

S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony
Lecture 1: Defining Ritual 1

* Until recently, mentioning “ritual” to a sociologist would garner little reply, or claims it was for anthropology or religious studies to sort out

* Upon more prodding, three responses might come up:

- (1) “Ritualism” - a form of deviant adaptation (Merton);
- (2) Rituals of subordination and domination (Anarchist/ Feminist literature/ Garfinkel);
- (3) “Interaction ritual chains” (Collins).

* None properly address the question: what is ritual?

* Rothernbuhler attempts to sort this out:

- distinguishes rituals as events (nouns) and the ceremonial aspects of everyday activities (adjective). Broadens scope of term.
- emphasizes communicative aspects
- focuses on formal properties of ritual as distinguishing aspect

Prior Definitions: Factors

(1) Action: Ritual involves action, not just thought:

- Relationship between ritual, myth and belief: separate or fused?
- Relative fluidity of belief vs. ritual forms
- Ritual a form of action, not just a process of thinking

(2) Performance: Ritual is performed as “an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way, and put on display for an audience”

- Ritual follows pre-existing conceptions, formal or informal
- It is always performed for someone
- Competence is an issue

(3) Conscious, Voluntary: There is usually something conscious and voluntary about ritual

- Degree of voluntariness vs. compulsion: costs?

(4) Non-instrumental or Irrational: Many have considered instrumentality, rationality and the means-ends relation in definitions of ritual

- Ritual has been called nonrational when not used for technical purposes, or when technical purposes are metaphysical (e.g. magic)
- Yet these can perform other social functions (e.g. reducing tension, producing consensus, inspiring action)

(5) Not Recreational: Rituals are not just recreational: something serious is usually going on (i.e. ritual has an earnest side, even when playful)

(6) Collective, Social: Ritual is not only done for individual purposes: there is always something socially structured (language, ethics, standards, etc.)

(7) Expressive of Social Relations: Ritual involves the use of modes of behavior that are expressive of social relationships.

- Symbols have among their referents the social relations, orders and institutions of society
- Some argue that by reading the key rituals of society, one can map its social structure
- Role of language: to speak is to embody language and meaning, placing both in a position in the social order and constituting it

(8) Subjunctive, Not Indicative: Rituals are often not about what

is, but what could be, might be, or should be

- Many make the mistake of expecting rituals to be indicative of what is.

- Rituals are also liminal: having a threshold or in-between space offering a time-out from ordinary social roles for reflection and creativity

(9) Effective Symbols: Beyond the ordinary ways language gets things done, the symbols of ritual are powerfully transformative (e.g. rites of passage, prayer).

10. Condensed Symbols: Socially important symbols have layers of meaning and multiple, simultaneous referents.

- Social analysis must unpack the layers of condensed meanings and follow the ramifications

- Condensed symbols are richly ambiguous, flexible, and adaptive to multiple social uses, working in different ways for different people simultaneously

- Problems arise when social change removes prior referents, though opinions vary on whether this is a sign of healthy growth or pathology

(11) Expressive or Aesthetic Behavior: Aesthetic Excess:

- Some claim the hallmark of ritual is aesthetic “excess” (depends on ability to distinguish practical and expressive acts).

Problematic

- Yet it is still important to consider the expressive as one of the key modes of ritual

(12) Customary Behavior: Rituals are forms of customary behavior. There is always something stereotyped, standardized, stylized, relatively invariant and formal

- “There are right ways to do things”

(13) Regularly Recurring Behavior:

- Ritual is regularly recurring in social groups
- Cycles are dictated by group norms

(14) Communication Without Information: Some claim that ritual communication works in strange ways from the perspective of information theory: they do not carry much information and have more to do with performing

(15) Regarding the Sacred:

- Many emphasize that ritual is action regarding the Sacred.
- The problem is that the Sacred varies by context and group
- The Sacred is whatever is treated as unquestionable, treated as more important than just an object of nature
- Ritual is an element of the serious life

A Communicative Principle & Final Definition:

Incorporating the elements in the above discussion, ritual, according to Rothenbuhler, is defined as:

“The voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life.”