discussions, then this rhetoric will restrict the use of data and warrants to financial considerations. Of course, the special interest group may contest this historical argument for the use of a financial backing and instead propose that the nation's safety and security trump concerns for history and tradition, and, thus, social actors should consider this merger on political or national security grounds. In such a case, the special interest group is arguing that others should acknowledge and admit data and warrants relevant to political or national security interests into the merger debate.

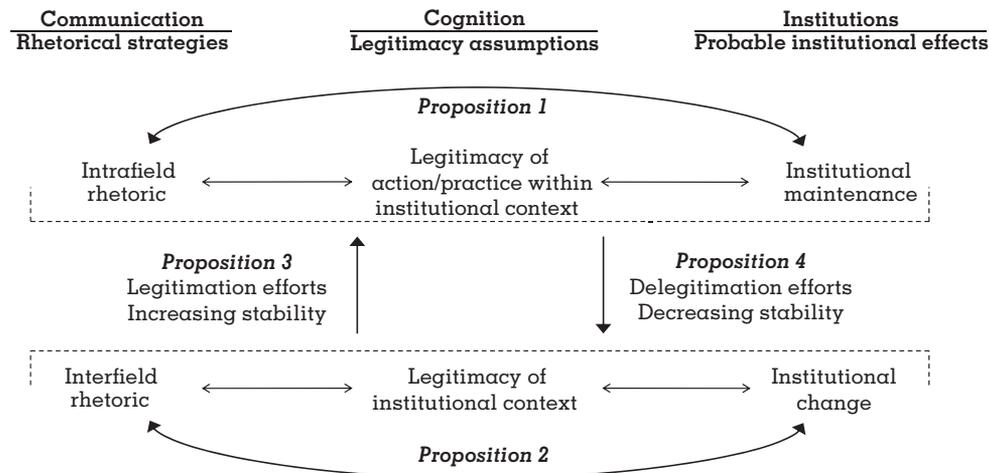
## A MODEL OF RHETORICAL LEGITIMATION

Toulmin's distinction between intrafield and interfield rhetoric provides a basis for advancing a novel understanding of the role of rhetoric in legitimation processes. In this section we develop a model of rhetorical legitimation, which emphasizes the importance of rhetorical structure for understanding social actors' assumptions of legitimacy and how these assumptions relate to the maintenance and change of institutions. Figure 3 depicts our model.

### Within-Level Dynamics

Prior work acknowledges the important relationship between rhetoric and the maintenance and change of institutions (Alvesson, 1993; Lammers, 2011; Suddaby, 2011), with scholars arguing that rhetorical strategies can both shape and reflect the legitimacy assumptions of a community of actors (Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Green, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) and that changes in these assumptions can shape and reflect institutions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001; Suchman, 1995; Tost, 2011). Our framework significantly extends this work by describing the two structurally distinct ways that rhetoric relates to legitimacy assumptions and how this increases the probability that the use of intrafield and interfield rhetoric will relate to different institutional effects. That is, even though social actors can contest or defend certain actions or ideas at both structural levels, we argue

**FIGURE 3**  
**A Model of Rhetorical Legitimation**



that the rhetorical dynamics at each of these levels differ. As a result, we propose that while intrafield rhetoric tends to relate more to institutional maintenance, interfield rhetoric tends to relate more to institutional change. For clarity, we depict institutional maintenance as the reproduction of a dominant backing in a particular context and institutional change as the shift from one dominant backing to another. However, our framework also applies to situations that are more complex. For instance, social actors assess some organizational phenomena using multiple backings that can combine or hybridize. We acknowledge such possibilities where appropriate.

**Intrafield rhetorical dynamics.** The use of intrafield rhetoric shapes and reflects social actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of an action or practice within a given institutional context. For instance, in our previous illustration the organization uses intrafield rhetoric to argue that the merger is still projecting a 25 percent increase in profitability. The organization makes this argument to bolster or shape the community's assumptions about the continued degree of legitimacy for the merger based on financial considerations. Moreover, the challenges or rebuttals proffered by the securities analysts and investors reflect that they disagree about the strength of the organization's proposed evidence in support of the merger. Indeed, if social actors still viewed the merger as legitimate, there would be little reason to engage in intrafield rhetoric (Green, 2004; Tost, 2011).

Despite the disagreement over the legitimacy of the merger, the financial arguments offered reflect that this community of social actors implicitly agrees that it is generally acceptable to ground the issue on a financial backing. This agreement over what seems to be the dominant backing in the present context is critical, because if social actors preserve the deeper-level consensus regarding the general acceptability of the underlying institutional arrangement, then they are still constrained in important ways by the institution within which they are embedded (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996: 1028; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Specifically, these conditions tend to limit the magnitude of the potential changes to the legitimacy of a particular action or practice by restricting the extent of such alterations to the defined boundaries of the dominant and already agreed upon backing (Goodnight, 1982).

This occurs because social actors at the intrafield level face a strong *ceteris paribus* presumption—a presumption that emphasizes maintaining the institutional status quo (Goodnight, 1980, 2006; Whately, 1963). Such cognitive conditions make it less likely that challenges or rebuttals will substantially alter the current institutional edifice (Zucker, 1977). Since social actors engaging in intrafield rhetoric still agree that the dominant backing within which they operate is generally acceptable, this shared definition of the context constrains both challengers and defenders in developing or acknowledging the force of intrafield rebuttals. For instance,

those seeking to challenge the status quo often have more difficulty thinking of or articulating alternatives to the present institutional arrangement (e.g., Holm, 1995). In contrast, those motivated to defend the status quo are more likely to overlook evidence that deviates from the prevailing institutional understanding (e.g., Tost, 2011). As a result, even though intrafield rhetorical challenges to the dominant backing clearly exist and can build over time, the rhetorical dynamics at the intrafield level tend to create the cognitive conditions that make social actors more likely to ignore or suppress such rebuttals or challenges to legitimacy.

For example, McNulty and Ferlie (2004: 1390) explored how social actors' "radical ambitions of organizational transformation gave way" to a story of institutional reproduction and maintenance because the pressures of their institutional context constrained their rhetoric and corresponding assumptions of legitimacy to the intrafield level. Social actors in their case study wanted to implement reengineering practices in a U.K. National Health Service hospital by replacing the existing new public management (NPM) practices. However, they found that the backing or grounds supporting NPM practices "limited the possibilities for senior management to pursue strategic choice and change" (2004: 1390). An interviewee exemplified these rhetorical limitations or cognitive constraints when he said, "Reengineering was not a word that you said here" (2004: 1404). This interviewee's statement describes a clear rhetorical boundary for the types of data and warrants admissible in argumentation within this institutional context. This illustrates that use of intrafield rhetoric can reflect the constraints of the institutional context and its corresponding rhetorical boundaries. These boundaries make alternatively grounded arguments about the adoption of reengineering practices more socially risky and, thus, less likely to occur.

In sum, the use of intrafield rhetoric in the absence of interfield rhetoric reflects that the dominant backing present in an institutional context can constrain social actors explicitly or implicitly by pressing them to acknowledge or use the data and warrants authorized by that agreed upon backing. Thus, even though intrafield rhetorical challenges may exist and even weaken actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of certain actions or practices to some

degree, these challenges still originate from within the argumentative rules of the dominant backing and therefore do not challenge the foundation of the institution directly. As a result, compared to interfield rhetoric, the use of intrafield rhetoric tends to relate more to the reproduction and, hence, maintenance of the dominant or prevailing institution.

*Proposition 1: The use of intrafield rhetoric shapes and reflects the legitimacy of an action or practice within an institutional context and, thus, relates more to institutional maintenance.*

When a single backing dominates a particular institutional context, the use of intrafield rhetoric reflects this deeper-level agreement and creates a strong presumption for the status quo. Under these conditions intrafield rhetoric is more likely to reproduce and, thus, continue to maintain the dominant institution. However, strong and persistent intrafield rhetorical rebuttals over time may weaken this deep consensus, prompting social actors to begin trying out alternative backings that may better fit or explain the current phenomena. In fact, social actors judge many organizational phenomena such as organizational mergers using more than one backing (e.g., financial measures, political concerns, national security interests, etc.). When data related to multiple relevant backings all support the same conclusion (e.g., the merger is legitimate), social actors are still likely to use intrafield rhetoric but draw on different backings more flexibly since there is less risk that such varied use of data will contradict the final claim (Goodnight, 1993, 2006; Toulmin et al., 1984). In this case, consistent with Proposition 1, intrafield rhetoric again will tend to relate more to institutional maintenance but will reflect the reproduction of a hybridized institutional understanding as opposed to a single dominant understanding. However, when data related to different backings support opposing claims, social actors are more likely to engage in interfield rhetoric to determine which backing or combination of backings best fits the present institutional context (Goodnight, 1993).

**Interfield rhetorical dynamics.** The use of interfield rhetoric shapes and reflects social actors' assumptions about the legitimacy of the institutional context itself. For instance, in the part of our previous illustration discussing in-

terfield rhetoric, social actors explicitly justified the backing because they sought to clarify the boundaries for what others should view as the appropriate institutional context for considering such merger discussions. Moreover, while the use of intrafield rhetoric reflects that social actors disagreed about whether the merger was indeed still legitimate based on the dominant financial backing, the use of interfield rhetoric reflects disagreement over whether this financial backing was the most appropriate grounds for the present institutional context (e.g., Goodnight, 1993; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Indeed, if social actors viewed the backing in the current institutional context as legitimate, there would be little reason to engage in interfield rhetoric (Green & Li, 2011).

This disagreement over what should be the generally acceptable backing (or combination of backings) on which to ground the current context is critical to the stability of institutions (Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010). In particular, social actors' collective and agreed upon understanding of the present institutional context provides the very foundation of the institutional edifice (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012; Zucker, 1977). If the assumptions related to this collective understanding are questioned, the foundation of the institution gets questioned as well (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002: 64; Huy, 2002). Holm (1995: 412) illustrated this point in his empirical study on institutional changes to the mandated sales organization of Norwegian fisheries. Specifically, he found that changes in social actors' assumptions about the definition of institutional context ultimately led to large changes in the dominant institutional model. We argue that social actors' use of interfield rhetoric opens up to examination the foundation of an institution, thereby amplifying the possible magnitude of alterations to the present institutional arrangement.

This occurs because social actors at the interfield level do not face the same *ceteris paribus* presumption seen at the intrafield level. Instead, when social actors engage in interfield rhetoric, they expose the grounds of the institutional context to questioning. In such cases actors tend to face a weakening of the *ceteris paribus* presumption—that is, a weakening of the assumption of institutional status quo (Goodnight, 2006; Green & Li, 2011; Whately, 1963). In-

terfield rebuttals, thus, are more likely to create tension and contradiction between the deeper-level assumptions of an institutional context (Holm, 1995). These deeper-level tensions and contradictions are often difficult to maintain and can lead social actors to mobilize their efforts and articulate change (Seo & Creed, 2002). Rebuttals or challenges to legitimacy at the interfield level therefore have a greater potential to become generative and to encourage social actors to think about an issue in an entirely new and profoundly different way (Goodnight, 1993, 2006; Toulmin et al., 1984).

As a result, while intrafield rhetorical dynamics tend to ignore and suppress challenges to legitimacy because social actors maintain agreement over the acceptable foundation of the institutional context, interfield rhetorical dynamics tend to elevate and amplify the potential impact of such challenges because social actors are beginning to question these grounds directly. Thus, even though actors can seek to defend and maintain the prevailing institutional arrangement at the interfield rhetorical level, these efforts are at an increased risk of failing, because when social actors deploy this rhetoric, the foundation of the institutional edifice is already in question. As a result, compared to intrafield rhetoric, interfield rhetoric tends to create as well as reflect the cognitive conditions where institutional change is more likely to occur.

*Proposition 2: The use of interfield rhetoric shapes and reflects the legitimacy of the institutional context and, thus, relates more to institutional change.*

**Implications of within-level dynamics.** Propositions 1 and 2 highlight three related insights that advance our understanding of how rhetoric shapes and reflects the legitimacy underlying institutions. First, by taking the structure of rhetoric into account, we can now understand and explain the apparent differences in how past research depicts the role of rhetoric in legitimation processes. In particular, Green's (2004) efforts seem to depict how social actors use intrafield rhetoric to shape the legitimacy assumptions of certain managerial practices and, thus, reproduce and maintain them within an agreed upon institutional context. In fact, consistent with our framework, Green argues that variation in the use of these strategies reflects

variation in the degree that actors take for granted the legitimacy of that practice. In contrast, Suddaby and Greenwood's (2005) efforts appear to depict how social actors use interfield rhetoric to explicitly challenge or defend the appropriate grounds or backing others should use to make sense of a new organizational form. Again, consistent with our model, Suddaby and Greenwood argue that these strategies reflect the questioning and contestation of the community's deeper-level assumptions regarding the general acceptability of the grounds on which argumentation takes place.

Second, these propositions also imply an important revision to institutional theory's prevailing definition of legitimacy. Most institutional scholars have relied on Suchman's definition of legitimacy as "a generalized assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (1995: 574). In fact, one of the most recent and in-depth examinations of how social actors' assumptions of legitimacy develop and change explicitly adopts Suchman's definition (Tost, 2011: 688). However, Proposition 1 implies that these efforts appear to emphasize the legitimacy assumptions underlying only intrafield rhetoric. Indeed, this is precisely what Suchman meant when he defined legitimacy as an assumption that resides "within some socially constructed system."

Yet this definition and understanding of legitimacy overlooks the fact that social actors can also hold assumptions about the desirability and appropriateness of the socially constructed system itself. Specifically, Proposition 2 implies that social actors also maintain assumptions about the legitimacy of the present institutional context, which pertain to whether the current backing, or an alternative backing, should apply. While these deeper-level assumptions often go unrecognized and remain implicit in most daily institutional activities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Toulmin, 1958; Toulmin et al., 1984), they undergird institutional arrangements by providing the taken-for-granted organizing principles that guide social action (Green & Li, 2011; Thornton et al., 2012; Zucker, 1977). Our framework thus suggests a revised definition of legitimacy that encompasses both structural levels: *legitimacy is a generalized assumption that an institutional*

*context and/or certain actions within that context are desirable or appropriate.*

Third, Propositions 1 and 2 link rhetoric to institutional maintenance and change in a new and important way. In particular, while in prior work scholars have clearly distinguished between institutional maintenance and change (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Scott, 2010), their efforts typically validate empirically only these institutional effects and often just presume that legitimacy has changed (Green, 2004; Green et al., 2009; Suddaby, 2010). The reason scholars typically do not empirically measure both variables is because they have found that empirical indicators of social actors' assumptions of legitimacy are notoriously challenging to observe (Suddaby, 2010). Propositions 1 and 2 present rhetorical structure as an empirically identifiable variable that corresponds to changes in these distinct legitimacy assumptions, as well as their probable institutional effects. Indeed, compared to interfield rhetoric, observing the use of intrafield rhetoric likely indicates that social actors are facing as well as creating the cognitive conditions where challenges to legitimacy are constrained or suppressed, thereby more likely leading to the reproduction and maintenance of that institution. In contrast, compared to intrafield rhetoric, observing the use of interfield rhetoric likely indicates that social actors are facing as well as creating the cognitive conditions where challenges to legitimacy are amplified and generative, thereby more likely producing the potential for change.

### Between-Level Dynamics

Rhetorical argumentation in everyday use is complex. Although social actors' arguments may reside within a single structural level, their arguments often move between levels. This argumentative complexity and movement creates the possibility for contestation and struggle within each structural level, as well as between them. Thus, while in the previous section we examined how social actors can use rhetoric to defend and challenge certain actions or ideas *within* each structural level, in this section we expand the use of our framework to explore shifts in the use of rhetoric *between* these two levels. We argue that an examination of these shifts can help shed light on deeper-level struc-

tural differences underlying the processes of legitimation and delegitimation (see Figure 3).

**Legitimation.** Institutional scholars suggest that legitimation is a process associated with an increase in legitimacy (Maurer, 1971: 371; Suchman, 1995: 573), which increases the stability of the institution (Green, 2004). Our framework proposes that an observed shift from the use of interfield to intrafield rhetoric reflects the structural characteristics underlying the process of legitimation. In particular, an observed shift from the use of interfield to intrafield rhetoric reflects an increase in legitimacy because this sequence in rhetoric indicates that the community of social actors now views the institutional context itself as legitimate and only contests the legitimacy of an action or practice within that context. This observed shift in rhetoric and related increase in legitimacy, in turn, reflects an increase in institutional stability. Specifically, constructing an agreed upon institutional context or backing establishes a comprehensible foundation on which social actors can then make sense of particular actions and practices (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005: 37; see also Suchman, 1995: 582). Once a comprehensible foundation is established, actors may begin to engage in intrafield rhetorical dynamics, which helps to begin reproducing and maintaining the established institutional arrangement. In sum, the shift from interfield rhetoric to intrafield rhetoric reflects the creation of an agreed upon context or backing and, thus, represents an important step toward stabilizing an institution.

For instance, consider the early total quality management (TQM) accounts, in which interfield rhetoric was used to create a stable foundation for understanding American manufacturing grounded in Japanese production processes (e.g., Deming, 1982; Ishikawa, 1985; Juran, 2003). Prior to the success of these interfield rhetorical strategies, most American managers believed that American manufacturing firms could never successfully use Japanese TQM practices (Cole, 1999; Cole & Scott, 2000; Deming, 1982). Indeed, during the 1970s, most American managers could not even imagine that TQM practices could create a negative relationship between quality and costs. However, by the 1990s most American managers understood that using TQM practices made it at least possible for quality and cost to have a negative relationship. The fundamental shift in understanding occurred

because TQM entrepreneurs in the early 1970s (e.g., Deming, 1982; Ishikawa, 1985; Juran, 2003) successfully argued that Japanese production techniques and related data were an appropriate way to ground their understanding of American manufacturing (Cole, 1999; Cole & Scott, 2000; Hackman & Wageman, 1995). Once TQM entrepreneurs using interfield rhetoric successfully established Japanese production techniques as appropriate grounds, TQM entrepreneurs were then able to shift their focus to using intrafield rhetoric in order to provide persuasive evidence for further convincing managers how and why quality could be negatively related to costs (Green et al., 2009). Our point is that a shift from interfield to intrafield rhetoric reflects an increase in institutional stability because it creates a shared understanding and foundation on which social actors can build legitimacy for their actions and practices.

*Proposition 3: The shift in use from interfield rhetoric to intrafield rhetoric relates to an increase in the effectiveness of legitimation efforts and an increase in institutional stability.*

**Delegitimation.** In contrast, delegitimation is a process associated with a decrease in legitimacy (Davis, Diekmann, & Tinsley, 1994), which decreases the stability of the institution (Oliver, 1992). Our framework proposes that an observed shift from the use of intrafield to interfield rhetoric reflects the structural characteristics underlying the process of delegitimation. In particular, an observed shift from the use of intrafield to interfield rhetoric reflects a decrease in legitimacy because this sequence in rhetoric indicates that the community of social actors is questioning more than just the legitimacy of the practice or action (e.g., Vaara et al., 2006: 797). Indeed, they also are beginning to question the legitimacy of the institutional context itself (e.g., Holm, 1995). This observed shift in rhetoric and related decrease in legitimacy, in turn, reflects a decrease in institutional stability. Specifically, deconstructing an agreed upon dominant institutional understanding or backing challenges how social actors comprehend their surroundings and throws into question the very criteria (i.e., the data and warrants) they should use in order to make sense of the present context. The direct questioning of an agreed upon backing

thus reflects an important step toward destabilizing an institution.

For instance, consider Suddaby and Greenwood's (2005) examination of the jurisdictional dispute between lawyers and accountants from 1998 to 2000, which showed how social actors transitioned from intrafield rhetoric to interfield rhetoric and destabilized their understanding and comprehensibility of an emerging organizational form. Traditionally, lawyers and accountants maintained relatively distinct jurisdictional boundaries. This meant that these social actors had constructed distinct backings or grounds on which they built their respective actions and practices. Moreover, with little overlap in these organizational forms, social actors remained primarily at the intrafield rhetorical level of argumentation. However, in 1997 the accounting firms of Ernst & Young and KPMG announced their intent to create law firms, prompting both lawyers and accountants to engage in interfield rhetoric to establish and redefine the appropriate jurisdictional boundaries for their respective professions. This shift from intrafield to interfield rhetoric reflected a decrease in institutional stability because it deconstructed the previously shared understandings and foundations on which these social actors had built a sense of legitimacy for their actions and practices.

*Proposition 4: The shift in use from intrafield rhetoric to interfield rhetoric relates to an increase in the effectiveness of delegitimation efforts and a decrease in institutional stability.*

**Implications of between-level dynamics.** Propositions 3 and 4 provide deeper insight into the rhetorical legitimation processes that stabilize and destabilize institutions. In past work scholars theorized that changes in the amount of rhetoric (e.g., justification or questioning) reflect changes in the assumptions of legitimacy and, thus, stability of institutions (Green, 2004; Jepsen, 1991; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Tost, 2011; Zucker, 1977). Specifically, these scholars theorized that, all else being equal, a decrease in the amount of rhetoric corresponds to an increase in the effectiveness of legitimation efforts and, thus, an increase in institutional reproduction and stability (Green et al., 2009). Conversely, all else being equal, an increase in the amount of

rhetoric corresponds to an increase in the effectiveness of delegitimation efforts and, thus, a decrease in institutional reproduction and stability (Green & Li, 2011).

While the amount of rhetoric is certainly an important indicator of stability, Propositions 3 and 4 suggest that the stability of institutions also relates to the underlying structure of this rhetoric. This is critical, because a structural understanding of rhetoric can potentially explain changes in institutional stability that the prior model based on the amount of rhetoric cannot. For instance, sometimes the overall amount of rhetoric may increase when social actors shift from the use of interfield rhetoric to intrafield rhetoric. Proposition 3 suggests that in these cases the structural shift in rhetoric actually corresponds to an overall increase in institutional stability. Moreover, sometimes the overall amount of rhetoric may decrease when social actors shift from the use of intrafield rhetoric to interfield rhetoric. Proposition 4 suggests that in these cases the structural shift in rhetoric may actually correspond to an overall decrease in institutional stability. Thus, although the amount of rhetoric provides a rough estimate of the amount of legitimacy and corresponding level of stability, the structure of rhetoric provides an alternative measure that has important implications for our understanding of legitimation processes.

In particular, by examining the structural transitions between the use of intrafield and interfield rhetoric, our model of rhetorical legitimation can empirically identify the precise moments when the risks confronting social actors, and thus the stability of the institution, change. Our framework suggests that it is at these moments when rhetorical structure transitions from one level to another that rhetoric interconnects with social actors' identities, goals, and interests in profound ways. Specifically, the transition from interfield to intrafield rhetoric reflects the moment when social actors' identities, goals, and interests become established and accepted, but also simultaneously constrained. Indeed, a comprehensible and shared understanding of the institutional context provides social actors with the criteria by which they can judge others and themselves (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005: 36). Moreover, this shared understanding helps direct actors' attention, dictate proper procedures, and determine who can participate within that social space (Holm, 1995: 400–401).

In contrast, the transition from intrafield to interfield rhetoric reflects the moment when social actors' identities, goals, and interests are called into question (e.g., Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Indeed, this rhetorical transition opens up the discursive space where social actors can argue over "who gets to do what, for what purpose, where, and in what way" (Green & Li, 2011: 1674; see also Burke, 1966, 1969). In these situations power and politics play an increasingly important role in creating new interests as well as reestablishing which voices are ultimately heard (Goodnight, 1980; Holm, 1995). Moreover, these complex institutional contexts also create the conditions that can prompt social actors to engage in what recent scholars have called identity work (e.g., Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Lok, 2010) in order to resolve institutional contradictions as well as maintain or strengthen their own self-conceptions.

These considerations suggest that while a model based on the pure amount of rhetoric may provide coarse-grained predictions regarding the effectiveness of legitimation (or delegitimation) efforts and the overall stability of institutions, our framework adds substantial precision to such predictions by pointing to the specific moments of transition and change.

### Structural Dynamics

Our framework thus far depicts how social actors use rhetoric both within and between different structural levels and proposes several implications of these dynamics for institutional change and stability (see Figure 3). Yet our model can also explain the structural dynamics of rhetoric in an entirely different way by highlighting how the institutional meanings associated with different structural levels, or what actors perceive as the claim, data, warrant, or backing, are not fixed. In fact, these meanings can change depending on the time period or perspective from which one observes the argument.

In particular, over time claims can become taken for granted and objectified. Once objectified, these claims can function as the backing that grounds future argumentation. For example, through an analysis of intrafield rhetoric, Green et al. (2009) show how the idea or claim that TQM practices would improve firm perfor-

mance diffused and institutionalized across large U.S. firms. However, once social actors popularized and objectified this claim across the business community, this claim transformed into a warrant and sometimes backing that supported numerous ancillary ideas and practices, from supplier chain partnerships to cross-functional team and statistical process control (Hackman & Wageman, 1995). Social movements like TQM can potentially show how institutional meanings initially associated with claims at the intrafield level can become objectified and exterior in institutional life (e.g., Zucker, 1977) and, thus, transition into backings at the interfield level.

These considerations highlight that the institutional meanings associated with different components of our model can depend on the actual argument social actors are making. Indeed, social actors may simultaneously view the same argument quite differently because of variation in background, interests, or even past experience (e.g., Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Zilber, 2002). As such, what is a taken-for-granted backing to one actor may seem to another actor a claim waiting to be justified. This raises the further possibility that social actors can strategically shift the meanings associated with rhetorical levels to gain advantage or accomplish certain goals in argumentation. For instance, an actor may seek to disrupt the shared understanding or backing of a particular community by asking its members to provide actual data for certain taken-for-granted assumptions as if they were claims requiring justification. Such tactics are common in public discourse and demonstrate how social actors can use rhetorical structure strategically to publicly settle private scores (Goodnight, 1993: 49). These considerations only further emphasize the power and usefulness of our framework for understanding different forms of contestation and struggle underlying legitimation processes.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The central aim of this article was to develop a deeper understanding of the role rhetoric plays in legitimation processes by emphasizing the importance and implications of rhetorical structure. Although institutional scholars recognize the potential value of a rhetorical perspective for understanding the processes of legitima-

tion, past efforts have primarily focused on the different types of rhetorical strategies social actors use to legitimate or delegitimize certain actions or ideas (e.g., Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Green, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). We built on and extended this work by developing a model of rhetorical legitimation, which emphasizes the *structure* of rhetorical strategies for understanding and predicting social action (Burke, 1966, 1969; Goodnight, 1993; Toulmin, 1958). By leveraging Toulmin's distinction between intrafield and interfield rhetoric and examining the dynamics within and between these structural levels, we were able to develop and advance novel arguments about how rhetoric shapes and reflects assumptions of legitimacy to maintain and change institutions.

In particular, our framework significantly extends prior work arguing that rhetoric can shape and reflect institutions (Alvesson, 1993; Lammers, 2011; Suddaby, 2011) by describing the two structurally distinct levels at which these dynamics can occur. Indeed, we argued that the dynamics at the intrafield level tend to restrict and suppress challenges to legitimacy and, thus, are typically associated with institutional reproduction and maintenance. In contrast, the dynamics at the interfield level tend to elevate and amplify the potential impact of such challenges and, thus, are typically associated with institutional change. The insight that rhetoric is connected to institutions in two distinct ways is critical and introduces rhetorical structure as a novel empirically identifiable indicator to better predict and explain different institutional effects.

While an examination of these within-level dynamics sheds light on how rhetoric relates to institutions in two distinct ways, an examination of the shifts between levels sheds light on the differences in the structural scaffolding underlying legitimation processes that stabilize and destabilize institutions. In fact, the idea that shifts between structural levels of rhetoric reflect the stability of institutions is critical because prior explanations of institutional stability have traditionally relied on the amount of rhetoric as the empirical indicator (Green, 2004; Jepperson, 1991; Meyer & Scott, 1983). Our framework suggests that while the amount of rhetoric remains important, an explanation based on rhetorical structure provides a novel indicator not only of the moments when stability changes

but also when the underlying communicative risks for challenging the institution change.

### Implications of a Model of Rhetorical Legitimation

A model of rhetorical legitimation contributes to our understanding of legitimation processes in particular and institutional theory in general in several important ways.

**Institutional maintenance and change.** First, our framework extends a growing body of research exploring how rhetoric or communication maintains and changes institutions. Scholars have long recognized that rhetoric or communication can affect institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zucker, 1977). Early scholars explained this relationship by linking the mere presence or amount of communication to changes in institutions (e.g., Jepperson, 1991; Meyer & Scott, 1983: 201). More recently, scholars have shown how specific types of communication strategies lead to various changes in institutions (e.g., Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Green, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). However, these more recent efforts have yet to organize these numerous strategies into a consistent and coherent framework or to provide a detailed description for how these strategies might relate to the maintenance and change of institutions.

By distinguishing between intrafield and interfield rhetoric, our framework provides a parsimonious typology of rhetorical strategies explaining more clearly how rhetoric both maintains and changes institutions. Specifically, we can begin to tease apart how and why certain types of rhetorical strategies might maintain the boundaries of institutional arrangements and make them more resilient and reproducible, whereas others might disrupt these boundaries and challenge the foundation of the institutional edifice. In doing so our framework helps to specify further and concretely explain the communicative and cognitive structure underlying the maintenance and change of institutions.

**Embedded agency.** Second, our emphasis on rhetorical structure also provides insight into how institutions constrain and enable social actors in thought and action, often referred to as the problem of embedded agency. Scholars have long grappled with these issues (Archer, 1982; Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Giddens, 1984; Green

et al., 2009; Holm, 1995; Seo & Creed, 2002), yet efforts to explain the problem of embedded agency still struggle to identify theoretically and empirically the key institutional factors that constrain and enable actors' agency.

By describing the distinct risks and assumptions social actors face when engaging in intra-field as opposed to interfield rhetoric, our framework provides a communicative explanation for how institutions both constrain and enable social actors. While intrafield rhetoric faces the *ceteris paribus* presumption for the status quo and tends to constrain social actors in thought and action, interfield rhetoric weakens this presumption and enables actors to become more rhetorically free from the binds of the institution (Burke, 1966, 1969; Green & Li, 2011). This perspective resonates with Holm's (1995: 399) observation that institutions operate as a nested system, constraining actors at a first-order level of action while enabling actors at a second-order level of action. Our framework extends Holm's insights by describing how rhetoric functions as the theoretically identifiable and empirically observable factor that restricts what actors can say or object to (e.g., McNulty & Ferlie, 2004), as well as expands the communicative and cognitive resources actors can use to reconstruct institutional boundaries (e.g., Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

**Institutional complexity.** Our framework also contributes to the growing literature on institutional complexity. Scholars argue that social actors "face institutional complexity whenever they confront incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics" or backings (Greenwood et al., 2011: 317). Past work has explored how social actors may experience this complexity differently (Scott, 2008) and how this variation in experience may lead to different responses and, thus, institutional effects (Greenwood et al., 2011: 319). Theories describing these relationships are critical to explaining the maintenance of legitimacy and stability of institutions but are still underdeveloped (Pache & Santos, 2010: 455).

Our framework suggests that analyzing the structural use of rhetoric potentially can provide insight into social actors' experience of varying degrees or kinds of institutional complexity. For example, the absence of interfield rhetoric could indicate several possible circumstances. One possibility is that a single backing is relevant to

the present context and, thus, represents a situation low in institutional complexity. Another possibility is that multiple backings are relevant to the present context but they all prescribe the same course of action. This situation again represents a situation low in institutional complexity and suggests that most social actors are rhetorically competent enough to employ the appropriate backing in the right place and at the right time. However, there are possible situations where the multiple backings relevant to the present context prescribe different courses of action and, thus, represent situations high in institutional complexity. In such cases, while social actors might want to speak out and deploy interfield rhetoric to propose alternative backings and, hence, courses of action, an absence of interfield rhetoric suggests that these actors find the risk of addressing or challenging such complexity too high. As a result, social actors' response to such complexity is suppressed owing to the social or communicative risks involved.

In contrast, the presence of interfield rhetoric could indicate two additional possibilities that represent drastically different experiences of situations high in institutional complexity. For example, sometimes multiple backings are relevant to the present context and prescribe different courses of action, and the social risks for challenging or addressing such complexity directly are low enough to engage in explicit rhetoric to justify the grounds of the institution. In such cases actors agree that they should take some action but disagree fundamentally on which backing and, therefore, prescribed course of action is most appropriate. In contrast, other times there are no readily available backings that seem relevant or appropriate for the present context because social actors rhetorically describe or perceive the situation as novel. While the former possibility shows how interfield rhetoric indicates a kind of institutional complexity where social actors select which preexisting backing is appropriate for the given context, the latter possibility shows how interfield rhetoric indicates a kind of institutional complexity where social actors must rhetorically construct a new backing to make comprehensible new circumstances (see Goodnight, 1993: 41). In sum, a model of rhetorical legitimation provides a theoretical framework and empirical indicators that can potentially provide insight into our un-

derstanding of the communicative and cognitive content underlying the existence, experience, and meaning of institutional complexity.

### Implications for Future Research

Our framework also has important implications for future research seeking to expand our understanding of the role of communication and cognition in shaping institutions. First, scholars might further explore and describe the distinct communicative risks social actors face when engaging in intrafield and interfield rhetoric. Such risks to communication are crucial in determining how and why actors maintain or challenge the institutional status quo. For example, by varying the deployment of intrafield or interfield rhetoric, social actors can suppress rebuttals to maintain the prevailing institution or create the conditions for generative rebuttals that may profoundly alter the institutional edifice. We did not seek to outline systematically the factors that shape the communicative risks of deploying intrafield and interfield rhetoric. However, an important and rapidly growing body of literature on voice has detailed a number of risks for communicating or speaking up (Burris, 2011; Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013; Fast, Burris, & Bartel, in press). A union of our framework with this work could produce important insights into when and why social actors are willing to take the communicative risks to challenge the present institutional arrangement.

Second, future research might also examine how proponents and opponents in a legitimization contest use rhetorical structure differently when deploying strategies to legitimate or delegitimize certain actions or ideas. While past work suggests that proponents and opponents often cluster around different types of rhetorical strategies (e.g., Bouwmeester, 2013; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), we know less about why different social actors select specific strategies. Our framework suggests that proponents or defenders of the current institution would tend to deploy more intrafield rhetoric in order to maintain the status quo by restricting the use of certain rebuttals and correspondingly increasing the risks of their use. In contrast, opponents or challengers of the present institution would tend to deploy more interfield rhetoric in order to deinstitutionalize the current environment. Future researchers might elaborate and test these

ideas as well as explore how power and politics might mediate or moderate the way proponents and opponents execute and implement their structurally distinct rhetorical tendencies.

Third, scholars could also use our framework to provide deeper insight into how social actors use multiple strategies in their legitimation efforts. Scholars have long argued that communication influences social action through a constellation of different strategies, rather than through a single, isolated voice. Whether different social actors are deploying distinct strategies (e.g., Bakhtin, 1982; Steinberg, 1999) or a single actor is deploying a variety of strategies simultaneously or sequentially (e.g., Creed et al., 2002; Rhee & Fiss, in press), the multivocal nature of legitimation processes is critical but not well understood (Vaara, 2002; Vaara et al., 2006). Our framework suggests that one potentially beneficial way to pursue this effort is to examine the implications of rhetorical strategies that social actors deploy across different structural levels. For instance, the presence of rhetorical strategies at the same structural level may indicate more homogeneity in the goals of social actors and a lower risk to the stability of the institution. In contrast, the presence of rhetorical strategies across different structural levels may indicate more heterogeneity among such actors' goals and a fractured understanding of the institutional edifice. Efforts to explore these ideas could provide deeper insight into the complex relationship between communication and institutions.

Fourth, our model of rhetorical legitimation also resonates in many ways with more discursive approaches that examine how social actors navigate and use alternative and competing discourses in public contestation over certain actions or ideas (e.g., Vaara et al., 2006; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Specifically, our framework suggests that different discourses (e.g., neoliberal, nationalistic, humanistic, etc.) function similarly to backings in that they are both distinct foundations on which social actors represent and constitute the world (Fairclough, 2003; Toulmin, 1958). Viewed in this way, our framework would suggest that social actors could use intrafield rhetoric to contest or defend certain actions or practices within specific discourses and interfield rhetoric to challenge or justify which discourses are the most appropriate to use in the present context. Our structural

approach to communication thus provides a potential point of convergence between prior rhetorical and discursive models. Future research might leverage our framework to integrate these perspectives in order to develop a deeper understanding of legitimation.

## Conclusion

Building on the classic insight that “institutions are built upon language” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 64), scholars have sought to understand better the relationship between communication and institutions (Alvesson, 1993; Green & Li, 2011; Lammers, 2011; Lammers & Barbour, 2006; Phillips et al., 2004; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008; Suddaby, 2010). A large body of work has started to show how different communication strategies can influence social actors’ cognitions or legitimacy assumptions that make up institutions (e.g., Green, 2004; Green et al., 2009; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Vaara et al., 2006; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Our model of rhetorical legitimation builds on this work and contributes to our understanding of legitimation processes by describing the central role rhetorical structure plays in shaping legitimacy assumptions and maintaining and changing institutions. It is our hope that this greater emphasis on the structure of rhetoric will provide scholars with new and exciting possibilities for future research and help develop deeper insight into the role of communication and cognition in the study of institutions.

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