

Organizational Rituals, Communication, and the Question of Agency

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Abstract

This study explores the performative aspects of organizational rituals to explain their agentic capacity and understand how rituals participate in the accomplishment of organizational action. We develop an alternative framework of organizational rituals based on insights from communication theory and the literature on the communicative constitution of organization/ing (CCO) and demonstrate how rituals “make present” abstract representations of organizational power and value in ways that convey authority and bear down upon the activities and decisions of organizational members. This can be understood through a logic of “attribution and appropriation” that both constitutes rituals as actants and enables them to possess the actions of their participants. This represents a departure from previous research on organizational rituals but can also enhance our understanding of rituals, agency, and symbolic action in organizations—especially in terms of exploring sources of action and agency beyond human intentionality.

Keywords

communicative constitution, CCO, agency, rituals

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When organizational practices take on a level of sacredness, formality, and aesthetic value, they go beyond mere routine and can achieve the status of ritual (Knuf, 1993). Rituals have a distinguished history in social theory (e.g., Durkheim, 1961; Goffman, 1967) and are a prominent topic of investigation for organizational scholars (Smith & Stewart, 2011). Organizational rituals are distinct forms of social practice involving the enactment of a group's values and identity (Islam & Zyphur, 2009). This common understanding of organizational rituals is grounded in the seminal work of Trice and Beyer (1984, 1985, 1993) who called attention to the symbolic and expressive character of organizational behavior (also see Deal & Kennedy, 1982; J. W. Meyer & Scott, 1983). Previous research also defines organizational rituals in terms of their formality, sacredness, irrationality, and aesthetics (Knuf, 1993), which helps distinguish organizational rituals from other symbolic forms such as routines (Pentland & Rueter, 1994), genres (Csordas, 1987; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994), and institutions (J. W. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In this study, we call attention to an important but underexamined aspect that warrants further analysis: the capacity for rituals to make a difference beyond their instrumental functions guided by human intention—the question of agency.

To date, work on organizational rituals has focused primarily on the instrumental uses of rituals and how they are employed in organizational settings (e.g., Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Smith & Stewart, 2011). However, organizational rituals also have latent meanings and unintended effects beyond human intentionality not reducible to the efforts and goals of members, yet exhibit the capacity to perform and accomplish things beyond their intended purposes. Although acknowledged, these latent, unintended characteristics of rituals are generally taken for granted or assumed away under the nebulous concept of organizational culture. At issue is whether or not these performative aspects can provide any insight to enhance our understanding of organizations and organizing.

We develop an alternative explanation to reconcile the instrumental functionality of organizational rituals with their latent meanings and unintended effects. This requires a different approach to communication and agency. Instead of seeing communication as merely the neutral carrier of human intentionality—a view that is prevalent in the organizational and management literatures (see Kuhn, 2008)—we need to appreciate the generative power of communication and its role in the constitution of social reality. Our basic premise is that organizational rituals can possess *agency*—they can make a difference in consequential ways not reducible to human intentions and purposes—and we can explain ritual agency from a distinctly communicative perspective.

This is important theoretically for several reasons. First, it challenges micro–macro dualisms that are common in organizational scholarship but hinder theoretical development (Kuhn, 2012). Examining the agentic capacity of organizational rituals enables us to see the mutual constitution and copresence of micro- and macro-phenomena, thereby helping reclaim the legacy of the linguistic turn (Deetz, 2003). Also, our approach to rituals and agency helps reframe the dichotomy between action and structure, one of the defining characteristics of modern organizational theory (e.g., Conrad & Haynes, 2001; Giddens, 1984). We emphasize how action is configured in a chain of agencies involving a number of human and nonhuman agents with variable ontologies (Cooren, 2010) and offer a way to understand the action associated with organizational rituals without separating supposedly transcendent structures and action. Our research also supports broader efforts to rethink a number of related issues from a communication perspective, particularly recent work that conceptualizes organizational memory as an interactional process (e.g., Seidl, 2005). Finally, our study contributes to interpretive approaches of organizational culture that challenge functional and managerial perspectives (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). Our approach suggests a limit to management's ability to "create" particular organizational cultures or "use" rituals to accomplish specific ends, and encourages us to examine sources of action and agency beyond human intentionality, which is a growing area of interest for organizational communication scholars (Brummann, 2006; Cooren, 2004; Robichaud, 2006).

Rituals and the Question of Agency

Anthropology and Sociology Ritual Literature

A systematic treatment of the extensive work on rituals, in anthropology and sociology, is beyond our purposes here (see Bell, 1992, 1997, for thorough reviews). Instead, we focus on how previous ritual research has addressed the question of agency. Our review of this work suggests several related themes. First, most research on rituals emphasizes individual agency and the instrumentality of individuals who use rituals to accomplish various religious and cultural purposes. For example, Csordas's (1987) study of Catholic Pentecostalism shows how community members utilize various practices and rituals to sustain their society and establish social relations for religious or spiritual purposes.

Also prevalent are attempts to explain the various attributions of agency regarding rituals. Nordin (2009) acknowledges the widespread anthropomorphism involved with many rituals, attributing human characteristics to inanimate

objects. He cautions not to confuse agency with animacy or other biological qualities, noting that “intentionality” is the defining characteristic of agency, which he claims only human agents can possess. Bloch (2006) contends that intentionality can shift when actions are ritualized because in rituals people defer to the authority of others to ensure the value of what is being performed. Similarly, Engler (2009) articulates a notion of distributed agency where rituals “displace” the agency of individuals but still point toward an initial causal sequence.

A final common occurrence is the framing of agency in terms of efficacy. That is, addressing the question of agency by exploring whether or not rituals “work” and examining why people believe that they do (Sax, 2010). For example, Sørensen’s (2007a, b) extensive work seeks to explain ritual efficacy in terms of social cognition, suggesting that rituals work because people process information about ritualized action in relation to their broader religious or spiritual worldviews.

Organizational Ritual Literature

The organizational literature on rituals has focused primarily on the instrumental uses of rituals in organizational settings. For example, research demonstrates that rituals are used to stimulate innovation (Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2002), shape identities (Coyne & Mathers, 2011), influence responses to environmental changes (Boyer & Lienard, 2006), convey rationality (Carter & Mueller, 2002), challenge dominant values (Islam, Zyphur, & Boje, 2008), and reduce uncertainty (Knuf, 1993). Furthermore, Smith and Stewart’s (2011) review of the ritual literature also shows that organizational rituals are employed for many more social and individual purposes. The central idea across this literature is that rituals are a function of human intentionality used to accomplish various organizational objectives.

Yet, a careful reading of the literature shows that rituals also display characteristics beyond their instrumental functions guided by human intention. For example, Rosen’s (1988) study of an advertising agency’s Christmas party distinguishes between the explicit and latent functions of rituals, where rituals were enacted but certain outcomes were realized only secondarily and quite unintentionally. Likewise, Knuf (1993) describes how rituals are not easily influenced by the “intentionality of [organizational] actors” (p. 89), and Islam and Zyphur’s (2009) review of the organizational ritual literature distinguishes between intended functions and what rituals actually accomplish in organizations. These studies suggest the apparent agentic capacity of organizational rituals—the ability to make a difference that is beyond human intentionality. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the neoinstitutional literature, which has long acknowledged the significance of nonrational and

informal organizational practices (Meyer & Rowan, 2012; Scott, 1987; Zucker, 1987). For instance, Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010) demonstrate how dining rituals at Cambridge colleges enable the institutional maintenance of the British class system, even though most participants were not aware how these ritualized practices contributed to broader institutions. Similarly, Trice and Beyer (1984, 1985) explain that rituals often produce latent consequences beyond their explicit purposes, such as socialization rituals (e.g., military basic training) that have the intended function of transitioning organizational members into new roles, yet also have the added effect of reestablishing equilibrium in ongoing social relations.

Despite these important insights, this literature reveals key shortcomings. At issue is a broader question about agency and organizational action. To date, the organizational literature presents two general ways of understanding this. One, a reductionist approach where all organizational actions are eventually attributed to people acting on behalf of the organization; or two, an essentialist approach where organizations are afforded a separate ontological status and thus able to act on their own (see Bencherki & Cooren, 2011; King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010, for reviews on this dichotomy). We find neither satisfying, especially for understanding the agentic capacity of organizational rituals. A reductionist approach overlooks the fact that rituals clearly exhibit latent meanings and unintended effects that cannot be reduced to the efforts and intentions of human actors. Conversely, an essentialist approach entails that rituals have an *a priori* existence that enables them to somehow act upon organizational members, but without accounting for how rituals come into being in the first place or how symbolic practices could indeed make a difference on their own.

Plugging both approaches is an instrumentalist orientation toward communication as a relatively neutral conduit of human intentionality divorced from organizational ontology (see Kuhn, 2008). For example, Dacin et al. (2010)—while recognizing the unintended effects of rituals—portray organizational rituals as “carriers of cultural material” (pp. 1394, 1414), suggesting that organizational culture is somehow “material” that can be “carried” through ritualized practices that are ontologically separate. In contrast, we argue that agency is not “in” rituals (or people, for that matter), nor is agency something static that can be “carried” by a ritual. Following Cooren (2006), we understand agency as a hybrid phenomenon that activates the involvement of several diverse agents with varying ontologies. This more relational approach to agency (see Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Robichaud, 2006) does not take for granted the apparent agency of rituals or reduce agency to the actions and intentions of organizational members, so as to overcome the shortcomings in the literature mentioned above. However, this approach does

require an understanding of communication not common in the organizational and management literatures. In the next section, we turn to the literature on the communicative constitution of organization/ing (CCO) to develop a conceptual framework of ritual agency.

A Communicative Framework of Ritual Agency

Recent theorizing in organizational communication underscores the generative power of human interaction and portrays the ontological status of organizations as social accomplishments. Based on a constitutive meta-model of communication (Craig, 1999), this approach has become known as the CCO perspective. The basic claim of CCO scholars—while encompassing a wide range of research agendas—is that organizations exist *as* communication and key organizational realities are best understood as communicative phenomena (see Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014, for a review). A CCO perspective provides the necessary intellectual resources to move beyond the limitations of previous research. We utilize three aspects of the CCO literature associated with the Montréal School of organizational communication to develop a conceptual framework that explains the agentic capacity of organizational rituals. Specifically, we draw on Cooren's (2006) notion of presentification, Kuhn's (2008) concept of an authoritative text, and Bencherki and Cooren's (2011) idea of possessive constitution. Combining these ideas enables us to explain that *what* rituals do is make present an authoritative text, and *how* they do this is through the attribution and appropriation of possessive constitution. Other schools of thought contribute to the broader CCO literature, most notably McPhee's structuration approach (see Putnam & Nicotera, 2009) and Luhmann's social systems approach (see Schoeneborn, 2011). We draw from Montréal School thinking—and these three areas in particular—because this literature has done the most to directly and thoroughly address the questions of agency that are relevant for our study of organizational rituals.¹

Presentification

We claim that rituals display agency by “making present” a unified sense of the organization, a process Cooren (2006) and his colleagues refer to as *presentification* (see also Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008). From this perspective, an organization exists in and through all the entities that act or speak on its behalf. When we interact or work with “an organization,” what we are actually doing is confronting a host of agents that represent the organization and therefore make it present

to us in situated interactions. Things like company logos, spokespeople, buildings, machines, and signage all materialize or “incarnate” (Cooren, 2010) the organization, such that it seems real to us in certain instances. This makes it possible to reconcile the abstract and embodied aspects of an organization, between which the organization oscillates through various incarnations that make it present. For example, Cooren et al.’s (2008) study of Doctors Without Borders demonstrates how their headquarters, identity cards, and white all-terrain vehicles all contributed to the joint production of this humanitarian organization’s presence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, all being essential for them to operate with legitimacy and authority in remote locations.

The work on presentification has focused primarily on how various material agents (e.g., work orders, signs, memos, press releases, etc.) help make organizations present in situated interactions. We suggest that distinct socio-material practices and symbolic actions such as rituals can also be thought of as agents—or more precisely “actants” (see Latour, 1994)—that make the organization present and thus display agency among organizational members. Certain kinds of interactions (i.e., organizational rituals) can bring forth the organization in ways that display agency and impose themselves upon the very organizational members involved. But how is it that something as nebulous as “the organization” could be present in rituals? This becomes possible if we understand organizations, their mode of being, as abstract textual representations of power and legitimacy that are manifest in practice.

Authoritative Texts

Kuhn (2008) argues for an approach to organizational ontology grounded in the actions of members who attempt to “author” the definitive representation of the organization. He offers the concept of an *authoritative text* to explain an organization’s mode of being as text writ large—a collection of interconnected textual resources that constitute an official conception of the organization. Kuhn (2008) draws primarily from Taylor and Van Every (2000) and their work on coorientation to develop his concept of an authoritative text. Coorientation involves the dialectic of texts and conversations that make up the basic building blocks of an organization. Texts form a self-organizing loop of interaction as they are both the medium and outcome of conversations. Texts can be either concrete or figurative, inscribed in tangible signs and symbols with relatively permanent form, or have a more virtual existence as abstract representations of practice (Kuhn, 2008). As the textual outcomes of coorientation overlap and gain distance from original circumstances, what emerges is not just a loose assortment of interactions but rather an organizational representation so abstract

it is considered to represent all the interactions it refers to (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996). What we then recognize and experience as “the organization” emerges as a higher-order abstraction that is not reducible to any particular instance of coorientation.

Kuhn (2008) introduces the term *authoritative text* to describe a particular manifestation of the organization that is “read” in such a way that it becomes an official interpretation for most organizational members. An authoritative text portrays the structure of the organization in ways that specify roles, duties, values, activities, outcomes, and the like, while also explaining relations of power and legitimacy. The key is that organizational members eventually attribute causal powers to the authoritative text, an “absent-yet-present actant ‘lurking’ in the image of the [organization] which they operate” (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1236). For example, the idea of the “multidimensional form” (the M-form) became more than just an organizational structure in early 20th-century industrialization—as an authoritative text it encompassed an entire way of thinking about efficiency and standardization that had implications for all aspects of work in a particular organization (Kuhn, 2008). Similarly, Koschmann (2013) describes how the term “community dashboard” became an authoritative text for a social service collaboration, providing a renewed sense of identity and purpose to organize their work. Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) demonstrate how the texts of a university’s strategic planning process became more authoritative over time by inscribing power relationships and social order within the organization.

We can now say that organizational rituals can exhibit agency by making present an authoritative text—the symbolic actions of rituals bring forth an abstract understanding of the “official” organization in ways that convey power and legitimacy. It is *in* the symbolic actions and interactions of rituals that the organization—its values, norms, ideals, distributions of power, and so on—is brought to bear on the participants involved. This is why organizational rituals “feel” powerful and are said to “do” things (i.e., exhibit agency). Yet, we still have not accounted for how it is that rituals come to have this ability in the first place. That is, we have explained what ritual agency entails—making present an authoritative text—but we still need to explain how rituals come to possess the capacity for agency. This requires us to demonstrate how it is that action passes between the human actors that perform organizational rituals and the rituals themselves.

Possessive Constitution

Bencherki and Cooren (2011) address the issue of affording the organization a distinct ontological existence with the ability to act completely on its

own and suggest a distinctly communicative approach that involves a logic of appropriation and attribution, based on the two forms of acquisition from Greimas's (1987) narratology. *Appropriation* means that an organization assumes the actions of its members as its own, which is made possible as these actions are *attributed* to the organization itself and not individual members. For example, when we say "The company decided to withdraw from the negotiation," what we mean is that the aggregate actions of the individual members are attributed to a collective known as "the company," which, in turn, appropriates these actions as its own. In this way, the act of attribution helps constitute the very "thing" that now appropriates. Thus, the organization exists and acts because it possesses the actions of its members. Bencherki and Cooren (2011) call this *possessive constitution*, or "being as having" (p. 1580)—possession is a practice that is constitutive of that being.²

In addition to explaining organizational action, this idea of possessive constitution can also help us understand rituals' agentic capacity. As distinct organizational phenomena (i.e., recognizable practices with relatively clear boundaries), rituals can "act" when they appropriate the actions of the participants involved as agency is attributed to the rituals themselves, rather than any particular person or group involved. In other words, organizational rituals can "have" agency by assuming the actions of others who credit rituals as a source of this action. Of course, rituals are not the only possible impetus for action, so to be constituted as actants rituals must be "disentangled" (Nyberg, 2009) from other sources of agency. As Cooren (2006) and Brummans (2006) explain, appropriation involves stopping (or extending) the chain of agencies to account for whatever happens to make a difference in a particular situation, what Barad (2003) refers to as "agential cuts." Agential cuts are temporary distinctions within practices that help resolve the ontological indeterminacy of entangled entities, thereby constituting certain phenomena (such as rituals) as actants (Barad, 2003; Nyberg, 2009). This enables us to reconcile the purposeful functionality of organizational rituals with their latent meanings and unintended consequences, without having to essentialize rituals or reduce their agentic capacity to the intentions of human actors. Rather than saying that people simply *use* rituals to accomplish various organizational objectives, we can recognize that rituals themselves make a difference and have consequential effects because they possess (via attribution) the aggregate actions of participants as a constitutive feature of their existence.

In summary, the CCO literature helps explain the agentic qualities of organizational rituals. Our framework brings together the concepts of presentification, authoritative texts, and possessive constitution to state that rituals

exhibit agency by making present an authoritative text through the appropriation and attribution of organizational action. Next, we present an empirical example of organizational rituals at a nonprofit organization to illustrate this framework.

Research Method

Research Site

AIDS Support and Advocacy³ (ASA) is a nongovernmental organization in the United States serving people with HIV/AIDS and educating the public about HIV/AIDS and related issues. ASA provides individual case management services, medical care, financial support, food bank access, and pro bono legal assistance and also operates as an outreach and information center to prevent further transmission of HIV/AIDS. It has 14 full-time staff members, including an executive director, a volunteer coordinator, fundraising and grants coordinators, and a community outreach coordinator. We were already connected to ASA as part of a larger research project, and it proved to be an especially relevant site for the current investigation because of the salience of organizational rituals.

Following the conventions of inductive, practice-based research (Craig & Tracy, 1995), we sought to identify practical issues ASA members were facing and let specific topics emerge to guide a more targeted investigation. The second author was involved at ASA as a participant observer, acclimating to the organizational context and learning the basics of ASA's operations. In discussing our initial observations, the notion of rituals quickly rose to the forefront as a significant part of ASA's work. This led us to focus more on research about organizational rituals, as the latent meanings and unintended effects of rituals were often recognized but rarely explained or theorized. We also noticed a consistent pattern in our observations and conversations at ASA: The rituals that were so prominent in their work also seemed to be making a difference in the organization, and that people attributed agential powers to these rituals. That is, people extended the chain of agencies beyond individual members to the rituals themselves. Thus, ASA was a compelling site to further investigate questions of ritual agency. We hoped to explain this phenomenon through previous research on organizational rituals, but soon realized the extant literature did not provide a satisfactory account of ritual agency, as explained above. Therefore, we developed an alternative framework from the CCO literature, then pursued a more targeted investigation of ASA rituals to simultaneously inform and illustrate our theoretical framework.

Data Collection

Our case study involves two primary data sources: ethnographic field observations of ASA meetings and activities, and in-depth interviews with a sample of ASA employees and volunteers. The second author attended several ASA meetings and events to get a broad sense of the organization and its operations. This included weekly staff meetings, board meetings, subcommittee meetings, fundraising events, and volunteer projects. Twenty-seven hours of observations from 14 ASA meetings and events were documented, resulting in 125 pages of field notes.

Interview data were collected through theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of ASA staff members and volunteers. The second author conducted 20 initial interviews: 11 were female and 9 male interviewees; 15 were staff members and 5 volunteers. At first, we simply asked questions about the organizational rituals we observed at ASA and probed for additional examples beyond our field observations—so as not to lead in any ways. For instance, when discussing a particular ritual we merely asked the interviewees to “please explain your understanding of [the ritual] and what it means to you.” Only when people answered in ways that attributed agency to rituals that we followed up with more targeted questions to understand how these rituals made a difference in their daily work: “Does [this ritual] influence how you do your job or make decisions? If so, how?” We also used interviews to corroborate our observations and clarify our understanding of ASA—by asking people to explain the rituals we observed at ASA to make sure we understood them accurately. The interviews averaged 45 minutes in length and all, except two who requested not to, were recorded digitally for transcription, resulting in 179 pages of text. We also reviewed a number of ASA documents and materials to supplement our field observations and interviews as an additional measure of interpretive validity. This included all the website content, various brochures and handouts, materials distributed at volunteer events and training workshops, and meeting minutes when available.

After 3 months of observations and interviews, we decided that the fieldwork had become “theoretically saturated” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 110), that is, new observations and interviews about rituals were adding limited value to the concepts under investigation and understanding of the data, and turned to develop our case study. After preliminary data coding and analysis, the first author conducted follow-up phone interviews with eight ASA members to ask clarifying questions and to validate initial observations and conclusions. These interviews averaged 20 minutes in length and resulted in an additional 10 pages of data specifically about rituals at ASA.

Data Analysis

We used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, to organize field notes and interview transcriptions and help us recognize patterns in the data. We conducted a thematic analysis to identify analytical categories that would illustrate the theoretical framework we presented above. This involved an initial process of open coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) where we identified all instances in the data related to organizational rituals. Six distinct organizational rituals at ASA were identified by all members specifically as rituals that were consistent with the definition of organizational rituals we offered earlier.

Subsequently in focused coding (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), we concentrated our efforts on organizational rituals and agency. We operationalized ritual agency as any instance where rituals were said or observed to be accomplishing something or otherwise making a difference, in accordance with the framework we developed above and previous literature (see Cooren, 2006), for example, someone mentioned that a particular ritual “told” them something or “made” them take a particular action we coded these as instances of ritual agency. Focused coding enabled us to examine various subcategories and collapse them into broader themes, resulting in the two themes of ritual agency from overall thematic analysis: reminding and disciplining. For example, initial codes such as remember, recall, and repeat were combined to create our first theme “reminding.” We also checked to ensure that these themes fulfilled the criterion of being mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (Christensen & Carlile, 2009); that is, each theme is analytically distinct and all relevant-coded categories are captured by one of the themes, to enhance the validity of our analysis.

We present our analysis as a case study that includes a detailed explanation of the six specific rituals involved, a description of two themes of ritual agency and explication of how thematic categories illustrate our CCO framework of ritual agency.

A Case Study of Ritual Agency

Organizational Rituals at ASA

We identified six prominent rituals at ASA that were a consistent part of their work, all taking place at the weekly staff meetings. Every Wednesday, the entire ASA staff gathered to give progress reports, plan for upcoming events, and discuss a variety of business-related items. Immediately, we noticed that these weekly staff meetings also involved a number of additional activities seemingly aimed at enhancing employee relations and maintaining a positive

work environment. We soon realized that these activities were best understood as rituals as they were distinct symbolic practices and everyone at ASA specifically referred to them as rituals. For 3 months, we documented rituals as they occurred and clarified our observations in interviews. We describe the six rituals below.

The opening. At the beginning of each staff meeting, the executive director would ask whether anyone had an “opening” to begin their session. This involved a question for everyone in the group to answer. Questions were not directly about work and usually asked people to reflect on something more personal. Some questions were more lighthearted (e.g., “When was the last time you laughed at yourself?”); other questions were more intense (e.g., “Who is someone that has passed away that you are missing?”). People could pass when it was their turn to answer, though the group often circled back to people who passed with another chance to offer a response. The opening also incorporated a “spirit stick” that got passed around as everyone responded. Only the person with the spirit stick could talk. After the opening was over, the spirit stick was placed in the hands of a statute on a bookshelf in the staff meeting room. There was a time when the group forgot to use the spirit stick as they started the opening, but people spoke up and said that using the spirit stick was an important part of the opening that should not be abandoned. Sometimes, the executive director would say that they could forgo the opening in a particular meeting, but another staff member would jump in with an opening question, claiming that this was something they were supposed to do and make time for. Overall, there was a definite ceremonial feel to the opening that set it apart as a distinct practice in the weekly activities of ASA, and it was referred to specifically as a ritual by ASA staff even without our prompting.

Sharing the critter. A second ritual involved a stuffed animal that got passed around each week at the staff meeting to recognize individual employee efforts. This practice began innocuously when one staff member spontaneously thanked another colleague and gave him a small Winnie the Pooh stuffed animal that happened to be lying around the office. Thinking that this was fun and clever, the person who received the stuffed animal then passed it on to someone else as an expression of gratitude. Soon, this practice became routine and was eventually incorporated into the weekly staff meeting, affectionately referred to as “Pooh” and even listed as a specific item on the meeting agenda. Eventually, Pooh was retired and the staff sought a new stuffed animal, now simply referred to as “the critter.” Whichever employee was in possession of the critter that week has the

opportunity to recognize the work of a fellow employee and pass them the critter for the following week, which they usually displayed somewhere in their work space. This weekly process continued until everyone has had the critter for a week, then the critter was retired and a new stuffed animal was used. Again, the critter was a distinct organizational practice at ASA, apart from their “normal” work and often referred to by staff members specifically as a ritual.

Card signing. During each staff meeting, the executive director passed around a number of cards for everyone to sign. These could be birthday cards for clients, thank you cards for donors and volunteers, cards to mark important milestones, or cards to express condolences. For example, in one meeting the staff signed a card for a donor who had made a significant contribution, they signed cards for longtime volunteers who helped at a recent event, and they signed birthday cards for four clients. Birthday cards for clients were especially important because everyone knew how much it meant for someone with HIV/AIDS to live another year, especially when ASA was first founded and little treatment was available. Initially, this seemed like an empty routine or mere busywork, but we quickly noticed the tone of the meeting changed when the card signing began. Staff members talked about whom the cards were for and the significance of the events being recognized. Rather than an administrative detail to hurry through, the card signing was a time for reflection and bonding. We came to see the card signing as a ritualistic practice because of its patterned behaviors and its symbolic significance beyond its immediate instrumental purposes.

The Spanish lesson. Weekly staff meetings also included a brief Spanish lesson for staff to learn key words and phrases they are likely to encounter or need to utilize in their work. Many of ASA’s clients spoke Spanish as their primary language and it was necessary for ASA staff to have a working knowledge of Spanish even if not fluent. The Spanish lesson certainly appeared to have an immediate practical value for the work of ASA, and originally we did not think of it as a ritual. Thus, we were surprised to hear ASA staff members refer to it as a ritual. As we probed in our interview questions, we realized that the Spanish lesson was more about symbolizing a connection to the Spanish-speaking community rather than actually learning a foreign language. ASA staff members told us that the lesson really was not effective for learning Spanish, but a symbolic gesture to affirm their commitment to those who did not speak English as a primary language, appreciating the extra difficulties these people have living with HIV/AIDS or caring for infected relatives and friends.

Reciting the mission statement. At some point during each weekly meeting, ASA's mission statement was recited. Sometimes this was done toward the beginning of the meeting, other times at the end. This was always initiated by the executive director and always done by the person sitting to her right. Staff members would even deliberately avoid sitting next to the executive director if they did not want to be the person to recite the mission statement that particular meeting—or position themselves next to the executive director if they wanted to do it. The executive director would indicate that “it is time to read the mission statement,” followed by a nod to the person on her right to initiate the process. We noticed that the tone of the meetings usually became more serious during the recitation of the mission statement, especially compared with some of the lightheartedness of the rest of the staff meetings. This was a thoughtful time where people focused on the mission of ASA and the work they were trying to accomplish. The reading of the mission statement had a liturgical, benediction-like feel to it. Everyone we interviewed mentioned the importance of this ritual in their weekly staff meetings.

The moment of silence. Finally, each staff meeting ended with a time of silent reflection, specifically referred to as the “moment of silence” initiated by the executive director after all other agenda items were covered. There were no specific instructions before the moment of silence; people were free to use this time however they choose. Sometimes, the moment of silence was preceded with a somber announcement that a client had passed away—and a reminder of how many clients they had lost that year. Most interviewees said that they thought about their upcoming work for the day or reflected on the problem of HIV/AIDS and the overall work they were doing at ASA. The staff meeting room also has a large memorial on one of the walls for each ASA client who has died. The memorial consisted of plaques, paintings, and each person's name. It took up more than half the wall. Many people told us that they focused on this memorial (referred to as “the wall”) during the moment of silence. After about a minute, the executive director jumped in with a comment meant to end the moment of silence and signal a transition to get on with the day's work. People we interviewed referred to the moment of silence as “important,” “appropriate,” “honoring,” “respectful,” and “serious.” Everyone recognized it as a ritual and a distinct part of ASA.

Ritual Agency at ASA

In addition to the prominence of the rituals at ASA, we also discovered a key theme. That is, these organizational rituals were *making a difference* (Cooren, 2006), and that ASA members often ascribed agential power to the rituals

themselves, not just the people performing the rituals. In this section, we describe two themes of ritual agency: reminding and disciplining.

Rituals remind. A most salient idea in our data was that organizational rituals reminded ASA members about key aspects of their organization. For example, reciting the mission statement helped remind people about the larger purpose of their work. An employee named Thomas explained how easy it was for him to get caught up in the details of his work, but that reciting the mission statement reminded him to stay focused on the big picture:

My work is often so much about logistics about making the operation of the overall organization work, sometimes it's a little distanced because I'm one step removed from the direct mission statement . . . I think it's helpful to remind me when that's happening . . . there's constant interruptions and [reciting] the mission reminds me those constant interruptions are for the greater need we have.

Other ASA members expressed similar sentiments, describing how reading the mission statement helped them remember why they were there and what the overall purpose of their work was. This was also true of other rituals: Signing cards reminded members about all the other people involved in this work, sharing the critter reminded them about the efforts of their colleagues, the opening reminded them about the significance of relationships at work, and the Spanish lesson reminded them about specific clients and the cultural barriers of HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention. Thus, our analysis centered on a keytheme of *reminding* as a key attribution of rituals at ASA.

Furthermore, it is notable that ASA members described the rituals themselves as doing the reminding (e.g., "Reading the mission statement makes us remember . . ."). It was not the mission statement itself, for example, that reminded them about the purpose of their work, but rather the collective act of reading the mission statement in the context of the staff meeting (i.e., the ritual). ASA members did not talk about "using" the mission statement or other rituals to do this remembering, as if they are the sole agents involved and merely appropriating the rituals for their own purposes. Instead, interviewees all spoke of the ritual itself as making a difference. More than just a figure of speech, we can conclude that a degree of agency is present in the communication practices of these rituals, not just the material artifacts that were used or the people involved.

Rituals discipline. This theme involved the ways in which various rituals disciplined ASA members—not in terms of punishment, but rather by instilling

order and constraining behavior. When explaining the rituals at ASA, many people described them as “powerful,” and as having the ability to “force” or “make” people do things. For example, an employee named Juan talked about how the staff meeting rituals “force everyone to stop and look and reflect” and think more carefully about their work. Similarly, an employee named Antonio said that reading the mission statement “forced” him to consider why he was there in the first place; Janice explained how the opening helped “get everyone to [the staff] meeting on time,” and Alex described the moment of silence and reading the mission statement as “powerful” ways to “make sure” that they are staying focused on the main purpose of their work. Others mentioned how these rituals “ground” them and their work. “I feel like everything we do at these staff meetings really grounds me and keeps me focused,” said Mateo, an ASA caseworker. We interpreted such examples as relating to a broader theme of *disciplining* that characterized how people experienced the rituals at ASA.

Members often described this disciplining in positive terms—that the rituals helped them refocus and stay on track. This was especially true as people left the staff meeting and went about their weekly work routines. For example, an employee named Maria who worked at the front desk described how challenging it was to sustain a positive attitude toward everyone who walked in the door or called on the phone, but that rituals like the moment of silence made her act differently throughout the day. Conversely, certain people said that they did not like some of the rituals, even going so far as to say that they were a waste of time. Yet, even though they did not care for the content of these activities, they did not feel like they could resist or suggest alternatives because the ritualistic quality was “too powerful,” further indicating the strength of their agency and their ability to discipline action and curb resistance. People also described how rituals disciplined outside the staff meetings: “I remember a time that I decided to make an extra phone call to thank a volunteer who did some extra work for us,” explained Kimberly. “We didn’t sign a card for her in the staff meeting, but just thinking about the card signing and how grateful we are made me want to pick up the phone and give her a call”—the ritual of card signing appears to have disciplined Kimberly and “made” her do something outside the staff meeting. As with reminding, it was clear that ASA members ascribed this disciplining to the rituals themselves, not the intentions of any particular individual. This was especially true for individuals in position of power—recall the examples above of the executive director submitting to the power of the rituals. These rituals were not merely being used by an individual to impose their authority; the rituals themselves were actants in the accomplishment of this disciplining.

Explaining Ritual Agency Through a CCO Framework: Inclusion as an Authoritative Text

In this final section, we apply our CCO framework to explain ritual agency in terms of authoritative text and possessive constitution. First of all, what is the authoritative text for ASA and how is it made present in organizational rituals? As Kuhn (2008) explains, because of its virtual existence an authoritative text can only be known through inferences about the discursive practices it brings about, or by abstracting meaning from concrete texts involved in various practices. Authoritative texts are, thus, revealed in networks of meanings that appear to be favored characteristics of organizational work. We combed through our field notes and key ASA documents and probed the interviewees to discover key ideas and concepts that seemed to have traction and influence at ASA. Ultimately, we identified *inclusion* as an authoritative text that permeated ASA and served as an abstract ideal to coordinate their work. This is based on how the notion of inclusion showed up in so many aspects of ASA's work, both explicitly (e.g., the launch of a new "inclusiveness project" and "inclusiveness committee") and implicitly (e.g., how volunteers were oriented, how staff were trained, how community outreach materials were designed). ASA also had a large "inclusion poster" hanging above the main staircase in their office that listed several statements about valuing and including all people involved with the organization. Furthermore, in our interviews with ASA staff and volunteers, it was clear that inclusion was not just a particular strategy or project, but rather an overarching ideal about how ASA should be and how they should conduct their work. Thus, we posit *inclusion* as an authoritative text to define the work of ASA and their constitution as an organization.

Now we are in a position to say that the specific rituals at ASA—the opening, sharing the critter, card signing, the Spanish lesson, reciting the mission statement, the moment of silence—are symbolic practices that make present the authoritative text of *inclusion*; this sense of inclusion is understood as a commanding abstraction of ASA as a whole, and thus its norms, values, relations of power, organizational history, and so on—not just the preferences or intentions of any one individual or group. We can say how inclusion is made present: The opening invites everyone to participate in a personal story, circling back to involve those who passed originally; sharing the critter recognizes the efforts of each staff member until everyone is acknowledged; card signing expresses gratitude and appreciation to donors, clients, and other stakeholders; the Spanish lesson displays a commitment to the Spanish-speaking community; reciting the mission statement articulates the totality of ASA's work; and the moment of silence directs attention toward the memorial

of clients who have passed away, allowing people to reflect on any other aspect of their work they prefer. We argue that because an authoritative text of inclusion is “lurking” (Kuhn, 2008) throughout all these rituals, people are willing to attribute agency to the rituals themselves, thus constituting rituals as actants and enabling the rituals to appropriate and possess the actions of their participants, even if not explicitly recognized in the moment.

This logic of attribution and appropriation enables the rituals at ASA to remind and discipline. Attribution establishes a possessive relationship that helps constitute rituals and enables them to act (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011). This action makes present certain authoritative elements of ASA and its work, implying an existing organization with a recognizable identity as a collective basis for remembering. Thus, these rituals only *remind* to the extent there is a stable and authoritative reference point (the authoritative text) in the first place. Furthermore, the rituals can *discipline* because they carry the weight of the organization and its authority within their practices. This disciplining, we argue, can only happen to the extent there is an authoritative text already in existence to do the disciplining. As an ASA member Ross explained, “These rituals only mean something because they *point to something bigger* about [ASA] and the work we do” (emphasis added). Finally, it is the performance—not merely the existence—of inclusion through rituals that actualize their agency. The authoritative text of inclusion must be “presentified” in situated interaction to have meaningful impact. Therefore, rituals are not just the carriers of agency in a limited functional sense but also a locus of agency and thus a “site” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) of constitution.

Discussion

Our purpose was to advance thinking about agency and organizational rituals by explaining their agentic capacity and their ability to participate in the accomplishment of organizational action. Rituals are powerful precisely because they cannot be reduced to the actions of individuals, but make present the full force of the organization—its values, norms, and relations of power (i.e., its authoritative text). Ritual participants enter a sequence of actions that extend beyond their original contributions (Cooren, 2004) and cannot be reduced to the human actors involved. Just as in the game of baseball, “You’re out!” yelled by a certain person under specific circumstances does not simply *refer* to your being out, but rather *makes* you out (Rothenbuhler, 1998)—as in numerous other organizational contexts—rituals are making a difference; this display of agency calls for an explanation.

Our explanation of ritual agency enables us to reconcile the instrumental functionality of organizational rituals with their latent meanings and unintended

effects. Whereas other areas of organizational scholarship have been concerned with these issues for many years, most notably scholars working from a critical perspective (e.g., Mumby's, 1993, work on narrative and social control), the uniqueness of our study is our emphasis on developing an explanatory framework that accounts for how these latent meanings and unintended effects contribute to the agentic capacity of organizational rituals. We do not have to reduce rituals to the intentions of human actors, nor do we have to essentialize rituals as mysterious entities independent of human participants.

The central contribution of our research is to develop the concept of ritual agency and describe how organizational rituals can act and make a difference—a theoretical payoff from this CCO approach to organizational rituals. This also contributes to the larger conversation on agency, a central concern of organizational communication scholarship (Brummans, 2006; Sotirin, 2014). Our work aligns with recent efforts to decenter notions of human agency and to present a more relational view of agency as a hybrid concept involving the mobilization and participation of multiple actants with varying ontologies (Cooren, 2006, 2010; Robichaud, 2006). Research in this vein emphasizes how various material artifacts—such as signs or memos—often participate in the accomplishment of organizational action (e.g., Cooren, 2004; Cooren et al., 2008), thus connecting agency to the *textual modality* of coorientation that is central to the Montréal School's CCO approach. Our insights on organizational rituals compliment and extend this work by connecting agency to the *conversational modality* that completes the dialectic of coorientation (see Taylor, 2006, on the topic of modality and coorientation). That is, organizational rituals are more conversational as they involve episodes of interaction and situated exchanges among organizational members. Consequently, our work helps develop alternative conceptions of agency rooted in both textual and conversational modalities of coorientation.

Furthermore, our research has broader implications for three additional theoretical issues of interest to organizational communication scholars. First, our work contributes to research that challenges the conventional micro–macro dualism that is prevalent in organizational studies, and relates to broader efforts to bridge the micro–macro divide, a persistent topic of research and debate (Aguinis, Boyd, Pierce, & Short, 2011; Bamberger, 2008). Kuhn (2012) argues that most research seeks to span the micro–macro divide by either emphasizing the micro-foundations of macro-level concepts or developing multilevel theories that examine micro- and macro-relationships at various levels of analysis. Although producing novel insights, these approaches inevitably bracket out micro- or macro-level phenomena or privilege one to explain the other, thus perpetuating the very divide they seek to overcome.

Our study supports an alternative perspective: We show how the situated and local interactions of rituals make present authoritative aspects of the organization, such that the micro and macro are mutually constitutive and always copresent. Following the prescription of Kuhn (2012), we challenge the dualism between subjects and objects that is implicit in most of the extant micro–macro literature. That is, previous literature tries to bridge the micro–macro divide by reconciling the subjective and symbolic behaviors of individuals and groups with the objective systems and structures of organizations and institutions. Instead, we suggest that a more productive approach to bridge the micro–macro divide involves an alternative conception of organizations and organizing that accounts for the linguistic and discursive character of all experience and the dialectical relationships that constitute all subjects and objects (Mumby, 2011). Our CCO framework of ritual agency complicates the conventional distinction between the micro-interactions of rituals and the more macro-level organizations they supposedly represent. The communication practices of organizational rituals are not just micro-level events, nor are they abstract macro-forms that somehow lie outside of interaction. Instead, by making present an authoritative text, organizational rituals demonstrate the inseparability of micro- and macro-phenomena, helping us go beyond micro–macro dichotomies that limit theoretical development.

Second, our research speaks to related concerns about the relationship between action and structure, a central theme in organizational communication scholarship (Conrad & Haynes, 2001). Grillo's (1994) review explains that most research on rituals assumes that rituals reveal deeper structures of meaning, and that these cultural structures are those that influence and dictate subsequent action. However, our approach to ritual agency challenges this action–structure dichotomy. Rather than posit a preexisting structure to explain rituals in organizational action, we emphasize that action is configured in a chain or “imbrication” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000) of agencies involving a number of human and nonhuman actants with variable ontologies (Cooren, 2010). We demonstrate how rituals make present an authoritative text through the logic of attribution and appropriation, all of which keeps us grounded on the terra firma of interaction. Structure, as Cooren (2004) explains, “functions as a hodge-podge concept in which scholars include an array of factors . . . has less explanatory power and conceals the sources of control” (pp. 385–388). By “dislocating” interaction (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009), as organizational rituals do, we see that action has no clear point of origin and thus no structural foundation. Thus, we offer a way to understand the action associated with organizational rituals that does not require a separation between what happens in interaction and what supposedly transcends it.

Finally, our research shows how CCO scholars can contribute to thinking about organizational memory, an important aspect of organizational studies that to date has only received minimal attention in the CCO literature (e.g., Kuhn, 2012). Traditionally, organizational memory has been understood in terms of information that is stored in various “facilities,” such as people, procedures, and structures (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). However, a CCO perspective challenges this static conception toward the location of organizational memory. In particular, our analysis of *reminding* shows that rituals are a particular kind of interaction that can activate organizational memories, that is, remind people of key organizational realities—interactions thus provide a locus for organizational memory. Similarly, scholars in the Luhmannian tradition (see Brummans et al., 2014) demonstrate that organizational memory is not the mere storage of information, but rather involves an interactional process where present situations are related to earlier operations of the system; memory is understood *as* interaction in decisional situations (Seidl, 2005). Therefore, our work offers a possible connection between Montréal and Luhmannian approaches to CCO research, as well as a platform to advance further CCO thinking about organizational memory.

Despite these insights, our research has limitations, especially regarding a potential concern about our methodology and analysis. CCO research is often known for its empirical emphasis on actual exchanges that show communicative constitution in action, often through conversational analysis (e.g., Cooren et al., 2008; Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004). Yet, our work diverges from this approach in two key ways. First, we do not focus on any particular conversational episode, but rather the accumulation of numerous episodes and accounts of organizational members to illustrate broader theoretical claims. Although this contrasts with more conventional CCO research, it is in line with recent CCO work that utilizes case study approaches to trace organizational communication through extended observations and interviews (e.g., Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012; Güney, 2006; Koschmann, 2013), thus complementing previous research that is focused on more narrow conversational episodes. Second, the nature of our study does not necessarily allow for the kind of empirical demonstration that is often characteristic of CCO research; we do not “show” ritual agency in the same way that other empirical studies have explained CCO concepts. However, we do offer the kind of empirical demonstration that is consistent with our theoretical framework. As we assume that ritual agency is based on a logic of attribution and appropriation, we would not necessarily expect to see it manifest in actual group interactions, but rather in retrospective personal accounts as people make sense of their actions in relation to ritual practices. The “showing” in this case *is* the attribution and appropriation of agency in our interview data,

not in the actual practice of rituals themselves. We do not *demonstrate* communicative constitution, but rather *presuppose* it as a theoretical foundation to explain ritual agency. Our initial study provides a conceptual framework and an extended empirical example to inform subsequent research.

In conclusion, responding to Cooren's (2004) call to start with agency and all its forms to explain various organizational phenomena, we provide an alternative way to think about agency as it is displayed in the symbolic practices of rituals. Our CCO framework of ritual agency demonstrates how the generative power of human interaction can constitute social phenomena with the capacity to act and make a difference. Given the complexities of organizational life, we should continue exploring the ways in which all aspects of organizations participate in the accomplishment of action, including symbolic practices that are often taken for granted in everyday organizational life. We hope that our work can be a catalyst for this line of research.

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Notes

1. Luhmann's theory of social systems places a similar emphasis on nonhuman agency, but his focus on "deparadoxification" of decisional events and autopoietic communication processes presents a stark contrast from the *Montréal* School's emphasis on coorientation and sociomateriality (see Schoeneborn, 2011, on this point).
2. This idea is rooted in the processes philosophies of Tarde (1893/2012) and Whitehead (1929/1979).
3. All organizational and personal names are pseudonyms.

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