#FeesMustFall# Movement in the Post-Apartheid Era:

Legitimacy Battle for Leaders

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Underpinned by institutional legitimacy, this study explores how South African public university senior managers struggled to maintain legitimacy during an unplanned radical change process.

Design/methodology/approach: Gioia's grounded-theory analysis approach is employed to analyse interviews with 37 senior managers of public-funded universities in South Africa.

Findings: Our findings show that a change without proper planning severely damages institutions in all aspects of leadership's normative, empirical, moral and pragmatic legitimacy.

Originality: Though other legitimacy models have been well developed, they do not apply to such unplanned social change in organisations. This study shows a different angle of the legitimacy crisis under unplanned social change conditions.

Research implications: This study contributes to the literature on legitimacy by illustrating the importance of institutional legitimacy during unplanned social change and the factors that negate legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

Critical changes often influence the legitimacy judgements of an entity (Hanelt et al., 2021; Huy et al., 2014). Legitimacy is not a constant state but a persistently evaluated condition (Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011). Legitimacy is also vital for organisations to uphold their authority and extract high-quality compliance from their clients and other stakeholders. Lepsius (2017) pointed to the complexity of the dual role of change agents, who are actors in the institutionalised system but must also fulfil the role of change initiators. Several reasons make legitimacy a critical consideration for organisations, particularly during crises. Legitimacy enables organisations to mobilise resources, obtain regulatory support, gain access to essential resources and maintain crucial support from their environment (Deephouse et al., 2017). Affirmed legitimacy increases the chances of continued existence and acquisition of power and active and passive societal support (Deephouse et al., 2017). Researchers have comprehensively analysed different legitimacy types among various stakeholders in building legitimacy and managing complex situations (Bitektine, 2011). However, studies involving social and economic inequality and social change (Girschik, 2020) seem to be limited. Management scholars have well covered the area of planned change set within organisations (Kitchener and Delbridge, 2020). In contrast, few have examined unplanned changes outside or above organisations that directly impact administrative operations.

This study is designed to further investigate legitimacy theory by exploring a research question: *How do leaders fail to meet the demand for legitimacy during the unplanned change process under the complexity of the social environment*? We investigate the #FeesMustFall# movement to understand how South African (SA) public university's leaders responded to the movement that shook the whole country for a few years, particularly in a low-trust society like SA (Gumede, 2015). Given the multidimensional nature of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995), we explore

different level interactions enacted by individuals (Powell and Colyvas, 2008) and micro-level processes through which actors create, alter and destroy institutions. This exploration is critical for understanding the duality of macro-level institutional processes. The issue of levels and level interactions is fundamental to institutional theory, and conceptual and empirical research is required to explore cross-level interactions within the social system (Bitektine and Haack, 2015). We responded to their call for more qualitative research on social judgments by exploring micro-level communication and actions that yield macro-level outcomes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Legitimacy and Organizational Change

Legitimacy is defined as an "appraisal of action in terms of shared or common values in the context of the involvement of the action in the social system" (Parson, 1960: 175). We adopt Parson's definition of legitimacy for the benefit of this study to understand the judgement of university executives on legitimacy during a controversial change of free higher education (HE) in SA. It is because granting or withholding legitimacy represents a mechanism of social control, i.e., social actors promote structures and practices that institutions perceive as beneficial to themselves, their social group, or the entire society (Parsons, 1951).

Different types of legitimacy, such as cognitive, pragmatic, moral, regulatory, normative, socio-political, managerial, procedural, structural, consequential, personal, media, internal and external, have been identified and developed by scholars (e.g., Scott, 2014; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). Suchman (1995), for example, distinguished between cognitive, normative and regulatory legitimacy and identified pragmatic legitimacy, cognitive legitimacy and moral legitimacy, which is based on normative approval, as primary forms of legitimacy.

Institutional change inevitably requires legitimation (Baba et al., 2021; Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Deephouse et al., 2017; Huy et al., 2014). To answer the research question, we use the process perspective, which allows us to zoom in on the role of legitimation efforts and discourse as an inherent part of institutional change. We have consulted a proliferation of research on how legitimacy is sustained during radical change (Amis et al., 2004; Huy et al. 2014; Kim et al., 2016); how organizations can lose legitimacy when crises, environmental jolts (Sine and David, 2003), or actions of vocal outsiders (Maguire and Hardy, 2009) precipitate changes in dominant institutional logic in their field.

According to Bitektine and Haack (2015), it is important to distinguish between legitimacy during institutional stability and the legitimacy demands during institutional change. Our study focuses on legitimacy demands during unplanned radical change. The differences manifest both in theory as well as relationships in the legitimation process. During institutional stability, the legitimacy process tends to be dominated by efforts to reinforce validity. During change, that goes hand in hand – with competing judgements; legitimacy is weakened, and micro-level processes become prominent in reshaping social order (Bitektine, 2011). Through the process of institutionalization, legitimacy judgments of evaluators are subjected to social control (Bitektine and Haack, 2015). Collective perceptions, which are composed of subjective legitimacy judgments of individuals (Bitektine, 2011; Tost, 2011), are aggregated and objectified (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) at the collective level.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Context

A decline in university subsidies and an increase in youth unemployment for decades led to cumulative levels of frustration among students in SA (Tomaselli, 2021). Universities became a 'battlefield' where students rebelled against rising tuition fees and demanded fee-free higher education (HE) (Jensen, 2017). What began as a protest over proposed fee increases in October 2015, within days, escalated to a nationwide call for free education, with thousands of students and staff across the country participating in one of the largest student protests, known as the #FeesMustFall#, that have dominated SA HE. Although the call for free HE for the poor was widely supported, the violence, destruction of property, and boycotting of academic activities generated mixed responses. After two years of instability, in mid-December 2017, with relatively little consultation or planning, the SA President announced that in 2018 free HE would be provided to all new first-year students from poor families. The announcement was made less than three weeks before the commencement of the new academic year, leaving the national student financial aid system and public universities in a state of flux. University leadership had to steer universities through this turbulent and unplanned change period. Those events are referred to as the *#FeesMustFall# movement*.

Data collection

The #FeesMustFall# movement has received multiple levels of coverage that captured the human experience and opinions of the change process from both the micro and macro levels (Habid, 2019). We approached all 26 public universities in the country to invite senior managers to participate in our study. Thirty-seven senior managers from 16 public universities from seven of the nine provinces in SA participated in our interviews. (Demographic information will be provided upon request due to the word limit). Semi-structured open-ended questions were

prepared. The questions focused on emotions and thoughts during the student protests and the introduction and implementation of free HE for poor students. Participants were asked to reflect on the meaning of those experiences. The total length of all interviews is 1,555 minutes.

Constructing meaning through data analysis

We extended Gioia's grounded-theory analysis approach (Gioia et al., 2013) into two processes (i.e., top-down and bottom-up) and two stages in analysing the data. In the first stage, we ran top-down and bottom-up processes parallel. In the top-down process, we identified themes (i.e., types of legitimacy) that roughly emerge during data collection. Then, all the data, entered as text files into NVivo, were coded based on those themes. We started to code data freely in the bottom-up process, generating hundreds of nodes. From those notes, we grouped roughly into first-order categories. From first-order categories, we continued to group them into second-order categories. In the second stage, we integrated the results from the above two processes to match and finalise 19 first-order categories and five second-order categories, equivalent to five types of legitimacy. We also developed visual tools to comprehensively present the interactions and emergence from the multilevel analysis.

FINDINGS

Scholars have identified many sources of legitimacy based on their distinct research purpose and context (Deephouse et al., 2017). In this study, the impact of unplanned change on institutional legitimacy emerged as an overarching theme. Multiple levels of analysis have captured the diversity in the legitimation of such change by varying sources of legitimacy (Ruef and Scott, 1998). The five types of legitimacy that emerged during the #FeesMustFall# movement are normative, empirical, moral, leadership, and pragmatic legitimacy (Figure 1). It became evident that social interactions, cultural sensitivity, generational differences, the inner conflict

experienced by social actors and the prolonged uncertainty contributed to perceptions and judgements surrounding legitimacy under this unplanned change.

{Insert Figure 1 here}

Loss of normative legitimacy

Normative legitimacy emphasises "normative rules that introduce a prescriptive evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life" (Scott, 2014: 37). Our analysis shows at least five reasons that caused the loss of normative legitimacy in SA HE: government corruption, destabilised HE environment, violation of rules of engagement between management and students, absence of law enforcement, and violence on campuses. First, universities' normative legitimacy seemed to be threatened by their *government corruption and behaviour*:

> "We don't have leadership in this country. We are failing the young people because we are not solving problems or creating sustainable ways of solving a problem. This is like throwing money at problems thinking that you are solving the problem by throwing money at it" (Director A).

The above evidence confirms that SA people, whether black or white, deeply distrust their government due to its poor performance and manipulation by unscrupulous politicians (Gumede, 2015).

SA universities seemed to be losing their normative legitimacy since they could not control the student protests, which turned into riots. In other words, v*iolence* on campuses scared not only staff and other students (who did not partake) but also posed a question of legitimacy:

> "Many staff members were threatened, in all kind of subtle and crude ways, by the damage the police and security came in. The damage had been done, and we recognised it was huge" (Vice-chancellor C).

Implementing a 'free higher education' policy without any strategic plan in SA also pushes its public universities into another loss of normative legitimacy. The second finding emerging from the analysis is a *destabilised environment*. The change erupted in chaos, and the mess was exacerbated by the fact that "*rules of engagement*" accepted under stable conditions were violated:

> "Once it [the government] announced the fee recommendations and the protests erupted across the higher education system, they effectively retreated, leaving the universities to fend for themselves" (Deputy Vice-Chancellor C).

The protests, which were then turned into riots, added up to the instability of the environment in most universities in the country:

> "People don't want to take VC (Vice-chancellor) and DVC (Deputy Vice-chancellor) positions unless it is a stable environment. When they take these positions - they only last one or two years. They are lucky if they survive one term. The environment has become so immature in terms of the demands of what students want" (Executive Dean A).

The loss of normative legitimacy can be seen in the *violation of rules of engagement between management and students*. Furthermore, upholding the law is a prerequisite for the effective functioning of a parastatal institution (Gumede, 2015). The *absence of law enforcement* forced senior managers to take decisions outside their area of expertise and also tread on a terrain that was not seen as part of their core business:

> "I will label it as basically the tragedy of 2016. In the whole national system – you cannot show me one student that was active in this chaos in this whole sector who is sitting in jail today – So this is a symptom of the lack of upholding the law and the lowering standards of imposing law and order" (Director I).

{ Figure 2}

An additional summary of the key factors that influenced normative legitimacy during this change period is illustrated with a concept diagram in Figure 2 to provide more depth to the issue. On the bright side, we see that students and academics expressed their views, and there was a space of freedom, despite the chaos. However, many students were negated by the detrimental economic environment, cryptic fascist reactions, deviation from the social contract, and 'everything is questioned'. Thus, they felt they had no choice but to use violence. The loss of normative legitimacy first came from the narrative that change erupted in chaos when the environmental stability was compromised. The chaos was exacerbated by the fact that "rules of engagement" accepted under stable conditions were violated. HE senior managers were profoundly disillusioned and shaken by students' violent protests and threats. They did not know what to do with their violent students and their scared staff, which led to the disappointment of these two key stakeholders. The failure to condemn violence and related behaviours of spectacle undermined normative legitimacy. Treading on the terrain of law enforcement resulted in a loss of legitimacy (Thomas and Louis, 2014).

Susceptible empirical legitimacy

Empirical legitimacy is not based on expertise or morality but rather on perception (Bitektine, 2011). Empirical legitimacy is influenced by all stakeholders as it is determined by the perceptions as to whether the normative measures are indeed adhered to. The analysis shows several factors that make SA HE's empirical legitimacy vulnerable. The first contradictory issue that stood out from the analysis is the *mismatch between the promise of the new democracy* and the ideals expressed in the constitution and *the actual experience of democracy* by young people:

"A mismatch between the promise of democracy and the experience of democracy, and this annual escalation in the numbers of those who have little hope and for whom social and economic opportunity is simply not there" (Vice-Chancellor G).

Second, trust plays a significant role in legitimacy judgements (Moreno-Luzon et al., 2018). Our analysis revealed *broken trust* between the government and universities, between management and staff, and between staff and students during the process:

"There is definitely no trust amongst the colleagues. Definitely not, particularly senior people" (Dean of Students A).

Trust seemed to have been an issue in SA society for so many years. Apartheid did not only break the trust between black communities and public, private and social institutions, but it also broke the trust between SA communities, between black and white, and between employees and organisations (Gumede, 2015). Staff were confused because they did not know what was happening because senior managers did *not share information* with them for fear that the information would leak out to students.

The distrust in the management of universities was also aggravated by the instability, disruption of classes and *"militarisation" on campuses*:

"Where it was an open public environment or space – it became a closed jail where security is everything. Security has been listed as our number one risk" (Director I).

Vice-Chancellors had to take measures to protect the infrastructure and create an environment that would allow academic activities to continue. These measures – obtaining court interdicts and calling the police – created a sense of anxiety and uncertainty on the university campuses. Students felt that the securitisation and militarisation of universities not only limit the rights of students to freedom of expression but undermine the legitimacy of universities as open

spaces for students and staff to freely exchange and express ideas. As a result, both staff and students *criticised university leaders*:

"Our Vice-Chancellor had the support of the senate to act, but he did not. Staff felt they were let down by leadership" (Executive Dean B).

Many university leaders acknowledged that they did not communicate effectively during the period of unplanned change. Communication was hampered by the unpredictability of events and the volatility of the situation. The context within which decisions were taken was not always understood, and that led to distrust and a loss of legitimacy.

Furthermore, the media were influenced by legitimacy judgements and perceptions about trust among different stakeholders of the universities. Trust relations were based on the expectation that the actions of management captured the best interest of the other stakeholders, and trust was seen as the extent to which *management meets the expectations of staff, students and other stakeholders*:

"The extent to which one gets involved in responding on blogs and Twitter and Facebook, and whether you respond to the nonsense that gets put out, as an institution, it feels like we should not. We are hoping that other individuals will present the counter view of the truth, but they do not, and so only one side gets put out" (Vice-chancellor I).

The lack of trust led to the corrosion of public confidence and disengagement. It is evident that university *staff felt unprotected and consequently disengaged*:

"My observation is that people have disengaged and have lost the light in their eyes" (Director D).

{ Figure 3}

Figure 3 visualises the SA HE empirical legitimacy with the views of staff, students, media and external stakeholders. Some staff affirmed their pride in HE and what it stood for. Still, the majority felt shocked, angry, anxious, injustice and hurt by the damage the protest and unplanned change have damaged the legitimacy of the university. As a result, some resigned and quit their job because they could not recover from the shock. On the other side, students were disappointed with the university and the democracy of the country. They had little hope and blamed universities as a part of the reproduction of capitalism for the rich, not the poor. In addition, they viewed the presence of police on university campuses as negating the university's legitimacy. All of these, the view of truth, were disseminated to the public via various media.

Most of the evidence shows that senior leaders of SA universities were alone and lonely in the battle for legitimacy. Their inability to empower others during change is called the loss of 'leadership legitimacy' (Chakravarthy and Gargiulo, 1998). They lost the trust of their staff, students and media, which led to what we call 'wounded leadership legitimacy'.

Wounded leadership legitimacy

During that period of unplanned change, normal business-as-usual operations could not proceed. Halting the academic business whilst trying to find solutions infringed on leadership legitimacy because all this was happening in a very *complicated context*:

> "It was a heavily politicised environment in which the academics found themselves. It was not necessary to look at students as students. You had to think of what is the force behind their actions" (Vice-chancellor E).

Funding problems on the surface were portrayed as a tension between HE senior managers and students. However, this study shows that the underlying reasons for the change indicated that many of the decisions fell outside the mandate of university managers:

"Call for free education got hijacked by political activists and opportunists" (Executive Director A).

Together with a complicated national context, HE managers also had to deal with *irreconcilable demands* from students. Smaller groups of students emerged with their own sets of demands, disregarding established university processes on how to deal with these issues. They presented demands as non-negotiable actions, leaving no room for discussions or negotiations; or they would leave a meeting with a decision taken and then overturn the decision because they did not have a clear mandate or 'authority' to represent the students:

"We really tried to engage with them but quickly realised they do not really want constructive solutions. The more we gave in to demands, the more, newer demands came" (Deputy Vice-chancellor C).

Such behaviours raised a question about the legitimacy of student leaders as well. During this turbulence, two contradictory images of students emerged – heroic fighters against socio-economic injustice versus lawless, misbehaving brutes. The complicated context and conflicting demands caused *anxiety and muddled issues* for universities' leaders:

"Staff felt bad. Especially because we had, what I would call wounded leadership - they lose objectivity. I could see how the vice-chancellor is crumbling under pressure" (Executive Dean B).

This kind of unplanned change seems to be less studied in HE and management, but such rationality can have a profound impact on organisations (Kitchener and Delbridge, 2020). The head of Universities SA stated, "There was no defence of the HE system at this time, not from the private sector, not from the industry, not from government, not from students and not from the

communities either" (USAF, 2019). The net effect is that senior university managers became *exhausted*:

"People do not want to take VC (Vice-chancellor) and DVC (Deputy Vice-chancellor) positions. The environment has become so immature in terms of the demands of what students want" (Executive Dean A).

The majority of senior leaders experienced an inner conflict. The unplanned change evoked a lot of emotions. Most of these feelings were negative, such as sadness and disappointment. The storyline that prevailed throughout the research was an experience of inner conflict. Ultimately it has to do with the fact that the noble call for free education, the interpretation thereof, as well as the uncontrolled violence, caused this inner conflict. As elucidated under the challenges of leadership legitimacy, crisis leadership decisions around security caused conflict as the rational myth of the university as an 'open space', was violated. Whilst students and staff could express their feelings, senior managers felt that their leadership role required the suppression of emotions in public.

{Insert Figure 4 here}

Figure 4 presents key attributes that contribute to the leadership legitimacy of SA HE during turbulence. The loss of normative and empirical legitimacy made it almost impossible to sustain leadership legitimacy. In addition, this section also shows a question on the legitimacy of the student movement, which partly contributed to the wounded leadership legitimacy. It is because the movement was continually fracturing and reforming without a leadership election. It was easily hijacked by any small incident and showed no accountability. Consequently, HE leaders were chess pieces of a large board game. They felt that things were set up externally whilst they were personally held liable. They did not know what to do apart from making concessions and

psychological efforts to respond passively and confusingly. To them, "every meeting was a contestation"; "common sense was not common", and "reasoning was not the order of the day'. They were projected as 'the other' by both students and staff. Hence, they lost the trust of their staff.

Despite all of those, some leaders showed their understanding of the given context, implemented decisions they could not change, and knew they could not lead by proxy. There were signs of resilience and adaptability.

Weakened moral legitimacy

The moral legitimacy of *senior leaders* came under scrutiny during the unplanned change process because they seemed to be reactive and indecisive in responding to the constantly changing situation:

"There were many times when one compromised on principles" (Vice-Chancellor I).

Their values were also questioned while dealing with such unprecedented circumstances:

"Where is the justification in forcing a public university that is severely financially constrained to divert scarce resources to fight frivolous legal cases so that it can effectively fulfil its institutional mandate?" (Vice-Chancellor E).

In addition, the act of *bringing private security* onto university premises continued to be questioned by many and raised issues about moral legitimacy:

"They (staff) wrote to me on a daily basis asking, 'Can you guarantee our safety?' and I had to say, 'No, I am a Vice-Chancellor , that is all that I am. I make decisions that I hope will secure your safety, but I cannot guarantee anything" (Vice-Chancellor L)

However, HE managers justified such a decision by re-iterating that before communities recognised, until the violence was rejected, both in rhetoric and in practice, there was no moral legitimacy in the demand that a public institution should withdraw security.

Not only was the moral legitimacy of senior leaders questioned, but also the moral legitimacy of *other stakeholders* who presented their demands to university leaders, for example, the analysis of the legitimacy of the government and student leaders above. Without the assumed moral legitimacy of all stakeholders in an engagement, the negotiated outcome is annulled. Moral legitimacy might also be questioned when *racial and gender prejudices* were used by staff and students to express their anger:

> "I think it was racialised by staff members. Most of the times – I speak general – most of the white colleagues were extremely unsympathetic – thought the students to be out of order" (Executive Dean C).

Due to the sensitive nature of racism in SA, some stakeholders believe that people can only speak of a certain experience if they belong to a certain race group. Such stereotyping and silo-mentality of people in different cultural groups can also hinder moral legitimacy. However, Muldoon (2008) argued that it is important to recognise the moral legitimacy of anger in order to avoid a renewed cycle of violence in a context like SA; and it helps to reconcile the wounded society and cultivate humanity.

Figure 5 visualises how moral legitimacy was weakened during the unplanned change in SA HE. Externally, it was weakened by a corrupted government, which stole the future of poor students. Internally, it was perceived as inadequate by staff who were let down by their senior managers with their compromised principles, indecisive and confusing decisions and actions, and lost objectivity despite some managers who maintained their values during the turbulence.

{ Figure 5}

Competing pragmatic legitimacy

Pragmatic legitimacy is based on self-interested calculations (Suchman, 1995). During this turbulence and unplanned change, SA universities seemed to have become a shooting target for both angry students and external opportunistic stakeholders. In other words, they were confronted with both interferences from external stakeholders and power dynamics during the process. Below is an example of how they perceived external stakeholders' interference:

"We should not be very simplistic in looking at the crisis in universities and analysing it separately from the business interests that benefit from this turmoil" (Vice-Chancellor E).

University's leaders seemed to judge that their pragmatic legitimacy was also affected by the power dynamics that were constantly changing during the process without their control:

"So, the minute you speak to a group of students, you give them legitimacy" (Deputy Vice-Chancellor D).

Deciding which meetings to conduct and with whom became critical during unplanned change. Different stakeholder groupings requested meetings with management during this period. Whilst the management of unexpected change required urgent interventions, the recognition of formally established structures at the university – and dealing with these structures according to the mandate in the statutes of universities, assisted these structures in retaining their legitimacy.

{Insert Figure 6 here}

Figure 6 illustrates how SA HE leaders perceived pragmatic legitimacy. They perceived that students were influenced by external stakeholders (mainly politicians and political parties) who either had political/business interests or/and benefitted from this turbulence. Those external stakeholders seem to be the key component behind the student movements to attack the autonomy

of universities and create a heavily politicised environment, which, as a result, generated two competing forces affecting pragmatic legitimacy.

DISCUSSION

Andrews et al. (2016) and Poell (2020) also investigate the legitimacy of certain social movements, but none of them investigates social movement from the leadership legitimacy perspective. With insights from 37 senior managers who experienced the #FeesMustFall# social movement in the post-Apartheid era, this study shows how they failed to meet the demand for legitimacy during the unplanned change process under the complexity of the social environment of SA. Five types of legitimacy (normative, empirical, moral, leadership and pragmatic) emerged during the unplanned change to show how leaders failed.

Theoretical Implications

First, SA's new democratic foundations were built on deep racial inequality – economic, political, social and individual self-worth –deliberately fostered by colonial and apartheid governments (Gumede, 2015). The disillusionment and social inequality, the subverted national environment of corruption, escalating enrolment trends, and tuition fees contributed to a frustrating institutionalised environment. The deterioration of the economy trapped many in poverty and led to disappointment in the social justice promises made by the national government. Thus, many parents and students viewed the call for free HE as a call for social justice. For them, a university symbolises hope and a way of breaking the cycle of poverty. Universities have been accused of becoming institutions that contribute to the reproduction of capitalism (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). Upon reaching a tipping point, these frustrations led to a period of involuntary and sweeping change, including violence. The nature and complexity of the demands, the prolonged instability

in the society, and the need for operational changes in the sector resulted in the loss of normative legitimacy.

Second, empirical legitimacy is more about perception than expertise or morality (Bitektine, 2011). Distrust and mistrust emerged from our study as key features that created a susceptible empirical legitimacy among SA HE. The prolonged uncertainty of the socio-economic reality and a bumpy road to democracy contributed to the crisis of student protests. This mistrust in management led to the questioning of decisions taken by management. The findings revealed how distrust between various actors, namely students, staff, managers, government and other stakeholders, negated empirical legitimacy.

Third, in such a complicated national context, HE leaders and managers were trapped in escalating violent student protests and the instant implementation of free HE within weeks. Within a short period of time, SA HE leaders had to deal with a number of competing forces, which should have supporting boards for HE, and their irreconcilable demands. We call it wounded leadership legitimacy. This kind of leadership legitimacy crisis was analysed in Vuori and Huy's (2016) study when the top and middle managers had different fears about the innovation pressure. In our study, it is slightly different in at least two aspects. (a) Top and middle managers, almost across the whole sector, suddenly became 'indecisive' and 'ineffectual' because of the constant pressures and aggression from both inside and outside. (b) We are discussing leadership legitimacy in the context of the public sector, not the private one. Leaders in this context hardly have any fear of going bankrupt, like private firms. As a result, no one lost their job due to the leadership legitimacy crisis unless they quit their position due to exhaustion.

Fourth, SA universities suffered a severe moral legitimacy concern. All stakeholders, i.e., top managers, senior managers, staff and students, questioned one another's trust and morality

about how each stakeholder responded to the crisis. Unplanned change does not seem to work well in any aspect of legitimacy maintenance. Trust in decision-making is linked to moral legitimacy as it relates to the trustworthiness of a change agent (Huy et al., 2014). We have seen distrust in empirical legitimacy and moral legitimacy. This study has confirmed that the classification of different forms of legitimacy can overlap, as can the sources of legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011).

Fifth, what started as a protest for free education, quickly became a platform for many student demands, including free, decolonised education for all, the immediate clearance of historical debt, and the end of outsourcing allied workers. Party-political power dynamics and battles for leadership positions played off within the protesting movement. Pragmatic legitimacy questions about the true motives and driving forces behind these movements emerged; to such an extent, reference was made to a 'third force' that had taken advantage and piggybacked on the student protests to cause chaos and heighten tension. Responses to competing rationalities are always complex (Townley, 2002). Being entangled in such dynamics power and fast-changing circumstance of the free HE movement, HE leaders saw themselves as chess pieces between government and students. There is no evidence to suggest that HE leaders gained any self-interest.

The findings show that different forms of legitimacy can overlap, so they should not be viewed as separate occurrences but as cognitive judgments that collectively impact the legitimacy of public HE institutions. Normative legitimacy supersedes the other forms of legitimacy. It is harder for a parastatal organisation to maintain legitimacy once normative legitimacy has been compromised. While Scott (2014) acknowledges the prevalent importance of external institutionalisation on organisations' structuring and functioning, this study underscores the impact of government legitimacy on university legitimacy. During this period of unplanned change, the legitimacy of a university was not attributed to a single institution but rather to the cluster of public

universities: the prolonged instability, the multiplicity of issues and the uncertainty evoked emotions from all stakeholders.

Though other legitimacy models have been well developed (Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Huy et al., 2014), they do not apply to such unplanned social change in organisations. This study shows a different angle of the legitimacy crisis under unplanned social change conditions. During such unplanned change, it is challenging to measure legitimacy perceptions, judgements and actions because the organisations constantly have to react and respond to the dynamic complexity asserted from outside and inside. Therefore, to obtain a comprehensive explanation of the #FeesMustFall# movement in SA, we have integrated multiple levels of analysis.

The findings show that SA HE has experienced an 'oblique approach' (Kitchener and Delbridge, 2020), or 'strategy without design' (Chia and Holt, 2009) to respond to this social movement. Hence, there is no surprise that a legitimacy crisis arose. The challenges faced by African HE are magnified due to the impact of colonialism, which has influenced education in the past and continues to have lasting implications (Darley and Luethge, 2019). The history of SA post-apartheid shows that when legitimacy is questioned or in crisis, ordinary people may seek the answer through violence (Gumede, 2015). Legitimacy crises in HE seem frequent in many global south countries (e.g., Hutchinson and Pendle, 2015), but management scholars fail to pay sufficient attention to those important contexts.

This study contributes to the literature on legitimacy by illustrating the importance of institutional legitimacy during unplanned change and the factors that negate or enhance legitimacy. Bitektine (2011) claimed that the most appropriate forms of legitimacy in a particular situation depend on the dimensions of the institution's activities, staff, processes, and relationships. In this study, normative legitimacy, empirical legitimacy, leadership legitimacy, moral legitimacy, and

pragmatic legitimacy came under scrutiny during the turbulence of the student protests and the introduction and implementation of free HE.

Managerial and Social Implications

The value of an analysis of legitimacy is that senior managers are sensitised about the different sources and issues that impact legitimacy. Planned change can be steered more effectively when awareness of legitimacy factors exists (Bitektine and Haack, 2015), but unplanned change is more likely to negatively affect all aspects of legitimacy. During radial and volatile change, leaders must set examples of alternative ethical, moral and value-based leadership to engender new trust (Gumede, 2015). The #FeesMustFall# movement was effectively a call for radical social justice. It also became a platform for many smaller groups with particular demands. The more diverse the issues under pressure, the more complex maintaining legitimacy became. Performance legitimacy came under scrutiny when normal business-as-usual operations could not proceed during the unplanned change period. The lack of legitimacy on a national level forced university leaders to adopt roles and responsibilities that are not part of their mandate under normal circumstances. Also, decisions are evaluated by what is taken away and not by the potential value that can be added. Henceforth, the importance of communication and proactivity and flexibility to contextualise decisions is critical.

Limitations and future research

First, this study focused on public universities in SA. SA has its own political, economic, and cultural composition. The findings of the study can be generalized but should be mindful of the aforementioned context. Second, we focused on the perspective of senior managers. Future research should further investigate the issue from the perspectives of front-line staff, academics and students to have a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. This study focuses on the

broad cycle of change – starting from the mounting pressure, followed by the student protests and period of disorder, up to the announcement of free HE and the responses of universities in implementing these changes. However, the long-term impact of the legitimacy of the implementation of free HE in SA will be an intriguing study in advancing our knowledge of the process of managing legitimacy on the move (Hernes, 2014).

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Figure 1: Data structured for aggregated dimension: institutional legitimacy under scrutiny

First-order categories   **Second-order themes**   **Aggregated dimension**

| A. Government corruption
B. Destabilised environment
C. Violation of rules of engagement between management and students
D. Absence of law enforcement
E. Violence on campuses |

→ 1. Loss of normative legitimacy

| F. Mismatch between the promise of democracy and the experience of democracy
G. Broken trust
H. J. Insufficient information sharing
I. "Militarisation" of campuses
J. Criticized leadership
K. Subjective role of the media |

→ 2. Susceptible empirical legitimacy

| L. Complicated context
M. Irreconcilable demands
N. Muddled issues |

→ 3. Wounded leadership legitimacy

| O. Questioning of leadership values
P. Presence of security
Q. Races used to express anger |

→ 4. Weakened moral legitimacy

| R. Stakeholder's interference
S. Power dynamics |

→ 5. Competing pragmatic legitimacy
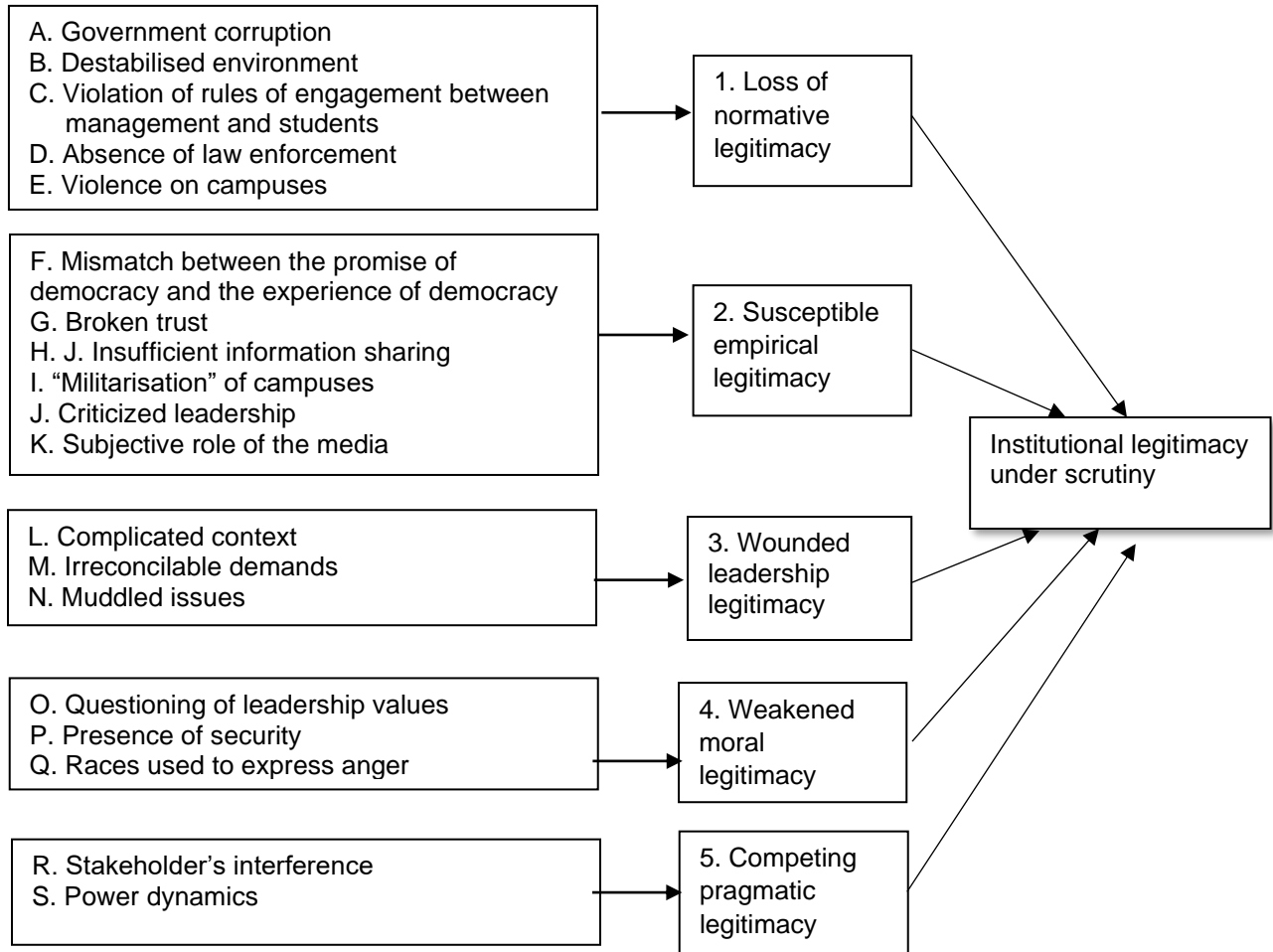
Institutional legitimacy under scrutiny
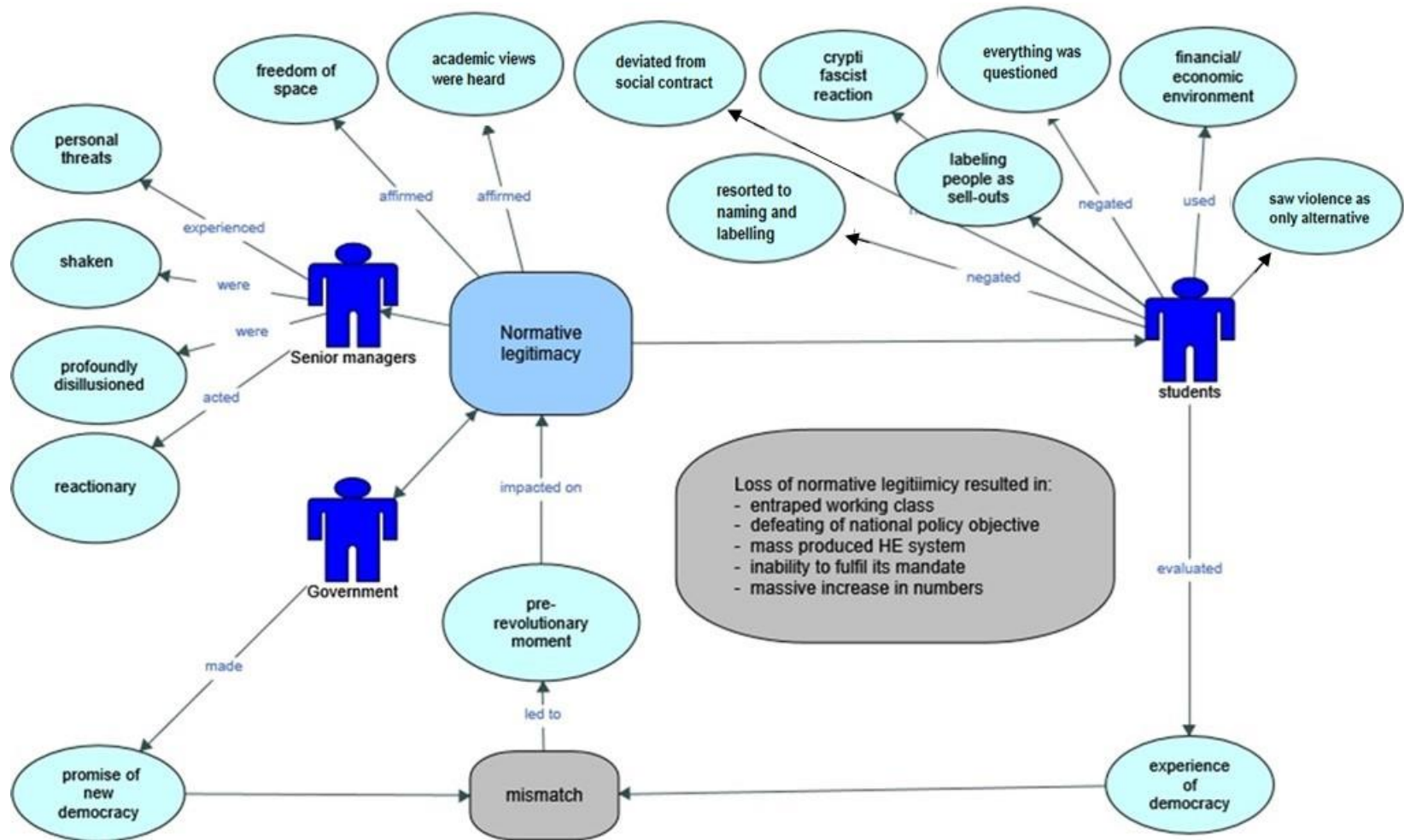
Figure 2: Loss of normative legitimacy

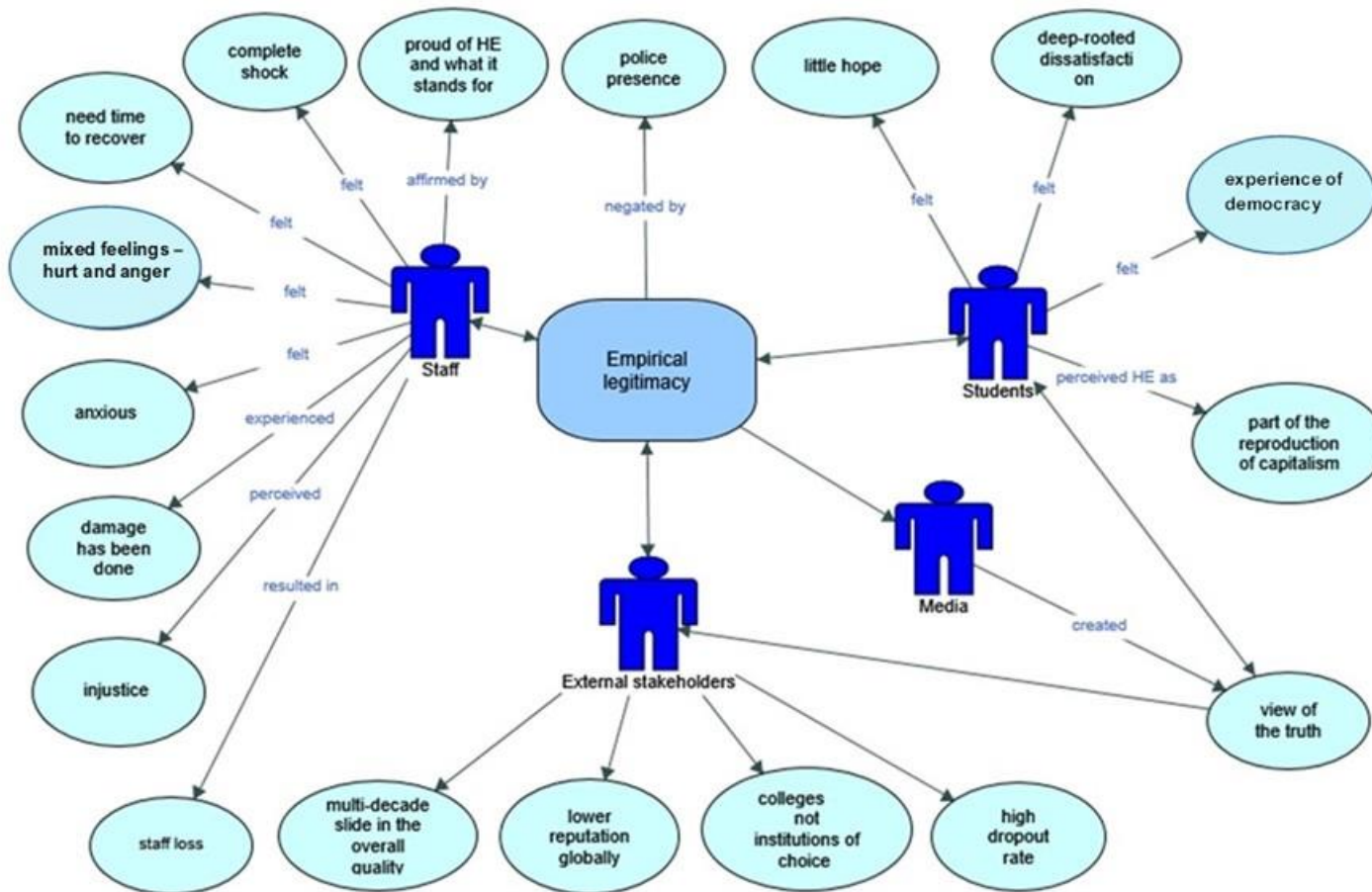Figure 3: Susceptible empirical legitimacy
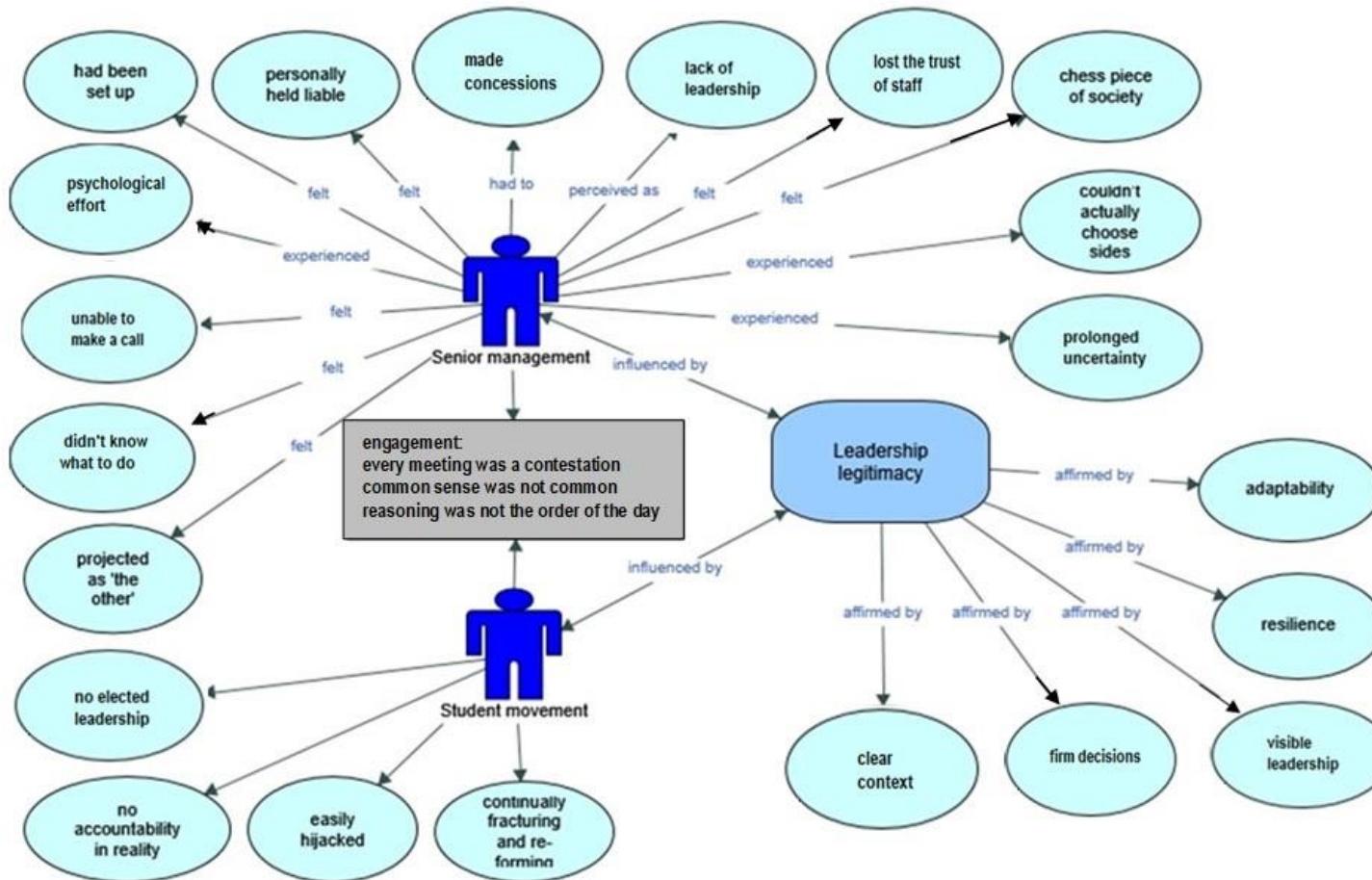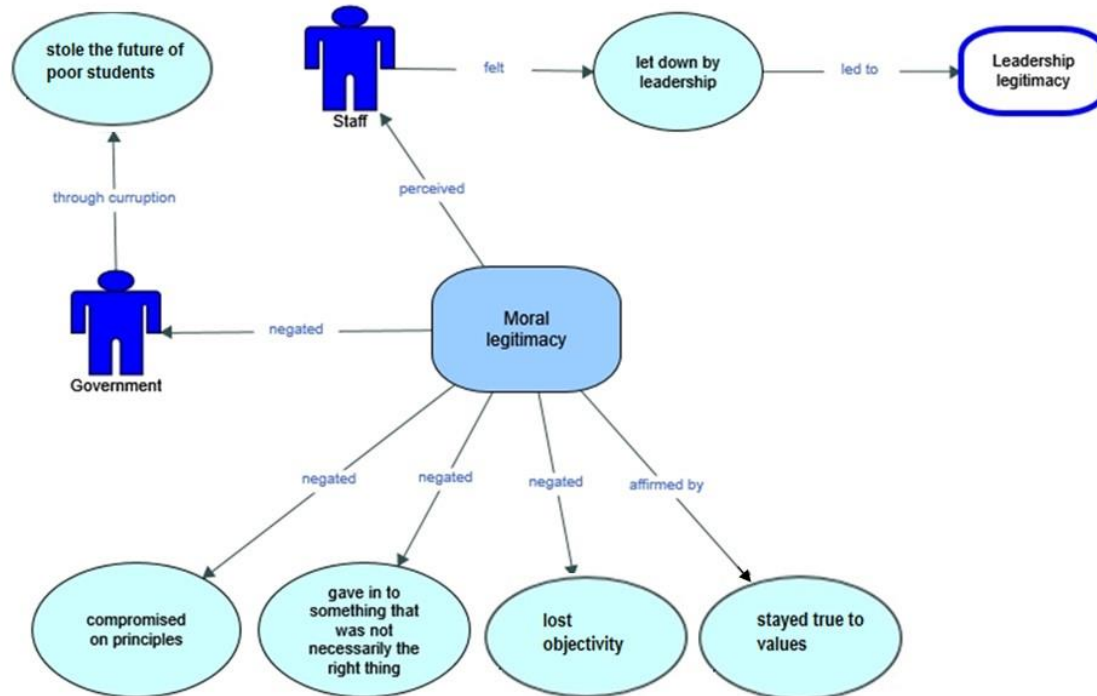
Figure 4: Wounded leadership legitimacy

Figure 5: Weakened moral legitimacy

Figure 6: Competing pragmatic legitimacy