

The Moodiness of Action*

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This article argues that the concept of moodiness provides significant resources for developing a more robust pragmatist theory of action. Building on current conceptualizations of agency as effort by relational sociologists, it turns to the early work of Talcott Parsons to outline the theoretical presuppositions and antinomies endemic to any such conception; William James and John Dewey provide an alternative conception of effort as a contingent rather than fundamental form of agency. The article then proposes a way forward to a nonvoluntarist theory of action by introducing the notion of moodiness, highlighting how the concept permits a richer conceptualization of actors' prereflexive involvement in and relatedness to nonneutral, demanding situations. Effort is reconceptualized as a moment in a broader process of action, where the mood is fragile and problematical. Finally, the article draws all of these elements together in an outline of a unified portrait of the pragmatist action cycle that includes both creativity and moodiness as essential moments.

INTRODUCTION

This article critically engages the voluntaristic conception of agency as effort on which, as Mische (2011) suggests, much recent sociological theory and research has been based. Like others, I seek to somehow resolve dilemmas endemic to that conception. Yet, I do not dimensionalize the concept of effort or synthesize agency and structure. Rather, contributing to the recent reappropriation of pragmatist themes in sociology, I seek to articulate a richer theory of action in which dualisms between the normative and the conditional, effort and environment, symbolic and material become derivative rather than fundamental. Doing so requires shifting the type of theoretical question we ask when we ask about action, agency, and their situations. Not: What qualities of human action permit actors to operate independently of environmental constraints, such as symbolic performance or normative effort? But instead: What qualities must actors possess in order to experience situations as calling out a response from them? What must a theory of action include such that it can countenance the possibility of situations showing up to actors as demanding their attention, compelling their wills, or soliciting their efforts?

Once we see that and why these are the right kinds of questions to be asking, we can begin to answer them. We can do so, I shall argue, by directing our attention to the phenomenon—largely neglected in action theory—of *being in a mood*. If we conceive action as possessing a constitutively moody character, we can theorize actors as attuned to situations on the basis of the way situations demand responses from

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them. This experience of being drawn upon and solicited is more fundamental than that of choosing and willing; in fact, as we will see, effort is a derivative rather than basic dimension of action. Effort does not establish relations between actors and situations but instead registers a modification of a prior relatedness manifested in moods.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, I attempt to illuminate a present-day dilemma in sociological action theory—namely, its grounding in a conceptualization of agency as effort. As part of this illumination, I discuss the work of Parsons, Dewey, and James (among others). In the second section, I develop the concept of being in a mood, elaborating how it relates to effort in both voluntarist and nonvoluntarist conceptualizations of action. I offer a way to move forward by presenting the outline of a theory of the moodiness of action, rooted in pragmatist and phenomenological theory. In the third section, I draw all of these elements together in an outline of a unified portrait of the pragmatist action cycle that includes both creativity and moodiness as essential moments. By developing and integrating key moments of pragmatist action theory informed by the concept of moodiness—resonating situations, attuning moods, habits, perplexities, and innovative problem solving—I aim to provide a more robust theory of action that might inform the ongoing “pragmatist turn” in sociology (e.g., Ansell 2009; Bernstein 2010; Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Glaude 2007; Gross 2009; Joas 1996; Lewis and Smith 1980; Misak 2007; O’Riain 2004; Sabel 2005; Schneiderhan forthcoming; Seidman 1996; Shalin 1986; Whitford 2002). A concluding example, drawn from the recent work of Jeffrey Alexander on political rhetoric, illustrates the power of this approach to illuminate undertheorized areas in important domains of sociological research.

AGENCY AS EFFORT, AND ITS DILEMMAS

In a retrospective account of developments in “relational sociology” over the past three decades, Ann Mische suggests that the great promise of relational sociology consists neither in a particular set of methods nor in a particular claim about the intrinsically relational character of social structures. Rather, that promise lies in a certain “theoretical orientation” according to which “relational thinking is a way to overcome stale antinomies between structure and agency.” (Mische 2011:1). Mische’s review of over 30 years of work within this orientation concludes, however, by noting that its promise remains largely unmet: “most social science research—including much work on culture and networks—is still rooted in . . . Kantian . . . antinomies” between the normative and the conditional, between freedom and constraint (Mische 2011:16; see also Emirbayer and Mische 1998:965).

The theoretical work at the basis of relational sociology was explicitly intended to overcome such dichotomies (as in Emirbayer [1997]; Emirbayer and Goodwin [1994]; Emirbayer and Mische [1998]). The persistence of “Kantian antinomies” may be due to the failure of this theoretical work to be properly assimilated into empirical research. However, we may also wonder whether some of the blame lies in the theoretical orientation not being extended far enough.

Indeed, it is a striking fact that Emirbayer and Goodwin’s (1994) essay expressly adopts as a starting point Talcott Parsons’s notion of agency as “effort”: “in our understanding, human agency signifies that moment of freedom—or ‘effort’, as Talcott Parsons termed it—that exists as an analytical dimension of all actual empirical instances of social action” (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994:1442). In “What is Agency?”, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) go on to disaggregate Parsons’s “crucial concept

of effort” and show how these disaggregated forms of effort “interpenetrate” (another Parsonsian term) with forms of structure. Inside the “black box of human agency,” they suggest, are multiple temporal dimensions of effort: agency involves efforts to typify past experience, imagine future possibilities, and judge present situations. “Structure” is also disaggregated into a revised version of the Parsonsian distinction between culture, society, and personality: cultural context, social-structural context, and social-psychological context. These situational contexts “structure,” “channel,” and “enable” actors’ normative commitments, social transactions, and emotional energies. The multiple dimensions of agency and structure are said to be in dynamic interplay.

This is impressive theory work in disambiguating concepts, in this case the concept of effort. However, a disaggregated and multidimensional conception of agency as effort remains a conception of agency as effort.¹ A disaggregated and multidimensional conception of structure as enviroing context remains a conception of structure as enviroing context. If the persistence of Kantian dualisms in sociology lies in the persistence of these basic conceptions of agency as elementally efforts separated from and surrounded by constraining and enabling, hindering and helping environments, then no degree of sophistication will weaken the grip of those dualisms over the sociological imagination. Quite the contrary, the proliferation of dimensions would obscure any fundamental tensions in this conception of action. And it would make it more difficult to imagine alternatives.

Voluntarism in the Early Work of Talcott Parsons

We do in fact have in sociological theory an example of an attempt to elaborate a conception of agency as effort that remains focused on the basic theoretical presuppositions of that conception. I am referring to Talcott Parsons’s early essay, “The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory” (1935). Indeed, Parsons’s early conception of agency as effort, as the above references suggest, continues to lurk in the background of contemporary work in the theory of action. By moving that conception to the foreground, we can grapple more directly with the promise and pitfalls endemic to any theory that identifies agency with effort and work toward a fully relational theory of action.

Why have Parsons and others been drawn to the identification of agency with effort? One primary reason lies in the fact that making effort central to agency seems to offer a crucial defense of human freedom against the seemingly overwhelming de-personalizing forces of heredity and environment. Yet, one of the reasons it is worth returning to Parsons is that he does not rest his *theoretical* case for this “subjective aspect” of action on his normative commitment to human freedom alone. Rather, he mounts his argument for voluntarism by demonstrating the extent to which *without* that conception other theories of action are exposed to intractable dilemmas. This is the strategy behind Parsons’s deployment of what he calls “the utilitarian dilemma.” It highlights two theoretical flashpoints in the utilitarian framework: the nonrandomness of actors’ ends and their commitment to the norm of scientific

¹ Emirbayer’s (1997) “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology” does draw heavily from Dewey to envision actors as standing in transactional, dynamic, unfolding relations to their situations. To develop a theory of action adequate to this fundamental relationality, however, a conception of agency as effort does not go far enough. We need first to understand the conditions and capacities through which this relationality is possible. Emirbayer and Goldberg’s (2005) discussion of collective emotions in contentious politics takes steps in similar directions.

rationality. Both, he claims, are essential to utilitarian action in practice, but neither can be conceptualized on utilitarian grounds. By pushing the utilitarian to claim that heredity and environment explain how ends are prioritized and rationality ignored, both issues tend to move utilitarianism outside of the action frame of reference and into (Parsons's version of) positivism.²

Having exposed to his satisfaction this dilemma at the heart of nonvoluntarist theories of action, Parsons goes on to develop in an instructive way new, avowedly voluntarist concepts. These are designed to resolve the utilitarian dilemma and recast instrumentalist action as one specific type of the more general category of normative commitment. In one conceptual direction, he reinterprets utilitarian action as an *effort* to conform with a norm (Parsons 1935:294), setting efforts to conform with "norms of efficiency" alongside efforts to conform with "norms of moral obligation" (Parsons 1935:303). On this conception, utilitarian rationality is not a natural fact; it is a way of acting that exists only so long as agents voluntarily, through their active, constant efforts, sustain it, even against obstacles such as tradition or ignorance (Parsons 1935:286). By attributing deviations from scientific rationality to efforts to conform to alternative norms—for example, moral or aesthetic norms—Parsons avoids reducing that deviation to factors outside of human action. In a second direction, Parsons develops a theory of ultimate values institutionalized as social norms that condition the possibility of social order by harmonizing actors' ends.³ The distinctive components of voluntaristic action—effort, commitment, norms—thereby become themselves the explicit subject of action theory.

The main poles of the voluntaristic schema that emerge follow directly from the components of utilitarianism undermined by the utilitarian dilemma. Instead of random ends, binding norms; instead of scientific rationality, efforts to conform. For strategic reasons, Parsons went on in *The Structure of Social Action* to focus his attention primarily on the normative rather than "effortful" component.⁴ Systems of norms, he thought, offered the most direct solution to the Hobbesian problem of order. Moreover, highlighting such systems would, so Parsons believed, most forcefully illuminate the special contributions of sociology to the sciences of human action.

²This approach has its rhetorical power because utilitarian theories are internally committed to treating human agency and subjectivity as realities unto themselves. Utilitarian actors (are supposed to) voluntarily pursue ends, and so the reduction of their agency to the "conditions"—such as heredity and natural or social-structural environment—in which they act does violence to the basic commitments of the perspective. Thus, to remain a utilitarian, Parsons argues, one must remain committed to this nonpositivist, voluntary dimension. Parsons's gambit is to force the utilitarian to see that in order to remain true to this voluntary dimension of action, he has to stop being a utilitarian in the narrow sense and include the effort to conform with norms in his theory of action (Alexander 1987).

³There is also a third, expressive direction, in which Parsons undertakes a more direct articulation of what these norm-sustaining efforts are like, highlighting art, marriage, and community as involving types of activity in which actors directly manifest the seriousness and bindingness of their normative commitments (Parsons 1935:308). The fate of this other direction in Parsons's later work is a complex and important story. Suffice it to say for the moment that Parsons, by the time of *The Structure of Social Action*, did not seem to believe that expression fit neatly into the voluntarist schema. Much of his later work can be read as a fraught attempt to integrate the expressive dimension into his theoretical framework (cf. Staubmann 1995).

⁴Many subsequent debates about Parsons's voluntarism have focused on questions about whether his early voluntaristic approach to action succumbed to "systems thinking" in the *Social System* and beyond (Habermas 1981; Levine 1998; Luhmann 1976; Procter 1978; Scott, 1971; Turner and Beeghly 1974). Relatively few note the centrality of this notion of "effort" in Parsons's conceptualization of the essential normativity of action (Camic 1989; Procter 1978, 1980; Savage 1981). These primarily offer (helpful) reconstructions of the concept in Parsons's *Structure of Social Action* system rather than insight into the new dilemmas the notion created and the possible responses to those dilemmas available within and without Parsons's thought.

Effort

However, scattered about “The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory” and *The Structure of Social Action*, we do find significant statements that allow us to pinpoint the crucial place held by the notion of effort in Parsons’s voluntaristic theory of action. “Effort” provides the key “linking factor” that prevents the voluntarist approach from falling into a strong dichotomy between idealism and materialism. Highlighting “effort” in this way asserts that ideas do not realize themselves. “Neither the knowledge of the relation of means and end on which action is based nor the application of that knowledge comes automatically. Both are the result of effort, of the exercise of will” (Parsons 1935:286–87). In order to be effective, Parsons is claiming, ideas must be committed to by agents against the resistances of their environments and their hereditary backgrounds. Each major section of *The Structure of Social Action* returns to similar themes around exercising effort as overcoming environmental obstacles and relating the “normative” and “conditional” factors of action by committing oneself to normative ideals.⁵

It is no wonder that the concept of effort has reemerged on the theoretical scene with the emergence of relational sociology. For “effort” has a central position in voluntarist theories of action precisely because of its “relational” qualities. In addition, then, to saving the voluntarist theorist from giving pride of place to depersonalizing conditions, the concept seems to provide a theoretical alternative to an analytical substantialism that would treat social life as flowing automatically from cultural or material conditions. It inserts between the two a way to grant analytical priority to dynamic struggles evident in the efforts of agents to perform and realize norms.

The Voluntarist Dilemma

If there is an equally *theoretical* problem with the voluntarist framework that has kept it from overcoming dualisms, it will be found at its relational heart, in its still-current theoretical promise to hold “normative” and “conditional” elements of action in dynamic interplay. As Parsons did in the case of utilitarianism, it is possible to identify two structural instabilities in the schema. These, again paralleling the case of the utilitarian dilemma, demonstrate that the voluntarist framework cannot live up to its own relational promise just as utilitarianism cannot live up to its own voluntaristic promise. Exposing them points us in the direction of alternatives better able to comprehend agency in its situatedness and its effortfulness without being forced into dichotomies between symbolically free agents versus constraining and enabling conditions.

We can locate the voluntarist antinomies at the voluntaristic descendants of the utilitarian’s “ends” and “norm of rationality”: the application of norms and the sustenance of effort. The former generates a more familiar line of critique, found in the writings of a number of pragmatist authors, as well as in the work of Harold Garfinkel, concerning the question of how norms are applied. We could call this the problem of judgment. It highlights the absence of any norm that can govern

⁵See also Parsons (1949:76–77, 141, 147, 253, 397, 719). Most significantly, in his methodological opening chapters, Parsons defines action *as such* as involving a form of effort: “there is no such thing as action except as effort to conform with norms just as there is no such thing as motion except as change of location in space” (Parsons 1949:76–77). Parsons could not be clearer about the centrality of effort to the voluntarist theory of action: *no effort, no action*. If a piece of human behavior does not exhibit striving to uphold some normative ideal over and against the resistances of environmental and hereditary conditions, for Parsons, it just is not action—maybe psychological or biological drive, but not action.

the application conditions that specify when, how, and why one norm rather than another is to be applied to a given situation. On this line of thought, the exercise of norms in human action therefore depends on the exercise of creative judgment; the voluntarist is thus implicitly committed to an analysis of creative problem solving and the ongoing interpretation and transformation of norms. Analytical focus on creative processes in action then opens out onto a complete reformulation of the theory of action, one that highlights those conditions under which the creativity of action is possible (e.g., corporeality, situatedness, primary sociality) rather than (only) its instrumentality and its normativity (Joas 1996).

But there is another, less studied, instability in the voluntaristic perspective that is more directly relevant to the problems endemic to a conception of agency as effort. Let us call it the problem of passion. It focuses on the passive aspects of intentionality (Joas 1996:169). This side of the dilemma concerns the contingency of effort. What accounts for the fact that effort is not constantly maintained by actors, that it can lapse and vary? This question is the voluntarist analog to the utilitarian dilemma regarding deviation from the norm of rationality. As the utilitarian wants to avoid positive questions about how deviation from economizing rationality is possible, the voluntarist wants to avoid positive questions about how lapses and initiations of willful effort are possible, how “letting oneself go” and “getting turned on” can occur. The voluntarist must treat such experiences not as outcomes of actions but as the effects of environmental conditions or heredity just as the utilitarian must do so for lapses in scientific rationality.

The overall movement of the dilemma may be briefly summarized as follows. Action for the voluntarist is the effort to live up to normative ideals. Without effort, norms cannot be realized; to claim otherwise is to succumb to emanationist idealism and to give up on voluntarism. Effort is either constant or it can subside. If effort is constant, then norms are automatically realized; they cannot fail. But if norms are automatically realized, then voluntarism slides into idealism; hence, the propensity of Parsons and his followers to drift in this direction. If voluntaristic agents cannot accept that their efforts are constant, then the energy of their efforts might seem to be functions of their “conditions” or “environments,” whether pre-given psychological drive, social position, or biological instinct. Voluntarism would revert to positivism; effort would be assimilated to the “conditions” of action. The creative, free aspect of human activity to which the voluntarist is committed would be lost.

Alternatively, normative efforts may be conceived as the contingent outcomes of human activity, specific results of specific actions rather than natural or social givens. If effortfulness is a contingent result of human activity, then the voluntarist must admit that voluntaristic action depends on more than the willful exertion of effort. It rather depends on activities that produce energetic effort without assuming its prior exercise. Effort to conform to normative symbols is not automatic, not a “first mover,” but is itself a problem that arises in the course of actions that are not always, or even often, effortful. In order to understand how normative efforts are related to their situational conditions, then, the voluntarist, to stay true to herself, must look beyond voluntary activity and the exercise of the will to the prevoluntaristic involvements and engagements that under some circumstances require effort to be sustained or changed. The problem for a nonvoluntarist theory of action—and for the voluntarist sensitive to these dilemmas—is to develop a positive account of what this nonwillful but engaged dimension of action consists in. And then to account for the conditions under which from out of this background sense of immediate involvement in situations specific experiences of effort emerge.

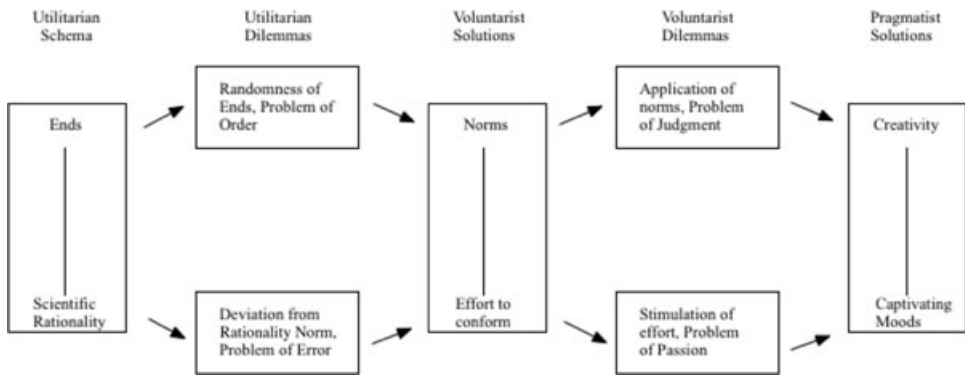


Figure 1. Action theory and its dilemmas.

In order to live up to its relational potential, then, the theory of action must abandon the identification of agency with effort. Instead, we need to develop a broader theory of action in which effortfulness is a contingent modification of some other aspect of action.

The overall analytical (not causal or historical) movement through these dilemmas is laid out in Figure 1. It begins with the utilitarian schema's basic concern with action as the rational pursuit of ends and highlights where each of these poles issues in a fundamental theoretical dilemma, the problem of order and the problem of error. Moving to the right, it shows how the voluntarist schema purports to resolve these problems through the concepts of norms and the effort to conform, which in turn form the new polarities within a unified conception of action as essentially normative. The basic concerns of voluntaristic action theory lie along this spectrum, such as isolating mechanisms of producing conformity or analyzing variation in norms. The two theoretical dilemmas faced by the voluntarist schema are shown next, the problem of judgment and the problem of passion. The solution to the first dilemma stresses the essential creativity of action; the solution to the second, I will suggest, features the essential moodiness of action. How the two relate will be the topic of the final section of the article.

Efforts as Contingent Results of Specific Action Situations

Parsons did have some intimation about the importance of the nonvoluntaristic aspects of human action. He wrote about faith as a "stimulant to the will," for example (cf. Parsons 1949:440, 467). But Parsons did not directly theorize these dimensions of action; they remain residual categories in his thought.⁶

Having unpacked in Parsons's early work the action-theoretical presuppositions and dilemmas behind the pervasive dualisms of effort and environment noted by Mische, we are now in a position to begin to look for and appreciate alternatives. For Parsons is not the only classical theorist who devoted considerable intellectual attention to the concept of effort. William James and John Dewey provide a useful

⁶Parsons's middle-period work does make faltering steps in this direction, especially through his engagement with Freud. Yet, it is at this point that his explicit development of action theory ends and his work on his theory of order expands. The latter was never fully brought together with the former (Joas 2009).

starting point, as each wrote essays on the limits of conceptions of agency as effort—James in an 1880 essay, “The Feeling of Effort” (later adapted and included in the section on volition in *The Principles of Psychology*), and Dewey in his 1897 “The Psychology of Effort” and his 1913 pedagogical tract, *Interest and Effort in Education*. The insights contained in these essays offer an analytical bridge to a nonvoluntarist theory of action. By explicitly making the movement from effort as identical to agency to effort as a specific and relatively rare aspect of agency they provide materials for building up an account both of the elements that constitute the domain of action without effort and the conditions under which effort is likely to predominate.

In striking contrast to Parsons (and Emirbayer and Mische), both James and Dewey treat effort not as the essence of agency but as a typical outcome of certain sorts of activities. “The immense majority of human decisions,” writes James, “are decisions without effort” (James [1890] 1981:534). James’s and Dewey’s central target is what Dewey calls the “spiritual theory of effort.” This is the theory—strongly similar to Parsons’s and later invocations of agency as effort—according to which effort is the “one sole evidence of a free spiritual activity struggling against outward material resistance” (Dewey 1897:55).

For Dewey and James, by contrast, effort arises within human activity rather than in the confrontation between action and something outside of it (e.g., conditions or structure). Effort is not a case of a self being met by recalcitrant reality that either helps or hinders it. Rather, effort is sensed in the “divided activity of the self” and in conflictual situations (Dewey 1897:52). For instance, when a shipwrecked sailor struggling to survive becomes fatigued, James suggests, part of him is pulled to rest, the other to continue at the pumps. Carrying on his work becomes experienced as requiring an effort that comes in the form of the normative command “to the pumps!” Learning to master “novel acts” introduces similarly conflictual situations. A novice bike rider, Dewey suggests, imagines herself in balance but also is met with her existing habits that have not yet been trained for bike riding but most likely for walking. The result is “an amount of stress and strain relevant to the most serious problems of the universe.” Once one learns to ride a bike, “the effort entirely vanishes” (Dewey 1897:55). A student, Dewey adds, who experiences the subject matter of a course as somehow outside of himself must engage with that material through an act of will; it does not speak to him in his own language, as it were.

An implication of this way of treating effort is that effortfulness occurs within a broader and deeper domain of human action. In this domain, effort in the sense of the “spiritual theory” plays little to no role. In the context of his pedagogical writing, Dewey helpfully calls this “unified activity.” Attending to the root meaning of the word “interest,” he suggests, serves to outline its contours. This is interest as “interesse”—being among or between things. To be interested in some matter in this sense marks “the annihilation of the distance between the person and the materials and the results of his action” (Dewey 1913:17). Without such distance, there is no need to exert effort to sustain attention to a distant, dead subject matter; nor must that topic be sugarcoated or hyped up to be made “interesting.” The object is already reaching out to the student as some stimulant to the further development of his own potentials. James gives a gripping example of this sort of unified activity:

In the mountains, in youth, on some intoxicating autumn morning, after invigorating slumber, we feel strong enough to jump over the moon, and casting about us for a barrier, a rock, a tree, or any object on which to measure our bodily

proWess, we perform with perfect spontaneity feats which at another time might demand an almost impossible exertion of muscle and will. (James 1880:21)

These are cases of activity in the fullest sense. They suggest full involvement and complete immersion in an engaging situation. They do not suggest any loss of agency or subordination of freedom to external environments. But they do not make any reference to effort, spiritual struggle, or will.

In sum, effort for the pragmatists is a symptom of “divided activity”; it arises from internal tensions within situations and among ideas; it registers an awareness of these conflicts, and means that some alternative and somehow attractive course of action resists being displaced or changed by another that is not fully and immediately engaging (James 1880:23). Effort is not the elemental spiritual source of human agency over and against (hindering or helping) environmental conditions but part of a process of readjustment, where one struggles to open oneself to or resist some emergent possibility, either as a duty to be realized or a temptation to be avoided. Effort thus subsists within a broader universe of action that is not effortful but rather “undivided,” “interested,” involved, and engaged in situations. What, then, is action like when not undertaken in the mode of struggle, conflict, and strain? And what must we add to a theory of action to account for this sort of responsive engagement in situations?

THE MOODY CHARACTER OF HUMAN ACTION

Moods

By specifying the relatively rare action situations in which effort typically occurs, Dewey and James provide a hinge that opens a theoretical doorway into the non-effortful domain of action. For the fact that effortfulness is contingent means that we need concepts that can cover the remainder of the field, namely, those characteristics of human action that make unified, undivided, effortlessly engaged activity possible. This section argues that the concept of moodiness can do this theoretical work.

Let us begin by noting a difference between a theory of moods and a theory of the moodiness of action (or of the moody dimension of action). This difference parallels, for instance, the one between a theory of creativity on the one hand and a theory of the creativity of action on the other. The former type of theory seeks, among other things, to distinguish moods or creativity from other psychic phenomena, explain the conditions under which specific types of creativity or moods are likely to occur, investigate social norms about whether and when mood-driven or creative action is appropriate, or analyze the various social, cultural, or psychological consequences of variations in moods or creativity. The latter type, by contrast, is concerned to investigate how granting a kind of analytical priority to a certain dimension of action (e.g., moodiness or creativity) requires rethinking and sometimes adding to the basic terms in the theory of action, such as “actor,” “ends,” “means,” “situation,” “norm,” “rationality,” and “effort” (the key terms in Parsons’s “unit act”). This type of theorizing will typically seek to articulate how making some dimension central rather than peripheral to the theory of action revises how we think about the conditions under which successful action is possible. It does not intend to valorize creativity or moodiness but to draw from them lessons for the general theory of action. My concern is to develop the latter type of theory, though doing so should provide conceptual resources for the former.

Moods have received some attention in recent sociological and psychological literature. But this attention has largely come in the form of the first type of theory: propositions about causes, characteristics, and consequences of moods (cf. Bloch 2002, 2008; Collins 2004; Jasper 1998; Robinson et al. 2006). The few sociologists who do take up the topic of moods tend to focus on the consequences of moods for social action. They highlight their impacts on social phenomena such as political protest, occupational satisfaction, interpersonal interaction, or ritual energy. The psychological literature on moods, by contrast, has been concerned to define the specific psychic qualities of moods and to connect them to other psychological phenomena such as emotions and cognitive appraisals (Siemer 2009; Ben-Ze'ev 2000). Such theories highlight several features of moods and mood-related experiences. Moods are not only long-lasting emotions; they are global and diffuse. They fill the whole space of encounter rather than attaching to a specific object. Moods set up internal standards of what counts as appropriate reactions to situations. Certain thoughts and emotions make sense within one mood but not within another. Moods, finally, provide the context of justifying responses to situations rather than any specific justification. For instance, being angry with somebody for making an inappropriate remark is tied to a specific justification, the angry remark. Being in an angry mood, however, provides the context in which remarks are likely to be taken as containing hostile overtones.

Both psychological and sociological literatures provide a fund of valuable distinctions for a theory of the moodiness of action. But neither explicitly draws out the implications of their observations about the consequences and character of moods for developing a nonvoluntarist theory of action. What, then, would a nonvoluntarist theory of action look like were it to take into account the character and consequences of being in a mood? The remainder of this section outlines an answer in three steps, building on the pragmatist and phenomenological philosophical traditions, and contributing an enriched conception of the crucial but relatively undertheorized notion of “the situation” to the recent pragmatist turn in sociology.⁷

First, I highlight three theoretical implications of the moody character of action for conceptualizing the character of action situations: in virtue of its moodiness, action can *disclose* nonneutral fields that *call forth* responses. These responses are more or less successful to the degree to which they *enrich* actors' attunement to the compelling qualities of the situation. Second, building on this enriched account of action, I reformulate accounts of agency as voluntary effort on new grounds. If the theory of the moodiness of action is correct, effort has heightened salience for action when the hold of a situation over actors is weak or distant—when the mood is fragile and problematical. This means, third, that effort itself proceeds according to its own moods, typically those that disclose the problematical characteristics of situations. Variations in effort are thus, in contrast to the voluntarist schema, referred to elements within rather than beyond the action frame of reference.

⁷“The situation” has been a central but underappreciated component of pragmatist theories of action. As Joas writes, “the concept of ‘situation’ is a suitable replacement for the means-end schema as the primary category of a theory of action” (Joas 1996:160). Collins (1994) too, drawing on Goffman, makes “the situation” central, recommending we begin analyses not with “men and their moments” but “moments and their men.” The present discussion pushes both of these lines of thought further: to the former it adds a positive conception of the “nonneutrality” of situations, to the latter it goes beyond a deterministic conception of actors as being “charged up” by situations by adding a conception of “enriching” the situation.

Disclosing, Calling Forth, and Enriching

Disclosing. Martin Heidegger and other phenomenological authors have offered rich descriptions of various moods.⁸ These elaborate many ways in which different moods operate and seek to determine their constituent elements. For present purposes, the crucial insight of this tradition is that even if particular moods may come and go, moodiness is a constitutive feature of human action. As Heidegger puts it, there is “only ever a change of mood” (Heidegger 1995:68). If we accept this theoretical assumption about the constitutive character of moodiness, how does it help to revise the theory of action so as to make central those nonvoluntaristic aspects of action that must be merely residual within a voluntaristic frame of reference?

This first implication of this insight for a theory of action concerns the character of action “situations” and the disclosive power of human action. It suggests that actions are not simply contingent on situations but constituted by their situations. If being in a mood is an essential element of action, actions do not simply intervene upon a neutral situational field by bringing to bear intentions and plans formulated outside or before the situation. Rather, being in a mood discloses the qualities that grant importance to situations as provoking or eliciting certain responses. Voluntarist and instrumentalist conceptions, by contrast, assume that situations are primordially neutral. For the instrumentalist, situations provide resources that may be put into the service of whatever end actors seek to meet. The resources have significance only insofar as they further actors’ instrumental purposes. For the voluntarist, situations constitute the blank screen onto which norms, frames, definitions, or accounts are subjectively imposed. Action situations have significance so long as they help or hinder the realization of these subjective ideals; it is, accordingly, these ideals, frames, scripts, and accounts—and the subjective effort of persons to perform them—to which sociological analysis is most properly directed. In both cases, situations receive their significance through some meaning being attached to them through the subjective stance disembedded actors take on them.

If action has an inherently moody dimension, by contrast, actors do not inhabit situations neutrally. Rather, moods disclose situations as containing some sort of significance or another; actors are always tuning into the import their situations hold for them. A room enlivened by a joyous mood is filled with possibilities of celebration; in a hostile mood it is filled with threats; in a scientific mood it is full of perplexing problems in need of solution.⁹ In such atmospheres, some aspects of the situation stand out as salient, others recede as unimportant. The festive mood of a party, for instance, makes some details of the room show up as needing to be dealt with (how is the lighting, are the windows open, are there enough or too many seats, where are people standing?) while others fade into the background (is the refrigerator door open again, is there enough soap to wash the dishes, is the shower

⁸Smith (1986) reviews how this line of thought has been developed by a number of authors. By contrast, the Husserlian strand of phenomenology—more influential in sociology than the Heideggerian one—has, due to its latent Cartesianism, produced much more attenuated conceptions of moods (cf. Smith 1978). The classical pragmatists were less emphatic in their statements about moodiness. James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* comes the closest to the sorts of statements made by Scheler and Heidegger, while Dewey’s *Art as Experience* contains many similar ideas without using the term explicitly.

⁹Collins’s conception of emotional energy, by contrast, focuses not on the evident sense of felt importance in situations but on a single scale of energy running from high confidence to low dependence. This obscures the difference between a heavy metal concert and a chamber orchestra by reducing all shades of emotional tonality to a common denominator. A theory of the moodiness of action, however, suggests that what counts as important in a situation—from transgressive rebelliousness to serene harmoniousness—depends on the mood in which it is disclosed. See Barbalet (2006).

curtain open or closed?). People show up as “to-be-greeted” or “to-be-chit-chatted with” (cf. Dewey [1922] 2002:22; Scheler 1993:56; see also Bollnow 1974).

A theory of action that includes moodiness is thus equipped to account for and investigate the fore-and-background structure of situations, an aspect of experience beyond the conceptual reach of instrumentalist and voluntarist perspectives. It highlights those moments in the action process when various lines of relevance present courses of action as if already in the actor’s perception—all before any utility calculation or declarations of normative commitment about which course to follow are made. “Nature,” writes Dewey, “is kind and hateful, bland and morose, irritating and comforting, long before she is mathematically qualified or even a congeries of ‘secondary’ qualities like colors and their shapes” (Dewey 1934:17). Situations are not neutral; they already “say” something. The concept of moodiness helps us to build this into a theory of action.

Calling Forth. A second action-theoretical implication of taking moods seriously concerns the sense in which situations make claims upon actors. For the supposition that actors always operate in some mood or another implies that situations make demands on actors; they solicit responses. Situations are not only the subjects of cognitive beliefs or the object of subjective effort and normative definitions; because they are important and show up foregrounded with lines of salience, they ask for something important and relevant to the situation to be done. The nonneutrality of situations, that is, has consequences for what we do in response. This general theme has been central in the lines of thought descending especially from Merleau-Ponty and into Gestalt psychology. They developed concepts such as “affordances” and “solicitations” to capture this sense in which situations call forth responses from actors tuned into them (cf. Gibson 1977; Acord 2010 reviews recent sociological research in this mode). The philosophical implications of these concepts for an expanded conception of intentionality have been developed by Dreyfus and Kelly (2007).

Integrating this aspect of being in a mood—the felt sense of being called upon to respond to a situation—into a theory of action requires revising our conception of action further. Consider the difference between holding a belief about a situation and deliberating about how to act within it versus responding immediately and without reflection to elements of the environment. It is possible, for instance, to believe that a person’s outstretched arm is a symbol of friendship, to normatively define the situation as a friendly one, and to calculate correctly about the most rational response to the offer—all without feeling any compulsion to respond. These instrumentalist terms fail to render intelligible the experience of the outstretched hand as a solicitation for a response, not to mention the fact that action solely based on such terms is typically a mark of socially disjointed behavior in which situations do not flow or come off. Beliefs and definitions provide reports about how the world is; they treat the action situation as a datum that needs to be categorized and calculated. If action proceeded only through definitions, calculations, and accounts of situations, the sort of call and response would not be comprehensible.

The difference between sensing a call to act and feeling compelled to act versus making an effort to act is equally significant. Dreyfus and Kelly helpfully articulate this distinction.

To say that the world solicits a certain activity is to say that the agent feels immediately drawn to act a certain way. This is different from deciding to perform

the activity, since in feeling immediately drawn to do something, the subject experiences no act of the will. Rather, he experiences the environment calling for a certain way of acting, and finds himself responding to the solicitation. . . . Affordances draw activity out of us only in those circumstances in which we are not paying attention to the activity they solicit. (Dreyfus and Kelly 2007:52)¹⁰

It is one thing to make a strong effort to conform to norms of hospitality and perform them according to script in a convincing way. When the arm is outstretched, one decides to make the effort to react in the normatively appropriate way. It is something entirely different to reach out in joyous fellowship, in immediate response to having sensed elements in the environment as calling for friendliness. Within a room in a hospitable mood, the outstretched hand calls out to be grasped. To the extent that an actor willfully performs her activities as responses to a solicitation or treats it as an occasion to play out a symbolic repertoire, the response is fundamentally altered, even disrupted. A friendly response is one thing; an effort to make a friendly response is something else.

It will be difficult if not impossible to integrate this sort of engaged responsiveness into a theory of action if we begin by identifying agency with normative effort. However, if action proceeds in an inherently moody way that keys actors into the compelling qualities of situations, then we can readily see how this sort of experience of being called to act can be an integral component of a theory of action. Consider as an example scientific research. Inasmuch as researchers are drawn into an inquisitive mood, they become attuned to their field of action as a puzzling place that demands investigation, resonating with lines of thought beckoning in uncharted yet significant directions (Dewey explores these themes in *How We Think*). In a scientific mood, it is as if the world were saying: “solve my riddles!” Particular objects from social relations in jazz clubs to residential patterns show up as strange puzzles calling out to be made sense of, promising unforeseen discoveries; specific research plans and intentions are formulated accordingly. In the light of the mood, scientific investigation *matters*, for it is demanded by problems perceived as flowing directly from the world, before any specific intentions are formulated concerning effective ways to carry out that response. Voluntarist and instrumentalist theories are blind to this aspect of action situations.

Enriching. Situations, therefore, do not simply trigger responses. Nor do they merely “charge” or “pump” up actors with emotional energy along a single dimension running from depression to confidence (as in Collins 2004). Rather, from the perspective outlined here, action situations make demands the qualitative character of which is given by the mood in the light of which they show up. Because moods are diffuse and global, the situations they reveal make relatively open demands. Feeling compelled to solve some puzzle in a scientific mood does not automatically trigger any specific research program. Many responses are possible. Moreover, situations may be just as compellingly important in an attunement of boredom as in one of confidence (cf. Heidegger 1995; Silver 2008). There is no single scale into which the power of moods to attune actors to action possibilities can be placed, nor a single way to deduce what a compelling situation demands by specifying ahead of time what a successful encounter must entail (e.g., energized confidence).

¹⁰See also James (1890:524).

What matters theoretically is developing an alternative account of what makes responses to situations more or less successful. I suggest we think of successful responses to a mood as *enriching* actors' attunement to their action situations. Dewey points toward this sort of standard in *Human Nature and Conduct*: "Activity is creative in so far as it moves to its own enrichment as activity, that is, bringing along with itself a release of further activities . . . some amount of this [creativity] is a normal accompaniment of all successfully coordinated action." A successful action, Dewey suggests, opens up a space for further action possibilities; failures shut down such possibilities.

Instrumentalist and voluntarist conceptions of action, however, provide little insight into this action-generating quality of successful actions. They locate success and failure in, respectively, achieving pre-given ends and sustaining commitment to pre-given normative ideals. Achieving some preformulated end, however, may or may not lead to further actions. An academic article may achieve the goal it sets for itself but plant no seeds for further research. Similarly, successfully making the effort to live up to some ideal may or may not lead to further efforts. Strong effort to stick to a research program may shut down future research precisely because of its steadfastness. Understanding success and failure in the sense of producing further actions requires going beyond the terms available within instrumentalist and voluntarist theories of action.

A theory of action that includes the phenomenon of being in a mood can provide the basis for assessing the success and failure of actions in terms of their action-generating capacities. A successful response to a situation would consist in enriching the mood in which the action proceeds. To the extent that the response succeeds, actors are more fully tuned into the importance of the situation. To the extent that this sense of importance is heightened, the sense of being called upon to act is strengthened. To the extent that this sense of being called upon is strengthened, further actions are more likely to occur. Dewey's analysis of art as experience provides perhaps the most direct pragmatist engagement with this line of thought.

A stylized example helps to make the point. Consider again an academic research article. As Fleck already pointed out in *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (see also Barbalet 2002), "thought communities" routinely assess whether papers are written in the right mood. The scientific mood, he suggests, is one in which the article proceeds out of some genuine puzzlement that demands a resolution. A poor article kills this mood, as it were. After reading it, one feels less tuned into the puzzling characteristics of the topic. Accordingly, one feels less compelled to further investigation. A successful article, by contrast, enriches the mood. After reading it, one feels more fully drawn into the problem; new lines of thought emerge; seemingly resolved problems appear in a new light; points of debate become clarified; new breakthroughs are in one's grasp, just over the horizon. This is a far cry from simply being "pumped up" with emotional energy. One feels that further research *has* to be done—not as a choice, not as the result of one's will, but as a compelling and important challenge by which one is captivated. "Demand for the solution to a perplexity," writes Dewey, "is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection" (Dewey [1910] 1997:11). If we include moodiness within a theory of action, we thus immediately acquire a set of terms for investigating the conditions under which actions produce further actions.

Putting Voluntary Action in its Place

Theoretically, it is possible to investigate the moods accompanying any activity. We can study the moods through which artists, stock traders, chefs, academics, sports teams, and the whole myriad of actors and groups reveal, feel compelled by, and respond by enriching important situations. We can study the rituals through which moods are activated within concrete settings and the habits that keep them going in the face of distractions. One could point to as examples much work on entry rituals carried out by research within the various interactionist approaches. For instance, there are the ways in which parents set a mood of comfort and familiarity that enables children to let themselves fall asleep (cf. Collins 2004). Or one could point to work in the sociology of nightlife that stresses how the actions of bartenders, DJs, waiters, and others conspire to produce a certain ambiance that animates a space (Lloyd 2005; Silver et al. 2010). Recent work in the sociology of religion has made religious experience rather than religious norms a centerpiece of analysis, highlighting how religious actors prepare sacred spaces that draw congregants into a sense of, for instance, awe and wonder (Bender 2010).

Moreover, we could investigate how expert practitioners cultivate habits that allow them to sustain moods—for instance, how master teachers hold open a thoughtful mood in their classrooms or how master researchers keep themselves attuned in a mood of puzzlement, even when distractions threaten to undermine the mood's power. A theory of the moodiness of action allows us to gather these and other seemingly disparate practices under a common heading and to make inductive generalizations about their typical patterns and directions. These will likely vary in numerous ways that cannot be determined ahead of time by theoretical fiat, and many propositions about how they do might be developed. This, to repeat, is not identical with studying the production of emotional energy or the influence of emotions on interpersonal relationships. It rather suggests paying attention to the pervasive tones and atmospheres in which situations show up as foregrounding demands upon actors of one form or another and the actions that make this foregrounding possible.

It would be a mistake, however, to take the inclusion of moodiness in a theory of action to require the exclusion of voluntary effort. To the contrary, if we accept that action always proceeds in a mood, then we are in a better position to understand the specific conditions under which it acquires an effortful character. We can then put the voluntaristic dimensions of action in their place, just like the voluntarist approach sought to put the utilitarian dimensions of action in their place as a specific form of effort to conform to norms of efficiency.

As we saw above, specifying these conditions was of great concern to Dewey and James. They held that “divided activities” issue in effort since in them means and ends come apart or multiple attractive ends compete for attention. Agency as such, however, is not effortful. We are now in a position to go one step further. For ends and means to come apart and ideals to collide, actors must have become related to their situations by way of a normative ideal rather than on the basis of a captivating mood. As situations become less captivating, involvement in them becomes more a matter of effort. In such situations, it makes more sense to treat agency as consisting in effort. Variations in effort can be referred to variations in moods, enclosing the theory of action more tightly within the action frame of reference.

We can make this idea clearer if we return to the sorts of examples James and Dewey give of action situations where agency does seem to be characterized by

effort. These can be roughly grouped into three classes: learning situations, planning situations, and conflict situations. These types of action situations share a common attribute. In each of them, captivation by a mood and attunement to a situation lose their immediacy and become normative ideals that require effort to realize. In struggling to learn a skill, trained up habits fail to put one in a position to follow the immediate demands of the situation, and effort is required to willfully monitor and control one's behavior. Conflicts thrust one out of the mood and demand explicit defense of practices as normative principles. Planning projects one outside present involvements into the future, requiring calculations about how to realize a far-off goal. In fact, it is in such situations that the various temporal dimensions of effort identified by Emirbayer and Mische become relevant for action: past styles become typical models to which one aspires; the present situation becomes something to be evaluated and judged instead of simply compelling a response; future actions become distant goals to be realized and deliberated about rather than the next step called for by the current one.

As the hold of the mood weakens and action shades over into its voluntarist and calculative dimensions, so too would the immediacy of the claim made by the situation. Should one calculate how to respond or work up the effort to respond, the current atmosphere, the theory would suggest, should suffer. The sense of feeling called to a response would diminish. These sorts of hypotheses about transformations in the character of situations cannot be formulated in utilitarian or voluntarist terms. A theory of the moodiness of action, by contrast, permits clear formulations about variations in the conditions under which situations may or may not be experienced in their compelling character.

Problematical Moods

Effort, to paraphrase Dewey, matters when something is the matter. More precisely, agency becomes more a matter of effort the less actors are immediately captivated by the compelling qualities of their situations. Voluntarism has its place. But putting voluntarism in its place requires starting from a theory of the moodiness of action. We should not, however, equate the moody dimension of action with unproblematical involvement in situations and the voluntaristic dimension with problemat�city. If, as Heidegger suggests, action always has a moody dimension and there is only ever a change from one mood to another, then we would have to draw a different conclusion: to the extent that actors experience their situations as problematical, as making competing attractive demands on them, they are likely to find themselves in a problematical mood. Voluntarism would then have its own moods; in them, action situations would show up as fields of struggle, toil, challenge. In such moods, the relevant elements of the situation solicit effort; to respond without effort would, in such circumstances, kill the mood of struggle and overcoming.

Indeed, the pragmatist and phenomenological traditions do identify a class of moods that we might call problematical moods. The most famous example of this sort of mood is anxiety. It loosens up the everyday categories and roles we use to make sense of one another. The everyday situation "explodes"; it shifts from something taken for granted to a puzzling problem of the utmost concern. Dewey's notion of "thinking" as a constant attunement to the perplexing qualities of the world is similar. As is James's discussion of "melting moods," where, taken-for-granted categories melt away. In such moods, the world is strange, uncanny (James 1987:140). Indeed, some religions actively cultivate this sort of mood, developing

rituals and habits that produce a sense of being overwhelmed by the tragic character of existence (Silver 2006).

In such situations, effort makes the mood and sustains the atmosphere of the situation rather than marking its decline. The greater the sense of resistance and antagonism, the more elements in the environment are disclosed as soliciting effort and struggle. This is the mood in which action seems identical to effort and situations seem identical to structures. It is, as James puts it, not the world of “the child of the sunshine” but of “the hero and the neurotic” (James [1890] 1981:548).

A great deal of phenomenologically inspired sociological theory has treated taken-for-granted everydayness as an achievement and investigated how that unproblematical involvement is produced. On this view, not knowing how to go on, feeling unsettled, is a temporarily and typically externally imposed breach rather than its own state of mind with its own rituals and habits. Acknowledging the moody character of action allows us to remedy this mistake. By more fully investigating the practices and habits that cultivate problematical moods, we can investigate the experience of problematicity as potentially internal to rather than necessarily a falling out of everyday situations. Indeed, we might treat Heidegger or James’s lectures as case studies in the production of this sort of mood.

A UNIFIED ACCOUNT OF THE PRAGMATIST ACTION CYCLE

Stressing the place of moods within the nonvoluntaristic domain of action highlights those processes of action out of which situations show up as atmospheres that matter to and make demands upon actors. Just as “the creativity of action” provides an analytical response to the “problem of judgment,” “the moodiness of action” offers an analytical window to the residual category indicated by the “problem of passion” inherent in the voluntarist standpoint. What, then, is the unified conception of action toward which these two responses point?

This is a large question, too large to fully take up here. But we can conclude with a remark about the general consequences of the above discussion for developing a more robust theory of action. For including the moody dimension on the same analytical level as the creative dimension helps to refine our understanding of the pragmatist action cycle by reframing how we think about the interplay between creative and habitual action. Pragmatist sociology typically stresses the fact that most of human action is deeply habitual, guided by ingrained, bodily habits that allow us to move “prereflexively” about our everyday involvements and to respond appropriately to situations (Gross 2009). Sometimes our habits do not enable us to cope with problems that arise, and this exposes us to problems and perplexities (Addams 1964; Schneiderhan forthcoming). These perplexities demand creative solutions and revised interpretative frames, new styles of behavior or responsiveness, for which ingrained habits and established norms do not provide a model. A successful response to a perplexing problem counts as creative insofar as it resolves such tensions and enables the unreflective flow of action to continue, now armed with new and more resilient habits. These new habits sediment prior creative solutions and set the backdrop for future ones. Human action as such is essentially defined by its creativity.

However important the notion of habits and prereflexive involvement in situations are to this picture, they can seem to be less systematically developed than the notion of creative problem solving that has dominated the recent reception of pragmatism, especially in North American sociology. The essential place of habit in human action can appear to be swamped by episodes of creativity (Camic 1997; Dalton 2004). The

fundamental idea of situations as “nonneutral” prereflexive involvements that “call forth [and] provoke certain actions already in our perception” (Joas 1996:160) does not seem to admit of more formal and positive elaboration, at least without adding many terms and considerations that seem to go beyond the terms available in classic pragmatism (Camic 1997).¹¹

One reason for these halting steps toward integrating a robust version of the pragmatist theory of action into the “pragmatist turn” in sociology might be that focusing attention on action as proceeding according to a continual “tension between unreflected habitual action and acts of creativity” (Joas 1996:129) does not on its own provide a complete enough picture of the internal relations in the pragmatist theory of action among acts of creativity, habits, and situations. In fact, as we have seen, moodiness is an action-theoretical cousin to creativity. If we conceptualize being in a mood as part of the pragmatist action cycle, what emerges is a more concrete and determinate picture of the links connecting “the situation” to habits and acts of creativity, as well as a basis for theorizing more rigorously the ways in which situations operate “nonneutrally” and prereflexively in action.

Figure 2 provides a schematic sketch of what this model of the action cycle would look like. It reframes habitual action as one moment in a movement that connects the domains of moodiness and innovative problem solving via perplexity and habituation on the upper half of the cycle depicted in Figure 2, whereas the lower half of the cycle shows the connection between the moody dimension of action and the situations of action through the moments of “attunement” and “resonating calling forth.”

We can begin to elaborate the analytical potential of this model by taking as an example the topic of political campaign rhetoric and rallies, recently placed center stage by Jeffrey Alexander. In *The Politics of Performance*, Alexander skillfully narrates the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Ritual meaning and emotional fusion, he shows, are alive and well in late modernity. The contest between Barack Obama and John McCain was not driven primarily by material, social-structural, and organizational factors. More fundamentally, it was a struggle by political performers to symbolically transform themselves into heroes before their citizen audiences. Political rallies are more than means to consolidating ulterior ends; they are theatrical performances of symbolic values that create solidarities among citizens and build loyalties to leaders. It is the job of the politician struggling for democratic power to perform these values with gusto, to bring symbols to life. Successful “cultural pragmatics,” on Alexander’s account, consists in becoming a collective representation capable of piercing the citizen heart and attaching masses of emotional energy onto a candidate’s character. Emotional fusion between speaker and audience is its consummation.

This is a powerful reintroduction of the autonomy of politics and culture into the sociological understanding of voting. Yet, from the pragmatist perspective, without theoretical supplement this reintroduction comes at the price of idealism.¹² For

¹¹In *The Genesis of Values* (2000), Joas takes decisive steps in this direction by giving an essential place to the passive, attractive moment and the self-transformative moment in the theory of value-commitments. The formal connections between the two levels deserve further elaboration, however, something along the lines of Parsons’s theorization of the core elements of the process of action encapsulated in the “unit act.” As Camic (1998) notes, whatever the specific problems with Parsons’s model, this sort of systematization of the voluntaristic conception greatly facilitated its “subsequent use, elaboration, and critique.”

¹²See Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005) for an account the “pernicious postulates” that make it difficult to recognize the independent power of emotional “economies” and “topologies” in contentious politics as

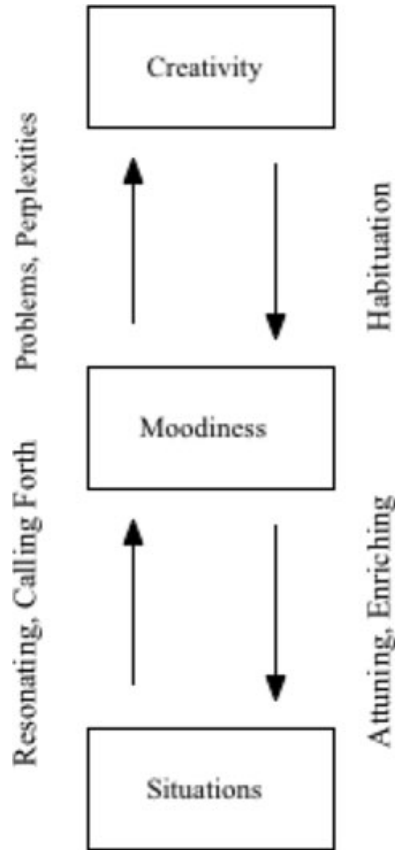


Figure 2. The action cycle among situation, moods, and creativity.

“cultural pragmatics,” the pragmatists would insist, consists not only in performing symbols before audiences. Perhaps more importantly it consists in exercising what we might call “cultural intelligence”: altering or articulating symbols in such a way that they help to awaken, heighten, change, or clarify actors’ sensitivity to their situation.

The model outlined in Figure 2 helps us to elaborate this alternative. It suggests a framework for analyzing political rhetoric and rallies as a form of situated action that is responsive to and generative of substantive moods that key participants into the demands of their current predicaments. The lower half of the model stresses that citizens and candidates begin with a vague perception of available lines of action. Situations resonate with some range of political possibilities, showing up ahead of time as, to use Alexander’s helpful examples, suffused with anxiety about foreign affairs or hope for civil repair. The field of action comes charged with enemies to be confronted or wounds to be healed.¹³

well as a pragmatist-inspired alternative approach to capturing not only their semantic patterns and static feeling rules but also their emotional dynamics and transactions. Oliver et al. (2003) provide a useful overview of social-psychological work connecting emotions and social movements, and Summers-Effler (2010) charts how the emotional rhythms of social movement groups as “thrilling risk” and “recovering from failure” attract involvement and carve action.

¹³As the work of a first-rate theorist, *The Performance of Politics* does gesture toward this more pragmatist perspective, albeit in an ad hoc way. For instance, Alexander suggests McCain’s “performative

The pragmatist approach would not deny the importance of symbols, narratives, or party identification in political campaigns.¹⁴ But it would insist on locating these as moments within the action cycle, in particular as part of the activity of holding open, deepening, articulating, and enriching the moods of politics, moods such as hope, anxiety, or sober resolve. The chants, images, calls-and-responses, music, and words of the rally are not from this perspective primarily performances of preformed cultural symbols and scripts. Rather, they are the appropriate and intelligent way to fill the situation with a specific mood, keep participants tapped into that way of inhabiting the situation (as hopeful or desperate, for instance), and draw others into that way of relating to the world. Political parties would be treated similarly, as embodying deeply habituated heuristics. These enable candidates and citizens to more easily, without reflection or effort, activate and articulate a common mood in which what to do is immediately evident and compelling. Party membership—or more precisely, the habitual ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking it expresses—for the pragmatist focus one's attention toward certain aspects of the situation, permitting possible responses to circulate freely and spontaneously among numerous persons.¹⁵ Symbols and parties, that is to say, are from the pragmatist perspective not first movers. They are ways of getting something done, technical means toward sustaining engagement and keeping certain elements of the situation foregrounded to be articulated, shared, rejected, or responded to in some other way.

The upper half of the action cycle is likely to come into play when the power of sets of habits or symbols to attune citizens to the demands of their situation becomes weakened or contested. Emergent situations often outstrip existing habits and press against existing ways of awakening political moods. When they do, the established habitual schemas embodied in party identification and long-held cultural symbols weaken attunement to the situation, weaken the mood, and political action becomes more a matter of voluntary effort and symbolic performance than effortless and engaged responsiveness. Parties then seem like external imposition rather than authentic identity, political symbols then look like a play of impression management, audience and performer become split from one another because their subject matter has gone dead, and only surges of emotional energy seem capable of putting them together.¹⁶

In this disrupted mood, creative action may (or may not) develop new or reinterpreted habits, heuristics, and symbols that permit collective responses to flow again,

problems" were driven by "more substantive concerns... The message that the Republican image makers have crafted is not fitting with the country's mood" (Alexander 2010:30). Alexander's account, however, leaves the link between symbol and mood to forces beyond human action, claiming that once a candidate's symbolic character is formed, "history" chooses among the available symbols (Alexander 2010:84). If we treat attunement to mood as an element of human action, this leap beyond the action frame of reference to historical destiny is not required and the making and changing of symbols more or less effectively, rigidly, or fluidly in response to moods can be made part of the normal stuff of politics.

¹⁴For an application of pragmatist thinking to theories of the state, see Novak (2008).

¹⁵Because these habits have worked before to open large numbers of people to moods in which certain types of actions are evidently required by the situation, they are likely to do so again, so they tend to become highly sticky, though revisable when their living connection to the action situation becomes attenuated, as described in Green et al. (2002) and the body of work in social psychology from which they draw.

¹⁶Democratic politics, as Dewey, for instance, conceived it, regularizes this moment of tension, requiring existing political ideas, symbols, and habits to be tested by routinely problematizing their claim to capture the mood. The call for reform, the demand for improvement is the very substance of the sorts of moods endemic to democratic habits and campaigns since these awaken us to possibilities everywhere of their "eclipse." The democratic campaign cycle, in other words, embodies trained up habits for sustaining a problematical mood in which the very meaning and goals of collective action are regularly put into question.

directly from the situation, captivated by a newly awakened or reawakened mood. When creative problem solving fails, the mood likely weakens, the water is muddied, paralysis sets in, and the simplest move seems to require massive effort. The urgency of now becomes the complacency of maybe later. When they succeed, trained up responses, now more experienced at handling potential problems, tend to permit action to continue to flow immediately and directly by keeping the mood alive.¹⁷ When this occurs, a pragmatist account would suggest that we after the fact attach to candidates the normative and emotional labels of “hero” or “creative” or “energizing” rather than “mere celebrity” or “flip-flopper” or “dull.” But these labels are again contingent and revisable results of situated action rather than first normative principles into which actors seek to fit themselves.

Political speech on this model, much like pedagogical speech in Dewey’s account, would then aspire not so much to make its objects “interesting” or to create emotional energy that adds enthusiasm to the dull external objects of material reality or policy debate. Success, instead, would consist in activating a space that continuously elicits the relevant movements, feelings, words, and gestures that keep the mood alive and deepen the collective sensitivity and receptiveness to the urgencies suffusing the present situation: something *has* to be done and our collective powers of action *must* be developed and exercised in a certain direction, even if exactly *how* to do so is unclear. Rather than indicating in the first instance poor performance of scripts, failing to awaken the mood would on this account be a sign of practical failure to be sensitive to the possibilities flowing from a particular situation and to adjust, reinterpret, and reformulate one’s scripts, habits, and symbols accordingly. Specific acts of rhetorical creativity and habituated modes of political behavior, on the other hand, become two phases of a broader action cycle through which actors, subject to moods, keys into the resonating situations that demand responses and that are enriched in return.

CONCLUSION

This article started with a theoretical puzzle in which relational sociology finds itself: how to develop a conception of human agency that preserves its relational character. It started with the proposition that the recurrent tensions within relational sociology pointed out by Mische (2011) can be traced back to the voluntarist conception of agency as effort. Using Parsons’s early work as a proving ground, it then highlighted the antinomies within the voluntaristic conception of action and offered an immanent critique of it. It took the aporia in Parsons’s voluntarism as a point of entry into an alternative conception of action based on the pragmatist and phenomenological traditions. On this conception, as Dewey and James forcefully argued, agency is not identical with effort but rather becomes effortful when divided.

Building on this entry point, it then elaborated the place of moodiness in a theory of action, focusing on how acknowledging moods requires a revision of how we conceive of action situations. Accounting for the phenomenon of being in a mood requires conceiving of action situations as possessing captivating qualities

¹⁷For instance, experienced protesters sometimes develop techniques (and teach novice protesters techniques) that keep the mood of a rally peaceful and celebratory rather than confrontational and hostile, even in the face of potential violence, such as chanting “peaceful protest” when confrontations are on the verge of escalation. The pragmatist perspective, would direct analytical attention not so much to symbolic performance or the pleasures of protest but rather treat these as practical techniques for sustaining receptivity to the opportunities for peace rather than violence in the ongoing situation.

that call out responses from and present lines of salience to actors; these responses succeed when they enrich attunement to the latent action potentials in the situation, revealing new possibilities and deepening sensitivity to old ones. Based on these revisions, it proposed an alternative conception of the effortful dimensions of agency as consequences of problematical moods, a new, positive, way to think about the experience of problematcity, and a unified portrait of the pragmatist action cycle.

This unified portrait builds on the significant potential pragmatist (Abbot 1999; Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Gross 2009; Lichterman 2005; Mische 2007, 2009; Whitford 2002) and Heideggerian (Aspers 2010) thought offers for sociological theory and research, especially work in the relational mode. For once we are in a position to treat effort as a specific type of agency that typically occurs when situations lose their grip on actors, we can then formulate a positive theory of what makes “being gripped” by (and so “related to”) a situation possible. This, I have suggested, is the moody quality of action. For it is in virtue of this quality that situations “speak to” actors in the first place. To do justice to the relationality of human action, in other words, we need a conception of agency that starts from its moodiness rather than its effortfulness. Empirical work may build on these foundations to investigate familiar practices with a fresh view to the significance of moodiness within them, studying how actors activate and enrich the atmosphere of situations, form habits and practices that sustain their mutual attunement to them, and respond with effort and creativity to reengage themselves as or if the mood weakens or becomes problematical.

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