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Chapter 6

Gestures, Habits, and Cultural Transmission: From “Organic Memory” to the Social Sciences

Abstract: The chapter asks to what extent the study of gestures and habits can help us investigate the dynamics of cultural transmission. I first describe the theories of habit that emerged in the 19th century as a bridge between biological and cultural transmission. Second, I show how, once the Lamarckian premises of this 19th-century paradigm were lifted, the question of cultural transmission through habit became a sociological rather than a biological problem. Third, I analyze the work of Paul Connerton, who argued that habit and bodily performances are central to the functioning of social memory.

Keywords: theories of habit, gestures, cultural transmission, Connerton, Paul, social memory

1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the relationship between gestures and habits from a historical perspective. More specifically, it offers a brief historical overview of ideas about the relevance of gestures and habits to the study of cultural transmission. By cultural transmission, I mean the process by which cultural elements are handed down to individuals or groups. I will focus on the contribution of 19th- and 20th-century theories of habit to our understanding of this phenomenon.

Why should we pay attention to the role of habits and gestures in the transmission of culture? To answer this question, let us begin by considering three prominent features of the concept of habit. First, habits establish a connection between the past and the present. When we speak of a habitual action, we usually mean an action that is conditioned by a series of similar actions that have taken place in the past. In this sense, we can say that the past leaves its mark on the present through habit. In the following sections, I illustrate how this link between

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past and present has led the concept of habit, at least since the 19th century, to be associated with the concept of memory. Second, habits establish a connection between individuals and society, since habitual actions often depend upon the social context in which they occur. As Dewey ([1927] 2008, 334) elucidates, “habits are formed for the most part under the influence of the customs of a group.” Thus, the concept of habit is not solely linked to *individual* memory but also to what has been called *social* or *collective* memory.¹ Third, habits can be *transmitted* from one individual to another or from a group to an individual, making them one of the most significant means through which individuals absorb the cultural elements that are distinctive to a group.

Now let us consider the link between habits and gestures, a link that runs in both directions. On the one hand, gestures shape our habits. That is, the formation of a habit often occurs through the repetitive performance of the same gesture over time. I learn how to perform a skilled action, for instance, by repeating the same gestures over and over again. This further implies that, as gestures become ingrained in our behavior, they tend to solidify into habits. On the other hand, habits shape our gestures. That is, once formed, habits determine how we execute specific gestures and engage in various kinds of bodily actions. Pierre Bourdieu’s reflections on *habitus* as a generative matrix of behavior exemplify this particular perspective (more on this below).

These two directions—gestures shaping habits and habits shaping gestures—are not mutually exclusive and may coexist in a circular process where particular actions interact with general rules. Habits are general rules of behavior that *govern* particular actions, but they are also *governed by* particular actions because they arise only from the repetition of those actions. For example, I may have a habit of playing the piano that allows me to quickly learn a tune or even improvise a melody. However, I acquired that habitual capacity in the first place by practicing the specific movements of my fingers on the keys over and over again. So, gestures give rise to habits that are, in turn, the matrix of new gestures, and so on. This circularity helps us explain the two senses in which gestures are relevant to the study of cultural transmission. As I aim to show in what follows, we can study gestures as the outcome of a given chain of transmission, but also as the engine of cultural change, in the sense that it is only through particular gestures that habits are consolidated, transformed, and transmitted across time and space.

¹ For a concise introduction to the extensive body of literature on collective memory and to the terminological distinctions among “social,” “collective” and “cultural” memory, see Olick, Vinitsky-Seroussi, and Levy (2011).

To make this case, the chapter provides a historical overview of the paradigm shift that took place in relation to how habit, cultural transmission, and gesture were studied in the transition between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. In the first section, I briefly outline the 19th-century paradigm that was committed to the biological transmissibility view of habits. Although now discredited, this paradigm provided a crucial model for thinking about habits as a form of social memory. Following this, in the second section, I show how, when faced with the demise of the *biological* paradigm, scholars turned to a new *sociological* paradigm to answer the question of how habits are transmitted over time. Finally, I analyze the work of British anthropologist Paul Connerton, who understood the concept of habit through the study of the collective memory of a social group.

2 Organic Memory and Cultural Transmission

The 19th century was, in many ways, a pivotal period in the development of the concept of habit. As sociologist Charles Camic summarized almost four decades ago in an influential historical overview of the concept, scholars at this time became increasingly concerned with studying the fundamental psychological and physiological processes that contribute to the formation and maintenance of habit (Camic 1986, 1048). This shift in focus reflected the emergence of new academic disciplines, such as physiology and psychology, and their growing influence on philosophical debates of the time. A common concern in the 19th century was to trace the existence of habits back to fundamental properties shared by all living beings, such as the ability to create behavioral regularities from ongoing interactions with the environment.²

The psychological-physiological approach to the study of habit did not, however, make the concept irrelevant to the analysis of social and cultural facts. On the contrary, linking the existence of habits to the basic laws of organic matter facilitated the development of one of the earliest frameworks for the study of cultural transmission. The key concept here is “organic memory” (Otis 1994; Olick,

2 In some cases, scholars suggested that the laws of habit could be at work even in inorganic matter. William James’ concept of “plasticity” in the *Principles of Psychology* exemplifies this (James [1890] 1981, Chapter 4). According to James, plasticity “means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once” (James [1890] 1981, 110). Organic matter is endowed with plasticity, but the same can be said, at least in some cases, of inorganic objects: garments can be adjusted to who is wearing them, a metal lock works more or less efficiently depending on how it has been used in the past, and a piece of paper shows the traces of previous uses.

Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011, 11–12). This concept suggests that memories acquired by past generations are transmitted to future generations through biological means. In other words, studies of organic memory posited a link between biological inheritance and individual memory. From past generations we inherit not only our biological makeup but also the memories of past events, acquired abilities, and the like.

This thesis is based on a Lamarckian assumption, namely, the heritability of acquired traits. According to the Lamarckian theory, organisms acquire several habits in the course of their life, and these habits are then passed on to their offspring in a purely biological way. Such a theory is hardly compatible with the current Darwinian synthesis in biology, but it was widely accepted until the end of the 19th century. One only has to read *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Darwin 1872) to note that even Darwin by no means ruled out the biological transmissibility of acquired traits, and especially the transmissibility of habits, but considered it an additional evolutionary factor parallel to natural selection. According to Darwin, gestures initially performed to fulfil specific functions become ingrained as habits. Those habits are then transmitted to future generations, allowing gestures to persist even when their original practical purpose is no longer relevant. Consequently, these gestures can develop an expressive function that is distinct from their initial practical utility.

The Lamarckian idea of the transferability of acquired traits survived until the early decades of the 20th century, when it became increasingly untenable due to the synthesis of Darwinian evolutionism and the Mendelian theory of heredity. According to this synthesis, genetic inheritance is the only element that can be biologically transmitted from one generation to the next. As I elaborate in the next section, this theoretical shift had substantial implications for the problem we are discussing here: the *biological paradigm* of organic memory will be replaced by a *sociological paradigm*. Social rather than biological dynamics will explain the transmission of habits and, thus, their role in cultural transmission.

One of the first, and most prominent, systematizers of the theory of organic memory was the German physiologist Ewald Hering. In his treatise “Memory as a General Function of Organized Matter” (Hering 1913, Chapter 1 [1870]), Hering aimed to include both physiological and psychological perspectives on the study of mind. For this reason, he insisted that we should construe the concept of memory broadly as the general ability on the part of the organism to preserve traces of past events. Thus, unconscious memory, the stable traces of past events accumulated in the body, became even more integral to understanding organic memory than the phenomena of conscious recollection studied by psychologists. Indeed, memory became an essential feature of all living beings because all organic (or “organized”) matter was claimed to be endowed with the ability to retain traces of past stimuli

and be influenced by these traces. Habit, in turn, became a manifestation of organic memory, as habit conditions the behavior of organisms in the present through the traces left by past stimuli or action. Moreover, according to the Lamarckian orientation of the whole theory, the habits of an organism do not disappear with the organism's death but are passed on to its descendants. They thereby become carriers of biological and cultural information.

Other prominent representatives of the theory of organic memory were the Frenchman Théodule Ribot (see Otis 1994, 14–17) and the English writer Samuel Butler, author of the book *Life and Habit* (Butler 1878). Years later, the German Richard Semon—a student of Ernst Haeckel—formulated a version of the theory of organic memory that initially received little attention in the psychology and physiology of his time, but that eventually proved influential on the broader public (Semon 1904; see Schacter 2001). Some of the most significant innovations Semon introduced were, in fact, terminological. He coined the concept of “mneme” to refer to an expanded idea of memory that encompassed both cultural and biological phenomena (memory proper and heredity). He also coined the terms “engram,” the trace of a past event that is stored and reproduced at the organic level; and “ecphory,” the process through which that trace is reactivated.

These neologisms have, in a sense, outlasted their creator. They remain in use today, thanks in particular to their reception in the writings of early 20th-century theorists of culture such as psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung (Pinotti 2004, 69), as well as the art and cultural historian Aby Warburg (Pinotti 2004 and Wedepohl 2014). Warburg, in particular, understood the engram as a trace accumulated in the pictorial and bodily memory of a social group. A key component of this pictorial memory is what Warburg called “pathos formulae,” i.e., schematic representations of the human body that, owing to their ability to become fixed in habitual gestures, are able to transmit symbolic content across time and space (Settis 1997 and Targia 2022). In line with the duality of function described in the Introduction, gestures here are both the content and the conduit of cultural memory. They represent both what is passed from one generation to the next and the means through which the body is molded to encapsulate specific formulae of pathos that can traverse time and space. Warburg, however, did not clarify further whether we should explain the existence of pathos formulas by invoking a form of organic memory, as in Semon, or whether we should stick to purely social mechanisms of transmission. In this sense, his work was a compromise between the biological and the sociological paradigms.

Semon's concept of the “mneme” is further echoed in today's use of the term *meme* as the cultural equivalent of the gene (Pinotti 2016, 423–427), meaning the minimal cultural unit that can travel from one individual to the next (Dawkins 1976 and Fischer and Grünewald-Schukalla 2021). However, the similarity in

terms here should not be mistaken for indicating substantial overlap in ideas. The modern-day use of the term “meme” is based on a neo-Darwinian selection mechanism and has therefore very little to do with the Lamarckian inheritance of habits.

A much more robust link to 19th-century theories of organic memory is offered by new research into non-genetic inheritance, including epigenetic mechanisms by which the environment can influence gene behavior (Portera and Mandrioli 2021). This research revives the Lamarckian idea of the inheritance of acquired traits. Scholars propose that profoundly traumatic events like wars, famines, or genocides can leave traces on affected individuals that are subsequently transmitted to later generations (Yehuda, Daskalakis, Bierer, Bader, Klengel, Holsboer, and Binder 2015 and Curry 2019). However, the validity and generalizability of these findings remain highly contested (Carey 2018 and Mitchell 2018). Moreover, it is worth noting that these studies—unlike 19th-century Lamarckism—conceptualize the “trace” of past events not so much through the idea of habit but through the idea of “trauma,” an idea influenced by psychoanalysis.³

3 The Sociological Paradigm

Charles Camic has noted that the theoretical discourse about habit in the mid-20th century declined significantly compared with the previous century, in part owing to the emergence of a behaviorist approach that seemed to offer little conceptual value to the sociologists, philosophers and psychologists of the time (Camic 1986, 1071). However, there were many notable exceptions to this trend, exceptions that positioned themselves at the intersection of philosophy and the social sciences. These studies highlighted the sociological dynamics that make habit a powerful engine of cultural transmission after the biological and Lamarckian explanations had lost their persuasive power. Rather than insisting on the biological transmissibility of acquired traits, they emphasized the role of social processes such as learning, communication, and imitation.

The role of *education* and schooling in the social transmission of habits is one of the issues that gained relevance in this new theoretical framework.⁴ In *Democracy and Education* ([1916] 1985), for instance, philosopher John Dewey laid out

³ The concept of trauma (or “cultural trauma”) has been extensively used in sociologically-oriented theories of memory and identity (see Alexander 2004).

⁴ The idea that habit plays a crucial role in education, however, is not novel in the history of philosophy (see Carlisle 2014, 47 and 103–107).

the implications of his pragmatist conception of habit for pedagogy, emphasizing the role of schools in shaping the habits of future members of a democratic society. According to Dewey, “[s]ociety exists through a process of transmission quite as much as biological life.” This process of transmission, however, is not biological but rather takes place through learning, i.e., the “communication of habits of doing, thinking and feeling from the older to the younger” (Dewey [1916] 1985, 6). There is, moreover, a specific kind of learning, namely, education, which takes place when the person who learns does not merely change his or her own habits in a mechanic way but accompanies the acquisition of habit with the acquisition of ideas and emotions (Dewey [1916] 1985, 17). This understanding of education is underpinned by a distinction between *active* and *passive* habits. Passive habits are routine-like adjustments to the environment, of which we may be partly unaware, and they are not necessarily accompanied by an intellectual or emotional component. Active habits, however, incorporate an “end in view,” that is, a purport or aim that makes us conscious of those habits as supporting skilled and intelligent engagement with the environment (Dewey [1916] 1985, 34–35).

The idea of *incorporation* was also critical to 20th-century sociological theories of habit, and it is here that the relation between habits and gestures comes most prominently to the fore. As shown in the previous section, 19th-century theorists of organic memory had conceptualized habit as equivalent to bodily memory; they highlighted that habit turns the human body into an unconscious carrier of cultural traits that emanate from the past (see Heinlein, Dimbath, Schindler, and Wehling 2016). In contrast to theories of organic memory, however, sociological theories of incorporation emphasized the role of society in inscribing habits onto the bodies of individuals.

A major contribution to incorporation theories comes from French sociologist Marcel Mauss. In his essay on the “techniques of the body” (Mauss [1934] 1973), Mauss focused on everyday gestures and bits of ordinary physical behavior that are socially learned (although they might at first blush appear universal and ingrained in human nature) and are therefore found to vary across societies and cultures. Some key examples of techniques of the body in Mauss’ sense are ways of walking, eating, sitting, and sleeping. Mauss pointed out that it is precisely the habitual nature of these bodily techniques that allows for their learning and transmission. He drew on the Aristotelian concept of habit as a stable disposition (*hexis*) that can be acquired and strengthened through practice. However, he gave this Aristotelian notion a distinctly empirical-sociological twist in order to distinguish it clearly from the metaphysical and individualistic conceptions of habit prevalent in the French philosophical context of his time:

These “habits” do not just vary with individuals and their imitations, they vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges. In them, we should see the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason rather than, in the ordinary way, merely the soul and its repetitive faculties (Mauss [1934] 1973, 73).

Here again we see the bidirectional relationship between habits and gestures that I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Certain gestures, when repeated, create habits. At the same time, habits, once formed, govern the continued repetition and social transmission of gestures.

Mauss’ notion of bodily techniques influenced Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory of habitus, which emerged in the late 1960s. According to Bourdieu, the habitus is a pre-reflexive and persistent behavioral disposition that determines the relative position of an individual within a social group by influencing their abilities, schemes of action, perceptions, expectations, and values. Bourdieu placed a strong emphasis on the fact that the habitus is not the result of biological mechanisms but rather of exclusively social processes; it is, in other words, the “social made body” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127; see also Kastl 2016, 81). At the same time, he claimed that the habitus is a link between the past and the present. As he put it, “[h]abitus is that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forth-coming” (Bourdieu [1997] 2000, 210). Bourdieu examined the role of occupation, gender, and class differences in shaping the habitus, which led him to conceptualize habit as a tool for social differentiation and social domination. The gestures of a waiter at a Parisian café, for instance, are the means by which an individual “espouses” and “identifies with” his social function without having to be intellectually aware of this identification process (Bourdieu 1981, 309).

Among the authors who have taken up and further developed Bourdieu’s incorporation-based approach, the political theorist Iris Marion Young is particularly worth mentioning because of her influential contribution to understanding the incorporation of gender inequalities. (Young 1980) Young highlighted that the supposed innate differences in behavior between men and women are often the result of social forces that shape the gestures and bodily techniques of an individual from childhood. For instance, “The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment—walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on” (Young 1980, 153). It is through habit, Young suggests, that social forces come to have an influence on individual behavior. It is worth noting how Young focuses on seemingly innocuous everyday gestures to reveal not only their social conditioning (in line with the work of Mauss and Bourdieu), but also their role in shaping more significant social inequalities and patterns of oppression.

The two strands of 20th-century research on the social transmission of habits mentioned thus far—education and incorporation—focus on society’s influence

on individuals. Through the formation and transmission of habits, subjects become carriers of information, symbols, or techniques that are already present in their social group. However, by highlighting the bidirectional relationship between habits and gestures, we should be able to appreciate that the opposite is also true. Through their individual actions, subjects can modify existing habits. This may involve local habits as well as more generally shared social norms. As Max Weber has noted, for instance, a habit that initially appears to pertain to an individual's behavior alone can readily turn into a binding social norm, because "the mere fact of the regular recurrence of certain events somehow confers on them the dignity of oughtness" (Weber [1922] 1978, 326, translated in Camic 1986, 1059). For example, if I wave to the shopkeeper near my home before going to work two days in a row, I will have created a minimal expectation that I will also make the same gesture the next day. If I do not, I will give the impression that I have violated a norm established by my own behavior.⁵

5 The account just given is, admittedly, overly individualistic, as it appears to postulate a linear progression from individual actions to social norms. In the pragmatist-Deweyan framework I have already alluded to above, it would instead be more correct to argue that interaction, the joint perception of a social situation, and conjoint action are prior to individual behavior (Testa 2016, 42). While Dewey was inclined to regard social norms as "precipitates of the habituations of our activity" (Testa 2016, 47), he did not conceptualize the process as a linear progression from individual habits to social norms, but rather as a process of crystallization by which a habit that is already embedded in social interactions and structures gradually acquires normative force. As a further development of the pragmatist perspective, Roberto Frega (2018) suggests speaking of patterns of social interaction rather than collective habits in order to better demarcate the individual and the social level. He gives examples that show to what extent these patterns of social interaction might be relevant to a study of gestures. "Patterns of interaction involve a plurality of individuals (at least two), for example the way in which a customer and a shopkeeper interact during their commercial transaction, or the way two strangers look at each other and maybe solve interactional troubles such as rights of precedence when jumping on a bus. But there are also, as explained above, the normative orders that are immanent to interactions themselves, for example the way strangers stand in line waiting their turn to be served, usually respecting an order of precedence while being sensitive to exceptions and circumstances, without needing every time to re-establish queuing rules" (2018, 177–179).

4 How Societies Remember

In *How Societies Remember* (1989), anthropologist Paul Connerton made a very explicit attempt to place the concept of habit at the center of studies on social and collective memory.⁶ As the title of his book reveals, Connerton's aim was to explain whether and to what extent we can talk of a collective or social dimension of memory (i.e., to discuss the dynamics through which a social group preserves its past over and above the mnemonic capacities of individual subjects). Unlike other scholars in the field of collective memory studies, Connerton did not exclusively focus on the public acts by means of which a social group recollects or recreates its own past. Rather, he sought to encompass the idea of memory as *active recollection* within the broader framework of memory as *transmission*. This broader perspective considers the ways in which culture is preserved and transmitted over time within the boundaries of a social group.⁷ Thus, Connerton addressed the very same question I have investigated throughout this chapter, namely, the role of habit and gestures in preserving and transmitting culture.

The starting point of Connerton's argument is the idea that, in order to give a detailed account of social memory and cultural transmission, we need to foreground the role of bodily and ritual practice. He claims that "[t]here is [. . .] an inertia in social structures" (Connerton 1989, 5) that we can fully account for only by paying attention to the embodied, performative, and practical dimensions of social life.

This focus on embodied practices is not aimed at downplaying the importance of language and narrative frameworks as factors of cultural transmission.⁸ Rather, Connerton took issue with hermeneutical approaches that take language and the interpretation of linguistic elements as the more important or essential facts of culture. He rejected the idea that texts and other forms of "inscriptions" are the key factor in explaining social memory (Connerton 1989, 3–4). Granted, hermeneutical approaches may, in principle, account for bodily practices. How-

⁶ Considering the history of the concept of habit outlined in this essay, but also considering the fact that Connerton's work follows Bourdieu's, one may get the impression that his claim to be exploring new territory is exaggerated. (On the affinities between Bourdieu and Connerton, see Dimbath and Heinlein 2015, 200–207.) Be that as it may, his book was effectively perceived to break new ground in sociological studies on collective memory.

⁷ See his critical remark about Maurice Halbwachs: "If we follow the thread of Halbwachs's argument we are inevitably led to the question: given that different groups have different memories which are particular to them, how are these collective memories passed on within the same social group from one generation to the next?" (Connerton 1989, 38).

⁸ See, for instance, his very insightful observations on the role of informal narratives for the transmission of culture (Connerton 1989, 17–21 and 39).

ever, Connerton believed that this rarely happens without an implicit devaluation of the specificities of these practices. He highlighted that bodily practices are essentially unlike texts in that they “do not exist objectively, independently of their being performed” (Connerton 1989, 102). The hermeneutical perspective, however, always attempts to identify a layer of meaning that transcends the performance itself. Thus, hermeneutics detrimentally neglects the formal and performative aspects of rituals and embodied practices to focus instead on the referential aspects (Connerton 1989, 53).

Connerton grounded his investigation of rituals and bodily practices on the concept of habit-memory.⁹ This concept can be distinguished from both biographic memory (the ability to recollect episodes of one’s life and place them into a coherent narrative) and cognitive memory (the ability to recollect information). Habit-memory is simply the “capacity to reproduce a certain performance” i.e., the ability to read, write, or ride a bicycle, for example, in virtue of our having acquired these skills in the past. Connerton rejected the Bergsonian view that opposes habit-memory to genuine recollection.¹⁰ Instead, he relied on Dewey’s and Merleau-Ponty’s conceptions of habits as deep-seated inclinations to action that are responsible for the faring well of human cognitive and affective faculties (Connerton 1989, 93–95).

Both based on habit-memory, rituals and bodily practices are, in turn, internally differentiated. Bodily practices break down into three categories: *techniques of the body*, *proprieties of the body*, and *ceremonies of the body*. Despite their names potentially suggesting otherwise, all three categories, not just the first, are indebted to the Maussian concept of bodily technique. They all encompass gestures, attitudes, and postures that are deeply conditioned by society (although they may sometimes “feel” natural) and act as vehicles of culture. “Techniques of the body” are, according to Connerton, communicative gestures and other forms of everyday actions. “Proprieties of the body” are bodily attitudes and postures that convey a sense of decency and adherence to social etiquette. Finally, “cere-

9 Connerton further specified his idea by saying that he was interested in “social habit memory,” that is, habits based on “others’ conventional expectations within the context of a system of shared meanings” (1989, 35). Compare this definition with my remarks on collective habits above (§3.3).

10 Connerton’s critique of Bergson falls within a tradition of anti-Bergsonian approaches to social memory that begin as early as Mauss (see above, §3.2) and Maurice Halbwachs (see Coser 1992, 7–9). More recently, see the remark by Dimbath and Heinlein that Bergson’s concept of habit-memory, because it is devoid of any real cognitive import, turns out to be an instrument of forgetting rather than recollecting (2015, 221). On Bergson and habit-memory, see also Casey ([1987] 2000, Chapter 8).

monies of the body” are ritualized ways to use one’s body to signal social status (Connerton 1989, 79–88).¹¹

The latter category—ceremonies of the body—refers to more ritualized gestures than the other two. It thus provides a link with the sphere of rituals. Connerton focused in particular on one kind of ritual, which he called *commemorative ceremonies*. These highly formalized rituals convey a conception of time and of the continuity of the social group. Commemorative ceremonies add to the repetitive nature of all rituals the intentional re-enactment of the past through gestures and symbols (Connerton 1989, 45 and 65). They thus represent the most explicit example of cultural memory as an instance of active recollection. In this sense, they provide a social equivalent to what biographical or narrative memories are to individuals: the foundation of identity (Connerton 1989, 70). Again, it is important to note that, according to Connerton, ceremonies succeed in their commemorative function because the gestures and actions of which they are composed are based on habit-memory: “if the ceremonies are to work for their participants, if they are to be persuasive to them, then those participants must be not simply cognitively competent to execute the performance; they must be habituated to those performances” (Connerton 1989, 71).

5 Conclusion: Gestures as Rites and Routines

We might conclude this brief historical survey by saying that Connerton systematized and developed the sociological paradigm I have explored in §3, and that he did so along two axes. On the one hand, he took up the problem of *cultural transmission*. Like many other representatives of social memory studies, he used the

11 For the sake of simplicity, I omit Connerton’s further differentiation of social practices into “incorporating” and “inscribing” (1989, 72–73). This differentiation is relevant to his criticism of language-centered approaches to culture. Alongside Mauss, two further sources of Connerton’s classification of bodily practices are worth mentioning. The first is Norbert Elias’ study on the historical development of table manners (Elias [1939] 2012), which directly inspires Connerton’s concept of “proprieties of the body.” The other is David Efron’s study of communicative gestures among New York immigrants (Efron 1941). A student of Franz Boas, Efron analyzed how Southern Italian and Eastern European Jewish communities used gestures to accompany speech. He sought to show that the existence of different styles of gestural communication had nothing to do with biology but rather depended on social transmission (see Speyart 2020). This thesis was meant to contribute to Franz Boas’ project of rejecting the alleged scientific foundations of race theories precisely in the period in which the biological paradigm in the study of cultural transmission analyzed in this chapter was giving way to a sociological paradigm.

metaphor of culture as memory already present in the biological paradigm but gave it a sociological twist. The concept of habit is relevant to this side of Connerton's project because it is a key instrument of incorporation, as can be seen from his analyses of gestures, manners, and ceremonies. On the other hand, Connerton dealt with another crucial problem in social memory studies, namely, the analysis of memory as *recollection* rather than as *transmission*. To do so, he focused on rituals, which he understood as the means by which the social group thinks about its past and constructs its identity. Habit here is not so much what allows culture to be passed on from one generation to the next, but what allows rituals to function, i.e., to be correctly performed and interpreted within the dense network of norms and conventions that characterize every society.

Connerton's emphasis on ritual as a vehicle of social identity may evoke Durkheimian sociology, with which the British anthropologist maintained, in fact, an ambivalent relationship. Durkheim had already ascribed to ceremonies and rituals the role of producing new collective representations for a social group, establishing traditions, and reworking the past. However, Connerton charged Durkheim with having underestimated the diachronic dimension of rituals and with having therefore been more interested in rituals as an instrument of social cohesion rather than as an instrument of recollection. Moreover, whereas Durkheim tended to demote habitual actions to mere routines,¹² Connerton insisted on a non-dualistic conception of habit as a crucial component of all spheres of human action.

We may contrast Connerton's reception of Durkheim with that of Jan Assmann, a founding figure of cultural memory studies in Germany. According to Assmann, cultural memory establishes the identity of a social group mainly through the transmission of myths and rites. This thesis is close to Durkheim's notion that rituals are a key aspect of how a social group constitutes itself and develops its own traditions. In contrast to Connerton, however, Assmann sharply separates ritual action from routinized behavior. According to him, humans are "two-dimensional" beings who oscillate between the poles of ceremony and the pole of everyday life, or "rite" and "routine." Both poles capture one sense in which human action can be habitual, or schematized. However, "[r]outines are schematizations of action for the purpose of repeatability and relief from effort. They are oriented towards the goal of action and have no other meaning than the fulfilment of that action. [. . .] Rites, on the other hand, are schematizations of action for the purpose of meaning-making, and they convey that meaning in the

¹² See Camic (1986, 1052–54), who also claims that the realm of education (see §3.1 above) was the one aspect of social life regarding which Durkheim was most inclined to nurture a positive understanding of habit.

performance itself” (Assmann 1991, 16–17, my translation). Moving from these definitions, Assmann argues that rites and rituals contribute to the formation of cultural memory in the strict sense of the term, while routines can only play a role in the formation of what he calls “communicative memory,” a layer of memory that fulfils the instrumental function of helping social actors orient themselves in everyday life.¹³

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed analysis of the contrasting approaches of Assman and Connerton to the role of habits, rituals, and routines in the formation of social memory. However, it is worth pointing out that Assmann’s sharp demarcation between rites and routines can be challenged when we consider micro-sociological studies like those conducted by Erving Goffman, who sought to unearth the ritual component of even the most basic interactions of everyday life (Goffman 1967). Following Goffman, we may read seemingly mundane gestures, like greeting a passer-by or offering a seat to a stranger, as “interaction rituals” through which individuals demonstrate their adherence to social norms. Viewed from this perspective, everyday gestures take on a layer of meaning that goes beyond their practical function. They may convey a sense of continuity with the past and even function as micro-commemorative rituals. Think of social interactions that revolve around the celebration of specific events: wishing a friend a happy birthday, raising a glass to a colleague who has reached retirement age, and so on. Or consider social media activities such as sharing photos that capture past moments of our lives that we spent with friends. In all these cases, the commemorative ceremony is embedded in everyday life and appears inseparable from routine.

This adds an extra layer of complexity to the relationship between gestures and habits explored in this essay. As discussed throughout the chapter, gestures exhibit a bidirectional relationship with habits, in the sense that they both *govern* and are *governed by* habits. Now, however, we can identify a second duality of gestures. Gestures can be *habitual*, in the sense that they are schematic and routinized, even as they take on a *ritualistic* quality, by virtue of which they convey a meaning that transcends the immediate context of action and makes our past an integral component of our present identity.

¹³ §§2 and 3 of this chapter take up, with some changes, my entry on routines and habits in the 2022 *Handbuch sozialwissenschaftliche Gedaechtnisforschung*, edited by Gerd Sebald, Mathias Berek, Kristina Chmelar, Oliver Dimbarth, Hanna Haag, Michael Heinlein, Nina Leonhard, and Valentin Rauer; Wiesbaden: Springer (Viola 2022). I thank Gerd Sebald and Cori Antonia Mackrodt for their permission to translate and use that material.

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