Government, coercive power and the perceived legitimacy of Canadian post-secondary institutions

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Abstract

Governments regulate and control organizations, yet their role in determining organizational legitimacy is largely unexamined. In the changing Canadian post-secondary landscape, legitimacy is an increasingly important issue for post-secondary institutions as they compete amongst themselves for access to ever-shrinking resources. Using an institutional theory framework, we analyze two examples of government policy and legislation relating to the organizational legitimacy of Canadian post-secondary institutions. Based on this analysis, we suggest a more nuanced understanding of the effects of government's coercive power on organizational legitimacy.

Résumé

Bien que les gouvernements contrôlent et réglementent les organisations, leur rôle quant à la légitimité de celles-ci est très rarement étudié. Dans le contexte variable de l'éducation post-secondaire au Canada, la question de la légitimité revêt une importance grandissante pour les institutions post-secondaires,

puisqu'elles rivalisent entre elles pour l'obtention de ressources en diminution constante. En utilisant le cadre de la théorie institutionnaliste, nous analysons deux exemples de politiques et de législations gouvernementales en rapport avec la légitimité organisationnelle des institutions post-secondaires au Canada. En fonction de cette analyse, nous suggérons une compréhension plus nuancée des effets du pouvoir coercitif du gouvernement sur la légitimité organisationnelle.

Introduction

The question of how organizational legitimacy is acquired and maintained has long been of interest in the discipline of organizational studies. Legitimacy is conferred on an organization in the context of its field of operation, with the field being defined as a "community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside of the field." (Scott, 1995, p. 6) Legitimacy is generally defined as the perception that an organization's actions are desirable, proper, and appropriate given the norms, values, and beliefs of the field in which they operate (Suchman, 1995). According to neo-institutional theory, the process of isomorphism causes organizations to evolve into conformity with the relevant norms, values, and beliefs in order to gain legitimacy and access to resources (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Government affects legitimacy by using its formal authority to create and enforce laws and policies that set standards for legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Accordingly, organizations are compelled to follow certain practices if they wish to operate legally or to receive government-controlled designations associated with legitimacy. Having received such recognition, organizations may acquire associated perceptions of legitimacy and, in turn, potentially gain access to other resources necessary for survival.

One example of an organizational field that is affected by government regulation is Canadian post-secondary education. In the past, Canadian universities existed in a relatively stable and mature organizational field that was well-defined and was supported by tacitly understood norms (Marshall, 2008). These norms included research activity, academic freedom, tenured faculty, bi-cameral governance, and public non-profit operations. But with the relatively recent emergence of many new or reconstituted post-secondary institutions in Canada, the uncontested isomorphic state of the field has been disrupted, and the norms of the field have become more obscure (Marshall, 2008). This has led some governments to attempt to reframe the field by enacting new policies and legislative initiatives.

In organizational theory, government legislation and policies are identified as coercive forces because organizations that wish to acquire the perception of legitimacy generated by compliance with the law must follow the standards of practice articulated in the relevant legislation—regardless of whether those standards are appropriate or effective (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Indeed, government is often characterized as one of the primary sources of coercive force (another being professional associations), and organizations that resist this force are deemed to be illegal and must face the consequences associated with that status (Kondra & Hinings, 1998). However, despite the potentially strong impact of government legislation and policy on organizations' perceived legitimacy, a more nuanced analysis of power exercised by "the state in contemporary accounts [of legitimacy] is a strange absence." (Clegg, 2010, p. 6)

In this article, we examine examples of state actions attempting to define legitimacy in Canadian post-secondary education. We suggest that government's role in defining organizational legitimacy is particularly important to the field of Canadian post-secondary education because it lacks a single recognized unified source of legitimacy such as a nationally recognized accreditation organization (Marshall, 2004). This absence causes ongoing instability in the field. Governments may be particularly inclined to attempt legislative or policy-based control if the legitimacy of individual institutions, or of the post-secondary system as a whole, is perceived to be threatened. "In contested social systems, which all systems to a greater or lesser extent are, the powerful try to maintain their power by ensuring predictability, whereas the less powerful have an interest in counter-hegemonic, destructional practices." (Clegg, 2010, p. 8) In keeping with the behaviours, Clegg suggests some of the less powerful or newer participants in the Canadian post-secondary field have used the field's instability as an opportunity to persuade government to accord them such signifiers of legitimacy as degree-granting status and the ability to use the word "university" in their title—signifiers that were formerly associated only with traditional universities.

Using an institutional theory framework, we explore government's role in determining and conferring legitimacy by examining recent specific actions of the provincial governments of British Columbia and Alberta. These two governments have created legislation and policies that deliberately attempt to create distinctly different classes or categories of post-secondary institutions. We analyze how these actions have affected the perceived legitimacy of institutions in these provinces. As a result of this analysis, we propose that government's coercive force in regulating post-secondary education is best understood as having two components: regulatory coercion and social coercion. We conclude by discussing how the theoretical and practical understanding of the process of legitimation in post-secondary education can be advanced by further examining the role and actions of government.

Legislation and Policy as Legitimators

Relatively little research in organizational theory has focused on better understanding how government legislation and policy may act as a legitimating mechanism, beyond the raw force of coercion. Sonpar, Pazzaglia, and Kornijenko (2010) looked at whether government-driven reforms of Alberta's health care system affected the perceived legitimacy of the health authorities mandated to implement the reforms. They examined legitimacy using Suchman's (1995) three-fold typology, distinguishing between cognitive legitimacy (defined as comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness), moral legitimacy (defined as normative evaluation), and pragmatic legitimacy (defined as assessment based on self-interested calculation). The authors suggest that while the health authorities' actions initially increased their cognitive legitimacy in the eyes of government, their moral legitimacy decreased in other parts of the environment because of a perceived inattention to stakeholder concerns. Eventually the health authorities reached a state of pragmatic legitimacy through modifications to their original actions designed to address the concerns of all parties.

This example indicates that while government is a powerful source of legitimation, the legitimacy it confers may not be recognized by all stakeholders and that perceptions of legitimacy acquired in response to government control efforts evolve across time, across different parts of the environment, and across different audiences. Sonpar et al. (2010)

also note that "[a] strategic approach to engaging and managing various groups,… as opposed to simply focusing on [a] few key constituents that confer legitimacy, may be more necessary than proposed by institutional theory" (p. 17). Legitimacy is ultimately conferred by those external to the organization, and thus different types of legitimacy in the eyes of different audiences have different implications.

Ashworth, Boyne, and Delbridge (2007) examined change in United Kingdom public sector organizations caused by isomorphic pressure and what components of these organizations were most affected by such pressure. Coercive force was applied by government through new legislation requiring local and regional governments to develop strategies and set performance targets. A survey of representatives of 101 public-sector organizations indicated that the legislation did not produce any significant convergence toward similar organizational characteristics, as might have been expected in response to a uniform set of regulations. However, the authors note that since these organizations have been subject to government regulation for the last century, there may have been little scope for change. Isomorphic pressure appeared to have the strongest impact on organizational culture and strategy, rather than on structure and processes, and had the greatest effect where regulatory pressures were most strongly applied (e.g., when site visits were made to check compliance with certain parts of the legislation). The authors suggest that isomorphic pressure through legislation may result in "conformity" in compliance with the law but may not result in "conformity" in convergence toward a common structural model.

In the specific context of post-secondary education, Arvast (2008) examined the 2002 Ontario alterations to the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, which removed the "catchment areas" defining the communities served by community colleges, "while still … maintain[ing] some control over the nomenclature and overall outcomes of diplomas and degrees" (p. 109). Arvast characterizes these changes as "a conscious design of elitism" (p. 114) because, while the redesigned system allegedly afforded colleges more freedom in programming choices, it also maintained the monopoly of the province's universities over degree program approval standards. Thus, through this legislation, government established how the legitimacy associated with degree programs will be allocated, and in Arvast's view did so in a way that privileged existing hierarchies among post-secondary institutions.

Cooke and Lang (2008) examined how government regulations, particularly funding formulas, affected the strategic plans of Ontario community colleges. The authors theorized that these plans would be highly similar since the colleges were all subject to the same funding formulas and regulatory structures, and also shared a common mandate and a common set of activities. While colleges attempted to differentiate themselves by using different status-associated words to characterize themselves (e.g., "national," "premier," "best"), the authors' analysis found there was minimal variation in stated strategic goals and a high degree of similarity among the strategic plans' content and components. The authors suggest, "the colleges recognize consciously or unconsciously that their growth and survival does not depend on competition, differentiation, or comparative advantage as much as it depends on the intent and strategy of [the government]" (p. 633), thus implying that government can be an extremely powerful isomorphic force because of its control over desired resources and because of organizations' desire or need to acquire those resources.

Wedlin (2006) examined the role of business school rankings in the evolution of the field of business and management education in Europe. She conceptualized business school rankings as an arena in which control over the meaning and sources of legitimate business education was played out among educational institutions, media organizations that rank business schools, and stakeholders that consume business education. She found the rankings served as a classification system that brought both stability and change. The rankings tended to outline a template for business education, which set broad parameters for inclusion in the category of business school and the meaning of a legitimate business school, without designating the specific practices or attributes that such a school needed to have. Thus, while the template provided all institutions with the basic category boundaries for legitimate business education in Europe, there was sufficient width inside those boundaries for individual institutions to differentiate themselves.

Wedlin also argued that the rankings involved a struggle over defining the source of the authority to assess and compare legitimate business management education. Thus, individual institutions also engaged in boundary work to shape the criteria for evaluation in the rankings, and made changes to their organizational identities in order to be included in the ranking or to emulate prototypical others. Wedlin's analysis integrates these diverse findings by explaining how a formal classification system forced upon organizations sets in motion a contest over boundaries, which generates homogenization of a template for category membership as well as resistance among the affected organizations who wish to assert control over their organizational identities and distinction.

Provincial Legislation and Policy Affecting Post-Secondary Education

In this section, we describe several recent regulatory actions in two Canadian provinces that have formally attempted to control, through legislation and policy, how government-granted legitimacy is conferred on post-secondary institutions. We follow these descriptions with an analysis of these actions using an institutional theory framework.

Alberta

Two key government mechanisms affecting the public post-secondary environment in Alberta are the "six sector model" and the Campus Alberta Quality Council. In November 2007 the Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology instituted a policy framework for publicly funded post-secondary education. The stated motivations for creating this framework include the development of the province's economic capacity, increased competitiveness, human resource development, and "*differentiated roles* [our emphasis] combined with a high degree of system collaboration ... to achieve excellence" (Alberta Ministry, 2007, p. 1).

The framework outlines a six sector model based on "institutional differentiation ... largely based on credentials offered, type and intensity of research activity, as well as geographic focus" (p. 9). The framework document specifies that the names of classifications within the model "are not intended to convey a system of nomenclature for institutions, for example, the use of the term 'university' or the use of the term 'college'" (p. 9). The six sectors within the framework are Comprehensive Academic and Research Institutions, Baccalaureate and Applied Studies Institutions, Polytechnical Institutions, Comprehen-

sive Community Institutions, Independent Academic Institutions, and Specialized Arts and Culture Institutions. The definition of each sector also includes a list of the specific institutions assigned to that sector. The framework document further clarifies the term "research activity" as including pure research, applied research, and scholarly activity, and specifies, "pure research is conducted by the Comprehensive Academic and Research Institutions" (p. 11).

The other regulatory mechanism, the Campus Alberta Quality Council, is intended to regulate the quality of degrees granted by post-secondary institutions operating in Alberta, including private institutions and institutions based outside Alberta. Institutions proposing new degree programs must submit a proposal to the Minister of Advanced Education. After a review by ministry staff, the proposal is then reviewed by the council, which assesses the content of the program and also assesses whether, in its opinion, the institution proposing the program is capable of effectively delivering the program. The council uses nine criteria in its assessment, including faculty and staff qualifications, institutional resources, academic policies, program content and delivery, and credential recognition. The council then makes a recommendation to the minister, who decides whether the institution can offer the program (Campus Alberta, 2010). In the council's own words, it is "committed to ensuring the national and international recognition of Alberta's degrees" (p. 1).

British Columbia

Public post-secondary institutions in British Columbia are governed by the Ministry of Advanced Education. Universities are defined as "offer[ing] an array of undergraduate degree programs and a range of programs at the graduate level. Some also offer courses and programs in trades, vocational, and career technical studies leading to certificates and diplomas, as well as developmental programs that prepare adult learners for post-secondary studies. Some universities undertake original and applied research in a range of disciplines, while others undertake applied research and scholarly activities in support of their programming" (Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development, 2010).

Colleges are defined as "offer[ing] developmental programs that prepare adult learners for post-secondary studies, as well as courses and programs in trades, vocational, career technical and academic studies leading to certificates, diplomas, associate degrees and applied degrees" (Ministry of Regional Economic and Skills Development, 2010).

Within the group of 11 British Columbia public institutions named as "universities," there are further legislated distinctions. In 2008, the University Amendment Act created five new universities from existing university–colleges and colleges. The act specifically identifies the mandate of these new universities as "special purpose, teaching universities [that] ...so far as and to the extent that its resources from time to time permit, undertake and maintain applied research and scholarly activities to support [its] programs" (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2008, sec. 47.1). Two other degree-granting public institutions in the province (Thompson Rivers University and Royal Roads University) were created and mandated through individual acts of legislation.

As in Alberta, the British Columbia government has created an advisory board to assess and make recommendations on degree programs. The Degree Quality Assessment Board (DQAB) in British Columbia operates very similarly to the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC), but with two major differences. In British Columbia, degree pro-

gram applications from colleges and institutes are reviewed by the Ministry of Advanced Education rather than DQAB; in Alberta, all degree program applications, regardless of the status of the applying institution, are reviewed by CAQC. Additionally, DQAB, unlike CAQC, has the mandate to make recommendations on applications involving "the use of the word 'university' submitted by private and out-of-province public post-secondary institutions" (Degree Quality Assessment Board, 2010).

In 2009, the British Columbia government introduced another regulatory mechanism. Education Quality Assurance (EQA) is a "quality assurance designation that identifies BC public and private post-secondary institutions that have met or exceeded provincial government-recognized quality assurance standards and offer consumer protection" (Education Quality Assurance, 2010). EQA membership is voluntary. Institutions wishing to receive the EQA designation must make a formal application and undergo a review process. EQA member institutions are entitled to display the EQA seal on their promotional materials and to be identified as EQA members in provincial government listings of British Columbia post-secondary institutions. To date, 25 public and 33 private post-secondary institutions in British Columbia have received the EQA designation.

Analysis

A comparison of these legislative and policy initiatives suggests similar underlying goals from an institutional theory perspective: to define and articulate categories of different post-secondary institutions, and to implement mechanisms that regulate the type and quality of activities by members of each class. Using Scott's (2008) terminology, the British Columbia and Alberta governments have set up constitutive rules that define different social actors with different capacities and interests and then devised rules to regulate the behaviour of those actors through the application of sanctions and incentives. An orthodox interpretation sees governments as more or less paternalistic, trying to stabilize a field in turmoil by implementing new guidelines for legitimacy, intended to benefit all institutions. This interpretation also sees institutions as more or less passive recipients of those guidelines, whose acceptance of new legitimacy standards mirrors field-level stability.

Another interpretation builds on Wedlin's (2006) framework. In this interpretation, governments are political actors, trying to assert their authority to establish boundaries for legitimate higher education institutions. These boundaries serve governments' interests by distributing resources differently (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). This interpretation also sees individual institutions as actors that do not necessarily or fully accept the boundaries created by government without some resistance, and thus they attempt to refine category boundaries by asserting organizational attributes unique to their identity and status and relative to other institutions. Consequently, while institutions may have little choice but to accept newly established official categories, what happens at the local organizational level is subject to deviation through translation, interpretation, and editing of boundary meanings (Sahlin-Andersson & Wedlin, 2008).

Additionally, both provinces have chosen a similar mechanism (an advisory review board) to accomplish the goal of system regulation through the enforcement of tacit or explicit institutional norms about the acceptability of degree programs. These mechanisms can also be interpreted as boundary-setting devices in which measurement along an established set of criteria leads to either inclusion or exclusion in a category of legitimate

degree-granting institutions (Wedlin, 2006). The majority of the members of both DQAB and CAQC are appointed by government and are also associated with established post-secondary institutions. In addition, both boards appoint external reviewers—generally individuals with extensive experience in post-secondary education—to participate in the assessment of degree applications and program proposals. In other words, even though both mechanisms are intended to reinforce governments' established standards—standards that are presumably consistent with the typology of post-secondary institutions—drawing on the expertise of established stakeholders in the traditional post-secondary environment means that the interests of those other stakeholders may influence the way boundaries are likely to be enacted. Hence, government control may be oriented toward discouraging program applications that do not meet the new standards of practice, for example, those that do not include the range of subjects that *should* be included in a degree-granting program of study.

However, the two provinces differ in their use of mechanisms to define differences between types of post-secondary institutions. Alberta's six sector model assigns institutions by name to specific groups with defined mandates. British Columbia has legislated some definitional differences, particularly for the institutions most recently redefined as universities, but otherwise does not formally distinguish between different types of institutions. Alberta's model may be more practical for a province with relatively few private post-secondary institutions. British Columbia's more complex post-secondary landscape includes several private degree-granting institutions, including some based in other jurisdictions, and many private colleges and institutes, so a streamlined framework similar to the six sector model could be difficult to apply effectively. The EQA mechanism is a potential source of further differentiation, but EQA membership requires institutions to already be subject to some form of government regulatory oversight; thus, EQA primarily reinforces existing distinctions rather than creating new ones.

A larger issue, though, is whether the coercive power exercised by these governments affects legitimacy perceptions in the post-secondary field in these two jurisdictions. To fully understand this effect, we propose a refinement to the one-dimensional conceptualization of government's coercive force in the organizational-theory literature. We suggest that government's coercive power actually has *two* components—regulatory coercion and social coercion—and each has a different effect on organizations that is mediated by different boundary setting forces. Regulatory coercion is the force by which government sets boundaries for the category of legally operating organizations. This force is exercised through such mechanisms as licensing, tax remittance, or reporting, which serve to verify that a given organization meets the criteria for inclusion in the category. The power bases for this type of force are formal authority and resource dependence.

Post-secondary institutions in both British Columbia and Alberta must perform specific functions such as reporting enrolment numbers and submitting strategic plans, in order to receive government-controlled resources such as funding. We classify these requirements as regulatory coercion because if institutions do not perform these functions, they will be deemed to fall outside the boundary of what constitutes legal operations. The consequences of not meeting legal standards could include a denial of operating permit or a withdrawal of government resources, either of which could have dire results. Compliance provides the legitimacy associated with legal status, yet does not confer in-

creased reputation, status, or legitimacy in the eyes of other stakeholders. Thus, legitimacy through compliance with regulatory coercion only provides limited meaning and value to post-secondary institutions, and highlights the vast gulf between legitimacy and reputation (Deephouse & Carter, 2005).

While compliance with regulatory coercion allows institutions access to government-controlled resources, in our examples such compliance appears to have little effect on institutions' access to the legitimacy associated with new boundaries of classifications and reshaping the attendant norms and practices in the field. We define the coercive force associated with obtaining legitimacy through inclusion within these classification boundaries as social coercion. As explained above, governments can attempt to influence legitimacy through policies and legislation that create bases for legitimacy beyond legality, by designating a typology of organizational categories and defining criteria or measurement scales that assess the extent to which a given organization meets the specific criteria for membership in one of those categories. Legal or policy-based categories for regulated organizations specify different criteria that define the capabilities, rights, and responsibilities of members of those categories, but in the case of post-secondary education, these criteria are typically rooted in, and must be compatible with, existing field-based norms and practices such as research activity, nomenclature, degree-granting requirements, or geographic mandate.

Hence, while government can accord or revoke legal status to organizations, it has limited ability to enforce social coercion through law because the effect of laws depends also on social approval by other stakeholders, such as professions, the public, employers, and clients (e.g., students). These additional considerations reflect the fact that legitimacy is at least partially a social judgement (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990) and is conferred by an audience. Similarly, Wedlin (2006) describes how business schools in Europe had to show that their actions were compatible with the established criteria for inclusion in business school rankings, even as those same business schools tried to change some of those criteria. In our examples, the two governments are trying to establish a new set of categories that must to some extent be compatible with the established norms and typologies of the field in order to constitute enforceable standards of legitimacy. The involvement of multiple stakeholder audiences in these legitimacy dynamics (e.g., the professoriate, student organizations, provincial and regional associations of universities) further emphasizes the limited ability of governments to enforce new category boundaries.

We can further sharpen our understanding of social coercion by looking at post-secondary institutions' responses to government actions. For example, newer or less well-known universities could attempt to gain social legitimacy by exploiting governmental associations with older or better-known institutions. In Alberta's six sector model, Athabasca University, a newer university focused on distance education, is categorized as a comprehensive academic and research institution alongside larger and older institutions such as the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary. Having been classified by government into a category alongside institutions with established legitimacy, Athabasca could attempt to increase its own legitimacy by exploiting or publicizing this association. However, searches of the Canadian Newsstand database and of Google—sources that could be expected to hold evidence of institutions' public responses to government initiatives—reveal no evidence of Athabasca University attempting to link itself with the es-

tablished reputations of the University of Alberta or the University of Calgary. It appears that government can force post-secondary institutions into categories of typologies that it creates, but the institutions themselves may not necessarily believe that broader social legitimacy can be gained by capitalizing on their placement in that category and resist highlighting any characteristics they share with other category members. Thus, in order to exert effective social coercion, government must rely on individual institutions to recognize and acknowledge relevant category features in their own organizational identities.

It is also noteworthy that both British Columbia and Alberta use the criterion of research activity as a differentiator between institutions, reflecting the institutional norm that research is an essential activity at legitimate post-secondary institutions. The choice of research activity as a differentiation criterion implicitly acknowledges the turbulence of the post-secondary field because historical differentiators, such as institutions' names or types of degrees granted, no longer represent clear distinctions between institutions. Research is thus employed as a criterion to draw new boundaries by, for example, assigning pure research activities to the institutions in only one classification in the Alberta model and specifying that only applied research will take place from time to time at certain types of British Columbia universities (Legislative Assembly, 2008). These choices imply status differences associated with different types of research and therefore may be interpreted as attempts to shape institutional norms separating different types of institutions.

However, the weaknesses of social coercion are highlighted by these governments' decision to associate certain types of research with certain categories of institutions through legislation. The deployment of research as a boundary between types of institutions may not reflect the reality of academic research, because the difference between pure and applied research is ambiguous at best, and government policy or legislation cannot dictate the topics that researchers investigate. Even indirect controls over choice of research topics, such as regulated access to government-supplied research funds, are influenced by other parties, for example, independent third-party administrative agencies and peer review committees. Furthermore, research is a relatively invisible part of post-secondary activity that is unlikely to affect perceptions of an institution's legitimacy by other important stakeholders. Effective boundaries are drawn by criteria that are visible (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), and thus broader judgements of an institution's legitimacy are likely to be based on more visible criteria such as programs or credentials offered, tuition costs, and employment rates for graduates. Therefore, governments' ability to use social coercion to confer legitimacy on post-secondary institutions may be inhibited if the criteria for legitimacy judgment are not under direct government control through formal authority or resource dependence, or are not sufficiently visible to other stakeholders.

In contrast, a government regulatory action that *did* affect public perceptions of post-secondary institutions' legitimacy occurred when the Alberta government permitted Grant McEwan College and Mount Royal College, two non-university degree-granting institutions, to use the name "university" (Kondra, Lamertz, & McQuarrie, 2010). The name changes for these two institutions were not accompanied by any change in mandate or official government status, but this small yet highly visible and symbolic change appeared to confer more external legitimacy on these institutions than any larger change in post-secondary education policy. We argue that this shows yet again that government's social coercion can affect the legitimacy of post-secondary institutions only indirectly because

legitimacy is not conferred by government but by the public. Government legislation can only influence judgments of legitimacy through social coercion to the extent that legislation builds on widely institutionalized boundary standards, such as the symbolic meanings of an institutional name that includes the term "university" (Glynn & Abzug, 2002). We suggest, as others have previously (e.g., Sonpar, Pazzaglia, & Kornijenjo, 2010), that different stakeholders hold different perceptions of a post-secondary institution's legitimacy, and that those perceptions evolve. In the case of government as a stakeholder, once post-secondary institutions respond to the government's regulatory coercion, the legitimacy perceptions of non-governmental stakeholders become much more meaningful to the institutions even if government makes further attempts to control legitimacy through social coercion.

Integrating those analyses with the general idea that boundaries created by government can be resisted and redrawn by individual institutions, we can speculate about a clearer distinction between regulatory and social coercion in reference to the interaction between top-down boundary creation and bottom-up boundary redrawing. Regulatory coercion unfolds top-down through government-legislated models of organizational categories. These operate like a stencil or cookie cutter, producing identical responses because there is little or no latitude in implementing the legislative requirements. Social coercion may also be government initiated and may also operate through legislation, but the legislation creates categorizations that operate more like an institutional template (Wedlin, 2006)—a model that is subject to local interpretation and has leeway in terms of organizational implementation. As a result, conformity to the template may not result in complete organizational homogeneity because individual organizations adapt the template to their particular identities and histories (Mazza, Sahlin-Andersson, & Strandgaard-Pedersen, 2005). In addition, the government template implicit in social coercion cannot force homogeneity because conformity with the template is driven not only by legitimacy judgments in the eyes of government but also from the perspective of other stakeholders, such as professions, peer institutions, and review boards. In social coercion, top-down boundary creation is thus supplemented by bottom-up boundary refinement efforts; this contributes to the emergence of field-level norms and standards by fusing an imposed typology, with boundaries inherent in existing meanings, standards, and norms to create a workable compromise among all stakeholders over time.

According to Clegg (2010, p. 7), "If organizations become *isomorphic* [original emphasis] with their institutional context to secure social approval [legitimacy] which provides survival benefits, then this requires that the institutional context is already secured and is seen as such a sign of legitimacy." Legislation can define institutional contexts, but in the examples we have examined, legislation does not seem to confer anything more than a minimal level of sanctioning to post-secondary institutions operating in a turbulent and deinstitutionalizing field. This may explain why the British Columbia government created a new form of legitimation through the EQA designation. The government may be trying to prove its relevancy and ability to control the environment, since minimal compliance with legislation (i.e., regulatory coercion) apparently does not increase the externally perceived legitimacy of post-secondary institutions. What is interesting in our example is that this government is attempting to confer legitimation through voluntary processes driven by social coercion, rather than through further regulatory coercion. The

government is also apparently attempting to increase its power to legitimate through controlling the use of a symbolic representation of legitimacy (a seal that member institutions can display on their websites and their promotional material), rather than creating a less visible form of additional legitimation with potentially much greater structural or operational impact. As such, this reasoning seems to align with the attitudes expressed by interviewees in Chapleo's (2007) study of branding in British universities, who speak to the external significance of visual marks of differentiation for institutions in a turbulent post-secondary environment.

Thus, we see that post-secondary institutions are far more responsive to symbolic legitimation, such as awarding the right to use a seal or to use the name "university," than to legitimation through comprehensive government policy and legal frameworks. The amount of attention given to university rankings such as those published by *Maclean's* magazine and the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, which target broader, societally defined boundaries that signal status differences (Wedlin, 2006), similarly suggests that legitimacy perceptions of the general public are of critical concern to universities. Searches of the Canadian Newsstand database and of Google for discussions of Alberta's six sector model and the EQA mechanism reveals very little discussion about either initiative, beyond the initial information released by government and institutions' responses to the government's initial information. In contrast, there are several heated on-line discussions around a joint proposal by five of Canada's largest universities that they receive the largest allocation of federal research funds. This suggestion has been characterized by its proponents as "giv[ing] these institutions the means and mandates to set themselves still further apart from the rest of Canada's universities—to pursue world-class scientific research and train the most capable graduate students" (Wells, 2009), thereby making a clear delineation between institutions with graduate programs and high-level scientific research capability and those without. Critics have described the proposal as "insular, short-sighted and potentially destructive" and dismissive of equally valuable research and other forms of scholarly activity that take place in smaller universities and other types of post-secondary institutions (Turk, 2009). The proposal appears to be a direct response by a select group of powerful institutions to the reduced homogeneity of the meaning of the term "university," and the proposal can be interpreted as their undertaking boundary work to obtain social control and to redefine legitimacy.

These universities' actions are somewhat contrary to the actions Clegg envisions, in that these powerful institutions may be attempting to destabilize, rather than stabilize, the field in order to reify their perceived higher status. This could be accomplished by turning what was once a symbolic boundary into a social boundary. Lamont and Molnar distinguish between symbolic and social boundaries on the basis that while both refer to conceptualizations of differences between social entities, the latter but not the former are institutionally "manifest in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources" (2002, p. 168). It could thus be argued that these institutions are attempting to *re-stabilize*; in Clegg's terms, they are trying to maintain the historical norms of the field, as they perceive those norms, in order to help them maintain their historically privileged status. They wish to secure their perceived legitimacy through a change in government policy that would maintain their elite status by formalizing the boundary between them and all other Canadian universities. In essence, this is an attempt at institutional entrepreneur-

ship by the most influential organizations in the field that perceive they are losing the battle and want the field to stabilize in a way that benefits them.

Altogether, the diverse pieces of analysis above suggest that in a field undergoing change, such as Canadian post-secondary education, a struggle is likely to emerge between different stakeholders and groupings of stakeholders over the boundaries defining important categories of social actors and their legitimate activities. Wedlin (2006) argued that while a regulating agency can try to control authority over granting legitimacy to organizations, such authority will not be meaningful without resistance and attempts by the organizations themselves to maintain such authority—to the extent that being able to establish categories and thereby to set category boundaries is tantamount to setting standards of legitimacy. Hence, individual institutions will engage in organization-level activity, such as image management, but will also undertake activities such as developing degree programs, teaching standards, and evaluation criteria for research to establish for themselves how to interpret the categorization required by government. Thus, they will carve out a unique niche to simultaneously fit themselves into the category while still setting themselves apart from other category members.

At a higher level of generality, our analysis highlights two boundary properties that are important in understanding how governments and post-secondary educational institutions may achieve institutional agreements and equilibriums about the definitions of different categories of institutions and the criteria that designate legitimate membership in the categories. First, boundaries not only separate groupings of social entities with different identities but also create groupings of entities with a common identity. This duality of boundaries is highlighted in our analysis of how governments appear to create separate classes through top-down force, but individual institutions seek affiliation with peer organizations through bottom-up defiance or modification of the boundaries around those imposed classes. Likewise, an attempt to define a category of social actors may inevitably be met with defiance because "all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated defy definition; only something which has no history can be defined" (Nietzsche, 1887/1994 p. 56). In other words, neither the historical genesis of post-secondary education in Canada nor the unique histories of individual institutions can conveniently be sidestepped for the purpose of defining a university or different types of universities. Together, those histories have produced practices, norms, and values within the organizational field, and these shape standards of legitimacy in the eyes of established stakeholders and institutions. Artificially setting specific criteria intended to represent a larger group of established historical entities, in many cases with unique historical paths, can therefore only be successfully accomplished by taking those practices, norms, and values into account.

Future Directions

What can be gleaned from this analysis? Consistent with the findings of Sonpar, Pazzaglia, and Kornijenko (2010), we suggest that governments have limited influence over post-secondary institutions' legitimacy in the public sphere, outside of setting minimum regulatory classification standards within which membership is enforced through regulative mechanisms resting on formal authority and resource dependence. Thus, government's coercive power over post-secondary institutions can be conceptualized as taking

two forms: regulatory coercion and social coercion. We suggest that social coercion, which government can only control indirectly, has much more impact on the perceived legitimacy of post-secondary institutions than regulatory coercion does. According to Deephouse and Suchman (2008), legitimacy is binary—an institution has it or it does not—only from the perspective of a single stakeholder audience. The coercive powers of the state may thus not have played a large role in discussions about legitimacy in post-secondary education because in this context it is largely a public good, conferred by multiple stakeholders. The templates that governments impose only initiate boundary work by organizations, which react to and attempt to define or redefine the field and the associated category boundaries. These reactions may include asserting organizational attributes unique to their identity and status relative to other institutions.

Government's effectiveness as a legitimator through legislating behavioural norms is limited to integrating relevant criteria into definitions of constitutive categories. Because implementation, monitoring, and enforcement of norms and practices is a prerogative shared with other stakeholders in a field (Baron, Dobbin, & Jennings, 1986; Reay & Hinings, 2005), government can only initiate social coercion by selectively providing identities and capabilities from which organizations may choose to compete for additional legitimacy through social approval from other stakeholders. For the regulated organizations, government-initiated legitimation thus sets a default basis on which to compete for additional social approval and esteem in the form of status and reputation (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Top-down regulatory coercion may only provide loose templates, which are subject to local interpretation and which provide leeway in terms of organizational implementation. We surmise that such further competition involves extensive translation and editing of suggested institutional standards to suit local exigencies (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), resulting in bottom-up resistance and boundary work that contribute to shaping organization fields. Collectively, the field thus becomes an arena in which organizations, stakeholders, and coalitions of organizations and stakeholders may engage in entrepreneurial activity and power struggles to influence the very definitions of what is acceptable and approved by their audiences. This is no less true of post-secondary education in Canada than it is of any other organizational field. Future developments in this regard may occur in the form of government responses to the 2011 *Times* Higher Education World University Rankings; the standings of Canadian universities slipped in these rankings, which provoked a renewed call by elite institutions to alter distributions of university funding (Bradshaw, 2012).

We suggest that the understanding of the effects of organizational legitimacy in Canadian post-secondary education could be greatly developed and enriched by further investigation and assessment of the effects of government's regulatory and social coercion in general. The impact of regulatory and social coercion on the legitimacy of Canadian post-secondary institutions could be contrasted with governmental effects on the perceived legitimacy of other public and para-public organizations such as not-for-profit organizations dependent on government funding or on groups of privately owned organizations subject to stringent government oversight, such as casinos. There may be potentially rich findings in comparing regulatory and/or social coercion's effects in strictly regulated groups and in loosely regulated groups. Qualitative data such as interview data may also produce a more thorough understanding of the impact of regulatory and social coercion on post-secondary

institutions' legitimacy, particularly in identifying how government regulation or policies affect organizations' routine functioning. These research directions have great potential for furthering our understanding of government's effects on how the legitimacy of post-secondary institutions is generated, how it is maintained, and how it may evolve. ❧

Acknowledgement

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