

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions *is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

The Ritual Animal by David G. Myers

[Watson-Jones, R. E., & Legare, C. H. \(2016\). The social functions of group rituals. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 25, 42–46. doi:10.1177/0963721415618486](#)

Evolutionary, anthropological, and psychological science concur: We humans are the ritual animal. Rachel Watson-Jones and Cristine Legare (2016) propose that social-group rituals serve adaptive functions. Rituals — “socially stipulated, group conventions” — create social cohesion and promote shared beliefs.

The Abundant Reality of Social Rituals

To introduce the facts and the functions of rituals, instructors might first invite students (perhaps in small groups) to brainstorm social rituals that they practice or observe. Mention that these may include group behaviors not labelled as rituals. Possible examples:

Political rituals:

- Speaking the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of a school day
- Singing the national anthem before a sporting event
- Congressional or parliamentary rules of address and debate
- Inaugurations

Sports rituals:

- Teams entering the field or arena to cheering fans
- Team warm-up routines
- Volleyball, basketball, or baseball team member introductions
- Huddles

- Within-game breaks, such as baseball's 7th-inning stretch
- Players' postgame greetings and hand slaps
- Sportsmanship behaviors

Social rituals:

- Birthdays
- Weddings
- New Year's celebrations
- Funerals
- Club meeting formats, from Rotary clubs to Greek life
- Induction ceremonies
- Eating rituals

Religious rituals:

- Eating the Passover meal
- Taking communion (the Eucharist)
- Speaking confessions and creedal affirmations
- Baptism
- Group singing

The Functions of Social Rituals

So, instructors could ask, what are the shared purposes of these varied social rituals? If we were deprived of them, what would be lost? Watson-Jones and Legare offer several rationales, which perhaps students could anticipate:

- Identifying group members: Dress, etiquette, and actions mark group membership and the accompanying shared beliefs and values.
- Demonstrating in-group commitment: Well-practiced or costly social rituals signal commitment and promote trust and affiliation.
- Facilitating cooperation: Social rituals support exchanges with and generosity to nonkin.
- Increasing cohesion: Social rituals, such as synchronous movement and singing, increase connection and trust, perhaps especially in times of stress.

To these I venture a fifth: Social rituals not only express commitment, they deepen it. Attitudes and beliefs follow behavior. Much as we internalize new role behaviors — becoming the roles we enact — so also ritual behaviors shape our consciousness. Celebrating Passover helps family members know and remember who they are. The early Christian ritual of washing one another's feet strengthened the idea of humility. Worship participation shapes religious identity.

“To attain faith,” advised Blaise Pascal (Pensees), “follow the way by which [the committed] began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe.” Tevye (from Fiddler on the Roof) echoed the sentiment: “Because of our traditions every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do ... Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.”

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