

What pandemic messaging around changing holiday rituals gets wrong

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In the midst of the raging coronavirus pandemic, we're faced with agonizing decisions about whether to forgo treasured holiday rituals. Many people have defied health officials, putting themselves at risk of

contracting COVID-19 or spreading the disease in order to uphold their family traditions in person.

A new paper by two researchers at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business sheds light on the psychology of rituals—and why [health officials](#) may have to do more than just tell people not to gather in order to be effective.

That's because coming together to exchange gifts on Christmas isn't just about getting presents; it's a symbol of love. Eating turkey on Thanksgiving isn't just a shared meal; it's an expression of gratitude. "We view rituals as more important than regular types of group activities because they reflect the values of the group," says Dan Stein, a Berkeley Haas doctoral student and lead author on the paper.

"When people alter activities that are more ritualistic, it elicits stronger moral outrage," says Juliana Schroeder, an assistant professor in the Haas Management of Organizations Group and the paper's co-author. Pitting pandemic social distancing against the values of love and togetherness represented by the holidays creates moral conflict for many people. "If messages from officials to social distance are going to be successful, they must come up with a response to these strong group values."

The paper, forthcoming in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, examines the psychology of rituals through experiments that drive home just how strongly people feel about traditions and resist even minor changes. It was co-written by Harvard Business School professors Francesca Gino and Michael Norton along with Nicholas Hobson, founder of The Behaviorist consulting firm.

"From Catholics performing the sign of the cross since the fourth century to Americans reciting the Pledge of Allegiance since the 1890s, group rituals have strikingly consistent features over time," the

researchers wrote. "Because group rituals symbolize sacred group values, even minor alterations to them provoke moral outrage and punishment."

In one experiment, the researchers asked Berkeley undergraduate students to rate 15 holidays according to how ritualistic they were. They then asked them to rate on a scale of 1 to 7 how angry and frustrated they would feel if the U.S. government "moved celebrations for the holiday one week forward," and also how immoral and inappropriate it would be to change the date. The more ritualistic the holiday, the higher it scored on both scales, signifying stronger "moral outrage" about altering it. Christmas and New Year's scored above 5 on both scales, while Columbus Day scored as a 2 on both.

Change for the sake of good

In other experiments, they found that altering a [ritual](#) elicits moral outrage even if a person has a good reason for doing so. When they asked participants—all U.S. citizens—how they would feel if they saw another citizen remaining seated rather than standing for the Pledge of Allegiance, participants reported outrage even when they were told the person was sitting to show solidarity with Americans with disabilities. Participants expressed even more outrage, however, when told that the person was sitting to protest U.S. values—indicating that the reason for the change was important—and they were also upset if told that the person had forgotten to stand. Their irritation only subsided when they were told the person was injured and physically unable to stand.

Even changes that might make a ritual safer elicit moral outrage, they found. In another experiment, the researchers asked Jewish participants how they would feel if a circumcision ceremony—a highly ritualized event occurring the same way for thousands of years—was done in a hospital rather than at a temple. Over 80% of respondents agreed that a hospital ceremony would be safer, and yet they also reported more anger

about the suggestion of moving the circumcision ceremony to a hospital rather than keeping it the same, even if it was riskier.

"People don't want to have to pit one sacred value against another," Stein says. "While medical safety represents the sacred value of life in Judaism, circumcision stands for a literal blood covenant with God. That creates an uncomfortable conflict in people's minds."

In fact, the researchers found that the study participants who were most committed to U.S. values expressed the most outrage about changing holiday traditions. "We theorize that moral outrage is functional in the long-run because it can help a group protect its sacred rituals," Stein says. "We need those people who are committed for the group to survive, but our research suggests that trying to tell people, 'By not practicing your ritual, you'll save lives,' might not be effective for everyone."

The challenge for families trying to stay safe during the pandemic is how to alter rituals in ways that keep their values intact, even if getting together physically isn't possible. "This research suggests that to reduce outrage when altering rituals, you should try to change them in ways that still allow people to celebrate group values," says Schroeder. "That's what people are getting upset about when the ritual is altered—and that's the thing that needs to be maintained."

More information: Daniel Stein et al, When Alterations are Violations: Moral Outrage and Punishment in Response to (Even Minor) Alterations to Rituals, (2020). [DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/yd7tg](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/yd7tg)

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