

Ritual

Rituals are complex, socially scripted behaviors that facilitate collective, coordinated activity within groups. They are pervasive features of all human cultures, and include social behaviors that range from rites of passage, to elaborate ceremonies, to everyday greetings. The content of rituals vary considerably across the world, however, the structure and functions of ritual is universal. Rituals are (a) socially stipulated (*i.e.*, ritual is not the product of individual innovation), (b) causally opaque (*i.e.*, the actions have no direct physical connection to the intended outcome), (c) group conventions. The combination of social stipulation and causal opacity inhibits individual-level innovation and makes rituals ideal for faithful transmission from one generation to the next. In this entry, we describe the functions of rituals in social groups across the lifespan and the development of the psychological mechanisms that allow children to acquire rituals.

Ethnographic evidence collected by anthropologists has long suggested that rituals increase social group cooperation. Sociologists have also emphasized the role of ritual in strengthening social cohesion in religion. Yet, the cognitive and motivational mechanisms associated with ritual have only recently been examined from a psychological and developmental perspective. The cognitive and motivational capacities underlying engagement in ritual may be a behavioral trademark of humans.

The Functions of Ritual in Social Groups

Engaging in ritual helps groups function efficiently and encourages people to join together in cooperative and collective actions. There are a number of ways by which ritual contributes to group functioning. Participation in rituals marks group members in salient ways and hence provides a means of identifying in-group members (*i.e.*, members from a social group

to which an individual psychologically identifies as being a member). For example, wearing ash on the forehead on Ash Wednesday identifies group members as Catholic. Being able to accurately identify in- from out-group members is important to determine who is more likely to cooperate and less likely to take advantage of in-group members.

Rituals also often include actions that are costly in terms of time, energy expenditure, and psychological and physical harm. Thus they operate as reliable signals of commitment to the group. For example, when individuals go through painful initiation rituals that cause bodily harm, they are demonstrating that they are willing to endure, sometimes intense, physical pain to be a part of their group. Demonstrating commitment to in-group values through ritual participation increases trust between group members and facilitates cooperative endeavors. Social group living entails tension or conflict between individual and group interests. Rituals might be one way to reduce within group conflict and facilitate cooperation with social coalitions. Finally, rituals function as mechanisms of social group cohesion that bind group members together and foster the longevity of social groups.

Rituals are pervasive across human development and crucial to facilitating group cohesion. For example, rites of passage demonstrate group membership and group commitment of individuals. Initiation rites are commonly found across cultures as a coming of age (*i.e.*, entering an age grade) ritual to mark the time when adolescents enter adulthood (*e.g.*, bar or bat mitzvah). There are many group rituals surrounding uniting individuals (*e.g.*, weddings) or expanding families (*e.g.*, baby showers) that prepare individuals for additional roles, even in adulthood. Later in life, individuals may have key leadership roles in rituals that boost their reputation by demonstrating they are masters or experts in order to maintain their dignity and connection to society. There are even collective rituals in death (*e.g.*, mortuary rituals) that honor

high-esteeming community members. Rituals related to group conflict (*e.g.*, warfare rituals) help protect in-groups from threatening out-groups and maintain group cohesion.

Though there is convergent evidence across many disciplines of the functions of ritual in social groups, much of the research on ritual has been conducted with adults. Understanding the development of ritual behavior has important implications for understanding cultural learning in childhood as well as for informing our understanding of the evolution of social cognition in humans. Until recently, the process by which rituals are acquired has not been studied developmentally. In the next section, we will discuss the development of ritual cognition in childhood.

The Development of Ritual Cognition

Social group cognition is developmentally privileged, meaning that young children easily reason about social behavior and are motivated to engage in behaviors aimed at affiliation with group members. Young children view social categories as having a stable, unchanging, psychological essence. The tendency to use social categories is so prevalent amongst both adults and children that putting individuals into arbitrary groups creates in-group biases (*i.e.*, the tendency for individuals to give preference to others they perceive as members of their own social group). Young children are motivated to engage in behaviors marked as ritual as a means of affiliation with others. The development of ritualistic behavior has important implications for understanding the evolution of social cognition in humans. To become mature group members and coordinate behavior for cooperative efforts, children must learn and adhere to the norms and conventions of social groups through social learning mechanisms such as imitation.

Children can identify conventional behaviors and expect group members to engage in them. They also imitate conventional behaviors, such as rituals, with higher fidelity than

instrumental behaviors, such as using a tool to achieve a goal. As highly specialized cultural learners, children readily engage in high fidelity imitation (*i.e.*, copying in nearly an exact form). This high fidelity imitation could be a means of affiliating with a group through conformity. For example, young children readily overimitate (*i.e.*, overcopy) others' behaviors. Even when it is obvious that some actions are not causally relevant to achieving a goal, children as young as 2-years-old will faithfully copy all of the actions demonstrated (*e.g.*, children will use a stick to manipulate a switch to open the box because it was modeled by an adult, even after discovering that the switch can be more easily activated by hand). Current evidence suggests that only humans overimitate, whereas other primates omit obviously irrelevant actions to achieve the goal (*e.g.*, chimpanzees manipulate the switch on the puzzle box with their hand).

The motivation to affiliate with others is associated with imitation of ritual even in early childhood. Thus, young children are psychologically prepared to become members of social groups and engage in ritual, early in development. The focus on highly faithful imitation of ritual action also contributes to their transmission across generations and thus promotes the longevity of social cohesion across time. New research on the cognitive developmental foundations of ritual has examined imitative behavior as a tool for the goal of affiliation. Three- to 6-year-old children imitate with higher fidelity after witnessing behavior without an instrumental purpose or goal (*e.g.*, if a behavior has identical start and end states or performance of obviously irrelevant actions) versus a sequence with a clear purpose or goal (*e.g.*, if a behavior has distinct start and end states or performance of only relevant actions), suggesting that the opacity of the behavior is a cue to social conventionality. They engage in higher fidelity imitation after hearing conventional language that describes a shared social activity rather than language that describes an instrumental goal or purpose. Children are also very sensitive to cues to conformity and are

more likely to use higher levels of imitation when they observe multiple people demonstrating a behavior versus a single individual. Children use higher levels of imitation after watching a synchronized (coordinated movement matched in time) activity.

When ostracized by members of their group, 3- to 6-year-old children use high levels of imitation as a way to gain reinclusion into the group. Accurately imitating behaviors that are specific to the group functions as a means of affiliation with group members. Participating in a social group ritual also increases in-group affiliation in 4- to 11-year olds to a greater degree than group activity alone. This provides insight into the early developing preference for in-group members and demonstrates that rituals are related to group functioning.

In sum, social group rituals are socially-stipulated, causally opaque, conventional behaviors that provide insight into how humans learn and maintain culture. Early developing social cognitive capacities provide the foundation for the development of ritual cognition. Humans are prepared to become members of their social groups starting in infancy. The drive to maintain social cohesion becomes more salient with time. At each stage of life, we must flexibly navigate social relationships and there are new social groups to become a part of as one leaves childhood, enters adolescence, and then adulthood. Collective rituals that mark group membership are salient at every stage of the lifespan. This is why even young children are motivated to imitate ritual as a means of affiliation with others, which prepares them to become competent social group members in adolescence and adulthood. Examining the development of ritual cognition across the lifespan increases our understanding of the emergence of social group cognition in general and provides unique insight into high fidelity cultural transmission over time.

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See also Cognitive Development; Culture; Evolutionary Theory; Family Rituals; Imitation; Norms; Social Cognition; Social Development; Social Groups

Further Readings

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