

# **Ritual Dynamics, Theory, and Research: Summary & Update**

## **Structural Ritualization Theory (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 and related disciplines.

This is due to the conventional understanding of rituals in sociology and the social/behavioral sciences in general. For instance, it is often assumed that rituals are found only or far more often in premodern rather than modern societies, which is due in part to implicit or explicit evolutionary assumptions, which depict modern societies as increasingly rational. Rituals are also presumed to be static, unchanging, and fixed in nature. Furthermore rituals are often thought to occur only or mainly in religious or sacred contexts. And rituals are believed to be 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 and others, while paying attention to social organization, pay relatively less attention to culture and/or 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 discussion of some of the issues addressed by this perspective see Knottnerus 1997, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2014 a, 2014 b, 2016 [2011], 2022 a, 2022 b, 2023 [Now Available]). SRT is grounded on 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 theory and research are directed to rituals, which occur in various social settings, e.g., face-to-face interaction, small groups, formal organizations, entire societies, and globally.

### **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 (Knottnerus 2016 [2011]). More precisely:

(1) Rituals are found in both premodern and modern societies. Stated somewhat differently rituals are found all over the world and throughout history. They occur in all societies in one form or another.

(2) 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. Furthermore the relations between ritual activities within any particular level and between levels can take many different forms and exhibit various degrees of complexity.

(3) Rituals occur in both secular and religious or more broadly speaking sacred contexts. They are not restricted to only religious and sacred milieus. Rather rituals can play a central role in our ordinary, everyday lives and many collective events in the secular realm.

(4) Rituals are dynamic and subject to change. They are not always static, fixed, or permanent in nature. While rituals can be enduring they may also be altered for various reasons, e.g., large-scale social historical developments, group dynamics and pressures, individuals who for different reasons may modify or create new types of rituals (what could be termed a "ritual innovator"), or individuals and groups adapting to situational changes and exigencies.

(5) Rituals can have consequences for social organization (i.e., social structure), culture, and identity. These are key dimensions of human and social reality that are of interest to many. Rituals can significantly influence all of these factors.

(6) Ritual is a social phenomenon that can be investigated with very different methods and types of evidence, e.g., qualitative and quantitative techniques. Evidence collected by these research strategies can complement, supplement, and validate the findings of different methodologies.

(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 (what is sometimes referred to as theory integration).

(8) The idea of ritual can provide a common vocabulary and framework to study developments occurring in various groups and its individual members. It has analytical value helping us to explain the workings of society.

(9) Ritual is a concept that has potential relevance for the multifaceted nature of social life. Consequently, it can be utilized in a wide range of studies given the complexity of human behavior. In other words ritual has implications for various dimensions of human reality ranging from personal experiences and individual conduct to diverse kinds of social formations, large and small.

(10) Rituals can be of profound importance in social life. They are real and consequential for humans, albeit in numerous and varied ways. In other words rituals are not necessarily secondary to other forces, irrelevant, superficial, and so on. They may exhibit an autonomous quality, a power within and of themselves, capable of producing significant effects.

(11) Rituals have great explanatory value. Simply stated they can help us understand different aspects of social behavior in a multitude of situations. They enable us to understand and explain important parts of human behavior and social dynamics.

### **SRT**

SRT directly addresses these issues and concerns because it, among other things, uses the idea of ritual to explain different social developments. It provides formulations which focus on ritual dynamics taking place in many settings throughout the world and in different historical periods, e.g., small groups including experimental task groups, corporations such as Exxon, ethnic communities in urban areas or small towns, slave societies in the ante-bellum south, health care facilities, especially nursing homes, the emergence of golf in the United States, youth groups in 19th century French elite schools, the socialization of youth in ancient Sparta, political systems ranging from the Nazi party to the Khmer Rouge, and crews in polar expeditions and other hazardous ventures. For all these reasons ritual and perspectives using this concept provide a missing link in sociological analysis and more generally the social/behavioral sciences.

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 2016 [2011]).

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

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 behaviors and 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 (Knottnerus 2002; Van de Poel-Knottnerus and Knottnerus (2016 [2011])).

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 short description of the first research employing SRT. A summary is then presented of the subsequent studies that have been or are 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 19<sup>th</sup> century French schools, experimental groups, slave societies in American slave plantations, and youth trained in ancient Spartan society.

### **Extensions of SRT Research**

Different lines of theory and research are under way each of which builds upon and involves an extension of the just described original formulation. And several studies have been or are currently being carried out providing tests, exemplifications, and applications of these 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 reritualization (DDR): Breakdowns of social and personal rituals, their consequences, and the ways people may cope with such experiences by reconstituting old or new ritualized practices. Examples of DDT could range from disasters or placement in concentration camps and other restrictive settings such as refugee camps, prisons, or nursing homes to engaging in hazardous ventures such as polar expeditions.

Internment in concentrations camps (Knottnerus 2002; Van de Poel-Knottnerus and Knottnerus 2010); 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); polar expeditions, crews, and rituals (Knottnerus 2023 [Now Available]); SRT, DDR, and technological disasters (Johnson, Knottnerus, and Gill Forthcoming); technological disasters, rituals, and grief (Ulsperger and Knottnerus Forthcoming).

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

A theory of emotional intensity, group commitment, and solidarity in collective events (Knottnerus 2010a); 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 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, 2021, 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); 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 in **Early SRT Research**.

Male and female youth societies in 19<sup>th</sup> 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 2010); 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 persecution, 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), and persecution (Knottnerus In Progress).

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 2016 [2011]); mass homicide (Ulsperger, Knottnerus, and Ulsperger 2017).

These lines of research are organized in terms of their analytical focus. Disruption, deritualization, and reritualization (DDR) studies rest upon the basic assumption that rituals are crucial to social life and disruption and deritualization can create symbolic (or cognitive) ambiguity, a loss of stability, insecurity, emotional stress, and trauma, which can be countered and coped with through reritualization.

Work on emotions and identity direct attention to other key aspects 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 structures within society. The last line of investigation focuses on applications and policy implications.

### **Recent Research Topics and Publications**

Various research projects and topics are currently forthcoming, in progress, or under examination. Topics include:

- \* The impact of rituals on groups in hazardous, high stress missions, i.e., *Polar Expeditions: Discovering Rituals of Success within Hazardous Endeavors*. J. David Knottnerus. Routledge. 2023 (Now Available).

For more details about this study such as the table of contents, reviews, and ordering information see the publisher's link for the book:

<https://routledge.pub/Polar-Expeditions>

- \* Disruption, deritualization, and reritualization (DDR): symbolic and emotional/traumatic aspects of these experiences and constructive or destructive responses to them.

- \* Technological disasters and grief, Jason S. Ulsperger and J. David Knottnerus, for *Encyclopedia of Technological Hazards and Disasters in the Social Sciences*. Forthcoming.

- \* SRT and DDR: applications for technological disaster research, Kevin J. Johnson, J. David Knottnerus, and Duane A. Gill, for *Encyclopedia of Technological Hazards and Disasters in the Social Sciences*. Forthcoming.

- \* Persecution and ritual in social life: the moral, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of ritual and maltreatment, i.e., *Persecution, Ritual, and Groups: Principles and Cases*, J. David Knottnerus, Routledge, In Progress.



\* *Reviving Sociological Criminology: An Introduction to the Structural Ritualization of Crime*, Jason S. Ulsperger and J. David Knottnerus, In Progress.

\* "Backward Dresses and Covered Up Messes: How Bureaucratic Rituals Worsen Physical Abuse and Neglect by Employees in Nursing Homes," Jason S. Ulsperger, J. David Knottnerus, and Kristen Ulsperger, Unpublished Manuscript, for Criminology and Ritual book, Jason S. Ulsperger and J. David Knottnerus, In Progress.

\*Ritual and identity among Asian Indian immigrants, Basudhara Sen and J. David Knottnerus, In Progress.

\* Collective emotions and/or collective pride.

\* Transformative rituals and identity, J. David Knottnerus, Unpublished Abridged Manuscript.

## **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 instance, 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 these studies reveal 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, ritual processes contributing to gender, racial, or class inequalities, and the ways ritual can foster persecution.

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

In that regard the study of ritual dynamics could contribute to our understanding of how trauma and/or grief develops following catastrophic events and how it may be ameliorated (see work by Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, Jason S. Ulsperger).

**Works by the author and others dealing with Ritual Dynamics and 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 updated references to papers, books, and projects are available upon request from me at [david.knottnerus@okstate.edu](mailto:david.knottnerus@okstate.edu)

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