Rituals Alleviate Grieving For Loved Ones, Lovers, and Lotteries

Michael Norton, Harvard University, USA
Francesca Gino, Harvard University, USA

Across two experiments, participants directed to reflect on past rituals or assigned to complete novel rituals after experiencing losses – of loved ones, lovers, and lotteries – reported lower levels of grief. Increased feelings of control after rituals mediated this relationship, and beliefs in the effectiveness of rituals enhanced their positive effects.

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Rituals Improve Emotions, Consumption, Interpersonal Relationships, and Even Luck

Chairs: Kathleen D. Vohs, University of Minnesota, USA
Yajin Wang, University of Minnesota, USA

In summary, this is a session that consumer behavior scholars will want to see. It offers indepth, empirical, and theoretical advances featuring perceptual, cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and identity outcomes. To show that grieving, eating, hosting, and protecting are all made better by rituals illustrates why rituals are so common and, as the proposed session will highlight, so powerful.

Rituals Enhance the Experience of Consumption

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Rituals mark many life events, big and small. From the sequences of activities around Thanksgiving dinner to the activities involved in opening a bottle of wine, people use systematized sequences of behaviors in order to signify an event, and quite often those are consumption experiences. We hypothesized that one reason that rituals are so tightly tied to consumption is that they amplify experiences. Four experiments tested and found support for this hypothesis.

In experiment 1, participants tasted a chocolate bar, before which they either performed or did not perform a ritual. In the ritual condition, participants were told that, “Before a consumption experience, people often engage in simple rituals (e.g., when opening a bottle of wine at a restaurant). Please follow these specific steps in unwrapping the chocolate: 1. Without unwrapping the chocolate bar, break it in half. 2. Unwrap one half of the chocolate bar and eat it. 3. Then, unwrap the other half and eat it.” In the non-ritual condition, participants were told, “Before you taste the chocolate, please spend a couple of minutes relaxing.” We measured how much they savored the chocolate, as surreptitiously measured by duration spent consuming it. We also measured how much participants reported enjoying the chocolate, and how potent was its taste. We predicted and found that participants in the ritual condition spent longer eating the chocolate (i.e., savored it more), found the chocolate’s taste to be more potent, and enjoyed the chocolate more than participants in the non-ritual condition.

Experiment 2 tested the hypothesis that rituals are effective in boosting consumption enjoyment and potency only when performed by the individual who is about to do the consuming. Experiment 2 tested whether rituals must be performed by the self in order to aid the consumption experience. Experiment 2 also included a measure of mood to examine whether engaging in rituals influences emotional state during the consumption experience. In the self-ritual condition, participants were given a series of steps that formed the ritual of making a glass of lemonade. They were told to pour half of a packet of lemonade powder and half glass of water into a glass, then to stir the mixture, and then wait for 30 seconds. After 30 seconds, they were told to pour the remainder of the lemonade mix and water into the glass, stir, and wait for 30 seconds. In the other-ritual condition, participants observed the experimenter perform the same steps as described above. The results demonstrated that rituals before consumption increase the potency of the consumption experience when performed by the individual who is about to consume rather than another person. We also ruled out mood, as there were no differences in positive or negative affect as a function of condition.
Experiment 3 compared ritualistic behaviors involving systematic movements to a control condition where participants engage in similar movements that are random and therefore not systematic. Second, the experiment included a control condition where no ritual was performed. Third, we measured both anticipated enjoyment before consumption and actual enjoyment. Last, we used an international sample of community adults. Participants were told that their task would involve consuming a specific beverage (of their choice), one that they drank at least five days a week in a typical week. They were given instructions to carry with them and perform wherever they consumed the drink. Participants assigned to the ritual condition were instructed to perform a distinct set of gestures before the first sip of the beverage. Then they rated their anticipated enjoyment of the beverage and willingness to pay, which occurred immediately before the first sip of the beverage that day. Participants assigned to the non-ritual gesturing condition performed hand gestures before consumption, but the gestures were randomized such that there was no consistent pattern. Participants assigned to the no-ritual condition were not given a ritual to perform before consuming the beverage. Results showed, as predicted, that anticipated enjoyment rose throughout each consumption experience for participants in the ritual condition but not so for participants in the other conditions. A similar pattern was found with actual enjoyment, and mediation analyses confirmed that the heightened anticipation of consumption led to heightened enjoyment upon consuming.

We designed a last study to further examine the relationship between potency, enjoyment and savoring in consumers’ consumption experience, and test the role of fluency and intrinsic interest in explaining the beneficial effects of rituals. The study used the same product and procedure as in experiment 1. Participants were informed that they would be asked to taste a chocolate bar. The measures, as in Experiment 1, were enjoyment, and time spent savoring. In addition, we included measures of 5-item measure of fluency. The results showed that ritual condition participants enjoyed the chocolate more and spent more time savoring it, in a replication of experiment 1. Moreover, we found the same evidence for mediation through fluency for both enjoyment ratings and time spent savoring as dependent measures.

In summary, this work provides robust evidence that performing ritualized behaviors prior to consumption enhances the consumption experience. People who were randomly assigned to perform a ritual enjoyed that which they consumed more so than others. Meditational evidence suggested that anticipating the act of consumption is key, as is fluency. This work will be of interest to scholars who study motivated behavior, the regulation of intake (e.g., calories), as well as those interested in satiation. Because rituals are a lubricant for consumption, intervention implications are also suggested by this work.

“Home and Commercial Hospitality Rituals in Arab Gulf Countries”

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Hospitality is so much a part of Arab Gulf heritage that a number of ethnographies of the region have titles like “‘Ever a Guest in our House’” (Shryock and Howell 2001), “Guests of the Sheik” (Fernea 1969), and “Culture-Middle East: Arab Hospitality Runs Deep” (Janardhan2002). Arab hospitality is viewed as an expression of the high value placed by Arabs on generosity (Karam). Arab hospitality or karam al-arab is a traditional virtue of which Arabs are deliberately proud (Shryock 2004). There is a general consensus among Muslim scholars that hospitality and generosity towards guests are an integral part of faith in Islam. Many verses in the Q’uran as well as a significant number of ahadith (prophet Muhammad’s sayings) provide such evidence.

The importance of hospitality to social relations in different regions of the Arab world has been documented by anthropologists (e.g., Young 2007). In the Gulf region hospitality rituals are attributed both to their traditional necessity in the harsh desert environment of the region’s Bedouins and to their moral centrality in Islam. Hospitality in Arab Gulf countries is expressive of culture and an important part of the presentation of national identity. Yet, such rituals have been little studied in the social sciences either generally or in the Gulf region in particular. The concept of hospitality remains largely un-specified and un-examined. We believe that hospitality is a critical concept in a globalizing world and that the insights gained in the Gulf region can help inform theory and practice in other parts of the world. Due to petrowealth, Qatar and the UAE are the two wealthiest nations on earth and both are changing rapidly and dramatically. Despite such changes the society still requires strong adherence to traditional norms of hospitality. Urbanization has not eliminated these rituals and, if anything, may have increased their importance as a means for citizens who have become a minority in their own countries to assert their cultural identity in the face of broad immigration and visitation by guest workers, foreign business people, and tourists to the Gulf region.

Using depth-interviews and observations of hospitality rituals in Qatari households, we explore culturally constructed meanings of hospitality rituals in Gulf Arab States and examine associated performatory constructions of ethnic identity as well as the multifaceted exchange of material and symbolic possessions (especially foods, perfumes, and incense) that take place between the host and guests. We also study commercial hospitality in high end hotels, restaurants and similar touristic sites in the Gulf region, focusing on the capitals of Doha in Qatar and Dubai in the UAE. Both commercial and home hospitality are forms of what Goffman (1959) called the presentation of self. That is, both are self-conscious acts performed for the guest in order to create a particular impression of the self, whether the self of relevance is the family or the culture. We show how contemporary hospitality rituals can help us better understand the concept of hospitality itself and how it differs from the hospitality of the Bedouin past, as well as what the possible futures of hospitality are between these minority hosts and majority guests. Ironically, this may be a future dependent more on commercial hospitality, inasmuch as few non-Qataris and non-Emiratis are visitors in Qatari and Emirati homes.

In the process, we discuss the process of commoditizing culture and its impact on both hosts and guests. Within the more public realm of paying guests, many of these rituals are transformed. The gracious hosts are now more like servants to the paying guests. This can occur, for example, from the moment of entering Qatar at the Doha airport. For a fee (often arranged by local hosts), rather than stand in lines to get a visa and have passports inspected and stamped, the visitor will be escorted to a lounge and asked to relax while a young woman takes the passport and does all required processing. When she returns, she delivers the passport and escorts the guest through the airport to transportation or another local contact person. Because service workers in Qatar are almost inevitably foreigners themselves, this is one of the first evident differences from hospitality within Qatari homes. Even at Bedouin and Arabian themed hotels, restaurants, oases, and other representations of local culture, the workers and performers are not likely to be Qatari. This may raise issues of authenticity (Bruner 2005), but authenticity is a socially constructed concept and as with going to the theater, the guests seem willing to either suspend disbelief or adopt a questioning gaze rather
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Rituals of mourning in the face of loss – from the death of loved ones to the end of meaningful relationships to losses in wars and competitions – are ubiquitous across time and cultures (Ashenburg, 2004; Durkheim, 1912; Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). The most frequently studied rituals are those surrounding religion; people turn to prayer after negative life events such as September 11th, for example, and prayer has been associated with improved coping (Ai, Tice, Peterson, & Huang, 2005; Pargament, 1997; Sherkat & Reed, 1992). So common is this instinct to devise rituals in the face of negative events that the wide variety of known mourning rituals can even be contradictory: crying near the dying is viewed as disruptive by Tibetan Buddhists but as a sign of respect by Catholic Latinos; Hindu rituals stress the removal of hair when mourning while growing hair (a beard) is the preferred ritual for Jewish males (Clements, 2003; Kemp & Bhungalia, 2002). Ritualistic behavior manifests not just in religious practice, but is ubiquitous across domains of human life, providing order and stability while marking change – especially in times of chaos and disorder (Romanoff, 1998; Turner, 1969).

Why are rituals so ubiquitous, and why do they seem to improve coping? Despite the variance in the form that rituals take, we propose that a common psychological mechanism underlies their effectiveness: a restoration of feelings of control that losses impair. Indeed, people who suffer losses often report feeling “out of control” (Low, 1994) and actively try to regain control when they feel it slipping away (Brehm, 1966); feeling in control in turn is associated with increased well-being, physical health, and coping ability (Glass & Singer, 1972; Klein, Fencil-Morse, & Seligman, 1976; Rodin & Langer, 1977). Some qualitative data offer initial evidence for the link between rituals and control; for example, the extent to which athletes and fisherman engage in rituals is related to the unpredictability of their jobs (Gmelch, 1971; Malinowski & Redfield, 1948; see Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). We suggest that the use of rituals serves as a compensatory mechanism designed to restore feelings of control after losses, and that this increased feeling of control contributes to improved coping.

We propose that people turn to rituals after diverse kinds of losses – in the experiments below, of loved ones, lovers, and lotteries – in order to reestablish their feelings of control and mitigate their general negative feelings, such that the feelings of control brought about by rituals will mediate the relationship between ritual use and reduced grief. Although we recognize the many differences in the rituals people use after experiencing a loss and the diversity of emotions that accompany different types of losses, we propose that a common psychological mechanism – perceived control – underlies the effectiveness of rituals. Engaging in rituals mitigates grief by restoring the feelings of control that are impaired by both life-changing (the death of loved ones) and more mundane (losing lotteries) losses, and rituals are particularly effective when participants are convinced of the efficacy of those rituals.

We tested our hypotheses in two experiments in which we explored the impact of mourning rituals after losses – of loved ones, lovers, and lotteries – on mitigating grief. Participants who were directed to reflect on past rituals (Experiment 1) or who were assigned to complete novel rituals after experiencing losses (Experiment 2) reported lower levels of grief. Increased feelings of control after rituals mediated the link between use of rituals and reduced grief after losses, and a belief in the effectiveness of rituals enhanced their positive effects.

In Experiment 1, we relied on participants’ self-definitions of what constitutes a “ritual” – as a result, our investigation encompasses a broad definition of the term, including both actions prescribed by a religion or a community of reference as well as behaviors chosen arbitrarily by participants (and the experimenters). This choice is consistent with evidence that mourning rituals across cultures and religious are often contradictory, suggesting that the effectiveness of rituals on grief and coping after a loss is driven primarily by the act of engaging in a ritual and not by the specific actions involved in the ritual. Future research, however, is needed to explore at a more granular level the impact of specific types of rituals on mourning.

Finally, we note that our participants were drawn from non-clinical samples, and our conclusions therefore must be qualified in light of research suggesting that overly ritualistic behavior can negatively impair psychological functions, as in the case of obsessive-compulsive disorder (Tolin, Abramowitz, Przeworski, & Foa, 2002). Clearly, further research is needed to understand which rituals benefit which individuals. Still, our results offer initial support for Durkheim’s contention that “mourning is left behind, thanks to mourning itself” (Durkheim, 1912, p. 299); the rituals of mourning in which our participants engage hasten the decline of the feeling of mourning that accompanies loss.

Rituals for Reversing One’s Fortune

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Across cultures, people try to “undo” bad luck with superstitious rituals such as knocking on wood, spitting, or throwing salt. We suggest that these superstitious rituals have more in common than just being actions that offer a sense of control. Instead, these superstitious rituals for reversing one’s fortune all seem to involve avoidant motor movements that exert force away from the self. Thus, even though at first glance these rituals may appear to be unrelated cultural traditions, we suggest that these particular rituals...
may have developed and been passed on, in part, because these avoidant actions create a sense that bad luck is being pushed away from the self.

This hypothesis is based on two streams of embodied cognition research. First, recent work suggests that people use bodily movements to understand and simulate their experience with abstract concepts (Barsalou, 2008; Niedenthal et al., 2005). Second, research has shown that pulling something towards one’s representation of self is associated with approaching desired stimuli, and pushing something away from the represented self is associated with avoiding undesired stimuli (Cacioppo, Priester, & Bernston, 1993; Chen & Bargh, 1999; Markman & Brendl, 2005). We suggest that, because avoidant motor actions help avoid negative objects and reduce risk, engaging in an avoidant action may simulate the experience of avoiding bad luck. Consequently, after engaging in an avoidant action, people may feel less pessimistic about the likelihood of anticipated negative outcomes.

Four experiments test this hypothesis by having participants tempt fate and then engage in avoidant actions. In all four studies, participants were lead to tempt fate by having a scripted conversation with the experimenter. The experimenter asked questions and participants were provided with three answers that had the same meaning, but were phrased differently. They were asked to choose the one that sounded the most like them. For example, in Study 1, the experimenter said, “A friend of mine recently got into a car accident… it got me thinking about how dangerous it can be on the road, especially when the snow starts to fall. Do you think that there is a possibility that you or someone close to you will get into a horrible car accident this winter?” Participants in the control condition selected from one of three neutral options (e.g., “I can’t believe it’s going to start snowing soon”). Participants in the tempting fate condition chose from one of three options designed to express presumptuousness (e.g., “No way. Nobody I know would get into a bad car accident. It’s just not possible”). Participants in Study 2a tempted fate about getting the swine flu and participants in Study 2b and 3 tempted fate about being mugged.

Based on previous findings (Risen & Gilovich, 2008), we expected that negative outcomes would seem especially likely after people tempted fate. We predicted, however, that the effect of the jinx would be reduced if people engaged in avoidant actions that exerted force away from the self. Critically, according to our hypothesis, even non-superstitious avoidant actions should be effective for reversing the effect of a jinx. Thus, we tested our prediction with a superstitious action (Study 1, knocking on wood) and a non-superstitious action (Studies 2a, 2b, and 3, throwing a ball).

In Study 1, after the conversation, the experimenter told participants that they should clear their thoughts before continuing to the next part of the study. To help, he would slowly count to 5. In the knocking-down condition, participants were instructed to knock down on the table with each number (away from themselves). In the knocking-up condition, participants were told to knock up on the underside of the table (towards themselves). In the no-knocking condition, the experimenter counted to five with no instructions to knock. Participants then rated how likely they believed it was that they or someone close to them would get into a horrible car accident. As predicted, participants who tempted fate were more pessimistic in the no-knocking and knocking-up conditions than those who did not tempt fate, but the effect of the jinx was eliminated when participants knocked down on the table and away from themselves.

Study 2 tested whether other movements that exert force away from self—even those that are not ingrained as superstitious rituals—also reduce the subjective likelihood of a bad outcome after people tempt fate. After the conversation with the experimenter, participants in Singapore (2a) and the United States (2b) were asked to either hold a ball in their hand or toss it away. After doing so, they rated the likelihood of becoming seriously ill or being mugged, respectively. We found that after tempting fate, participants who tossed the ball away were less concerned about getting sick and getting mugged than those who held the ball in hand.

Finally, in Study 3, we distinguished between exerting force away from the self and creating physical distance from an object in one’s environment, and tested whether each was sufficient for undoing the effect of the jinx. All participants tempted fate and then engaged in an action that either created distance or not and either exerted force or not. We found that pretending to throw a ball (an action that does not create distance, but does simulate pushing something away) was as effective for reducing the effect of the jinx as actually throwing the ball.

The present research suggests that knocking (down) on wood is a successful strategy for reducing the heightened concern that typically follows a tempting fate behavior. Moreover, our results suggest that the success is due, at least in part, to the avoidant nature of the act. After tempting fate, avoidant actions—even those that are not part of a superstitious belief system—effectively undo the effect of the jinx. Although superstitions are often culturally defined, our results suggest that the underlying psychological processes that give rise to them may be shared across cultures.