From Habits to Social Institutions: A Pragmatist Perspective

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The article discusses the pragmatist view of social institutions which underscores that institutions are based on habitual action. That habits can be shared is sometimes thought to be a problematic assumption but I argue that sharing is the default setting in the case of habits as well. These ideas, which were first presented by so-called classical pragmatists, also get support from contemporary research related to the postulation of so-called common ground. I also discuss Thorstein Veblen's theory of institutions and some of the empirical implications of the insights of pragmatist social theory.

Pragmatism has experienced a renaissance or a "recovery" (Margolis 2010) in social theory in recent years. This is no wonder since the so-called classical pragmatists, especially John Dewey and G. H. Mead, outlined a highly original theory of social life. One of their main points was to show how a theory of habitualised action improves our understanding of social structures. This insight has profound implications for the way in which we conceptualise many of the fundamental issues in social theory. Sometimes it is argued that habits are of relevance only for individual psychology but both Dewey and Mead thought that the intersubjective constitution of human agency also guarantees the social nature of many of our habits. The ideas of Dewey and Mead, however, often do not go into specifics. To get an insight into what a pragmatist theory of social structures would look like, I will present some of the arguments made by Thorstein Veblen who, besides being the grandfather of institutional economics, is also a representative of pragmatist social theory.

For some, pragmatism indicates a somewhat opportunistic attitude in politics; this is probably the most common usage of the word. The political message of philosophical pragmatism need not be so bleak, however. For example, a recent book on President Barack Obama's political outlook argues that the "close connection between the philosophy of pragmatism and the culture of democratic decision making illuminates crucial dimensions of Obama's thinking" (Kloppenberg 2011, xii).

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Thus, philosophical pragmatism is usually intimately tied up with an appreciation of democratic means for making decisions (Dewey 1927).[1] Sometimes pragmatism is also taken as a catchphrase for relativist epistemological stances in which "anything goes". According to his critics, the late Richard Rorty did his best to advocate such a stance. However, the real novelty and contribution of the pragmatist tradition, especially from the perspective of social sciences, has to do with its view of action as the context in which all things human take place. Explanations for enduring social aspects, such as social structures, should always be related to action (though not necessarily reduced to it). In the pragmatist tradition, the relation of action and structures comes about through a particular kind of action: habitual action. The *re*production of social structures takes place when action is habitualised; that is, when we develop dispositions to act in the same manner in familiar environments. In what follows, I mainly discuss three interrelated issues: the pragmatist concept of habit, how habits come to be shared, and the way in which habitual action can be said to be the basis of social institutions.

The context of Pragmatism

The concept of pragmatism has been used in such diverse settings that it can cause one to question "whether the label serves any real purpose" (Haack 2004, 5). Despite this diversity, there are certain philosophical principles shared by many (if not most) pragmatists. The philosophical "push" behind pragmatism was a realisation that knowledge has no certain foundations but that this was no reason for despair. This realisation was originally a reaction against the Cartesian quest for solid foundations in a situation of imagined "paper doubt". This phrase, originally used by C. S. Peirce, refers to a situation imagined by Descartes where he supposedly questioned all of his beliefs at once. In Peirce's view, all-encompassing doubt is not feasible (nothing good will come out of it) or even possible (one cannot doubt all of one's beliefs). In its place, he postulated that there are real situations of uncertainty and one can never be certain that the present beliefs and habits one happens to hold rest on solid, infallible foundations. In fact, such foundations do not exist because there is always the possibility of encountering novel and changed situations, which can cause doubt because our habits and beliefs do not meet the changed requirements of those situations.

Classical pragmatists – Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey and G. H. Mead – were first and foremost philosophers, but pragmatist philosophy has something to offer for social sciences as well. G. H. Mead and John Dewey are the foremost figures in this regard. Mead developed a sophisticated conception of the social nature of selfhood,

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1 See also Misak's (2000) discussion of the epistemological arguments for democracy offered by pragmatists.

whereas Dewey's ideas on habitual action and its relation with the environment are fruitful. Despite the social science ideas of Mead and Dewey, pragmatism and sociology have had an uneasy relationship. Often viewed as purely an American enterprise, pragmatism has sometimes been met with a European shrug. However, there are famous exceptions. Èmile Durkheim, one of the undisputed fathers of sociology, found pragmatism a challenge to the tradition of Western rationalism. According to him, the acceptance of "the form of irrationalism represented by pragmatism" would mean that "the whole French mind would have to be radically changed" (Durkheim 1983, 1). He also argued that pragmatism "claims to explain truth psychologically and subjectively" (ibid., 67). Durkheim's interpretation derived from seeing pragmatism as a representative of utilitarian thought; thus, pragmatism presumably derives truth from mere psychological satisfaction. This is a crude caricature of most forms of pragmatism. As Joas (1993, 59-60) – a major figure in the renaissance of pragmatism – argues, "pragmatism is above all a reflection on the fact that the subject is embedded in praxis and sociality prior to any form of conscious intentionality of action." Accordingly, our embedding in practical and social relations is the main focus here, not explaining truth psychologically. In pragmatism, truth is rather about facing up to the problems of action in all of their social and material facets. Furthermore, Durkheim characterized pragmatism as a monism of action, that is, as a denial of conscious rationality. According to Joas, this characterization actually characterises behaviourism rather than pragmatism. Indeed, pragmatism has never denied that there is a place for conscious, reflexive thought. This place, however, is not to be found outside of action, as I explain in the next section. Joas concludes his verdict on Durkheim's arguments by saying that they are based on "the false Cartesian alternative of action as purely physical movement versus thought as a purely mental construct" (ibid., 71).

Habits in Pragmatism

In social theory, the concept of habit can be used to discuss at least two interrelated dilemmas: the relationship between volition and action or the relationship between action and social structures. The first question is addressed by Erkki Kilpinen in this volume and will not be discussed at length here. However, it is worth pointing out that, as a general philosophical current, pragmatism stresses the practical results of our beliefs. The general lesson of pragmatism is a lesson on action theory and the way in which action and rationality present themselves in self-correcting situations of doubt. The issue of self-corrective rationality refers to reflecting on one's reactions to environmental stimuli as a way to correct these reactions if they lead to problems. As Joas (1993, 19) argues, for pragmatists truth "no longer expresses a correct representation of reality in cognition, which can be conceived of using the metaphor of a copy; rather, it expresses an increase of the power to act in relation to an environment" – which is potentially a source of action

problems. This does not mean that the idea of a copy would be lost, for, as William James (1975, 102; emphasis added) argues, “To copy a reality is, indeed, one very important way of agreeing with it, but it is far from essential. The essential thing is the process of *being guided*.” Thus, mental imagery is in the business of guiding our conduct, not in copying it from some perspective that would be totally independent of what we are doing (broadly speaking). To many non-philosophers this issue can seem trivial. However, it has far-reaching implications: we encounter the world through our bodily experience and not only at the level of language, for example. That is why habitual dispositions do much of the explaining in pragmatism. Habits are often taken to be mere restrictive factors (e.g., of rational action) but this need not be the case because one can also see them as “positive agencies.” “The more numerous our habits the wider the field of possible observation and foretelling,” as Dewey (2002, 175) argued. This means that habits *enable* different lines of conduct, even lifestyles or “careers,” when habits couple themselves with other habits.

In Dewey’s thought psychology is social and thus habits precede individualized beliefs and purposes because human beings are always interacting with their social and material environment. For human beings, this environment is indeed social in the sense that even the material environment is largely moulded by social habits and thus even our relationship with the non-human environment is mediated by social and cultural attitudes. If this view is taken to its extreme, it can lead to too constructionist a view of culture which argues that the material world is only a result of individual or social volition. Such extremes are not called for by classical pragmatists. Dewey and Bentley (1949) argued that the concept of interaction presupposes independently existing “interactors”, whereas trans-action (with a hyphen) indicates that, generally speaking, no such independence exists between an actor and its environment (see also Lyng & Franks 2002). Thus, action, especially in its habitual phase, is usually embedded in its environment. However, the relationship goes both ways because active engagement is also a factor which partly constitutes our environment.[2] Thus, what constitutes a stimulus depends on our present and former actions. Habits indicate that circumstances are, to some extent, a part of us in our tendencies to act. The concept of habit may bring to mind the analogy of an ecological niche. Ecological niches are the result of an organism adapting to its objective environment through gradual evolution. There is, however, the difference that habits are acquired rather than being innate dispositions; they are units by which culture is “inherited”. This does not mean that our natural proclivities would always be opposed to acquired ones, but there is still a conceptual difference between these forms of inheritance. In addition, cultural moulding of our environments is an example of so-called niche construction whereby an organism actively moulds its environment.

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2 The extent of such constitution through active engagement is a factor which is not constant. Thus, in some situations there can be more of such constitution than in others.

In contemporary terminology, we can say that sensomotoric proclivities are a necessary basis even for our thought processes, abstract ones included, as the latter utilise, for example, various metaphors that are based on our bodily being (Lakoff & Johnson 1999). Thus, neither reason nor perception is free from the influence of habits, because both are vehicles for action and only make sense as part of action processes. Habits are also the unifying factor behind individual acts, as they are generalisations from particular responses. This means that what we call character is an interpenetration of different habits. Does this mean that we are mere slaves of our habits? Not necessarily. Dewey (2002, 38) argued that "since environments overlap, since situations are continuous and those remote from one another contain like elements, a continuous modification of habits by one another is constantly going on." It can be possible to achieve an integration of various habits, however momentary this integration may be, but it is in no way self-evident. Reconciling different action processes – habits – is thus an ongoing process. To state the matter in Bourdieusian terminology, if one's habitus is related to incompatible field positions tensions are bound to ensue. Habits can never adapt to an environment (or environments) entirely, and therefore there is always the chance of conflict between a habit and its "habitat". This can lead to psychological distress – cognitive dissonance – but it also gives us the opportunity to distance ourselves from our ingrained habits (or parts of those habits) and thus from the social circumstances that we happen to inhabit.

Habits and their overt manifestations are often taken to be the same thing. However, such alignment can be problematic because, as Hodgson (2006) argues, the implication is that habits cease to exist if no overt activity is visible. Do habits simply disappear when they are not manifest? This conclusion would amount to a denial of the continuity of action – and continuity of action is what habits are about. Thus, habits do not refer to discrete acts but to *attitudes* or *dispositions* to act in a specific fashion: "The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to *ways* or modes of response, not to particular acts except as, under special conditions, these express a way of behaving" (Dewey 2002, 42). Habits are thus general "policy recommendations" rather than individual acts (cf. Joas & Kilpinen 2006).

The pragmatist description of action does not deny reflexivity its important role but it situates it in concrete action situations. This is why it can be called situated creativity (an expression used by Joas 1996). One can also argue that creativity is a *phase* of action, albeit a very important one. To use concepts proposed by Elder-Vass (2007, 341), one can distinguish between a decision-taking phase and an action-implementing phase. Reflexivity is especially, if not exclusively, related to the former phase, and thus it is not present at all times. However, I would hasten to add that even this decision-taking phase is a process situated within action, not something external to it. Therefore, both of these phases are, strictly speaking, *action-implementing*. In reading Dewey, one gets the impression that he sometimes

overlooks the role that anticipating the possibilities for action plays in reflection, since he tends to emphasize the need for habit-change only when habits are facing acute problems. Anticipating problems, and not only waiting for problems to come about, surely is a central part of our reflective thought processes. Furthermore, in situations of current action problems, the failure of habits does not automatically and mechanically lead to novel solutions. Rather, this process is always mediated through images of the future consequences of possible action scenarios. And at any moment, the attempted resolution can also fail. The term “crisis” can lead one to think only of major turning points in life or major societal changes (e.g. disasters, wars). Naturally, these major events are included in the category of a crisis, but action also encounters obstacles in daily life that are much more mundane. These obstacles can involve, for example, disagreements with other actors and ensuing negotiations with them, or new work tasks with new responsibilities. If nothing else changes, then our “inner environment” poses challenges through the aging and inevitable decay of our bodies. Conflicts between habits and their environments are always more or less present due also to the multiple stimuli that we encounter. These stimuli are not only environmental, but they also originate in the associations that our minds formulate.

The idea that we mainly adopt a reflexive attitude in relation to action crises can sound too instrumental to those ears not accustomed to using action as their starting point. What about daydreaming and mental associations? These phenomena are naturally real enough, as anyone who has ever had a sleepless night will testify; how to stop oneself from thinking, that is the question! Veblen used the concept of idle curiosity to refer to the natural tendency to be interested in what happens around us, without necessarily having any instrumental aims. However, pure fantasy will not get us very far and thus it has to join hands with our existing habits. Even the mental associations of a sleepless night are likely to be a nuisance when some non-habitual task is imminent (e.g. problems with a relationship, a demanding project). Pragmatism does not present a functionalistic account of structures (more on this issue later), but it does imply a somewhat functionalistic account of human deliberation: habits are adaptations in relation to the environment, and conscious deliberation mainly arises when these adaptations do not work for some reason. Owing to this adaptive character, habits are often self-perpetuating once they have been constituted. For example, habits affect our perceptual awareness by selecting familiar stimuli and this is why one can be immune to stimuli that contradict existing habits. Does this lead one to conclude that habits are *determinants* of action? For some purposes such wording might be acceptable but in general one can argue, as I mentioned, that habits should be perceived as phases of action rather than its determinants. Saying that someone did something as a matter of habit can naturally act as an explanation in some specific case. However, there are two reasons for cautioning against a view of habits as determinants of action. First, pragmatists often emphasize the processual nature of action: action is a process

in which habits and deliberations take turns. Second, human beings – and other animals, one might add – are always active. Thus, there are no passive states of inactivity but rather different *kinds* of action. According to Shilling (2008, 12), a consequence of this active view is that instead of explaining the initiation of action, one should focus on "the characteristics of how people act in particular situations."

One of the most thorough reviews of the uses of the concept of habit in sociology has been presented by Camic (1986). According to his analysis, one can distinguish a continuum of different kinds of habits. On the lower levels of this continuum, one finds dispositions to perform elementary and specific activities, whereas on the upper reaches habit refers to a broader conduct of life or to the idea of character (ibid., 1045-1046). Even though Camic (1988, 958) claims that Meadian uses of the term lie on the lower levels, not all have agreed. Baldwin (1988) argues that pragmatists also think of habits in broader ways. In this broader sense, "[c]omplex chains of activity may be based on organized sets of habits" (ibid., 955). For example, to state the matter in Meadian parlance, the social attitudes of the environment and our associations and responses towards this environment can be integrated in a generalised other (cf. Camic's broad sense of habits). This integrated unity is not a matter-of-course but rather something to strive for. Even though Baldwin's assessment that pragmatists also view habits in the broader conduct-of-life-perspective is not incorrect, it has to be admitted that this perspective is underdeveloped in pragmatist social theory and needs more focus in the future.

Camic's (1986) diagnosis for the loss of "habit" from the tool-kit of sociology had to do with a general aversion to behaviourism. There are undoubtedly some affinities between behaviourism and pragmatism. Both take seriously the argument that action matters and that there are stimuli in our environments. However, these thought currents are not the same thing. For pragmatists, stimuli relate to what we are doing and have been doing. For example, perceptions are very selective in the sense that we often pick out those features of the environment that we expect to find. Therefore the relationship between stimuli and reactions is not as mechanical as it is for behaviourists. Rather, the "stimulus and response reciprocally affect one another" (Cook 2006, 70). Or, as Mead (1925, 270) argued, "The percept is relative to the perceiving individual, but relative to his active interest, not relative in the sense that its content is a state of his consciousness." Thus, a justifiable aversion to behaviourism is not an argument against pragmatism.

Camic's discussion of habits, although very informative, lacks a perspective on recent developments in sociology. One name that springs to mind is that of Pierre Bourdieu – his concept of habitus, after all, comes close to that of habit. Bourdieu himself noted that his ideas and those of Dewey have "affinities and convergences [which] are quite striking" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 122). Both Bourdieu and

pragmatists (especially Mead and Dewey) undoubtedly underscore the way in which habitualised action is the key to social reproduction. However, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is related to socioeconomic factors, whereas pragmatists discuss issues of habituality *in general*. Analysing power relations, socioeconomic factors and social differentiation is certainly one of the main concerns of social theory and sociology. Thus, in the sociological context pragmatist ideas could, and should, be enriched with notions of power and socioeconomic differences. Nevertheless, there is a case to be made for a general discussion of habits as well because not all habits are related to socioeconomic divisions. Many of them naturally have such a basis, but it should be investigated empirically, and not decided on the level of theory, whether this is true in the case of a particular habit.[3]

Sharing habits?

For social scientists, one of the most interesting questions of the phenomenon of habituality is the way in which habits are related to social entities. It is easy to see habits as individual phenomena, a part of our action. But if habits are in essence related individual action, in what sense can they be shared? Turner (1994) has argued that many practice theories are not capable of explaining how practices are shared and this same critique can be made in relation to theories of habits. If habit is a property of an individual – that is, it is *in* his or her action – then it surely seems somewhat paradoxical to speak of sharing habits. Surely one cannot share one's action: if you and I were to go hiking together, you still would not be walking in my shoes! According to Kilpinen (2009, 113), however, this problem only arises if we view practices and habits as some sort of baggage or possessions to carry around: "Turner's idea about tradition-*cum*-habit being something that an individual carries with oneself and then transmits – like a father gives an inherited gold watch to his son – is not necessarily a defining characteristic of traditions." Kilpinen argues that rather than viewing practices and habits according to the logic of possessive individualism (as something we could literally possess) we are better off if we follow a so-called participatory notion. Habits need not be exactly the same for everyone involved; a "'working agreement' about basics is all that is needed" (ibid.).

Thus, in Kilpinen's view, habits are shared in that they allow for *participation* in common activities. This does not necessitate that habits be completely identical in every detail of their execution. For example, one can say that people are habitually predisposed to shake hands with certain kinds of people, with strangers met in formal occasions, for example, without necessarily shaking hands with the same particular people. In addition to offering an explanation for the way in which habits

3 For a more thorough discussion of the relationship between the ideas of pragmatists and those of Bourdieu, see Ostrow (1990), Aboulafia (1999), Colapietro (2004) and Gronow (2011; ch. 4).

are shared, such a view has the advantage that it leaves room for individual interpretation: it does not make the unconvincing claim that units of cultural reproduction – habits – are monolithic and shared by all of those living within a certain cultural sphere. Rather than falling for such an essentialist view of culture, using the concept of habit points to seeing things in terms of populations: there is variation between habits (even related habits) and if they are shared, this is to the extent that they encourage participation in common activities. This is somewhat tangential but evolutionary biology states that particular individuals belong to the same species if they can reproduce and breed offspring.[4] Analogously one could argue that two people share a habit if they are capable of participating in the same action process.

However, one can still wonder what the mechanism behind sharing habits is even if they are shared in such a participatory manner. People certainly participate in common activities – but how do we know that these activities are based on common habits? One possible answer is that habits are shared in the same manner that all things human are shared: through taking the attitudes of others towards our common environment. Thus, there are no special mechanisms related particularly to sharing habits. And even more importantly, what is shared is not a particular action but a *disposition* to do so. Of the classical pragmatists, G. H. Mead presented a theory of intersubjectivity (see Gronow 2008a) or primary sociality (Joas 1996). Mead postulated that as children develop psychologically, they gradually learn to anticipate the reactions of other people towards their own action. This is what he meant by the expression "taking the attitudes of the other towards oneself." This indicates that the sharing of habits is a general social psychological process in which one anticipates the attitudes or dispositions (i.e., habits) of others and acts accordingly. This anticipation is also closely related to the environments of action, which are often manifestations of social institutions. For example, having been to a hospital before, one anticipates certain responses from the people encountered there and acts as a patient (with other patients) without anyone explicitly advising us on the moral career of a patient.

Mead's ideas on developmental social psychology are undoubtedly fruitful but they are somewhat speculative. Contemporary research on similar subjects reveals that Mead seems to have been more or less correct in his general assessment of the importance of sociality for all things human (see, e.g., Bogdan 2003). A closer look at current research also gives a more nuanced picture of the issue because Mead's ideas are quite general and do not go into specifics. If sharing is the issue, then one surely has to look at communication – after all, sharing happens through things being communicated. One promising line of research has been suggested by Michael Tomasello (2008; 2009). He argues that human beings understand

4 Technically speaking, these offspring should also be able to breed.

any kind of communicative reference by what they postulate to be its shared, intersubjective context. The intersubjective, shared context of communication is a default setting for human beings and determines what we take to be the relevance of communicative acts; the way in which this happens is by intuitively grasping the so-called common ground – what is taken as shared in each situation. The concept of common ground can refer to, for example, our common communicative history or to some presumed common culture (e.g., when communicators meet abroad and are from same country of origin). According to Tomasello, only human beings are capable of recursive mind reading (I know that you know that I know etc.), role reversal imitation (placing myself in your shoes) and properly sharing attitudes and feelings. All of these abilities are a prerequisite for seeing ourselves and others from a bird's eye point of view, which Mead referred to with the concept of the generalised other.

Although Mead had a grasp on this phenomenon of seeing oneself as part of a social collective, he did not have much to say on the theme of collective intentions. Tomasello argues that such intentions are a necessary corollary of human sociality. Thus, he implies that when acting with others one not only recursively reads the other's mind and sees the whole situation from a bird's eye perspective; in addition, so goes Tomasello's argument, one also feels as if acting according to intentions not of one's own choosing but intentions postulated by "us". This argument might be pushing things a bit too far. Even when sharing habits with others, we do not necessarily think of ourselves as sharing explicit collective intentions. More often than not it is a case of going with the habitual flow of things rather than explicitly formulating such intentions with others.[5]

So far so good – but what does this have to do with the problem of sharing habits? What I am trying to show is that sharing all sorts of things in and through on-going participation in communal action is something that human beings do by default. Graeber (2011, ch. 5) has gone so far as to argue that human interaction is based on the well-known communistic principle "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs". This does not mean that we would be communists in all of our economic relations (these relations actually are, in Graeber's analysis, often based on reciprocal exchange and hierarchies). It simply points to the fact that we often take pleasure in sharing things (information, food etc.) without taking any account of the things being shared. This is the case especially with family and friends but to a certain extent with other people as well. To return to my main argument, we interpret the meaning of social situations by what we postulate to be the common ground in each situation. This is how habits are shared

5 However, there are plenty of examples of people trying to postulate explicit and binding collective intentions. For example, just think of social movements and the way in which their representatives try to state matters in terms of what "they" want etc. On collective intentions from a somewhat controversial philosophical perspective, see Searle (1995).

as well: by intuitively grasping the common ground and by acting accordingly. Therefore there is no dilemma about sharing habits; it is something that happens by default. This should not mask the fact that it is no small feat to grasp what the common ground happens to be in each case – there often are differing and even conflicting interpretations.[6] However, what separates habits from some other social phenomena is that they get their cue from encountering the same sort of action situations repeatedly. Accordingly, habits refer to action in situations where doubt and confusion about the common ground are missing *by definition*. Such a perspective does not preclude the fact that there is often plenty of variation between habits and situations where habits are in doubt. In general, human communication is based on relevance and not on producing exact copies. As habits do not produce identical copies of themselves, there is bound to be variation among habits. This variation itself can also be the source of social change and novel solutions (cf. Feldman & Pentland 2003). In any event, it is a matter of empirical investigation to find out *to what extent* habits are actually shared in each case – but the mechanism explaining the sharing of habits is no mystery.

To conclude this section I offer some brief examples of empirical work relying on the notion of habit. Routines are probably the most studied aspect in relation to habits but they are often approached from a psychological perspective (see, e.g., Wood et al. 2002). Identifying habits with routines, however, faces the danger of making habits too thing-like. After all, the pragmatist way of using the concept emphasizes the processual character of habits and the way in which they interact and are intertwined with conscious control. Nevertheless, studying habits as routines can be done if it is done with caution and bearing in mind that even routines are rarely mindless. For example, Katainen (forthcoming) has studied smoking and manual work. She argues that the smoking habits of manual workers is so deeply engrained because it gives them a certain sense of autonomy in relation to their relatively constrained work. Pragmatism can also draw one's attention to crises of habits in different phases of people's life-course. For instance, using a Meadian framework, Ketokivi (2008) has studied the reorganization of family relationships as a biographical crisis. Another, related theme, is to pursue the pragmatist roots of ethnomethodology since the latter points out that social order is creatively maintained in everyday life (Emirbayer & Maynard 2011). Such research could also be combined with research into the importance of the common ground conducted in cognitive science (Tomasello 2008). The common ground is, after all, usually taken for granted and a phenomenon intertwined with habituality. In addition, the relationship between socioeconomic habits (Bourdieu's concept of habitus) and more general habits is a theme that should be studied empirically (see Gronow 2011, 117-118).

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6 In addition, not everyone is equally capable of grasping the common ground. For example, people diagnosed with autism probably have major problems in this regard.

Social habits as institutionalisation

So far I have mainly discussed the nature of habits in general and the way in which they are shared. Next I will argue that shared, social habits are one of the keys in understanding the enduring aspects of social reality – that is, institutions. To do so, I introduce some of the ideas of Thorstein Veblen, who is the founding father of so-called institutional economics.[7] Economists who worked in the U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century and emphasized the role of institutions are often grouped under the label Old Institutionalism. Veblen was the main theoretical inspiration behind this school. Besides pragmatism, he was also influenced by evolutionary theory and instinct psychology (Hodgson 2004). Veblen was highly critical of many presuppositions in economics. His main criticisms had to do with the hedonistic conception of the individual, the atomistic conception of society, and the presupposing of a false role for causality and teleology in explaining individual action and social processes (Kilpinen 2000). These criticisms help us to understand Veblen's own habitual view of institutions.

For many economists, the human being is an inactive being who acts only when a negative or a positive stimulus drives him or her to do so (Veblen 2002, 73-74). According to Veblen, the problem with this view is not the postulation of wrong motives for action, but the supposition that action as such needs any motives *at all.* In line with the pragmatist action theory introduced above, Veblen thought that motives for action do not precede action but rather enter the scene in the middle of ongoing action processes, or habits. Because of their focus on discrete acts, "neoclassical economists do not in fact analyze action" (ibid., 78). Second, methodological individualism easily leads to an atomistic conception of society whereby society is understood merely as the sum of independent individuals (ibid., 139). In contrast to some later sociological ideas (Talcott Parsons being an example), the enrichment of neoclassical action theory with the normative context is not enough because it leaves the underlying view of action untouched. Third, neoclassical economics denies the continuity and teleology of action with the argument that every choice situation is a discrete event. Structures or institutions, as Veblen called them, however, are cumulative causal processes and do not have any teleology in and of themselves. Invisible hands or other such ahistorical teleological mechanisms are in fact animistic remnants in Veblen's discussion.

All of these critiques can be applied to dominant paradigms of contemporary economics and also to many sociological frameworks. In Veblen's own view, institutions are always based on habits (Veblen 2002, 77). This is why I label his position *habitual institutionalism* (see Gronow 2008b). Due to the intuitively social

7 See, for example, the recent collection of Veblen's writings edited by Camic and Hodgson (Veblen 2011).

nature of human action, institutions are based on established tendencies to act in a certain manner in a familiar social environment exhibited by many people. Hodgson and Knudsen (2006, 14) have argued that Veblen's perspective amounts to seeing institutions in terms of social evolution. In their view, social evolution is not merely analogous to evolution in the natural world but it is of the same kind because it shares the same general principles. In this general framework, all complex evolving systems exhibit the basic mechanisms of Darwinian evolution –variation, selection and heredity – and institutions are thus an example of such systems.

Institutions are indeed complex and they evolve – sometimes gradually, sometimes in an abrupt manner – but one should be careful in using the system metaphor. It is by no means self-evident that institutions exhibit properties that characterize "proper" systems such as organisms. A cautionary note is in order because enthusiasm for systems theories led Talcott Parsons to treat social structures as intentional beings that follow clearly defined goals. In addition, the validity of the evolutionary perspective can even be questioned as a metaphor for institutional development because it is by no means self-evident that the all mechanisms of Darwinian evolution have counterparts at the institutional level. Variation is exhibited by institutions and one can also imagine processes where some institutions are "selected" due to their compatibility with other institutions, for example. Hodgson and Knudsen also propose that the mechanism behind the hereditary aspect of institutions comes down to learning habits of action from other actors. Such learning of habits certainly takes place but Hodgson and Knudsen tend not to see that the learning of habits is not a process where habits are copied as faithfully as genes. Furthermore, Darwinian hereditary theory requires descent from a common ancestor. It surely sounds absurd to argue that all habits, or institutions for that matter, would have a common ancestor! However, conceptualising institutions in terms of habits does not necessarily imply that one would have to use the evolutionary perspective as a framework for institutional analysis as well – or, one can use it with caution. For example, mechanisms of path dependence and lock-in are certainly to be found both in the worlds of institutions and species.

Hodgson's (2006, 138) definition for institutions says that they are "systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interactions." He also emphasises that rules should be understood as dispositions. I would hasten to add, however, that if habits are the mechanism through which institutions are maintained, then the important issue has to do with *dispositions* instead of rules. Rules are intimately related to dispositions but dispositions can be present without proper rules behind them. Of course one can then argue, as Hodgson does, that institutions are, at least in principle, *codifiable* as rules. This is indeed true, but in many cases any codification only takes place after established habits have been put into question. If one defines institutions through rules, this leads too easily into

concluding that institutions do not exist if no associated rules are to be perceived. Where would one even look for them in the case of informal institutions? In what people do, in their dispositions. Defining institutions through rules would also draw a too uniform, rule-like picture of action, since rules take the lead and we follow. Instead, at the level of action one should define institutions through dispositions, tendencies that are, for the most part, habitual. The habitual is the basic level of institutional reproduction – not rules that are related to the discursive aspects of institutions. Therefore, in case one cares for exact definitions, the following could be said of institutions: *institutions are based on established and prevalent social dispositions that structure action*. It is noteworthy that institutions are not necessarily reducible to such dispositions. Institutions also include material (buildings etc.) and discursive aspects (codified rules), which are not the same thing as habits. However, these other aspects are mere potentialities if no one has a tendency to act accordingly. Thus, habits can in some sense be said to be constitutive of institutions.

A conciliatory solution would be to say that rather than defining institutions as rules, one can argue that they are social dispositions that usually have *rule-like* characteristics. These characteristics can exhibit themselves in actual rules but need not do so. Defining institutions with the help of dispositions has the additional advantage that it fits well with the pragmatist view which stresses that habits are the origin of our social formations (rather than rules and other discursive factors). However, I will not object if someone wants to define institutions through rules – if it is immediately added that rules refer only to regularities of action. Some regularities of social action are “only” habitual dispositions and get a voicing in cases where their self-evident character is in doubt. For example, in Western countries there is no official rule saying that technical occupations are only for men but it is probably mainly due to habitual reasons that men are overrepresented in these professions.

Naturally not all dispositions are related to institutions, but only those are that are sufficiently established and exhibit temporal constancy. An institution that is completely transformed overnight simply is not the same institution anymore. In addition, institution-related dispositions are thus also prevalent; they are *social* ways of responding to environmental cues and not just individual habits. It would also be possible to distinguish the origin of institutions and the way in which they are maintained once in place. This distinction can be useful for analytic purposes but in many cases it can be difficult to discern the exact places and dates of institutional origin. The more informal an institution is, the more obscure its origin; it is simply what the people in question feel they (and possible their ancestors) have always done (although they have not necessarily done so). Shared dispositions are the reason why one engages habitually, without thinking twice, in joint activities with others. This presents us with a self-reinforcing cycle: sharing a disposition and

being proficient in doing something makes it easy to take the habit in question for granted. Breaking this cycle leads to unpleasant cognitive dissonance.

Stressing the dispositional and habitual nature of institutions allows one to analyse institutional aspects in all cases where the required stability and conformity of action is present. Some commentators have argued that such an institutional conception is too broad (see Fleetwood 2008). A more narrow definition is certainly in order in some cases – but this issue depends on the research question at hand. For example, Tomasello (2009, 55, 59) argues that in addition to the physical and social worlds also inhabited by other apes, only humans live in an institutional world with its "public social norms and the assignment of deontic status to institutional roles." In this context – drawing a distinction between humans and other apes – it can be useful to connect institutions with normative issues. Despite these provisos, an extensive institutional conception is justified because institutionalisation happens to be a – or even *the* – foundational feature of social reality. This is due to the fact that we are not inventing our habits anew all the time; rather, we encounter familiar social situations and act as we and others in similar situations have done previously.

Conclusion

My intention has been to show that the pragmatist concept of habit has relevance for discussions on the nature of social reproduction, or, more specifically, on the nature of institutions. Whether habits can be shared is an issue that has perplexed some previous commentators. These commentators have shared (no pun intended) an implicit notion of what sharing habits means; it has been a notion of possessive individualism – habits are shared like things or they are not shared at all. These commentators also often presume that we are first and foremost individuals doomed to our individual subjectivity. Recent research by Tomasello points towards a participatory notion of *inter*subjectivity, which indicates that acting together, and interpreting the action of other people based on the common ground, are the default setting of human beings. This setting is also the mechanism for sharing habits as dispositions. As Mead and other classical pragmatists argued, meaning is about shared action tendencies, and if this is the case with meaning in general, then habits are not that much different – they are not a special case in need of an explanation as to how their sharing comes about. However, if one wants to analyse some specific habit and its diffusion across some population from a social network perspective, for example, then it can be useful to enquire into the more detailed mechanisms that are responsible for its diffusion.[8]

8 Social network research has pointed out that there can be different mechanisms behind the diffusion of different kinds of things (Borgatti 2005).

Pragmatism certainly is not the only relevant perspective out there, nor is it a theory of everything. For example, in relation to institutions one can argue that there are also regulative (legalistic rules), normative, discursive (see Gronow 2008b) and material aspects of institutions. To what extent these other perspectives deserve a hearing depends on the research question at hand. One criticism of pragmatism has to do with the general nature of its theory of action; for some, it can seem too general, even so general as to exemplify the perspective known as philosophical anthropology. This criticism has some relevance but it sidesteps the fact that all empirical operationalizations have to be made from some theoretical or philosophical perspective. Pragmatism offers one such perspective – and it has advantages in relation to competing paradigms. One major advantage is that it makes possible a dialogue between the social and the natural sciences (Lyng and Franks 2002) as it draws our attention to the fact that bodily involvement with and in the world sets "transactional limits" (i.e., what can be *done*) to processes of ideational or discursive construction (Franks 2003, 616). After the so-called cultural turn some sociologists have seen these limits as more malleable and more arbitrary than they actually are. Another, related benefit, has to do with pragmatism's take on action as constitutive of social structures rather than antithetical to them (irrespective of whether one wants to conceptualise structures as institutions – as I have done following Veblen – or not). It is a particular kind of action, habitual action, in which the seeds of structuration inhere. However, more precise definitions of social structures and institutions are sometimes called for, especially if one wants to operationalize these concepts empirically.

Furthermore, future research – both empirical and theoretical – should discuss the relationship between practice theory and pragmatism. Both underscore the fact that action is not in the business of executing attitudes that would exist independently of the social and material context. What matters instead are tendencies to act in accordance with *this very context*. From the habit-perspective of pragmatists, change in patterns of behaviour (e.g., habits) is often the result of the changes taking place in the environment of action. Thus, if one wants to change the habits that people happen to have – for example, their habits of consumption in a more sustainable direction – then tackling this issue calls for implementing changes in the environment of action, in its institutional aspects (which can at any time be analytically broken down to people's habits) and probably often in its material aspects as well (which is especially of interest to practice theories). This is not to deny the relevance of the material environment of action, but pragmatism – unlike practice theory – is especially well suited to conceptualise the way in which recurrent, shared dispositions to act in a certain manner (i.e., habits) lead to the reproduction of institutional aspects of the environment. These aspects have to be taken into account by practice theory as well: materiality – not even technology – often does not act in and of itself and practices cannot "recruit" anyone (see Shove in this volume) if no one acts accordingly and recurrently.

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