

Ritual and Routine in American Middle-Class Families



Ritual and Routine

- What are they?
- Why are they important for family life?
- Why are they important specifically for American middle-class working families?
- How can we work to strengthen rituals and routines in families?

Ritual

- Formalized, repeatable behavior
- Meaning is in the specific forms
- No paraphrase
- Based on habituation
- Ritual: habit+symbolism

The Power of Ritual

- Repeated action sequences
- Automaticity
- Agency Reversal
- Socially Coordinated
- Powerful Memory Effects

Ritual is . . .

The source of most human institutions.

A foundation of an ongoing social contract.

Spectrum of Ritual Forms

Individual



Mutual



Collective



Increasing social scope

Routine



Social ritual



Sacred Ritual



Increasing symbolic load

Two Key Functions of Ritual

Coordinated action

Simplifies joint tasks



Coordinated meaning

shapes collective memory



Ritual has Special Function for Middle-Class American Families

- American MC Family is temporary unit
- 1.5 generation life-span
- Prepares children to leave and create own families
- No joint property or economic functions for siblings after they leave home
- Ritual and myth are the main way American families recover scattered family

Ritual provides centripetal counter-force to the various centrifugal forces that pull American family members apart.

- Family dinners
- Family vacations
- Family Reunions
- Thanksgiving
- Christmas
- Passover



Ritual and Memory

Two very different kinds of memory in family life will affect autobiographical memory of adults:

1. *Unique event memories*

“The day our dog died.”

2. *Generalized event memories*

“When we were kids we used to. . . “

Generalized Event Memory

Created by routines and rituals.

Characterized by generalization of repeated or salient events into a timeless, repeatable past.

An important foundation of the sense of a coherent life.

In their everyday conversations . . .

families are constantly
transforming their events into a
distinctive sense of a shared
ritual history.

Nostalgia. The Adult View from Afar: Historicized “habit memory”

“When growing up *we always had*– I grew up Methodist in a little church here in the community and we always had a sunrise service where *everybody would get up* and gather at somebody’s house and typically they would do it, we had a lot of dairy farmers around here so *somebody would erect a wooden cross* out on the side the lake or something and *then they would have a little service* there, maybe a 30 minute service. Sing some songs and read a little scripture and read about the resurrection and then, and then have coffee and doughnuts or something.”

The Negotiation of Family Memory

B. What do you guys do on July 4th?

F. Fireworks.

M. The lake is a big thing too. *We usually go* with Gary and Susan and hang out there.

S. *We went this year* to the lake.

D. *We've done that every year haven't we?*

F. *We just did that one time. Usually we go with our friends* and eat and then go to the Covington fire works.

-B. What do you do on Halloween?

-D Candy.

-S Halloween is awesome. **We go** trick or treating. Floyd Street is phenomenal.

-B So you go into Covington and trick or treat?

-M We do. The neighborhoods that we have lived in have not been great for trick or treating. **We tend to go get with other families who also don't have neighborhoods, like we have several** friends that just live on land like acreage and aren't neighborhoods. And **they usually invite** those of us who don't live in neighborhoods to come and join them so we've gone like to the Smith's neighborhood. **This year** the Jones. **Last year** on Floyd Street.

-F. You can't trick or treat here. The kids can't walk.

-S. Floyd Street was pretty fun. **We did that the year before** with some other friends. **That's what we've done every year** has been with groups of friends. **I've always been** something scary and **this year I was** a girl.

Collective memories often crystallize around distinctive memory “objects” which serve to stand-in for complex events, feelings and situations.

- Food
- Pets
- Heirloom objects
- Houses/moves
- Photographs
- Eccentric Relatives

-M Christmas Eve dinner is at Mother's house before we go to church. She usually has ham, shrimp, potato salad, things she's done ahead. Nothing really hot.

-D. Okra sometimes.

-M. Not for Christmas Eve she didn't. Then Jim's family comes over here. Everybody comes here.

-S. We have brunch don't we? We don't have lunch or dinner. We have brunch. We have an awesome breakfast.

-M. And my mother brings country ham. We do the southern breakfast, country ham.

-S. She does this country ham –

-F. You get a salt load that day.

-M. Country ham and we have country ham and biscuits. Red eye gravy. Have you ever heard of red eye gravy?

-B. Do you know cousin Bill?

-D. Oh yeah we love him.

-M. Bill is---back in those days he grew a garden. He was self-sufficient.

-F. He hunted and he kept a garden.

-M. He might have been homeless but he was self sufficient. He was also a carpenter by trade. And we'd always take him beer you know because he didn't have money or anything.

-B. So how did he live?

-M He gardened and he'd sell his vegetables and he'd hunt. But he was the kind with a job and he would be on his way to work and he might see a deer somewhere out and he'd go hunting instead.

B. So how did you guys, the kids, think of him? Did he seem like a crazy person?

S. He's funny. No, he's not crazy he's just Uncle Bill.

In conclusion. . .

The unique power of ritual in shaping family life and family memory.

Pragmatic implication of family ritual:
“private policy” and family well-being