

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21A.215 Medical Anthropology
Fall 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

THE INSTITUTION(S) OF MEDICINE VII
Oct. 29, 2007

Read: Rosenhan et al., "On being sane in insane places"
Katz, "Ritual in the operating room"
Hahn: "Between two worlds: Physicians as patients"
Vuckovic, "Fast Relief: Buying Time with Medications"

I. The role of ritual and symbolism in institutions

A. Definition of ritual

1. Ritual is often defined in religious terms
 - a. "Religion in action"
 - b. A patterned act that involves the manipulation of religious symbols
2. But oftentimes this definition is too restricting
3. Examples of secular ritual:
 - a. Commencement
 - b. Executions
 - 1) The film "Dead Man Walking"
 - 2) The title describes part of the ritual—an announcement is made, "dead man walking," as the man who's about to be executed walks into the execution chamber
 - 3) Another ritual: a nurse swabs his arm with disinfectant before putting in the needle
 - c. **Discuss:** MIT examples?
 - d. Medical examples?

B. We clearly need definitions not limited to religious practice

1. Here's one definition: standardized ceremonies in which expressive, symbolic, mystical, sacred, and nonrational behavior predominates over practical, technical, secular, rational, and scientific behavior

2. But there are problems with definitions like this one, which seem to dismiss ritual as superfluous, irrational, unscientific
3. So, let's stay with the idea of patterned behavior
4. And then add that rituals require *shared* understandings about what the behavior consists of, and why it's done
5. And add that rituals occur in social situations
 - a. If you want to call brushing your teeth a ritual, fine, but that's not the prototypical ritual

C. What do rituals *do*?

1. First, they accomplish things
 - a. They *properly* launch a ship, *properly* execute a man, *properly* expel a cadet from West Point
 - b. Some rituals properly move people from one social status to another
 - 1) These rituals are called "rites of passage"
 - 2) Commencement, Bar/Bat mitzvah, "sweet sixteen" birthday parties, weddings, funerals, joining the army
2. Second, they also are occasions where members of a society make statements about society
 - a. About what's important; about what's beautiful, what's moral, etc.
 - b. Some of the communications are crystal clear
 - 1) "I dub thee Sir Paul McCartney"
 - c. Some of the communications are sent unconsciously, it is the anthropologist who discovers them
 - 1) Note: hypothesizing about unconscious motives is risky
 - a) If you're a social scientist, making claims about what is being said unintentionally is tricky

- b) Your evidence is not as strong
- c) But it's very clear that rituals often contain hidden meanings
- d) Such unconscious meaning may be mainly psychological, or social
- e) Example: Gordon's analysis of hospital slang
 - (1) Slang use affirms membership in an "in group"
 - (2) And messages are being sent about the social status of participants

D. Rituals in modern operating rooms are stylized, arbitrary, repetitive and exaggerated forms of behavior

1. What are Katz's hypotheses about ritual in an operating room?
 - a. That rituals serve some very practical functions
 - b. Operating room ritual contributes to the efficiency of a technical, goal-oriented, scientific activity such as surgery, by permitting autonomy of action to the participants and enabling them to function in circumstances of ambiguity
 - c. Such rituals make salient, and even exaggerate, the boundaries of categories in a situation of potential confusion
 - d. Operating room ritual establishes the discontinuous nature of the operating room and its activity from the rest of the hospital and world
 - e. The ritual permits diffusion of emotions

II. Liminality

- A. Katz talks about it
- B. "Liminality" refers to "betwixt and between" objects or states—neither "fish nor fowl"

1. Examples: Twilight, lungfish; swamps
- C. Katz mentions anthropologists Arnold Van Gennep, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner; they all analyzed liminality
1. These 3 authors talk about periods of transitions being seen as special, often dangerous, in all societies
 2. There is lots of cross-cultural evidence that people in transition are indeed seen this way, even those that are kind of “permanently” in transition
 - a. Such as hermaphrodites
 3. The hypothesis is that we are made nervous by “betwixt and between” cases
 - a. Situations in which the classification of objects or people is not clear are also often seen as dangerous or problematic in some way
 - b. Such objects or people are often said to be
 - 1) Polluted
 - 2) Sacred
 - 3) To have special powers
 4. The argument is that ritual is so prominent in situations of liminality because the ritual is seen to control the danger
 5. Some of the tasks that rituals accomplish are either to strongly mark boundaries, or create them when they aren't there
 - a. Carrying the bride over the threshold makes a *ritual statement* that the threshold (the boundary between outside the house and inside the house) is being crossed
 - 1) Why don't they both just walk into the house?
 - 2) A classic case of ritual in the context of liminality—the threshold is “betwixt and between”
 - 3) **Discuss:** what is the ritual saying?

- 4) Are the bride and groom aware that this is the meaning of the ritual they're engaging in?

III. Medicine and liminality

- A. Organ transplants provide occasions for exploring ways societies deal with liminality
 1. "Betwixt and between" again
 2. We see cannibalism as horrible
 - a. We are appalled even when we learn about cultures prescribing cannibalism where no killing is involved, and where the dead person *wanted* to be incorporated into his/her descendants
 - b. Note that "medicinal cannibalism" has been documented in European medical literature since the first century A.D., mentioned by Pliny the Elder,
 - 1) Who spoke about human blood as a cure for epilepsy
 - 2) Substances from human corpses to treat arthritis, reproductive difficulties, sciatica, warts, skin blemishes
 - 3) Blood was seen to be most effective when drunk immediately after the death of the person, and blood of those who died violently was seen to be especially potent
 - 4) In the heyday, human body products were regular items in any well-stocked pharmacy¹
 3. If you're cut open and a part of someone else is put in
 - a. **Discuss:** How is this not like cannibalism?
 - b. Why is it less upsetting than if you were to ingest a body part?
 - c. It's still not totally OK, as transplant recipients' comments make clear

¹ Beth A. Conklin: *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001: 8-10.

4. The Christian ritual of communion
 - a. Communion involves symbolically or actually (Catholicism—doctrine of transubstantiation) taking in the body and blood of Jesus Christ
 - b. A ritual that *appropriates* the disturbing quality of incorporation of another's body to make powerful positive statements
 - c. It's a kind of cannibalism
 - d. Ingestion of human flesh and blood, but with totally different meanings—this is a blessing, a sacrament, is seen to promote spiritual health
 - e. **Discuss:** analyze the functions of beliefs in transubstantiation

C. Our readings offer examples of liminality

1. Katz's examples of making strong statements about boundaries—if they seem arbitrary, then the hypothesis would argue that there is a greater probability that ritual will be employed
 - a. Above the waist, below the waist?
2. Rosenhan et al.: people inside a mental hospital playing the role of patients are by definition insane—no “betwixt and between” possible here
3. All of Dumit's “new socio-medical disorders” reveal an abundance of classificatory problems, liminality
 - a. “Biomental,” for example
4. Hahn's physicians as patients: probably some of the unfortunate reactions and treatments experienced by these seriously ill physicians
 - a. Occur because of the improper boundary-crossing they engaged in