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#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nr3x2tk>

#### **Journal**

American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 71

#### **Author**

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#### **Publication Date**

2011

Peer reviewed

## THE TALKING CURE AS ACTION: FREUD'S THEORY OF RITUAL REVISITED

**Abstract:** Freud made creative use of late Victorian theories of ritual as empty modes of behavior, using the idea of “seemingly meaningless” ritual to offer a compelling comparison with obsessive behavior. However, analytic hours, with their repetitive frame and repetition of unconscious conflicts, have stronger links with rituals than Freud admitted. Recent theories highlight the extensive power of rituals to organize and instantiate models of effective action, especially in terms of the multifunctionality of language. These new theories of ritual offer in turn new tools for understanding the therapeutic action of analytic hours.

**Key Words:** Ritual, language, efficacy

Superman lying on a couch. A dog with glasses sitting in a chair behind a couch. Endless *New Yorker* cartoons are funny because the analytic hour is easily recognizable in altered versions . When Roy Rappaport, a scholar of ritual, states that a ritual is “among the most perfectly recurrent social events,” he could be talking about analytic hours . Analytic hours are replete with repetition, both in their carefully structured “frame” and the unconscious repetition that occurs. Freud, however, wanted to drive a firm wedge between religious rituals and psychoanalytic practice, negating any possible comparisons. His essay “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practice” explicitly equated rituals with obsessive neurotic behavior, disavowing any possible similarities between repetition in religious rituals and the special type of repetition that occurs during analytic hours (Freud, 1907, pp. 115-127).

Freud was eager to expand on a picture of ritual as habitual, but neither meaningful nor effective, behavior. He found an ally in contemporary scholarship on religion that cast a suspicious eye on ritual. His adoption of contemporary ideas about ritual permitted him to make stimulating comparisons with neurotic behavior but also left

a complex legacy. Eviscerating rituals of any efficacy has an unintended blowback for analytic hours, especially in terms of theories of therapeutic action. My goal here is not to recast Freud's entire theory of religion, a theory dependent on an array of ideas beyond that of ritual. My more modest task consists of mapping the vicissitudes of Freud's ideas about ritual and their implications, before then turning to new models of ritual. This task has surprising implications for analysts since more complex conceptions of rituals can in turn offer new theories of efficacy for analytic hours, despite Freud's insistence on their basic incommensurability.

### **Part 1: The Limits of Symbolic Theories of Ritual**

The broad term "ceremonials [Zeremoniell]," Freud commented, was often applied to "obsessive actions" (1907, p. 117). Unfortunately Freud does not include any notes on this point. Despite the fact that neurotic behavior is not part of religious practice, it fits under this characterization.

Neurotic ceremonials consist in making small adjustments to particular everyday actions, small additions or restrictions or arrangements, which have always to be carried out in the same, or in methodically varied, manner...These activities give the impression of being mere formalities, and they seem quite meaningless to us (1907, pp. 117-118).

Neurotic behavior, like ceremonies, necessitates strict attention and unswerving commitment to detail. This attention does not make any sense to the observer since the actions do not appear to have any consequences or impact. This seeming lack of effect does not negate the urgency of the actions, or the compulsion to repeat them in exact form.

On closer observation the "mere formalities" of obsessional behavior turn out, as Freud revealed, to be replete with significance. On a case by case basis, Freud

illuminated the hidden meanings of neurotic behavior such as a woman renouncing part of her food after renouncing sexual relations with her husband. Based on analytic insights, Freud argued, the most meaningless-looking actions are more correctly seen as symbols of the most basic human motivations.

An obsessive was always unaware of the true meanings of his behavior, according to Freud. Matching the symbol with its meaning can only be done by a master interpreter who looks beyond an individual's own conceptions and has insight into the unconscious. So too, for many then contemporary scholars of religion, participants in rituals are oblivious to the import of their actions, rationalizing their actions based on mistaken ideas of cause and effect. This notion was no doubt particularly appealing to Freud since it was compatible with his negative view of religion. Gods do not exist, so all theological explanations are wrong. Thus the theory of "ceremonialism" Freud cites plays right into his hand; rituals are at best misguided magical actions that demand more plausible cultural explanations for why people are so engrossed in and committed to them. The theory also includes a tremendous implicit push towards psychological interpretations of rituals as a possible solution to the enigma of their true purpose.

Freud brilliantly exploited his obsessive-religious comparison in reverse, that is, to illuminate the meanings hidden in religious rituals. All religious rites are also symbolically encrypted examples of drive-based motivations. These motivations are extremely powerful; individuals may find that they are unable to abstain from these actions, even if they are not sure why they do them. A trained analyst is able to decipher the meanings of religious rituals, even if the participants in the rituals, as well as scholars of religion, are all unaware of these meanings.

The essay on religious behavior is the only theoretical discussion of rituals in Freud's writings.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his extended cultural analysis Freud offered controversial, even notorious, interpretations of specific symbolic meanings of religious rituals. Aboriginal, Jewish and Christian rituals all are disguised repetitions of the killing of the primal father and enact various combinations of neurotic guilt and atonement.<sup>2</sup> It mattered little that the participants in these rituals not only were unaware of these meanings, but even rejected them. Conscious awareness of the symbolic meanings would bring the rituals to an end, destroying secondary rationalizations and substituting insight for misguided action.

Freud's analysis of rituals stimulated an array of subsequent symbolic psychoanalytic studies. Many of these studies have long since fallen by the wayside due to their flamboyant and poorly-supported interpretations, such as Theodore Reik's analysis of Jewish atonement rituals based on then-current ideas of totemic ritual . According to Reik, the Jews identified their leader with the bull totem, hence the Kol Nidre prayer on the Day of Atonement signified the blowing of the totemic animal's horn to atone for the guilt they felt for repudiating the covenant, the sound mimicking the slaughtering of the animal. Other uses of Freud's theory of ritual have been more successful, among them the work of Gananath Obeyesekere (1990) discussed below.<sup>3</sup>

While the specific psychoanalytic interpretations were distinct to Freud, the general theory of ritual as "empty ceremonialism" that Freud employed was standard at his time. This concept of ritual developed in a specific historical context and when Freud adopted it he also adopted its rhetorical and polemical underpinnings. Theories of ritual contemporary with Freud were originally developed in the intense debates between

Catholics and Protestants about the meaning of Christian rituals. As part of their attack, Protestants denounced Catholic rites as empty, rigid behavior. Jonathan Z. Smith cites Protestant polemicists who argue that

ritual could be perceived as a matter of surface rather than depth; of outward representation rather than inward transformation. It was a matter of ... 'bare ceremoniousness' (1583); 'it is onlie a ceremonie' (1693), a mere ceremony' (1759). (Smith, 1987, p. 100).

The Protestants aligned ritual with "superstition (shallow, unreasoning action) or with habit (a customary, repetitious, thoughtless action)" (Smith, 1987, p. 100). A ranking of rituals was outlined, ranging from the lowest level "magic" to the higher, less-magical, less goal-oriented and more philosophical rites. A small number of proper Protestant rituals (internal, spiritual prayer) were viewed positively and placed at the top of the list while all Catholic practices (external, automatic spells) were basically suspect and viewed as magic. A ritual labeled 'magic' could not by definition have any real efficacy since the term of necessity implies fraud. The purpose of the "higher" types of rites was conceived of as primarily contemplative, that is, divorced from any real attempt to affect or change the world.<sup>4</sup>

To outline in greater detail one influential example, James George Frazer (1922) advanced his theory of "magic" in his monumental work *The Golden Bough*. Magic, the starkest possible contrast with Protestant prayer, was based on the application of two fundamentally wrong modes of thought: sympathy (like-affects-like analogy) and contagion (once connected, always connected).<sup>5</sup> The "primitives" who employed these rituals were making pathetic attempts at causal actions, attempts doomed to failure because they were based on mistaken modes of thought. They believed, for example, that sticking pins in a voodoo doll could harm a human being (doll-person analogy) and

having someone's hair or cut fingernails gave total power over the person (contagion). While "magic" was the term used for the most misguided actions, "ritual" in general was viewed with suspicion and carried much of the taint of magic.

The concept of ritual Freud used has, not surprisingly, been modified. Anthropologists broke with the Victorian attempt to develop an evolutionary schema for societies from the magical primitive to the religious Protestant. The distinction between "magic" and "religious" rituals has collapsed with the realization that it is impossible to classify rituals into these categories based on either means or ends. The word "magic" is a pejorative social label; it tells us about the view of the person using it, but little about the practices attacked.

Some reformulations of symbolic theories jettison the magic/religion distinction to argue instead that rituals are never attempts to manipulate the world but are rather entirely symbolic actions. (For this position see Leach, 1969; Winch, 1964 and Smith, 1987.) Still compatible with Freud, these symbolic theorists sharply distinguish between scientific and religious thinking; scientific thought relies on notions of cause and effect while religious thought does not. According to this view, since ritual is a purely symbolic activity, practitioners do not expect a particular outcome from their ritual activities and the meaningfulness of their actions should not be measured by the outcome. Instead they are participating in a symbolic expression of cultural concepts or desires. One such theorist explains, "myth dramatizes the universe, science analyzes it" (Beattie, 1970, p. 65). For Jonathan Z. Smith, who offers one of the most elegant articulations of a symbolic theory, ritual is a meditation on the limitations of being human and not an attempt to assert human influence. Smith cites Freud's emphasis on ceremonial as "an

exaggeration of an ordinary and justifiable orderliness" and compares it with Lévi-Strauss' notion of ritual as parceling out and repetition (Smith, 1987, p. 111), which correlates with Levi-Strauss' theory of language.

Any understanding of ritual that stresses cause-and-effect, Smith argues, ultimately depicts the practitioners as naïve or deluded. Anthropologists, who recorded so much of the material used in theories of magic, mistakenly took at face value the fantastic descriptions of ritual efficacy articulated by natives; scholars do not need to incorporate claims about ritual efficacy that the natives themselves do not believe.

Symbolic explanations of rituals remain coupled to psychological motivations, though not always in explicitly psychoanalytic terms. That is, individuals repeatedly engage in rituals that do not work because the participants undergo psychological experiences such as relief from anxiety. These psychological experiences constitute a main function of ritual, though participants are oblivious to this. As we saw, Freud was eager to embrace this idea; these explanations of ritual do seem to take vast areas of human activities and place them at the door of psychologists for analysis. Theories about the specific psychological experience, however, vary considerably as does the cause-effect relationship between an emotional state and a ritual.<sup>6</sup> The problem of repetition looms large as well, since the question remains of why these acts must be repeated continually in the exact same form.

Freud's original observation centered on the apparent lack of motives and efficacy in neurotic and religious behavior, neither of which achieve clear goals and both of which were hard to stop (the basic component of a compulsion). This observation came from the specific nature of neurotic obsessive repetition, that is, the repetition of stupid and painful



actions (Schur, 1966). Repetition, however, plays a much more complex role in psychic life and in analysis. The issue of repetition leads directly to the question of therapeutic action, that is, the question of how repetition is related to psychic change.

In Freud's earliest discussions of technique, the goal of analysis was remembering, that is, filling in the gaps in the memory of hysterics. He quickly realized that remembering was not in itself enough and shifted emphasis. In "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through (1914)," treatment was based on the patient repeating a psychic conflict during the hour instead of remembering it. This repetition is intrinsic to the treatment. The patient repeats in his actions "...everything that has already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality—his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character traits" (1914, p.151). The patient has no idea he is doing this since what he is repeating is not accessible to him. Instead, as Freud explains, "He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it" (1914, p. 151).

This unconscious repetition is not a hindrance to the cure, but its essence. In the presence of the analyst, this "repetition" can be analyzed via the transference and the repetition "worked through". Repetition may at times necessitate regression, but this is regression "in the service" of the ego and therefore also welcomed.

Hans Loewald, in a typically subtle commentary on Freud, attempted a deeper theoretical underpinning of repetition in his essay "Some Considerations on Repetition and Repetition Compulsion" (Loewald, 1980). He tried to correct a misguided emphasis where "'neurotic repetitions' have been stressed more in psychoanalytic writings than

repetition as a normal phenomena” (p. 97). Loewald insisted that analysts must distinguish analytic repetition from what he calls “mechanical” repetition.

It is, in fact, one of the most important issues confronting us in a psychoanalytic consideration of repetition to make the distinction between such relatively passive or automatic repetitions and active repeating, and to study the conditions under which transitions from one to the other take place .

He contrasted the “working through” of analysis and the “eternal return” of religious ritual as described by Mircea Eliade. According to Eliade, as described by Loewald, in archaic societies the emphasis is on the past as it represents an eternal form of existence. This divine mode of existence is available via religious rituals that re-create the past and permit individuals to participate in that “eternal return.” (For Eliade, the “eternal return” was the true meaning of all religious rituals and to the extent that Judaism and Christianity had fallen from these models, they were inferior traditions.)

In effect, Loewald attempted to modify Freud’s views of religion, views that Loewald considered over-simplifications. He did not directly attack Freud, but pointed to other views of repetition and ritual that complicated Freud’s conception. Loewald tipped his hat towards a more generally positive role for repetition per se by expanding the comparison with religious rituals. Basically, Loewald made his characteristic turn to philosophy and outlined Kierkegaard’s theory of repetition as a different religious model closer to that of analysis. Kierkegaard distinguished between the Greek notion of “recollection” where “all that is has been,” and the modern view of repetition where “that existence which has been now becomes” (Loewald, 1980, p. 97). In the later case the past is repeated, but in the process of becoming something new. Repetition a la Kierkegaard sounds identical to analytic repetition: “a directed, self-realizing (although not necessarily

conscious) activity of the person, repeating his past, as exemplified by certain prototypical crucial experiences and early levels of organization of experience, creatively in the present” (p. 97). Pagan/archaic rituals of recollection or exact repetition stand over against both modern Christian rites (as understood by Kierkegaard) and analytic hours. Archaic rituals hold no promise of “working through,” being frozen repetitions of a distant past. They cannot be “repetitions in Kierkegaard’s sense of becoming now, of active re-creation where the emphasis is on the present creator” (p. 99). Given Loewald’s use of Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition, it is at least theoretically possible for modern rituals to function in a manner similar to analytic hours.

This same shift is evident in his explanation of psychic change. For his theory of psychic change, that is, in order to explain how analytic repetition is creative, Loewald specifies the concept of mediation. Repetition works in analysis, according to Loewald, because the analyst is present with his or her higher stage of mental organization and “mediates this to the patient” (p. 239). The mediation is done via the interpretation; any repetition that is not interpreted is not going to be part of the therapeutic action. The concept of mediation appears consistently wherever Loewald is trying to capture the efficacy of analysis, as for example when he writes,

The interpretation takes the patient the step towards true regression, as against the neurotic compromise formation, thus clarifying for the patient his true regression lever, which has been covered and made unrecognizable by defensive operations and structures. Secondly, by this very step it mediates to the patient the higher integrative level to be reached. (p. 240)

Via his use of Kierkegaard’s ideas about repetition, Loewald abandoned Freud’s definitive wedge between analytic hours and rituals. The dividing line between useful

and useless repetition is drawn based on the presence of mediated interventions by someone with better-organized mental functions. If something equivalent happens in religious rituals, then the same psychic change occurs as in analytic hours.

Numerous analytic thinkers have followed a path parallel to Loewald's and attempted to modify Freud's anti-religious stance by critiquing his ideas about rituals.<sup>7</sup> The work that holds the greatest interest for this paper is that of Gananth Obeyesekere, who updates Freud's models for a more nuanced view of the similarities between religious rituals and analytic hours. His masterful reworking begins by using Freud's own insights against his stance on ritual. It is extremely difficult to claim, according to Obeyesekere, that before Freud developed his model of the analytic hour, no other human activities encouraged self-reflexivity (rational self reflection) and stimulated change . This simple observation re-opens the entire debate. Obeyesekere also jettisons Freud's crude universalizing of symbols, a shortcoming that has tripped up many of Freud's followers as well.

Obeyesekere argues contra Freud that Freudian tools can map not simply the existence but also the modification of deep human motivations via symbols in numerous cultural settings. Paul Ricoeur (1970) whose work Obeyesekere builds upon, credited Freud with the major breakthrough that all individuals engage in psychologically motivated behavior, not just a special category of the mentally ill. Thus Ricoeur was able to "retain the Freudian concern with 'deep motivation' but disentangles it from individual pathology" (Obeyesekere, 1990, p. xviii). Religious rituals are distinct in that they connect self-reflexivity with issues of, for example, knowledge of the cosmos and salvation (Obeyesekere, 1990).

Using Ricoeur's modifications of Freud, Obeyesekere delineates the general category, the "work of culture," that includes a wide variety of cultural activities (i.e., religious rituals and analytic hours). This "work" is defined as "the process whereby symbolic forms existing on a cultural level get created and re-created through the minds of people (p. xix)." In different cultures, in culturally-specific ways, people create and re-create symbols via all types of rituals that express, obfuscate and modify individual and group conflicts specific to that society.

The work of culture, as outlined by Obeyesekere, maps both symptoms and symbols; symptoms are more closely linked manifestations of wishes, desire and fears while symbols are more removed from these motivations and function at a more clearly cultural level, transposing the motivations into widely diverse expressions (p. 14).<sup>8</sup> Symbols are thus more abstracted and differentiated representations of motivations, and vary greatly from culture to culture. Obeyesekere differentiates between them thus: "a symbol and a symptom contain both motive and meaning, but whereas a symptom is under the domination of motive, a symbol is under the rule of meaning" (p. 11). Cultures differ not only in terms of specific symbolic meanings, but also in terms of the extent they manifest symbols versus symptoms, leaving Freud's heavy hand of cross-cultural comparison far behind.

Both Loewald and Obeyesekere, the latter borrowing again from Ricoeur, draw upon the same model for psychic change as cultural work (outside of the analytic hour): the "fort-da" game Freud's grandson played by throwing out a spool from his crib and then drawing it back in again. For Freud, this game was a way of dealing with separation anxiety. For Ricoeur the game also is exemplary of the creative process. He explains,

“The work of art is also a fort-da, the disappearance of the archaic object as fantasy and its reappearance as a cultural object” (Obeyesekere, p. 15). This rite permitted the young boy to experience psychic growth; similar processes can happen during many other cultural events as well.

Obeyesekere supplements Freud by adding a notion of “progression” to the theory of regression, again borrowing from Ricoeur (1970). This concept is briefly mentioned by Freud in the *Interpretation of Dreams* Chapter Seven, contrasting the “progressive current” that streams in during the day time from the sense organs with regression, the absence of this stimulation (Freud, 1900, p. 547). Ricoeur and Obeyesekere greatly expand this very slight mention and place progression at the center of cultural activities as firmly as Freud placed regression at the center of the analytic hour.

The “work” of culture oscillates, for both individuals and groups, between regression towards symptoms and progression away from symptoms to symbols for individuals and groups. Some rituals will lead to progression. The example Obeyesekere offers is that of rites of spirit possession practiced by an Indian “nun.” She first broke with her family by eloping and when a relative subsequently died and she was unable to return for the funeral, she became possessed. Despite her mental suffering, via the rituals she engaged in, she “ultimately triumphs over privation, guilt and loss and becomes a priestess” (p. 11). Other religious rituals turn out to be regressive only. Adbin, Obeyesekere’s informant, engaged in a series of quite violent rituals during which he “was abreacting his infantile past and using the pre-given cultural symbol system to express and bring some order to and control over his psychic conflicts” (p. 10). Yet he was unable to hold a religious job and failed in the secular world as well. He repeatedly returned to

the Hindu rituals of hanging on hooks, finding only temporary relief. Abdin only repeated and did not work through because “the symbols do not help to overcome his troubled past but repeat it” (p. 19). In the case of Abdin, his symbol system is closer to the archaic terrors of childhood (p. 13), with an over-determination of motive but under-determination of meaning. The ultimate result is that he “possesses little reflexivity” (p. 12). In the case of the female possessed by a spirit, “over determination by meaning helps transcend the domination by motive” (p. 12-13). Finally, the cultural settings are different, which profoundly influences the role of rituals. Abdin was a Muslim practicing a Hindu ritual with little support from his community while the Buddhist priestess was more easily able to make use of a Hindu cultic practices due to the nature of the Buddhist community and its open attitudes towards Hindu practices (p. 20).

Obeyskere’s compelling reformulation of Freud’s symbolic theory demands, like Loewald’s work, a much closer examination of every ritual (and every analytic hour) in order to see if meaningful psychic change is taking place. Unlike Freud’s universalizing approach to symbols, this schema is based on the idea that psychic change is dependent on cultural models of psychic change.

Ultimately both Obeyskere and Loewald remain closely connected to Freud’s original ideas about rituals, even as the relationship between analytic hours and religious rituals changes. The motivation behind this type of symbolic theory of ritual is laudable, as noted above. It avoids imposing often quite wild theories of cause and effect on selected rituals, usually non-European. As Hans Penner notes in his analysis of symbolic theories, “one of the strengths of the symbolic approach is its criticism of ethnocentric explanations of religious beliefs and practices” (Penner, 1989, p. 71). The caricatured

voodoo doll model of ritual has been left behind, as have outdated theories of primitive magic.

A symbolic approach, however, cannot explain the full range of roles rituals fill in society. It is impossible to claim that the modes of thought represented in rituals possess the complete differentiation from issues of cause and effect symbolic theorists claim. As Richard Parmentier reminds us, “ritual in many cultural traditions functions to change social relationships, convey divine powers, cure diseases, or coerce natural forces” (Parmentier, 1994, p. 128).

While theories that downplay cause and effect may at first glance seem a boon to psychoanalysts, they come with tremendous limitations. Since the rituals are not undertaken for explicit psychological reason, the psychological experiences always operate as secondary, “by-the-way” effects. The wide spectrum of types of rituals and their intricate structures are not motivated, that is, psychological needs can be more directly, and simply, met by other means. It is not surprising that so many have rejected Freud’s specific complex of hidden meanings, since they are much more elaborate than needed for most symbolic theories. Finally, and most importantly, a relentless limitation of ideas about the efficacy implicates even psychological cause-and-effect theories, ultimately questioning Freud’s explanation of therapeutic action. Efficacy is relegated to the science lab and attempts to alter brain chemistry based on surgery and pharmacology.

## **Part 2: Ritual as Action**

Rituals are the opposite of unique events but they are not the opposite of transformative events. This transformational capacity is obvious at one level; everyone recognizes that at the end of a marriage ceremony, the bride and groom are married.



Participants are only aware of the most explicitly stated aspects of ritual change and not the more general capacity of rituals to enact and create the very basis of social action. As Rappaport starkly reminds us, “By participating in a ritual, the performer becomes part of an order which is utterly dependent for its very existence upon instances, such as his, of its performance” (Rappaport, 1980). The newer theories of ritual attempt to focus on exactly this dimension, that is, how rituals construct the social basis for transformational actions. Sometimes the term “performance” is substituted for “ritual” to forefront issues of efficacy and also to avoid some of the legacy of the term “ritual.” Catherine Bell, for example, explains, “Performance approaches seek to explore how activities create culture, authority, transcendence, and whatever forms of holistic ordering are required for people to act in meaningful and effective ways” (Bell, 1998, p. 208). Whatever the terminology employed, the problem remains the same: How is it that repeated actions structure and implement social agency? Since the goal of this paper is to generate new ideas about the analytic hour, the two aspects of efficacy focused on here are the general issue of structure and then the more specific question of the role of language.

Each ritual, via its complex structure, calls attention to itself as an enactment of a recognizable type of social action. Each ritual is a specific enactment of a recognizable goal-directed type of event (a marriage, coronation, healing) that repeats a prior, successful model of that event. As Richard Parmentier (1994) explains,

Hyperstructure is the key to this, since ritual actions are not just conventional, they are so conventionalized that they highlight or call attention to the rules, that is to the pattern, model, or semiotic type which the ritual action instantiates.  
(p. 128)

For instance, the “hyperstructure” displayed at the inauguration of a new president indicates that 1) this action is an example of an inauguration and 2) this is how

inaugurations work. These actions, in the case of religious rituals, depend on divine models as the basis of the transformation. That is, religious rituals are privileged moments when human-divine relationships are interpreted, organized and regimented so that divine power can be presupposed and utilized for a specific goal (Parmentier, 1994, p. 19). In secular rites, other types of precedents, complete with foundational moments, undergird and support agency.

All of these events operate with a sleight of hand: while each instance of a ritual points towards a general type of action (this marriage works because it is an example of the general category “marriage”), the very enactment itself reshapes the general model. That is, while it may seem that rituals *repeat* social models, these social models are *retroactively determined* by each specific enactment. As LiPuma and Lee explain, “A ritual exchange unfolds as though the participants already objectively presupposed the state of affairs that the ritual creatively (re)enacts, including its own context of enactment.” Each time, for example, a legal ruling is made it both enacts that ruling and reshapes the “precedent.” In more technical terms, each marriage ceremony (token) is a replica of the culturally-defined action “marriage” (type) but at the same time the efficacy of the token reinvigorates the type. The performance of any ritual is such that it “determines those primordial events, creates the collectivities past and present to which they pertain, and sets out the criterion of identity which specifies the present event as an instance (an indexical icon) of a type” (LiPuma & Lee, 2008, p. 99).

One of the more obvious aspects of the structure of any rite is the manner in which it enacts cosmological presuppositions that otherwise are simply taken for granted, clarifying how the world was created and thus how it operates. These cultural

cosmologies exist for societies *to the extent* that they have been articulated by and for the members via rituals, and this articulation is usually done in the most dramatic and obvious manner as part of religious rituals. As one example among millions, in the Buddhist Topknot cutting ceremony in which a boy becomes a monk, a small artificial hill is built which is an exact image of Mount Kailasa, the dwelling place of the god Shiva. “The more the constructions resembled Mount Kailasa itself, the more efficacious, auspicious, and potent were deemed the effects of the ceremony for the candidate and his family” (Tambiah, 1979, pp. 57-58). Mount Kailasa has both been instantiated and its instantiation employed to enact divine presence and power in the ritual.

The “cosmological” groundings of the analytic hour were determined by the original historical setting, that is, by Freud’s practices. The use of the couch, the number of meetings per week, the mental attitude of the analysts are all tropes on Freud’s model. The analytic patient, in the original model, was conceptualized as an isolated individual whose story always begins with gender, age and marital status.<sup>9</sup> The patient’s mind was perceived as a museum, since, as Handler notes, “in modern society, the temple of authenticity is the Museum” [cited by (Parmentier, 1994, p. 141)]. Changes in practice can be justified as returns to the original model. Hence the periodic analytic “reformations” that introduce change by rediscovering aspects of Freud’s original intentions.

The frame at any one moment is a mixture of adaptations and traditional practices since it must always adapt to a variety of social changes and pressures (from new notions of mind-body connections to the growth of the internet). This is despite that fact that certain factors carry much of the weight of tradition, such as, for example, the number of

sessions per week. A different way of conceiving of the frame, and attempting to give it a stability, is Lear's statement that the frame is anchored by a commitment towards objectivity on the part of the analyst (Lear, 2004, pp. 52, 113). Not surprisingly, the argument about the frame is always an argument about efficacy, though often displaced a level or two.

Turning to the role of language, rituals are also replete with special uses of language, that is, we see very clearly in rituals that language functions in much more diverse and complex ways than the standard model of semantic meaning. Scholars of ritual have been quick to embrace alternative theories about linguistic functions, foremost being speech-act theory as outlined in the work of Austin (1962), *How to Do Things with Words*. The appeal of speech-act theory is that the recitation of certain verbal formulas is understood to carry out a deed in the very speaking. A famous example is "I now pronounce you man and wife" in the marriage ceremony that effects the marriage by its utterance. Austin created the term "performativity" to capture the sense of "doing" in this type of speech.

Austin's study was an analysis of only a small number of English linguistic forms so its direct application is extremely limited (See the important critique of the cultural limitations of speech act theory Rosaldo, 1982). What Austin did demonstrate, and what others borrow from him and expand on, is the notion that words can function not only semantically (refer to objects), but also pragmatically (relate to their contexts of use).<sup>10</sup> Pragmatic speech refers to speech that effects the context of use. Everyone who uses language is aware of this at times, since in some cases the fact that words seem to "do things" is apparent to the user. A useful example, because of the clear context-effecting

implications of language, is law school. Students undergo an extended education in the meta-rules for using legal terms appropriately in order to be able to employ them successfully in legal argumentation (Mertz, 1996). Similarly, Wertsch (1985) outlines the strategy kindergarten teachers use to steer their students away from “noninstructional experience statements” in the classrooms. The students learn the special modes of talk appropriate for formal schooling.<sup>11</sup>

The more specific question is: If utterances are part of social projects and not merely vehicles for expressing thoughts (Hanks, 1996, p. 168), what kind of social project is analysis and how is the multi-functionality of language employed for therapeutic reasons? The “talking cure” is an extremely rich case of “performativity,” that is, the potential for the talking cure to cure is dependent on the potential for conversations to shape mental processes.

Analysis is a sub-category of conversation that makes use of the “relative focus on interpersonal involvement usually found in conversation” (Cicourel, 1985, p. 163). The idea that “something else” besides conversation happens during analytic hours presumes that in some *other* conversations only information is exchanged. Shifting notions of the interpersonal involvement of different modes of interaction (phone, Facebook, etc) will ultimately influence analytic models. As traditionally conceived, the analytic conversation permits the analysand to have access to more dimensions of his or her mind. Analysts opt for a wide set of metaphors to try to capture the increased ability of the patient to think, such as gaining additional “room” for thinking or creating “two-person thinking” that can tolerate a wide spectrum of thought. All these metaphors,

stimulating as they are, depend in part on mystification since that is the nature of metaphor.

Theorizing instead in terms of the multi-functionality of language, an hour is decontextualized, that is, set off from as much as possible from daily life verbal exchanges. The patient is shown in every possible way that a special type of talk takes place in analysis, one that is unlike any other. The point of this decontextualization is to permit the subsequent recontextualization of language, that is, to develop special meanings that point principally toward, and depend on, meanings developed in *the hours themselves*. The goal of the talk is to transform the talking that happens during sessions. Analytic talk thus is incredibly self-referential, and articulating that process to anyone outside the hour is fraught with problems, even if it is an analytic audience.

Recontextualizing of language is done based on an asymmetric dialogue. William Hanks mentions in one breath “clergy, psychoanalysts and medical doctors,” as evidence of “asymmetries in knowledge, responsibility, rights of inquiry and consequences of categorization” (Hanks, 1996, p. 171). No amount of analyzing the countertransference will change this basic asymmetry.<sup>12</sup> The structure of the speaking in the hour, with the patient speaking towards the ceiling and the analyst towards the patient, reflects this hierarchy. Since in all rituals “spatial orientation is a sign of role incumbency” the very fact that the analyst sits while the patient lies down demonstrates their distinct roles (Hanks, 1996, p. 186).

Interpretations given by analysts are basically interruptions of the patient. Here again, while patients may interrupt analysts as times, these interruptions are not of the same status. From this point of view, the talk of the analyst might appear analogous to

much political and religious discourse that is immune to “outside” voices and reformulations. As Voloshinov explains, “The stronger the feeling of hierarchical eminence in another’s utterance, the more sharply defined will its boundaries be, and the less accessible will it be to penetration by retorting and commenting from outside” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 123). The situation is very complex when it comes to analytic hours, because of the intertwined modes of sharing minds. The patient does the primary talking and the analyst comments from the side, as if in a parliamentary speech the role of heckler was delegated to the speaker instead of the audience.

In this confusing, dialogic mixing of minds, the question of the ultimate origin of a specific thought is not clear. Whose unconscious is responding to whose? Projective identification can be seen as, in part, an attempt to disown some aspects of the analyst’s mind by locating some mental content as being originally from the patient, much as the talk of the gods is always ideologically displaced from the human speaker who conveys it. Analytic talk is also similar to specific religious rituals in that the language used points relentlessly towards the patient, just as a shaman during a cure keeps the patient in his focus by means of indexicals such as “you” and “I” (Hanks, 1990).

Numerous studies offer detailed depictions of the deep connections between language and mental development. These studies outline the “performative” effect of interpersonal conversations on intra-psychic processes because of the irreducibly social nature of language.<sup>13</sup> This claim does not simply mean that the meaning of words comes from the society and is thus “social.” Language use is essentially social because, to use the Russian psychologist Vygotsky’s phrasing, in a “semiotic analysis of human communication any utterance is an irreducibly social phenomenon.” Language begins not

with meaning but with goals. As Vygotsky explains, “A sign is always originally a means used for social purposes, a means of influencing others, and only later becomes a means of influencing oneself” (L. Vygotsky, 1981, p. 157).<sup>14</sup>

Language changes mental functions because mental functions are basically shaped via the internalization of social modes of language uses. Unlike Freud’s picture of the individual making his way into the world of the social, here the social world shapes the individual from the start. Higher mental functions, it turns out, “emerge from the internationalization of sign-mediated social interactive processes. Language provides simultaneously a medium for social interaction and for internal representation” (Hickman, 1987, p. 176). Using signs, and the most important of all signs is language, always begins between people and not between an infant and his personal externalization of his mind (such as hallucinations). Interior speech is an extension of social speech, as “egocentric speech grows out of its social foundations by means of transferring social, collaborative forms of behavior to the sphere of the individual’s psychological functioning” (L. Vygotsky, 1934, p. 45).

The analytic hour is a complex process of externalizing internal speech that was originally social. Vygotsky describes inner speech as “in inner speech the word, as it were, absorbs the sense of preceding and subsequent words, thereby extending almost without limit the boundaries of its meaning”. In the process of the hour, such internal, or egocentric speech is mediated between the two minds, and inner psychological processes illuminated. Since inner speech is not the same as social speech, a very particular talk about talk results. “As opposed to social speech,” Vygotsky explains, “where more stable forms of meaning predominate, in egocentric and inner speech a word’s sense is



influenced and changed as a function of its entering into an intralinguistic context” (L. Vygotsky, 1934, p. 308). What this means is that meaning has to be reconstructed by the analyst and patient together, again highlighting the metalinguistic dimension of the speech (constructing highly context-specific meaning).

Analyst and patient investigate the patient’s inner, or egocentric, speech via two main ideologies of speech, free association and interpretation. Free association is an attempt to locate the most decontextualized speech possible, that is, as decoupled as possible from social expectations. Numerous critiques of free association have pointed out the limitations of this idea, since any person who speaks is, to use Bakhtin’s terminology, “renting” the meaning established by the social system (Todorov, 1984). It does, however, make sense as a meta-pragmatic rule, that is, a rule that talks about the kind of talk that analysis is trying to elicit, since it directs the patient away from social speech. The question of interpretation is equally interesting, since it is a form of meta-commentary, talk about the meaning of previous talk. For those of the tradition of Loewald, an interpretation is the pragmatic moment when the psychic implications of a statement are laid bare by someone who has a greater capacity to see the psychic organization represented in the patient’s half of the conversation.

Psychic structures, according to these ideas, will vary from cultural to culture. The “unconscious” is not a part of the brain, but the sum of many internalized social interactions. Vygotsky argued that the conscious and the unconscious represent two ideas or ideological trends and not two natural, material forces. This idea is close to one articulated by Tzvetan Todorov, who writes, “What if the difference between the conscious and the unconscious were no more than a difference between two models of

discourse? The difference between the Ego and the Super-Ego, that which exists between a sender and an imaginary receiver that has been interiorized” (Todorov, 1984, p. 32).

The difference is that Todorov focuses on discourse while social interactions are not limited to language-based signs. Theoretically, other sign systems can and do effect social interactions, including ones that are more central to other cultural events than analytic hours (music, dance, use of fire, etc.).

### **CONCLUSIONS:**

While analytic hours overlap in their goals and efficacy with religious rituals, not all rituals are equally devoted to enhancing psychic-changes, nor do they bring about the same insights. An amazingly strong attachment is made to the analyst and the patient’s love gives a real impetus towards cure. Tanya Luhrmann posits that in part this is due to the unique talking-without-seeing involved in analysis (Luhrmann, 2000, p. 189-90). The attachment is of course, not unique, but its subservience to cure puts analysis in a small category of cultural work.

Central to Loewald’s claim about the transformative power of analysis would be the fact that the patients are constantly made aware of what is happening during the hour, a mode of self-reflexivity not true of many rituals. Analysis is in this way similar to the very small set of rituals that include some type of disenchantment. The neutrality of the analyst means he does not root for a particular use of the tool by the patient. The analyst points out to the patient that the dream he dreamt is the patient’s own mental product, and that the unconscious he is becoming aware of is his own unconscious (Loewald, 1980, p. 93).

As Jonathan Lear has argued recently, building upon the work of Loewald, the ultimate goal of analysis is for the patient to have a new experience of his subjectivity. Psychoanalysis teaches the patient “what he has taken to be objective is in fact subjective”. Over and over again, by means of analysis of transference, the patient learns to “take up the task of developing herself as a subject” (Lear, 2004, p. 47). She talks about herself in a new way, and in the process transforms herself.

As a new mediating tool, the analytic hour is maximally structured to bring out what is often only a secondary by-product of a religious ritual. The economy of attention is all directed towards the insight. The analytic hour does not instantiate any representation of supernatural beings, and since these do not exist, the hour has a basis in reality that Freud insisted upon. What happens in the hour then, looking through this lens, is that mental functioning is influenced by the mediating use of language developed during the hour itself. Over a period of time learning this new type of talk, each person internalizes a new way of being in the world that is founded on new understanding of their own agency. Freed up from having to be a unique cultural event, seen instead through a vision of what it shares with the other forms of the work of culture, an analytic hour may turn out to be more effective, not less.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>He does discuss obsessional prohibitions in a section of *Totem and Taboo* (1913, pp. 26-29).

<sup>2</sup>Freud imposed Robertson Smith's extremely influential theory about Semitic sacrifice onto the Australian Aboriginals. He combined it with James George Frazer's often quite shaky theories on sacrifice and totemism.

<sup>3</sup>For a recent compelling reformulation of the religious/neurotic analogy based on Jewish conceptions of law see . Dundes' extensive studies include numerous interesting speculations about rituals such as . For a general listing, see .

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the discussion by Smith cited here, see also Asad's important critique of modern uses of the term "ritual".

<sup>5</sup>See S. J. Tambiah's discussion of the early history of anthropology and Frazer's influence .

<sup>6</sup> In Bernard Malinowski's classic explanation of Trobriand fishing customs, for example, when fishermen fished near shore, they did not employ "magical" rites (1954). When they fished in the open and dangerous seas, however, anxiety caused them to supplement their practical knowledge of the seas with magical rituals for supernatural aid. To this Radcliffe-Brown made his famous rejoinder that Malinowski may have put the horse before the cart; individuals may be anxious because of the rituals they perform.

<sup>7</sup> Volney Gay, for example, points out that repeated action is the basis of ego development since "repetitious sampling and comparing is essential to the development of reality testing and therefore to the development of the ego itself" . According to Gay, a better parallel to religious ritual might be the behavior of the hysteric. Numerous other modifications of Freud's ideas about religion begin from other

<sup>8</sup> The concept of symbol used here is not the technical one employed in semiotic analysis but simply the idea that specific representations (parts of a rite for example) “stand for” something else.

<sup>9</sup> Voloshinov critiques Freud on exactly this conception of the isolated individual psyche . Other cultures may have different conceptions of the individual, as noted by Kakar, (1981).

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed discussion of the multi-functionality of language see Silverstein (1993).

<sup>11</sup> The teacher intervenes with direct negative statements and teaches the student that pictures “serve to index decontextualized semantic terms, a kind of linguistic object” .

<sup>12</sup> The most direct challenge was Ferenczi’s attempt at mutual analysis (1988). Reading in his *Clinical Diary* his explanation of why this failed is a useful reminder of the importance of the customary analytic hierarchy (Ferenczi, p. 46ff).

<sup>13</sup>Fascinating parallels between Freud and Vygotsky beyond the scope of this paper can be found in (Wilson & Weinstein, 1992a) and (Wilson & Weinstein, 1992b).

<sup>14</sup>For an introduction to Vygotsky see , which discusses not only Vygotsky and Bakhtin but is also extremely readable. The collection of Vygotsky’s essays published as *Mind in Society* is also excellent. Wertsch is for those ready for a more technical discussion.

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