Habits and their creatures

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Habits have an ambivalent status in current environmental debate and policy. In a recent document entitled 'Creatures of Habit' (2008), Prendergast et. al. advocate adding what they refer to as a much needed 'behavioural' element to economic understanding.

"Behavioural economics combines learning from the disciplines of psychology and sociology with traditional neoclassical economic models, and offers insights into the impact of habits, emotions, cognitive capabilities, cultural attitudes and social norms in influencing individual behaviours. Behavioural economics suggests that the rational actor model of behaviour is, in some circumstances, inappropriate when thinking about how people make decisions." (Prendergast et. al. 2008: 10)

The basic idea here is that habits, which have the important psychological function of reducing the 'need' to explicitly attend to the many choices people confront in the course of daily life have the also important function of clogging the works of economic theory. Nicholas Stern goes along with this idea. In his words, "Individuals and firms behave habitually and in response to social customs and expectations. This leads to 'path dependency", which limits their responses to policies designed to raise efficiency" (Stern Report, 2006: 381). In this account, 'habit' is used to characterise the problematic 'stickyness' of certain kinds of behaviour.

For the psychologist Paul Stern (2000), habits figure not as undesirable blockages but as 'causal variables' that drive behaviour. As he explains, *"habit or routine* is a distinct type of causal variable. Behavior change often requires breaking old habits and becomes established by creating new ones". Though one Stern focuses on obstacles and the other on drivers, both take habits to be intervening factors that propel or prevent behaviour. As such, habits are possessed by individuals: they can be made and broken but they are not, in these analyses, conceptualised as types of behaviour. In a further twist to the same story, habits are thought to form when contexts are 'stable': in these cases, behaviours are shaped (driven or obstructed) by external features of setting and situation. Such representations allow psychologists and economists to preserve the theoretical purity of key concepts like those of 'behaviour' and to sustain the also foundational idea that behaviours are moulded by diverse external forces, including habit. Although these are important requirements within the disciplines concerned, the result does not ring true in daily life.

For most people, habits and behaviours are not conceptually distinct. Consider those who always have dinner at 5.30 pm. Does it make sense to imagine that there is some invisible habit that drives these diners to eat at this hour? Or is it more convincing to describe this arrangement as habitual because of the ways in which the routine performance of dining is enacted? If we go along with this latter interpretation, it makes sense to define habits not as external drivers of behaviour but as practices characterised by distinctive forms of regularity and persistence.

If we define habits like this it is reasonable and sensible to ask about matters of process: how do habits develop, or more accurately, how is it that some practices become routinised and others do not? What are the conditions in which routines form and fade?

These are themes that have been discussed by a range of influential social theorists, including writers like Howard Becker. In his classic book, 'Outsiders' (1966), Becker

followed the 'careers' of marijuana users[1] and jazz musicians in detail, describing the steps and stages through which new recruits were enrolled, explaining how they learned to 'be' and to become musicians or drug takers, and how their identities changed along the way. The novices he describes were progressively 'captured' by their new roles, and by the demands of the pursuits in which they were engaged. Becker's analysis is complicated in that the process is not one in which individuals simply 'take up' a ready-made practice that becomes habitual. Rather, the acquiring and sustaining of habits is itself transformative: identities are reshaped and competences developed with the result that old hands (the habituated) and new recruits engage in what are to all intents and purposes different (but to outsiders seemingly identical) pursuits.

The general insight here is that habits – whether of dining, showering daily, playing the piano or taking drugs – are ongoing processes, not fixed states of affairs. More than that, they are reproduced through dynamic processes in which both the habit and the practitioner evolve. Even sedimented forms of practical consciousness require ongoing reproduction and as in other instances, reproduction is provisional and generative. Ironically, this aspect is overlooked in the more psychological literature which associates frequency, automaticity and repetition with stability rather than change. It is also missed by those who suggest that routines have to be disrupted and that practices only change when they ping back into the realm of overt consciousness (Wilk 2002).

Becker, Sudnow (1993) and others write about how people become habituated. Others, like Crossley (2003) and Bourdieu (1984) are concerned with different but related issues to do with the social networks in and through which 'habits' circulate and with patterns of access and exclusion that emerge as a result. For Lizardo (2007), caught up in a debate with Stephen Turner, the question of how people become practitioners, and how practices diffuse remains something of a problem.

Rather than persisting with this practitioner-centric approach it is interesting to turn the whole topic around and think instead about how habits find practictioners and in particular how habits secure the distinctly extensive resources of time and devotion required to keep them 'alive' (Jalas 2005). The seemingly strange suggestion that we are somehow captured and held in thrall by predatory habits is not as implausible as it might at first appear. It is in fact a view very close to that outlined by Reckwitz who notices that "In practice theory, agents are body/minds who 'carry' and 'carry out' social practices. Thus, the social world is first and foremost populated by diverse social practices which are carried by agents." (Reckwitz 2002: 256).

What would it mean to take this idea forward in the context of contemporary environmental policy?

It would, for a start, generate a fresh research agenda organised around the qualities and characteristics of key habits. How have different environmentally significant habits circulated? Which practitioners have they captured and which other habits have they ousted along the way? How are these habits changing as they are reproduced by new and established cohorts of practitioners?

Assuming habits to be distinguished from other practices by virtue of how they are reproduced and enacted (frequency, persistence), we would get drawn into further discussions about the temporality of everyday life, and rhythmic patterns within it. Understanding how this rhythmic order (Lefebvre 2004) is sustained would be as

[1] Though Becker writes about drug takers, his emphasis is on the unfolding 'moral career' of those he studies, not on physiological addiction.

relevant for conceptualising the demise of problematic habits as for the promotion of those that require less resource intensive forms of consumption.

We would also have to consider relations between habits and think about how specific sets of frequent and persistent practices sustain each other, and how these complexes generate the conditions of their own future development.

In addition, other important questions would have to do with the work involved in sustaining habits and routines (Trentmann 2009) and the efforts invested in preventing disruption, minimising repair and averting collapse.

These are all key topics for better understanding the lives of habits and us, their creatures.

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