

Brief Description and Sources for "Structural Ritualization Theory," Initiated by David Knottnerus

Brief Description

David Knottnerus is currently working on several projects related to a distinct body of theory and research, "structural ritualization theory." This perspective focuses on the role rituals play in social life and the processes by which ritualization occurs and leads to the formation, reproduction, and transformation of social structure.

This theory is grounded in the basic assumption that daily life is normally characterized by an array of social and personal rituals. Moreover, 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.

A number of empirical investigations have been and are currently being carried out providing tests and exemplifications of the theory (see Appendix for a list of published works employing the theory). This work has progressed to the point that several lines of theory development and research employing multiple methodologies are currently under way (each of which builds upon the original theory). At present this research mainly focuses on:

1. Deritualization (i.e., disruptions to social and personal rituals, their consequences, and the ways people may cope with such experiences).
2. The enactment of ritualized practices in organizations and communities.
3. The reproduction of ritualized behaviors and social structure within groups.
4. Strategic ritualization and power.
5. Collective ritual events and emotions.
6. Applied research and social policy.

The paper posted on this webpage "Structural Ritualization Theory" (presented in 2006 at the Philadelphia SIG conference) is related to the first line of research dealing with disruption and deritualization.

David Knottnerus is also currently working on the book, *Ritual as a Missing Link within Sociology: Structural Ritualization Theory and Research* (Paradigm Publishers).

The book argues that the basic assumption that rituals are crucial to human behavior is consistent with the arguments of various social scientists including Durkheim, Goffman, Collins, and Warner who have used this concept for analytical purposes. Despite the work of scholars such as these the concept of ritual has been underutilized, if not largely ignored, in sociology. This is especially the case in regard to the idea of ritual being used as a “link” to connect and integrate sociological knowledge, i.e., sociological theory and research. The program of theory and research, “structural ritualization theory (SRT),” which this book describes, directly addresses these concerns

Building upon the contributions of scholars concerned with ritual, SRT more formally defines ritualization and presents a set of factors to explain various dynamics involving social action and social structure. The theory focuses on the role “ritualized symbolic practices” play in social behavior and the ways they contribute to the organization of social life. Being formally stated with precisely developed concepts SRT exhibits a necessary quality of predictive theory. The development of precise concepts facilitates use of the framework for systematic investigations of empirical cases and a clearer understanding of the processes occurring in these social settings.

In focusing upon rituals in daily social life SRT differs from many other theories and perspectives. For instance, unlike social exchange theory, game theory, and elementary relations theory, SRT is not driven by rational choice. While sharing some assumptions with symbolic interactionism, expectation states theory, and social cognition approaches, it differs from these traditions due to its explicit focus on ritual enactments, its willingness to employ different methods and types of empirical evidence, and a concern for social dynamics occurring at different levels of the social order. And, while concerned in part with the social dynamics contributing to social inequality and power, it also differs from approaches such as Marxist theory and world-systems/social change perspectives because of its emphasis on the symbolic and meaningful components of social life and culture. In essence, it addresses a different kind of social phenomenon than theories such as these.

The theory assumes that social rituals can operate at different levels of the social order (i.e., micro to increasingly macro levels of analysis) and ritualized behaviors operating in a particular setting can influence the rituals that develop in different contexts (i.e., different levels of the social order). A basic model for depicting levels of social analysis first presented in a previous book (*Recent Developments in the Theory of Social Structure*, edited by Christopher Prendergast and J. David Knottnerus. 1994. JAI Press) and briefly discussed in Knottnerus (1997) in regard to a framework for the development of SRT conceives of social structure as composed of six levels. The levels are: relationships, networks, intraorganizational relations, interorganizational relations, societal stratification, and the world system. Ritualization processes, it is argued, can occur within the same level or move from macro to micro or micro to macro levels.

Reflecting a commitment to multimethod research strategies others and I have carried out a number of investigations of ritual dynamics in different social milieus. Studies focus on ritualization occurring in both contemporary and historical settings. This research also

examines ritual enactments in American and international settings. In doing so, the theory shows that it can bridge across methods having been applied in the field, in historical research, and in the laboratory. SRT is unique in the very broad scope over which it has been applied.

I would emphasize that all of this research demonstrates in various ways the central role rituals play in our social and personal behavior. It is argued that the study of ritual enactments in our daily lives is of crucial importance and can provide various insights into our behavior and social relations.

The book explores all of these issues and discusses research examining quite different situations and groups. Several of the six lines of research/theory previously outlined are emphasized.

Sources (April 2007)

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