

THE INFLUENCE OF LEGITIMACY ON CAREER TRAJECTORIES OF INDIVIDUALS IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS: NCAA BASKETBALL

DANIEL S. HALGIN

The Wallace E. Carroll School of Management
Boston College
140 Commonwealth Avenue
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

ABSTRACT

In this paper I investigate the importance of various types of legitimacy on the career trajectories of individuals in leadership positions. Using data from NCAA basketball coaches as an empirical setting, I propose that pragmatic legitimacy (performance), cognitive legitimacy (recognition) and moral legitimacy (compliance) are significant predictors of career advancement. Results from Cox regression survival analysis indicate that among all variables, affiliation with high status actors, a measure of cognitive legitimacy, is the strongest positive predictor of likelihood of career advancement (even when controlling for performance). Results also indicate that members of minority groups advance at a slower rate regardless of actual performance.

INTRODUCTION

The quest to understand the driving factors of job promotion and demotion have led to a plethora of research on careers. However, to date, scholars have not utilized the concept of legitimacy at an individual level to understand differences in career opportunities and the timing of promotions. Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). Types of organizational legitimacy include pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy rests on the self-interest of an organization's most immediate audiences based on direct interactions and exchange; Moral legitimacy rests on the perceived moral and normative behavior of an organization; and cognitive legitimacy rests on the comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness of an organizational action (Suchman, 1995). In this paper I propose that concepts of legitimacy inform our understanding of career progression by clearly separating accomplishments and talent (pragmatic legitimacy) from recognition (cognitive legitimacy) and from compliance with professional norms (moral legitimacy).

THEORY

Pragmatic legitimacy is based on the self-interest of an organization's most immediate audiences based on direct interactions and expected value (Suchman, 1995). For example, the pragmatic legitimacy of an organizational policy is based on that policy's expected value to a particular set of constituents (Suchman, 1995). In the realm of careers, one can imagine that a working individual with successful and productive interactions with customers, clients, and coworkers, will produce value for the organization (achieving pragmatic legitimacy), and be more likely to be promoted than individual who has not had successful interactions. This form

of legitimacy signals to promotion and hiring committees that an individual is capable of performing job duties and therefore worthy of increases in job responsibilities. Thus,

Hypothesis 1: Pragmatic legitimacy is a significant positive predictor of the likelihood of career promotion.

Cognitive legitimacy rests on the comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness of an organizational action (Suchman, 1995) and rests on the availability of cultural models that provide plausible explanations for the organization and its endeavors (Suchman, 1995; Scott, 1991; Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kurzweil, 1984). This form of legitimacy is conferred based on signals that improve the comprehensibility, increase the recognition, and lower the uncertainty of an actor. In the realm of careers, one can imagine that an individual who is deemed comprehensible and recognizable by supervisors will progress up the career ladder due to mitigated uncertainty and predictability. One method of achieving cognitive legitimacy is through affiliation with high status actors, thus

Hypothesis 2: Cognitive legitimacy achieved through affiliation is a significant positive predictor of the likelihood of career promotion.

Scholarship investigating the career promotion of women and minorities has consistently identified prejudice as a barrier and obstacle to promotion. Prejudice can be understood as a cluster of negative preconceptions, attitudes, and expectations that people of one group hold about members of other groups (Thomas & Gabarro, 1999, p26). In the workforce, these institutionalized assumptions and attitudes can relegate members of certain groups to particular positions; for example, Gabarro and Thomas (1999, p26) use the example of managers not assigning African Americans to the customer side of the business because of perceptions that African Americans do not interact well with white customers. These culturally biased assessments and relegations also promote stereotypes of minorities being incompetent and unqualified for positions held, and exclude minorities from informal social networks within organizations and professional circles (Bell & Nkomo p137, 2001). These institutionalized assumptions affect the recognition and acceptance of these individuals (cognitive legitimacy) in leadership roles and thus prevent promotion up the career ladder. This suggests,

Hypothesis 3: Membership in a minority group is a significant negative predictor of the likelihood of career promotion.

Moral legitimacy reflects judgments about whether the techniques and procedures of an organization are “the right thing to do” and are in line with a socially constructed value system (Suchman, 1995). At the individual level in a career setting, this form of legitimacy applies well to a worker’s compliance with organizational and professional norms. Failure to comply with norms can stigmatize a worker and cause others to see them as unsuitable for the organization. For example, scholarship on whistle-blowers who deviate from organizational norms and speak against unethical organizational behavior has highlighted the multiple retaliations and challenges faced by these individuals (Miceli & Near, 2002; Miceli, 2004). In addition, scholars have found that work place deviant behavior, defined as behavior that violates significant organizational norms and threaten the well-being of an organization (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p556) has a negative influence on individual reputation and both objective and subjective organizational performance (Dunlop & Lee, 2004). Individuals stigmatized for violating organizational and

professional norms hurt the reputation of hiring organizations and therefore do not progress upwards in career ladders. Thus,

***Hypothesis 4:** Moral illegitimacy is a significant negative predictor of the likelihood of career promotion.*

METHODS

Empirical Setting

There are currently 306 division I colleges and universities within the National Collegiate Athletic Association that have men's basketball teams. Each team is coached by one head coach and three assistant coaches. This study includes the complete career trajectories of the 300 head coaches of division I men's basketball as of October 15, 2004 (at the beginning of the 2004-2005 NCAA college basketball season there were 6 colleges with no public information available). During the study window there were 1,777 changes in head coaching positions. Changes of job level from assistant coach to head coach and changes in organizational status level, determined by conference affiliation, are the main kinds of career advancement. Because of the high volatility of the profession and the clear benchmarks for pragmatic, cognitive, and moral legitimacy, the investigation of basketball coaching careers provides a unique opportunity to analyze the influence of these different forms of legitimacy in a competitive environment. The study period is from 1958 to 2004.

Variables

Independent Variables. Pragmatic legitimacy was measured as the cumulative winning percentage of each coach as both an assistant and head coach at each year of his career, NCAA tournament experience, and prior coaching experience as a head coach (used in Analysis 1).

Cognitive legitimacy was measured in four variables: (1) prior affiliation with the National Basketball Association as a player or coach. I argue that coaches with professional basketball experience as a player or as a coach have a taken-for-granted aura that deems them a quality candidate for an open position; (2) affiliation with a high status university as an assistant coach determined by league affiliation. Universities with membership to the Atlantic Coast Conference, the Big East, the Big Ten, the Big Twelve, the South Eastern Conference (SEC), and the Pac 10 conference were coded as high status institutions; (3) affiliation with a high status university determined by the historical cumulative number of players drafted in the first and second rounds of the NBA draft. This is a separate measure from actual coaching performance, team win-loss performance, and organizational conference affiliation because it captures organizational reputation and recognition achieved through historical ties with the NBA; and (4) whether the coach was a racial minority.

Moral illegitimacy was based on the existence of major NCAA violations committed by each college basketball program and "negative press events" of each individual coach defined as an arrest, suspension, or criminal investigation of any individual coach in my dataset. These behaviors are violations of societal norms and university values which question the leadership ability of each individual in the dataset. Year of birth and total games coached were used as control variables in this model.

Dependent Variables. This study involves two career mobility investigations. Analysis 1 investigated the likelihood of an individual being promoted to head coach at the end of each season, without differentiating between head coaching positions (all head coaching positions at all universities are treated alike). Analysis 2 investigated the likelihood of an individual being promoted to a head coaching job at a high status university.

Model and Estimation

Similar to the study conducted by Sheridan, Slocum, Buda, and Thomson (1990), this study used survival analysis to estimate career mobility and likelihood of job advancement and test the significance of the hypothesized relationships discussed above. In this study, the Cox Regression model estimated hazard rates for the occurrence of promotions during specific years of job tenure. Variables representing each form of legitimacy were entered in a stepwise block fashion (1. control, 2. pragmatic, 3. cognitive, 4. moral) and change in chi square compared to the null model following the entry of each block was used to determine the relative strength of each form of legitimacy.

RESULTS

Results indicate that pragmatic legitimacy and cognitive legitimacy through affiliation are significant positive predictive factors of career promotion supporting hypotheses 1 and 2. Membership in a racial minority group was a significant negative predictor of promotion to first head coaching job but was not significant in predicting promotion to first job at a high status university providing partial support for hypothesis 3. Moral illegitimacy was not significant, failing to support hypothesis 4. In analysis 1 the changes in chi-square of each form of legitimacy compared to the null model indicate that pragmatic legitimacy explains slightly more variance than cognitive factors in predicting promotion to first head coaching job. Analysis 2 indicates that pragmatic legitimacy is the strongest predictor followed by cognitive in predicting promotion to first head coaching job at a high status university. I will now discuss specific variable relationships in my analyses.

Analysis 1: First Head Coaching Job. Pragmatic factors indicate that each increase of one winning percentage point increases the likelihood of promotion by 1 percent; and being an assistant coach on a team that qualifies for the NCAA tournament increases the likelihood of promotion by 53 percent. Cognitive factors are also significant predictors of promotion. Controlling for performance, individuals that are assistant coaches at high status organizations are 92 percent more likely to become head coaches than those without such affiliation. A rather discouraging finding at the cognitive level is that controlling for performance, minority coaches are 33 percent less likely to be promoted to their first head coaching job at the end of season providing support for hypothesis 3. At the moral level, surprisingly each prior organizational NCAA violation of an employing school increases the likelihood of promotion by 9 percent. However, there is no significant relationship between negative press events and career promotion. These findings fail to support hypothesis 4.

Analysis 2: Top Level Coaching Positions. Measures of pragmatic legitimacy are also significant and influential in determining likelihood of promotion to a top level head coaching

job. Each 1 percent increase in coaching winning percentage increases the likelihood that a coach will be promoted by 6 percent. Coaches with prior head coaching experience are 130 percent more likely to be promoted to a top level job than those without prior head coaching experience and coaches on teams that qualified for the NCAA tournament are 385 percent more likely to be promoted. The addition of cognitive measures into the analysis is also significant and substantially larger than actual performance measures in this model. For example, even when controlling for performance, coaches with prior affiliation to a university in a top conference are 663 percent more likely to be promoted and individuals with affiliation to the NBA are 140 percent more likely to be promoted to head coaching jobs at a high status university. Race is not a significant barrier of promotion at this level and moral illegitimacy variables are not significant.

Additional Analyses. Based on the strong predictive power of affiliation with a high status university uncovered in analysis 2, I ran an additional analysis predicting employment at a high status university coming from a low status university (regardless of whether the individual was hired as a head coach or assistant coach). Results from this additional analysis, also indicate that even when controlling for actual performance, employment at a university with historical affiliations with the NBA increases the likelihood that a coach of a low status university will leave for a high status university determined by league affiliation. This suggests that employment at a high status university is not fully based on merit further strengthening hypothesis 2.

I also analyzed head coaching performance after point of hire to investigate relationships between predictors of employment and actual performance after employment. Results indicate that the only significantly correlated variable with head coaching winning percentage after point of hire at a new job is past winning percentage ($r=.247, p<.001$). Other predictors of employment such as affiliation, negative press events, and demographics are not significantly related with performance after promotion.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study expand current knowledge of legitimacy by investigating relationships between influential attributes and career advancement. While existing work has linked individual behavior with the achievement of legitimacy, no work has investigated how different behaviors and attributes create different forms of legitimacy which in turn influence career promotion. Existing career research has identified two mechanisms of promotion but not fully separated pragmatic measures from cognitive measures and moral measures. While it might seem that the sponsored mobility norm of career promotion is based on cognitive factors (affiliation with a mentor), the often discussed driving force of this norm is the pragmatic measure of quality training, prior performance and access to resources. However, this analysis clearly distinguishes cognitive factors from these resources which are defined as pragmatic factors.

Surprisingly certain cognitive factors of legitimacy are stronger predictors of career promotion than pragmatic measures despite clear measures of job performance. For example, the strength of individual affiliation with a high status conference dwarfs the strength of actual performance in predicting promotion. These findings contradict existing research on status and reputation that indicate affiliation is most often used as a measure for performance and quality in

uncertain markets (Barley, 1991; Fernandez, Castilla, & Moore; 2000; Seidel, Polzer, & Steward, 2000). Despite clear performance measures (prior winning percentage) affiliation with high status organizations still plays a major role in determining career advancement.

This finding is also different from findings of sponsored mobility theory because despite no significant relationships between prior affiliation and performance after hire, (which would imply that affiliation is a proxy for training and access to resources that improve performance) affiliation is still a positive predictor. A possible explanation is that organizations benefit from the public attention achieved when a new coach is hired almost as much as they benefit when they field a winning team. For example, university press releases announcing new hires often stress the organizational “pedigree” of a new hire perhaps with the goal of organizational image management with stakeholders and external audience members to improve the marketing of the university, attract donations, and increase fan support. This form of image management perhaps is an attempt to signal that the new hire provides the organization with ties and affiliation to other high status universities. Viewing results using this lens suggests that organizational status generated by “partnering” with other high status organizations through hires based on cognitive legitimacy is equally if not more valuable to an organization than status achieved from hiring a strong performing coach.

Findings from this analysis are disheartening to supporters of a contest mobility norm (Turner 1960) of career promotion which assumes that all promotions are fair and based strictly on merit. These findings suggest that perceptual biases such as a Mathew effect are strong enough to overpower clear objective data such as winning percentage, and despite the lack of a significant relationship between affiliation and with future performance, candidates with these ties are still more likely to be promoted than individuals with proven ability. Although pragmatic measures are positive predictors of promotion, these variables are dwarfed by cognitive variables such as conference affiliation and NBA affiliation.

This analysis also highlights issues of discrimination that plague minorities across multiple professions. In this setting, minorities were far less likely to be promoted than non-minorities regardless of performance. It is also noteworthy that as of 2006 there was not one woman coach among any of the 306 division I men’s basketball programs.

Surprisingly results indicate a positive relationship between NCAA violations and likelihood of career advancement to first job. This contrasts the expected finding that individuals affiliated with universities with major violations would require more time to advance. A possible explanation of this finding is that universities not individuals are sanctioned by the NCAA which might allow individual coaches to avoid any stigma associated with the violation. This procedure also allows coaches who have violated NCAA rules to avoid punishments for NCAA violations such as loss of university athletic scholarships and loss of funding by leaving the sanctioned university for another job. This suggests that coaches who have won despite violating NCAA rules are still valued and therefore hired at other schools.

CONCLUSION

Through the use of Suchman’s forms of legitimacy and data from the NCAA this paper suggests that cognitive legitimacy plays a stronger than expected role in influencing career opportunities, even in situations with certain measures of quality.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR

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