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Legitimacy by Association? How Citizens Form Propriety Beliefs Through Horizontal Spillovers in Public– Private Partnerships

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Abstract

How do citizens form legitimacy judgments about public organizations involved in complex collaborations? This study explores *propriety beliefs*—citizens’ individual beliefs about the appropriateness and legitimacy of public organizations—as a micro-level component of organizational legitimacy. This question is relevant because *legitimacy-as-perception* research has largely overlooked how individuals form propriety beliefs in inter-organizational contexts. We address this research gap by theorizing and testing the *horizontal legitimacy spillovers*—a mechanism in which legitimacy judgments about one organization influence perceptions of another, connected organization. Using two pre-registered factorial survey experiments with German citizens (n = 2,510), we demonstrate that citizens draw on their propriety beliefs about a collaborating private partner when evaluating a public organization engaged in a public–private partnership. Our findings challenge the assumption that legitimacy judgments are made in isolation, showing instead that they are socially constructed through associative cognitive processes. These insights highlight how organizational legitimacy is shaped in networks and partnerships, underscoring the importance for public organizations to carefully consider potential legitimacy spillovers when entering collaborations with private actors.

Keywords:

Organizational legitimacy, legitimacy-as-perception, horizontal spillover, public–private partnership, survey experiment

1. INTRODUCTION

This study provides theorizing and empirical evidence about how citizens form so-called *propriety beliefs* about public organizations involved in public–private partnerships (PPP). In short, propriety beliefs refer to individuals’ personal judgments about whether an organization is appropriate, desirable, or legitimate. Conceptually, they reflect an individual’s legitimacy perception (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2021, 2025). We care about citizens’ propriety beliefs about public organizations because this type of approval constitutes degrees of public support (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Huy et al., 2014), which is particularly important for the successful implementation of PPPs (e.g., Casady, 2021; Lieberherr et al., 2012). However, to understand how citizens form propriety beliefs, we must account for how they make sense of organizational complexity.

PPPs reflect an increasing level of complexity in the organizational landscape (e.g., Stadtler et al., 2024). While scholars assess whether and how such collaborative governance models perform well (e.g., Andrews & Entwistle, 2010; Lee & Hung, 2022), focusing on propriety beliefs seems relevant from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Citizens’ propriety beliefs of public organizations matter because this type of public approval is particularly relevant to them (e.g., Berg & Johansson, 2020). Studying PPPs offers an insightful perspective because it helps to understand organizational legitimacy in complex organizational settings more broadly, characterized by multiple entities, conflicting types of organizations, and uncertainty (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). We build on and contribute to the legitimacy-as-perception research stream (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Suddaby et al., 2017). Presently, this research reveals a significant gap in the existing literature regarding the formation of propriety beliefs amidst complexity (Tost, 2011). While this gap was identified early on (e.g., Haack et al.,

2014, 2021), research still lacks theorizing and empirical assessments of how individuals reach propriety beliefs despite often being confronted with complex and dense information (e.g., Mariconda et al., 2024). We provide theoretical reasoning about the cognitive mechanisms resulting in the formation of individual propriety beliefs (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Bitektine & Song, 2023; Scheuer & Thaler, 2024). Our research begins with the following research question: *How do citizens form proper beliefs about public organizations participating in Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs)?*

When constructing propriety beliefs, citizens build on salient information from various sources, complemented by expectations and previous experiences (Haack et al., 2021; Siraz et al., 2023). In the case of PPPs, this means incorporating information about both the project and collaborating organizations (Tortosa-Edo & López-Navarro, 2024). We focus on how citizens combine (1) performance signals with (2) pre-existing propriety beliefs about collaborators. Our theorizing proposes that the former constitutes a linear predictor for propriety beliefs about public organizations, while the latter results in horizontal legitimacy spillovers. Horizontal spillover is defined as a transfer of legitimacy between singular organizational entities in a partnership. We argue that such spillovers are cognitive in nature (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2014).

Our research contributes to contemporary research on organizational legitimacy (Suddaby et al., 2017) and, more specifically, the legitimacy-as-perception stream (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2021, 2025) by theorizing how individuals incorporate salient information, expectations, and previous experiences when forming propriety beliefs (Siraz et al., 2023). In addition to confirming the relevance of social stimuli, such as performance signals (Bitektine & Song, 2023), the proposed horizontal spillover mechanism complements legitimacy-as-

perception research (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Jacqueminet & Durand, 2020). We demonstrate that evaluators deliberately utilize pre-existing propriety beliefs about collaborators in a reciprocating manner when organizations are linked by a tangible project structure. The resulting horizontal spillovers are characterized by complex considerations, consisting of an evaluative process involving pre-existing propriety beliefs. (Bitektine & Song, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022). In addition, our theorizing and empirical tests extend research on collaborative governance and specifically PPPs (Bertelli, 2019; Boyer et al., 2016) by theorizing horizontal legitimacy spillovers and highlighting how this affects citizens' propriety beliefs. Our theorizing is important because it sheds light on an understudied perspective in PPP-oriented research: citizens' legitimacy judgments of public organizations participating in PPPs (Lee & Esteve, 2023; Lee & Kim, 2024). The findings indicate that propriety beliefs depend considerably on who the public organization collaborates with and whether the collaboration is successful. Thus, when deciding on collaborations for policy implementation, citizens' perceived legitimacy of the collaborating entity should be an integral part of ex-ante risk assessment because negative propriety belief may reduce public support for the governing body (primarily for a failing partnership). At the same time, practitioners should continually evaluate the collaboration's performance and engage in public relations activities to share success stories and explain any problems and challenges.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Organizational Legitimacy Research

Organizational legitimacy constitutes the appropriateness of an organization as judged (and, thus, perceived) by an external audience (Suchman, 1995). Organizational legitimacy is defined as “the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules,

values, norms, and definitions” (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 35). While legitimacy research traditionally allows different conceptual perspectives, the contemporary literature features three prominent streams (Suddaby et al., 2017): legitimacy-as-property (e.g., Aldrich & Fiol, 1994); legitimacy-as-process (e.g., Berger et al., 1998), and legitimacy-as-perception (e.g., Tost, 2011). Legitimacy-as-property refers to “legitimacy as a capacity, property, or trait possessed in some measurable quantity by an organization” (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 458). Legitimacy-as-process primarily focuses on legitimization, defined as “a structured set or sets of formal or emergent activities that describe how an actor acquires affiliation with an existing social order or category” (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 462). Within these more traditional perspectives, legitimacy often serves as a means to other ends, essentially using legitimacy to explain other phenomena (e.g., organizational structures;). However, recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes legitimacy itself rather than treating it as a means to other ends. This shift foregrounds legitimacy as perception (Bitektine & Song, 2023; Suddaby et al., 2017), which conceptualizes legitimacy as “a multilevel social process that extends from perceptions of a legitimacy object by evaluators to their judgments about it and eventually to their actions based on that judgment” (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 468). Our research builds on the third perspective as it revolves around individual *propriety beliefs*. We apply this perspective because “legitimacy ultimately exists in the eye of the beholder” (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002, p. 416).

2.2 Legitimacy-as-Perception and Propriety Beliefs

Scholars focusing on legitimacy-as-perception agree that understanding what drives legitimacy judgments is essential (Haack et al., 2021, 2025; Suddaby et al., 2017). This is because low propriety beliefs may result in the withdrawal of support or resources, imposing constraints on organizations (e.g., van den Broek et al., 2023). Legitimacy-as-perception research

results from the multilevel theory of legitimacy, encompassing both micro- and macro-levels. Mechanisms across these levels received widespread attention (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). While several studies theorize that legitimacy is rooted in both macro- and meso-level legitimacy (Haack et al., 2021; Siraz et al., 2023), the main focus has been on propriety judgments and the resulting *propriety beliefs* (Haack et al., 2021; Haack & Sieweke, 2018). Previous research suggests the following conceptual dimensions: First, pragmatic legitimacy beliefs relate to the expected value an organization will provide its primary stakeholders with (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019, p. 472). Second, moral legitimacy beliefs consist of assessments regarding the organization's adherence to social norms and reflect "a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its activities" (Suchman, 1995, p. 579). Third, cognitive legitimacy beliefs constitute "a passive assumption that an organization is simultaneously comprehensible and necessary or taken-for-granted" (Alexiou & Wiggins, 2019, p. 473).

Early research focusing on individual legitimacy perceptions primarily examined how organizations can affect legitimacy (Elsbach, 1994; Foreman & Whetten, 2002), rather than exploring how individuals form propriety beliefs per se. A variety of more recent studies theorize the underlying legitimacy judgments (Bitektine & Song, 2023; Haack et al., 2021; Scheuer & Thaler, 2024; Suddaby et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2022). In general, propriety beliefs can result from different cognitive mechanisms (Bitektine, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2017; Tost, 2011), including both deliberative (van den Broek et al., 2023) and affect-based (Haack et al., 2014). Thus, evaluators apply information cues highlighting "signals of a firm's social qualities" (Bitektine & Song, 2023, p. 1077), such as pricing signals, and rely on them when forming propriety beliefs. This reasoning builds on the observation that when facing an organization, evaluators often encounter considerable information asymmetries. There is generally limited

information about organizations, and most evaluators lack expert information or fail to acquire it (Haack et al., 2014).

2.3 Legitimacy of Public Organizations in Public–Private Partnerships

While previous research predominantly focuses on isolated information cues, the bulk of empirical studies provide limited insights into how organizational complexity influences legitimacy judgments (Haack et al., 2014). This argument can be made based on the observation that evaluators often face multiple types of information rather than solely isolated information cues (Schilke et al., 2025; Thaler et al., 2023). In addition, given the increasing complexity of organizational arrangements and governance structures (Stadtler et al., 2024), the overarching information environment becomes more complex. Overall, we are interested in how both available information cues and the general presence of collaborating organizations shape the formation of propriety beliefs.

For public organizations, citizens constitute the foundation of the democratic and political framework (Ruder & Woods, 2020), representing the “evaluators” in this case. If citizens judge public organizations as illegitimate (reflected in low propriety beliefs), this may have severe consequences (e.g., Lieberherr et al., 2012; Sievert & Bruder, 2024). Citizens might withdraw from participation (e.g., in citizen participation) and react with non-compliance. This is particularly important for organizations that employ cooperative modes of service delivery (Lieberherr et al., 2012), such as PPPs (e.g., Tortosa-Edo & López-Navarro, 2024). (Public) service delivery may be comparatively intangible when conducted in such arrangements because citizens are non-experts and often have limited insight into such partnerships. Citizens are comparatively critical of the involvement of private actors (Boyer & Van Slyke, 2019). Typically, the role of private organizations is not transparent, and democratic control is limited.

Thus, the complexity of PPP constellations can lead to a reduction in citizens' support, particularly when private organizations are involved (Thompson & Elling, 2000). However, the exact workings of the underlying legitimacy judgments remain unclear.

3. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Propriety Beliefs and Performance Information Signals

First, we focus on how individuals use information signals (Bitektine & Song, 2023) to reach propriety beliefs about organizations. Information signals are salient pieces of information allowing inferences about an organization (e.g., Lee et al., 2018). Information cues can come from different sources, often unrelated to the mode of "service delivery" (i.e., whether a PPP is implemented). For example, large infrastructure projects usually receive considerable media attention during and after construction phases (Chen et al., 2013). Previous scholarship addressed, e.g., pricing and corporate social responsibility signals (Bitektine & Song, 2023; Blanco-González et al., 2023). We focus on performance signals because they constitute common signals in the context of public service delivery (e.g., van den Bekerom et al., 2021).

Performance Signal. Project reports and media coverage tend to focus on whether and to what extent public service delivery "performs well" (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999). As such, we argue that citizens can form propriety beliefs based on such tangible performance information. Previous public management scholarship suggests that the relevance of performance signals for evaluators is evident (Meng & Li, 2025). Given "the complex and challenging nature of public service delivery, public organizations are expected to satisfy a large and varied range of public values, such as effectiveness, efficiency, equity, and responsiveness" (van den Bekerom et al., 2021, p. 128). As such, both expert (e.g., policymakers) and non-expert audiences (i.e., citizens) generally seek to judge and consider performance information on these dimensions (Damgaard &

James, 2024; van der Voet & Lerusse, 2024). Performance information is widely available, characterized by low complexity, and frequently presented with non-expert audiences in mind.

Given the complexity of public service delivery (especially in PPPs), citizens will likely rely on easily accessible information (Suchman, 1995) obtained primarily through media narratives. In line with legitimacy-as-perception theorizing, we argue that performance signals directly influence citizens' perceptions of propriety. In particular, Bitektine (2011, p. 162) makes the convincing argument that “in a sociopolitical legitimacy judgment observed organizational features and performance on a set of relevant dimensions are benchmarked against the prevailing social norms and regulations.” This reasoning suggests that citizens should hold favorable perceptions of an organization if it achieves its political or social goals, thereby benefiting society (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2001). As such, we argue that the performance signals will be relevant predictors of propriety beliefs. Accordingly, we hypothesize that positive (negative) information will result in higher (lower) propriety beliefs:

H1: Performance signals affect the citizens' propriety beliefs about public organizations such that positive (negative) performance information cues increase (decrease) propriety beliefs.

3.2 Propriety Beliefs and Horizontal Legitimacy Spillovers

Second, we suggest that citizens ground propriety beliefs about public organizations in attitudes and beliefs about collaborating organizations (to account for organizational complexity, see, e.g., Tortosa-Edo & López-Navarro, 2024). We follow prominent theorizing that outlines how legitimacy judgments (and, thus, propriety beliefs) develop in iterations (Siraz et al., 2023), following so-called “legitimacy judgment cycles” (Tost, 2011, p. 684). According to Tost (2011), building on social psychology research, legitimacy judgments develop and change in a

cyclical manner. The result is the distinction between “two judgment stages (judgment formation and judgment reassessment)” (Tost, 2011, p. 684). The presence of judgment reassessments implies that evaluators' propriety beliefs emerge over time (Huy et al., 2014), requiring consideration of propriety beyond isolated information signals. Previous research tends to relegate such arguments to study limitations. Still, scholars actively highlight the need to consider developments over time (Bitektine & Song, 2023). As such, we argue that citizens should hold pre-existing propriety beliefs about any organization they encounter (Lenz & Viola, 2017). These pre-existing beliefs, resulting from the judgment formation stage (Haack & Sieweke, 2018; Tost, 2011), will be contextualized in the judgment reassessment stage, where evaluators assess a new situation, in this case, a PPP, in which collaboration with a private actor serves as an information cue. In this case, citizens will reassess propriety beliefs by considering any present collaborating organizations. Previous scholarship cautiously theorized similar mechanisms, suggesting that propriety beliefs can result from cognitive spillovers (Haack et al., 2014).

In our case, considering the private collaborator in a PPP allows for the indirect inference of characteristics of the public organization and, thus, enables citizens to contextualize their legitimacy judgment “horizontally.” In complex settings like PPPs, citizens will likely hold expectations about ideal or acceptable collaborators. We expect that implicit prototypes serve as a reference for citizens (Tost, 2011), resulting from their assessment of desired attributes such as fairness or responsibility (Haack et al., 2014). Hence, when judging the legitimacy of public organizations, citizens likely factor in whether a private collaborator embodies characteristics that fit the prototypical expectations. Positive perceptions occur if the partner resembles an expected prototype. A deviation results in negative perceptions (Zajonc, 1980). Thus, it may be

relevant to consider whether a public organization fosters the interests associated with the PPP and its own interests. For instance, if citizens suspect a private collaborator in a partnership to hold extensive profit-maximization interests, this likely constitutes a deviation from ideal prototypes (Barsalou, 1991). Following these arguments, we expect that citizens' propriety beliefs reflect such cognitive horizontal spillovers (Haack et al., 2014; Willems et al., 2019). In complex settings such as PPPs, propriety beliefs about collaborators should skew citizens' propriety beliefs about a public organization. We argue that pre-existing propriety beliefs allow comparatively easy inferences about a public organization in a PPP. We hypothesize:

H2: Pre-existing propriety beliefs about a collaborating private organization spill over to citizens' propriety beliefs about public organizations.

H3: Pre-existing propriety beliefs about a public organization persist and predict reassessed propriety beliefs.

4. DATA AND METHODS

4.1 Overview of Studies

To test our hypotheses, we applied two consecutive survey experiments. In Study 1, we employ a pretest–posttest factorial design to investigate whether performance signals and the hypothesized horizontal legitimacy spillovers influence variations in participants' propriety beliefs. The vignette designs included manipulations for a performance signal (H1) and the service delivery method (H2). The latter reflects the project was implemented in a public–private partnership (with a private collaborator) or as a standalone project. The survey experiment then measured citizens' perceptions of propriety regarding both public and private organizations. The first manipulation allows for inferring whether and to what extent citizens' propriety beliefs are

informed directly by performance signals. Given the logic of the second manipulation, only participants who saw a private organization were asked about their respective propriety beliefs ($n = 498$). In contrast, all participants indicated propriety beliefs about the public organization. This manipulation allows for the testing of a direct effect resulting from involving a private collaborator. The direct effect reflects whether participants would generally oppose or favor a PPP without considering their propriety beliefs about this organization. To properly test H2 and H3, we thus also consider the correlational evidence by analyzing whether pre-test propriety beliefs about both organizations correlate with the change in propriety beliefs about the public organization. This is the primary rationale for the adoption of a pretest–posttest factorial design. Subsequently, Study 2 applies a conceptual extension by manipulating a validity cue (Haack et al., 2021), thus altering citizens’ propriety beliefs about the private collaborator. Using a similar pretest–posttest design, Study 2 examines whether horizontal spillover effects occur when intentionally manipulating the private organization’s legitimacy, thus presenting causal evidence about H2.

4.2 Experimental Context

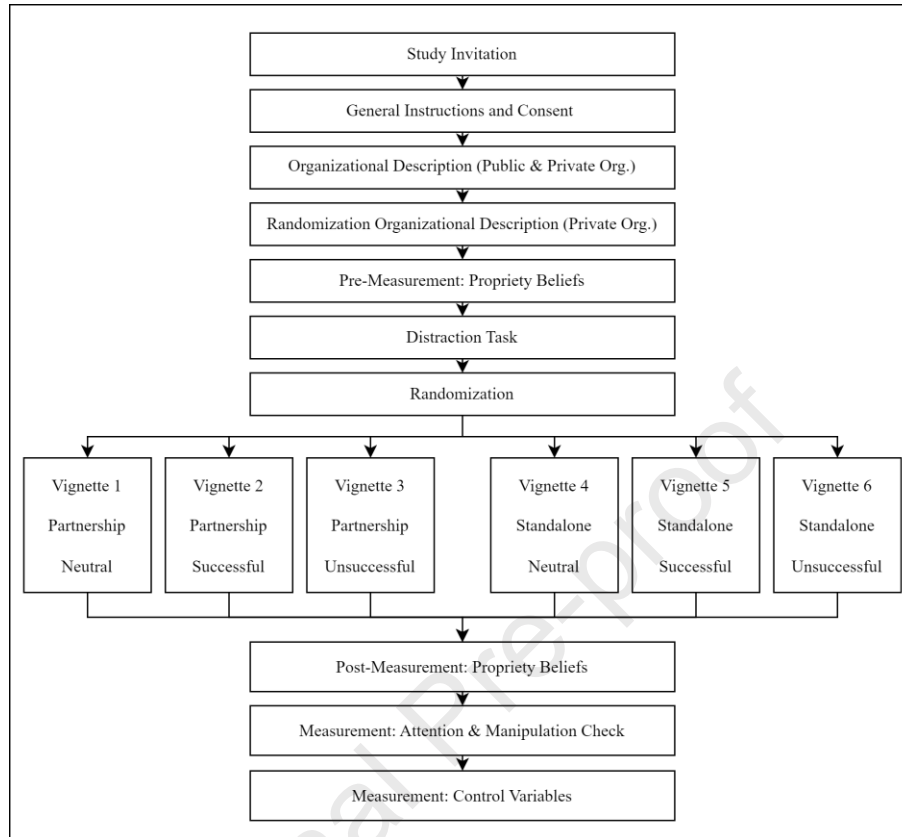
Our research designs utilize a typical public service setting, specifically prison modernization. The vignettes present a modernization project in a prison setting (e.g., Montes & Mears, 2019). Public organizations within the judicial system organize and manage the operations and implementation of prisons. Most judicial systems define clear responsibilities for maintaining the buildings in combination with the management of corrections. Still, judicial organizations can cooperate with private firms to deliver maintenance and services. Participants

presented with a collaborating organization and received information about this very typical PPP. The vignettes presented a relatively typical private organization operating in the given industry.

5. STUDY 1

5.1 Procedure

Study 1 was a pretest–posttest experiment (2 x 3 mixed factorial design with six vignettes: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/UBA38>). Figure 1 summarizes the experimental design, and Appendix A shows the vignettes he translated. Before the treatments, participants saw separate descriptions of two organizations (public and private) and indicated propriety beliefs. Thereafter, a distraction task (approximately 5 minutes) was used to reduce priming effects. Afterward, participants were randomly assigned to one of the vignettes. The first manipulation varied on whether the project involved a private collaborator (yes/no). The second condition manipulated a performance signal. Two groups saw a successful project, and two received information on a failed project. Two control groups received neutral performance information. For the post-test measurement, participants again indicated propriety beliefs for the organizations. Participants in the treatment groups with a standalone project were asked only about the public organization.

Figure 1: Experimental Design Study 1

5.2 Measures

Appendix B outlines the full wording for the variables used in Study 1.

Propriety Beliefs. To account for the construct's multi-dimensional nature, we used a validated scale introduced by Alexiou and Wiggins (2019). The scale covers pragmatic, moral, and cognitive propriety beliefs separately. First, we applied exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to each measurement (pre- and post-measure for both organizations) separately, indicating three-factor solutions. While the factor structure remains constant across measurement points, the EFA reveals a deviation in propriety beliefs about the private organization. Here, the analysis suggested sorting two items differently, resulting in a modified three-factor solution. Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for all four measurements indicates a good fit for the

solutions. The three dimensions for the public organization ($\chi(1) = 44.313, p = .072, CFI = .998, TLI = .997, RMSEA = .020, SRMR = .036$) as well as the modified factor solution for the private organization perform adequately ($\chi(1) = 42.826, p = .096, CFI = .998, TLI = .997, RMSEA = .018, SRMR = .036$). Accounting for Haack & Sieweke (2020), we also assessed whether item 4 (“the general public would approve of this organization’s policies and procedures”) skews the scale’s reliability, given that its wording reflects a second-order judgment. The factor analysis and the regression findings remain consistent, leading to the decision to retain the item.

Demographic Variables. We asked participants to provide the following demographic information: gender, age, educational level, employment sector, and a measure of self-identified political classification on an 11-point scale. These variables cover common demographic standards. Finally, we also controlled for individual motivation by including public service motivation (PSM), often applied in the context of public organizations. We included PSM, given its increasing use in research focusing on the general population, e.g., as a predictor of prosocial behavior (Piatak & Holt, 2020).

Manipulation & attention checks. Participants were required to complete two manipulation checks to assess the effectiveness of the treatment manipulations. In addition, we implemented an attention check. First, they indicated the level of project responsibility attributed to the public organization. Afterwards, they were asked about their perceptions of project success to assess whether the information cue affected their judgment. Both measurements use 5-point Likert scales. The attention check asked participants about the type of project (prison restructuring) featured in the vignettes, presenting four options. Those indicating the wrong kind of project were redirected to the panel provider’s database. As such, they were removed from the dataset, and the analysis features only the remaining participants.

5.3 Sample

We conducted Study 1 with an adult sample from Baden-Württemberg in Germany. A commercial panel provider recruited participants between the ages of 18 and 69. The final sample consists of 1,000 citizens, aligning with the pre-registered specifications. Participants are representative of age and gender, with 50% women and an average age of 43.45 ($SD = 14.72$). Randomization checks for the control variables indicate that the groups are statistically equivalent.

5.4 Data Analysis

We applied OLS regression analysis, calculated in “R.” We used the three factors (moral, pragmatic, and cognitive) for propriety beliefs as separate dependent variables. Additionally, dummy variables for the two treatments act as independent variables. Lastly, control variables are added to the models as covariates. Given the complexity of pre-post data, we applied two approaches to the dependent variables. First, we used the propriety beliefs about the public organization as the dependent variables. Second, we calculated the standardized individual differences (SID) following Estrada et al. (2019)¹. The SID score helps identify whether and to which degree participants’ propriety beliefs changed due to the manipulation. To test H2, we conducted a subgroup analysis with participants confronted with the PPP vignettes. For the OLS regression, the independent variables consist of the SID for participants’ propriety beliefs about the private organization.

¹ Estrada et al. (2019) applies the SID because of low false negative rates. The standardized index is calculated by dividing the individual pre-to-post difference by the standard deviation.

5.5 Results

First, we tested whether the manipulations worked as intended with two OLS regression models. The results in Appendix C show that participants perceived lower levels of overall project liability for the public organization in those conditions featuring a private collaborator ($b = -1.48$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the performance manipulation had a positive effect on perceptions of success ($b = 1.10$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$).

For the regression models in Table 1, we applied the SID scores as dependent variables (DV). The results reflect whether the manipulations affect propriety beliefs, specifically whether participants' propriety beliefs changed from pre-test to post-test. The regression models present the three dimensions of the DV (change in propriety beliefs about the public organization) separately (pragmatic: models 1 & 2, moral: models 3 & 4, cognitive: models 5 & 6). Models 1, 3, and 5 present the average treatment effect for both manipulations (performance signal & private collaborator) on the change in propriety beliefs. Models 2, 4, and 6 add the control variables.

Table 1: OLS Regressions for Change in Propriety Beliefs (Study 1)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> Change Propriety Beliefs (Public Organization)					
	Pragmatic		Moral		Cognitive	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Private collaborator	0.12 (0.06)	0.12 (0.06)	0.12 (0.06)	0.12 (0.06)	0.12* (0.06)	0.13* (0.06)
Performance signal	0.15*** (0.04)	0.20*** (0.05)	0.19*** (0.04)	0.25*** (0.05)	0.03 (0.04)	0.07 (0.05)
Private collaborator x Performance signal		-0.11 (0.08)		-0.14 (0.08)		-0.07 (0.08)
Female		-0.02 (0.07)		-0.003 (0.07)		0.08 (0.07)
Age		-0.0004 (0.002)		0.002 (0.002)		-0.001 (0.002)
Employment sector		0.01 (0.02)		-0.003 (0.02)		0.02 (0.02)
Educational level		-0.07* (0.03)		-0.07* (0.03)		-0.08** (0.03)
Political orientation		0.002 (0.02)		-0.02 (0.02)		-0.01 (0.02)
Public service motivation		0.07 (0.04)		0.10* (0.04)		0.04 (0.04)
Constant	-0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.26)	-0.11* (0.04)	-0.20 (0.26)	-0.18*** (0.04)	-0.03 (0.26)
Observations	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
R ²	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.005	0.02
Adjusted R ²	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.04	0.003	0.01
Residual Std. Error	0.99 (df = 997)	0.99 (df = 990)	0.99 (df = 997)	0.98 (df = 990)	1.00 (df = 997)	1.00 (df = 990)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; Standard errors in parentheses

The performance signal positively affects changes in pragmatic (model 1: $b = .15$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) and moral (model 3 $b = .19$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$) propriety beliefs, lending support

for H1. However, it does not have a significant influence on changes in cognitive propriety beliefs (model 5: $b = .03$, $SE = .04$, $p = .23$). Project delivery with a private organization has a statistically significant effect on changes in cognitive propriety beliefs (model 1: $b = .12$, $SE = .03$, $p < .05$). In contrast, the effects on changes in pragmatic (model 3: $b = .12$, $SE = .03$, $p = .053$) and moral propriety beliefs (model 5: $b = .07$, $SE = .03$, $p = .06$) are not significant.

Apart from the average treatment effects (ATE), we are primarily interested in the horizontal spillover of prior propriety beliefs (H2 & H3). We applied additional regression models to test whether evaluators' pre-existing propriety beliefs about the private organization had a separate effect. The regression analysis in Table 2 builds on a subgroup of participants (those confronted with a public–private partnership, $n = 498$). It addresses the post-measurement propriety beliefs about the public organization as the DV. Like before, we present separate regression models for the three dimensions of propriety beliefs. Models 1, 4, and 7 include the SID score for the change of propriety beliefs related to the public organization as independent variables (IV). Models 2, 5, and 8 also test for pre-test propriety beliefs about the public organization. Finally, models 3, 6, and 9 add the control variables.

The results partially support H2. Across all models, we find statistically significant associations between dimensions of propriety beliefs (SID scores) about the private organization and post-measurement beliefs about the public organization. The changes in pragmatic propriety beliefs about the private organization are positively associated with all three post-measurement dimensions of propriety beliefs related to the public organization. The effects on pragmatic (Model 3: $b = .11$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$), moral (Model 6: $b = .06$, $SE = .02$, $p < .05$), and cognitive propriety beliefs (Model 9: $b = .10$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$) are statistically significant. As such, a positive change in any dimension of propriety beliefs about the private organization aligns with a

positive change of beliefs about the public organization on the respective dimensions.

Furthermore, the change in cognitive propriety beliefs about the private organization is positively associated with both pragmatic ($b = .06$, $SE = .03$, $p < .05$) and moral propriety beliefs ($b = .08$, $SE = .03$, $p < .01$) about the public organization. Following the preregistration, we conducted robustness tests with the SID scores as dependent and independent variables. Appendix E outlines additional OLS regression models with the SID score as the dependent variable. The results resemble the findings from Table 3.

5.6 Discussion Study 1

Study 1 highlights the effect of performance signals on citizens' propriety beliefs, supporting H1. However, the performance signal only changed pragmatic and moral propriety beliefs. Cognitive propriety beliefs about the public organization were not affected. Overall, citizens seem to interpret performance information as an indicator of the benefits they can expect from the organization and whether it adheres to social norms (Suchman, 1995). Since cognitive propriety beliefs did not change, perceptions about an organization's taken-for-grantedness were unaffected. The presence of a private organization did not change propriety beliefs directly. A PPP was not seen as either positive or negative information per se.

Still, the extended analysis of the subsample provides support for H2. Indeed, we can observe the hypothesized horizontal spillover guiding citizens' propriety beliefs about the public organization. Primarily, pre-existing pragmatic and cognitive propriety beliefs about the private organization correlate with propriety beliefs about the public organization. As such, we provide strong evidence that citizens incorporate beliefs about collaborators, as theorized.

Table 2: OLS Regressions for Post-Measurement Propriety Beliefs (Study 1)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> Post-Measurement Propriety Beliefs (Public Organization)								
	Pragmatic (P)			Moral (M)			Cognitive (C)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Change Propriety B. (P) Private	0.16*** (0.04)	0.12*** (0.03)	0.11*** (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)	0.06* (0.02)	0.06* (0.02)	0.11** (0.04)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)
Change Propriety B. (M) Private	-0.004 (0.05)	-0.003 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.08* (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Change Propriety B. (C) Private	0.08 (0.04)	0.06* (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)	0.10* (0.04)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Performance Signal	0.14** (0.04)	0.06* (0.03)	0.06* (0.03)	0.11** (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)	0.11** (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Pre-Propriety B. (P) Public		0.59*** (0.04)	0.57*** (0.04)		0.11*** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)		0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Pre-Propriety B. (M) Public		0.07 (0.06)	0.07 (0.06)		0.51*** (0.05)	0.48*** (0.05)		0.20*** (0.05)	0.19*** (0.05)
Pre-Propriety B. (C) Public		0.08 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)		0.11** (0.04)	0.09* (0.04)		0.54*** (0.04)	0.52*** (0.04)

Note: * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001; Standard errors in parentheses

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>								
	Post-Measurement Propriety Beliefs (Public Organization)								
	Pragmatic (P)			Moral (M)			Cognitive (C)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Female			0.01 (0.05)			0.04 (0.04)			0.09* (0.05)
Age			0.001 (0.002)			-0.0005 (0.002)			0.001 (0.002)
Employment Sector			-0.01 (0.02)			-0.0004 (0.02)			0.02 (0.02)
Educational Level			-0.04 (0.02)			-0.04* (0.02)			-0.01 (0.02)
Political Orientation			-0.02 (0.01)			-0.01 (0.01)			0.01 (0.01)
Public Service Motivation			0.09** (0.03)			0.14*** (0.03)			0.07* (0.03)
Constant	3.45*** (0.03)	0.85*** (0.15)	0.89*** (0.23)	3.65*** (0.03)	0.95*** (0.13)	0.87*** (0.19)	3.99*** (0.03)	0.99*** (0.13)	0.71*** (0.21)
Observations	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498	498
R ²	0.09	0.53	0.55	0.11	0.57	0.60	0.07	0.57	0.59
Adjusted R ²	0.09	0.53	0.53	0.11	0.56	0.59	0.06	0.57	0.57
Residual Std. Error	0.75 (df = 493)	0.54 (df = 490)	0.53 (df = 484)	0.66 (df = 493)	0.46 (df = 490)	0.45 (df = 484)	0.72 (df = 493)	0.49 (df = 490)	0.49 (df = 484)

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; Standard errors in parentheses

6. STUDY 2

6.1 Procedure

To confirm the horizontal spillover mechanism, Study 2 applies a preregistered conceptual generalization. The study applies a multi-stage factorial design with pretest–posttest measurements. (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/DY5ZM>). The vignettes are outlined in Appendix A.

After a short introduction, participants were presented with descriptions of the organizations and indicated propriety beliefs. Contrary to Study 1, the present design manipulates a validity cue related to the private organization. Participants were randomized into three groups, each receiving a different version of the description. While a control group received a neutral description (similar to study 1), the other groups received information indicating high or low appropriateness, conceptualized as a validity cue (Haack et al., 2021). The high legitimacy condition states general approval and certifications. In contrast, the low legitimacy condition indicates low levels of external approval and a lack of certifications. After a distraction task (duration ca. 5 minutes), participants were randomized a second time. Contrary to Study 1, we manipulated only the performance signal. All three vignettes introduced the project as a PPP. Figure 2 summarizes the experimental design.

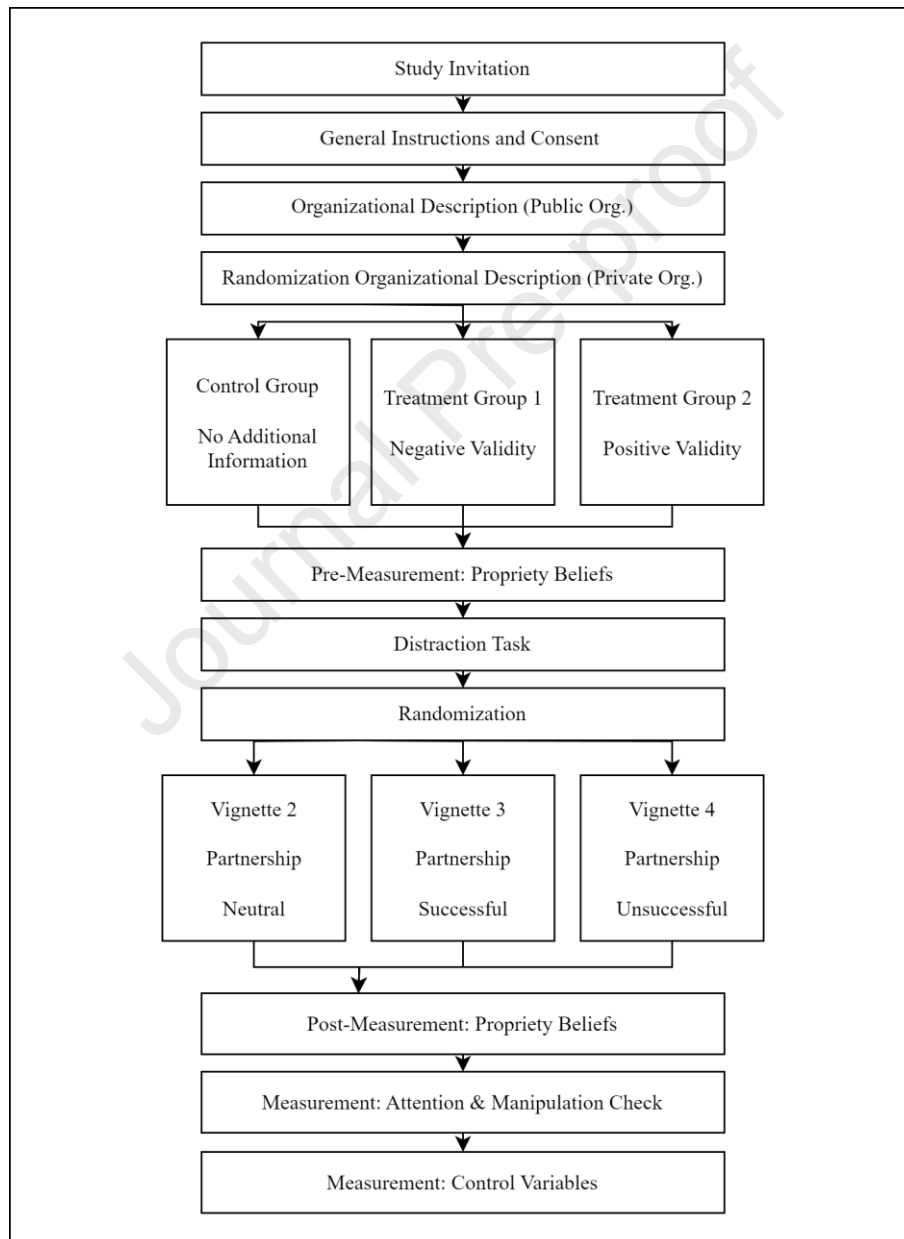
6.2 Measures

This survey experiment applies the same measures used in Study 1, outlined in Appendix B.

Propriety Beliefs. To test the scale’s validity, we applied EFA to each measurement (pre- and post-measure for both organizations) separately, indicating the same factor solutions used in Study 1. CFA for all four measurements indicates a good fit for the solutions. The

dimensions for propriety beliefs about the public organization ($\chi(1) = 279.821, p = .000, CFI = .883, TLI = .836, RMSEA = .072, SRMR = .037$) as well as the factor solution related to the private organization are acceptable ($\chi(1) = 261.438, p = .000, CFI = .924, TLI = .893, RMSEA = .069, SRMR = .033$).

Figure 2: Experimental Design Study 2



6.3 Sample

A commercial panel provider recruited participants between 18 – 69 from North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany. The final sample comprises 1,510 citizens and resembles the intended sample size specified in the pre-registration. Participants are representative of age and gender, with 50.4% women and an average age of 44.4 ($SD = 14.6$). The results of randomization checks indicate that the groups are statistically equivalent.

6.4 Data Analysis

We applied OLS regressions and a mediation analysis calculated in “R.” The OLS regression analysis uses the SID scores as the dependent variables for pre-post changes in propriety beliefs. Furthermore, we used stepwise mediation analysis (Shaver, 2005).

6.5 Results

The results in Appendix D indicate that the manipulations were successful as the performance signal manipulation positively affected participants’ perceptions of success ($b = 1.04$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the validity manipulation results in the expected changes in propriety beliefs about the private organization across all three dimensions (pragmatic: $b = 0.21$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$; moral: $b = 0.24$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$, cognitive: $b = 0.21$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$). Thus, both experimental manipulations were successful.

Table 3 presents the regression results for the three dimensions of propriety beliefs to assess the ATEs. In line with Study 1, we applied the SID scores as dependent variables. The regression models present the three dimensions of the DV (change in propriety beliefs about the public organization) separately (pragmatic: models 1 & 2, moral: models 3 & 4, cognitive: models 5 & 6). Models 1, 3, and 5 present the average treatment effect for both manipulations

(performance signal & validity cue) on the change in propriety beliefs. Models 2, 4, and 6 add the control variables.

Table 3: OLS Regression for Change in Propriety Beliefs (Study 2)

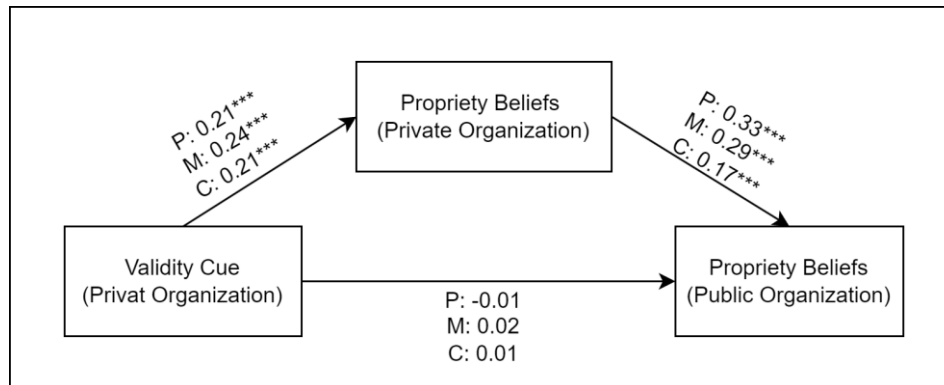
	<i>Dependent variable:</i> Change Propriety Beliefs (Public Organization)					
	Pragmatic		Moral		Cognitive	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Performance Signal	0.17*** (0.03)	0.18*** (0.03)	0.08* (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)	0.10** (0.03)
Treatment: Legitimacy	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Information Cue (Performance) x Legitimacy		0.10* (0.05)		0.05 (0.05)		0.06 (0.05)
Female		-0.003 (0.002)		0.002 (0.002)		-0.01** (0.002)
Age		0.004 (0.02)		0.04* (0.02)		-0.03 (0.02)
Employment sector		-0.05 (0.02)		-0.003 (0.02)		-0.14*** (0.02)
Educational level		0.01 (0.01)		0.02 (0.01)		0.004 (0.01)
Political orientation		0.02 (0.03)		0.02 (0.03)		0.03 (0.03)
Public service motivation		-0.04 (0.04)		0.004 (0.04)		-0.06 (0.04)
Constant	-0.02 (0.03)	0.05 (0.21)	0.22*** (0.03)	-0.14 (0.21)	-0.49*** (0.03)	0.23 (0.21)
Observations	1,510	1,510	1,510	1,510	1,510	1,510
R ²	0.02	0.03	0.004	0.01	0.01	0.03
Adjusted R ²	0.02	0.02	0.003	0.005	0.004	0.03
Residual Std. Error	0.99 (df = 1507)	0.99 (df = 1500)	1.00 (df = 1507)	1.00 (df = 1500)	1.00 (df = 1507)	0.99 (df = 1500)

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Standard errors in parentheses

The performance positively affected changes in pragmatic ($b = .17$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$) moral ($b = .08$, $SE = .03$, $p < .01$), and cognitive propriety beliefs ($b = .09$, $SE = .03$, $p < .01$) about the public organization (H1). The manipulation of the private organization's legitimacy did not exhibit a direct effect, as indicated by the lack of statistical significance across all models.

Still, the hypothesized spillover effect implies an indirect effect, potentially mediated by the propriety beliefs about the private organization. Thus, we calculated stepwise mediation models (Wood et al., 2008). The effect of the legitimacy treatment on propriety beliefs about the public organization was partially mediated by propriety beliefs about the private organization (H2). Figure 3 suggests an indirect effect between the legitimacy treatment and the outcome variable. This provides support for H2. Propriety beliefs about a private collaborator (contingent on the validity cue) spill over to beliefs about the public organization. The indirect effect was $(.21) \times (.33) = .0693$ for the pragmatic dimension, $(.24) \times (.39) = .0696$ for the moral dimension, and $(.21) \times (.17) = .0357$ for the cognitive dimension. The effects prove significant ($p > .001$) after using bootstrapping procedures (1.000 simulations).

Figure 3: Results for Mediation Analysis (Study 2)



6.6 Discussion Study 2

Study 2 confirms the effect of the performance signal on citizens' propriety beliefs about the public organization (H1). Unlike in Study 1, the performance signal affected all dimensions of participants' propriety beliefs. The results provide further support for the existence of a horizontal spillover mechanism. While Study 1 offered preliminary support for H2, Study 2 increased our confidence in the theorized mechanism. The mediation analysis indicates that changes in propriety beliefs about the private collaborator (induced through the validity manipulation) indirectly spill over to propriety beliefs about a public organization. We observe this effect despite introducing a comparatively weak treatment.

7. GENERAL DISCUSSION

We investigated whether and how citizens incorporate performance signals and (pre-existing) beliefs about collaborators when constructing propriety beliefs. Two empirical studies provide strong evidence in support of our hypotheses. First, as expected, citizens directly incorporate performance signals (H1). This finding confirms theoretical reasoning about the relevance of information cues for individual legitimacy judgments (Haack et al., 2021; Jacqueminet & Durand, 2020). Second, the results indicate the existence of a cognitive horizontal spillover mechanism across organizations (H2) and highlight that re-existing propriety beliefs persist and predict reassessed propriety beliefs (H3). The findings in both studies align with theoretical reasoning about legitimacy judgments, suggesting that evaluators engage in constant reassessments (Tost, 2011). We show that citizens inform their legitimacy judgments by drawing from their beliefs about collaborating organizations. While simply collaborating with a private organization does not affect propriety beliefs about the public organization, we show that what citizens specifically think about such a collaborator matters.

To illustrate, citizens bestowing private organizations with low propriety beliefs also lower their propriety beliefs about public organizations. This is the case, even when their propriety beliefs about the private collaborator are affected by validity cues (i.e., information reflecting collective-level legitimacy, see Haack et al., 2021). Study 1 suggests that pragmatic and cognitive propriety about the private collaborator mattered most. Pragmatic propriety indicates whether citizens expect an organization to provide benefits to its stakeholders. Cognitive propriety indicates whether an organization is “taken-for-granted” (Suchman, 1995). As such, propriety beliefs about the public organization are higher if citizens think the private organization promises additional value to the project and is taken-for-granted. Study 2 provides similar findings, confirming the indirect nature of horizontal legitimacy spillovers. When manipulating a validity cue about the private, participants altered their propriety beliefs about the public organization. This effect is driven by the changes in propriety beliefs about the private organization. The mediation effects indicated a constituent spillover for each dimension. For instance, higher pragmatic propriety beliefs about the private organization correlate with higher pragmatic propriety beliefs about the public organization.

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

This article contributes to the literature on organizational legitimacy (Suddaby et al., 2017), specifically the theoretical discourse on legitimacy-as-perception (Bitektine, 2011; Haack et al., 2021, 2025; Tost, 2011). Our theoretical arguments and empirical insights emphasize the importance of cognitive mechanisms at the micro-level. Our findings provide insights into how individuals reach propriety beliefs, especially when lacking expert information (Haack et al., 2014). Our research contributes to legitimacy research by suggesting the need to study the complexity of organizational contexts (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999) that evaluators face when

forming propriety beliefs. This consideration is relevant given the presence of legitimacy judgment cycles, which involve constant reassessments of propriety beliefs (Tost, 2011, p. 684). Our theorizing challenges contemporary legitimacy-as-perception research, which often considers organizations in isolation (Jahn et al., 2020). While scholars advocate for the multi-level nature of legitimacy, including a focus on the relevance of cognitive-level validity as a factor in propriety beliefs, little attention is given to the complexity of micro-level factors in legitimacy judgments. We highlight the need to account for complex considerations of pre-existing propriety beliefs in the formation of “new” propriety beliefs, further developing early arguments in the legitimacy-as-perception stream (Tost, 2011). Despite highlighting the need to consider the legitimacy judgment cycles, a lack of theorizing is apparent. Our research addresses this research gap by proposing cognitive horizontal spillovers. In this mechanism, propriety beliefs about one actor affect propriety beliefs about another (because they are linked in some way). The findings suggest that propriety beliefs, although also incorporating performance signals (Bitektine & Song, 2023; Jacqueminet & Durand, 2020), result from cognitive horizontal spillover effects. We show that propriety beliefs are heavily intertwined. Moreover, we suggest that individuals’ legitimacy judgments are driven by deliberative cognition (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Tost, 2011) because they almost always incorporate information cues combined with pre-existing propriety beliefs. Future research should consider this complexity of legitimacy judgments. This includes a stronger emphasis on the development of propriety beliefs over time. Additionally, we advocate for considering organizational complexity more comprehensively. While we focused on PPPs, modern organizations typically exhibit a variety of linkages with other organizations. Based on our reasoning, organizational linkages should play an important

role in legitimacy judgments beyond their suggested importance on the macro-level (Baum & Oliver, 1991).

Second, we extend public management research on collaborative governance and PPPs (Bertelli, 2019; Boyer et al., 2016; Emerson et al., 2012). Our theorizing is important because it sheds light on an understudied perspective in PPP-oriented research (Lee & Esteve, 2023; Lee & Kim, 2023): citizens' propriety beliefs. We show that the public's perception of public organizations is heavily influenced by spillover effects. As such, citizens' perceptions of propriety are influenced by the organizations with which public organizations collaborate. In doing so, we highlight the importance of assessing public sector performance as a multi-dimensional construct containing output performance and legitimacy as relevant dimensions. In particular, the latter is essential for the stability of democratic systems (Andersen et al., 2016).

7.2 Practical Implications

Public management practitioners interested in collaborative governance should consider incorporating propriety beliefs into their risk assessment when deciding to start collaborative endeavors, as it provides an appropriate perspective on the performance of public administrations (Lieberherr et al., 2012; Pinz et al., 2018). By acknowledging the potential impact of cognitive horizontal legitimacy spillovers, they will be able to carefully evaluate whether and when ties to collaborating organizations are desirable, particularly concerning private organizations in PPPs. This will enable them to prevent unintended legitimacy losses, particularly when evaluators perceive a collaborator as inappropriate (Weber et al., 2017).

In addition, our findings confirm the need for practitioners to engage in legitimacy work (Rueede & Kreutzer, 2015) to prevent the negative impact of legitimacy spillovers. (Joutsenvirta & Vaara, 2015). Thus, when using inter-sectoral collaborations for policy implementation,

practitioners must actively utilize public relations instruments to explain their decisions and communicate the success stories of these partnerships.

Both careful risk assessment and public relations activities are essential in the context of inter-sectoral collaborations because, apart from causing horizontal spillovers, such arrangements may also lead to vertical spillovers. Suppose evaluators judge the governing party to be responsible for an inappropriate and/or failing inter-sectoral collaboration. In that case, the respective party may suffer from a loss in electoral support. Thus, even from a more politics-oriented perspective, it makes sense to apply a holistic perspective on inter-sectoral collaborations and public sector performance.

7.3 Limitations and Research Avenues

First, the experiments applied a fictitious collaborative setting. Generally, artificial settings can undermine empirical results (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). For instance, participants might not recognize manipulated information cues in a real-life setting. We maximized internal validity through randomization and attempted to maximize external validity by using representative adult samples. Still, future research should consider using field experiments and deliberative experiments (Haack et al., 2021). Furthermore, future studies should vary the organizational contexts. Apart from PPPs, other types of organizational linkages may have considerable implications for legitimacy judgments (Baum & Oliver, 1991).

Second, both studies applied cross-sectional data and exhibit a limited longitudinal perspective. Our survey experiments cannot assess dynamic changes over extended periods. Future research should address the issue by conducting survey experiments with separated measurement points. Multiple surveys with matched responses could help mitigate potential problems, such as priming and order effects. Moreover, event-based methods and diary studies

would enable scholars to integrate experimental manipulations in longitudinal data structures. Both approaches would be particularly suited to examine within-person differences, which could illuminate our understanding of how propriety beliefs develop (Siraz et al., 2023; Tost, 2011). In addition, implementing longitudinal research designs would enable the study of the interplay between individual legitimacy judgments on the micro-level and macro-level concepts, such as validity (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2021). Studying propriety beliefs from a more dynamic perspective over time could also yield promising insights into how individual propriety beliefs coalesce into collective-level legitimacy (Illia et al., 2023). We expect that multiple spillover mechanisms would be at play, where propriety beliefs of significant audiences (e.g., citizens as voters) affect collective-level validity (e.g., authorization) of organizations, e.g., through actively voicing concerns (van den Broek et al., 2023).

Third, we conducted both studies in Germany. Since Germany deviates from the economic development and culture of other countries, the findings may be limited to developed countries. Evaluators of PPPs, such as citizens, may differ in their perceptions and information processing of such complex settings. For instance, the diffusion of information revolving around partnership arrangements is likely to be different in developing countries. Furthermore, PPPs implemented in developing countries often result from economic aid programs. The interplay of organizations in such international development settings probably causes evaluators to rely on different information cues. Future research should focus on settings of complexity featuring constraints for evaluators' information processing.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Vignettes for Studies 1 and 2

Design Step 1:

Description Public Organization:

The ministry of justice in [Study 1: Baden-Württemberg; Study 2: Northrhine Westfalia] is a federal ministry. Our responsibility is ensuring a functioning justice system in the federated state. To achieve this goal our employees take care of providing financial and human resources for the judicial procedures in our federated state.

Description Private Organization:

The steep GmbH is an international technical service provider, with more than 30 locations and roughly 800 employees in Germany and Europe. Besides core business in radar and IT-technology, the steep GmbH has been active in the provision and maintenance of infrastructure in public-private partnerships.

Treatment Validity Addendum (only Study 2):

Neutral validity: No addendum

Positive validity: The steep GmbH has an above-average external approval within its industry. The organization received various prizes for innovate solutions. Furthermore, the organization is certified based on the ISO 9001 norm, ensuring that relevant legal and administrative requirements are fulfilled.

Negative validity: The steep GmbH has a below-average external approval within its industry. The organization is not known for innovate solutions. Furthermore, the organization is not certified based on the ISO 9001 norm, which would ensure that relevant legal and administrative requirements are fulfilled.

Design Step 2:

Survey Vignette (Newspaper Article):

Title: Modernization of the corrections facility in [Study 1: JVA Konstanz; Study 2: JVA Anrath]

For the first time, the corrections unit in [Study 1: JVA Konstanz; Study 2: JVA Anrath] has been restructured and modernized. The prison, with more than 120 employees, increases its capacity to 120 inmates. “The prisons’ restructuring included a fundamental remediation with a modern security concept and the redevelopment of the ongoing operations” said minister of justice Guido

Wolf. “This includes observation and custody of prisoners as well as the infrastructure maintenance and general supply of the facility.”

Treatment Private Organization

Standalone project (only Study 1):

Execution of penal sentences and justice is an important responsibility of the state. The ministry of justice in [Study 1: Baden-Württemberg; Study 2: Northrhine Westfalia] has carried out the prison modernization single-handedly. Thus, the ministry of justice has taken responsibility for the fundamental remediation and the operation of the prison. According to minister of justice Guido Wolf, the modernization of the corrections unit will be financed solely from public funds.

Collaboration with Private Organization:

Execution of penal sentences and justice is an important responsibility of the state. The ministry of justice in [Study 1: Baden-Württemberg; Study 2: Northrhine Westfalia] has carried out the prison modernization in cooperation with the private firm “Bodensee-Sicherheit GmbH”. The private firm has taken responsibility for the fundamental remediation and the operation of the prison. According to minister of justice Guido Wolf, the modernization of the corrections unit will be financed solely from public funds paid to the “Bodensee-Sicherheit GmbH”. The charges consist of payments for the modernization and prison operation including profit-oriented surcharges.

Treatment: Performance Signal

Success: During the modernization of the prison in [Study 1: JVA Konstanz; Study 2: JVA Anrath] no problems occurred. Both the remediation of the facility and the subsequent operation were executed frictionless. The recently published final report of the selected committee for home affairs in [Study 1: Baden-Württemberg; Study 2: Northrhine Westfalia] evaluated the modernization project as successful. An independent evaluation agency confirmed this assessment.

Failure: During the modernization of the prison in [Study 1: JVA Konstanz; Study 2: JVA Anrath] major problems occurred. Both the remediation of the facility and the subsequent operation were not executed frictionless. The recently published final report of the selected committee for home affairs in [Study 1: Baden-Württemberg; Study 2: Northrhine Westfalia] evaluated the modernization project as unsuccessful. An independent evaluation agency confirmed this assessment.

Neutral: Thus far, nothing new and verified related to the modernization procedure came forth. Both the remediation and the following operations have not yet been evaluated. The recent status report of the home affairs committee refers to the project as ongoing. Still, an independent organization has been commissioned to evaluate the collaborative project.

Appendix B: Measures (Study 1 & Study 2)

Variable	Operationalization (5-Point Likert scales if not stated differently)
<i>Propriety Beliefs</i> adapted from Alexiou and Wiggins (2019)	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements concerning the ministry of justice in [Study 1: Baden-Württemberg; Study 2: Northrhine Westfalia]? Please respond based on your understanding of the organization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think that ...
Pragmatic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • this organization creates value for its stakeholders. • the policies of this organization cater to the interests of its stakeholders. • the activities of this organization benefit their immediate stakeholders.
Moral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the general public would approve of this organization's policies and procedures. • the way this organization operates promotes the common good. • this organization is concerned with meeting acceptable standards for ethical behavior in their field. • if more organizations adopted policies and procedures like this one, the world would be a better place.
Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • this organization is necessary. • this organization provides an essential function. • it is difficult to imagine a world in which this organization did not exist.
Age	[Year –] What year were you born?
Gender	How do you describe your gender identity? (1 = Female/ 0 = Male)
<i>Educational level</i>	What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School attendance up to 7 years • Secondary modern school qualification • High-school diploma • Entrance qualification for a technical college

Variable	Operationalization (5-Point Likert scales if not stated differently)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General qualification for university
<i>Employment</i>	<p data-bbox="548 373 1130 399">Which of the following groups do you belong to?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed in a private organization • Employed in a nonprofit organization • Employed in a public organization • Unemployed
<i>Public Service Motivation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am very motivated to contribute to society • I find it to be very motivating being able to contribute to society • Making a difference in society, no matter how small, is very important to me • Defending the public interest is very important to me
<i>Political Orientation</i>	<p data-bbox="548 856 1224 949">In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10? (0 = extreme left, 10 = extreme right)</p>
<i>Manipulation Check (Study 1)</i>	<p data-bbox="548 982 1192 1050">To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project was conducted by the ministry of justice alone
<i>Manipulation Check (Study 1 & Study 2)</i>	<p data-bbox="548 1176 1127 1243">To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The presented project was successful.
<i>Attention Check (Study 1 & Study 2)</i>	<p data-bbox="548 1344 1159 1411">Which project was presented to you in the previous newspaper article?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of a highway. • Renovation of a hospital • Modernization of an airport • Prison reconstruction (correct)

Appendix C: OLS Regressions Manipulation Checks (Study 1)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Level of Responsibility	Level of Performance
	(1)	(2)
Private Organization	-1.48*** (0.08)	
Information Cue (Performance)		1.10*** (0.04)
Constant	3.02*** (0.05)	2.27*** (0.03)
Observations	1,000	1,000
R ²	0.28	0.45

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; Standard errors in parentheses

Appendix D: OLS Regressions Manipulation Checks (Study 2)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Perceived Performance	Propriety Beliefs (Pragmatic)	Propriety Beliefs (Moral)	Propriety Beliefs (Cognitive)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment: Performance	1.04*** (0.03)			
Treatment: Legitimacy		0.21*** (0.02)	0.24*** (0.02)	0.21*** (0.03)
Constant	2.22*** (0.03)	3.26*** (0.02)	3.10*** (0.02)	2.63*** (0.02)
Observations	1,510	1,510	1,510	1,510
R ²	0.43	0.05	0.07	0.04
Adjusted R ²	0.43	0.05	0.06	0.04
Residual Std. Error (df = 1508)	0.98	0.75	0.75	0.83
F Statistic (df = 1; 1508)	1,116.46***	78.67***	105.73***	64.57***

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; Standard errors in parentheses

Appendix E: OLS Regressions for Change in Propriety Beliefs (Study 1)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> Change Propriety Beliefs (Public Organization)		
	Pragmatic (1)	Moral (2)	Cognitive (3)
Change Propriety B. (P) Private	0.14** (0.05)	0.14** (0.05)	0.15** (0.05)
Change Propriety B. (M) Private	0.02 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)
Change Propriety B. (C) Private	0.09 (0.06)	0.16** (0.05)	0.07 (0.06)
Constant	0.08 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.04)
Observations	498	498	498
R ²	0.04	0.09	0.05
Adjusted R ²	0.04	0.08	0.04
Residual Std. Error (df = 494)	0.99	0.91	0.95

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001; Standard errors in parentheses