

OPAQUENESS, RITUALISATION, ANXIETY: THE COGNITIVE FOUNDATIONS OF RITUAL
OPUS PROJECT DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC
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Rituals are everywhere. From the way that people wash their baby's bottle, through the team chant repeated before every match, to the Orthodox Easter service that involves numerous priests, deacons and altar boys, and takes several hours. Their variety is an essential aspect of the rich differences between various human cultures. Yet, they are all performed by people whose brains and minds are fundamentally very similar. So, it is not so surprising that rituals the world over share certain characteristics such as adhering to a script or including actions that do not seem to achieve anything.

The project seeks to understand what it is about the human mind that makes rituals so ubiquitous. It does so by looking at the way that people come to spontaneously behave in ritualised ways. To make the research easier and more interesting for those participating, it takes the form of a game, in which the exact way to score points is never revealed. By subtly altering the rules of the game as well as the conditions in which it is played we are trying to find out in what circumstances people will – without noticing – begin to behave in ways typical of ritual.

This will help us to understand some basic things about the nature of ritual. We will be able to find out to what degree rituals are a side effect of our attempts to deal with an environment that is only partially known and what to make of the role played by anxiety, which is well known to make it much more likely that people will behave in ritualised ways. By letting people observe the way others play before getting them to play themselves, we will also get to study how it is that traditions of ritual form. Finally, our research will help us understand something of the relationship between religious beliefs and practices.

By putting all of this together we will be able to put forward an account of ritual that will be able to relate the various rituals people engage in within the context of religion, magic and superstition. None of this will negate the rich variety of such practices. Instead, by letting us better explain what they have in common, we will be in the position to understand what makes each of them different.