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INSTITUTIONALIZING IDENTITY: SYMBOLIC ISOMORPHISM AND ORGANIZATIONAL NAMES

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An organization's identity, symbolized by its corporate name, is rooted in institutional fields. We advance the construct of *symbolic isomorphism,* or the resemblance of an organization's symbolic attributes to those of others within its institutional field, and examine its effects on the homogenization of names and legitimacy. We review historical naming patterns and present two studies that examine the antecedents and outcomes of name conformity: The first analyzes 1,600 name changes to demonstrate how institutional conformity shapes organizational identities, and the second surveys public audiences and delineates how symbolic isomorphism serves as a touchstone for legitimacy.

The core insight of institutional theory—that isomorphism legitimates—has been routinely appropriated to organizational structures and practices (Abzug & Mezias, 1993; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983), as well as to strategy (Deephouse, 1996; Fligstein, 1990), but has been applied less to symbolism. This is ironic, for institutionalism had as its genesis the study of myth and ceremony in organizations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Our objective is to revisit the symbolic realm. We propose that *symbolic isomorphism,* defined as the resemblance of an organization's symbolic attributes to those of other organizations within its institutional field, increases organizational legitimacy. Recognizing that it is through the choice of a name that organizations "identify with other actors, values, or symbols that are themselves legitimate" (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990: 181), we focus on demonstrating that symbolic isomorphism affects the attributes that organizations encode in their names and, in turn, affects their legitimacy.

Organizational names encode central features of meaning (Olins, 1989) and organizational identity (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Boddewyn, 1967). And, although names may not capture the entirety of a firm's identity, "To many people, corporations are 'nothing but a name'" (Boddewyn, 1967: 39). Two theoretical perspectives on organizational identity have been advanced (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). One emphasizes how central, distinct, and enduring attributes (Albert & Whetten, 1985) constitute an organization's "essential" character (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994), thereby individuating and differentiating organizations. A second locates organizations in fields of meaning at the interorganizational (or industry) level (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), thereby categorizing organizations into membership groups (identifying a firm as a bank and not a school, for instance).

Taken together, these views illustrate the complexity of identity dynamics and how they are predicated upon micro-level organizational processes and macro-level field dynamics. As such, the study of names can inform theories of institutionalism as well as identity. For identity, institutionalism offers insight on dynamics that extend beyond the boundaries of an individual firm, through the establishment of culturally patterned practices. In turn, the organizational act of naming introduces agency into the processes of institutionalization and reveals how organizational meanings can become fixed so that the symbolic actions of individual organizations produce and reproduce patterns in the aggregate. Institutionalists' notion of constitutive rules, which "define the nature of actors and their capacity for action" (Scott & Meyer, 1994: 61), offers a focal point for the interplay between identity and institutional dynamics. Constitutive rules arise from fields or industries that, in turn, function as boundaries of meaning or as a "frame of comparability" (Porac, Thomas, Wilson, Paton, & Kanfer, 1995). The degree of isomorphism—that is, the prevalence of a particular organizational form or feature—is an index of consensus about such boundaries, which are

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themselves socially constructed (Porac et al., 1995). Such rules delineate the salient attributes that codify and *constitute* identity to create an essential organization self. Further, conformity to these constitutive rules appropriately and legitimately *categorizes* an organization into referent fields.

Constitutive rules are voiced by "professional namers" (Shalit, 1999) in the booming consulting industry focused on "corporate identity" and organization naming. To wit:

> When changing a name, a corporation may be able to use the term "industries" to include all of its products' divisions. It may also consider using a company/brand name which may be an asset, as did Del Monte. A meaningless name can sometimes beat initials if the company is not firmly established. A unique name is essential, so it is wise not to use "American" and "U.S." which are overused. Do not discard the old name casually. Handle mergers carefully. (Margulies, 1977: 41)

As institutionalists would predict (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), standardization of rules and increasing professionalism of fields has lead to homogenization in organizations' names. To illustrate:

> As naming has become professionalized, it's led to a certain norming standard. The names have come to sound more and more alike. . . . You can imagine how, at one time, Livent might have sounded new and hot. . . . Well, but now we have Lucent. And we have Aquent and Avilant and Agilent and Levilant and Naviant and Telegent. What's next, Coolent? (Shalit, 1999)

Thus, in spite of an infinite supply of names from which to choose, organizations seem to converge on a few overworked words and patterns. Institutional pressures for conformity to constitutive rules offer an explanation. Broad-based sociocultural norms and more local activities (Dacin, 1997) give rise to rulelike industry "recipes" (Spender, 1989) that define what is credible, appropriate, or legitimate in a name. The institutional perspective affords a lens with which to view identity patterns at industry or sector levels, which, presumably, embed sociocultural, historically developing norms (Dacin, 1997). It is to this level that we first turn.

We mapped the historical evolution of institutionalized naming practices in order to contextualize naming within the *broad* institutional environment (Dacin, 1997; Scott, 1987) and identify name attributes for closer scrutiny in organizations' *immediate* institutional environments (Scott, 1987). We did this in two studies. In study 1, we examined how institutional prevalence of name attributes in organizational fields affected name choices for 1,600 organizations changing their names in the mid 1980s. In study 2, we tested the effects of these name choices on legitimacy. The two studies take symbolic isomorphism full circle, through institutional determinants of names (study 1) to their effects (study 2), demonstrating that organizations align their names with prevalent institutionalized naming patterns; in turn, such symbolic isomorphism legitimates names that conform to institutionalized practice.

EVOLVING PATTERNS IN ORGANIZATIONAL NAMES, 1800–2000

The importance of historical time periods in institutionalization has been well documented (Abzug & Mezias, 1993). At the level of the broad institutional environment (Scott, 1987), industry power, dependence, and political pressures are muted, thus allowing isomorphism to transgress more narrow borders (Dacin, 1997), but not indefinitely (Scott & Meyer, 1994). To examine periodicity in naming practices, we drew from publications (Boddewyn, 1967; Chajet, 1991; Charmasson, 1988; Jones, 1986; Olins, 1989), the popular press (100 articles on naming trends from Nexis-Lexis and Dow-Jones databases), and interviews with informants at six firms in the corporate identity industry. From these data, we constructed an overview of prevalent naming patterns within demarcated time periods. Table 1 presents this overview.

From the table, it is evident that organization names have changed dramatically, both in content and form, over time. In contrast to the rich, descriptive, and lengthy names of the 1800s (The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company), the names of more recent vintage are brief and concise (GE, Philco). The three-part configuration of the names of the 1800s seemingly parallels the tripart construction of personal names: a first name identified the corporate owner or business location, a second (or middle) name identified firm products or services, and a last name was something like "company" or "incorporated." Not only the syntax, but also the content of names changed as well. Names trended from being more descriptive in the 19th century, to more abstract in the mid 20th century, and back to invoking more familiar products, brands, and identifiers at the close of the 20th century (Amstar to Domino Sugar). At the turn of the millennium, naming tendencies reflected a new driver—corporate ventures into cyberspace—and we observe a rise in popularity of the form *www.name.com.* Over time, organizational names have changed, but they have done so with patterned regularity; isomorphism may drive identity symbols. However, "the [mere] existence of norms

TABLE 1
Patterns of Organizational Names over Time

Period	Name Pattern	Illustrative Names	Organizational Activity
Colonial	Details an organization's purpose, leadership, membership.	Long Wharf in the Town of Boston in New England.	Corporate charters typically granted for narrowly defined purposes.
Late 1700s–1800s	Preeminence of three-part names: *first name* referencing a firm's owner or location; *second name* referencing the firm's products and processes; *third name* referencing the firm itself; "company" was the most common form until the 1880s.	Bridgeport Glass Company. The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company.	Incorporation of the first manufacturing firms; legal changes (circa 1800) enabled greater variety of firms to obtain corporate charters, specified more explicit rules regarding firm names and name changes.
Early 1900s	Changes in content of names: increased references to market coverage (for instance, "National," "International"); introduction of "United," "Allied," "Union."	United States Steel Corporation. American Car and Foundry. International Harvester.	First merger movement; opening of national markets; monopolistic ambitions to control industries.
Mid 1900s	Use of brand names for national markets; introduction of "Products" and "Industries."	Evans Products Co. Engelhard Industries, Inc.	Expansion of communication systems enables diffusion of brands to national markets.
1960–70s	Departure from three-part names; middle names dropped. Decreased use of geographic identifiers; introduction of acronyms and initials.	General Aniline and Film to GAF. Thompson-Ramo-Wooldridge to TRW. American Sugar Co. to Amstar.	Evolution of industries; Diversification of firms not tied to particular products or processes.
1980s	Near disappearance of three-part names; increasing use of ambiguous, esoteric, nontraditional (for instance, "unbankish") names; adoption of nicknames from stock exchange or financial listings.	Philco to UNISYS. International Harvester to Navistar. United States Steel Co. to USX. After 36 mergers, the Bank of Ohio becomes Fifth Third Bancorp.	Takeover era: restructuring of companies and industries; mergers and acquisitions; banking deregulation; diversification away from core industries.
1990s	Return to familiar brand names and descriptive words; clarity; translatable words in major languages.	Amstar to Domino Sugar. Greyhound Dial Corp to The Dial Corp.	Focus on core industries and brand names; recession, organizational retrenchment; global markets.
2000s	Return to three-part names, albeit with the new language and locales of cyberspace; blossoming of ".com," ".org," and ".net."	*www.yahoo.com* *www.amazon.com* *dljdirect.com*	"Dotcom" IPOs; Net millionaires; start-ups; rushing to put company on-line before competition.

doesn't guarantee organizational effects" (Dacin, 1997: 55), and organizational concern for legitimacy often differs by industry (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Deephouse, 1996). It is these effects that we explicitly investigated in study 1.

In defining a theoretically useful period of study, we observed that different periods were characterized by different constitutive rules. There was an inflection point, between the 1970s and the 1980s, in which names shifted from the century-old three-part form. In the same era, there was a shift in consumer values, and corporations began to promote their names as a "value-added benefit of their products" to reach consumers who were oriented to "strategic pragmatism" (*Marketing News,* 1985). More generally, the 1980s were a time of transformation and of an intense wave of mergers and acquisitions (Stearns & Allan, 1996). In an event history study of 79 firms during 1979–86, Bosch and Hirschey (1989) found a positive market reaction to name change announcements. Because the 1980s mark a clear break with previous constitutive

rules and because name changes were documented to affect organizational performance during this time of transformation and change, we chose the 1980s for closer scrutiny in study 1.

Our historical periodization also suggests the particular name attributes that are defined by constitutive rules. Given observed name shortening (Table 1; Boddewyn, 1967; Glynn & Abzug, 1998), *name length* is one such attribute, particularly for the time period under study. The eighties names were also more fabricated and ambiguous: "Many companies took a detour into a land of strange, foreboding names like Primark, Unisys, Allegis and alphabet soup names filled with X's, like CSX and USX" (Belkin, 1987). This trend suggests two additional attributes: *ambiguity,* or use of fictitious or unfamiliar words in a name, and *domain specificity,* or use of specific identity descriptors. The representativeness (or content validity) of these attributes is corroborated by professionals in the naming industry, such as those at Master-McNeil Inc. *(www.naming.com/glossary2.html.),* who have identified these similar attributes: "coined/fanciful name," for "made-up names such as Exxon or Kodak," and "descriptive name," for "names describing a product, service, or company . . . such as Workgroup Server and Pacific Gas and Electric." Using measures of these three attributes—length, ambiguity, and domain specificity—as our dependent variables, we examined institutional determinants of organizational name choices in study 1.

STUDY 1

We propose that the institutional forces that shape cognitive interpretations of sector or field practices will also shape the attributes of new organizational names. In their quest for legitimacy, firms changing their names will adopt new names that align with prevalent institutional practices in their organizational field. By evoking legitimated industry recipes (Spender, 1989), names will locate an organization in an appropriate institutional field. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1. Organizations changing their names will be more likely to choose names that conform to prevalent practices in their new institutional environment rather than to those in their old institutional environment.

Conformity can, however, be a double-edged sword. Legitimacy can constrain "varieties of stability" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) and thus lead to organizational inertia. Because identities may be central, distinctive, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985), names may be inert in the face of those organizational changes that customarily accompany name changes (Glynn & Slepian, 1993). To avoid the loss of legitimacy that can accompany the loss of an old name, an organization changing its name may try to evoke the legitimacy of the past in a new name (for instance, PriceWaterhouseCoopers). We posit that legitimacy will exert an inertial effect in such a way that:

Hypothesis 2. The attributes of an old organizational name will be reflected in the attributes of a new organizational name.

Methods

We studied all 1,587 firms that reported a name change in the period 1982–87 in *Predicasts F&S Index of Corporate Change.* Firms that did not publicly announce name changes are excluded; these tend to be smaller firms that are not publicly traded. During the period of study, 96 percent of the firms changed their names only once; for firms that experienced multiple name changes, we counted each of these separately. We also reran our analyses with only the firms that changed their names once; we found the same pattern of results.

Dependent variables: New name attributes. *New name's length* was a count of the number of letters in the new organization name. We used letters rather than words (Boddewyn, 1967) in order to increase variance in the measure. *New name's ambiguity* measured the use of ambiguous, coined or fabricated words. Names were coded by two independent raters using a two-point coding scale: 0 for ambiguous names (Sonat, USX) and 1 for names composed entirely of real words (Silicon General). The variance in raters' codings was not unduly restrictive (s.d.'s = .76 and .77); consequently, almost any kind of statistical estimate is appropriate to assess agreement (Jones, Johnson, Butler, & Main, 1983: 515). We correlated the two sets of ratings and found satisfactory agreement (r = .94, $p < .001$). Higher values indicated less ambiguous organizational names. *New name's domain specificity* measured the extent to which names specifically described an organization's business, products, services, or operations. Again, names were coded by two independent raters, who used 0 for nonspecific names (such as Primerica) and 1 for specific names (such as Sun Chemical). The variance in raters' codings was not unduly restricted (s.d.'s = .50 and .51), and correlations between ratings were satisfactory (r = .85, $p <$ .001). Higher values indicated more domain-specific (or descriptive) organizational names.

Kerlinger advised that when "measuring . . . rela-

tively simple attributes . . . validity is no great problem" (1973: 456) and noted length as one of those simple attributes. Here, we established content validity—that is, the relevance of the measures to the phenomenon of naming—by using industry standards for name ambiguity and domain specificity. We guarded against unreliable or invalid results (Hall & Rist, 1999) by "triangulation" of objective (length) and subjective (ambiguity and domain specificity) measures. Moreover, the three measures correlated to indicate convergence; that is, the more specific names were less ambiguous and more lengthy. However, they also diverged in discriminantly different, but predictable, ways. Name specificity and ambiguity were inversely related but positively correlated, owing to the way variables were coded.

Independent variables. Three attributes of old names, length, ambiguity, and domain specificity, were measured in the same manner as for new names. Interrater reliability was satisfactory, both for ambiguity ($r = .80$, $p < .001$) and domain specificity ($r = .90$, $p < .001$).

Institutional prevalence was measured as the pervasiveness of a particular name attribute within institutional fields; this measure of prevalence is consistent with prior institutional research (Ingram, 1982; Knocke, 1982). Scott rationalized this measure as follows: "One principal indicator of the strength of such mimetic processes is prevalence: the number of similar individuals or organizations exhibiting a given form or practice. Within fields of organizations, those performing similar tasks confront strong pressures for structural isomorphism" (1995: 45). Similarly, Zucker conceptualized institutionalization as a continuous variable "with different degrees of institutionalization altering the cultural persistence which can be expected" (1991: 83).

Adopting DiMaggio's definition of industry as "a collective definition of a set of organizations . . . committed to supporting, policing, or setting policy toward the 'industry'" (1991: 267), we used two-digit Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes (Greer & Ireland, 1992) to measure institutional frames of reference (Keats & Hitt, 1988). Using *Predicasts Thesaurus,* we obtained two-digit SIC industry codes for 1,435 firms (90.4 percent of our sample) and classified firms into the following industry groups: manufacturing (54%); finance, insurance, real estate (15%); services (10%); transportation, communication, utilities (7%); and retail, mining, and wholesale (< 5%). Institutional prevalence was measured for each name attribute separately: for length, as the mean number of letters in organizational names; for ambiguity, as the percentage of names coded as 0; and for domain specificity, as the percentage of names coded as 0.

Control variables. Because larger, more visible firms may legitimate particular organizational practices (Deephouse, 1996; Galaskiewicz, 1985), we controlled for *organizational reputation.* Using a dummy variable adapted from Boddewyn (1967), we coded 1 for firms listed in the *Fortune* 500 or Service 500 for the year of a name change ($n = 250$, 16%) and 0 otherwise ($n = 1{,}344$, 84%).

Organizations that changed their names solely to change their image or identity could be more sensitive or responsive to institutionalized practices. We searched press and organizational sources for verbatim accounts of the reasons given for name changes and categorized these reasons as follows: acquisition, merger, or consolidation (32%); diversification or change in business, geography, products/services, market and/or ownership (30%); image or identity (23%); reorganization (12%); legal (1%); and sale of subsidiary (1%). We created a dummy variable *identity reason for name change,* coded 0 for organizations explicitly stating image or identity as the reason for their name changes (23%) and 1 otherwise (77%).

Because *environmental uncertainty* can affect "mimesis" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983), we included Tushman and Anderson's (1986) measure, "forecast error," as a control variable. Mean environmental uncertainty for each organizational name change was calculated by averaging across the three-year interval around the year of the name change. Finally, because of historic periodicity, we also controlled for *year of name change.*

To discern variation in naming patterns across industries, we conducted preliminary analyses of local environments. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) across the 27 industry groups for each name attribute yielded significant differences. For the old and new names, respectively, values measuring differences across industries were significant for name length ($F_{26} = 111.99$, $p < .001$; $F_{26} = 65.24$, $p < .001$), ambiguity ($F_{26} = 51.66$, $p < .01$; $F_{26} = 45.27$, $p < .001$), and domain specificity ($F_{26} = 55.09$, $p < .001$; $F_{26} = 47.20$, $p < .01$). Longer and more domain-specific organizational names were found in the finance, insurance, and real estate industry group; shorter and less specific organizational names were found in the service industry.

To test hypotheses, we conducted separate regression analyses for the three measures of name attributes. For name length, we used ordinary least squares regression analysis; positive values for the variables assessing institutional prevalence indi-

cated greater name conformity. For the categorical variables of ambiguity and domain specificity, we conducted separate maximum-likelihood logistic regression analyses predicting the probability that the dependent variable (an attribute of a name) would have a value of 0 (more ambiguity, less domain specificity). Positive values for institutional prevalence indicated greater name conformity.

Results

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics. For old and new names, name attributes are significantly correlated with each other (all r's $\geq .37$, $p < .001$); in addition, longer names are less ambiguous and more domain-specific, and more domain-specific names are less ambiguous. Further, an organization's name attributes are correlated with the corresponding measures of institutional prevalence for the same name attributes (the negative correlation for ambiguity and specificity reflects coding schemes). To test hypotheses, we ran separate regression analyses for the name attributes; these are reported in Table 3.

Hypothesis 1, predicting that organizations changing their names will choose a name that conforms to prevalent practices in the *new* institutional environment rather than in the *old* institutional environment, was supported for all three attributes. Prevalence of attributes in the new institutional environment affected choices of new name attributes; institutional prevalence in the environment associated with the old name was not significant for any of the three name attributes. Hypothesis 2, predicting that attributes of old organizational names would be reflected in new organizational names, was not supported. In fact, the negative coefficients for ambiguity and domain specificity indicate that new name attributes were significant departures from the old.

The results indicate that organizations made name choices that enhanced institutional alignment. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) might have predicted, organizations may change their names to secure legitimacy, through isomorphic conformity to constitutive rules, in order to "buffer" their central cores from outside forces. Institutional prevalence tends to drive organizations toward name choices isomorphic with the field; over time, and in the aggregate, such isomorphism likely leads to convergence, accounting for the historical patterns observed in Table 1. Our results indicate that name attributes are constituted by a set of shared cultural rules that identify an organization and that organizational choice of name attributes is isomorphic within institutional or industry fields. But to what effect? Or, as Deephouse (1996) put it: Does isomorphism legitimate? We took up this question in the next study.

STUDY 2

In study 2, we investigated the effects of symbolic isomorphism on legitimacy, as conferred by public audiences. Suchman stated that organizations are legitimate when they are "understandable" (1995: 573). Following his conceptualization, we used understandability as a measure of legitimacy, as it reflects a cognitive orientation to constitutive or binding rules (Stryker, 1994), such as those characterizing naming practices. When an organization fits institutionalized patterns of behavior that are appropriate, and when these accounts are consistent with relevant social norms, organizations are seen to be right, proper, and legitimate. We propose that symbolic isomorphism, measured as organizational conformity to institutionalized naming practices, should increase understandability. More formally, we hypothesize:

> *Hypothesis 3. Greater symbolic isomorphism is associated with significantly greater public understandability.*

This argument about legitimacy admittedly represents a fairly homogenous view of an organization's audience as a generator of legitimacy. Institutionalists have begun to deconstruct the notion that the basis of legitimacy is uniform over all types of audiences (e.g., Deephouse, 1996). The organizational identity literature is informative about how audiences may make different attributions about legitimacy. Albert and Whetten (1985) described how organizational identities may be ideographic (or specialized), consisting of contradictory identity elements that are held by different sets of actors. They identified two such elements, the *utilitarian* element, emphasizing economic rationality and efficiency, and the *ideological* element, emphasizing cultural, aesthetic, or expressive functions. Glynn (2000) demonstrated how different organizational actors within one organization emphasized and promoted these elements differently. Similarly, we posit that audiences, by virtue of their membership in, or educational/professional affiliation with, more utilitarian organizations, may be more cognizant of institutionalized practices and, thus, more responsive to the alignment of organizational names with such practices. Thus, we propose:

TABLE 2
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations, Study 1

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Organizational reputation	0.16	0.36															
2. Identity reason for name change	0.78	0.41	.03														
3. Year of name change	1,985.00	1.73	−.01	−.02													
4. Environmental uncertainty	24.98	113.80	−.03	.02	.04												
5. Old name's length	16.26	6.39	−.01	.05	−.02	−.04											
6. Old name's specificity	0.70	0.46	−.02	.00	−.02	−.06	.51***										
7. Old name's ambiguity	0.89	0.32	−.01	.01	.01	−.01	.46***	.37***									
8. Institutional prevalence of old name's length	16.25	1.77	.28***	.07	−.06*	−.04	.28***	.13***	.06*								
9. Institutional prevalence of old name's specificity	30.51	9.20	−.04	−.06	.00	.04	.36***	−.15***	−.05	−.68***							
10. Institutional prevalence of old name's ambiguity	11.37	5.87	−.07*	−.07	.05	.00	.51***	−.05	−.18***	−.53***	.27***						
11. Institutional prevalence of new name's length	15.35	1.34	.13***	.11**	−.05*	−.02	.18***	.07**	.07**	.18***	−.41***	−.41***					
12. Institutional prevalence of new name's specificity	41.90	10.18	−.13***	−.10**	.04	.00	−.09***	−.09***	−.09***	−.09***	.44***	.51***	−.66***				
13. Institutional prevalence of new name's ambiguity	18.10	5.93	−.08**	−.05	.00	.03	−.03	−.05	−.09***	−.03	.22***	.48***	−.51***	.76***			
14. New name's length	15.35	6.34	.00	.13***	−.04	−.04	.09***	.02	.02	.09***	−.09***	−.09***	.21***	−.14***	−.11***		
15. New name's specificity	0.58	0.49	−.05*	.01	−.05	−.04	.05*	.19***	.08**	.05*	−.09***	−.09***	.13***	−.21***	−.15***	.50***	
16. New name's ambiguity	0.82	0.39	.05	.08*	.02	−.08*	.03	.01	.20***	.03	−.03	−.07**	.08**	−.12***	−.15***	.54***	.44***

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

TABLE 3
Tests of Hypotheses 1 and 2, Study 1[a]

Variable	Length		Ambiguity		Domain Specificity	
Reputation	−1.78*	(0.82)	−0.02	(0.39)	0.21**	(0.31)
Identity reason for name change	1.98*	(0.83)	−0.10	(0.35)	0.06	(0.30)
Environmental uncertainty	0.00	(0.00)	−0.01	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)
Year of name change	−0.33	(0.21)	−0.04	(0.09)	0.01	(0.07)
Old name attribute	0.09	(0.06)	−0.22***	(0.43)	−0.23***	(0.28)
Institutional prevalence of attribute, old name	−0.22	(0.27)	−0.09	(0.03)	−0.07	(0.01)
Institutional prevalence of attribute, new name	1.11***	(0.35)	0.33***	(0.03)	0.37***	(0.01)
F	5.78***					
R^2	.12					
n	297		302		310	
−2 log likelihood			261.96***		377.20***	
Pseudo R^2			.46		.55	

[a] Standardized regression coefficients are shown, with standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Hypothesis 4. The relationship between symbolic isomorphism and understandability will differ by audience members' experience in, or educational/professional affiliation with, utilitarian organizations; the slope on measures of institutional conformity for audiences with greater exposure to business-oriented organizations and practices will be significantly greater than for audiences with relatively less exposure to business-oriented organizations and practices.

Methods

Survey. The questionnaire was brief (two pages) and took about ten minutes to complete. The focal section read as follows: "The following is a list of 10 actual organizational names. Based only on the name, indicate the industry which you think is suggested by the firm's name. You can choose an industry more than once." Industry choices were manufacturing, food, chemicals, oil and gas, medical products/health care supplies, and telecommunications. We selected the ten names from firms in study 1 using the following criteria (listed in order of importance): the firm was not well known, the SIC code was available, and different name types and industries were captured. The ten names, listed in alphabetical order with the correct industry category in parentheses, are: Alagasco (oil and gas), Applied Intelligence (manufacturing), Contel (telecommunications), Excel (food), Flex Products (manufacturing), Lifetime (medical/health), Metricor (medical/health), Weber USA (chemicals), York/Alpern (medical/health), and ZMO (manufacturing).

Sample. To test Hypothesis 4, we sampled two different types of audiences. To avoid potential self-report bias, we drew respondents according to their membership in utilitarian or ideological settings. One sample (n = 516; 100 percent response rate), which represented extensive employment in, and exposure to, institutionalized business practices and organizations, consisted of master of business administration (M.B.A.) students (403 day and 113 evening students). A second sample (n = 96) consisted of adults in the arts or human services and of liberal arts undergraduates, people who had little or no exposure to, or involvement in, utilitarian organizations and practices; instead, they evidenced considerable exposure to more ideological organizations and practices. We contacted the undergraduates (n = 41, 50 percent response rate) through a sorority; their majors were social sciences (61%), humanities (15%), natural sciences (9%), and undeclared (15%). None had business experience or course work. We compared the respondents' demographic characteristics to those of the sorority's membership and found no significant differences in age, work experience, or major. We contacted the adults through an art gallery and a community orchestra; all who were contacted participated (n = 55). Occupations were varied; respondents were teachers, health care providers, musicians, writers, journalists, artists, and professionals, but none were employed or educated in business. Their primary educational degrees were

in the humanities (45%), natural sciences (30%), and social sciences (25%).

The resulting overall sample (n = 612) had 38 percent women and an average age of 27.6 years (s.d. = 5.7). Respondents had, on average, 5.1 years of full-time work experience and were well-educated; 51 percent had bachelor's degrees, and an additional 40 percent had graduate or professional degrees. For all the respondents, participation was voluntary and without reimbursement. We conducted comparative analyses on the dependent variable within samples (day M.B.A. students versus evening M.B.A. students; students versus adults) and across samples on measures of individual differences (sex, age, and education); we found no significant differences (all t's $\leq$ 1.59).

Measures

Dependent variable. *Understandability* was our measure of legitimacy (Galaskiewicz, 1991; Suchman, 1995) and was assessed as the percentage of responses correctly categorizing an organizational name into an industry. Percentages of correct responses varied substantially for the ten organizational names. They are reported here, with standard deviations in parentheses: Alagasco, 72.5% (0.9); Applied Intelligence, 10% (1.6); Contel, 76% (1.5); Excel, 4% (2.0); Flex Products, 50% (1.8); Lifetime, 74% (1.2); Metricor, 30% (1.6); Weber USA, 10% (1.7); York/Alpern, 12% (1.5); and ZMO, 16% (1.5).

Independent variables. Industry categories were formed from firms' actual two-digit SIC codes. For the regression analyses, we created five dummy variables to represent the six industries.

Symbolic isomorphism was measured as a name's *conformity* and was computed in a way comparable to assessments of strategic conformity for a single asset in previous research (Deephouse, 1996; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990). The three name attributes (length, ambiguity, and domain specificity) were compared on institutional prevalence and expressed as standard deviations. Institutional prevalence was measured as in study 1.

Audience was captured with a dummy variable coded 1 for membership in utilitarian organizations and practices and 0 otherwise.

Control variables. *Name attributes* were measured as in study 1. Controlling for name attributes allowed us to assess what isomorphism added beyond meanings embedded in the names themselves. To check on the content validity of these measures, we asked respondents to do the following: "Rank order the 7 items below to indicate how important it is to have this characteristic in a firm's name: a) A name that specifically describes the firm's major products or services (The Tire Store); b) A name that reflects traditions in the industry in which the firm does business; c) A name that is creative, unusual or catchy; d) A business name that reflects the name of the founder or owner (C.M. Smith, Inc.); e) A name that indicates the geographic area in which the firm does business (Southeast Dairies); f) A name that reflects the company's key competitive advantages (Discount Drugs, Quality Auto Repair); g) An abbreviated name (ISX, FTP)." Across the sample, we found that the top choices were: a specific name, a creative or unusual name, and, tied for third, industry traditions and geography. Respondents seemed attuned to firms' name specificity, name uniqueness, and environments, both institutional and strategic.

To test the hypotheses, we conducted three separate ordinary least squares regression analyses, each one predicting the percentage of names correctly classified. In the first, we entered only the control variables, to ascertain their baseline impact. In the second, we entered the control variables and the measures of symbolic isomorphism, to test Hypothesis 3. To test Hypothesis 4, we ran additional regression analyses that included the main and interaction effects of the audience variable.

RESULTS

Table 4 provides descriptive statistics. Regression results are reported in Table 5.

From Table 5, we note that two control variables were significant: *name length,* which was negative, indicating that shorter names were more understandable, a finding consistent with theories of information processing and retention that call attention to the limits of perception (Miller, 1956), and *domain specificity,* which was positive, indicating that more descriptive names had significantly greater understandability. Ambiguity did not relate significantly to understandability.

Hypothesis 3, predicting that greater symbolic isomorphism is associated with significantly greater public understandability, was supported for ambiguity and domain specificity, but not for length. Institutional factors had a significant effect above and beyond that of the name attributes themselves. Thus, organizational conformity to institutionalized constitutive rules concerning name ambiguity and specificity increased legitimacy.

Hypothesis 4, predicting that the slope on measures of institutional conformity would differ by audience, was not supported. Audiences with differing levels of exposure to utilitarian practices and organizations did not differ significantly in their

TABLE 4
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations, Study 2

Variables	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Name's length	10.60	4.74							
2. Name's ambiguity	0.53	0.51	.49**						
3. Name's domain specificity	0.67	0.48	.52**	.55*					
4. Conformity in length	3.92	0.38	−.71***	−.52**	−.36*				
5. Conformity in ambiguity	2.91	0.35	.16	.32	−.36*	.21			
6. Conformity in domain specificity	3.49	0.49	−.06	.31	−.52**	.21	.85***		
7. Audience orientation	0.50	0.50	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	
8. Understandability	38.43	24.38	.03	−.07	.74***	.05	.30	.30	.09

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

TABLE 5
Tests of Hypotheses 3 and 4, Study 2[a]

Variable	Control Variables	Test of Hypothesis 3	Control Variables, Including Audience	Main Effects, Including Audience	Test of Hypothesis 4
Name attributes					
Name's length	−2.36*** (0.70)	−1.17 (0.60)	−2.36** (0.71)	−1.17* (0.57)	−1.17* (0.56)
Name's ambiguity	−1.58 (5.74)	−10.58** (3.64)	−1.58 (5.77)	−10.58** (3.47)	−10.58*** (3.41)
Name's domain specificity	50.19*** (6.17)	60.13*** (4.15)	50.19*** (6.20)	60.13*** (3.95)	60.13*** (3.88)
Symbolic isomorphism					
Conformity in length		1.17 (2.07)		1.17 (1.97)	0.26 (2.16)
Conformity in ambiguity		−3.07*** (0.50)		−3.07*** (0.47)	−3.30*** (0.58)
Conformity in domain specificity		0.80*** (0.09)		0.80*** (0.09)	0.90*** (0.11)
Audience orientation			4.33 (4.99)	4.33 (2.37)	10.22 (5.81)
Interactions: Audience X symbolic isomorphism in . . .					
Name's length					1.82 (1.91)
Name's ambiguity					0.47 (0.68)
Name's domain specificity					−0.21 (0.14)
F	22.43***	58.08***	16.85***	55.33***	40.48***
Adjusted R^2	.69	.92	.69	.93	.93

[a] Standardized regression coefficients are shown, with standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

understanding of organizational names or in their sensitivity to the symbolic conformity of those names. Although audiences may be pluralistic in their construal of other aspects of an organization's identity (Glynn, 2000), they appear to be undifferentiated statistically so far as understandability of the organization's name. Perhaps, as one identity consultant quoted in an article by Shalit (1999) commented, organizational names "are for the masses." After all, organizations can have complex and multifaceted identities, but only one name.

Results from study 2 indicate that organizations seem to follow constitutive rules in naming and that symbolic conformity enhances understandability and legitimacy. Our findings support Albert and Whetten's (1985) contention that organizations engage in deliberate attempts to invoke suitable categories of reference in their identities; we demonstrate that doing so enhances organizational legitimacy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This multipart investigation explores the antecedents of institutionalization in broad and immediate organizational environments and its effects

on that most cogent of identity symbols: an organization's name. In both empirical studies, we found support for the interplay between organizational identity and institutionalism, in that organizational nomenclature was isomorphic with cultural patterns that, in turn, increased the legitimacy of the organizations.

Our historical review demonstrated how radically corporate names have changed over time. From the rich and descriptive names of yesteryear (Long Wharf in the Town of Boston in New England), organizational names shifted first into abbreviated and ambiguous monikers (TRW, USX), and then to more familiar and descriptive names (Domino Sugar). Presumably, such identity shifts over time are predicated upon efforts to be understandable, interpretable, and desirable to target audiences, in order to secure organizational legitimacy. In study 1, we found that a symbol as inherently differentiating as an organization's name cued not the organization's own history, but rather, institutional fields. Ironically, a uniquely idiosyncratic symbol succumbed to isomorphic pressures embedded in institutional environments. Results from this study indicate the importance of institutional frames of reference: to the extent that other firms in an industry had short, specific, or ambiguous names, so too would an organization changing its name. Study 2 examined a presumption underlying our first study, that is, the link between the institutionalization of symbols and the conferral of legitimacy. We found that it was institutionalized constitutive features cued by an organization's name, above and beyond any connotative meanings embedded in the name itself, that enabled individuals to correctly identify a firm's industry. Understanding naming patterns in the broad and immediate institutional environment is critical to legitimacy; this is a need that brings us back full circle to study 1. Taken together, results from the two studies attest to the interlocking relationships among organizational identity symbols, institutionalization, and legitimacy.

Limitations of the present research are acknowledged. We isolated the determinants of symbolic isomorphism within a discrete period (1982–87), and so the generalizability of our results to other eras merits investigation. Nonetheless, names from the period under study were the most ambiguous and vaguest to date (see Table 1; Belkin, 1987) and thus provide a strong test of symbolic isomorphism. Another limitation is that we studied only one symbol—an organization's name—as a marker of its identity. Future work should examine other types of identity symbols, such as organizational logos and languages, including those used to craft mission statements, codify values, and make identity claims. Finally, legitimacy might be examined with regard to other dimensions of audience heterogeneity, particularly those that distinguish between organizational insiders (such as employees) and outsiders (such as shareholders) and more or less powerful institutional actors. Because our interests centered on institutionalizing identity, we used identity theory (Albert & Whetten, 1985) to differentiate audience legitimacy profiles (Suchman, 1995). However, given our demonstration that membership in utilitarian (versus ideological) types of organizations (Albert & Whetten, 1985) was not significant, future researchers might sample across different identity types and, instead, explore differences between public audiences and powerful elites, such as government officials, regulators, and professionals from identity-consulting firms who might promulgate the naming trends we observed.

Implications for Theories of Organizational Identity and Institutional Change

Our studies, through their focus on organizational symbols, return to Meyer and Rowan's (1977) early and influential formulation of the institutional perspective. Our finding that institutional theory informs the study of symbolic choice in organizations, and in particular, the codification of organization identity in the organizational name, is consistent with their work. Correspondingly, our results speak to theories of organizational identity (both constitutive and relational), in that they alert researchers to institutional factors. Even something so individuated as a name is embedded within, and influenced by, a web of institutionalized practices. Thus, organizational identity (and its labeling in a name) needs to be situated within institutional dynamics; this shifts the theoretical perspective from a view of organizational identity as central, enduring, and distinctive (Albert & Whetten, 1985) to one that recognizes that organizational identity is related to, and often mimetic of, institutional isomorphism. Isomorphic conformity is both driven by, and a consequence of, legitimacy, itself cued by the organizational name.

Although our findings place organizational identity at the interorganizational level of the field, we acknowledge the need for in-depth research that uncovers institutional processes operating *within* fields or industries. Convergence at the macro level of organizational fields does not presume convergence at more embedded micro levels. Conversely, a more global perspective would problematize the national naming trends that we uncovered and turn

the larger sociocultural norm-producing nation-state into another independent variable influencing choices of organizational symbols. Additionally, it would be productive to couple issues of organizational compliance with issues concerning the politics of influence, examining the roles of differentially influential constituencies, both organizationally formal and informal, internal and external, central and marginalized. Social knowledge is political, and categorizations (and their boundaries) can be contested; examining the dynamics attending name choices would be revealing of such influences.

Implications for Managerial Practice

Our findings indicate that some organizational names are better than others in securing perceptions of legitimacy from public audiences. However, our results also offer some assurance that the organizational name can be understandable to audiences, whether they are strongly immersed in business-oriented practices or not. To have found a significant effect for audience plurality might suggest that organizations need a multiplicity of names (or at least nicknames). This is good news, because organizations, as Boddewyn (1967) noted, are often just a name—and only one name, at that. Our results hint at two possibilities for making organizational names more understandable: First, that names will be perceived as more legitimate when they resonate with audiences, by signaling the specific nature of the firm's business, and second, that names will be perceived as more legitimate when they resonate with institutionalized (constitutive) patterns that evoke category membership.

Finally, legitimacy itself may be a dual-edged sword. Abrahamson and Rosenkopf (1993: 491) noted that the sheer numbers of organizations adopting a practice (regardless of its technical efficiency or returns) creates "bandwagon pressure"—which arises from the threat of lost legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, counterbandwagon effects can occur when either the "the symbolic or emotional benefits that enticed organizations to adopt a 'state-of-the-art' innovation dwindle rapidly, or when 'snob effects' predispose organizations to not look like so many others in their environment" (Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1993: 504). Thus, although institutional prevalence can legitimate, at some point, it can also delegitimate. Crossing that threshold of overinstitutionalized (or commonplace) nomenclature, organizations may seek radical new names. Such processes may be one of the factors driving periodicity over time.

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