Organizational narratives and self-legitimation in international organizations

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In contrast to most of the articles in this special issue, this contribution turns the lens inwards on international organizations (IOs) to examine self-legitimation: legitimation activities aimed not at audiences such as member states, publics or beneficiaries, but at IO staff themselves. Self-legitimation is undertaken by IO leaders for IO staff in a bid to (re)affirm a cohesive and normatively appropriate organizational identity, one that is aligned with the values and principles espoused by the organization.[1] Self-legitimation occurs in all IOs, but it is particularly salient in complex organizations that have contradictory mandates, objectives and organizational values. These contradictions compel staff to make choices about what to prioritize, forcing them to sometimes behave in ways that are contrary to the norms and rules of their institutional environment and therefore illegitimate. Where this occurs, staff experience operational complexity and ambiguity, which can lead to reduced motivation, low commitment and, ultimately, ineffectiveness. IO leaders therefore create self-legitimation narratives in order to maintain cohesion, clarity of mission and staff dedication.

Though IO self-legitimation is relatively unstudied, there is a growing literature that examines the topic, including discursive and behavioural practices and the agents within IOs who undertake them.[2] This literature concludes that

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[1] Sarah von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror, on the wall": self-legitimation by international organizations', *International Studies Quarterly* 64: 1, 2020, pp. 207–19; Sarah von Billerbeck, 'No action without talk? UN peacekeeping, discourse, and institutional self-legitimation', *Review of International Studies* 46: 4, 2020, pp. 477–94.

[2] von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror"'; von Billerbeck, 'No action without talk'; Jennifer Gronau and Henning Schmidtke, 'The quest for legitimacy in world politics: international institutions' legitimation strategies', *Review of International Studies* 42: 3, 2016, pp. 535–57; Ben Christian, 'A threat rather than a resource: why voicing internal criticism is difficult in international organisations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 25, 2022, pp. 425–49; Rodney Barker, *Legitimating identities: the self-presentations of rulers and subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Karl Weick, *Sensemaking in organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995); James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, 'The institutional dynamics of international political orders', *International Organization* 52: 4, 1998, pp. 943–69; Sabine Saurugger, 'Sociological institutionalism and European integration', in William R. Thompson, ed., *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Gisela Hirschmann, 'International organizations' responses to member state contesta-

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self-legitimation is a crucial and constitutive activity of IOs, but that it entails a number of adverse consequences including stasis, resistance to change and a lack of innovation.[3] However, this literature does not yet systematically show why certain self-legitimation narratives proposed by IO leaderships are taken up by staff and become dominant in an organization, while others peter out or are challenged by counter-narratives from staff.

This article addresses this gap by zeroing in on the agent- and audience-based perspectives in the agents–audiences–environment (AAE) framework,[4] here composed of IO leadership and IO staff respectively. I ask how the type of narrative content used by agents explains which self-legitimation narratives 'stick' and which fade away or are challenged by counter-narratives proposed by audiences. To answer this question, I first review the scholarship on internal legitimation in organizations, drawing on International Relations, sociology and organization studies to examine why and how IOs engage in internally directed legitimation activities. Second, I describe the life-cycle of self-legitimation narratives, depicting the pathways by which narratives introduced by agents are variously *endorsed* by audiences and emerge as dominant within an IO, *challenged* by counter-narratives proposed by audiences, or *rejected* or *disregarded*. Third, I identify three categories of narrative content that make a self-legitimation narrative more or less likely to follow a particular pathway: purpose, performance and politics.

Overall, I argue that self-legitimation narratives in IOs are more likely to become dominant when agents focus their content on purpose, and that when they focus on performance or politics, they are more likely to be challenged by their intended audiences. There are, of course, numerous factors unrelated to content that influence the success or failure of narratives—for example, the relative power of agents who initiate narratives, or the resources available for their dissemination. However, I focus here specifically on content, showing how narratives of purpose are particularly central for IO self-legitimation, while narratives of performance or politics tend to be weaker, less convincing and easier to refute, and thus more susceptible to audience-driven challenges. Where such challenges emerge, legitimacy-granting audiences can compel agents to adjust the content of legitimation claims in order to make them more focused on purpose and therefore more acceptable to audiences. I thus show how, in self-legitimation, the agent- and audience-based perspectives of the AAE framework interact, in particular where agents draw primarily on performance or politics. Specifically, I show that agent-based perspectives cannot draw exclusively on agents' own normative frameworks and ideologies because they risk being challenged by audiences who do not find

tion: from inertia to resilience', *International Affairs* 97: 6, 2021, pp. 1963–81.

[3] von Billerbeck, 'No action without talk'; Sarah von Billerbeck, 'Talk from the top: leadership and self-legitimation in international organizations', *International Studies Review* 24: 3, 2022; Christian, 'A threat'; Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore, *Rules for the world: international organizations in world politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, 'Institutionalized organizations: formal structure as myth and ceremony', *American Journal of Sociology* 83: 2, 1977, pp. 340–63.

[4] Tobias Lenz and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'The origins of legitimation strategies in international organizations: agents, audiences and environments', *International Affairs* 99: 4, 2023, pp. 899–920.

these frameworks convincing.[5] In this way, narrative endorsement requires that agents be sensitive to the normative demands of audiences, and that they strike a balance between their own normative convictions and those of the audiences to whom they wish to appeal.

I illustrate my argument with two cases from the UN. The first examines the rhetoric of local ownership in UN peace operations. Here, agents successfully proposed a narrative focused on purpose, which was widely endorsed by audiences and has subsequently become dominant. The second examines internal discussions surrounding the cholera epidemic in Haiti. In this case, agents proposed a narrative focused on politics that failed to convince its audience and was challenged by an audience-driven counter-narrative focused on purpose; this forced the agents to revise their narrative. These case-studies and my theoretical discussion are based upon 87 interviews with officials from three IOs: the UN, the World Bank and NATO.[6]

Ultimately, whether self-legitimation narratives are endorsed, challenged or rejected has implications for staff motivation and overall effectiveness in IOs, and thus getting it right is crucial for IO leadership. Most IO leaders are aware of the importance of effective communication with key constituencies, yet these are nearly always externally focused and neglect internal audiences.[7] Where efforts are made to communicate with staff, they may focus too heavily on politics- or performance-related issues, thus missing the special role that purpose plays in the self-legitimacy perceptions of staff. Indeed, IO staff tend to be 'believers' in their organizations and in their mission, values and principles. Even if abiding by these is complex in practice, for staff they are crucial to having a sense of cohesion, clarity and appropriateness in the face of ambiguity and contradiction. IO leaders who tailor internal messaging accordingly are thus more likely to see a more motivated, satisfied and effective workforce.

Self-legitimation in IOs

Scholars in International Relations have long noted that in the absence of coercive means to exercise authority, IOs rely disproportionately on perceptions of legitimacy by stakeholders to operate effectively,[8] and they have examined IO legitimation strategies and practices, a range of legitimacy audiences, and the success or failure of these attempts. One area that has received relatively little attention is self-legitimation. Most analyses of legitimation by and legitimacy perceptions of IOs

[5] Lenz and Söderbaum, 'The origins of legitimation strategies'.

[6] Interviews were conducted between Jan. 2017 and Feb. 2018. Interviewees were selected for their familiarity with the mission and values of the organization, organizational structure and member-state relations, and internal discourse and communications. All interviewees were secretariat staff and represent a range of ranks and functions.

[7] Lenz and Söderbaum use 'internal audiences' to refer to those subject to IO rules, and 'external' ones as those who are not. My usage differs slightly: 'internal' refers to staff of an IO, and all audiences that are not 'members' of the organization are 'external'.

[8] Ian Hurd, *After anarchy: legitimacy and power in the United Nations Security Council* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

focus on external audiences such as member states, domestic publics, the media, civil society and private-sector actors.[9] Yet IO bureaucracies are distinct legitimacy audiences in their own right.[10] Indeed, as scholars in organization studies, sociology and management studies have shown for other types of organization (e.g. government agencies, private-sector firms or non-profit organizations), an internal sense of appropriateness, cohesion and alignment with organizational norms and values is crucial for organizational identity, staff commitment and effectiveness.[11] Where organizations face incoherence in identity, mission and purpose, frequent divergence from stated values and unclear guidance on how to deal with situations of complexity, staff become demotivated and organizations become less efficient and effective.[12]

These studies have largely omitted IOs, but the problem of organizational identity incoherence is in fact particularly acute in these organizations, for two reasons. First, while some IOs have narrow scopes, focusing on a single technical or substantive area, most large IOs have wide-ranging mandates, undertaking an array of operational activities (e.g. peace operations, food distribution and environmental action), while also contributing to the development and dissemination of international norms, values and aspirational standards relating to democracy, human rights, equality and inclusion. This dedication to values and norms constitutes a key element of most IOs' identities, thereby distinguishing them from other types of organizations. However, the idealism of their normative mission can and frequently does clash with the reality of their operations on the ground, leaving staff to weigh conflicting courses of action against one another, take difficult decisions about what to prioritize, and therefore sometimes 'violate' their own stated values.

Second, most IOs are structurally complex. They are simultaneously agents obliged to fulfil tasks mandated by member states and autonomous entities composed of international civil servants who do not answer to any particular national government and who have specialized expertise, develop their own preferences and exercise operational discretion.[13] These two organizational identities can clash in practice, where the dictates of member states diverge from courses of action deemed appropriate by staff, again compelling the latter to compromise

[9] Magdalena Bexell, Kristina Jönsson and Nora Stappert, 'Whose legitimacy beliefs count? Targeted audiences in global governance legitimation processes', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 24, 2021, pp. 483–508.

[10] von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror"'; Gronau and Schmidtke, 'The quest for legitimacy'.

[11] Eero Vaara, Scott Sonenshein and David Boje, 'Narratives as sources of stability and change in organizations: approaches and directions for future research', *Academy of Management Annals* 10: 1, 2016, pp. 495–560; Michael Humphreys and Andrew Brown, 'Narratives of organizational identity and identification: a case study of hegemony and resistance', *Organization Studies* 23: 3, 2002, pp. 421–47; Benjamin D. Gollant and John A. A. Sillince, 'The constitution of organizational legitimacy: a narrative perspective', *Organization Studies* 28: 8, 2007, pp. 1149–67; Weick, *Sensemaking*.

[12] Lamberto Zollo, Maria Carman Laudano, Andrea Boccardi and Cristiano Ciappei, 'From governance to organizational effectiveness: the role of organizational identity and volunteers' commitment', *Journal of Management and Governance*, vol. 23, 2019, pp. 111–37 at pp. 114, 118; Jane E. Dutton, Janet M. Dukerich and Celia V. Harquail, 'Organizational images and member identification', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 39: 2, 1994, pp. 239–63.

[13] Barnett and Finnemore, *Rules for the world*; Volker Rittberger, Bernhard Zangl, Andreas Kruck and Hylke Dijkstra, *International organization*, 3rd edn (London: Red Globe, 2019).

on their expertise, independence and organizational values.[14] This leaves staff with an unclear and disordered sense of organizational identity and purpose and, ultimately, a weak sense of their own legitimacy.

Where this occurs, IO staff turn to self-legitimation. Efforts to this end are primarily discursive and behavioural, entailing the use of narratives and language, alongside symbols, rituals and performative acts, to engender a sense of cohesion, uniqueness and exceptionalism, and to demonstrate how the IO's identity is aligned with its organizational values and principles.[15] These activities are normally initiated by the senior leadership of IOs, due to their access to discursive resources and their high social status within the IO,[16] and they are directed at an internal audience composed of other IO staff. More specifically, IO leaders construct narratives that focus on the overarching goals of the organization (e.g. ending war or alleviating poverty) and the moral importance of these goals; the independent expertise and dedication of staff; and the supposed universality of the values they promote. They do this primarily by invoking sweeping language, phrases and stories from charters, founding documents, and mission statements that gloss over the finer details of the IO's work. These narratives simplify complexity, downplay contradiction and give sense to disparate activities.[17] As Geiger and Antonacopoulou note, narratives in organizations 'give meaning to events … , construct individual or collective identities, [and] transfer emotions, norms, and values'.[18] Alvesson and Willmott similarly note that organizational narratives portray an identity with 'coherence, distinctiveness and commitment'.[19] Brunsson concurs, arguing that when faced with inconsistency, staff make 'forceful attempts to describe the organization as one coherent actor'.[20]

Importantly, the accuracy of such depictions is generally irrelevant to this process. As Vaara and colleagues contend, 'when organizational actors retell narratives, their primary focus is not on accuracy but plausibility and some kind of coherence'.[21] Brown and Starkey describe five processes in organizations—denial, rationalization, idealization, fantasy and symbolization—whereby staff ignore contradictions, and organizations are 'stripped of any negative features' and portrayed in 'unrealistic', idealistic ways in order to maintain cohesive, positive

[14] von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror"'.

[15] Some work on self-legitimation categorizes symbol, ritual and performance as discursive; in keeping with the framework in the introduction to this section, I count them as behavioural strategies here. See von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror"'. To a lesser extent, self-legitimation can entail institutional legitimation, such as reforming organizational procedures, granting benefits or professional development opportunities (e.g. sabbaticals, trainings, mentorship, etc.), or introducing new performance evaluation mechanisms (e.g. 360-degree feedback, whereby feedback is gathered from an employee's subordinates, peers and supervisor(s), alongside self-evaluation by the employee themselves).

[16] von Billerbeck, 'Talk from the top',

[17] Weick, *Sensemaking*; Vaara et al., 'Narratives'; Gollant and Sillince, 'The constitution of organizational legitimacy'.

[18] Daniel Geiger and Elena Antonacopoulou, 'Narratives and organizational dynamics: exploring blind spots and organizational inertia', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 45: 3, 2009, pp. 411–36 at p. 413.

[19] Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott, 'Identity regulation as organizational control: producing the appropriate individual', *Journal of Management Studies* 39: 5, 2002, pp. 620–44 at p. 619.

[20] Nils Brunsson, *The consequences of decision-making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 125.

[21] Vaara et al., 'Narratives', p. 517.

identities and organizational self-esteem.[22] In complex, multi-mandated IOs, then, where staff face conflicting obligations or are compelled to flout organizational values, narratives—even (or especially) inaccurate ones—help to construct a coherent, legitimate identity.

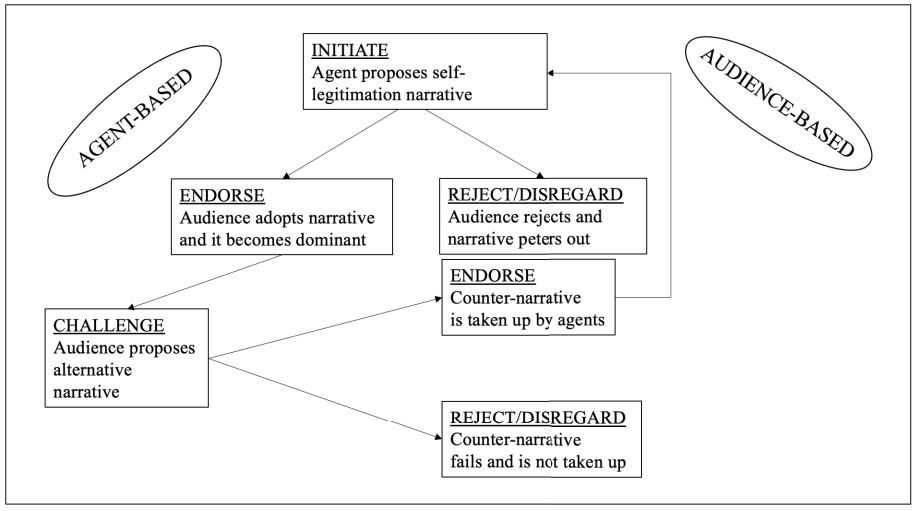
This process is primarily agent-driven because IO leaders initiate self-legitimation narratives based upon the IO's norms, values and legitimacy standards, rather than those of external audiences or peer IOs. Of course, because the main audience for self-legitimation—rank-and-file staff—have self-selected into the organization, they are likely to already believe in or be predisposed to believe in these norms and values. In this way, self-legitimation consists of a form of reinforcement of staff beliefs, and it can be conceived of as part of an ongoing process of socialization into and internalization by staff of the shared ideology of the IO.

At the same time, as I show in the next section, self-legitimation can also be audience-driven. Self-legitimation narratives initiated by leaders can be challenged by counter-narratives from staff, who propose new narratives based upon an alternative set of norms and values, which can then be endorsed by the agents who either take them up or revise their own narratives. In this way, IO self-legitimation highlights the fact that legitimation processes in IOs are not fixed, but instead dynamic, iterative and evolving, and they show how agent- and audience-based perspectives interact.

Life cycle of an IO self-legitimation narrative

Self-legitimation narratives can follow three pathways, as illustrated in figure 1: (1) *reject/disregard*; (2) *endorse*; or (3) *challenge*.

Figure 1: Life-cycle of self-legitimation narratives in IOs



[22] Andrew D. Brown and Ken Starkey, 'Organizational identity and learning: a psychodynamic perspective', *Academy of Management Review* 25: 1, 2000, pp. 102–20 at pp. 105–8.

IO leaders base self-legitimation upon their interpretation of what the IO is and stands for, and it therefore represents a mix of their own ideology and the IO's mandate. Once a narrative is initiated, it can be *rejected* or *disregarded*, failing to gain traction with legitimation audiences (IO staff) and petering out.[23] Alternatively, it can be *endorsed* and become dominant—that is, adopted throughout the organization and repeated by staff at different levels and with different functions. As mentioned, staff are likely to be highly amenable to accepting these narratives, but they do not actively play a role in constructing them, and this pathway can thus be considered agent-driven.

Such narratives, which have variously been called 'grand narratives',[24] 'master narratives',[25] 'core stories',[26] 'master stories'[27] and 'dominant stories',[28] become dominant 'by simply being told over and over again',[29] without regard for their continued relevance or accuracy. Uncritical repetition helps a narrative to take on the status of 'truth', thus making it unquestioned within the organization and ultimately self-reinforcing or, as Geiger and Antonacopoulou put it, 'self-legitimizing'.[30] As Autesserre notes, narratives that are repeated can come to be viewed as 'the only conceivable ones', thus providing continuity, stability and coherence.[31] Weick concurs, asserting that narrative-telling in organizations involves 'seeing what one believes and not seeing that for which one has no beliefs', thus bounding the realm of what is convincing and imaginable for staff.[32] Where a narrative becomes dominant through repetition, then, it will constitute a source of self-legitimacy perceptions for staff because they associate it with truth and a coherent identity, and it eliminates complexity and contradiction. This in turn can encourage additional repetition, further entrenching the narrative's dominance.[33]

[23] This article does not examine this pathway in detail (partly because it is difficult to observe empirically), but rejection probably relates to poor timing and lack of relevance and resonance.

[24] J. F. Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); David M. Boje, *Narrative methods for organizational and communications research* (London: Sage, 2001).

[25] Astrid Jensen Schleiter, Cindie Aaen Maagaard and Rasmus Kjærgaard Rasmussen, '"Speaking through the other": countering counter-narratives through stakeholders' stories', in Sanne Frandsen, Timothy Kuhn and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, eds, *Counter-narratives and organization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 83–103; Yannis Gabriel, 'Narrative ecologies and the role of counter-narratives: the case of nostalgic stories and conspiracy theories', in Frandsen et al., eds, *Counter-narratives*, pp. 208–26.

[26] Mogens Holten Larsen, 'Managing the corporate story', in Majken Schultz, Mary Jo Hatch and Mogens Holten Larsen, eds, *The expressive organization: linking identity, reputation, and the corporate brand* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 196–207.

[27] J. Jasper Deuten and Arie Rip, 'Narrative infrastructure in produce creation processes', *Organization* 7: 1, 2000, pp. 69–93.

[28] Boje, *Narrative methods*. In organization studies, narrative and story are often used interchangeably, but some scholars distinguish between them: stories follow a sequential plot and are entertaining (e.g. dramatic or comedic), while narratives sometimes lack a cohesive plot or sequence, consisting instead of fragments and phrases linked around a particular theme (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 'Narratives', p. 413; Vaara et al., 'Narratives', p. 496). I use the latter definition.

[29] Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 'Narratives', p. 429.

[30] Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 'Narratives', p. 412.

[31] Séverine Autesserre, 'Dangerous tales: dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences', *African Affairs* 111: 443, 2012, pp. 202–22 at p. 207.

[32] Weick, *Sensemaking*, p. 87.

[33] Replication can entail minor modifications to a dominant narrative or variations on its key themes and language without fundamentally questioning or challenging it (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 'Narratives', p. 414; Boje, *Narrative methods*). These narratives, by deviating only slightly from a dominant narrative, may expand the latter's resonance by rendering it appealing to a wider audience and making it easier to adopt.

However, dominant narratives proposed by agents may also be *challenged* by alternative discourses proposed by audiences.[34] Indeed, part of what makes a narrative dominant is the existence of other narratives: dominance is a relational concept and without divergent or weaker narratives, dominance would be impossible to observe.[35] As Currie and Brown describe, organizations are 'polyphonic, socially constructed verbal systems characterized by multiple, simultaneous and sequential narratives that variously interweave, harmonize or clash'.[36] Czarniawska concurs, noting that 'some narrative has been chosen (or enforced) as the official one, or the legitimate one, or the correct one; but there are others that defy and contradict it'.[37] These other narratives are proposed by junior, mid-level or even senior staff, such as heads of units or departments, and they may explicitly challenge the dominant narrative, directly questioning its assumptions, accuracy or relevance, or they may simply present alternative ideas, themes and topics.

This pathway can be characterized as audience-driven. While the end-goal remains the same—the reaffirmation of a coherent, positive organizational identity aligned with the organization's stated mission—here the legitimacy audience proposes alternative narratives that suggest that self-legitimacy beliefs may be better, more accurately or more powerfully derived from sources other than those posited by a dominant narrative. Such discourse, like any self-legitimation narrative, can of course peter out, never gaining traction against a hegemonic narrative, but it can also win followers, evolving from casual discourse into more systematic counter-claims and full-blown counter-narratives. Where a counter-claim is memorable, resonates with and is repeated by staff, and eventually wins the endorsement of the IO leadership, the cycle begins again: the new narrative will either fade or continue to grow in salience, displacing previous dominant narratives, existing alongside them or even generating counter-narratives of its own.[38]

The narrative life-cycle described here underscores the point that legitimation is a dynamic process in which agent- and audience-based perspectives interact. In particular, it shows how agent-driven narratives must align with or account for audience demands in order to emerge as dominant within an IO. In the next section, I examine how content influences how this occurs.

Narrative content: purpose, performance and politics

The survival and longevity of a self-legitimation narrative depends on several factors, both internal and external to an IO. These include the relative power

[34] Robert P. Gephardt, 'Succession sensemaking and organization change: a story of a deviant college president', *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 4: 3, 1991, pp. 35–44; Gabriel, 'Narrative ecologies'.

[35] Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews, eds, *Considering counter-narratives: narrating, resisting, making sense* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004); Jensen Schleiter et al., '"Speaking through the other"'.

[36] Graeme Currie and Andrew D. Brown, 'A narratological approach to understanding processes of organizing in a UK hospital', *Human Relations* 56: 5, 2003, pp. 563–86 at p. 566.

[37] Barbara Czarniawska, 'The fate of counter-narratives: in fiction and in actual organizations', in Frandsen et al., eds, *Counter-narratives and organization*, pp. 208–26.

[38] Gabriel, 'Narrative ecologies', p. 211. Indeed, most IOs will have more than one dominant narrative, with some that are organization-wide, some that exist only within particular units, and some that address different issue areas existing side by side.

of the agents who posit and disseminate narratives; the resources available for dissemination; the simultaneous existence of multiple narratives; the simplicity and 'usability' of narrative language;[39] and the content of self-legitimation narratives, which is my focus here. This content can be broadly categorized into three groups: *purpose*, *performance* and *politics*. These categories reflect the fact that the contradiction and ambiguity that characterize most large IOs derive from their normatively, operationally and structurally dichotomous nature, as described. Scholars have posited other such categories—for example input, output or procedure—but these do not capture the factors motivating *self*-legitimation specifically.[40]

The first category, *purpose*, covers narratives that seek to generate self-legitimacy by describing the normative content of the IO's mission, goals and procedures, and the degree to which these align with its stated principles and values. The second, *performance*, covers narratives that describe the effectiveness and impact of the IO's work and the achievement of stated goals. Here, self-legitimacy beliefs derive from the fulfilment of the IO's operational role, its unique ability to achieve operational targets and the positive impact of its work. The third, *politics*, refers to alignment with or deviation from the instructions of member states, geostrategic considerations or the political interests of IO leaders. Here, self-legitimacy beliefs derive from demonstrating fidelity to the specialized expertise of staff and their independence from the influence of particular member states or narrow political interests of IO leaders.

Narratives of purpose

While these three categories of narrative content can overlap, and many narratives combine them, those that emphasize purpose above performance and politics are generally more likely to be endorsed. There are three reasons for this. First, the missions and values of an IO tend to be difficult to refute and form a core part of IO identities. The UN, for example, seeks to 'end the scourge of war' and 'maintain international peace and security';[41] the World Bank has the twin goals of 'ending extreme poverty' and 'promoting shared prosperity';[42] and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) 'works for stability, peace, and democracy' through 'dialogue about … shared values'.[43] Even more technical IOs often portray their work in terms of values they seek to promote. For example, the World Tourism Organization emphasizes its role in driving environmental

[39] von Billerbeck, 'No action'.

[40] For example, a procedural narrative might stress the degree to which staff follow impartial or appropriate procedures; but while this may generate external legitimacy, it does not relate to the contradictions and identity fragmentation that make *self*-legitimation necessary. See Fritz Scharpf, *Governing in Europe: effective and democratic?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Tobias Lenz and Lora Anne Viola, 'Legitimacy and institutional change in international organisations: a cognitive approach', *Review of International Studies* 43: 5, 2017, pp. 939–61.

[41] UN, *Charter of the UN* (New York, 1945).

[42] World Bank, *What we do*, https://www.worldbank.org/en/what-we-do, n.d. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 9 Oct. 2022.)

[43] OSCE, *Who we are*, https://www.osce.org/who-we-are, n.d.

sustainability, inclusive development and universal access to tourism;[44] the OECD claims to 'build better policies for better lives' by promoting 'prosperity, equality, opportunity and well-being for all';[45] and NATO seeks to safeguard 'individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law'.[46]

These are lofty goals indeed, but they say little about the day-to-day work of the respective organizations. It is therefore difficult to be against them, and IO staff tend to view their missions and values as 'self-evidently right',[47] inherently 'moral',[48] and representative of 'higher ideals'.[49] As one UN official opined, a 'common sense [of what we do] can only be based on the values that the organization provides'.[50] This sense of purpose is a unique and crucial part of IO identity. Indeed, most staff refer to their work as a 'vocation', something special and superior in comparison to other professions because of its 'higher purpose'.[51]

Second, because these missions and values usually form the founding basis for many IOs, they are also viewed as universal—staff take them to be widely shared, and therefore to have the implicit or explicit approval of people everywhere. For example, a UN official described the values of the organization's Charter as 'a set of beliefs we all share that is core, irrespective of culture'.[52]

Finally, because missions and values are expansive and often aspirational, they gloss over the difficulties that IO staff encounter in their day-to-day work. Declaring that an organization works for world peace, human rights or environmental sustainability, or that it seeks to uphold principles of inclusion or equality, says little about any risks and challenges that their implementation might entail or whether these goals clash with other worthy activities. Instead, by expressing an *intention* or a *dedication* to the principles of the organization, staff can demonstrate purpose without linking it to how they carry out their work or whether they achieve these goals. In this way, such narratives '[allow] staff to disregard the operational and ethical difficulties encountered in practice and instead focus on the moral incontestability of their work'.[53]

To do this, staff invoke and repeat language from their charters, articles of incorporation, oaths of office or mission statements. For example, all UN Security Council resolutions begin with preambles reaffirming the purposes and principles of the Charter, the Council's responsibility for international peace and security, and its commitment to a range of organizational values such as inclusion and representation.[54] While these are partly external-facing documents, such language

[44] World Tourism Organization, *About us*, https://www.unwto.org/about-us, n.d.
[45] OECD, *Who we are*, https://www.oecd.org/about/, n.d.
[46] NATO, *Active engagement, modern defence: strategic concept for the defence and security of the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (Brussels, 2010), p. 6.
[47] Interview, former UN official, Feb. 2017.
[48] Interview, NATO official, Jan. 2018.
[49] Interview, NATO official, May 2017.
[50] Interview, UN official, Jan. 2017.
[51] Interviews, UN official, Feb. 2017; three NATO officials, May 2017 and Jan. 2018; two World Bank officials, Nov. 2017.
[52] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[53] von Billerbeck, '"Mirror, mirror"', p. 214.
[54] UN, *UN Security Council resolutions*, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/resolutions-0, n.d.

is not lost on the staff of the organization itself, who hear, read and write it on a regular basis. Similarly, the 1992 report, *An agenda for peace*, which sought a more robust peacekeeping role for the UN, also invoked Charter language in order to 'demonstrate its proposals' coherence and continuity with the founding principles of the UN'.[55] Human Rights Up Front, introduced in 2013 by then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, declared a 'renew[ed] commitment to "We the Peoples" of the UN Charter' and 'faith in fundamental human rights',[56] language that has since been mainstreamed throughout UN documentation from speeches to resolutions to job descriptions.[57] One UN official insisted that having irreproachable goals such as the promotion of peace and human rights enabled them to 'assum[e] that [their work] was legitimate'.[58]

In the World Bank, similarly, the language of the twin goals has filtered throughout the organization, with one official remarking that 'everybody tries to cite the twin goals' in order to demonstrate a link between what they are doing and the overarching mission of the organization.[59] Another World Bank official, also referring to the twin goals, remarked that 'the nature of the work we are doing is … a huge component of [our] pride and belief in the organization'.[60]

Narratives of performance

Narratives of performance, by contrast, tend to 'stick' less than narratives of purpose. While large, multifaceted IOs may have worthy missions, achieving them is difficult, slow and expensive. Peace operations, securing sustainable development or delivering international justice, for example, are all complex, long-term undertakings in which it is difficult to claim success definitively. Indeed, definitions of success and of how to measure it for such activities are usually highly contested, so even where a particular target has ostensibly been met—the delivery of food provisions or the establishment of schools, for example—this may not be universally considered a success, even within the organization. As Gutner and Thompson note, IO goals tend to be 'ambiguous and variegated' and measuring performance is 'messy and political'.[61] One UN official asserted that 'frequently, what is success isn't particularly obvious to us'.[62] Moreover, the actual implementation of IO projects is often plagued by budgetary shortfalls, security issues and bureaucratic inefficiency. Indeed, good performance to some may consist of visible outputs on the ground; for others, this may constitute success only if those outputs are achieved on budget and on time. Narratives of performance that

[55] Diane Imerman, 'Contested legitimacy and institutional change: unpacking the dynamics of institutional legitimacy', *International Studies Quarterly* 20: 1, 2018, pp. 74–100 at p. 90.
[56] Ban Ki-moon, *Renewing our commitment to the peoples and purposes of the UN* (New York: UN, 2013).
[57] Gerrit Kurtz, *With courage and coherence: the Human Rights Up Front initiative of the UN*, policy paper (Berlin, Germany: Global Public Policy Institute, 2015), p. 19.
[58] Interview, former UN official, Feb. 2017.
[59] Interview, World Bank official, Nov. 2017.
[60] Interview, World Bank official, Nov. 2017.
[61] Tamar Gutner and Alexander Thompson, 'The politics of IO performance: a framework', *Review of International Organizations*, vol. 5, 2010, pp. 227–48 at pp. 231–2.
[62] Interview, UN official, Nov. 2017.

describe delivering outputs or having a measurably positive impact are harder to create and are less likely to 'win over' staff.

One UN peacekeeping official remarked that despite occasionally achieving 'straightforward' or 'quick' objectives, they '[couldn't] speak of massive successes in the last four or five years'.[63] Others concurred, with one noting that 'delivering one particular result' was sometimes doable, but delivering more broadly defined objectives often was not.[64] This does not imply that performance does not matter to IO staff. Indeed, many express deep professional satisfaction when they 'see results … and have [a] sense of achievement'.[65] Yet because it is so difficult to define and observe success in their work, staff 'lack … an instinctive desire to measure [them]selves'. Others agreed, with one observing that the UN 'spend[s] less time thinking about … performance legitimacy'.[66] Accordingly, because success is both hard to achieve and hard to measure, narratives of performance are less convincing for staff and therefore less likely to constitute a source of self-legitimacy perceptions.

Narratives of politics

The same is true for narratives of politics. As noted, IO staff, with the exception of senior political appointees, are international civil servants who do not officially represent the interests of any particular state. IO staff develop specialized expertise in their functional area and use it to make independent judgements about the best courses of action to take in a given situation. This neutral expertise and technical specialism constitutes a key part of the professional identity of most IO staff: most describe themselves as 'independent' or 'substantive expert[s]'.[67] However, where the actions they propose conflict with the preferences of member states or the narrow concerns of politically appointed IO leaders, staff may be forced to implement actions with which they disagree, that contradict the values of the organization, or that they view as representative of limited interests rather than broader global ones.

While IO staff recognize that they are 'at the service of' member states,[68] they bristle at being 'micro-managed' by them, and they regularly feel caught between these two roles. A World Bank official described instances where projects with 'less technical merit' were funded because they 'matched the rhetoric' of member states.[69] A UN official similarly described how 'human rights component[s] mandated and required to uphold a certain normative framework' often found it 'operationally impossible to implement [their] mission' when faced with member-state demands.[70] As one UN official summarized, member-state

[63] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[64] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[65] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[66] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[67] Interview, UN official, Nov. 2017; interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[68] Interviews, UN official, Feb. 2017 and NATO official, Jan. 2018.
[69] Interview, World Bank official, Nov. 2017.
[70] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.

politics within the UN frequently 'undermin[e] the legitimacy of independent … expertise'.[71]

This reservation extends to political concerns that are promoted by an IO's own leadership and considered narrow and 'inferior' to the lofty ideals of the organization—for example, budgetary concerns, bureaucratic imperatives, or bad media coverage that might imperil the political survival of an IO leader. As one UN official asserted, 'fundamentally, every single aspect of our work is held hostage by the political.'[72] Another concurred, asserting that a shift within the UN from 'objective analysis … [to] political bargaining … has erode[d] a sense of legitimacy', ultimately failing to 'continuously reinforce a sense of culture that to work in the UN is to belong to an international calibre of civil servants'.[73] Accordingly, narratives revolving around bureaucratic politics and political imperatives, or in which the independence and impartiality of IO staff may be questioned, constitute weaker sources of self-legitimacy. In other words, because self-legitimation narratives are intended to help make sense of contradiction and reaffirm a cohesive identity, narratives that spotlight the tension between autonomy and political subservience are less likely to instil a sense of legitimacy in staff.

Illustrative case-studies

In the following sections, I illustrate these arguments with two cases of self-legitimation narratives from the UN: (1) a successful agent-driven narrative based on purpose that was endorsed; and (2) an unsuccessful agent-driven narrative based on politics that was rejected and challenged by an audience-driven counter-narrative based on purpose. The first case is an examination of local ownership in UN peacekeeping. Here, IO leaders developed a narrative centred on purpose—that is, demonstrating alignment with the mission, principles and values of the UN—that has been widely adopted within the UN and has emerged as dominant. The second case is an examination of internal narratives surrounding the cholera outbreak in Haiti of 2010, which focused on political considerations on the part of IO leaders. This narrative was rejected by staff and challenged by an audience-driven counter-narrative that returned the focus to purpose. While this counter-narrative has not yet been fully endorsed by the IO leadership, it is gradually shifting the rhetoric used by IO leaders, thus demonstrating how audiences can compel agents to amend the content of their self-legitimation claims in response to audience rejection.

These cases are based upon a review of primary documents, press reports and in-depth semi-structured interviews.[74] The two cases were selected to illustrate the agent- and audience-driven pathways in the narrative life-cycle, and to show how content type influences the pathways followed by different narratives. Both cases are from the same IO—the UN—which allows me to hold alternative factors besides content (such as the power of agents or communication resources)

[71] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[72] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[73] Interview, UN official, Feb. 2017.
[74] Of the 87 interviews conducted, 36 were with UN officials.

relatively constant. Despite this focus on a single IO, as noted in previous sections other IOs also encounter contradiction and ambiguity, and thus these findings are likely to apply more widely.[75]

Moreover, the cases represent, respectively, 'easy' and 'hard' cases, and thus help to demonstrate the explanatory power of narrative content in organizations. The first case is 'easy': according to my topology of narrative content, it is not surprising that a purpose narrative focused on UN values was taken up and generated self-legitimacy perceptions. The second is a 'hard' case, that is, least likely to bear out the relevance of purpose to self-legitimation. As I discuss below, because this outbreak of cholera in Haiti represented such an egregious and public failure by the UN, one might expect that no narrative, regardless of content type, could produce any self-legitimacy. However, this case shows not only the failure of a political narrative but also the subsequent (relative) success of a counter-narrative focused on purpose, even in inauspicious circumstances. Taken together, the two cases demonstrate how the chances of endorsement for self-legitimation narratives are bolstered when agents focus content on purpose; where they do not, audiences are likely to demand a shift back to purpose-focused narratives.

Local ownership in UN peace operations

For the past two decades, narratives about local ownership in UN peace operations—the degree to which local actors are involved in or lead peacebuilding in their countries—have expanded dramatically. UN peacekeeping personnel have increasingly advocated the inclusion of local actors in the design, implementation and evaluation of the UN's activities, and discourse surrounding local ownership has become omnipresent throughout the organization. Indeed, local ownership is now regularly listed alongside the three fundamental principles of UN peacekeeping—consent, impartiality and the non-use of force—and forms part of the core pre-deployment training for peacekeeping staff.[76]

Notably, senior leaders in the UN have primarily portrayed local ownership not as an *operationally effective* approach to peacekeeping but instead as the *right* approach, thus focusing squarely on organizational purpose. In a 2011 meeting of the Security Council, local ownership was declared 'a moral imperative',[77] and the 2011 Secretary-General's report on *Civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict* named ownership one of four key principles of peacekeeping.[78] This was echoed in a 2014 report by the Secretary-General, which called national ownership a 'fundamental principle' of peacekeeping.[79] Subsequently, several complementary narratives have emerged that have bolstered the core narrative. For example,

[75] Future research could usefully test whether the relative weight of different narrative content types varies with the nature of the IO—e.g. technocratic vs more normative, single- vs multiple-issue, and so on.

[76] UN, *Core pre-deployment training materials*, https://resourcehub01.blob.core.windows.net/training-files/Training%20Materials/003%20CPTM-EN/003-022%20Final%20Lesson%201.3%20160517.pdf, 2017, lesson 1.3 at p. 23.

[77] UN, *Proces-verbaux of 6630th meeting [provisional]: maintenance of international peace and security*, S/PV.6630, 2011.

[78] UN, *Civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict*, A/65/747-S/2011/85, 2011.

[79] UN, *Civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict*, A/68/696-S/2014/5, 2014.

the report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations called for all peacekeeping to be 'people-centred' and put beneficiaries at the heart of UN efforts;[80] and Action for Peacekeeping, introduced in 2018, called for 'inclusive and participatory approaches', again re-signalling the commitment of the UN to these organizational values.[81]

While some of this discourse is directed towards or at least visible to external audiences, much of it is internally directed, in documents and discussions for and by UN peacekeeping staff, and thus constitutes a key self-legitimation narrative that focuses on purpose rather than performance or politics. UN staff have since endorsed this discourse without challenge, and now tell and retell narratives about local ownership because they help to overcome fundamental contradictions in the practice of peacekeeping, ones that may call into question their dedication to organizational principles.[82] Indeed, peacekeeping is an activity that entails deep intrusion by external actors into the domestic affairs of member states and populations. This goes against longstanding principles relating to self-determination and non-imposition enshrined in the UN Charter. In the conduct of peacekeeping, then, UN staff may face situations where they must contravene their own stated principles for the sake of achieving their stated goals. Because UN staff value their normative mission so highly, this tension presents them with deeply uncomfortable trade-offs. However, by cloaking their activities in the rhetoric of local ownership, they can minimize these tensions or ignore them outright. Local ownership aligns directly with key organizational values, such as inclusivity, participation and self-determination; by focusing their narrative on these values, IO leaders enable UN staff to reaffirm cohesion between normative and operational imperatives and commitment to organizational principles. As one official remarked, local ownership in the UN 'is a response to the anxiety that international interventions like peacekeeping operations are neo-colonial'.[83] Another agreed, declaring that 'the UN stands for self-determination rather than externally imposed, neo-imperial forms of governance … this is an important part of the UN's self-perception' as an organization.[84]

In addition, because local ownership narratives remain broad and sweeping, they disregard the difficulties of actually implementing it. In reality, local ownership remains weakly operationalized and many staff privately assert that it is not always appropriate.[85] Furthermore, despite having become a kind of orthodoxy within the UN, there are few guidelines about how to actually 'do' local ownership and few attempts to measure whether local populations actually feel a sense

[80] UN, *Report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on uniting our strengths for peace: politics, partnership and people*, S/2015/446, 2015.
[81] UN, *Action for peacekeeping: declaration of shared commitments on UN peacekeeping operations*, 2018, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p-declaration-en.pdf.
[82] Sarah von Billerbeck, *Whose peace? Local ownership and UN peacekeeping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 122–3.
[83] Interview, UN official, Oct. 2011.
[84] Interview, UN official, Dec. 2010.
[85] Interviews, UN officials, Jan. 2017 and Feb. 2017.

of ownership.[86] However, the disappointing record of local ownership in concrete terms is relatively less important than the discursive utility of local ownership for self-legitimation. By focusing on purpose—the *intention* to include populations in determining their own paths to peace—narratives of local ownership help UN staff to reconcile contradictions between their operational and normative missions, reaffirm alignment with organizational values, and gloss over the challenges and risks of implementing local ownership on the ground. One UN official remarked that ultimately, local ownership is 'largely about signalling non-imposition'.[87] As discussed, what matters is the story staff tell themselves, rather than its accuracy or precision.[88]

Cholera in Haiti

In contrast to the success of local ownership narratives, organizational narratives surrounding the UN's role in the cholera outbreak in Haiti in 2010 focused on politics and ended up being challenged by counter-narratives from within the organization that brought purpose back to the forefront. The outbreak, which killed at least 10,000 and possibly as many as 30,000 Haitians, was linked to improper sanitation at a base belonging to Nepalese peacekeepers.[89] The UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti at the time, MINUSTAH, immediately denied any involvement, and only in 2016 did Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon admit responsibility and apologize for the UN's role.[90]

Internally, this response was explained to staff in terms of political imperatives: the Secretary-General insisted that the UN's absolute immunity according to the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and its Status of Forces Agreement with Haiti protected it from any obligation to provide redress to victims.[91] Any deviation from this would 'jeopardize [the UN's] financial viability, have a negative impact on future peacekeeping, create bad precedents, or embroil the United Nations in endless litigation'.[92] Though staff cared about these issues, they were dismayed by their narrowly political flavour and these arguments did not win them over. A number of UN officials described as 'unconscionable' Ban's efforts to 'try and cover it up, because [he was] so afraid of the claims for compensation that would be filed against the UN'.[93] Numerous other staff also refused to accept and repeat the narrative set out by the leadership

[86] von Billerbeck, *Whose peace?*, p. 80.
[87] Interview, UN official, Dec. 2010.
[88] For a related discussion of how the search for legitimacy can undermine implementation and effectiveness, see Hans Agné and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'The costs of legitimacy for political institutions', *Global Studies Quarterly* 2: 1, 2022, pp. 1–12.
[89] Ed Pilkington and Ben Quinn, 'UN admits for first time that peacekeepers brought cholera to Haiti', *Guardian*, 1 Dec. 2016.
[90] Ban Ki-moon, 'Secretary-General's remarks to the General Assembly on a new approach to address cholera in Haiti', 2016, https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2016-12-01/secretary-generals-remarks-general-assembly-new-approach-address.
[91] Emanuele Cimiotta and Maria Irene Papa, 'UN immunity and the Haiti cholera case', *Questions of International Law*, vol. 2, 2015, pp. 1–3.
[92] UN, *Extreme poverty and human rights*, A/71/367, 2016, p. 5.
[93] Interview, UN official, Nov. 2017.

because it was, in their view, 'immoral', and the 'antithesis' of what the UN stands for.[94] Ban's response was influenced by narrow political considerations rather than purpose, which meant that the narrative staff were being asked to retell had no traction with them. One official noted that the cholera epidemic in Haiti revealed how 'there is much to be learned in terms of … how [to] tell [staff] a story' within the UN, [95] and another noted that Ban failed in terms of 'telling your staff what's going on and how you want to tell them that story'.[96]

While Ban's statement in 2016 was ostensibly an apology, it remained carefully worded to avoid any additional legal obligations. Though it was externally directed, staff within the organization were again dismayed.[97] Indeed, the UN's own Human Rights Special Rapporteur, Philip Alston, issued a scathing report, in which he lambasted the Secretary-General for accepting only 'moral responsibility' while 'deny[ing] all legal responsibility' and insisting on 'absolute immunity' against claims of compensation, thereby risking the credibility, authority and standing of the UN.[98] He added that taking this line 'provided a convenient justification for States to avoid engagement on the responsibility of the United Nations for the cholera epidemic', again putting political considerations above values and principles.[99] Instead, Alston asserted that only through 'formal acceptance of human rights principles' could the UN as an organization retain its 'legitimacy and credibility'.[100] In this way, Alston challenged the narrative being promoted within the UN and proposed an alternative narrative that focused not on politics, but instead on purpose. While these challenges were publicly made, many discussions were also internal to the UN and involved staff at different levels speaking to one another about their disagreement with the official line from the Secretary-General.[101] These challenges have continued to the present day, most recently with ten UN human rights monitors and special rapporteurs sending a letter to Secretary-General António Guterres in 2020, criticizing his office for failing to deliver on earlier pledges to eradicate cholera in Haiti and provide material assistance to victims.[102] In this way, because the proposed narrative invoked political imperatives rather than the lofty purposes of the UN, it was unconvincing to staff, prompting them to counter with alternative narratives.

Gradually, this audience-driven counter-narrative is being adopted by IO leadership and it has partly, though not entirely, displaced the previous one. The process of proposing an alternative narrative and seeing that it dislodges an existing one takes time—a new narrative needs to 'gather momentum, detail, cohesion and credibility' while also 'drawing in neutrals' and persuading other staff to adopt

[94] Interview, UN official, Jan. 2017.
[95] Interview, UN official, Nov. 2017.
[96] Interview, UN official, Nov. 2017.
[97] Pilkington and Quinn, 'UN admits for first time'.
[98] UN, *Extreme poverty*, pp. 21, 2.
[99] UN, *Extreme poverty*, p. 14.
[100] UN, *Extreme poverty*, p. 6.
[101] Interviews, UN official, Geneva, Feb. 2017, and UN official, New York, Nov. 2017.
[102] UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), 'Letter dated 28 April 2020', AL OTH 35/2020; UN, *A new approach to cholera in Haiti*, A/71/620, 2016.

it.[103] Nevertheless, while staff still decry the leadership's failure to take legal responsibility and make good on pledges of assistance, UN leaders now regularly express regret, sorrow and responsibility for the crisis, rather than speaking of it in purely legalistic terms or in ways that ignore the UN's role.[104] In this sense, the way in which the cholera outbreak was represented internally to UN staff shows that when legitimacy agents in IOs focus their narratives on politics (or performance), audiences often find those narratives unconvincing and they are thus more vulnerable to challenge. Where this happens, legitimacy audiences can compel agents to adjust the content of their narratives and, over time, fully adopt a counter-narrative. In fact, as mentioned, this case demonstrates that purpose narratives may be compelling enough to create self-legitimacy even in the most serious deviations from values and principles by IO leaders and where previous narratives have been rejected.

Conclusion

As shown in this special issue, scholarship on legitimation in IOs is expanding to include a variety of perspectives on legitimation, strategies of legitimation and methodologies for studying legitimation. This article contributes to this literature by examining self-legitimation, a relatively little-studied form of legitimation, but one that is crucial to and widespread within IOs. Specifically, I have focused on how the content of self-legitimation narratives influences their durability and entrenchment, introducing a three-part typology of narrative content. I argue that where agents (IO leaders) propose narratives focused on purpose rather than performance or politics, they are more likely to become dominant in IOs because they are best able to counter the sources of identity fragmentation and trade-offs that audiences (IO staff) face and thus to reinforce a sense of their own legitimacy. This in turn helps IO staff to remain committed, focused and socialized within the IO, factors that all ultimately contribute to efficiency and productivity. Where IO leaders instead focus narratives on performance or politics, they often fail to galvanize staff, and the latter are more likely to propose alternative narratives focused on purpose, eventually compelling leaders to adopt these alternative narratives or alter theirs in line with audience demands. In this way, self-legitimation is rarely entirely agent-driven, but must account for and respond to the demands of its audience. This is an important point, because external audiences may judge IO legitimacy on the basis of performance or politics, and many external legitimation attempts therefore focus on these. These factors do of course matter to staff internally, but any assumption that such narratives fully satisfy internal legitimacy demands would be misleading. As noted above, IO staff are a unique legitimacy audience, one that places a special emphasis on purpose and that therefore requires different legitimation strategies. Examining self-legitimation and the forms it

[103] Gabriel, 'Narrative ecologies', p. 212.
[104] Anastasia Moloney, 'A decade after UN-linked cholera outbreak, Haitians demand justice', Reuters, 22 Oct. 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-haiti-cholera-un-feature-trfn-idUSKBN2772RM.

takes, as I have done here, thus provides a more complete understanding of legitimation within IOs, both challenging and contributing to theories of how these processes work.

Understanding the special importance of purpose to staff is also a critical management tool for IO policy-makers and leaders. Self-legitimation in IOs responds to a deep need within organizations for stability, continuity and structure, and for most staff, these derive from a profound belief in the organization's mission, principles and values. When the senior leadership of IOs 'speak' to staff primarily about reaching targets, value for money, avoiding political costs or catering to member states, they are likely to lose the commitment and loyalty of staff and engender cynicism, disillusionment and low motivation, ultimately imperilling organizational effectiveness. This observation extends also to IO member states, which often criticize IOs or push for reform and reorganization, nearly always with the aim of increasing productivity, reducing budgets and streamlining processes. While IO staff of course appreciate the need for efficiency, these pronouncements omit the moral dimension of organizational life that staff value so deeply and that, for many, attracted them to IO work in the first place. It is thus incumbent on IO leaders and member states alike to recognize that not only is self-legitimation a crucial activity in IOs, one that can deliver real benefits in terms of cohesion and morale, but that self-legitimation narratives cannot deviate too dramatically from the beliefs of staff. In this regard, 'telling' narratives to staff is as important as 'listening' to them, in order fully to understand the unique identity of the organization and what inspires, interests and confuses its personnel. Where IO leaders get this right, they will enjoy the benefits of having a motivated, cohesive and dedicated body of staff—no small thing in light of the complex work IOs undertake. At the same time, IO leaders must remain aware of the fact that external audiences, such as member states or NGOs, are also 'listening' to internal 'talk', and they will thus have to balance the demands of those audiences—or at least weigh the relative legitimacy costs and benefits of addressing multiple audiences at once when constructing narratives.