

Structural Ritualization Theory & Research (SRT)

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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, Leach, Kertzer, Bell, Alexander, Warner, Shils, 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. Consistent with these assumptions we find that many sociologists, while paying attention to social organization, pay relatively less attention to either culture and identity (or personality) structures notwithstanding the contributions of those in social psychology, sociology of emotions, and the sociology (and anthropology) of culture.

For these reasons rituals are often thought to have limited explanatory value and are often downplayed in social analysis. 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 broader discussion of some of the points dealt with in this handout see Knottnerus 2011 [paperback edition 2012]; and Knottnerus 1997, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2014 a, 2014 b). It is grounded in the basic supposition that daily life is normally characterized by an array of social and personal rituals. Such everyday, often taken for granted, rituals 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, and society as a whole.

Ritual as a Missing Link

SRT is based upon a number of presuppositions. Because of these assumptions I argue that ritual provides a “missing link” in sociological thought. More precisely:

- (1) Rituals are found in both premodern and modern societies.
- (2) Rituals occur in both secular and religious or more broadly 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 micro and macro levels of society ranging from face-to-face interaction and relationships, larger groups and organizations, societies as a whole, and globally.
- (7) The concept of ritual can be linked to perspectives emphasizing other social dynamics and issues, i.e., approaches focusing on ritual should be capable of forming linkages or conceptual bridges with other perspectives (theory integration).
- (8) Ritual is a social phenomenon that can be investigated with very different methods and types of evidence, e.g., qualitative and quantitative research strategies.
- (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. It has 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. Consequently, 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 the idea of ritual to explain various social occurrences. It provides abstract formulations which focus on ritual dynamics taking place 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, religious groups, social movements, and political systems.

At the same time this perspective is concerned with the ways social dynamics operating at one level of analysis influence group processes occurring at other levels. The approach assumes ritual dynamics occur at 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 wider 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 (Knottnerus 2011).

SRT creates different kinds of linkages with other approaches and areas of study focused on different topics. For example, SRT 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 evidence and historical-comparative analyses, experimental research, case studies, surveys, interviews, field research/ethnographies, content analysis of primary sources, reviews and analyses of secondary sources, focus groups, and interpretations of literary sources & accounts including novels, autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, travelogues, and diaries. Such an approach respects the strengths of different methods and recognizes how diverse research strategies can complement each other and enrich our investigations of social reality. For instance when similar findings are obtained employing different 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 structure* (or *social organization*). It stresses how ritualization occurs and leads to the formation, reproduction, and alteration of social structures. At the same time, it is 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 interaction. Furthermore, this approach has relevance for *individual and collective identities* because rituals can have profound consequences for people's cognitions, feelings, and overall character. In that regard evidence from studies of concentration camp internment shows 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).

Finally, given the 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, ritual is a concept that can be used to examine many aspects of social reality. SRT provides abstract formulations that can be applied to many different phenomena in a wide range of investigations.

Early SRT Research

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

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

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 individuals and then become part of people'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, individuals 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 American slave plantations, and youth trained in ancient Spartan society.

Extensions of SRT Research

Several lines of theory development are under way each of which builds upon and involves an extension of the just described original formulation or parts of that argument. And a number of studies have been or are currently being carried out providing tests, exemplifications, and applications of the newer topics and ideas. All of this work is committed to the development of abstract concepts, grounding these concepts in empirical evidence, and using this knowledge to mitigate social problems. A large amount of this research is also collaborative in nature.

Much of this work focuses on eight topics as outlined below. Notwithstanding what has been done the potential exists for more research that would advance these lines of investigation and expand upon the range of topics deserving of attention.

1. Disruptions, deritualization, and re-ritualization: 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); Khmer Rouge, ritual and control (Delano and Knottnerus 2018); disasters and ritual dynamics (Johnson, Knottnerus, and Gill In Progress); polar expeditions, crews, and rituals (Knottnerus Forthcoming Routledge).

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); collective pride, emotions, and ritual (Knottnerus 2014); music cultures and ritual (Meij, Probstfield, Simpson, and Knottnerus 2013).

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

Multi-ritual identity and first generation Asian Indian Americans (Sen and Knottnerus 2016); gender identity and Asian Indian Americans (Sen and Knottnerus In Progress); 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 Unpublished Abridged Manuscript).

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, Unpublished Manuscript for Ulsperger and Knottnerus Criminology & SRT Book In Progress); ritualized deviance in the Enron corporation (Knottnerus, Ulsperger, Cummins, and Osteen 2006; Enron, deviance, and rituals

Ulsperger and Knottnerus 2006, 2008a, 2010, Forthcoming); 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, i.e., previously described Early SRT Research.

Male and female youth societies in 19th century French elite male and female 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); Khmer Rouge, ritual and control (Delano and Knottnerus 2018).

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

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).

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. Disruption, deritualization, and re-ritualization studies concentrate on the basic assumption that rituals are crucial to social life. 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, and structural reproduction directs attention to the impact of rituals on social arrangements and group dynamics (and vice versa). Research dealing with power, strategic ritualization, and social inequality further broadens the analysis of rituals and examines the ways they may affect social conditions and structure within society. The last line of investigation focuses on applications and policy implications.

Special Research Topics

Various special research projects and topics are currently in progress or under investigation. Particular issues include:

- * The impact of rituals on groups in isolated, high stress missions, i.e., *Polar Expeditions: Rituals, Crews, and Hazardous Ventures*, Knottnerus, Routledge Forthcoming (2021).
- * Persecution and ritual in social life: the moral, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of ritual and vilification, i.e., *Persecution, Ritual, and Moral (Im)Purity*, Knottnerus, Routledge, In Progress.
- * Disasters and rituals: two communities coping with the impact of tornadoes, Johnson, Knottnerus, and Gill, In Progress.
- * *Reviving Sociological Criminology: An Introduction to the Structural Ritualization of Crime*, Ulsperger and Knottnerus, In Progress.
- * "Backward Dresses and Covered Up Messes: How Bureaucratic Rituals Worsen Physical Abuse and Neglect by Employees in Nursing Homes," Ulsperger, Knottnerus, and Ulsperger, Unpublished Manuscript, for Criminology and Ritual book, Ulsperger and Knottnerus, In Progress.
- * The ritual dynamics of the Notting Hill festival, Edwards and Knottnerus, In Progress.
- * Gender and ritual identity among Asian Indian immigrants, Sen and Knottnerus, In Progress.
- * "Organizations and Rituals of Ethnic Significance in an Asian-Indian Ethnic Community," Dasari and Knottnerus, Unpublished Paper.
- * Transformative rituals and identity, Knottnerus, Unpublished Abridged Manuscript.

* Collective emotions.

* Collective pride.

For references to some of these projects see the [SRT References](#) [handout](#).

Conclusion

This research rests on the assumption that ritual 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.

As previously noted 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 concepts; and (c) using this knowledge to alleviate social problems, inequality, and dehumanizing 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 harmful behaviors and social arrangements and how an understanding of ritual dynamics can provide the basis for reducing, if not eliminating, these circumstances.

For example, one line of 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 outcomes 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 and policy require dealing with the complexity of social life. By employing SRT with its focus on ritual in everyday life in social environs such as these we gain a fuller understanding of one type of social problem.

Other examples of social situations and problems that have or could be examined using the concept of ritual involve the functioning of Drug/DUI courts, the misuse of power and ritualized practices including the manipulation of rituals by political leaders and groups, and ritual processes contributing to gender, racial, or class inequalities.

Another concern focuses on how rituals might be developed that help people cope with disruptions and deritualization involving disasters or long term, stressful endeavors characterized by extreme isolation such as polar expeditions, space missions, and placement in refugee camps.

Lastly the study of ritual dynamics could contribute to our understanding of how grief develops following catastrophic events and how it may be ameliorated (see recent work by Jason S. Ulsperger).

Works by the author and others dealing with SRT are available at the following websites:

Academia.edu

ResearchGate.net

LinkedIn.com

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

Copies of papers and references to papers and books - **SRT References handout** - are also available from the author at david.knottnerus@okstate.edu