

## Comment: Practice Theory, Embodiment, and Language

*Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern*

*Cromie Burn Research Unit, University of Pittsburgh*

The following two papers are not technically a part of the Special Issue (Transforming the Self in Public Ritual—Secular and Religious Aspects) collection which precedes them in this issue. Moreover, their topics at first sight might appear to be quite disparate, and not necessarily related, whether to each other or to the Special Issue papers themselves. Closer inspection, however, will reveal that this is not the case. The papers in the Special Issue set all belong to a contemporary genre of writings on ritual which take their inspiration both from practice theory and from the examination of ritual events from the point of view of process and history, including processes in civil, political and religious contexts that belong to contemporary societies in parts of Europe as well as elsewhere in the world. A careful concentration on details that might be seen as mundane and an imaginative linking of these details to anthropological theory on personhood and selfhood constitute the distinguishing hallmarks of these well-crafted studies. As it turns out, the papers by Hutt and Hockey that follow here are also very much concerned with practice and the difference that a concentration on it can bring to the study of ritual. Hutt engages with the by now classic work of Catherine Bell

on this topic, arguing his way to a modified and balanced appreciation of her work via a number of critical considerations. One of Bell's foci, as he notes, was the production, via ritualization as a process, of embodied meanings rooted in experiential life (Bell 1997). Hutt inclines to the idea that researchers should give a priority in their interpretations to practices as against linguistically expressed propositions that constitute discursive meanings. His focus is theoretical and philosophical. Hockey's paper brings us directly to a demonstration of what can be done by exercising such an interpretive concentration on embodied practices, in his case the ritual practices of distance running training. It is interesting to note, of course, that these meanings are brought into relief precisely by linguistic means: Hockey and his co-researcher kept logs, and these logs, set into the context of the work of other theorists of sport and ritual, are the evidential basis for his argument. Experience is embodied, but it also depends on both cognition and the senses, and communication of experience has to pass through language if we, as readers, are to grasp its significance. Experience rules, then, but so does language, each in its own realms of human action (see, e.g., Duranti 1997: 23–50).

### References

Bell, Catherine 1997. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Duranti, Alessandro 1997. *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Biographical Sketch

Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Andrew Strathern are a husband and wife research team in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh. They have published over 35 books and over 175 articles on their research in the Pacific, Asia (mainly Taiwan), and Europe (primarily Scotland and Ireland). Their most recent co-

authored books include *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); and *Self and Group: Kinship in Action* (in preparation with Prentice Hall). Their recent co-edited books include *Exchange and Sacrifice* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008) and *Ritual* (forthcoming with Ashgate Publishing).