Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies

James V. Spickard
University of Redlands

Follow this and additional works at: https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles

Part of the Indigenous Studies Commons, Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons, Other Religion Commons, Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons, and the Sociology of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles/69

This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code).
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Our House at InSPIRe @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Our House Articles, Posters, and Presentations by an authorized administrator of InSPIRe @ Redlands. For more information, please contact inspire@redlands.edu.
Experiencing Religious Rituals:  
A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies*  

by  
James V. Spickard  

Department of Sociology/Anthropology  
University of Redlands  
Redlands, California 92373  

Published in Sociological Analysis 52(2): 191-204, 1991  

ABSTRACT  

The sociology of religion has, by and large, treated religious experiences as personal, having in themselves little social relevance. To this line of thought, experiences become social only when they are so defined by beliefs and/or institutions. This paper outlines a sociology of religious experience that erodes the experience-is-private/belief-is-social dichotomy. It is based on the work of Alfred Schutz.  

Schutz argues, in brief, that there are several kinds of sociality, of which sharing ideas and sharing institutions are only two. Sharing ideas and institutions do indeed distance one from experience, as the standard paradigm suggests. But in certain "life-worlds", experiences themselves may be social, not private. There, social actors share "inner time": a vivid present in which they "tune-in" to one another. The world of musical performance, to use Schutz's example, involves a polythetic sharing of consciousness which unites composers, musicians and audiences across the generations. Religious experience, I argue, parallels making music: it is, in its nature, a social act.  

The second half of the paper applies this perspective to traditional Navajo religion. It shows how Navajo "chants" reorient their participants' inner time to create the experience of the harmony between self, society and world that lies at the core of Navajo philosophy.  

Religions are complex phenomena. At the very least they combine three factors, each of which has been the focus of sociological investigation. As belief systems, religions order people's thoughts and provide a sense of meaning. As churches, they order people's interactions and give a sense of belonging. And in their rituals, they order people's moods and emotions so as to clothe both beliefs and institutions in "an aura of facticity" (Geertz 1973: 90).  

Traditionally, sociologists have looked at religious beliefs, institutions and rituals in terms of their ties with social relations. That is, they have looked at the ways society molds religious beliefs, structures and practices, and at the ways these elements mold society in turn. Neo-Weberian work on the relations between religious and secular ideologies (e.g., Bellah 1967),
Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies

neo-Marxist work on the relations between religious and secular institutions (e.g., Worsley 1968) and neo-Durkheimian work on the social messages of ritual (e.g. Douglas 1975, 1982) uphold traditions founded long ago.

Though not entirely left out, these studies neglect religious experiences: that is, the subjective side of what occurs in religious settings. This is held to be the province of psychology. With William James (1902), most sociologists see such experiences as essentially individual; their religiousness is an "overbelief" grafted onto purely psychological phenomena. Recent sociological work (e.g.: Stark 1965a, 1965b; Greeley 1975; Wuthnow 1976) has rarely departed from this paradigm. Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 87) put it most clearly: "We do not deny the worth of examining the prevalence of these other mental and emotional phenomena; we simply think it important not to mistake magic and odd mental states for religion." For most sociological observers, experiences are merely "odd mental states". They contribute to religion when people give them a socially validated interpretation--i.e., when they are explained by beliefs. In this view, beliefs are social and experiences are not. Unlike beliefs, institutions, or rituals, religious experiences are seen as immune to sociological analysis.

Mary Jo Neitz and I have argued elsewhere (Neitz and Spickard, 1990) that this is not the case. We showed that an adequate sociological theory of religion must account for religious experiences, and that the 'overbelief' model, while attractive, involves certain assumptions that prevent it from filling the bill. Specifically, that model fails to account for people's reported experiences of "otherness", of which we provided examples. These experiences are social in the traditional sense, in that they are often--indeed usually--interpreted by means of socially received ideas. Yet they are also social in a deeper sense, in that they are shared in the flow of time.

Both kinds of sociality are important. Neitz and I sought to complement traditional approaches with a theory of the sociality of experience, based on Alfred Schutz's phenomenology of music. But for reasons of space, we were not able to develop that theory in full.

In this paper I shall present Schutz's theory more fully, in order to generate a sociology of religious experience. First, I shall trace his theory to its origin in his philosophy of life-worlds. I shall show how this framework erodes the experience-is-private/belief-is-social dichotomy, and how it illuminates a neglected side of the religious life. Then I shall apply this analysis to traditional Navajo religion. In moving from the abstract to the concrete, I hope to highlight both the possibility of a social analysis of experience, and its potential usefulness alongside more traditional approaches.

Experience in Schutz's Social Phenomenology

Alfred Schutz devoted his scholarly life to developing a thoroughgoing sociology of subjectivity. He saw this as the necessary underpinning for a Weberian "sociology of understanding" (Wagner 1983: 15). He based his work on Husserl's phenomenology. According to phenomenological theory, each individual constructs his or her own 'world', but does so out of building blocks presented by others. Applying this insight to social life, Schutz described the world as it appears to its participants. But he did so without losing sight of that world's insubstantiality. In essays like "The Stranger" (1944) and "Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality" (1954), he detailed the
Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies

complex interplay between the individual's efforts to comprehend the world and the socially sanctioned conceptions of the world that she or he encounters.

These conceptions are powerful, yet fragile: they orient the individual's actions, yet they may be revised in the light of experience. For Schutz neither conceptions nor experiences can be ignored. As his biographer put it:

Where sociologists like Sumner and Durkheim saw this whole cultural superstructure as a deterministic and coercive mechanism, Schutz emphasized the subjective meaning of a person's membership in his community. ... Schutz showed that even the socially most stereotyped cultural ideas only exist in the minds of individuals who absorb them, interpret them on the basis of their own life situation, and give them a personal tinge which the reporting anthropologists so often ignore. (Wagner 1970: 17)

This aspect of Schutz's work is fertile ground for a sociology of religious experiencing.

Schutz is best known for his description of "typification"--the process by which actors call on their socially accumulated store of knowledge to interpret the world around them. In religious as well as other settings, people's understandings clearly depend on such typification. Encountering something new, we ask 'Is this event an A or a B?', where 'A' and 'B' are socially sanctioned alternate possibilities. As Schutz (1944) shows, new understandings come from the interplay between typifications and experience: people redefine both the situation and their experiences until the two seem to fit.

Many sociologists have used this concept to emphasize the social nature of our worldviews. Berger and Luckmann (1967), for example, use it to emphasize the constructedness of our images of reality. They join it to a socialization model (loosely derived from G.H. Mead) to highlight the ways our experiences are structured by the conceptions we already possess of what is happening to us. For them, experience is less important than the knowledge by which experiences are comprehended. In effect, experience is treated as a Kantian 'thing-in-itself', which is unknowable; only the social side of the interaction is explored.

This is, however, to read Schutz through Sumnerian or Durkheimian lenses. It cuts off the consideration of religious experience per se. And it is questionable on philosophic grounds. In Kantian philosophy, experience is no 'thing-in-itself'; experience is the human side of our interaction with things-in-themselves. For Kant, our experience of things-in-themselves is knowable, but it is subjective rather than objective knowledge. Experience is our knowledge, not knowledge in general. It is neither universalizable nor certain.

Husserlian phenomenology attempts to ground secure knowledge in this subjectivity by means of a rigorous examination of experience. In particular, Schutz's application of phenomenology to sociology is an attempt to highlight the interplay between social life and experience--not to demonstrate the hegemony of the former. Schutz certainly thought of himself as a phenomenologist of the Husserlian school. Subsequent scholars' overemphasis on typification as the mechanism by which experience is absorbed into social life prevents Husserl's project from going forward.
Rather than start with typification, I wish to start with another of Schutz's concepts that provides a better basis for a sociology of religious experience. This is his notion of multiple realities.

Multiple Realities

Schutz (1945) differentiated several experiential "worlds" within which people live. These are not external or objective worlds, but rather are attitudes toward the world--what we might today call states of consciousness. He mentioned four: "the world of everyday life", the world of imagination, "the world of dreams", and "the world of scientific theorizing". Each state exhibits different degrees of attention to external reality, different forms of spontaneity, different experiences of the self, time, sociality, and so on.

Ordinarily, we occupy what Schutz called "the world of everyday life", or, alternately, "the world of work". This is a practical world, in which work--defined as conduct intended to bring about a desired result--is the prevalent form of activity. Its state of consciousness is what we call "wide-awakeness": the full attention to life. The self is experienced as active more than contemplative; doing takes precedence over reflection. Time is treated as universal: minutes, hours, days, weeks and years are assumed facts of nature. Personal or inner time and clock time are often seen as if they were the same.

In the world of work, social life is based on interpersonal communication about an assumedly shared reality. This reality is vivid: we experience it with our bodies as well as in our thoughts. We do not doubt the world's reality. More precisely, we bracket our doubts in the interests of getting our work done. Sociality is a fact of life, only problematic when we visit a foreign land (see Schutz 1944).

The world of dreams, on the other hand, is free from everyday practicality. Dreaming is passive: dreams happen to one, without conscious direction. We express this experience in our retelling: we say 'This happened, then that, then this.' Within the dream world, the self may be experienced as active but not as ruling the world. The balance of power always lies with events, not the dreamer. In addition, we experience our dream-self as partial. Though sometimes realistic, dreams lack the vivid presence of everyday life. Dreams especially lack full bodily sensation.

In most dreams, time is no longer objective. It appears jumbled to the dreamer: before and after may be mixed, and attention is not confined to the present. Inner time remains constant, however. We may not experience dreams sequentially, but our experience of them is continuous. Schutz, following Bergson, called this continuous inner time *durée*.

For Schutz, a sociology of the dream experience is impossible. The dream world lacks full sociality. As he put it, "We cannot dream together, and the alter ego remains merely an object of my dreams, incapable of sharing them. ... The Other dreamed is always typified, and this holds true even if I dream him to be in very close relationship to my intimate self." (Schutz 1945: 244) In Schutz's philosophy, *durée* must be shared before one can speak of real social life occurring.
Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies

Like the world of dreams, world of scientific theorizing does not serve any practical purpose. By "world", here, Schutz means state of consciousness. By "scientific" he means the Socratic seeking after knowledge: the scientist-as-philosopher. He is referring to those moments in all scientists' lives in which thought dominates action; in which the self is "disinterested"; in which one acts to gain knowledge, not to improve life for 'me'.

As a state of mind, this is the world of pure contemplation. Its consciousness is impractical: in the sense that theory wishes to understand the world, not master or change it. Schutz agrees with Marx about this distinction; he merely points out that the theorist--qua theorist--is interested in the former. Neither theorizing nor dreaming attempt to control the world-as-it-is.

Unlike the world of dreams, however, the theoretical world has a social side. "The scientist enters a preconstituted world of scientific contemplation handed down to him by the historical tradition of his science. Henceforth, he will participate in a universe of discourse embracing the results obtained by others, problems stated by others, solutions suggested by others, methods worked out by others," (Schutz 1945: 250) The theoretician works with concepts made by others; without those others, theorizing would be impossible.

This conceptual sociality is a form of social life dreams do not exhibit. But it is not full sociality in an experiential sense. It is not the vivid present grounded in the movements of one's body. Instead it is a "specious present ... defined at any moment by the span of the project" on which one is working (Schutz 1945: 253).

In this specious present, one does not interact with whole Others. We may read about Aquinas's personality, but that personality does not enter our theorizing. Aquinas does not talk back to us from the page. And we grasp his thought monothetically. We do not share his thought processes, merely their results. True, Aquinas leads us through the steps of his argument to persuade us of its correctness; but in doing so we do not fully share his inner time, as we would in a face-to-face encounter. We focus on his reasoning, to the exclusion of all else.

From the lack of an actual vivid present, plus the lack of interaction with the Other's whole self, Schutz concludes that "the theorizing self is solitary; it has no social environment; it stands outside social relationships" (Schutz 1945: 253). Despite its dependence on social discourse, it experiences itself as cut off from its fellows. It does not share their durée.

Sociologists of religion, I believe, have too often treated religion either as a form of dreams or as a form of theorizing. Like dreams, religious experiences are seen as completely asocial. They occur, yet only to a partial, unsocialized self. They are seen as personal and ungraspable: witness the common image of mysticism as an 'oceanic', 'undefinable' encounter with the 'beyond'. As the shudder-quotes indicate, these terms are seen as public approximations of private experiences. They are not meant to express the full quality of the individual's subjective world.

Viewing religion as a form of theory, on the other hand, emphasizes that society provides the religious world with its terms of discourse. Public concepts structure religions. They guide what flows from them. Religious expression is seen as inseparable from socially validated ideas; in
this view, any sociology of religion begins and ends with a description of the social generation of meaning.

Each of these approaches results in a conceptual rather than a phenomenological sociology of religion. For the first, religious experiences (like dreams) are asocial; sociality enters with the concepts by which people tame them. For the second, religions (like theories) are built from socially generated ideas about the world. Neither approach focuses on the shared inner time—dureé—that Schutz sees as key to full social experience.

Religion as Music

Schutz argued that conceptual or semantic communication presupposes sociality rather than the other way around. Sociality is built on "the possibility of living together simultaneously in specific dimensions of time" (Schutz 1951: 162). Semantic understanding is one form of such living together. But it is not the only one. Experiencing things together is another. In an essay on the phenomenology of music (Schutz 1951), Schutz illustrates how experiential sociality occurs.

Musical performances involve several individuals. Most directly, they involve interactions between composers, performers and audiences. All these interactions are mediated by the point of the performance—the music. For Schutz, the heart of music is the experience shared by the composer, the performer and the audience. In Schutz's words (1951: 170),

For our purposes a piece of music may be defined ... as a meaningful arrangement of tones in inner time. ... The flux of tones unrolling in inner time is an arrangement meaningful to both the composer and the beholder, because and in so far as it evokes in the stream of consciousness participating in it an interplay of recollections, retentions, protentions and anticipations which interrelate the successive elements.

These recollections, retentions, and so on are not the private memories individuals bring to their experiences. They are not associations of musical phrases with parts of the external world. The "Moonlight Sonata" does not have to remind us of moonlight to draw forth the recollections of which Schutz speaks. Instead, such recollections are internal to the music. In Schutz's words (1951: 170),

The composer, by the specific means of his art, has arranged it in such a way that the consciousness of the beholder is led to refer what he actually hears to what he anticipates will follow and also to what he has just been hearing and what he has heard ever since this piece of music began. The hearer, therefore, listens to the ongoing flux of music, so to speak, not only in the direction from the first to the last bar but simultaneously in a reverse direction back to the first one.2

By structuring inner time, then, music allows composer and beholder to share experience.

Although separated by hundreds of years, the [beholder] participates with quasi simultaneity in the [composer's] stream of consciousness by performing with him step by step the ongoing articulation of his musical thought. The beholder, thus, is united with the
Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies

Music differs from reading philosophy in this regard. When one reads, one also participates in the author's thought, step by step, line by line. The meaning of a written passage, however, can be grasped all at once—monothetically, to use Husserl's term. One understands a philosophical conclusion without having continually to recreate its proof. Unlike conceptual thought, however, art is polythetic: it takes as much time to reconstitute the 'meaning' of a piece of music as it did the first time one experienced it. One must play it or listen to it again. Poetry, though using words, resembles music more than philosophy. As Schutz put it, "I can tell in one or two sentences the story of the ancient mariner ... [but] in so far as it is poetry[,] I can only bring it before my mind by reciting or reading it from beginning to end" (Schutz (1951: 173n).

Music's peculiar sociality depends on its polythetics. If the world of dreams is asocial, lacking any connection between self and others, and the world of scientific theorizing is social (in so far as it uses concepts) but is not intersubjective, the world of music is both social and intersubjective. And it is not dependent on conceptual thought. Composers, performers and audience all bring to music a socially generated stock of knowledge, which forms the ground of their experiences. But musical experience is not reducible to that ground. Music generates a shared experience of inner time: what Schutz calls a "mutual tuning-in relationship".

Neitz and I (1990) argued that this relationship can be the basis for a sociology of religious experience. Experiences are patterns of inner time; like all patterns in inner time, they can be shared. People experience time together in many religious settings, but especially in rituals. Rather than focusing on rituals' cognitive contents—their theologies and symbols—a Schutzian approach could focus on the ebb and flow of their activity. Rituals, in this view, help people "tune-in" to one another, to share an inner state of consciousness. Seen in this light, the experiences people have in religious settings are profoundly social—and in a quite basic way.

In order to illustrate what such an approach can do, I shall apply Schutz's insights to traditional Navajo religion. My presentation of that religion is not unique; it could not be, as I have based it on the work of established specialists. But my account differs in its emphasis on that religion's experiential, as opposed to its cognitive, side. I argue, in essence, that Navajo rituals structure their participants' experiences of time; this structuring both generates and confirms the religion's conceptual principles. To give these principles priority is, I believe, an error. Rather, we must look at the shared experience out of which religious meaning arises. Once we understand this sociality, we can investigate the shared concepts—the typifications, to use Schutz's term—that are applied to experience post hoc.

Navajo Religion

Navajo religion is highly ritualized. It is formal and precise. Firmly rooted in the Southwestern landscape, it concerns itself with maintaining individual and communal life and health. It's main event is the "chant"—a several day and night ceremony designed to reorder one's relationship with the powers of creation.
There are many different types of chant. Wyman (1983: 539ff) counted 24 aboriginal "chantway systems" used for curing, plus Blessingway and Enemyway (and their subvarieties) which, respectively, bring luck and exorcise alien ghosts. Each system can be conducted according to one of three ritual modes, depending on its intent. Holyway mode invokes the Holy People; Evilway mode wards off native ghosts; Lifeway mode treats victims of accidents. Most chants have two-night and five-night versions; some can be spread over nine-nights. The permutations and combinations of chantway, mode and length are almost infinite.

Families choose to sponsor chants at times of crisis or potential disorder. A family member may be ill; someone may be leaving for or returning from a journey among foreigners. That person--the "patient"--is the focus of the ceremony. The family will engage a "singer", a priestly specialist in the particular chant deemed proper for the occasion. As learning each chant requires memorizing several days worth of prayers and activities, the singer who masters more than a few chants is rare.

A typical Holyway chant begins in the evening by consecrating the hogan (the traditional circular house) in which it is to take place. The patient's body is painted with pigments, cornmeal and pollen. The singer's helpers make "unravelers"--bundles of herbs and feathers that are placed on the patient's body, then unraveled, symbolizing release from evil, danger and harm. This is followed by songs and prayers that last most of the night.

After dawn a large fire is built on the hogan's floor, and the singer, patient and any family members who choose disrobe and sweat. The patient is given an herbal emetic and washed, accompanied by more singing. After breakfast, the singer makes offerings to the Holy People, so they will come and render aid. Then the sand painting begins.

Each sand painting is large and complex, depicting in symbols the mythic journey that resulted in this chant being given to the people. It usually centers on the Holy People encountered by the protagonist. It is made on the floor of the hogan by trickling dry pigments onto a smoothed bed of tan sand. The singer directs the work; any man who knows how may help. A six-foot painting may take four to six men three to five hours to finish.

After the sand painting is done, the patient sits in its center and the singer applies medicines to various parts of the Holy People depicted in the painting. Then he touches the patient in the same places, intoning ritual prayers and songs. The patient is in this way identified with the Holy People, for his or her protection. The prayers retell the myth by which the world was created and sand painting given to the people.

After this part of the ceremony, the patient goes outside and the sand painting is destroyed. The sand--now supernaturally dangerous--is removed and strewn far from the hogan. The whole process is repeated for four days (in a five-day chant), each day bringing a different painting and a different myth. The last night is devoted to singing, culminating in the dawn songs, which greet the first faint streak of light in the east.

Of course, I have left out much. Besides the unravelings, sand paintings and sweats, a chant may specify more than 100 prayers and songs the singer must repeat exactly if the ritual is to have
effect. These are highly repetitive and display a detailed imagery. On the surface, they contain a simple message. Each invokes a Holy Person, then seeks identification between the patient and that Holy Person's powers. In some chants this leads to a request that the Holy Person remove and disperse the malevolence that besets the patient. Often the language models this removal. As one prayer from the Enemyway chant says to Pollen Boy (Haile 1938a: 207-213):

Nicely you shall put my foodpipe in its [former] condition again!
Nicely you shall put my windpipe in its [former] condition again!
Nicely you shall put my heart in its [former] condition again!
Nicely you shall put my nerves in their [former] condition again!
Nicely I shall walk about, without ailment I shall go about, unaffected by sickness I shall be going about!
Without monsters seeing me I shall be going about!
Without beings which are evil seeing me I shall be going about!
With monsters dreading me I shall be going about!
With monsters respecting me I shall be going about!
Governed by this I shall be going about!
After conquering monsters I shall be going about!
After accomplishing this with monsters I shall be going about!
Pleasant again it has become.
Pleasant again it has become.
Pleasant again it has become.
Pleasant again it has become.
Pleasant again it has become.

Prayer as Performance

Early interpreters reduced such prayers to their images. Either they saw them as attempts at magical compulsion (e.g., Reichard 1944). Or they treated them as texts out of context, separated from the religious performances of which they are a part (e.g., Reichard 1950; Villaseñor 1966). In either case, the emphasis was on the images' symbolic "meaning".

Recent interpreters have been more sophisticated. Lamphere, for example, interprets symbol systems, not isolated symbolic elements. As she remarks (1969), "In the Navajo case, it seems most appropriate to analyze chants as a system of symbolic objects and actions which both express cosmology and provide a means of dealing with individual illness through symbolic manipulation of man-to-god relationships and the patient's body state." Her emphasis, however, is still cognitive. In her model, ritual expresses cosmology. Then it manipulates relationships by manipulating people's thoughts. Rituals are tools to think with, not experiences.

More fruitfully, Sam Gill has recently argued that Navajo prayer must be seen as performance, not as text. He points out that when looked at from the point of view of the ritual's participants, such prayers "evoke and structure the images ... in such a way that they create the power that can expel malevolent influences and that can reorder, and hence restore to health and happiness, a person who suffers" (Gill 1987: 110). Their impact is experiential, not cognitive.
Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies

In the case of the just-quoted prayer, for example, the patient is guided from a position of pain and fear to one of strength. The first four lines express the patient's desire for a restored body. The next two presume this restoration, and hide him or her from the causes of pain. The following three express mastery over that cause, while the next two celebrate his or her invincibility. The last five lines affirm the refound joy of life that the prayer as a whole has created. The prayer itself models healing. And it makes sense only in the context of the healing act: the ritual as a whole.

This is the kind of analysis Schutz's sociology of music recommends. Like music or poetry, prayer is a polythetic phenomenon. It presents a stream of images that structure inner time. It guides the hearer from image to image: backward as the images repeat what has been, forward as they foretell what is to come. Where theology is meant to convince, ritual prayer is meant to be experienced.

Navajo religion is particularly oriented toward prayer, because in prayer is believed to be the origin of the world. On a conceptual level, we can see this in the Blessingway myth, which is retold at all major creative events. It is used when building houses, before journeys, at marriages. It is a part of many other rites. Literally translated, it means "the way to secure an environment of perfect beauty" (Gill 1987: 19). The myth recounts the occasion of the first ceremony, by which the world was made.

At the beginning of this world, the story goes, all was chaos. The lower worlds had fallen into disorder and been destroyed. All that was left was the medicine bundle, a collection of objects and powers from which the world was made.

Thought and speech emerged from the bundle. They took the form of a young man and woman, too beautiful to behold. As Long-life Boy and Happiness Girl they thought and talked about how the world was to be. Then they built a ceremonial hogan held up by the cardinal directions: East, South, North and West. They entered the hogan and spread the contents of the medicine bundle on the sand. They painted the life forms of all the living things that would be in the world, along with the months of the year, the stars and the landscape. Then they sang through the night. At dawn the painting was transformed into the world the Navajo know.

Even taken out of context, this is a remarkable story. In essence, it says the world was created by knowledge. It was thought and spoken into being all at once, perfectly. Creation is the external manifestation of knowledge, mirrored in language. As Witherspoon notes (1983: 575), "Navajos do not postulate the possibility that language may distort reality or the perception of reality. ...on the contrary, reality was created or transformed as a manifestation of language. In the Navajo view of the world, language is not a mirror of reality; reality is a mirror of language."

In Austin's terms, Navajo ritual is performative. "Ritual language does not describe how things are; it determines how they will be" (Witherspoon 1983: 575; see also Gill 1977). It does so formulaically, by telling the myths of the world's origin. The world was perfect at its creation. Telling the story--experiencing the story--restores this perfection.
But here lies a major difference. I have explained this story conceptually; the Navajo do not do so. The Blessingway myth is told in the context of ritual, where it is self-referencing. The story says that thought and speech created the world at the beginning of time; in the ritual retelling they create it once again. But this time the creation is in inner time—in the experience of teller and hearer. Every retelling is an origin. As people experience the story again, the world is renewed.

Their experience is not vicarious. Though the ritual goes to great lengths to identify the patient with the supernaturals, and to model his or her cure, its ultimate reference is not "there-then". It is "here-now". More particularly, the ritual experience is not a copy of the original world-creation. It is the world-creation. In Navajo eyes, the ritual literally recreates the world.

Like music, this world-creation can not be done monothetically. I can summarize rituals, but doing so subverts their purpose. Rituals to restore perfection take time. They use the same tools—knowledge and language—that did the original deed. And they are patterned on that deed. Long-life Boy and Happiness Girl sang songs and painted sand in the first hogan. Ritual singers do the same today. Order and harmony arise as they create their world in its minute detail. Ritual, like music, is a polythetic reordering of durée.

If we put ourselves in the place of the patient for whose benefit the ritual is performed, we can see this quite clearly. For a ceremony to occur, something must be out of order. An individual or family must identify an illness, an impending or recently completed journey, or other crisis as disrupting the harmony that should exist. Arranging for the ritual proclaims this crisis, calling forth aid from family and friends. The patient becomes the center of supportive attention.

The early stages of the ritual mark this as well. The patient is painted and sung over, his or her trouble is identified, and preliminary rites mimic the release from evil the ceremony is designed to achieve. In the company of others, the patient is purified by emetic, washing and sweat. Socially and psychologically, the patient is placed at the center: the ideal spot from which to see creation unfold. The patient is even placed in the center physically: of the sand painting, the high point of the ceremony.

The painting ritual unites the person being cured with the world's creators or with an heroic adventurer who brought some culture element such as agriculture or hunting into the Navajo world. The patient walks onto the painting and sits amidst the holy people that it represents. "In this way the person is identified with the very forces of the universe. He or she becomes one with the sources of life" (Gill 1987: 55). Repetitive prayers reinforce this union. Rather than magically compelling the Holy People to aid the patient, they identify the two. 'Now this is happening, now this...' The patient is rooted in the present, with the Holy People.

Such rituals are not magic. Magic would separate patient and Holy People: 'me' here compelling 'them' there. Instead, the patient becomes a Holy Person and experiences the truth of the myths: that the natural and supernatural are not two worlds, but one.

The sand-painting event accomplishes a recreation of the person and the universe. The world which may have seemed at odds with itself, experienced in the person as physical
or mental suffering, is unified and reintegrated in the sand-painting rite, where it is acknowledged that the whole drama of the universe is repeated in the human being. (Gill 1987: 56)

To the Navajo, this is not just a conceptual act. Conceptual knowing is not enough. Navajo religion works by experience, not by philosophy.

Religion as Experience

The point is, Navajo chants have an effect that can only be seen if they are approached polythetically. For the person cured in Navajo ritual, the content of the ritual message is less important than its experience. Just believing that the natural and supernatural are joined would not cure. Living their conjuncture does. Unlike dreams or scientific theorizing, but like music, the point of these rituals is to shape the participants' inner time, and thereby to reorient them to the world.

Navajo chants are social experiences. They are social in so far as they require many people for their execution. This is the external sociality our discipline studies well. They are social in so far as they make use of shared elements of the Navajo world view. This is the conceptual sociality our discipline also acknowledges.

But Navajo chants are also social as they guide experience along well-worn channels, toward an inner reorientation to the world. Through ritual acts, the patient is united in inner time with all patients who have gone before. The singer is united in inner time with all singers. The helpers are united with all helpers and the families with all families. And all are united with the Holy Persons, the world-creators.

To the extent that we limit our understanding of the social nature of religion to externals and to concepts, we miss much of Navajo religion's purpose. It is not, primarily, designed to heal social splits, though it may do that. It is not, primarily, designed to reinforce or change people's ideas, though it may do that as well. It is designed to 'cure' people: to create an experience of the harmony between self, society and world that in the Navajo scheme of things always is, and is always coming to be.

Schutz's approach is, of course, not the only one to arrive at such an interpretation. Gill (1987), for example, gets there theologically (though one wonders how he would generalize his results to non-Native American religions). Murray (1977) is on more generalizable ground, despite his emphasis on the interpretation of Navajo symbols. Building on the sign-theories of Morris, Austin and Peirce, he argues that "ritual symbols are performatives with indexical meaning and pragmatic efficacy" (Murray 1977: 197). Roughly translated: ritual symbols are acts which, through their very performance, impart to their audience a meaning beyond, yet not wholly separate from the ritual experience.

Like Schutz's formulation, Murray's combines the cognitive with the experiential. Schutz's advantage, however, is that his concept of shared inner time leaves no question about the social
Experiencing Religious Rituals: A Schutzian Analysis of Navajo Ceremonies

nature of religious experiences. For this reason, if for no other, a Schutzian sociology of religious rituals deserves our attention.

NOTES

* Previous versions of parts of this paper were read at the 1987 and 1988 annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. I wish to thank Anthony Blasi, Richard Carp, Stephen Kent, Mary Jo Neitz, and Paul Stroble for their helpful suggestions on those drafts.

1 Schutz limited his discipleship to the 'mundane' side of Husserl's phenomenology; he rejected transcendental phenomenology as idealist and unworkable. See Wagner (1980), esp. chapter 18.


3 However cf. Kuhn's (1970) discussion of ambition and goal orientation in science.

4 Science can be used for mastery, but mastery is not inherent in the scientific enterprise. See Schutz (1945: 245-6).

5 Of course no one lives this way, at least not for long. As Schutz put it, "Only a partial self, a taker of a role, a 'Me', namely, the theoretician, 'acts' within the province of scientific thought. This partial self lacks all 'essentially actual' experiences and all experiences connected with his own body, its movements and its limits" (Schutz 1945: 248-9). The theorist brackets these limits in the interests of the scientific project.

6 Schutz refers the reader to William James' (1890: 608ff, 641ff) use of the term.

7 Schutz notes St. Augustine's similar description of time and memory in Book XI, Ch. 28 of Confessions. (The reprint of his article in Vol. II of Schutz's Collected Papers lists this incorrectly as chapter 38.)

8 This is not to say that a partial presentation of music or poetry is 'meaningless'. To use a seasonal example, the Hallelujah Chorus does not require the full presentation of the Messiah to raise goose bumps. But the experience of the Chorus is different from the experience of the full Messiah: they are different performances. Neither can be grasped all at once; neither can be reduced to conceptual meaning.

9 On Navajo religion generally see Aberle (1966); Gill (1974, 1979, 1980, 1983); Haile (1938b, 1943); Kluckholn (1944, 1968); Kluckholn and Leighton (1946); Lamphere (1969, 1983); Leighton and Leighton (1941); Reichard (1944, 1945, 1950); Werner, Manning and Begishe (1983); Witherspoon (1977, 1983); Wyman (1950, 1983).


REFERENCES


