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# A dual-mode framework of organizational categorization and momentary perception

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## Abstract

We examine how both automatic and motivated modes of categorization are integral to understanding momentary perceptions of organizations, including perceptions of organizational identity and legitimacy. We begin by discussing how extant organizational research has relied, primarily, on single modes of categorization to describe how we form momentary perceptions of organizations. These ‘single-mode’ frameworks have explained momentary organizational perceptions as the result of *either* automatic categorization (i.e. driven by unconscious cognitive processes) *or* motivated categorization (i.e. driven by individual needs and desires). While these frameworks explain much about momentary organizational perceptions, we provide some notable examples that do not follow the paths they predict. To more fully explain momentary organizational perceptions, we present a framework grounded in psychological research that considers how *both* motivated and automatic modes of categorization influence these perceptions. In doing so, we illustrate how such a ‘dual-mode’ framework might better account for organizational perceptions that seem counter-intuitive when viewed through a single-mode lens. We conclude by outlining some theoretical and practical implications of our framework, and presenting an agenda for future research on organizational categorization and perception that may capitalize on our dual-mode framework.

## Keywords

categorization, cognition, identity, legitimacy, perception

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## Introduction

Momentary perceptions of organizations include audiences' immediate classifications and assessments of organizations when interacting with or thinking about them (Elsbach et al., 2005). Such momentary perceptions are important to organizations because they influence if and how audiences relate to them, including their willingness to support or join such organizations (Elsbach, 2006). In turn, cognitive categorization (i.e. how we view a thing as similar or distinct from other things; McGarty, 1999) is widely viewed as a central process underlying momentary perceptions of organizations (Pratt and Foreman, 2000).

### *The process of forming momentary perceptions*

According to psychologists, cognitive categorization is just one part of the process by which stimuli are perceived. For example, in one of the most well-cited models of person perception, Fiske and Neuberg (1990) propose that perceivers first attend to individuals and their context, then categorize them, and finally, in some circumstances, engage in 'piecemeal integration' of their individuating attributes (examining specific characteristics beyond broad category membership).

To be specific, Fiske and Neuberg (1990) define three types of categorization processes that may precede piecemeal integration in person perception. These categorizations follow initial encounters with a person (which draw attention to the individual and the context) and proceed in the following order: initial categorization (immediately and automatically upon encountering a person, often without intention or knowledge), confirmatory categorization (when additional information is available to confirm an initial categorization), and re-categorization (when an initial category is not confirmed and other categories, including subcategories, may be used to identify a person). Piecemeal integration follows these categorization processes and involves assessing the person's 'particular characteristics in order to arrive at a final assessment of the individual' (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990: 8). Such piecemeal integration occurs, primarily, in situations where highly accurate impressions are desired, the person is not easily categorizable, and time and resources are available to engage in careful information processing.

Our focus on categorization processes (versus piecemeal integration) stems from our interest in momentary perceptions<sup>1</sup> (where piecemeal integration is less likely to occur) that may help perceivers to make *quick sorting or screening decisions*. By sorting or screening decisions, we mean decisions about what to include and exclude from further consideration.

In terms of perceptions of individuals, decisions about who to include and exclude from a hiring pool would constitute screening decisions. Research has shown that such decisions are commonly influenced by categorizations and momentary perceptions of job applicants according to a number of broad identity dimensions, including their race, gender and social status (Derous et al., 2012). Similar effects of categorization and momentary perceptions have been found in screening decisions about employee promotions (Powell and Butterfield, 1997), medical school admissions (Magnus and Mick, 2000) and worker job assignments (Hosoda et al., 2003).

In the same manner, when considering perceptions of organizations (as is our focus in this article), individuals' decisions regarding which organizations to consider as potential employers, schools or service providers would constitute screening decisions. Likewise, for organizational leaders, screening decisions might include which organizations to consider as potential competitors or comparators. Researchers have shown such organizational screening decisions to be influenced by categorizations and momentary perceptions by observers (Porac et al., 1999). For example, researchers have shown that a business school that is categorized as 'top tier' (an identity dimension) may be included in the set of potential choices by an applicant (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996), while a business school that is categorized as 'illegitimate' (e.g. an online institution) may be excluded from this set (Mitchell et al., 2015). In other cases, organizations categorized according to a specific, but negative identity (e.g. a global arms manufacturer), may be included in a set of organizations that should be blamed for negative outcomes (e.g. insurgencies in war-torn countries) and punished (e.g. by the withdrawal of support) by perceivers (Vergne, 2012).

Thus, momentary perceptions and screening decisions based on categorizations are important to organizations because they determine if an organization is considered by a perceiver for further evaluation. Organizations that are 'screened out' never get a chance to undergo the more careful, piecemeal attribute integration that comprises more accurate perceptual processes (Fiske et al., 1999). As a result, such screening decisions have been the focus of much theorizing on organizational perception and evaluation, including research on organizational reputation (Barnett and Pollock, 2012), identity (Bartel et al., 2007) and legitimacy (Tyler, 2001).

### *Modes and drivers of categorization*

Given the importance of cognitive categorization to forming momentary perceptions and screening evaluations of organizations, it seems equally important to understand the underlying drivers of such categorization. Extant research in psychology (McGarty, 1999) and organizational behavior (King and Whetten, 2008) suggests two *primary drivers* that underlie two *basic modes of categorization* used by perceivers: (1) salient, environmental cues that drive "'automatic" modes of categorization', and (2) individual goals and desires that drive "'motivated" modes of categorization'.

Yet, as we argue below, neither of these drivers nor modes of categorization, alone (what we call 'single-mode categorization'), can fully explain many phenomena related to momentary organizational perceptions. For example, they do not explain why individuals who have strong and dominating motivations to view an organization positively (e.g. because their individual identities are tied to perceptions of the organization) sometimes hold negative perceptions of the organization. They also do not explain why individuals who encounter salient categorizations that define the traits possessed by legitimate organizations (e.g. the organizational names that are appropriate in a given industry), sometimes view organizations without these traits as legitimate.

We suggest that such momentary organizational perceptions may be more adequately explained by viewing categorization through a 'dual-mode' lens that considers the combined effects of both motivated *and* automatic categorization (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990).

The use of such dual-mode cognitive models has been long-discussed by psychologists as important to understanding interpersonal cognition (see Smith and DeCoster, 2000 for a review), but have not been used by organizational theorists to explain perceptions of organizations. Accordingly, *our overall goal is to promote a dual-mode framework of categorization and momentary perception of organizations.*

### *Map of the article*

In pursuit of this goal, we organize the remainder of the article into four sections. First, we describe extant research and theory on the role of categorization in momentary perceptions of organizations. We show how this research relies primarily on single-mode frameworks of categorization. Second, we discuss some extant findings that cannot be fully explained based on these single-mode frameworks. These findings present challenges to single-mode frameworks of organizational categorization. Third, we introduce a dual-mode framework of organizational categorization grounded in psychological research, and illustrate how this framework may best explain many types of momentary organizational perceptions, including those not fully explained by single-mode frameworks. Fourth and finally, we discuss some theoretical, practical and future research implications of this framework.

## **Single-mode perspectives on categorization and momentary perception of organizations: A review of extant research**

As noted earlier, psychological theories of perception have argued that thinking categorically is an ongoing, spontaneous and often unconscious process that occurs whenever stimuli are encountered by perceivers (Quinn et al., 2003). That is, following initial attention to a stimulus, categorization is likely to occur (although the perceiver is often unaware of this process), even if the perceiver engages, eventually, in more careful, piecemeal information processing (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990; Gilbert et al., 1988). This perspective suggests that perceivers who encounter organizations (e.g. via news media or personal experience) will categorize those organizations as a matter of course (e.g. as large or small, successful or failing, relevant or irrelevant to personal needs), although they may be unaware of this process and may later engage in more deliberate and careful information processing.

A recent review of categorization research has identified two organizational perceptions that are most commonly influenced by categorization: organizational identity and organizational legitimacy (Vergne and Wry, 2014). Cognitive categorizations may define an organization's identity, for example, by indicating its basic form or type (e.g. a business versus a church; King and Whetten, 2008). In other cases, categorizations may help to indicate distinctive organizational traits (e.g. being categorized as a 'light/heat/and mobility provider' versus 'an oil and gas company'; Van Halderen et al., 2011) that are relevant to perceptions of organizational identity. Alternatively, categorizations can help define organizations in terms of legitimacy (Elsbach, 2006), which is driven by the ease or difficulty of assigning organizations to familiar or normative categories (Ruef and Patterson, 2009).

Interestingly, most extant research in these areas has suggested that perceivers rely on *either* automatic or motivated modes of categorization – that is, single-mode frameworks of categorization – to form momentary perceptions of organizational identity or organizational legitimacy. Further, while both modes of categorization may be involved in forming either of these perceptions of organizations, extant research overwhelmingly connects automatic modes of categorization to perceptions of organizational legitimacy, while it connects motivated modes of categorization to perceptions of organizational identity. In the sections below, we review these research findings.

### *Automatic modes of categorization*

Automatic modes of categorization are driven by cues in the perceiver's environment, and involve the relatively spontaneous – or unconscious – assessment of a target (e.g. an organization) based on extant information (i.e. schemas or prototypes defining a category) stored in the perceiver's memory (McGarty, 1999). How the target is assessed and assigned to a category depends on the accessibility of category-relevant information in the perceiver's memory (Uleman, 1999).

Psychological research on person perception suggests that categories are more readily accessible if they have been used recently, are in chronic use, or are salient within a perceivers' context (Uleman, 1999; Zelli et al., 1996). For example, at the individual level, numerous studies have shown that merely mentioning a category name will increase a person's use of the category in describing themselves (Hogg and Turner, 1987) or others (Srull and Wyer, 1979). Other studies have shown that a person's routine or everyday experience is likely to influence which categorizations are most readily accessed (Bodenhausen and Macrae, 1998; Medin et al., 1997). In these cases, some categorizations become 'chronically accessible' to perceivers (and thus more likely to be used) because they are routinely encountered in their everyday life. Finally, environmental cues that make one category more salient than others are likely to lead perceivers to use that category when confronted with stimuli that fit into multiple categories (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2000). One variable that appears to increase salience of a given category is its valence. Across a number of contexts, from everyday experiences to major life events, researchers have found that *negative* (versus positive) information is attended to and processed more thoroughly, and thus, has a stronger impact on attitudes and perceptions (Baumeister et al., 2001).

Similar to psychologists, organizational theorists have suggested that recent, chronically-accessible or salient categories may lead perceivers to make automatic categorizations of organizations (Van Dyck et al., 2005). Perhaps the most common organizational perception to be linked to such automatic categorizations is *organizational legitimacy*.

Organizational legitimacy has been defined as 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: 574). One of the most consistent findings from research on this topic is that organizational legitimacy is established through the adoption of well-established and frequently encountered structures or 'blueprints' for organizing (Heugens and Lander, 2009). Further, significant empirical research has linked perceptions of organizational legitimacy to

cognitive categorization based on these blueprints (Glynn and Abzug, 2002; Hsu, 2006; Ruef and Patterson, 2009). This research has focused on the perceptions of external audiences or unaffiliated constituents (e.g. analysts, competitors, consumers), who would typically be concerned with legitimacy perceptions as a way to screen out irrelevant versus relevant organizations from their consideration. In general, this research suggests that categories that are most normative in an industry or field are likely to comprise legitimate blueprints for organizing.

For example, Glynn and Abzug (2002) investigated how an organization's most visible feature – its name – affected legitimacy perceptions by external audiences, including competitors and potential clients. Specifically, they tested whether actual (but relatively unknown) company names differed in their understandability (a measure of cognitive legitimacy; Suchman, 1995) depending on the naming patterns prevalent in the respective industry. They found that company names similar to those typical and normative of their category, in terms of ambiguity and domain-specificity, were perceived as more legitimate by external audiences.

These findings suggest that providing visible cues (i.e. organizational names) that signal membership in familiar and normative categories may lead to automatic categorizations and perceptions of organizational legitimacy by external perceivers. More generally they suggest that automatic categorizations lead to perceptions of an organization's prototypicality, especially when the category prototype is visibly recognizable. Because automatic categorization relies on visible and normative cues, it is well-suited to making judgments about how well an organization fits with a prototype defined by such cues (e.g. what a church versus a prison should look like). Such perceptions may be most relevant to sorting decisions that are impersonal or made on behalf of others (e.g. Is this supplier a legitimate contender for providing our organization with parts? Should we include this service provider in our list of preferred resources?).

### *Motivated modes of categorization*

Motivated modes of categorization involve classifying stimuli in ways that are consistent with perceivers' momentary goals and motives (Fiske et al., 1999; Gilbert and Hixon, 1991). At the individual and group levels, psychologists have identified three primary motives that may guide momentary information processing and categorization. These include needs for self-enhancement, distinctiveness and self-consistency (Showers and Cantor, 1985).

Most commonly, strong needs for self-enhancement (Baumeister, 1998; Fiske et al., 1999) have been shown to motivate perceivers to attend to positive information about themselves and their groups. For example, to the extent that they expect a group, to which they belong, to reflect on their own value or worth, perceivers can be expected to assign it to a category with more positive valence (Baumeister, 1998). In addition, individuals have been shown to categorize themselves or their groups in ways that meet their needs for distinctiveness, because being indistinctive is threatening to self-esteem (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). For example, if they feel they are perceived as undistinctive, individuals may categorize themselves as members of non-mainstream, social groups, that are still socially-valued (Hornsey and Jetten, 2004). Finally, individuals may

also be motivated by needs for self-consistency or self-verification in their perceptions of themselves and their groups (Swann and Read, 1981). In these cases, perceivers may be prone to individual and group categorizations that are consistent with their pre-existing self-concepts (Swann et al., 1987, 2003). While all three of these needs may lead perceivers to motivated categorizations in a proactive manner (i.e. to present a desired self-concept), researchers have shown that threats to the self-concept (e.g. being associated with a negatively-viewed group) may make these needs more salient, and create stronger motives for categorization (Baumeister, 1998).

In the same manner that self-motives relate to interpersonal categorizations and perceptions, organizational theorists have suggested they may relate to organizational categorizations and perceptions. In particular, organizational categorizations motivated by needs for self-enhancement through positiveness or positive distinctiveness (i.e. being seen as positive in a distinctive way, such as a member of the 'best school for entrepreneurship') have been found to be central to perceptions of *organizational identity* (Hatch and Schultz, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

Organizational identity has been defined as 'the central, distinctive, and continuous characteristic of an [organization] . . . [that is related to] a more or less clear mission or role, along with certain values, goals, beliefs' (Ashforth et al., 2011: 1145). Organizational identities are particularly important to internal or formally-affiliated organizational constituents (employees, members, alumni) because they help these constituents to affirm or protect important aspects of their self-concepts via their connection to a positively-viewed organization (Elsbach, 1999). As a result, motivated categorization has been tied to momentary perceptions of organizational identity and provides the basis for most social and organizational identity theories (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

As noted earlier, much of the extant empirical research on how categorization influences perceptions of organizational identities suggests that those affiliated with the organization will define their organizations' identities in terms of categorizations that are perceived as positive and/or positively distinct (see Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2010; Glynn, 2000; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). In some instances, this motivation will be inspired by events (e.g. poor rankings in an industry survey) that threaten an organization's positive identity. In these cases, the desire to screen out threat may motivate favorable categorizations of the organization that protect its positive identity. In other instances, motives for self-enhancement may be inspired by a group's salient affiliation with an organization (e.g. a business school that is saliently affiliated with its university). In these cases, group members may categorize their organization in ways that place their group (and themselves) in the most favorable light.

In this manner, Humphreys and Brown (2002) found that different faculty groups within a UK-based institution of higher education used different identity categorizations to define their organization in ways that were most enhancing to their group. Faculty groups who were most successful at publishing research, but not at teaching, emphasized the categorization of 'national research university' as central to the institute's identity. By contrast, faculty groups who were most successful at teaching, but not at publishing research, emphasized the categorization of 'local teaching institute'. Thus, these different faculty groups each emphasized the positive identity categorizations that most enhanced their group's favorability (and thus their own self-esteem).



Together, these findings suggest that affiliated constituents are likely to define their organizations' identities by categorizations that reflect positively on themselves (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996), and allow them to affirm positively distinct dimensions of their self-concepts (Johnson and Jackson, 2009). More generally, these findings suggest that motivated categorizations lead to perceptions about the positiveness of an organization. That is, unlike automatic categorization (which we argued lead to perceptions about the prototypicality of organizations), motivated categorizations appear to lead to saying something about an organization's desirability or prestige. These types of assessments might be most relevant to sorting decisions about organizations with which one will be visibly affiliated in some personal way (e.g. Should I apply to work for this organization? Should I list this association on my resume?).

### **Organizational perceptions not fully-explained by single-mode frameworks**

Despite the above evidence demonstrating that individuals are likely to use motivated categorization modes in perceiving organizational identities, while they use automatic categorization modes in perceiving organizational legitimacy, not all examples of these organizational perceptions appear to follow these expected processes. In fact, empirical findings suggest several cases in which organizational categorizations run counter to those predicted by single-mode frameworks. As a result, these findings (discussed below) present challenges to single-mode categorization frameworks for explaining momentary organizational perception.

#### *Non-normative categorizations sometimes enhance perceptions of legitimacy*

This finding is not expected because, as noted earlier, appearing normative is believed to lead observers to accept an organization as legitimate (Bitektine, 2011; Hsu, 2006; Vergne and Wry, 2014). Yet, one can find instances in which organizations have appeared to take on organizational categorizations that are in direct conflict with their industry norms, and yet, are perceived as more legitimate than those complying with industry norms.

For example, studying change in US private liberal arts colleges, Kraatz and Zajac (1996) investigated the effects of deviation from the industry prototype on stakeholder support and organizational deaths. During the observed time period, some private liberal arts colleges introduced professional degree programs, such as business administration or computer science, changing their industry categorization from one of pure liberal arts, to one including 'professional' degree programs. These changes stood in stark contrast to the established organizational form, which was based on a broad and general education in liberal arts or sciences. Indeed, liberal arts colleges had been a cornerstone of US tertiary education owing to their orientation towards interdisciplinary study and character development. Thus, the introduction of more vocational, professional programs constituted 'the *most illegitimate* change that a liberal arts college could consider, short of leaving the higher education sector altogether' (Kraatz and Zajac, 1996: 817; emphasis in original). This change was expected to result in serious negative consequences in

terms of enrollment and organizational deaths for the organizations who took on these new programs. Results of Kraatz and Zajac's study showed, however, that colleges introducing professional programs experienced *better* enrollment than those adhering to the established curriculum. Evidently, organizational stakeholders (i.e. potential students) were not dissuaded from support. Instead, the non-normative (and even illegitimate) categorization appeared to enhance stakeholders' perceptions of these colleges' legitimacy. This finding is not fully explained from a single-mode perspective because moving away from a strongly established prototype towards a hybrid form (a combination of liberal arts colleges and professional schools) did not entail a loss in legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011; Hsu, 2006).

### ***Strong organizational identifiers sometimes perceive their organizations' identities in terms of negatively-viewed categories***

This finding is not expected because, based on extant research and motivated categorization frameworks, such negative categorizations should be threatening to the self-esteem of organizational identifiers. As noted earlier, organizational identification has been shown to be overwhelmingly predicted by needs for self-esteem enhancement (George and Chattopadhyay, 2005), and the predominance of self-enhancement needs (versus other needs), has been consistently shown in psychological studies of the self (Baumeister, 1998).

Nevertheless, the finding that strong identifiers may define their organization's identity in terms of negatively-viewed categories has been documented, including a recent study of organizational identity perceptions (Hsu and Elsbach, 2013). In this study, the researchers examined differences in the most prominent organizational identity categorizations identified by different constituent groups of a university (e.g. high versus low identifiers; faculty versus students). They found that some constituents who should have been motivated to define their organization in terms of positive categories (e.g. high-identifying faculty), defined it in terms of negative categories (e.g. 'resource poor').

Brickson (2005) describes similar findings in her research on organizational identity perceptions among members of law and beverage firms. In this study, Brickson found that the organizational categorizations used by members of different firms in these industries varied greatly in terms of their favorability. In some cases, firm members made idealistic identity claims that were unambiguously positive (e.g. the organization 'cares deeply about the world around them'). In other cases, however, identity claims were more utilitarian and potentially negative (e.g. the organization is 'mainly interested in getting new clients, making money...'). While Brickson explains these findings based on the identity orientation of the firm in question (i.e. organizations with collectivist orientations lead to more ideological identity claims, while individualist orientations lead to more utilitarian identity claims), this explanation does not address the basic motivation that is assumed to be present in all organizational members to self-enhance through positive identity claims. If such a motivation were present, then even members of individualistic firms would prefer utilitarian identity claims that were likely to be seen as positive (e.g. performing well, being a highly-respected firm). In other words, defining one's organization via identity categorizations that are likely to be perceived as negative is not explained by a motivated categorization perspective.

In sum, while the single-mode categorization frameworks described earlier appear useful in explaining many instances of organizational legitimacy and identity perception, the above findings provide evidence that these frameworks cannot explain all instances. We suggest, however, that these findings may be explained if one takes a *dual-mode perspective* of organizational categorization and perception (Smith and DeCoster, 2000), which we explain next.

## **A dual-mode framework of organizational categorization and momentary perception**

Dual-mode perspectives, which suggest that two modes of processing may be followed (sequentially or simultaneously) in cognitive acts (e.g. in decision making, judgment and impression formation), have become a central theme of research in social and cognitive psychology (Chaiken and Trope, 1999; Evans and Stanovich, 2013; Smith and DeCoster, 2000). While existing dual-mode frameworks vary slightly in terms of specific assumptions, elements and implications, they generally suggest that human cognition may follow an ‘associative’ (i.e. automatic) form of processing, as well as a ‘rule-based’ (i.e. motivated) form of processing (Smith and DeCoster, 2000). For the sake of simplicity, and to align them with our labels for categorization, we refer to these cognitive processes as ‘automatic’ and ‘motivated’ information processing.

In dual-mode frameworks, theorists suggest that to fully understand how people think, we have to consider both what is motivated and what is automatic in information processing. In person perception, for example, Uleman (1999) suggests that automatic impression formation processes act like an ‘underground stream’ that carries past inferences and impressions and unconsciously attaches them to anything that crosses their path, while motivated impression formation processes act like an ‘above ground aqueduct’ system that is deliberately designed to meet current perception needs and is protected from ‘contaminating’ (i.e. undesirable or inconsistent) thoughts. Uleman suggests that both processes are used in impression formation, and together, they determine how we perceive others.

Based on both psychological and organizational research, we propose a dual-mode framework of organizational categorization and momentary perception (depicted in Figure 1) that may be used to more fully-explain how audiences perceive organizations. This framework builds, specifically, on Fiske and Neuberg’s (1990) Continuum Model of Impression Formation, which describes momentary person perception that begins with categorization. Thus, in our framework, ‘automatic categorization’ is akin to what Fiske and Neuberg (1990) call ‘initial categorization’, that is:

Upon encountering an individual, perceivers rapidly categorize that individual on the basis of salient features . . . The model proposes, however, that certain social categories – such as gender, ethnicity, and age – are ‘privileged, in that they can be easily applied to most people one encounters . . . these categories are central and available to perceivers automatically, within milliseconds. (Quoted from Fiske et al., 1999: 232)

Second, what we call ‘motivated categorization’ in our framework is akin to what Fiske and Neuberg (1990) label ‘confirmatory categorization’. That is, Fiske and Neuberg

(1990) suggest that motives may influence a perceiver's willingness to accept (i.e. confirm) an initial categorization. If the perceiver has strong motives that are inconsistent with the initial categorization (i.e. the perceiver is motivated to protect her self-esteem, but the initial categorization reflects negatively on her), she will reject that initial categorization. As Fiske et al. (1999: 234) note:

[In confirmatory categorization] . . . certain motivators (such as self-esteem threat) might increase the likelihood that a perceiver would view target information as consistent with the initial categorization, whereas other motivators (such as task outcome dependency, fear of invalidity, and accountability to an audience with unknown attitudes) might reduce the likelihood that a perceiver would view target information as consistent with initial categorization.

Third, what we refer to as 'category reconciliation' in our framework parallels what Fiske and Neuberg (1990) call 'recategorization' – and in particular, the type of recategorization they refer to as 'subcategorization' or 'subtyping' (Richards and Hewstone, 2001). Thus, the reconciliation of all categorizations that arise from automatic *and* motivated modes leads to a momentary perception of the organization that may be defined as a subcategory. Such subcategories are typically modifications of an initially-used, automatic categorization via a motivated categorization (e.g. a legitimate corporation that is also categorized as friendly may be subcategorized as 'a legitimate but friendly corporation'). As Fiske et al. (1999: 237–238) describe:

[P]erceivers may feel that the target's characteristics do not fit well with the initial categorization. When this happens, they may attempt to identify a different category, one better able to capture the whole of the target's characteristics. Fiske and Neuberg (1990) labeled this process 'recategorization' . . . For instance, a surprisingly passive man may be viewed as one of those 'strong silent types.' . . . [Such] subcategorization is probably the preferred method of recategorization, as it enables the perceiver to retain information from the initial categorization [i.e. reconcile this information], often with the apparently incompatible target information as justification.

This type of 'category reconciliation' helps to explain why organizations may be perceived in ways that do not fit with single mode categorization frameworks (e.g. why a strong identifier may perceive a negative organizational identity).

Finally, over time, these momentary perceptions may influence perceivers' additional encounters with the organization, which may lead to more long-term and stable perceptions of the organization. This process is depicted in the feedback loop at the bottom of Figure 1.

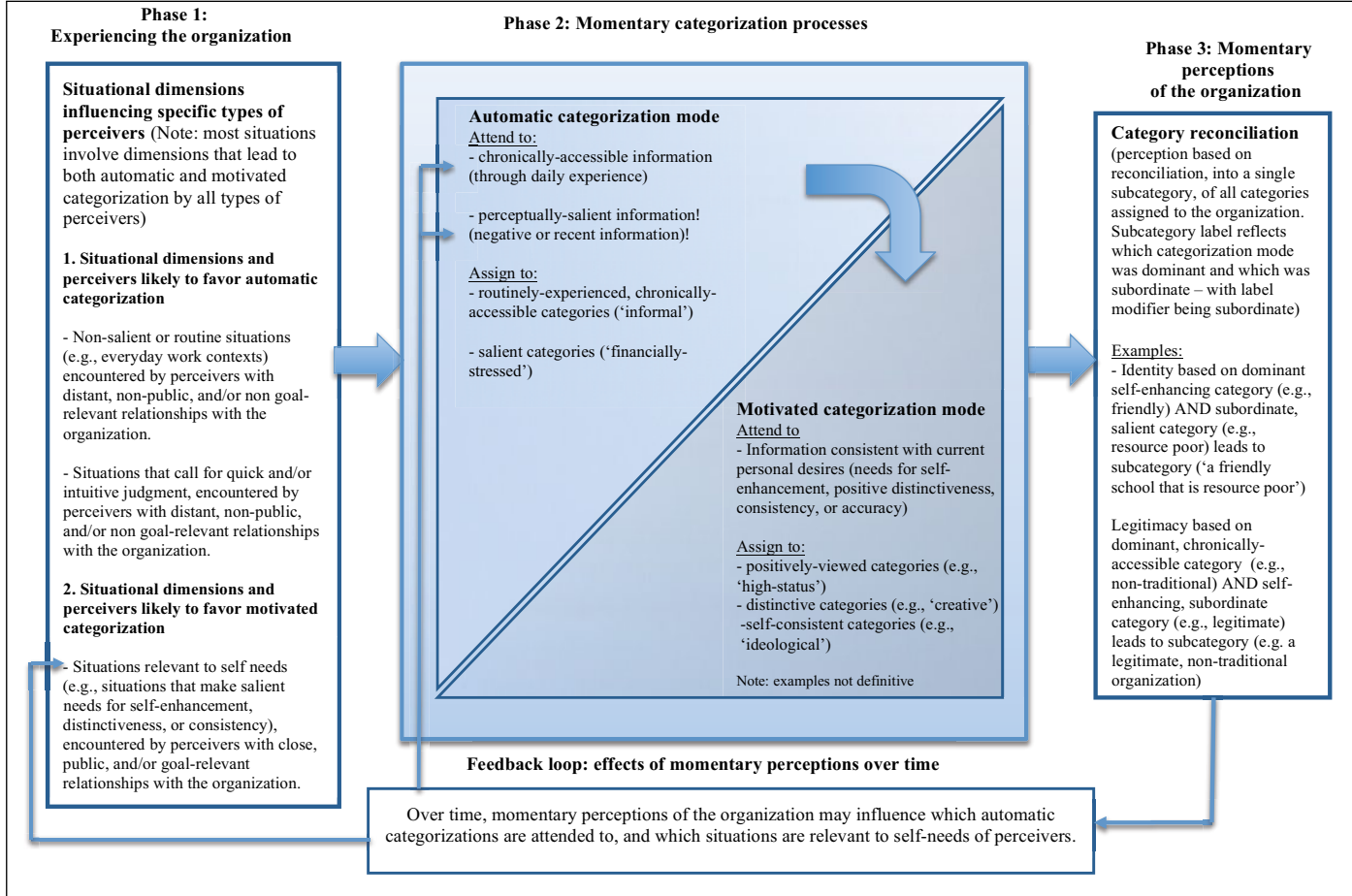
In general, then, like the Continuum Model, our framework suggests that, after encountering an organization, perceivers initially engage in relatively automatic categorizations based on salient features (e.g. physical features, visible activity), but will also engage in motivated categorizations based on their current self-needs (e.g. desires to perceive the organization more positively). Perceivers will then reconcile the outcomes of these dual modes of categorization in forming momentary perceptions of organizations, which, in turn, may influence screening or sorting decisions regarding those organizations.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, these momentary perceptions may influence more stable perceptions of organizations. We describe these phases in more detail next.

### Phase I: Experiencing the organization

According to Fiske and Neuberg (1990), when individual perceivers encounter others, they are exposed to a number of contextual variables that may affect their initial and dominant modes of categorizing those others. For example, a target individual's salience in the immediate surroundings (e.g. based on race, gender, age) may influence a perceiver's initial, automatic categorizations of that target, while a perceiver's self-needs (e.g. heightened needs for self-esteem, distinctiveness or consistency) and requirements for intuitive judgments about a target (e.g. based on its degree of threat, competence, friendliness) are likely to drive and influence motivated categorizations of the target. In addition, according to psychological research, the relationship of a target individual to a perceiver is likely to affect that perceiver's dominant mode of categorization. Thus, automatic categorization of a target individual is likely to be dominant when perceivers have a distant, private and/or non-goal relevant relationship with the target, while motivated categorizations are more likely to be dominant if a perceiver is in a close and/or public relationship with that target, and when this target's categorization is important to a personal goal (Fiske et al., 1999).

Likewise, when encountering organizations, specific types of perceivers (i.e. defined by their relationships with an organization) are likely to be exposed to specific situational dimensions that may affect their categorizations of the organization. That is, some organizational situations involving some types of perceivers are most likely to favor automatic modes of categorization, while others favor motivated modes of categorization. We depict common examples of such situations and perceivers in the leftmost box in Figure 1 and describe them below. We also explain, however, that, while one type of categorization may be *favored* in specific situations with specific perceivers, *both* types of categorizations are also likely to occur in most situations with most types of perceivers.

*Situational dimensions and perceivers likely to favor automatic categorization.* As noted earlier, automatic processing is believed to occur continually, as a matter of course, while motivated processing only occurs under specific, motivating conditions (Chaiken et al., 1989). Thus, situations that do not enhance, or that dampen motivating conditions are likely to favor automatic categorization. For example, encountering organizational work situations that are routine and non-salient (e.g. low-risk and normative work contexts, such as weekly status meetings) may be unlikely to lead perceivers to engage in motivated categorization (much like non-salient characteristics of individuals are less likely to lead to motivated categorizations (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990)). Instead, perceivers will rely, predominantly, on automatic categorization in their assessments of the organization. Further, like perceivers of individuals, perceivers of organizations who have distant, non-public and/or non goal-relevant relationships with the organization (e.g. a member of the general public, a potential customer), are more likely to rely on automatic categorizations of the organization. Thus, potential investors who encounter an organization with a normative name (e.g. a bank named 'First Union') are likely to engage, primarily, in automatic categorization of that organization (e.g. they may categorize it as a 'legitimate' bank) because its name is non-salient (i.e. not unusual in any way) and their relationship with the bank is of little importance at this point in time.



**Figure 1.** A dual-mode framework of momentary organizational categorization and perception.

This process is supported by research on interpersonal categorizations during routine service encounters (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2013), and appears common among external organizational audiences who need to make quick assessments of a firm's type or classification (Glynn and Abzug, 2002).

In other cases, perceivers with distant relationships with an organization (e.g. a member of the general public) may encounter situations that require intuitive judgments about an organization because they have little direct knowledge of the organization (e.g. a person not affiliated with Google is asked by a friend what he thinks is the 'culture' of Google). In these cases, where there is no clear correct assessment (sometimes because the situation is highly complex), and perceivers do not have a close affiliation with the organization (thus, reducing their motives for self-enhancement in relation to the organization) psychologists have suggested that perceivers will rely on automatic processing when forming impressions (Epstein et al., 1992). Thus, perceivers may categorize the organization based on salient and accessible information, such as that reported in the popular media (e.g. Google's culture is 'innovative' and 'hip').

*Situational dimensions and perceivers likely to favor motivated categorization.* Other organizational situations may threaten or call into question the personal, self-concepts of perceivers who are closely and publicly affiliated, or have goal-relevant relationships with the organization. These situations are likely to favor motivated categorization modes designed to protect the self-concepts of those perceivers. For instance, long-time and closely affiliated employees of an organization may perceive their self-concepts to be threatened when media reports portray the organization as negative, indistinctive and/or incongruent with those employees' existing self-categorizations (Fombelle et al., 2012). For example, if a visible organizational employee, who considers herself an environmentalist, hears a news report claiming that her organization dumped toxic chemicals into public waterways, she may find her own self-esteem to be threatened and may be motivated to protect or enhance that self-esteem. Similarly, this employee may also find that her self-distinctiveness and self-consistency are threatened if she had publicly defined herself as an environmentalist (e.g. on her Facebook page). In turn, her perceptions of her firm may be dominated by motivated categorization that show the firm in a more positive light (e.g. she may categorize her firm as a responsible organization that was unfairly targeted by the media).

*Why both automatic and motivated modes of categorization are likely to occur in most situations with most perceivers.* Although the above discussion suggests how specific types of perceivers in specific situations may favor either automatic or motivated categorizations, we would argue that most situations encountered by most organizational perceivers (including those described above) will lead to *both* automatic and motivated modes of categorization. This is because, in most situations, most organizational perceivers encounter *both* salient cues that lead to automatic categorizations, as well as personally-relevant cues that lead to, at least some, motivated categorizations.

In support of this notion, at the individual level, psychologists have shown that both types of cues are routinely considered in person perception. For example, Mille and Rayner (2012) describe how the strong occupational culture in UK police departments led new

officers (who would have close, public and goal-relevant relationships with their organization) to attend to both salient ‘prototypes’ of police officers (that influenced automatic categorizations of their peers), as well as personal motives to avoid bullying from fellow officers (that influence motivated categorizations of their peers), in developing their conceptions of a ‘desirable’ police officer. The fact that they had a close relationship with the organization did not erase their reliance on automatic categorizations based on police officer ‘prototypes’ – perhaps because they needed to make intuitive judgments about what a desirable officer looked like (given their lack of experience with such prototypes).

In the same manner, at the organizational level, several of the examples given earlier of organizational perceptions not fully-explained by single-mode categorization frameworks appear to have occurred in situations that led perceivers, with both close and distant relationships with the organization, to use both automatic and motivated modes of categorizations. For instance, in Kraatz and Zajac’s (1996) study of new professional degree programs in liberal arts colleges in the 1970s, student applicants (with potentially close relationships to the organization) who perceived these non-normative schools to be legitimate were not only exposed to salient cues (including strong public criticism) suggesting that these schools were dissimilar to traditional liberal arts schools, but also to a situation in which their own self-concepts were aligned with becoming professionals who would benefit (in the future) from these non-normative schools. As a result, in addition to being influenced by salient cues about the new schools, as suggested by the study authors, these applicants were likely motivated by self-consistency and self-esteem needs to protect their self-concepts as *future* ‘professionals’ in their categorizations of the schools.

Similarly, Hsu and Elsbach’s (2013) example of business school faculty defining their school’s identity via negative categories shows that these members (with close relationships to the organization) encountered both conditions relevant to their self-concepts, as well as salient cues regarding the school’s identity. These conditions resulted from their strong identification with the school (which has been shown to motivate self-enhancing perceptions of the organization), as well as their everyday experiences with salient features of the school that they processed, automatically, as ‘routine’ encounters with the organization. As Hsu and Elsbach (2013: 1006–1007) explain:

... even among high identifying constituents, some of the most salient identity categorizations were negative in valence [e.g. ‘resource poor’] . . . we speculate that most faculty, including high identifying faculty, were frequently reminded of the poor resources at Western through their daily teaching and research as well as through comparisons to other schools through their frequent travel and meetings at other schools . . . these findings suggest that, if negative categorizations are highly salient in constituents’ everyday experience . . . they may influence perceptions of organizational identity, even among those who are highly motivated to perceive the organization’s identity in positive terms.

In summary, in Phase 1, we suggest that both the relationships perceivers have with organizations and the momentary situations they encounter in those organizations determine the specific combination of automatic and motivated modes of categorization they use in forming organizational impressions. While there are situations that may lead either automatic or motivated modes of categorization to dominate, we suggest that most situations are likely to lead perceivers to use a combination of both modes of categorization



in forming momentary organizational perceptions. We describe these momentary categorization processes in more detail next.

## Phase 2: Momentary categorization processes

In this phase of the framework we suggest that perceivers typically engage in both automatic modes of categorization (i.e. assigning organizations to salient or routinely-experienced categories), *and* motivated modes of categorization (i.e. assigning organizations to categories that help to meet individual needs related to their self-concepts), but that the degree to which these two modes are used varies on a *continuum* from mostly automatic categorizations to mostly motivated categorizations (with a balance of automatic and motivated modes in between). This continuum of categorization modes is depicted in the second box in Figure 1 by a diagonal line – which is meant to illustrate predominantly automatic modes (at the top of the box) and predominantly motivated modes (at the bottom of the box). The arrow that flows from automatic to motivated modes within the box denotes the general order of categorization modes, which begin with automatic and move to motivated (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990).

*Automatic categorization modes as dominant.* In some cases of organizational categorization, automatic modes may be dominant, although motivated modes are also used (i.e. representing categorization that occurs at the top of the middle box in Figure 1). For example, organizational perceivers are often introduced and chronically exposed to organizations via popular media encounters (e.g. internet, television, print media), rather than via in-person encounters (which may be more common in interpersonal perception). In these media contexts, the temporary newsworthiness of specific categories (e.g. the organization's ethicality or morality, or the organization's connection to celebrity endorsers) may be privileged over more mundane categories (e.g. the organization's structure or size). In turn, these privileged categories may dominate automatic categorization in organizational perceptions. For example, if organizations in a specific industry (e.g. insurance) are described by the popular press as corrupt and engaged in illegal practices, then those descriptions may come to dominate audiences' automatic categorizations of any organization in that industry, regardless of the firm's specific behavior. Further, these negative categorizations may be difficult to ignore, even by organizational perceivers who are motivated to perceive the organization in a more positive light (e.g. current clients of an insurance company).

In other cases, legislative, regulatory, or scientific action may highlight particular features of organizations, effectively rendering certain categories more salient. For example, organizational researchers have discussed the rise of the category 'nano-technology' as a consequence of scientific advancements that allowed for the control of very small amounts of matter. Yet, owing to ambiguity over its exact definition, the category came to denote more broad ideas of 'new' and 'sexy' forms of science and innovation (Granqvist et al., 2013: 404). As a result, the category of 'nano-technology' was privileged when discussing new technology ventures in the early 2000s, and new ventures using the categorization of 'nano-tech' came to be seen as more fundable than other ventures during this time (Granqvist et al., 2013).

Another such example is illustrated in a case study of organizational perceptions in the context of Hurricane Katrina (Martinko et al., 2009). This case suggests that, in anticipation of the Hurricane's impending landfall, the complexity of the situation led organizational perceivers to rely on their intuition or 'gut instincts' when processing information and making categorizations (Slovic and Västfjäll, 2010). Thus, while awaiting Hurricane Katrina's August 2005 landfall, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin was required to assess the state of his city's emergency preparedness and determine the need for mandatory evacuation. This issue was very complex (e.g. how to get millions of people who do not own cars out of the city, or shelter them within the city) and did not have a clear right answer (Martinko et al., 2009). As a result, Nagin appeared to rely on his gut instincts in his assessment of his organization (i.e. New Orleans' Emergency Services), which led him to automatically categorize the organization as prepared. This categorization appeared to be based on the salient information that the organization had been capable of handling the dozens of other storms that hit the coast of Louisiana each year (Martinko et al., 2009). As a result, the mayor called only for a voluntary evacuation.

While automatic categorization may have been favored in the above situation, we argue that Mayor Nagin also used motivated categorization in forming perceptions of New Orleans' Emergency Services organization. In particular, it seems likely that the mayor was not only influenced by his automatic and 'intuitive' categorization of his emergency services organization as prepared, but also by his self-esteem needs – which would be threatened by admitting that his organization could not handle the storm. In fact, Nagin's categorization of his emergency services organization as adequate and prepared may have been partly driven by his desire to maintain self-esteem because he may have perceived that his leadership would now be under scrutiny (Martinko et al., 2009). In line with this thinking, his comments after the storm indicate that Nagin was influenced by motives to protect his self-esteem. As he noted in response to criticisms of his leadership during the Hurricane (Martinko et al., 2009: 53):

My big question to anybody who's trying to shift the blame is, 'Where were you?' I was here. I know what happened. I walked among the people in the Superdome and in the convention center. I saw babies dying. I saw old people so tired, they said, 'Just let me lay down and die.' They can talk that, but bring it on. I'm ready for it.

These comments occurred only after his decision to not evacuate had been criticized, and thus, suggest that motives for self-enhancement may not have been dominant at the time the decision was made. Nevertheless, they suggest a motive to protect his self-esteem when in the spotlight, and indicate that such motives were present (but not dominant) when he made his original decision.

*Motivated categorization modes as dominant.* In other cases of organizational categorization, motivated modes may dominate, although automatic modes may still carry weight (i.e. representing categorization that occurs at the bottom of the middle box of Figure 1). For example, in Elsbach and Kramer's (1996) study of business school rankings, the authors describe how perceivers (i.e. members of business schools) whose school ranking was lower than anticipated, reacted as if their self-esteem had been

threatened by this loss of organizational status. As one University of Texas, Austin respondent noted, in response to falling out of the top 20 in the rankings, ‘Students were upset; many said, “I applied to a top 20 school, and it’s not a top 20 school”’ (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996: 456). In turn, these individuals categorized their schools in ways that enhanced their status in alternate ways (not measured by the rankings). Thus, another University of Texas respondent claimed that their school catered to ‘regional labor markets better than other schools’ and that regional standing was a more important metric for evaluating its program than its standing in a survey that compared all schools across the nation (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996: 459). This motivated categorization (i.e. we are a ‘top regional school’) improved the school’s status and, likely, shored up the respondent’s self-esteem.

Yet, we would argue that business school members were likely also (and initially) to have been influenced by the salient types of categories to which they could legitimately assign their schools (e.g. it was relatively ‘automatic’ for members of the University of Texas to assign their school to the category ‘regional school’ because this is a categorization they encountered on a daily basis in marketing about their school). Thus, when motivated perceivers have a number of different ways of positively categorizing their organization, our framework suggests that they will choose those specific positive categories that are most salient and ‘chronically accessible’ (Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2000). This is because those categories were initially assigned to the organization through automatic categorization when it was first encountered.

In summary, in Phase 2, we suggest that the categorization processes in which organizational perceivers engage typically involve both automatic and motivated modes, although one mode may dominate. The specific combination of these modes is determined by both the perceiver’s relationship with the organization as well as the situations encountered by perceivers (that occur in Phase 1). Based on all of the categorizations arrived at in Phase 2, perceivers then develop momentary perceptions of the organization, as we explain in Phase 3 next.

### *Phase 3: Momentary perceptions of the organization*

In this phase of the process (depicted in the rightmost box in Figure 1), perceivers develop perceptions of the organization that reconcile all categorizations of the organization arrived at in Phase 2. As noted earlier, this reconciliation process is consistent with Fiske and Neuberg’s (1990), Continuum Model of Impression Formation, which suggests that perceivers will use subcategories or subtypes in their perceptions of individuals who do not cleanly fit into an initial categorization (e.g. ‘he’s an outgoing accountant’ or ‘she’s a shy New Yorker’). Such category reconciliation also falls in line with recent psychological research on person construal that recognizes the likelihood that people are assigned to multiple categories, and the need to form impressions that reconcile these categorizations (Freeman and Ambady, 2011). For example, in Freeman and Ambady’s (2011), ‘Dynamic interactive theory of person construal’, the authors argue that several different categories assigned to a person (e.g. female, white, older) might be reconciled in a single impression of the person (e.g. docile).

Our framework suggests that perceivers follow similar processes for reconciling multiple organizational categorizations. That is, category reconciliations typically lead to ‘subcategorizations’ of the organization, that combine the multiple categories to which it is assigned (e.g. ‘the newest, top tier school’ or ‘the most financially-stable small school’), and influence momentary perceptions of the organization. Further, we argue that these reconciliations may reflect the dominant mode of categorization via the nature of subcategory label. That is, in labeling the subcategory, the category resulting from the dominant mode of categorization (e.g. top tier school) will be modified by the category resulting from the subordinate mode (e.g. newest school), to produce the subcategory label (e.g. newest, top-tier school). Finally, as noted earlier, we would expect that categorizations that result from automatic modes to be related to the ‘prototypicality’ of an organization, while expecting categorizations that result from motivated modes to be related to the ‘desirability’ of the organization. We would also expect that, given the hierarchical nature of categories (King and Whetten, 2008), ‘higher-order’ (i.e. broader) categorizations would tend to result from automatic modes, whereas ‘lower-order’ (i.e. narrower) categorizations would tend to result from motivated modes. These expectations should further help us to understand which part of the sub-category label arises from automatic versus motivated modes of categorization.

For example, if, as suggested in the Kraatz and Zajac (1996) example, an organization is categorized dominantly via automatic modes as ‘non-traditional’ (an indication of prototypicality), but also via motivated modes as ‘legitimate’ (an indication of desirability), audiences may reconcile these categorizations by perceiving the organization as a ‘legitimate, non-traditional organization’ (indicating that non-traditional was the dominant category, while legitimate was the subordinate category). Similarly, if, as suggested by Hsu and Elsbach (2013) employees of the business school studied favored motivated categorizations of their school as ‘friendly’ but also categorized their school as ‘resource poor’ via automatic modes, these categorizations might be reconciled into the subcategory of ‘a friendly school that is resource poor’. This type of reconciliation was noted in Elsbach and Kramer’s (1996: 460) study of business school rankings, when a member of the business school at the University of California, Berkeley (a school that was ranked lower than expected) made claims of being ‘a public university that is top-tier’. This reconciliation suggests that the automatic categorization of ‘public university’ (a prototypical form) was dominant, but was reconciled with the subordinate and motivated categorization of being ‘top tier’ (a form of desirability). If top tier had been dominant, and public university had been subordinate, this member should have used the subcategory label ‘a top tier university that is public’.

In summary, in Phase 3 of our framework, we suggest that perceivers reconcile their motivated and automatic categorizations of an organization by creating a ‘subcategory’ that preserves both types of categorizations, and helps to provide an overall, momentary perception of the organization. The nature of the subcategory label may indicate which categorization mode (i.e. automatic versus motivated) was dominant in the dual mode process.

*Feedback loop: Reinforcement or modification of perceptions over time.* While our framework focuses on momentary perceptions of organizations, we suggest that these momentary perceptions may influence more stable perceptions, over time, through a feedback loop (depicted

at the bottom of Figure 1). This feedback loop may operate in two ways. First, momentary perceptions of an organization may influence which automatic categories are attended to by perceivers in the near future (as indicated by the arrow connecting the feedback loop box to the automatic categorization mode in the central box). For example, if audiences momentarily perceive an organization as 'moral and trustworthy', this salient perception may lead them to attend mindlessly to moral and trustworthy behavior of the organization in the near future, while ignoring behavior that is immoral and untrustworthy (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990). Over time, then, the categories of 'moral' and 'trustworthy' become chronically accessible to these audiences when thinking about the organization, leading them to automatically categorize the organization as 'moral' and 'trustworthy' in future encounters.

Second, momentary perceptions of an organization may influence how audiences experience the organization in the near future in terms of their momentary self-needs (as indicated by the arrow connecting the feedback loop box to the 'situations relevant to self-needs' bullet in the first box in Figure 1). For example, if members of an organization momentarily perceive it as 'low-status', this may threaten their self-esteem and heighten their needs for self-enhancement in near-future experiences with the organization. In turn, this may lead them to engage in motivated categorization processes that lead them to assign the organization to predominately positive categories.

## Implications for theory, practice and future research

The preceding discussion describes a dual-mode framework of organizational categorization and momentary perception. This framework has a number of immediate implications for theory, practice and future research on organizational perception.

### *Theoretical implications*

In terms of theoretical implications, our framework provides some specific new insights into theories of organizational identity and organizational legitimacy.

*Implications for theories of organizational identity.* Theories of organizational identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2010), have, from their beginning, been grounded in social identity theory and the self-esteem hypothesis (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This perspective suggests that people who identify with organizations are motivated to perceive those organizations in positive ways because they gain self-esteem through their affiliations with such positively-viewed collectives. While recent research (Vignoles et al., 2006) has suggested that identity perceptions may be linked to motives other than self-esteem enhancement (e.g. belonging, consistency or authenticity), this work has remained focused on self-needs as a primary driver of identity perceptions, placing self-esteem enhancement at the top of the list of needs that motivate these perceptions (Vignoles et al., 2002).

Our framework extends theories of organizational identity in an important way by highlighting the role of automatic categorizations in identity perception and suggesting that people perceive their organizations through both the lens of self-needs and the lens of salient experience. As a result, our framework helps to explain why those who identify

with organizations may sometimes perceive their organizations in not-so-positive ways (Hsu and Elsbach, 2013). That is, if salient, but negative dimensions of the organization are repeatedly observed, they will lead to negative categorizations of the organization that become part of the organization's identity.

Further, our framework helps to predict which categorizations, of the many available to perceivers, will influence both momentary and more permanent perceptions of organizational identity. Specifically, our framework suggests that perceivers will latch onto those categorizations that are salient (in the short term), and repeated (in the long term) to define the identities of their organizations. This set of categorizations may limit the pool of possible choices perceivers have to define their organization's identity, even if they are motivated to perceive it most positively. This may influence their ability to 'screen in' or 'screen out' organizations as desirable in their identities.

Finally, because different perceivers have different daily experiences with the organization, our framework predicts that there will be variance across these perceivers in terms of the most salient categories observed. As a result, our framework helps to predict and explain how and why the identity of an organization may be perceived differently across identifiers (Corley and Gioia, 2004). For example, our framework would predict that those identifiers (e.g. top managers) whose daily experience puts them in contact with strategic decision making in the organization would include the organization's strategy in their definition of its identity. By contrast, those identifiers (e.g. rank and file workers) whose daily experience puts them in contact with the everyday culture of the organization would include that culture in their definition of the organization's identity.

*Implications for theories of organizational legitimacy.* Theories of organizational legitimacy have recently been advanced by conceptualizing cognitive processes underlying the formation of legitimacy perceptions (Bitektine, 2011). Accordingly, perceptions of legitimacy derived from categorization are based on whether the organization can be assigned to a positively evaluated category ('cognitive' legitimacy). Otherwise, the organization is assessed based on features vis-a-vis prevalent standards ('sociopolitical' legitimacy). Our framework elaborates this perspective by explaining that the process is more complex. Legitimacy perceptions are an outcome of both automatic and motivated categorization. At the same time, extant theory tends explicitly to assume that legitimacy perceptions require available information regarding a firm's normativeness (Bitektine, 2011). Based on research in cognitive social psychology, our framework elucidates that even in information-poor situations, individuals may engage in automatic categorization by drawing on chronically accessible categories. One well-researched counterpart of this phenomenon in person perception is stereotyping (Bodenhausen and McCrae, 1998). Thus, our framework suggests that organizations may be stereotyped in ways that are similar to individuals. In turn, such stereotypes may influence perceivers' assessments of organizational legitimacy.

In addition, extant theories of legitimacy have posited on drivers of legitimacy perceptions that are provided by perceiver's environment, such as societal norms, prototypes and standards (Bitektine, 2011; Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Vergne and Wry, 2014). We extend theory on the 'micro' level (Bitektine and Haack, 2015) by positing that two additional factors play into legitimacy perceptions: the situation in which the perception

is formed (routine versus non-routine), and the specific motives of the perceiver based on their relationship with the organization. Moving beyond a static conceptual perspective, our framework also addresses how, over time, legitimacy perceptions feed back to affect which categories are drawn upon when encountering an organization as well as which needs may be activated in future encounters.

### *Practical implications*

Our framework also has a number of interesting implications for managers. First, our framework may help current practitioners understand and avoid being pre-emptively 'screened-out' of consideration in a number of domains. For example, if leaders of organizations in new and unfamiliar business (e.g. the Service Design industry) want to avoid being screened out of consideration by potential clients because they appear illegitimate, then, our model suggests that they attempt to get perceivers to engage in motivated categorization that would lead to more positive perceptions of the organization. In this case, a leader might attempt to link potential clients to the organization by reminding them of characteristics or behaviors they have in common (e.g. you were considered 'new and unfamiliar' at one time too). These kinds of reminders might lead clients to identify with the organization, and thus, engage in more motivated (and positive) categorizations.

Second, our framework may help practitioners to understand how everyday exposure to negative cues in the work environment can undermine organizational members' positive perceptions of organizational identity. For example, if leaders of organizations want to leverage their followers' positive organizational identity judgments in order to maintain and increase performance, our model suggests that they should pay attention to the stimuli followers routinely encounter. When negative categorizations based on such stimuli (e.g. bureaucratic, uncaring, unethical) become chronically accessible, even individuals with close, proximal, goal-relevant relationships with the organization (e.g. long-term employees) may be driven to more negative perceptions of identity (e.g. a successful, unethical organization). Such perceptions may lead to unwanted consequences in terms of follower attitudes and behaviors.

Finally, our framework suggests some new ways of thinking about organizational perception management (Elsbach, 2006), including the effectiveness of tactics that may lead perceivers to engage, primarily, in motivated versus automatic categorizations of organizations. Thinking about organizational perception management, not only as a set of tactics that explain organizational actions, but as tactics that influence the mode of categorizations in which perceivers engage, may be useful to organizational leaders and managers.

For example, if organizational leaders wish to provide justifications for a firm's apparent poor performance (i.e. claims that there was a 'good reason' for poor industry rankings), our framework suggests that these leaders should lead organizational audiences to engage, primarily, in motivated categorization of the firm (i.e. categorize the firm in ways that protect their self-esteem, such as re-categorizing it as high ranking among similar others). Such motivated categorizations may lead members to justify poor performance as the result of unfair assessment (i.e. the firm is really better than the rankings show if you consider its performance in relation to similar others). Further, our

framework suggests how leaders might induce this mode of categorization (i.e. making perceivers' own self-esteem needs salient by reminding them of their links to the organization's reputation).

By contrast, if organizational leaders wish to provide excuses for poor performance (i.e. claims that the poor performance 'wasn't our fault') then our framework suggests that these leaders should lead organizational audiences to engage, primarily, in automatic categorizations that highlight salient external reasons for poor performance (e.g. persuade audiences to view the organization as part of an industry that has been unfairly hurt by new legislative actions). Further, our framework suggests how leaders might induce this mode of categorization (i.e. by making salient, categorizations – such as being in a highly regulated industry – that excuse the organization's performance).

### *Future research implications*

While our dual-mode framework provides a new model for thinking about categorization and perception, it is strongly grounded in individual-level, psychological research. Yet, we recognize that organizations are defined by social categories that often do not apply to individuals (e.g. brands, markets or organizational culture categories), and that perceivers may have relationships with organizations that are distinct from their relationships with other people (e.g. stockholders, alumni, graduates). While we have theorized about some of these aspects in developing our framework, little empirical research has examined these facets of our model. We suggest that future research might apply our dual mode framework to the further study of organizational-level categorization and perception. We discuss two primary avenues for research for expanding our understanding of these phenomena.

First, very little is known about what makes a category privileged in a specific organizational context. We posit that perceivers are exposed to certain categories through media coverage, regulatory or scientific action, or repeated first-hand experience. Yet, further research is needed to identify the range of factors rendering a specific category privileged in terms of automatic categorizations of organizations (i.e. is newsworthiness more important than impact?). In addition, future research is needed to understand how motivated categorization interacts with privileged automatic categorizations (i.e. are some motivated categorizations strong enough to dominate even privileged categories?). Finally, research is needed to determine what contexts (e.g. competitive rankings, retail contexts, leadership addresses) are most likely to make specific types of categories stand out (e.g. status categories, brand categories), and how these privileged categories might interact with momentary motives of perceivers (e.g. needs for self-esteem, distinctiveness and self-consistency).

A second avenue for future research indicated by our framework is examining how the specific relationships perceivers have with organizations influence their dual-mode categorization processes. For example, individuals may be graduates or alumni of an organization. Such individuals often maintain strong relationships with the organization despite not being members any more (Breitsohl and Ruhle, 2013). We know little about how such relationships might influence perceivers' reliance on automatic versus motivated categorization modes. Future research should explore how these and other unique



forms of organization–individual relationships affect modes of categorization as well as the specific categories perceivers invoke in forming impressions of the organization. As noted earlier, stakeholder groups have different strengths of relationships with organizations (e.g. long-time employees may have stronger relationships with their employers compared with members of the general public), which will likely shift the respective dominance of motivated versus automatic categorization. Yet, it remains unclear to what extent stakeholders, who are similar in the strength of their relationships with an organization (e.g. long-time customers versus long-time suppliers), may nevertheless, rely on different modes of categorization when forming impressions of the organization (i.e. what aspects of customers' and suppliers' organizational relationships matter when categorizing an organization?). Further, it is unclear how these stakeholders might differ in the specific types of categories they rely on when perceiving the same organization (i.e. will customers focus more on status categorizations, while suppliers focus more on brand or market categorizations?). Finally, it is unknown how perceivers might reconcile multiple relationships with the same organization when forming impressions of the organization (i.e. what specific categories might a perceiver rely on in forming impressions of an organization with which she has both a public and goal-relevant relationship?). Research that links modes of categorization with perceiver/organization relationships to explain perception appears a wide-open field for future study.

## Conclusion

Psychologists have long promoted the notion that both automatic and motivated cognitive processes may affect person perception. Our dual-mode framework of organizational categorization and momentary perception leverages this insight to explain how momentary perceptions of organizations, such as perceptions of organizational identity and legitimacy, may similarly result from both automatic and motivated categorizations. Our hope is that this model provides a springboard for future organizational research and theorizing that includes both automatic and motivated modes of categorization when examining organizational perceptions.

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## Notes

- 1 We follow psychologists in defining momentary perceptions as 'a mental state at a particular moment' (Klemm et al., 2015: 121), where a moment is taken to mean a relatively short period of time (i.e. a few seconds) and contrasts with 'general perceptions' that are defined as more stable and permanent.

- 2 We would note that, while needs for pure distinctiveness and self-consistency may also influence organizational categorizations, because extant research has focused on needs for self-enhancement through positive distinctiveness, our discussion also focuses on these motives.
- 3 As noted earlier, Fiske and Neuberg's (1990) model suggests that perceivers may also rely on piecemeal attribute integration. We exclude piecemeal integration from our focus because we are interested in momentary perceptions of organizations that lead to quick sorting or screening decisions. We argue that these types of perceptions are based on categorization processes, but not on piecemeal integration (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990).

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