

Article

# Reentry as a rite of passage

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## Abstract

Mary Douglas argues that, 'There are some things we cannot experience without ritual.' Ex-prisoner reintegration may be one of them. The punishment process involves an inordinate amount of ritual behavior, from the drama of the courtroom to the elaborate de-individuation processes involved in institutionalization. Durkheim argues that these rituals serve a distinct purpose for society: engendering social solidarity and shaping penal sensibilities. Like the commission of a crime, the reintegration of the former outcast back into society represents a challenge to the moral order, a delicate transition fraught with danger and possibility. However, unlike punishment, reintegration is not a process characterized by well-orchestrated and familiar rituals. This lack might explain the failings of prisoner reentry in contemporary society. This article reviews the sociological and anthropological literature on rituals, explaining what they are and what they do, focusing in particular on the role of status degradation ceremonies in criminal justice work. Drawing on this literature, the core elements that would be needed to develop rituals of reintegration powerful enough to counteract these degradation effects are discussed, and the potential impact of such hypothetical rituals is explored.

## Keywords

ex-prisoners, parole, reentry, rites of passage, rituals

Over forty years ago, Gorer (1965) made the radical argument that the British were uniquely poor at coping with death. In particular, compared to the elaborate

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mourning practices found in most cultures, British society had an absence of adequate bereavement rituals to help mourners express and work through their grief. Gorer argued that the consequences of this societal inadequacy included 'public callousness toward the loss of human life and a preoccupation with violence in the mass media' (Scheff, 1979: 113).

In this article, I make a similar case in the realm of ex-prisoner reintegration. I argue that contemporary Anglo-American societies (not just Britain, but Britain represents a typical example) are particularly bad at reintegrating and re-accepting individuals who have committed offenses back into wider society (see Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005). Evidence of this failing can be found in the rates of released prisoners being returned to prison (Kubrin and Stewart, 2006), as well as in the high rates of suicide among recently released ex-prisoners in the United States (Binswanger et al., 2007), Australia (Kariminia et al., 2007) and the United Kingdom (Pratt et al., 2006). Equally telling is the preoccupation that the Anglo-American media has with the release of prisoners – a prime example of which was the media-fueled panic following the British government's recent decision to release a large number of prisoners 18 days earlier than their scheduled release date to clear space in the overcrowded prison system (Ford, 2007).

I will argue that one part of the reason for this societal difficulty involves the failure to understand the dynamics of ritual in facilitating crucial life transitions like reintegration. The influential British anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966/2002: 80) argues that, 'There are some things we cannot experience without ritual.' In this article, I make the case that ex-prisoner reintegration may be one of them. As a society, we make an impressive ritual of punishment – from the drama of the courtroom to the elaborate de-individuation processes involved in institutionalization. Yet, when it comes to reintegration – turning prisoners back into citizens – we typically forgo all such ritual and try to make the process as stealthy and private as possible, if we make any effort at all. This contradiction may account for why the imprisonment of human beings is taken for granted as 'normal' or even 'natural', and yet the return of the same human beings to communities is the cause of often inordinate concern.

If terms like 'reintegration' or 'reentry' are to be meaningful, this process presumably involves more than just physical resettlement into society after incarceration (e.g. a place to stay, a source of income – as important as those are), but also includes a symbolic element of *moral* inclusion (see Braithwaite, 1989). It is in this expressive/symbolic terrain – involving seemingly anachronistic concepts such as atonement, forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation – that the extensive, contemporary discussion of prisoner reentry seems to be the most silent. Yet, as Braithwaite and Mugford (1994) argue, it may be that these intangible processes of status elevation are among the more critical components of the reintegration process.

In developing this argument, I first review the basic sociology of ritual, seeking to define what ritual is, and what rituals do. I then examine what role rituals

currently play in the correctional process, before imagining what effective rituals of reintegration might look like. This is an imaginative, theoretical exercise. That is, I am not evaluating or assessing actual reintegration rituals (although scattered examples exist in correctional practices already – see Burrell, 2004; Wexler, 2001). Instead, I try to lay out the basics of what elements might be necessary for ideal-type reintegration rituals in the abstract. In doing so, I draw on the work of Durkheim and his contemporary Arnold Van Gennep, but also on more contemporary scholars working in a neo-Durkheimian tradition, including Mary Douglas (1966/2002), Kai Erikson (2005 [1966]) and Thomas Scheff (1979), but especially John Braithwaite (1989) and Randall Collins (2004). This work, then, is part of a larger situationalist trend in correctional research (see, for example, Haney, 2006) that foregrounds the power of the situation, rather than the internal qualities of the individual, as in the slogan: ‘Encounters make their encountees’ (Collins, 2004: 5). My goal, though, is specifically to revise interest in the power of rituals in criminology.

In addition, this article is also a call for thinking anew about the way criminal justice sanctions (including community sentences) end. Although overlooked in criminal justice (where our attention is typically on front-door practices of arrest, conviction, and sentencing), ‘endings’ can be a rich area to explore. Considerable psychological research on recall and affect suggests that retrospective evaluations of personal experiences are driven almost entirely by two factors – the moment at which affect was most extreme and the conclusion of the experience (see, for example, Diener et al., 2001; Kahneman, 2000). Retrospective evaluations show little or no sensitivity to duration and appear instead to be biased strongly to the final moments of whatever activity is experienced. So, a film with a weak ending will be judged as unsatisfying even if the first hour was engaging. A short vacation that ends with a magic final evening may be treasured more than a longer holiday that ends on a down note and so forth. I argue that criminal sanctions, for the most part, end very badly. Indeed, by most accounts, they do not end at all. Except for a very fortunate few who have their offenses formally forgiven through pardons or other legal means, individuals with felony records can remain permanently stigmatized, excluded from employment, educational and social opportunities, on the grounds of something they did many years or decades earlier (see Pager, 2007; Travis, 2005). The resulting cycle of stigma and recidivism is predictable and tragic (Chiricos et al., 2007), but could conceivably be broken with rituals of reintegration among other factors.

## Resurrecting ritual studies

The study of ritual was central to the growth of anthropology and sociology in the 19th century. One of the so-called ‘fathers’ of modern sociology, Emile Durkheim, assigned rituals a prominent role in his theory of societal dynamics. Durkheim (1895/1966) argued that punishment, for instance, was not really directed at the

individual being deterred or reformed, but rather was a public ritual designed to restore a sense of social order to the wider community:

Crime, therefore, draws honest consciences together, concentrating them. We have only to observe what happens, particularly in a small town, when some scandal involving morality has just taken place. People stop each other in the street, call upon one another, meet in their customary places to talk about what has happened. (Durkheim, 1893/1964: 58)

Importantly, he argued that these ‘honest consciences’ were both shaped and sustained through the practice of penal rituals. According to Durkheim, punishment ‘transforms a threat to social order into a triumph of social solidarity...[through] a socially binding ritual of moral affirmation’ (Garland, 1991: 123). Rather than being a *product* of collective morality, then, the reaction to crime is itself said to be the *source* of that morality, suggesting crime plays a key part in maintaining social order.

One might expect that an idea with this pedigree and such a clear relevance for understanding justice practices would be a central concept for criminology. Yet, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994; Garland, 1990), ritual research has made relatively little impact on the sociology of punishment in recent decades. Indeed, Smith (2008: 335) argues that Durkheim’s immense contributions to criminology have been badly neglected in general, and that ‘Durkheim is in need of redemption and recognition’ in our field.

Resistance to ritual research in contemporary criminology has two primary explanations. First, there is a perception that rituals are declining in importance in contemporary societies or that the rituals Durkheim wrote about are anachronistic and irrelevant in late modernity. Second, the Durkheimian view of rituals is seen as inherently conservative, celebrating tradition and presuming a shared value system across societies. Both of these concerns are well grounded, but neither is a good rationale for abandoning Durkheim’s primary insights about ritual.

First, it is true that contemporary society has undergone what anthropological observers describe as a process of ‘deritualization’ (Mandelbaum, 1959), whereby traditional, religious-based rituals, in particular, have declined in their significance. A general ‘poverty of ritual’ in contemporary society is blamed for numerous social problems, but especially a decline in community spirit and mutual trust (see especially Driver, 1991). Yet, it is hard to believe that ritual no longer plays any role in modern cultures when one considers that the average amount spent on a wedding ceremony in the USA is estimated to be around \$30,000 (Wong, 2005). At least since Max Gluckman (1962), the socio-anthropological understanding of ritual has rejected the idea that rituals necessarily involve religious or spiritual themes. Football fans chanting in unison for their team may not recognize that they are unconsciously building a sense of unity or turning high-paid athletes into sacred objects, but neo-Durkheimians would argue that this is precisely what they are achieving with their deeply ritualistic behavior (see Collins, 2004). Participants in

'raves', rock concerts, stand-up comedy shows, and birthday parties are doing much the same, which helps to explain why individuals will go to such lengths and pay such high costs to engage in these activities. Indeed, Goffman (1966) drew attention to the ubiquity of minor, everyday rituals throughout social interactions, arguing that everything from salutations in written correspondence to the making of a toast at a dinner party can be best understood if analyzed as ritualized events on a micro scale.

Second, there is also truth to the argument that Durkheim's original analysis of ritual is a largely conservative one. For instance, Durkheim argued that penal rituals served to reinforce a shared sense of collective morality and did not question the legitimacy of power and authority within a society (Garland, 1991; Smith, 2008). Yet, ritual scholars who have followed Durkheim have underplayed this aspect of Durkheim's project. Neo-Durkheimians like Erikson (2005 [1966]) and Garfinkel (1956) emphasize, for instance, that penal rituals can evoke strong social divisions, especially in divided societies, with one group united in support and others united in opposition of a punishment (Garland, 1991). Likewise, Collins (2004) seeks to rescue Durkheim's theory from accusations of conservative functionalism by arguing that the 'collective conscience' that Durkheim famously describes 'can exist in little pockets rather than as one huge sky covering everybody in the society' (Collins, 2004: 15). This new understanding makes the neo-Durkheimian model 'entirely compatible with a view of stratification and group conflict' (Collins, 2004: 41). Finally, numerous scholars, drawing on insights from the Manchester School of Anthropology (Gluckman, 1962; Turner, 1969), have argued that far from preserving tradition, rituals can be creative, imaginative, even subversive (Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994; Garland, 1991). While rejecting aspects of Durkheim's overall theory, then, the new Durkheimians have sought to preserve Durkheim's fundamental argument regarding the important communicative power of rituals.

### **What do rituals do?**

Collins (2004: 7) defines ritual as 'a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership.' Above all, a ritual is a medium of communication, with its own symbolic grammar and syntax, although on the surface, ritual behavior has the appearance of being non-utilitarian or even irrational (see, for example, Oakdale, 2005). So, shaking hands upon meeting someone is clearly ritualistic; it serves no clear practical purpose (indeed spreads germs), but serves a substantial symbolic role in many cultures (try not shaking hands the next time you are introduced to someone and note the impact on social dynamics). On the other hand, turning a key to start the engine of a car is not a ritual; the action serves a direct, instrumental purpose and is not meant to signal anything wider. (At the same time, revving the engine of the car by depressing the accelerator in

short, sharp bursts at a traffic light certainly has ritualistic qualities, as a means for adolescent males and others to symbolically convey a message to others around them.)

Why do we engage in seemingly pointless rituals? Rituals appear to perform a crucial, cathartic function when individuals are facing epistemically threatening life events, especially transitions and turning points (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Scheff (1979: 133) writes, 'Effective ritual is the solution to a seemingly insoluble problem, the management of collectively held, otherwise unmanageable distress.' Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, Marshall (2002) accounts for rituals by arguing that individuals spontaneously engage in 'effortful, binding action' in 'the face of uncertainty' as a means of reducing anxiety. The life 'crises' that trigger rituals can be big or small (Gluckman, 1962). A funeral rite is a means of coping with the substantial trauma of loss and fears of our own immortality. The ritual's 'ostensible object is the dead person, but it benefits not the dead, but the living.' (Firth, 1951: 63) Yet, smaller, transitional 'crises' also trigger rituals in everyday interactions. Ritual goodbyes (often phrased as 'see you later' or 'until next time') are a way of managing the awkwardness of cutting off correspondence with an acquaintance (Chapple, 1970), for example.

The anxiety-reducing function of ritual is nowhere more important than in what the Belgian folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (1909/1960: 4) first called 'rites of passage', defined as the rituals 'which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.' Rites of passage include remarkably persistent practices such as hazing rituals in college fraternities, high school graduations, military boot camp initiations, bachelor (or 'stag') parties, and bar mitzvahs (Bell, 1997; Grimes, 2000). Van Gennep (1960: 3) argues that there was 'a wide degree of general similarity' among all of these 'ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation into religious societies and funerals.'

In short, Van Gennep argued that such rituals typically followed a tripartite processual scheme involving separation from everyday reality, a period of liminality, then reintegration as a new person (see Deflem, 1991). Crucial here is the notion of liminality: 'betwixt and between' two distinct stages where old configurations of certainty and identity are no longer present but where there is as yet no new configuration (Turner, 1969). 'Liminal *personae*' or 'threshold people' shed their former identities, but what they shall become is not yet known. They stand outside the normal structures of society in a liminal state characterized by jeopardy and promise (Bell, 1997; Turner, 1969).

Van Gennep argued that these rites of passage did not just accompany biological changes and development. To the contrary, social rituals could be exercised 'so as to try to dominate the imperatives of biology' (Bell, 1997). In other words, the developmental transition follows rather than precedes the ritualization. Numerous developmentalists – Otto Rank, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Erik Erikson – have incorporated this idea of 'rites of passage' into their understandings of the process of human individuation and development. According to this model, 'adults are

not born, but made' (Grimes, 2000: 147). Adulthood (or more accurately 'manhood' or 'womanhood') does not arrive naturally or spontaneously, but is ritually constructed through 'socially orchestrated training that is learned and mastered despite difficult obstacles' (Bell, 1997: 101). Rites of passage become the 'events that we remember, that give meaning to our personal biographies' (Collins, 2004: 43), hence shaping our self-narratives and personal identities.

Rituals, then, are said to play a particularly powerful role in the shaping of human sensibility and imagination. They create mental states, not simply express them (Bell, 1997; Grimes, 2000). Douglas (1966/2002: 79, emphasis added) writes,

Ritual focuses attention by framing; it enlivens memory and links the present with the relevant past. . . . So it is not enough to say that ritual helps us to experience more vividly what we would have experienced anyway. *It can come first in formulating experience.*

Most immediately, successful rituals are 'emotion transformers' generating what Collins (2004) calls 'emotional energy', making participants 'feel strong, confident, full of impulses to take the initiative' (Collins, 2004: xii). Unconsciously, Durkheimian theory suggests, this energy also triggers feelings of both belief and belonging (Marshall, 2002). Rituals engender solidarity and social cohesion by bringing people together in common cause; this community bonding is then thought to serve the purpose of generating beliefs about standards of morality (Durkheim, 1912/1995). We come to 'know' right and wrong through the enactment of ritual behaviors, according to Durkheim. Indeed, Marshall (2002: 370) argues that rituals can produce 'a quasireligious hardening' of beliefs: 'This lets us make sense of why social movements involving voluntary abstinence, such as temperance, smoking cessation, and vegetarianism, so often and easily become moralized' (2002: 370).

## The impact of ignoring ritual

If rituals are this important in the shaping of lives, then it is worth considering what might happen when ritual is ignored or bypassed. In particular, what do anthropologists suggest happens when status passages and transitions are not accompanied by ritual practices? Grimes (2000: 5–6) provides one colorful suggestion in this regard:

The primary work of a rite of passage is to ensure that we attend to such events fully, which is to say, spiritually, psychologically and socially. Unattended, a major life passage can become a yawning abyss, draining off psychic energy, engendering social confusion, and twisting the course of the life that follows it. Unattended passages become spiritual sinkholes around which hungry ghosts, those greedy personifications of unfinished business, hover.

The poverty of ritual in modern societies is frequently blamed for feelings of alienation and the demise of community (Driver, 1991). In particular, young people are thought to suffer from the lack of clearly demarcated rituals for achieving an adult status (see, for example, Moffitt, 1993). For instance, Paul Hill, founder of the National Rites of Passage Institute<sup>1</sup> in Cleveland, Ohio, argues that '[i]dentity, community, history, spirituality, and the environment are all at stake in the decision to initiate, or not to initiate, adolescents into adulthood' (cited in Grimes, 2000: 147).

Maybe the most obvious 'greedy personification of unfinished business' in urban cultures is the existence of youth gangs. Glynn (2007) argues that gang crime and criminal justice involvement fills a ritual void in the lives of urban youth who seek out ways of demonstrating their masculinity and toughness. Indeed, such ideas have a long-standing, if overlooked, place in the criminological literature. In their classic book, *The Gang*, for instance, Bloch and Niederhoffer (1958: 28) argued: 'It is almost as if the contemporary young person, in the absence of puberty rituals and ordeals, is moved to exclaim: If you don't care to test us, then we will test ourselves!' After all, much delinquency itself – from vandalism to joyriding to youth violence – meets the criteria of what Hall and Jefferson (1976) call 'rituals of resistance', with its symbol-laden, non-instrumentality. The behaviors are not rational, but serve a crucial developmental purpose.

At the extreme end of such do-it-yourself ritualism, of course, are the elaborate rites and rituals of gang initiation and membership, where wars are fought and young lives are lost over the wearing of certain colors, the flashing of certain hand signs, and the protection of symbolic turf. The South African criminologist Don Pinnock (1998: 19–20) argues:

In the history of all of our cultures, and in cultures people call 'primitive' today, adolescent boys face ordeals and trials that test their manhood and courage. . . . In our urban cultures, which have lost their ancient roots through migration, poverty or dilution, young people continue to have (and act on) the same needs. Where ritual is absent, it is created. . . . Research into gangs suggested a new, hard look at their rituals – which led to the conclusion that the best way to beat gangs might be to make better, richer, more ritual-filled, gang-like groups. (Pinnock, 1998: 18–20)

## Rites of passage in criminal justice

Many observers have argued that imprisonment itself has become a normative 'rite of passage' for disadvantaged young men (see, for example, Mauer, 2005; Ogilvie and Van Zyl, 2001; Ortiz, 2005). Such an argument would have a great deal of support from the anthropological literature on rituals (although imprisonment is

not discussed in these works directly). Consider, for instance, the following description of Van Gennep's stages:

The first stage, separation, is often marked by rites of purification and symbolic allusions to the loss of the old identity (in effect, death to the old self): the person is bathed, hair is shaved, clothes are switched, marks are made on the body, and so on. In the second or transition stage, the person is kept for a time in a place that is symbolically outside the conventional sociocultural order...: normal routines are suspended while rules distinctive to this state are carefully followed. (Bell, 1997: 36)

In the liminal state, persons are said to have 'have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows' (Turner, 1967: 99). Identically dressed and treated, liminal personae have a 'sameness' that leads to a sense of 'communitas', a deep and lasting bond for those who go through the experience together (Turner, 1967: 99).

This description of liminality sounds like an almost perfect description of the imprisonment ritual. The difference is at the end, however. This is Van Gennep's third and last act in his stage-theory of rituals:

In the third stage, symbolic acts of incorporation focus on welcoming the person into a new status (in effect, birth of the new self): there is the conferral of a new name and symbolic insignia, usually some form of communal meal, and so on. (Bell, 1997: 36)

The imprisonment ritual as practiced, then, takes people out of normal society, initiates an extended period of extreme liminality, but does not take advantage of this to effect change. If prison is a rite of passage, then, the direction it leads is clearly down.

Garfinkel (1956: 420) refers to punishment practices as 'status degradation ceremonies' or 'communicative work directed to transforming an individual's total identity.' In undergoing these ritualistic interactions, a person starts out as one status (presumably a 'person' or 'citizen'), and emerges at the other end as a different entity altogether – an 'offender' or 'criminal'. Garfinkel (1956: 421) writes: 'The paradigm of moral indignation is public denunciation. We publicly deliver the curse: "I call upon all men to bear witness that he is not as he appears but is otherwise and in essence of a lower species."'

Garfinkel's degradation ceremony applies primarily to the criminal trial; however, these public denunciations are supported by later institutional processes associated with incarceration. In *Asylums*, for instance, Goffman (1961: 14) describes a ritual process of 'mortification' or the depersonalization of a person's former identity through the 'abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of self' common to total institutions. The prisoner undergoes a 'civil death', losing former citizen rights and liberties, but also a distinct set of ritualistic

admission procedures – undressing, strip searching, and disinfecting the individual, assigning him or her a new institutional uniform, haircut, and living quarters – and ‘obedience tests’ meant to break the individual’s personality, including enforced verbal acts of deference (‘You call me, “Sir”, if you want to ask a question’). The most significant loss to the self, according to Goffman, is the loss of one’s full name, with prisoners being referred to either by numbers or their family name. Sykes (1958) describes this stripping away of one’s identity as among the primary pains of incarceration. The prisoner has to define and establish himself without recourse to a spouse, a brand of clothing, a distinctive car or home; all the identity materials that the rest of us rely upon for establishing our individuality are stripped away.

Finally, as argued by labeling theorists (e.g. Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951), these ritual humiliations tend to continue even after the person leaves prison, with formerly incarcerated people continuing to wear ‘invisible stripes’ (LeBel, 2006) on the outside. This stigmatization manifests itself in laws denying ex-prisoners the right to vote or cross borders freely, as well as serious obstacles to finding housing and employment (Leong, 2006; Pager, 2007; Travis, 2005). Erikson (1962: 311) describes the prisoner’s degradation process as ‘a sharp rite of transition at once moving him out of his normal position in society and transferring him into a distinctive deviant role.’ Erikson (1962: 311) in fact warns that the deviant label is ‘almost irreversible’ once applied.

### **Imagining rituals of reintegration**

Although it is certainly true that the stigma of a felony conviction is extremely difficult to transcend, this pessimistic assumption of ‘irreversibility’ has been contradicted by the findings of the desistance literature. Longitudinal, life course research has found that most former prisoners do eventually move out of lives of crime (e.g. Laub and Sampson, 2001). Indeed, Maruna (2001: ch. 8) found that one part of the process of moving away from crime involved organic interactive processes that might be referred to as ‘redemption rituals’. In what remains of this article, I will outline the beginnings of a theory of what such rituals might look like if they were to be established more widely. In doing so, I first draw on what little criminological research exists on status elevation rituals. As this material is limited, I then draw upon the neo-Durkheimian literature on ritual to analyze this further. My goal here is not to outline a prescriptive policy proposal or a ready-made ‘how to’ for probation departments or reentry programs interested in ritual. Rather, the hope is that a better theoretical understanding of the literature on rituals could inform creative thinking from others around reintegration policy and practice.

Ritual ‘usually develops around recurring sources of collective distress’ as a way of coping with such anxiety-producing transitions (Scheff, 1979: 111). Like the commission of a crime, the reentry of former prisoners represents a threat or challenge to the moral order, a delicate transition fraught with danger

and possibility. Successful reintegration is a two-way process, requiring both effort on the part of the former prisoner (e.g. desistance, repentance), but also on the part of some wider community (e.g. forgiveness, acceptance). As such, reintegration appears to be an ideal candidate for the implementation of rituals that, by their nature, are supposed to generate feelings of solidarity and community among participants.

In fact, elements of reintegration rituals can be found in existing interventions as disparate as drug courts and other speciality courts (Wexler, 2001), wilderness challenge programs (Russell, 2001), circles of support (Walker et al., 2006), boot camps (Benda et al., 2006), therapeutic communities (Seltzer and Gabor, 2009), and more general rehabilitation practices (Burrell, 2004). Indeed, restorative justice interventions have already inspired a sophisticated literature around ritual in understanding the power of restorative conferencing (Ahmed et al., 2001; Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994). For the most part, however, this neo-Durkheimian restorative justice literature (see Scheff, 1990) emphasizes replacing rituals of retribution with repentance rituals in the immediate wake of a criminal offense (Braithwaite, 2000); only a few attempts have been made to apply this research directly to the process of ex-prisoner reentry (see especially Bazemore and Maruna, 2009). Finally, most religious traditions also maintain a deep concern for redemptive rites of passage, providing sophisticated rituals for managing liminal states, washing away 'sin' and becoming 'reborn' anew (Harding, 1987). The legacy of these traditions continues to influence penal practices (see Gorringer, 1996) as well as public beliefs about justice (Applegate et al., 2000). The appropriateness of integrating such rituals into a secular prison and probation context, however, has been a subject of substantial legal controversy regarding the separation of church and state (Branham, 2003).

In the review below, I will mostly ignore these and other well-known ritual practices and instead approach the idea of a reintegration ritual afresh, asking theoretically what rituals of reintegration could look like under ideal circumstances. Some criminological theory can be helpful in this regard. Forty years ago, Lamar Empey and Steven Lubeck (1971) set out to develop 'rites of passage' for the reintegration and 'stigmatization reversal' of a group of young people convicted of delinquency in *The Silverlake Experiment*. The authors drew upon the symbolic interactionist tradition in general and labeling theory, in specific, to argue that desistance from crime may be best facilitated through a looking-glass, 'de-labeling process' (see also Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2009). Likewise, Meisenhelder (1977: 329) describes a 'certification' stage of successful reintegration wherein 'some recognized member(s) of the conventional community must publicly announce and certify that the offender has changed and that he is now to be considered essentially non-criminal.' This research, however, lacks a specific discussion of the role of ritual and ritual theory in this process. Below, I summarize four key messages emerging from the new Durkheimian research on rituals (especially Collins, 2004) that might supplement this criminological understanding of 'de-labeling'.

### *Reintegration rituals would be symbolic and emotive*

The scholarly discussion of reentry in recent years has become increasingly sophisticated in technical and instrumental terms. We have far better research evidence of the scale and scope of the reentry challenge, the processes and outcomes associated with different policy interventions, and the administrative challenges to providing effective service delivery (Reentry Policy Council, 2005). It is notable, however, how little emotions are mentioned in this research, considering how substantial a role they may play in the actual process of moving from the degraded status of 'offender' to one of a 'citizen' (see, for example, Braithwaite, 1989; Maruna, 2001).

The roles of emotion and symbolism would be central to a Durkheimian analysis of reintegration (see especially Freiberg, 2001). Scheff (1979: 7) writes, 'Scholarly theories of the human experience which exclude emotions are both products and causes of repression.' In the Durkheimian framework, justice is 'not merely a technical-rational action' (Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994: 155) but rather 'an expressive institution – a realm for the expression of social values and the release of psychic energy' (Garland, 1990: 32). To Durkheim, then, 'the essence of punishment is irrational, unthinking emotion' (Garland, 1990: 30).

This literature would suggest that successful rituals would be highly emotional occasions. Collins (2004) emphasizes that an essential outcome of a successful ritual is the generation of 'emotional energy': feelings of confidence and enthusiasm in the participants. Rituals should involve a kind of cathartic, emotional contagion, allowing one to transcend the mundane. Collins argues that the core dynamics generating this emotional energy involve little more than bodily presence of a group in a shared space, with clear boundaries, a mutual focus of attention on a common activity or object, and a shared mood. He gives the example of a successful New Year's Eve party:

New Year celebrations that work are ones in which, in the hour or two before midnight, people in an assembled crowd start making noise – with the usual whistles, rattles, perhaps firecrackers – but above all making noises at each other, in their direction, better yet, in their face. This leads to entrainment; people start . . . throwing streamers at each other, often breaking down barriers of acquaintanceship by drawing strangers into interaction. Notice that this interaction has no cognitive content . . . this intruding noisily into someone else's personal space . . . is taken as friendly and not hostile or deviant. This mutual entrainment in noise-making builds up to a crescendo of noise as everyone is focused on counting down the seconds to midnight; when the anticipated focal point is reached, there is a burst of solidarity gestures, people hugging and kissing each other, even strangers. (Collins, 2004: 52)

Such outward affection, although not unknown in drug court graduations, restorative justice conferences, and other reintegration rituals (see Wexler, 2001) may be a step too far for some to imagine in the context of reintegration – and confetti and streamers may be too closely associated with other more

frivolous rituals. Yet, similar processes of entrainment and mutual focus can be achieved through the sharing of stories as at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting or restorative justice ceremony, or through numerous other bonding exercises common to business meetings, conferences, and other rituals. For instance, among other ‘rituals of inclusion’, Braithwaite and Mugford (1994: 153) include handshaking, the putting of signatures side by side on an agreement, and most importantly, apology and its acceptance.

When apologies are sincere, this can be an occasion of substantial emotional energy (see Bennett, 2008, for an in depth analysis of ‘the apology ritual’). In ideal circumstances, then, reintegration rituals will include expressions of remorse and repentance by those who are responsible for the harms, although these emotional expressions are most likely when forgiveness is thought to be a possibility. Restorative justice research suggests that most participants do spontaneously apologize for their crimes when confronted by their family members and the victims of their actions (Ahmed et al., 2001). Yet, there is a well-established two-way dynamic between confession and absolution with the former triggering the latter, but the possibility of the forgiveness allowing for repentance (Braithwaite, 2000). Apology is critical then, but no more so than a genuine willingness to accept an apology (Bennett, 2008). Rather than the rituals of penitence common to some religious ceremonies, then, the dynamics of a reintegration ritual may be more akin to the reconciliation processes in the wake of a conflict. After all, persons in prison have also been victimized themselves in many ways, both prior to and during their banishment from society. For this reason, Johnson (2002: 328) argues that reintegration requires ‘a mutual effort at reconciliation, where offender and society work together to make amends – for hurtful crimes and hurtful punishments – and move forward.’

Accepting (even welcoming) former outcasts back into the fold of wider society is not, of course, easy for many and appears to be particularly difficult in the United States where prisoners face a particularly punitive and unforgiving penal landscape. The United States has a long tradition of supporting redemption, second chances, and personal reinvention (see especially McAdams, 2006; Maruna and King, 2009) and public opinion research especially suggests widespread community support for rehabilitation for adolescents and young people in trouble with the law (Applegate et al., 1997; Piquero et al., 2010). Yet, this is not reflected in US criminal justice policy, and public opinion polls also suggest an unmistakable hostility toward persons convicted of crimes, and the media-fueled responses to the planned or real release of high-profile and even anonymous prisoners often trigger reactions similar to moral panics (Tyler and Boeckmann, 1997). Far from welcoming former outcasts into society, many citizens go out of their way to express their fear and anger about reintegration, and radio talk shows, tabloid newspapers, and television news programs provide both an impetus and an outlet for the expression of such concerns.

Importantly, however, rituals are thought to play a primary role in shaping (and not just reflecting) the sensibilities and social relationships of a given society.

Durkheim's message was not just that the extensive and highly punitive penal rituals that he described were a reflection of a collective punitive psychology. For Durkheim, there were important causal arrows in the other direction as well. The engagement and involvement in punitive rituals shaped the penal sensibilities and the shared understanding of morality for the villagers through the careful management of symbols and ceremony. The message of this literature is that a public can learn forgiveness and reconciliation by practicing it, by exercising this cultural muscle. In theory, a public may not, at first, be ready to support reintegration rituals, but the more the rituals occur the more these public sentiments will develop and the more genuine the rituals will become.

Indeed, ritual scholars acknowledge that there is an element of 'false consciousness' involved in most every ritual for participants. Marriage ceremonies, for instance, are not intended to be a 'warts-and-all' assessment of a couple's actual behaviors and a realistic appraisal of how long onlookers think the coupling might actually last into the future. To the contrary, the wedding is explicitly intended to paste over any such skeptical realism and celebrate love in its most romantic, idealized form. The hope is that such symbolism can be of value in helping the couple face the inevitable challenges that reality will throw at them in the future. The same would be true of reintegration rituals. Former outcasts would be welcomed into a society, and welcomed with excitement and enthusiasm – whether or not participants were completely positive they had anything to be enthusiastic about. The idea is to communicate a message of hope or a point of view (Oakdale, 2005) in the hopes that this message will become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Douglas (1966/2002: 90) writes: 'The ritual is creative indeed. . . . It is primitive magic which gives meaning of existence.'

### *Reintegration rituals would be repeated as necessary*

All rituals can, of course, lose their emotional power or resonance over time (as is obvious in the failing of so many marriages, regardless of the emotional investment in wedding ceremonies). As such, Durkheimian rituals need to be repeated periodically to sustain and support initial experiences, because 'solidarity runs down in the interim' (Collins, 2004: 235). The important ritual of 'first holy communion' in the Catholic tradition, for instance, may be a one-off experience, but core aspects of the ritual are revived on regular occasions each subsequent time the person attends a mass. Likewise, a married couple need not repeat their vows in a second ceremony in order to ritualistically renew their shared commitment established in a wedding ceremony. Collins (2004) argues instead that the sexual act serves the role of a regular ritual needed to sustain a couple's mutual commitment. He notes that, like attendance at many religious institutions, the sex act is repeated on average once a week for a married couple, as a way of regularly refreshing each participant's commitment to the cause of monogamy. Marriages without such regular reinforcement are likely to fail.

Likewise, a one-off ritual welcoming a former outcast to society – that is not followed up and sustained with similar rituals in the future – will be unlikely to support the long-term processes of desistance and reintegration. Success would seem much more likely with the regularly reinforced rituals of mutual aid groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, where each meeting's attendance is seen as a cause for celebration and congratulation. Likewise, in the drug court ritual, clients make regular (even weekly) appearances before a judge, and (if proceeding well) are routinely given positive reinforcement, praise, and even symbolic tokens of achievement in ritualized settings (Wexler, 2001). The individualized, focused and meaningful rituals in these interventions are high on emotional energy and repeated at routine intervals, building up to a graduation ceremony at the peak of the process, ideally once a new self-identity is beginning to take shape.

Equally important for reintegration efforts would be a consistency of message. Even repeated rituals of inclusion can easily be undermined by subsequent (or even concurrent) degradation ceremonies. Individuals with past criminal justice system involvement are frequently subjected to ritual humiliations by police officers and others, even decades after the commission of the offense (see Maruna, 2001). Enduring such treatment, especially when the person is making considerable effort to turn his or her life around, can provide a justification to return to old ways and 'reject one's rejectors' (Sykes and Matza, 1957) – 'If I am going to be treated like a criminal, I might as well act like one.' In order to convey a unified message, reintegration rituals would need perceived legitimacy outside of small, therapeutic pockets inside the criminal justice system. This could be facilitated, for example, by including law enforcement officials (as well as more treatment-oriented professionals) in rituals of reintegration.

### *Reintegration rituals would involve community*

Rituals work on two levels. They are thought to influence not just participants, but also their wider audiences. Indeed, as with funerals and the punishment ritual, the audience (and not the main participant) is often thought to be the primary beneficiary of the ritual's work. For instance, a young person undertakes a rite of passage (e.g. leaving the family home to travel the world independently) in order to convince him or herself that he or she is now an adult, but also (perhaps more importantly) to convince other adults in his or her life that this is the case.

Additionally, beyond their impact on participants, justice rituals are meant to reaffirm and strengthen the wider moral order. To be meaningful, then, reintegration rituals would not take place in secret, behind closed doors. Although such rituals can be effective (e.g. for initiation into secret societies and exclusive clubs), by definition, the reintegration ritual is meant to be the opposite of this sort of exclusivity. The point is to build inclusion and engender solidarity – functions that are well suited to ritual. After all, whereas 'treatment' is typically characterized by an insular, professionals-driven focus on the needs and risks of prisoners

(see Ward and Maruna, 2007), reintegration is something that happens between the returning prisoner and the wider community.

One way to ensure this would be for community members to play a key role in reintegration rituals themselves. This community component might consist more of a 'community of care', represented by members of the person's family and close friends, who after all, will be called upon to do the majority of actual reintegration work in any case (Bobbitt and Nelson, 2004; Braman, 2004; Sullivan et al., 2002). In other cases, by necessity, more artificial groupings of volunteers like 'citizen circles' or 'circles of support' (Petrunik, 2002; Walker et al., 2006) could be utilized. Agents of the criminal justice system have a core role in the rituals as well, in lending their official and institutional endorsement, sponsorship, and even facilitation of the reintegration processes.

Most of those impacted by rituals would, by necessity, not be participants or even first-hand witnesses, but rather the wider 'audience'. Members of the public do not regularly attend degradation ceremonies, for example; law-breakers are no longer punished on stockades in the town center for all to witness. Yet, primarily through media consumption, most of us still have a clear image of what is involved in the contemporary versions of such degradation rituals. Indeed, a large part of the population appears to be inordinately interested in televised portrayals of the work of the police, crime scene investigators, criminal courts, and prisons (Sparks, 1992). We know the various rituals involved in arrest, conviction, and imprisonment 'by heart' even if we have never witnessed these interactions first hand, and this deeply embedded imagination of what happens when someone is caught committing a crime plays a key role in shaping public morality. However, with only a few exceptions (in particular, the '12-step' meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous) currently existing reintegration rituals lack an equivalent hold on the public imagination or media representation. This lack of public imagery might be a cause, as much as a result, of anti-reintegration sensibilities among the public (Braithwaite, 1989).

### *Reintegration rituals would focus on challenge and achievement, not risk*

Classic initiation rituals and other rites of passage often involve a challenge of some sort, a demonstration of courage, valor, or other valued qualities. If a status passage involves the movement from one ascribed role to another, the person will frequently be required to act out, symbolically at least, the internal change they have supposedly gone through to deserve the new status. The message of the initiation rite is, 'If you want to be in our club, you have to prove that you have earned it.'

This active element has specific implications for the perceived legitimacy of the ritual for participants and observers. In a classic study of cognitive dissonance, Aronson and Mills (1959) examined the effects of initiation rites on subsequent views of an association. The researchers randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions requiring varying degrees of difficulty in gaining membership to an

identical group. The researchers found that those who had to work the hardest to achieve this membership valued the inclusion most highly. The easier the initiation process, the less the subjects valued getting into the group. Marshall (2002: 368) writes, 'Ritual participants engaging in effortful practices similarly justify their actions by inflating their subjective confidence in the efficacy of the rite and the entity behind it.'

Practitioners developing rituals of reintegration could learn much from this insight. A key question is what should be required of a person before they are 'awarded' with a reintegration ritual. What achievements, challenges, or personal journey is being symbolically recognized and celebrated with the ritual? The experience of imprisonment, on its own, is certainly a challenging one, yet to say it is an uncelebrated achievement is an understatement. Surviving prison might be seen as a badge of courage among one's peer group (and even occasional academic and activist groups). Yet, outside of these small pockets, a criminal record is a primarily regarded as a badge of shame, something to hide from others, and an open invitation for discrimination and social exclusion (Pager, 2007). Prisoners are said to 'pay their debt' to society through their time in prison. Yet, this terminology is misleading, because society picks up the, often substantial, bill for this period in prison, and few members of the public ever feel a need to thank or congratulate a person at the completion of their time. Rituals of reintegration, then, would presumably be based on something more than just the completion of a prison sentence or 'good time' inside an institution. Good behavior might earn a person a release from prison, but this is not on its own 'reintegration'.

Instead, rituals could be designed to recognize a person's efforts to 'make good' after committing an offense. These might include immediate efforts to apologize or make amends to one's victims, a period of 'good behavior' on the outside, and efforts to recover from addiction, find productive work, 'give something back' to one's community, or contribute to one's family responsibilities. Even in prison, many individuals go out of their way to volunteer their time and abilities in pro-social efforts, such as helping to build homes for low-income citizens through organizations like Habitat for Humanity (Ta, 2000), fighting the forest fires ravaging national forests (Jehl, 2000), and providing respite care to fellow prisoners dying of AIDS and other illnesses (Toch, 2000). Prisoners in the state of Ohio are said to perform more than five million hours of such voluntary community service work each year (Wilkinson, 2001). Such contributions, if acknowledged and celebrated in a reintegration ritual, would send a message to the community that an individual is worthy of further support and investment in their reintegration.

Of course, such charitable contributions do not demonstrate that a person poses no risk of future offending. Risk assessment has become an integral part of the prisoner release/reintegration process to the point of dominating most other considerations (Simon, 1993). When the British government recently released a large number of prisoners to make space in the prison system, for instance, the Prime Minister emphasized that these individuals had been specifically chosen on grounds of risk assessment, not desert. The prisoners to be released were not chosen because

they were deemed to have earned this early release (early, by all of 18 days, incidentally) but because they were deemed to pose a low threat (Ford, 2007). Such utilitarian decisions may make rational sense, but the messages they send to both prisoners and the community are deeply mixed.

Research suggests that many prisoners and probationers find risk assessment to be infuriatingly passive, something that is 'done to you' (Attrill and Liell, 2007: 193) and outside of one's control. Prisoners interviewed by Attrill and Liell (2007: 194) give voice to this common experience of frustration:

I want to communicate the pure fear that risk assessment has caused in me. The post-sentence report process was the hardest time of my life – it made me suicidal by leaving me in the dark and being so swift and out of my control.

In particular, prisoners in the research felt that risk assessment procedures focused too much on past crimes and not enough on their achievements and efforts at reform:

It's not fair – I'm prejudged on what I did in the past, not on what I'm doing now. (2007: 198)

They should take into account fully every attempt the individual has made to address offending behavior and remain objective and consider all the main indicators. They should consider all the work he's done in prison and his intentions for rebuilding his life and the steps taken towards this – in prison. (2007: 199)

I committed a crime that was terrible, that doesn't make me a terrible person. I can change and I have done work to do this. . . . Look at people's achievements. Do not look at knee-jerk reactions to prominent serious offences. (2007: 199)

Rituals of reintegration would be an ideal opportunity to focus on precisely these other aspects of a person's life and character – accomplishments that the person can better control than an abstract concept such as risk. Risk assessment will likely always play a central role in decisions to release prisoners or end criminal justice sentences, but the role of risk prediction in status elevation ceremonies would likely be downplayed and replaced with desert-based themes of 'active responsibility' (Braithwaite, 2000) or what Bazemore (1998) calls 'earned redemption'. After all, marriage rituals and university graduations would be destroyed as cultural events if these occasions were to introduce statistical predictions of a couple's likelihood of staying together or each graduate's chances of finding employment. Risk assessment interferes with the symbolic message of the rite of passage. A reintegration ritual would occur because the person deserves it, not because they were deemed 'low risk' enough to go through one.

### *Reintegration rituals might involve wiping the slate clean*

Finally, the literature on rituals suggests that successful rituals leave ‘a mark’. Rituals can imbue ordinary objects (rings, pieces of paper, styles of clothing) with a ‘sacred’ or deeply symbolic value. Totems are used to embody the achievement of some new status, such as the ‘patches’ given to newly initiated gang members in New Zealand gangs. One former gang member stated, ‘Powerful thing that patch. Gives you access to all sorts of things. If you take on me, you’re also taking on what’s on my back . . . My patch. My army’ (Tamatea, 2010: 43). Participants in other rites of passage leave with both a symbolic *certification* of completion and a literal *certificate*, proving their achievement of some new status. The newly married couple leaves with a marriage certificate, the graduate with a diploma, and the person who is convicted of a crime, leaves with a criminal record – all of which sit in official files and can be accessed by others with greater or lesser ease depending on the jurisdiction.

Reintegration rituals, to be meaningful, would also require certification of some sort (Meisenhelder, 1977). The American Bar Association, for instance, recommends greater use of ‘certificates of good conduct’ or ‘certificates of rehabilitation’ issued by state authorities (e.g. prisoner review boards) to law-abiding ex-prisoners. These provide an opportunity for qualified individuals with criminal records to demonstrate that they have paid their debt to society and earned the right to have statutory obstacles to employment and civic participation lifted (Choo, 2007). Leong (2006), likewise, argues that felon reenfranchisement might also be an ideal opportunity for a reintegration ritual.

Indeed, as a process of de-labeling, the core work of the reintegration ritual may be to remove or destroy previous tokens (in the form of one’s criminal record) rather than creating a new one. This process of ‘wiping the slate clean’, in other words, would be a complete reversal of the original status degradation ceremony (see especially Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994). A criminal past cannot be taken away, of course, and nothing can undo the harm that has been done. Convictions on the other hand are merely symbolic labels ritually awarded by the State in the name of punishment, and equally these can equally be taken away or sealed in the name of reintegration, along with a restoration of the full civil rights, liberties, and duties that all of us share.

The last stage of a rite of passage, after all, is the movement into an entirely new state, free of the liminality of the ‘betwixt and between’ state. Research on desistance from crime refers to such a process as ‘knifing off’ one’s criminal past, severing oneself from a past identity through geographical re-location, joining the military or starting a family (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Inherent in the process of knifing off, is also the reconstructing of biography, revising the past to make it consistent with one’s script for the future (see Maruna and Roy, 2007). Rituals may play a key role in this script work.

## **Conclusion: Reintegration rituals and the risk of routinization**

I have argued that a useful lens for the reform of the prisoner reentry process is to view reintegration from the standpoint of Durkheimian theory about rituals. Like Braithwaite (1989), I contend that most contemporary societies lack clear rituals of reintegration and that this lack may be implicated to greater or lesser extent in the substantial failings in reentry processes that are recognized widely in criminological research (Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005). Some will see little hope in this analysis, and indeed there are ample grounds for pessimism in work around reintegration issues. Punitiveness appears to be deeply ingrained in society, and the stigma of a conviction has become increasingly powerful in recent decades thanks to the rise in communication technology (Bushway, 2004).

As powerful as these forces are, the literature suggests that rituals can be potent tools for change – indeed scholars like Collins (2004) argue that ritual holds the key to understanding human agency itself. At the very least, rituals have been a fundamental aspect of human societies around the world for centuries. Indeed, the ubiquity of ritual across human cultures has led some to argue that the enactment of ritual is an instinctive aspect of human nature (see, for example, Needham, 1985).

The creation and legitimation of a new ritual is presumably not an easy task, but contemporary ritual scholars emphasize that rites and rituals are anything but permanent features of societies. Grimes (2000) points out that many of the rituals we think of as ‘timeless’, including the modern prison sentence, are actually quite recent phenomena. The Christmas ritual as it is currently practiced was really only invented in the Victorian Era. ‘Superbowl Sunday’ was not even imagined before 1965. The Great Depression saw the creation of dozens of ritual-heavy fraternal organizations for men, at least partially in response to the crisis of adult masculinity that accompanied widespread unemployment (Bell, 1997). Indeed, in what Grimes (2000) calls ‘a new paradigm’ of self-conscious ritualization, contemporary individuals and groups are actively pursuing experiments in new rituals including practices ranging from secular ‘naming ceremonies’ for newborn children to divorce rituals and rites to mark the leaving of religious traditions. Thus, far from leaving ritual behind, contemporary, secular societies have sought to harness the powers that religious rituals have long held.

If new rituals are to be developed, however, it is essential to understand their social psychological dynamics. This article has outlined some of the components of effective ritual drawn from neo-Durkheimian theory, but this literature also makes clear that it is easy to ‘do ritual wrong’. All of us have attended, what Collins describes as ‘empty’ or ‘forced’ rituals – routinized ceremonies involving the endless reading of names and distributing of certificates without emotional investment or the perceived legitimacy of participants or audience members. Such events are ‘energy draining, not emotional energy creating’ (Collins, 2004: 53) and can turn people off ritual participation altogether (e.g. the researcher who grows to abhor academic conferences; the Christian who stops attending church services

because she finds them tedious). Failed rituals can be particularly self-defeating when they erode support not just for the rituals themselves, but for the cause supposedly being sustained through the ritual (e.g., the once-committed researcher who drops out of academia because she finds academic conferences to be so awful; the once-committed Christian who leaves the faith for another in search of more fulfilling experiences). The worst outcome of a rite of passage, after all, is the participant who decides, 'If this is what your club is about, I'm not interested.'

For this reason, all rituals need regular reinvention to maintain their legitimacy. Rituals that are not working (not doing the job they are supposed to do) should be adapted. The trend toward individually tailored weddings (e.g. the writing of a couple's own vows) is an example of an attempt to make a traditional ceremony more personally meaningful to the participants. I argue that ex-prisoner reintegration, as it is currently practiced, is one such failing ritual that should be re-examined.

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### Note

1. The National Rites of Passage Institute is one of a number of predominantly African American organizations that have adopted 'rites of passage' as a central organizing concept. See <http://ritesofpassage.org>

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