

Structural Ritualization Theory & Research (SRT)

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J. David Knottnerus
Emeritus Regents Professor of Sociology
Department of Sociology
Oklahoma State University
david.knottnerus@okstate.edu

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The idea that rituals are crucial to human behavior is consistent with the arguments of different social scientists who have used this concept to analyze and examine society such as Durkheim, Goffman, Collins, Douglas, Rappaport, Kertzer, Myerhoff, Alexander, Warner, and Bellah. However, despite the work of scholars such as these the concept of ritual has been underutilized, if not often ignored, in sociology.

This is due to the conventional understanding of rituals in sociology. For instance, it is often assumed that: rituals are found only or far more often in premodern societies, not modern societies (which is due in part to implicit or explicit evolutionary assumptions which depict modern societies as increasingly rational); rituals are static, unchanging, and fixed in nature; rituals occur only or mainly in religious or sacred contexts; and rituals are of secondary importance and epiphenomenal in that they are the product of more important social processes, which implies they have little effect or significance for people and occurrences in society. Also, there is often a failure to open up to the full complexity of human behavior. And most sociologists, while paying attention to social organization, pay little attention to either culture or personality structure notwithstanding the contributions of those in the sociology of culture, sociology of emotions, and social psychology.

For these reasons rituals are often thought to have limited explanatory value and are often downplayed in social analysis. In other words, they remain in various ways invisible to and “under the radar” of many students of social life and modern society.

Structural ritualization theory (SRT), in contrast, focuses on the role rituals play in society (for a much broader discussion of the points dealt with in this handout see Knottnerus 2011 [paperback edition 2012]; see also Knottnerus 1997, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2014 a, 2014 b). It is grounded in the basic assumption that daily life is normally characterized by an array of social and personal rituals. Such everyday rituals, whether occurring in small groups or organizations can lead to consequences unanticipated by group members while both being fed by and feeding into larger societal levels of interaction. As such, this perspective is directed to rituals which occur in various social settings, e.g., face to face interaction, small groups, organizations, society as a whole, and globally.

Ritual as a Missing Link

SRT is based upon a very different set of assumptions. Essentially I assume that ritual provides a “missing link” in sociological thought. More precisely I suggest that:

- (1) Rituals are found in both premodern and modern societies.
- (2) Rituals occur in both secular and sacred contexts.
- (3) Rituals are dynamic in nature and subject to change.
- (4) Rituals can be of profound importance in social life.
- (5) Rituals have great explanatory value.
- (6) Rituals occur at and impact different levels of society ranging from face to face interaction and relationships, larger groups and organizations, society as a whole, and the world. Ritual operates at micro and more macro levels.
- (7) The concept of ritual can be linked to perspectives and traditions of research emphasizing other social dynamics and issues, i.e., approaches focusing on ritual should be capable of forming linkages or conceptual bridges with other perspectives (what is often referred to as theory integration).
- (8) Ritual is a social phenomenon that can be investigated with very different methods and types of evidence.
- (9) Rituals can have consequences for social organization, culture, and identity.
- (10) The idea of ritual can provide a common vocabulary and framework to study developments occurring in different groups. In other words it can have great analytical value helping us to explain the workings of society.
- (11) Ritual is a concept that has potential relevance for the multifaceted nature of social life. In other words, ritual can be utilized in a wide range of studies given the complexity of human behavior.

SRT

SRT directly addresses these concerns because it, among other things, uses an analytical framework employing the idea of ritual to explain various social experiences. It provides abstract formulations which address basic social processes involving ritual dynamics in many empirical settings, e.g., small groups, schools, corporations, ethnic communities in urban areas or small towns, slave societies, health care facilities, sporting events, youth groups, political or religious groups, and social movements.

It examines some of the ways social dynamics operating at one level of analysis influence group processes occurring at other levels. This approach assumes ritual dynamics occur at different - micro to macro - levels of analysis and that ritual processes operating in social environments can influence other social units. For instance, face to face interaction in small groups can be influenced by the organization the group is located in, or even the larger community. A six level model of the social order facilitates the study of ritual dynamics at various levels of analysis. The theory argues that ritual dynamics in a group can spread to and influence ritual enactments in other groups and social settings both across levels – interlevel transmission – and within each level – intralevel transmission.

SRT creates different kinds of linkages with other perspectives and areas of study focused on various topics. For example, this approach complements and/or has developed links or bridges with expectation states theory, the web/part-whole approach (Bernard Phillips, Tom Scheff), macro social change/Dark Age research, in addition to studies of organizational deviance, emotions, ethnic communities and identity, disasters, social power, movements, and social inequality.

It uses multimethod research strategies. Research employs multiple methodologies involving both quantitative and qualitative types of evidence, e.g., historical-comparative analyses, experimental research, case studies (contemporary and historical), interviews, field research/ethnographies, content analysis of primary sources, reviews and analyses of secondary sources, surveys, focus groups, and interpretations of literary sources & accounts including novels, autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, travelogues, and diaries. Such an approach implies a respect for the strengths of different methods and recognition of how diverse research strategies can complement each other and enrich our investigations of social reality. In other words, when similar findings are obtained employing dissimilar methods focused on social phenomena occurring in different settings and historical periods we increase our confidence in the value of the explanatory formulations.

SRT emphasizes the relevance of rituals for *social organization* (or *social structure*). It stresses how ritualization occurs and leads to the formation, reproduction, and alteration of social structures. At the same time, it is directly relevant for understanding *culture* due to the central focus on rituals and symbolic meanings expressed through them (concepts traditionally recognized as important by culture scholars) and the role rituals play in giving meaning, direction, and focus to social life and group interaction. Furthermore, this approach has relevance for *individual and collective identities* because persons develop rituals (oftentimes derived from or influenced by groups), which have profound consequences for people's cognitions, feelings, and overall character. While research in this area is in a preliminary stage, evidence from studies of concentration camp internment shows, for instance, how important personal and group rituals can be for enabling people to cope with highly disruptive experiences and maintaining a stable identity (or self concept). Such an issue is largely a void in sociological research.

Finally, this approach provides a missing link in sociology because, given the enormous complexity of human behavior and our partial success in addressing that complexity with our specialized approach to research in sociology and other social/behavioral sciences, it is a concept that can be used to examine many aspects of social reality. As previously noted, SRT provides abstract formulations and an analytical framework that can be applied to many different phenomena in a wide range of studies. Indeed, while a number of topics have already been investigated, the concept of ritual could be used in a much wider range of studies. Furthermore, given the complexity of human behavior and the limitations of specialized research, ritual may be a useful additional component in studies of many other research issues.

Early SRT Research

The following provides a very brief description of the first research employing SRT. An outline is then presented of much of the research that has been conducted or is being carried out using the theory.

In the original formulation of the theory (1997) I emphasized how rituals rest upon cognitive schemas and express symbolic meanings or themes. Rituals are referred to as “ritualized symbolic practices.” I formally defined ritualization and presented a set of factors that influence the importance of rituals in a social setting and which explain how social action and social structure are reproduced and transformed.

The formulation emphasizes the importance of embedded groups or groups that are nested within a more encompassing collectivity, e.g., an informal youth group in a school, a slave society within a plantation, or a problem-solving group within a formal organization such as a corporation or government office. The theory focuses on the ritualized actions performed in a wider social environment that acquire significance for actors and then become part of individual’s cognitive scripts for their immediate world. In this way, ritualized practices develop in ways that may confirm the patterns of behavior in the wider social environment, i.e., are reproduced.

Counter to what one might intuitively expect, research findings show that reproduction occurs in embedded groups even when no incentives exist for doing so, actors in such groups are briefly exposed to ritualized actions in the wider environment, only some members of the embedded group are exposed to those ritualized activities, it does not serve the interests of group members, and/or group members verbally express their opposition to the wider social milieu. These findings have been obtained in investigations of a variety of settings and historical periods including youth groups in 19th century French schools, experimental groups, slave societies in plantations, and youth trained in the ancient Spartan social system.

Extensions of SRT Research

Several lines of theory development are currently under way each of which builds upon and involves an extension of the original formulation dealing with structural

reproduction. And a number of studies have been or are currently being carried out providing tests, exemplifications, and applications of the original formulation and these extensions. All of this work is committed to the development of abstract concepts at varying levels of abstraction, grounding these concepts in empirical evidence, theory integration, and using this knowledge to mitigate social problems.

A large amount of this work is also collaborative in nature involving different researchers.

As outlined below much of this research focuses on 1 – 8. This research involves a number of studies, which attempt to examine different aspects of social behavior. Notwithstanding what has been done the potential exists for much more research that would advance these lines of investigation and expand upon the range of topics deserving of study. And the concept of ritual, these investigations, and additional issues under consideration can be fruitful for studies being conducted by others whose primary focus is on different research problems.

1. Disruptions and deritualization: Breakdowns of social and personal rituals, their consequences, and the ways people may cope with such experiences by reconstituting old or new ritualized practices.

Internment in concentrations camps (Knottnerus 2002; Van de Poel-Knottnerus and Knottnerus 2011); displacement of youth during China's Cultural Revolution (Wu and Knottnerus 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008); disasters (Thornburg, Knottnerus, and Webb 2007, 2008; Bhandari, Okada, and Knottnerus 2011; dark ages/periods of ecological degradation (Sarabia and Knottnerus 2009); laboratory experiment (Sell, Knottnerus, and Adcock-Adzill 2013); discussion and review of research (Knottnerus 2005); expeditions (Knottnerus Book in Progress. Routledge [Under Contract]; Knottnerus and Johnson In Progress); Khmer Rouge, ritual and control (Delano and Knottnerus Under Review); Disasters and ritual dynamics (Johnson, Knottnerus, and Gill In Progress).

2. The role of emotions in rituals and collective ritual events.

A theory of emotional intensity, group commitment, and solidarity in collective events (Knottnerus 2010); collective emotions, religion, and ritual (Knottnerus 2014 b); collective pride, emotions, and ritual (Knottnerus 2014 a); music cultures and ritual (Meij, Probstfield, Simpson, and Knottnerus 2013);

3. Ritual, identity construction, and the transformation of character, identity, and group membership.

Multi-ritual identity and first generation Asian Indian Americans (Sen and Knottnerus 2016); ethnic identity and biritual character among Chinese

Americans (Guan and Knottnerus 1999, 2002); the maintenance of traditional female identity in Malawi (Minton and Knottnerus 2008); transformative rituals and identity (Knottnerus In Progress).

4. The enactment (i.e., activation and mobilization) or failure to enact ritualized practices in organizations, institutions, communities, and individuals.

Ritualized maltreatment/neglect in nursing homes (Ulsperger and Knottnerus 2007, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2011, 2013, Under Review); ritualized deviance in the Enron corporation (Knottnerus, Ulsperger, Cummins, and Osteen 2006; Ulsperger and Knottnerus 2006, 2008a, 2010); model of Drug/DUI Courts (Liang, Knottnerus, and Long 2016); mass homicide (Ulsperger, Knottnerus, and Ulsperger 2017).

5. Reproduction of ritualized symbolic practices and social structure among groups.

Male and female youth societies in 19th century French elite educational institutions (Knottnerus and Van de Poel-Knottnerus 1999; Van de Poel-Knottnerus and Knottnerus 2002); experimental task groups (Sell, Knottnerus, Ellison, and Mundt 2000); slave societies in American slave plantations (Knottnerus 1999; Knottnerus, Monk, and Jones 1999); the cultivation of extreme militaristic behaviors and beliefs among youth in ancient Sparta (Knottnerus and Berry 2002).

6. Strategic ritualization (ritual legitimators, sponsors, entrepreneurs, and enforcers) and the role of power.

Strategic uses of ritual by individuals and groups in Italian American ethnic communities (Knottnerus and LoConto 2003); ritual enforcement and power in Nazi Germany, the Orange Order, and Pow Wows (Knottnerus, Van Delinder, and Edwards 2011); the Orange Order and parading (Edwards and Knottnerus 2007, 2010); Chinatown/community protest movement (Guan and Knottnerus 2006); Notting Hill, London Carnival (Edwards and Knottnerus 2011, In Progress a, b); Khmer Rouge, ritual and control (Delano and Knottnerus Under Review).

7. Ritual dynamics involving social inequality, distinction, exclusion, and persecution.

Royal women in ancient patriarchal India (Mitra and Knottnerus 2004); traditional ritualized behaviors of women volunteers in NGOs addressing women's rights in India (Mitra and Knottnerus 2008); golf, civility, class, and exclusion in America (Varner and Knottnerus 2002, 2010); gender

inequality in Malawi (Minton and Knottnerus 2008); persecution and ritual Book (Knottnerus).

8. Applied research, social policy, and personal/social change.

Alteration of ritualized practices in nursing homes (see Ulsperger and Knottnerus publications including Ulsperger, Knottnerus, and Ulsperger 2014); facilitating ethnic entrepreneurship among immigrants in Canadian society (Lin, Guan, and Knottnerus 2011); implications of ritual dynamics for individual and social behavior (Knottnerus 2011); mass homicide (Ulsperger, Knottnerus, and Ulsperger 2017).

These lines of research are organized in terms of their analytical focus. For example, disruption/deritualization studies concentrate on the basic assumption that rituals are crucial to social life while emphasizing the symbolic dimension of ritual practices. Work on emotions and identity direct attention to other key components of rituals in addition to their symbolic content. The analysis of ritual enactments in organizations, institutions, and communities, structural reproduction, and structural transformation directs attention to the impact of rituals on social arrangements and group dynamics (and vice versa). Research dealing with power and strategic ritualization, social inequality, and moral purity further broadens the analysis of rituals and examines the ways they may affect social conditions and developments within society. The last line of investigation focuses on applications, policy implications, and interventions involving ritual dynamics.

Special Research Topics

Various special research topics are currently under study or consideration. Particular issues include:

- * Persecution, oppression, and exclusion: the moral, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of ritual and the expression of moral purity and impurity, i.e., *Persecution and Ritual Book*, Knottnerus, Routledge, In Progress/Forthcoming, 2020.
- * Expeditions, crews, and rituals - the role of ritual in isolated, high stress, hazardous ventures, i.e., *Expedition and Ritual Book*, Knottnerus, Routledge, In Progress/Forthcoming, 2017/2018.
- * Collective emotions.
- * Collective pride.
- * The ritual dynamics of the Notting Hill festival.

- * Ritual identity of first generation Asian Indian Americans.
- * Transformative rituals and identity.
- * Disasters and ritual dynamics.
- * The Orange Order in the 21st century: rituals of power, gender, and conflict.
- * Ritual dynamics of extremist groups – Khmer Rouge, Nazi party, etc.

For references to certain of these projects see the SRT References handout including the “Unpublished Papers and Books/Papers in Progress” section.

Conclusion

This research rests upon the assumption that ritualization is a key dimension of social behavior as are other aspects of social action such as rationality emphasized by social exchange theory and rational choice theory, symbolic interpretation by symbolic interaction, or emotions within the sociology of emotions. Put somewhat differently, *ritual is like an engine that drives much social life*, sometimes quite intensely.

All of this work centers on three interrelated goals: (a) the development of theoretical ideas explaining ritual dynamics; (b) empirical research which substantiates and illustrates these abstract concepts; and (c) using this knowledge to alleviate social problems, social inequality, and dehumanizing social conditions.

In regard to the latter [which is directly related to number 8, “Applied research”) future theory/research will give attention to the ways ritual practices can play a fundamental role in the creation and perpetuation of undesirable behaviors and social arrangements and how an understanding of ritual dynamics can provide the basis for reducing, if not eliminating, these conditions.

For instance, recent research focuses on organizational deviance and how bureaucratic structures facilitate certain kinds of ritualized behaviors in the daily lives of people who work in organizations, which provide care for the elderly. We (see Ulsperger and Knottnerus publications) argue that bureaucratic work rituals are an important part of social life for nursing home employees and these behaviors can lead to unanticipated, negative consequences involving neglect. This research indicates that certain ritualized symbolic practices that express bureaucratic themes dealing with staff separation, rules, documentation, and efficiency influence the behavior of employees and contribute to the unintended maltreatment of residents involving, for instance, physical neglect, medical dereliction, personal negligence, and bodily harm in both for-profit and nonprofit nursing homes in the U.S. Various policy recommendations and strategies have been presented – i.e., the CARE model - which address these conditions and are aimed at cultivating alternative non-bureaucratic rituals in such settings.

At the same time this research reveals the complexity of settings such as nursing homes and the ways bureaucracy, organizational/institutional dynamics, and social behavior can intersect resulting in undesirable consequences. Applications require dealing with the complexity of social life, a condition that is not necessarily advanced, if not limited, by sociological specialization. By employing SRT with its focus on ritual in everyday life in social environments such as these we gain a fuller understanding of one type of social problem.

Other examples of social problems and environments which could be examined using the concept of ritual include the adverse effect of bureaucratic rituals in different kinds of educational and academic settings and health care facilities (and programmatic efforts aimed at changing them), the functioning of Drug/DUI courts, the misuse of power and rituals including the manipulation of rituals by totalitarian and other states in the modern world, and ritual processes contributing to social inequality including gender, racial, or class inequalities. Another concern focuses on how rituals could be developed that help people cope with disruptions and deritualization involving for instance disasters and long term, stressful endeavors characterized by extreme isolation such as expeditions, space missions, or placement in refugee camps.

While most theory/research to date is scholarly in nature some work is directed to both scholarly/academic audiences and a more general readership, e.g., the recent book on nursing homes, abuse, and bureaucratic rituals and the book under contract on expeditions, crews, and rituals.

References to papers/books and copies of papers are available from the author upon request at david.knottnerus@okstate.edu

Some papers are also available at several of the following websites:

Academia.edu

LinkedIn.com

ResearchGate.net

Faculty link to Dr. David Knottnerus at: Oklahoma State University - College of Arts & Sciences - Department of Sociology webpage - Faculty/Staff Directory - Emeriti Faculty.