

6. Institutions need justification

Institutions must persuade each generation to fulfill the necessary roles to maintain their existence. However, it's inevitable that children will question their purpose - "Why do we have to go to church?", "Why do I have to go to school?" To answer these inquiries effectively, parents can provide simple responses such as "Because I said so," or "That's just the way it is." Sometimes, imaginative reasons can also suffice, such as "The tooth fairy will be angry if you don't brush your teeth," or "Going to church makes God happy." However, as children grow older, these answers may no longer suffice and they will seek deeper understanding. It becomes increasingly difficult to provide adequate responses to their inquiries. In order to convince the next generation to maintain the important roles that institutions require for survival, better explanations and reasoning are necessary.

It's true that adults don't ask "why?" as frequently as children do. Once we are socialized into the fundamental institutions that shape our society, many of our questions have been answered or we have adopted a way of life that doesn't require further inquiry. We become accustomed to the daily routines and patterns of our lives, causing us to ask fewer questions. Instead, we tend to direct our curiosity towards novel experiences, whether they are trivial or significant. For example, we might ask questions when trying a new dish from a restaurant or making funeral arrangements for a loved one for the first time. However, in our day-to-day lives, we are presented with routine experiences that we have encountered numerous times before, such as driving to work, eating lunch, or brushing our teeth. We rarely question why we do these things or why they are done to us, as they have become a familiar part of our lives.

In essence, institutions require justifications in order to survive. If a new generation does not see the value in fulfilling the necessary roles, they will not participate. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann described the "four layers of legitimation" (1966), which determine an individual's trust and adherence to an institution. If an institution is seen as legitimate, individuals will trust and follow it. On the other hand, if legitimacy is questioned or the institution is perceived as illegitimate, individuals may avoid it or even act against it. Therefore, institutions must continuously justify themselves to maintain their legitimacy. The sophistication of these justifications increases as these layers of legitimation become deeper.

Layer One: Symbols and Sayings as Justification

This layer provides simple answers, referred to by Berger and Luckmann as pre-theoretical justifications. Examples of this type of justification include a parent telling their child "that's just the way it is" or "it will make God happy." This layer is most effective during the early stages of a child's primary socialization and includes moral maxims, sayings, songs, idioms, and basic symbols. For instance, in response to the question of why establishing a good sleep schedule is important, the justification might be "the early bird gets the worm" or "early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." To the question of what marriage is, the answer might involve pointing to symbols such as weddings or rings, or simply to examples of married couples.

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Layer Two: Basic Argumentation as Justification

In the second layer of legitimation, more complex answers are provided. Berger and Luckmann refer to this as the "incipient theoretical level." At this level, justifications go beyond simple symbols and sayings and delve into deeper explanations from various fields of study, such as theology, health, psychology, etc.

For example, when I was in a religious youth group as a teenager, I remember the youth minister trying to convince us to avoid premarital sex. Instead of simply stating that it would upset God, he used a combination of theological, health, and psychological arguments to make his case. He explained that having sex before marriage would result in the union of two souls, and that if this union was not with a lifelong spouse, it would cause the souls to tear apart. He also argued that premarital sex posed a risk of diseases and that the happiest and longest-lasting marriages were those where partners did not have prior sexual experiences.

While the arguments provided in this layer may not be highly sophisticated, they still hold persuasive power, especially to those at an early stage of development.

Layer of Legitimation Three: The Role of Experts and Expertise

The third layer of legitimation involves the use of expertise and specialized knowledge to support institutional claims. To advance and disseminate complex ideas, institutions require specialized personnel who are competent in their respective fields. Medical institutions, for example, require not only doctors but also research scientists with advanced degrees and training. Religious institutions require theologians and senior clergy to interpret their texts and train front-line ministers.

Level three legitimation is reached when an institution not only has specialized theoretical knowledge, but also has the personnel to advance and disseminate that knowledge. The more powerful the institution, the higher the bar is set for the training of its experts, creating a hierarchical structure of advanced and less advanced experts and trainees striving to reach the next level. This drive for advancement can also help to sustain the institution, as it shifts the focus from asking challenging questions to climbing the ladder. However, it can be challenging for these expert trainees to question the legitimacy of the institution once they have reached a certain point, as the same institution is often their source of income.

Layer of Legitimation Four: The Symbolic Universe as Justification

At the fourth and final layer of legitimation, institutions become an integral part of the symbolic universe. At this stage, the institution is widely recognized and highly visible in mainstream society, and people trust in the expertise of those who understand the institution, even if they themselves do not. Additionally, other highly legitimized institutions start to acknowledge and incorporate each other into their operations. For example, the institution of marriage is recognized by government, military, medical, and private for-profit organizations. The government recognizes it through the issuance of marriage certificates and changes in tax status, the military provides recognition and benefits to the widowed spouse, medical institutions allow a spouse to make decisions for their partner's health, and private companies offer joint credit accounts and sell wedding-related products. Institutions that have reached this highest level of legitimacy within a society create space for each other to integrate and reinforce each other's legitimacy.

Imagine each society as a rainforest, with the various cultural patterns represented by different trees striving to reach the light. The branches of the tallest trees interweave with each other, creating a united canopy over the forest. This is a great analogy for the concept of a symbolic universe in a society. The worldview that society provides is supported by a set of institutions that address the key challenges faced by the society. At the highest level, all fully legitimated institutions integrate with each other, serving as the pillars of society, and the worldview socialized by these institutions understands these institutions as reinforcing one another. At the lower levels of the forest floor, there are also other flora and fauna vying for legitimacy, but not all succeed in reaching higher levels. For every tree (i.e. cultural patterns of behavior) that reaches the top, many more remain in the shadows.

At the symbolic universe level of legitimation, institutions also communicate their meanings through symbolic shorthand. In the rainforest metaphor, this is represented by the dropping of seeds or fragments of culture. For instance, the institution of marriage is represented by symbols such as wedding rings, dresses, cakes, specialized words like "husband," "wife," "spouse," and "fiancé," and sometimes even changes in names. These symbols serve as an easily recognizable shorthand for individuals to understand the institution, even if they have limited knowledge of it. For a young person who is just learning about the institution of marriage, seeing wedding rings on someone's fingers may be enough justification to understand the meaning of the institution. They may not ask questions like "why rings?" or "why marriage?" if the initial explanation satisfies their curiosity.

When cultural institutions reach the highest level of legitimacy, they may seem permanent and unchanging, as if they are a natural part of the world. However, a closer examination of history and comparison across different societies and cultures reveals that these institutions can vary greatly in design and form. It is important to remember that these cultural institutions are human-made and subject to change over time and across different communities. For a great example of this with marriage, watch this brief TedEd video: [The history of marriage.](#)

As individuals, we are members of a society that is comprised of various institutions that assign us specific roles. These institutions first provide simple symbols and explanations to convince us of their legitimacy. As we mature and gain a deeper understanding, we encounter more sophisticated reasons, as well as experts who can provide knowledge and support. When institutions reach the highest level of legitimacy, they receive recognition from other top-level institutions and generate symbols and cultural fragments that reinforce their position in society. When people stop questioning these institutions and accept them as a natural part of life or as personal choices, the institutions become all the more firmly established and fortified for future generations.