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BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Ritual renaissance: new insights into the most human of behaviours

A theme issue compiled and edited by Cristine H Legare and Mark G Nielsen

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About this issue

Convergent developments across social scientific disciplines provide evidence that rituals are a psychologically prepared, culturally inherited, behavioural trademark of our species. Rituals are socially-stipulated, conventional practices that are opaque from the perspective of physical causality. The diversity of ritual practices is dramatic and ranges from elaborate religious ceremonies, to initiation rites, to simple greetings. It ranges from the life threatening to the benign. Yet our understanding of this core human trait remains limited.

This special issue integrates research from anthropology, archaeology, biology, primatology, cognitive science, psychology, religious studies, and demography to build an interdisciplinary account of ritual. The objective of this special issue is to contribute to an integrative explanation of ritual by addressing Tinbergen's four key questions. These include answering ultimate questions about the (1) phylogeny of ritual and (2) adaptive functions of ritual. These also include answering proximate questions about the (3) mechanisms (causation) and (4) ontogeny (development) of ritual. The intersection of these four complementary lines of inquiry yields new avenues for theory and research on the co-evolution of cognition and culture.

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Front image Children learn rituals by observing and imitating the behaviours of their family and those in their community. Here a young child copies his elders engaged in congregational midday prayers at the Strasbourg Grand Mosque on the first day of Ramadan. Image credit: REUTERS/Vincent Kessler.

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