ARE EMOTIONS A KIND OF PRACTICE  
(AND IS THAT WHAT MAKES THEM HAVE A HISTORY)?  
A BOURDIEUIAN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING EMOTION

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ABSTRACT

The term “emotional practices” is gaining currency in the historical study of emotions. This essay discusses the theoretical and methodological implications of this concept. A definition of emotion informed by practice theory promises to bridge persistent dichotomies with which historians of emotion grapple, such as body and mind, structure and agency, as well as expression and experience. Practice theory emphasizes the importance of habituation and social context and is thus consistent with, and could enrich, psychological models of situated, distributed, and embodied cognition and their approaches to the study of emotion.

It is suggested here that practices not only generate emotions, but that emotions themselves can be viewed as a practical engagement with the world. Conceiving of emotions as practices means understanding them as emerging from bodily dispositions conditioned by a social context, which always has cultural and historical specificity. Emotion-as-practice is bound up with and dependent on “emotional practices,” defined here as practices involving the self (as body and mind), language, material artifacts, the environment, and other people. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, the essay emphasizes that the body is not a static, timeless, universal foundation that produces ahistorical emotional arousal, but is itself socially situated, adaptive, trained, plastic, and thus historical. Four kinds of emotional practices that make use of the capacities of a body trained by specific social settings and power relations are sketched out—mobilizing, naming, communicating, and regulating emotion—as are consequences for method in historical research.

Keywords: history of emotions, emotional practices, practice theory, Pierre Bourdieu, habitus, emotives, history of the self

Practice theory, which has had a significant impact on sociology, anthropology, and cultural history in recent years, has also begun to provide a framework for thinking

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about emotions, though sometimes only implicitly. The term “emotional practices” has often been used without a detailed discussion of the theoretical background or its implications. Without such reflection, one could surmise that emotional practices are things people do that are accompanied by emotion. This interpretation would conceptually separate emotion from practice and undermine the potential of the idea of emotional practices as things people do in order to have emotions, or “doing emotions” in a performative sense, which would implicate thinking of emotions themselves as a kind of practice. The philosopher Robert C. Solomon has recommended thinking of emotions as acts: “They are not entities in consciousness,” he writes, but “acts of consciousness,” which is itself, following the phenomenological school in philosophy, “the activity of intending in the world.” Thus, he has pointed out that emotions are indeed something we do, not just have. By focusing on consciousness, such an approach may, however, neglect the contribution of the body as well as the significance of the fact that the world is socially ordered, both of which are central to the notion of practice and may explain its attractiveness for historians, anthropologists, and sociologists of emotion.

This essay is an attempt to think through the emerging use of the notion of “emotional practices” in these disciplines, to put it on firmer theoretical footing. Are practices simply the vehicles for emotions, or can emotions themselves be conceived of as practice as it is defined in practice theory? What would be gained by such a conception for historically grounded research on emotions? I will develop answers to these questions in the following five sections, beginning with a discussion of the two main analytical categories: (1) definitions of emotion from psychology and their relevance for historians, and (2) a definition of practice based primarily on the work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Then (3) I explore the concept of emotion that practice theory offers, (4) sketch out areas in which it can best be implemented, and (5) close with remarks on the methodological consequences of such an understanding of emotion for the cultural and historical disciplines.

2. This could also be said of other central concepts of Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory, such as “emotional fields” or “emotional capital.” There are exceptions: on the latter term, see Michalinos Zembylas, “Emotional Capital and Education: Theoretical Insights from Bourdieu,” British Journal of Educational Studies 55 (2007) 443-463. The term “emotional habitus” has also received some theoretical attention, though I find it somewhat problematic because it is either redundant or implicitly divides the habitus in a way that runs counter to Bourdieu’s theory. See Gesa Stedman, Stemming the Torrent: Expression and Control in the Victorian Discourses on Emotion, 1830-1872 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002); Eva Illouz, Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), and idem, Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). See also Habitus in Habitat I: Emotion and Motion, ed. Sabine Flach, Daniel Margulies, and Jan Söffner (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 7-22, and Deborah B. Gould, Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 34-42. The sociologist Norman K. Denzin uses the term “emotional practice” in On Understanding Emotion (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984), 89, but his argument proceeds from philosophical phenomenology, not practice theory.

I. EMOTIONS ARE IN BOTH MIND AND BODY

Though “emotion” has been notoriously difficult to pin down and define, it is generally agreed that emotions are something people experience and something they do. We have emotions and we manifest emotions. Much of the difficulty in defining them has come from the traditional view that these are two essentially different activities. Some definitions focus on the “inner” side of emotions, the experience, some on the “outer,” the expression or bodily manifestation. William James famously defined emotion as physical arousal.5 Neo-Jamesians, such as neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, continue to distinguish between bodily changes (emotion) and the mental perception and interpretation of them in the brain (feeling).6 This approach locates the seat of emotion at its purported origin in the body. In contrast, cognitivists in psychology and philosophy do not view the bodily components as the essence of emotion. For them, it is a mental event, most closely comparable to appraisals, evaluations, and judgments;7 bodily arousal is considered unspecific, secondary, and nonessential for understanding emotion.

Historians have been drawn to the cognitivist approach because it removed the stigma attached to emotion as something less than cognition. Feelings, like thoughts, could thus be said to undergo historical change and be subject to the forces of society and culture.8 Historians have also drawn on the work of social scientists who focus on emotion as a medium of communication, the role emotion plays in human exchanges, and the rules that govern emotion as a medium of communication.9 Thinking of emotion in this way made it like language, subject to conventions, learned from other members of a group, and deployed creatively. Historians were also inspired by the work of anthropologists, who discovered strikingly different emotion concepts in non-Western cultures.10 They sought to denaturalize emotions, making them “preeminently cultural.”11 Many of them

4. See the recent debate on defining emotion in the journal Emotion Review, especially its October 2010 issue.
5. William James, “What is an Emotion?” Mind 9 (1884), 188-205.
did not interrogate the contribution of the body to emotional experience, thus it appeared to be more or less determined by language. Though the subfield of medical anthropology was engaged in a lively discussion on emotion as part of an anthropology of the body, historians preferred to read those anthropologists who likened emotion to discourse.

Historians’ attraction to these approaches suggests that they believe that in order to historicize emotion, it is necessary to detach it from the body, thus construing the body as somehow ahistorical. They have often worked from a model of human subjectivity that pits the self against social norms and “true feeling” against convention, thus reproducing the divide between experience and expression (ruled by norms or “discourse”) while claiming that historians can access only the latter, and thus never the “real” emotions. They leave us with the somewhat dissatisfying sense that the history of emotions can only be a history of half of the phenomenon, abdicating the other half to the natural sciences rather than integrating it into a historical study.

Recent theorizing in consciousness studies and the philosophy of mind has opened up an interesting possibility for solving this dichotomy of “inner” feeling and “outer” manifestation. Under the rubric of Extended Mind Theory (EMT) a number of scholars have argued that we need not think of experience and activity as separate phenomena, but instead view experience itself as something we do—and that we do with our entire bodies, not just the brain. The philosopher Alva Noë puts it this way: Thinking, feeling, and perceiving are “not something the brain achieves on its own. Consciousness requires the joint operation of brain, body, and world. Indeed, consciousness is an achievement of the whole animal in its environmental context.” His externalization of experience owes a great deal to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and his argument emphasizes fundamentals of psychology important to William James in the early twentieth


14. For example, C. Stephen Jaeger, “Emotions and Sensibilities: Some Preluding Thoughts,” in *Codierungen von Emotionen im Mittelalter*, ed. C. Stephen Jaeger and Ingrid Kasten (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), vii-xii, in which the author distinguishes between emotions and sensibilities and claims that only the latter can be studied by historians, as the former are “private sensations” that “would appear not to have any history, to be primal, natural, instinctual, and unchangingly nebulous.”


century, such as nonconceptual forms of cognition, the role of habituation, and organic plasticity. These aspects, also central to sociological practice theory, urge a closer examination of EMT’s congruence and compatibility with it.

One consequence of this perspective is to say that, in affirming that emotion is linked to cognition, we should not assume that cognition is confined to a Cartesian mind separate from the body, but that cognition is itself always “embodied,” “grounded,” and “distributed.” A family of approaches in cognitive psychology grouped broadly under the heading of “situated cognition” includes activities formerly excluded from thought because they proceed without attention directed toward them. These are the automated and habitual processes of everyday assessing, deciding, and motivating; these are practiced, skillful interactions with people and the environment that do not presuppose an acute awareness of beliefs and desires, though it may arise in the process.

Like EMT for consciousness, these fields in psychological research aim to loosen the brain’s grip on cognition. Their experiments test the hypothesis that thinking is not only achieved conceptually (primarily with or like language), but also in the body’s sensorimotor systems (so that things like bodily posture and gestures matter) and in our environments, encompassing people and manipulated objects to which we “offload” information processing, knowledge, memory, and perception. The socially and environmentally contextualized body thinks along with the brain. From this point of view, calling emotions a form of cognition in fact does not successfully extract them from the body (beyond the brain), and conversely, the fact that emotional processes occur in the (peripheral) body does not make them separate from the mind, that is, only perceived or monitored by the brain.

Much emotion-related research from the perspective of situated cognition has not set about to redefine emotion, but has viewed it as part of the “situation,” focusing on the ways that affective responses support cognition, comprehension, and social ties. The philosophers of science Paul E. Griffiths and Andrea Scarantino have recently argued, however, that “a situated approach to emotion already

18. William James, The Principles of Psychology, vol. 1 (New York: Holt, 1890). Though he acknowledges that all organic tissue is to some extent capable of “yielding,” changing form and organization without losing structure completely, he emphasizes the particular “aptitude of the brain for acquiring habits” (103) and the “extraordinary degree” of plasticity of nervous tissue in the body (105), seeing in these the material basis of consciousness.
22. For an overview, see The Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition, ed. Philip Robbins and Murat Aydede (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Work at the intersection of anthropology and cognitive science also contributes to this paradigm; see, for example, Jean Lave, Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics and Culture in Everyday Life (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
exists and is backed by a substantial experimental literature.” According to this approach, emotions are:

1. Designed to function in a social context . . . 2. Forms of skillful engagement with the world that need not be mediated by conceptual thought; 3. Scaffolded by the environment, both synchronically, in the unfolding of a particular emotional performance, and diachronically, in the acquisition of an emotional repertoire; 4. Dynamically coupled to an environment which both influences and is influenced by the unfolding of the emotion.

Historians are experts at analyzing the way things are situated. These four statements alone seem to make the case that this approach is compatible with the notion that emotions must necessarily have a history, as they each link cognitive-emotional processing to elements that themselves are subject to historical change and cultural specificity: “social context,” “skill,” “performance,” “repertoire,” and “environment.” These concepts also resonate with Bourdieu’s use of the term “practice,” which, I would argue, could enrich this perspective substantially and provide a methodology for historical study.

The approach proposed here suggests that the distinction between “inner” and “outer” sides of emotion is not given, but is rather a product of the way we habitually “do” the experience. Practice may create an “inner” and “outer” to emotion with the “ex-pression” of feelings originating inside and then moving from inner to outer. But practice may also create bodily manifestations seemingly independent from the mind, ego, or subject, depending on historically and culturally specific habits and context. For this reason, I use the terms “emotions” and “feelings” not in Damasio’s sense, but interchangeably.


26. I choose not to use the term “affect” because it refers to only part of the physiological-psychological-social complex of emotion, singling it out as somehow more significant than the other aspects and running the risk of reductionism. More specifically, “affect” denotes the precultural “first step” in an emotional process conceived of as linear (from affect/sensation through cultural signification to emotion), whereas I am promoting a model of emotional response based on John Dewey’s notion of a circuit (see below). For a cogent critique of the “affect” concept in recent cultural theory, see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” Critical Inquiry 37 (Spring 2011), 434-472.

27. See James, “What is an Emotion?” 193-194, and Damasio, Looking for Spinoza, 86-87, where he distinguishes between thought and feeling by virtue of the brain’s representations of the body involved in perception, thus causing us to say “I feel happy” and not “I think happy.” This is, of course, possible only in languages in which a clear distinction is made between “thought” and “emotion,” which does not seem to be the case, for example, in Bali (see Unni Wikan, “Toward an Experience-near Anthropology,” Cultural Anthropology 6 [1991], 285-305). Be that as it may, in the interest of clarifying terms for a history that presupposes a distinct object called “emotion,” I will make the distinction in order to clarify my usage.


29. Reddy addresses Wittgensteinian concepts closely related to ones developed in practice theory in his “Emotional Styles and Modern Forms of Life,” in Sexualized Brains: Scientific Modeling of
developed its potential for an understanding of emotions. In my view, what needs to be emphasized is the mutual embeddedness of minds, bodies, and social relations in order to historicize the body and its contributions to the learned experience of emotion.

II. PRACTICES ARE EXECUTED BY A KNOWING BODY

The theory of practice that emerged at the intersection of philosophical phenomenology, sociology, and anthropology and concerned itself with overcoming the dichotomies of subject/object, mind/body, and individual/society has not included an elaborate discussion of the topic of emotions. If at all, emotions have been treated as part of “the internal” (thoughts, feelings, attitudes, motivations) or en passant as “bodily impulses” (drives, reactions), but hardly theorized as a category in and of itself. Nevertheless, concepts from practice theory, particularly those coined by Bourdieu, are implemented in studies of emotion by some social scientists and humanities scholars. For this reason, I will draw primarily on his particular brand of practice theory in the following brief characterization of the concept of practice. As should become clear, Bourdieu’s theory is particularly useful for studying emotion because it elaborates most thoroughly the infusion of the physical body with social structure, both of which participate in the production of emotional experience.

*Emotional Intelligence from a Cultural Perspective*, ed. Nicole Karafyllis and Gotlind Ulshöfer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 81-100. He briefly discusses the compatibility of findings in cognitive neuroscience with the work of practice theorists such as Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, William Sewell, and Sherry Ortner in this article, as well as in his “Saying Something New: Practice Theory and Cognitive Neuroscience,” *Arcadia* 44 (2009), 8-23. Though Reddy mentions the habitus concept twice in *The Navigation of Feeling*, one has the impression that he is hesitant about the potential of Bourdieu’s theory, perhaps because the role of individual agency in practice—important to Reddy’s framework—is not considered to be one of Bourdieu’s strong suits.


Practice is action; it refers—in one frequently cited definition—to a “nexus of doings and sayings.”33 Though it can encompass intentional, deliberate action, it also includes, and indeed stresses, habituated behavior executed without much cognitive attention paid. It differs from action in the Weberian sense of intentional, meaningful behavior, which presupposes a metaphysical subject that more or less knows what it is doing and why. In practice theory, subjects (or agents) are not viewed as prior to practices, but rather as the product of them; subjects “exist only within the execution of social practices: a single subject ‘is’ (essentially)—even in his or her ‘inner’ processes of reflection, feeling, remembering, planning, etc.—the sequence of acts in which he or she participates in social practices in his or her everyday life.”34 These acts “range from ephemeral doings to stable long-term patterns of activity.”35 They can require “relevant equipment and material culture,” or rely on “vocabulary and other linguistic forms or performances.”36 For the purposes of emotional practice it is important to note that these acts are not only habituated and automatically executed movements of the body, but also encompass a learned, culturally specific, and habitual distribution of attention to “inner” processes of thought, feeling, and perception.37 Depending on where and when we live, we learn to keep our thoughts and feelings to ourselves (or not), to listen to our hearts (or our heads), to be “true to ourselves” and to know what we want. These are not universal features of subjectivity. The history of the self in the West has shown that the concepts on which such practices are based—interiority, self-reflexivity, distinct faculties of feeling and thinking—have been intensely cultivated at certain times in specific social and cultural constellations.38 And since attending to “inner” experience is a practice, it is also always embodied, dependent on brain cells, bodily postures, and the disciplining or habituating of these.

The individual subject in practice theory is not conceivable without the body. The subject emerges from, is maintained by, and is fused with the body while it makes use of the body’s innate and acquired capacities. It is, in fact, illegitimate from the point of view of practice theory to make sharp ontological distinctions between the subject and the body, so that the use of the term “body” must be understood as always intertwined with “mind”—though in this text it is sometimes necessary to distinguish between the two in order to emphasize the contribution of the bodily organism to emotional experience. The materiality of the body provides not only the locus of the competence, dispositions, and behavioral routines of practice, it is also the “stuff” with and on which practices work. The body is

36. Ibid.
actor and instrument. It is conceived of not as an assembly of organic material and processes alone, but as a knowing body, one that stores information from past experiences in habituated processes and contributes this knowledge to human activity and consciousness. For this reason, the anthropologists Margaret Lock and Nancy Scheper-Hughes refer to this non-Cartesian entity as a “mindful body.”

The habitual use of the body’s muscular, autonomic, sensorimotor, hormonal, and other capacities does not leave them unaffected. The body is deeply shaped by the habitus, a term Bourdieu (by way of Marcel Mauss) adapted from Aristotelian and Scholastic traditions to denote a “system of cognitive and motivating structures” that correspond to social positioning. These structures are “dispositions durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions” of society and thus are “objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands.” The habitus consists of “schemes of perception, thought, and action” that produce individual and collective practices, which in turn reproduce the generative schemes. Subsumed within the habitus is “hexis,” Bourdieu’s more specific term for the socially conditioned physical body, its gestures and postures. These are not distinct: the habitus as a whole is fused with the body, which is thus infused with the temporality of society, though this fact is lost in everyday practice. “The habitus—embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product.”

The body also provides the habitus with something to shape; it is not radically or arbitrarily modifiable, and it dictates the range of practices available. Clearly, no human society will develop a dance step that requires five feet or a musical instrument made for a hand with eight digits. A blind person would not partake in practices involving visual stimuli the same way a seeing person does. Yet, a bright line between nature and culture cannot be drawn on or in the body because human beings hardly leave anything about themselves or their environment untouched. Whatever physical apparatuses, functions, and stirrings evolution and parentage may have imparted to a human organism, these cannot remain pristine after birth into a community. It might indeed be difficult to determine which bodily structures and processes are not utilized, neglected, modified, or conditioned by cultural activity in some way.

From this point of view, automatic behaviors, reflexes, spontaneous responses—categories to which emotions have traditionally belonged—are not “purely bio-

41. Ibid., 56.
42. Defining emotions as involuntary reflexes has a long history beginning with Charles Darwin’s Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals (1872). Silvan Tomkins’s definition of emotions as “affect programs” belong to this tradition (Affect Imagery Consciousness, vols. 1-4 [New York: Rho, 1991]).
logical” or free of culture just because they are executed by the body without the conscious participation of volition or cognition. They are more fruitfully thought of as habits emerging where bodily capacities and cultural requirements meet. The skillful use of the body in automatic movements, impulses, and activations is a learned practice, acquired through mimesis, making lasting changes in the body and brain. Habitual postures and movements build up muscle tissue, innervation, and blood vessels in one area and not another, shorten some tendons, lengthen others, affect bone density and shape, and induce specific development of brain tissue.

Practices are guided by what Bourdieu calls the “practical sense” stored in the habitus. Individuals behave according to the patterns that their community (class, milieu, subculture) requires, but not just in the sense of deliberately learning rules of “appropriate” behavior—as formulated in etiquette manuals—and “obeying” them. Practice theory is more interested in implicit knowledge, in the largely unconscious sense of what correct behavior in a given situation would be, in the “feel for the game.” Thus, practices are skillful behaviors, dependent (as the term suggests) on practice until they become automatic. The classic example used to illustrate this principle is that of the pianist, whose hands eventually know how to execute a piece of music on the instrument without conscious attention paid to the placement of the fingers, or of the soccer player for whom dribbling the ball at high speeds has become “second nature.” People move about in their social environments in much the same manner, in most cases supremely practiced at the subtleties of movement, posture, gesture, and expression that connect them with others as well as communicate to themselves who they are. These practices are neither “natural” nor random; they adhere to a learned repertoire that positions a person in a social field and constitutes participation in that field’s “game.” They are not executed as a mere reproduction of norms, but rather according to what Bourdieu refers to as “strategy” and the practical sense that emerges from the habitus.

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43. As Reddy has pointed out (Navigation of Feeling, 55), there are psychologists who have defined emotions as automatized cognitive habits: Alice M. Isen and Gregory A. Diamond, “Affect and Automaticity,” in Unintended Thought: Limits of Awareness, Intention and Control, ed. James B. Uleman and J. A. Bargh (New York: Guilford Press, 1989), 124-152.


46. Bourdieu, Logic of Practice, 66.

As we have seen, the situated-cognition approach to emotion has a decidedly practice-theoretical bent. The nonconceptual cognition and automaticity it is interested in rely heavily on the kinds of implicit knowledge and abilities that Bourdieu subsumes under the “practical sense.” By conceiving of emotions as “goal-oriented responses,” however, it is important to avoid thinking of “strategic” in a superficially instrumental sense. While allowing that actors often do consciously strategize, Bourdieu also reminds us that strategy does not always follow an intentional, goal-oriented logic, but rather is also often guided by the embodied memories of past coping strategies, habits following the logic of everyday practice, an intentionality not necessarily based on propositional thought. Emotions can thus be strategic without implicating conscious goal-orientation—they can even be at odds with conscious wills and desires, but nevertheless be oriented toward goals presented by social scripts.

Bourdieu describes habitus as an incorporation of structure, both in the Lévi-Straussian and Marxian sense, of symbolic and economic order, which it then unconsciously reproduces and supports. This has led many to criticize Bourdieu’s theory as a form of social determinism that leaves far too little room for individual agency. Bourdieu may indeed posit an actor less “loosely structured” than do some other practice theorists. Michel de Certeau openly berates Bourdieu for claiming that actors are unconscious, calling the habitus “a mystical reality,” a “blanket Bourdieu’s theory throws over tactics as if to put out their fire.” In his zealous opposition to rationalist, intentionalist theories of action, particularly in his early writings, Bourdieu did in fact emphasize, perhaps overemphasize, the structural side of the habitus, the unconscious “doxa” in which practices are embedded. However, it would be a mistake to assume that his theory leaves no room for individuality and thus for personal agency, however socially conditioned it must of necessity be. The “singularity of . . . social trajectories,” contact with different institutions in the course of a lifetime, such as the family, the village, the neighborhood, school, church, the military, a shop, a production line, a corporation, creates an individual habitus. Though “dominated by the earliest experiences, of the experiences statistically common to members of the same class,” the habitus of each individual is, in Bourdieu’s view, “a unique

51. In so doing, Bourdieu’s theory tends to ascribe a political orientation to the body, like that of William James, who called habit society’s “most precious conservative agent . . . [which] keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance” (Principles, I, 121). Bourdieu has also been taken to task for his ethnographic representation of Kabyle society, central to the development of his concept of habitus; cf. Herman Roodenburg, “Pierre Bourdieu: Issues of Embodiment and Authenticity,” Etnofoor 17 (2005), 215-226.
integration.” 52 Thus, the individual agency that emerges from the habitus is dependent on socialization, but not reduced to it. 53

The habitus must be static and binding to a certain extent, if it is to be more than just a loose cloak that can be thrown off on a whim. 54 At the same time, the set of dispositions is not established once and for all, but is dependent on confirmation in everyday practices. Since the habitus does not dictate the exact course of action in practice but rather provides a “feel” for the appropriate movements, gestures, facial expressions, pitch of the voice, and so on, it leaves space for behaviors not entirely and always predictable, which can also instantiate change and resistance rather than preprogrammed reproduction. 55 Social practice is spontaneous while drawing on conventional forms, individual by virtue of a unique montage of embodied social structures. Thus, in order to theorize a history of feeling, it is not necessary to posit change-producing friction between social structure and individual agency or between cultural demands and the timeless, universal “truth” of a body whose functions and structures remain untouche
d by their uses. A habitus may conflict with a changing social environment, and it is equally likely that friction will ensue when actors/bodies enact cultural scripts out of place. The plurality of practices suffices to explain historical changes and shifts, because they collide with one another, causing misunderstandings, conflicts, and crossovers between fields. 56 Furthermore, as Diana Coole has pointed out, “the body’s political reactions are not naturally either conservative or transgressive. They vary according to its situation.” Rather than positing agents/subjects as the ultimate originators of historical change, Coole suggests thinking of bodily capacities such as emotions as one end of a spectrum of “agentic capacities” that emerge in practice. 57

III. EMOTIONS EMERGE FROM BODILY KNOWLEDGE

In his works, Bourdieu rarely addresses emotion directly as a category of analysis, preferring to use terms such as thought and behavior, being and action. 58 Emotions

52. Bourdieu, Logic of Practice, 60. See the critical discussion of Bourdieu’s habitus concept in David Swartz, Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 95-116, and in Bernard Lahire, The Plural Actor (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010). Lahire has developed more fully the notion of the “multi-socialized and multi-determined individual” confronted with a plurality of contexts in which to deploy behaviors and practices on the basis of Bourdieu’s habitus theory. He argues for a social analysis that is at once “dispositional” and “contextual” (x-xi).

53. Judith Butler similarly argues that agency is radically conditioned by society, but is not fully constrained by it; see her The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 15.


55. The subversive potential of repetitive practices is more strongly articulated in Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990), and idem, Bodies That Matter (New York: Routledge, 1993) than in Bourdieu’s work.


58. This may explain why his theory has been largely neglected by anthropologists and sociolo-
are implicit in many passages, but his terminology varies and indeed reproduces some of the dichotomies he seeks to undermine. For instance, in the *Pascalian Meditations*, he discusses feelings or sensations in phenomenological terms as the means with which the habitus makes a connection with the world, as the moment, indeed the epitome, of the convergence of subject and object. In another passage, he uses Freudian language to speak of emotions as drives and affects. In *Masculine Domination* he distinguishes between “bodily emotions” on the one hand, and “passions and sentiments” on the other, implying a somehow “less bodily” emotional experience. In the *Logic of Practice*, however, he states that both thoughts and feelings emerge from “inductive states of the body.”

Bourdieu’s varying perspectives on emotion reflect different practices of emotion, which are, however, consistently anchored in the habitus. As body knowledge, the habitus is contrasted with conceptual knowledge in Bourdieu’s work. In this way, the habitus is construed so as to oppose rationality in the rational-choice theory he so assiduously combated, but without being irrational, as it follows a practical logic. Emotions also follow this practical logic embedded in social relations. Like all practices, they are simultaneously spontaneous and conventional. The habitus specifies what is “feelable” in a specific setting, orients the mind/body in a certain direction without making the outcome fully predictable. Emotions can thus be viewed as acts executed by a mindful body, as cultural practices. These practices are interconnected with other practices that manipulate and activate the body, as Bourdieu suggests in a famous passage from the *Logic of Practice*, because bodies as actors know, give rise to states of mind. Thus the attention paid to staging in great collective ceremonies derives not only from the concern to give a solemn representation of the group (manifest in the splendour of baroque festivals) but also, as many uses of singing and dancing show, from the less visible intention of ordering thoughts and suggesting feelings through the rigorous marshalling of practices and the orderly disposition of bodies, in particular the bodily expression of emotion, in laughter or tears.

This formulation of emotion in Bourdieu’s work can be compared with anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo’s construal of emotions as “embodied thoughts.”

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60. Ibid., 167.
63. Bourdieu suggests that the habitus is the location of emotion when he speaks in *Masculine Domination* of the “passion of the . . . habitus” (39).
64. See Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*, for an eloquent explication of the embeddedness of emotions in social relations.
Just as thoughts arise in connection with a perception or the processing of information, so do emotions arise as thoughts of the body, as elements of the body’s knowledge and memory, as its appraisal of a situation. And like thoughts, emotions are active and passive in that they can be a more or less voluntary sentiment, but they can also emerge from the receptiveness that dispositions create.

This is not to ascribe to the body the kind of agency traditionally attributed to the liberal self. Saying that emotions emerge from bodily knowledge does not make “habitus” just another word for “subject.” Rather, the habitus is the precondition for subjectification, for example, by determining the level of inhibition to shedding tears that is part and parcel of gender performance. It can and does produce the behaviors and thought patterns of intentionality or a “free will,” if that is what a specific community demands of its subjects.67 The “interior” as the locus of “true feelings” and the self is also a product of a habitus that daily engages in denigrating the “exterior” and “emancipating” the subject from it. Thinking of emotions as practices means integrating the history of feeling into the study of socially produced subjectivities.68

Conceiving of emotions as practices or acts also provides a way of counterbalancing the dominant language of emotions as always and essentially reactive, or triggered responses. In his seminal articles on emotion and the reflex arc, John Dewey criticized the stimulus-response model as reproducing the mind-body split.69 He suggested thinking of the “reflex arc” as an “organic circuit” that only functions if connected in a circular flow. This means that the stimulus is constituted by the response and vice-versa. The “teleological distinction” of cause and effect is not understandable as ontology but only as functions within the circuit with reference to a goal.70 Such a conceptualization would imply that the “triggers” of emotional “reactions” are constituted by those emotional acts, a constitution that can only be accurately clarified by examining the situation in which it took place and understanding the cultural meanings of the emotion/trigger circuit. Instead of searching the historical record for the “trigger” to explain the emotion that followed, the emotions can be viewed as the meaningful cultural activity of ascribing, interpreting, and constructing an event as a trigger.

Rejecting a linear model of emotional processes also rearranges the question of whether emotion-as-practice implies an active doing as opposed to a passive experience of emotions. Emotions involve many capacities of the body—facial expressions, firings of neurons, thought processes, production of tears or sweat, 67. How volition is construed and experienced across cultures is explored in Toward an Anthropology of the Will, ed. Keith M. Murphy and C. Jason Throop (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
expletives, changes in heart rate and breathing, gestures, postures, and movements—which can take place anywhere along a continuum from wholly conscious and deliberate to completely inadvertent, shifting in the course of their execution along this continuum. There is practiced and unpracticed weeping, intentional and unintentional laughter, spontaneous and re-enacted blushing. Which of these is more “real” or legitimate than the other and for what reasons is a judgment, not inherent in the emotional practice itself. The claim that emotions “happen to” the subject splits mind from body, locating the subject in the mind. On this reading, the emotions are viewed as outside the subject and thus acquire a sort of autonomy. This autonomy can be perceived as a threat to the subject’s own purported freedom as in Enlightenment discourses on the passions,71 or it can be valorized as in current affect theory in which the physiological aspect of emotion alone, imagined as “pure intensity,” promises escape from the incessantly signifying force of culture.72

But why does this ascription of “autonomy” to emotions always seem to enlist notions of the “physiological” that are assumed to be outside of culture? Why should the body be any more autonomous than the self? In Bourdieu’s terms, emotions are acts of the self, but in the “insidious complicity that a body slipping from the control of consciousness and will maintains with the censures inherent in the social structures.”73 Or, to phrase it less pessimistically, the habits of the mindful body are executed outside of consciousness and rely on social scripts from historically situated fields. That is to say, a distinction between incorporated society and the parts of the body generating emotion is hard to make. The physiological contains both the organic and the social, which cooperate in the production of emotion. And, as with other practices, the feeling self executes emotions, and experiences them in varying degrees and proportions, as inside and outside, subjective and objective, depending on the situation.

As Michel Foucault argued, subjectivity can be achieved only through passivity.74 We are subjected by and through emotions—the fact that they “overcome” us and are outside our control is the embodied effect of our ties to other people, as well as to social conventions, to values, to language. Emotions do not pit their agency and autonomy against ours; they emerge from the very fact that subjectivity and autonomy are always bounded by the conditions of their existence, by the fundamental sociability of the human body and self.

For Bourdieu, this fact is particularly pertinent to the distribution of power in society, which is incorporated into the body and produces corresponding thinking, feeling, and behavior. Domination is achieved, he writes, through “symbolic

71. Here the passions, as Thomas Dixon phrased it, are viewed as “mini-agents” outside the subject; see his From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 106.

72. This is the argument presented in Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 35: “The autonomy of affect . . . is its openness,” and the moment it is “[f]ormed, qualified, situated,” it is “captured” (emphasis in the original).

73. Bourdieu, Masculine Domination, 39.

violence,” meaning the compelling, even coercive, logic of a symbolic order that is reproduced day after day in micro and macro acts of body and language.

Symbolic force is a form of power that is exerted on bodies, directly and as if by magic, without any physical constraint; but this magic works only on the basis of the dispositions deposited, like springs, at the deepest level of the body. If it can act like the release of a spring, that is, with a very weak expenditure of energy, this is because it does no more than trigger the dispositions that the work of inculcation and embodiment has deposited in those who are thereby primed for it. In other words, it finds its conditions of possibility, and its economic equivalent (in an expanded sense of the word “economic”), in the immense preliminary labor that is needed to bring about a durable transformation of bodies and to produce the permanent dispositions that it triggers and awakens.75

Thus, Bourdieu continues, in “practical acts of knowledge and recognition” the dominated “often unwittingly, sometimes unwillingly, contribute to their own domination.” These acts “often take the form of bodily emotions—shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt—or passions and sentiments—love, admiration, respect. These emotions are all the more powerful when they are betrayed in visible manifestations such as blushing, stuttering, clumsiness, trembling, anger or impotent rage, so many ways of submitting, even despite oneself.”76 In this passage, Bourdieu comes closest to naming emotions as practices. He gives the example of societies in which women are excluded from public spaces; they are thereby denied the opportunity to develop habits of everyday, anonymous social contact with male strangers, and thus develop a “socially imposed agoraphobia.” Their terror of the public space leads them to exclude themselves from it.77

Depending on the validity attributed to the “truth” of emotions, such feelings can be experienced as a nuisance, a reflex of the body in spite of the fact that one “knows better,” or they can be taken to mean that this is how things should be, this is how “nature” intends it. Such a discourse depoliticizes the emotions by naturalizing them and endowing them with fundamental autonomy thus denying their social and historical contingency.78 In spite of all the evidence of pessimism in his work, in light of his various political engagements, it can be argued that Bourdieu’s intellectual project was, in the final analysis, an emancipatory one that sought to increase consciousness of these workings of the habitus, thus effecting change.79 Bourdieu’s approach allows for the recognition of the politics of emotion, which in the end is an intervention that increases the domain of agency by denaturalizing bodily impulses. As Reddy’s work has convincingly shown, dissonance between feelings and thoughts is just the kind of clash of practices that can generate personal, social, and historical change. Conversely, consonance between conceptual and bodily knowledge makes each especially convincing, important, or real. Human beings may cultivate and attach significance to this

76. Ibid., 38-39.
77. Ibid., 39.
78. For a detailed study of how the shift from the philosophical and theological concepts of “passions,” “affections,” and “sentiments” to the psychological concept of bodily “emotions” removed them from the moral sphere in the course of the nineteenth century, see Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*.
79. For more on Bourdieu’s political engagements, see Swartz, *Culture and Power*, 266-269.
kind of consonance in their practices, but they also pay attention to, reflect on, and learn from the dissonance. 80

IV. EMOTIONAL PRACTICES

Viewing emotion as a kind of practice means recognizing that it is always embodied, that an emotion without a medium for experience cannot be described as one. Access to emotion-as-practice—the bodily act of experience and expression—in historical sources or ethnographic work is achieved through and in connection with other doings and sayings on which emotion-as-practice is dependent and intertwined, such as speaking, gesturing, remembering, manipulating objects, and perceiving sounds, smells, and spaces. I have termed these “doings and sayings” “emotional practices,” which build on the embodied knowledge of the habituated links that form complexes of mind/body actions. In the following, I will sketch out four overlapping categories of emotional practices that can be studied as part of a history of emotions. These categories pick up on existing approaches with the intent to infuse them with a new vocabulary, that of practice theory.

1. Mobilizing

Emotional practices are habits, rituals, and everyday pastimes that aid us in achieving a certain emotional state. This includes the striving for a desired feeling as well as the modifying of one that is not desirable. Emotional practices in this sense are manipulations of body and mind to evoke feelings where there are none, to focus diffuse arousals and give them an intelligible shape, or to change or remove emotions already there. In other words, they are part of what is often referred to as “emotional management” and the ongoing learning and maintaining of an emotional repertoire. These practices are very often distributed, that is, carried out together with other people, artifacts, aesthetic arrangements, and technologies. This will often mean that we implement such means on our own by seeking out certain spaces, music, photographs, or other personal memorabilia to manage our moods. But we are also sometimes simply confronted with an emotional setup. The presence of other people, a crowd expressing emotion loudly, or music not of our own choosing can cause us to do an emotion and can lead to other managing practices.

An example of this kind of emotional practice is courtship. It is connected with widely variable “doings and sayings” throughout history and between cultures, involving changing technologies (from love letters to the cell phone and the internet) and changing venues (from supervised visits to dates to parties). Research has focused on how these practices are embedded in cultural norms and economic interests, but they also serve to cultivate a certain kind of feeling between potential marriage partners—which can range from dutiful obedience, to honor, to pas-

80. On practices of negotiating the inner and outer in early modern Europe, see John J. Martin, Myths of Renaissance Individualism (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); see also Reddy, Navigation of Feeling, 154-172 on sincerity and sentimentalism, and Solomon’s neo-Stoic formulation in True to Our Feelings, 121-122.
sion, admiration, familiarity, or respect. Courtship, then, is not just a behavior but has performative effects on the constitution of feelings and the (gendered) self.

Media use is an extremely important emotional practice. Listening to music, visiting a museum, attending a theater performance, watching a film or TV show, playing a video game, or reading a novel, for example, can modulate our feelings to a greater or lesser degree. These emotions are deeply embedded in culture though many media products are enjoyable only to a relatively small circle of connoisseurs and thus create subcultures of taste and enjoyment. They can also be relatively short-lived—some popular films and novels appear strange or no longer resonate with the audience after only a few years. Consuming older media can, however, be a means of experiencing the differentness (and sameness) of a past era, providing its own emotional experiences. Media consumption is part of a broader practice of the aesthetics of the everyday, surrounding oneself with the beautiful, familiar, comfortable, or stylish. Establishing and maintaining a pleasant feeling—even the pleasantly unpleasant, such as the thrilling fear and disgust of horror films—in aesthetic practices represents a broad subset of emotional practices, which also include actions associated with unpleasant feelings of sadness, anger, or regret.

The anthropologist Victor Turner saw in ritual behavior a means for canalizing negative emotions and minimizing their destructive power for the community, a notion predicated on the hydraulic model of the self. A practice-theory approach would emphasize the use of rituals (in the broadest sense) as a means of achieving, training, articulating, and modulating emotions for personal as well as social purposes. Christian practices of penance, for example, are not viewed as expressing a feeling of ruefulness or repentance that exists (or perhaps does not) prior to the act, but rather as a means of achieving an embodied experience of regret (whether it succeeds or not). Penance can mobilize the body in varying ways, causing one to experience pain or discomfort by wearing a cilice or walking long distances on the knees, by focusing attention on painful memories, by listening to a rousing fire-and-brimstone sermon together with others. Enlightenment discourses that emphasize a “natural” tendency toward pleasant feelings and avoidance of negative ones may make such practices appear pathological, but they are evidence of ways in which pain and suffering can be agentive in the sense proposed by Talal Asad.

Political activism also relies on the practice of negative feelings, as every good speaker knows. Conceptual knowledge that war crimes are morally wrong may not in and of itself lead to feelings of disgust and anger, or if so, only weakly. This knowledge can be transformed into bodily knowledge and thus be buttressed by reading or hearing of concrete details, viewing photographs, discussing with others in shared outrage, marching and chanting at demonstrations, or watching others do so. The word “can” is important here, because part of the dynamic of performance is its unexpected outcome. Emotional practices exist because people

81. On the intersection of media studies and the history of emotions, see Die Massen bewegen: Medien und Emotionen in der Moderne, ed. Frank Bösch and Manuel Borutta (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2006).
assume that they usually work, but they are not “techniques of the body” in the sense that they will always produce a desired effect. As long as they usually do produce the desired effect they will continue to be cultivated, whereas if they regularly fail—due to other, intervening emotional habits—they will be discarded.83

Emotional practices can be carried out alone, but they are frequently embedded in social settings. Other people’s bodies are implicated in practice because viewing them induces feelings. These effects are stored in the habitus, which provides socially anchored responses to others. Shame wells up in the cheeks in answer to a contemptuous glance; compassion propels one toward the pain in another’s face. However, these reactions are always already tightly bound up with apprehensions of who the other is, whether they are higher or lower in rank than oneself, if they are like or unlike oneself, if they are victims or perpetrators. This apprehension is not necessarily—or even usually—achieved conceptually, but mimetically through the habitus.

 Likewise, horizontal effects of the group experience on emotions (“emotional contagion”) are also mediated by habitual predispositions to acting within a group, a practical sense of the relations within it, and its broader social context. Centuries of reflection on the effects of observing others’ bodies and voices on the stage, on the soapbox, or in the pulpit have elaborated, refined, and revised emotional practices. Theories of rhetoric and of the emotional effects of music and theatrical performance form the basis of emotional theories that inform and arise from current emotional practices. The use of claqueurs in the theater, professional mourners at funerals, or laugh tracks on television build upon this knowledge, while their rejection is indicative of their waning effectiveness and/or of changing attitudes about their use.84

Finally, consumption of mood-altering substances intervenes in the materiality of emotional processes. It may be argued that drug ingestion requires no practice or accomplishment, as it is a completely mechanical chemical process. This may be true in many cases, though the well-documented “placebo effect” reminds us that bodily experience is shaped by more than just physiological changes. In any case, managing and shaping such effects is indeed a learned skill, and a given culture may cultivate it or neglect it, leading to different effects.85 Getting “high” is not explainable solely as a chemical reaction alone. It is deeply embedded in codes, norms, and social functions, and its ubiquity as a cultural practice—as well as the ubiquity of strong prohibitions against it—is indicative of its effectiveness.86 Drug ingestion is only one (perhaps the quickest and simplest) way of manipulating the body to achieve, for example, joviality or even ecstasy. It can be complemented—or replaced—by practices involving intense sensory stimulation (loud music, repetitive drumbeats, chanting, droning) and bodily movements that affect balance (rocking, twirling, dancing). These practices, too, are the

83. Reddy, “Emotional Styles,” also refers to “practical familiarity with what works ... and what does not work” in the “handling of emotional feedback” (96). Thus, “emotional styles rise and fall” (85).
85. See also Daniel L. Smail, On Deep History and the Brain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 112-189.
object of vehement debate, and are countered by practices intended not to stir the body, which is held in postures and movements that point “inward.” Interiorizing practices sustain a habitus that erects and maintains a boundary between “inner” and “outer” and can train inner capacities to the point of virtuosity (such as the “religious musicality” to which Max Weber referred).87

In situ one will find a combination of different practices that aim at the mobilization of psychophysical capacities in order to achieve aesthetic experiences and embodied forms of meaning. Entertaining and hospitality frequently entail music and conviviality and mood-altering foods and beverages; films and certain forms of theater employ a variety of media to steer emotional communication, as do religious rituals, which not only convey meaning, but also a certain kind of emotionality. These practices are subject to change over time, and transformations of emotional practices impact emotion-as-practice in certain groups at certain points in history.

2. Naming

Reddy’s concept of “emotives” stresses the performative nature of emotional expression. Putting a name on our feelings is part and parcel of experiencing them. Expression organizes the experience—or to use Reddy’s terminology from cognitive psychology, an emotive such as “I am angry” brings into attention thought material hitherto activated but outside awareness. It is amorphous and unintelligible until it has been shaped by mental attention. Reddy notes that emotives have unexpected outcomes, but that they very often succeed and that people generally use them (based on their practical experience with their effectiveness) to achieve certain emotional states.88 The use of emotives is emotional practice.

Many historians of emotion have looked for “emotion talk” in personal letters, emphasizing the cognitive process of producing emotives. However, writing about feelings, talking about feelings (for example in the context of therapy), or putting a name on our emotions is always bound up in a bodily practice. The specific situation matters: The formulation of thought is different when one is moving a pen across paper or typing on a keyboard as opposed to when one is speaking. Writing for oneself, as in a diary, while sitting alone has interiorizing effects, whereas speaking out loud while in view of a dialogic partner has exteriorizing ones. The social relationship of the two speakers affects the bodily dimension of the emotion in tone of voice, heart rate, and facial expression, which are all guided by the practical sense of the habitus, somewhere between deliberate control and unconscious habit.89

87. See Tanya Luhrmann, “What Counts as Data?” in Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience, ed. James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 212-238. Luhrmann attributes a significant role to proclivity (228), and seems to suggest that these are inborn talents for certain religious practices. It would, however, be difficult to determine in a given experiment whether people’s proclivity stems from their genes or their habitus.


89. Plamper, “The History of Emotions,” 242, refers to this embodied character as the prosody of speech and links it to social context, hinting at the work of the habitus in producing emotives.
Reddy and others have pointed out that emotions are not natural kinds, that any specific conglomeration of activated thought material is sui generis. Like snowflakes, every emotion is unique and gets put into a category—i—is typified—only through naming. The possibility that the body (whether through vasomotor changes or the activation of certain areas of the brain) contributes information that makes a certain naming more or less likely does not justify the conclusion that these physical contributions form the basis or the location of the “actual” emotion. The concept of habitus implies that there is complicity between discursive codes and socially prepared bodies. Stimuli, Bourdieu claims, work only when they encounter agents conditioned to recognize them. Conversely, the body can evoke a certain set of words when habitualized bodily activations building on inborn and acquired programs are deeply entangled with a socially generated script. Emotives themselves acquire their specific meaning only in their socially situated usage. The statement “I hate you,” or a gesture of contempt, mean different things depending on the way they are performed (whispered, shouted, or with a giggle) and by and to whom they are performed. In this sense, emotions can be seen as the product of a meaningful intersection of socially situated concepts and bodies.

For this reason, discursive practices that involve the interpretation of feeling (or what Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod call “emotional discourse”) are of as much interest to a history of emotions as the norms, orders of knowledge, and ideologies (“discourse on emotion”) discussed below. This applies not only to the initial experience and its signification but also to remembered feelings. In retrospect, emotional experiences can be reinterpreted and, in a sense, re-experienced, and sometimes it is only long after the fact that we “understand” what our feelings “actually” were. The work of signifying and resignifying emotions is done not only at the kitchen table with family and friends, but also through entire industries dedicated to improving “emotional intelligence” and new media genres, perhaps best exemplified by the afternoon talk show. The discourse of therapy has become firmly anchored in everyday speech, circulating ever more

91. Bourdieu, Logic of Practice, 53.
92. Plamper, “The History of Emotions,” 241-242. Reddy has often been criticized for not adequately theorizing the role of the body in emotional experience, which Plamper calls “logocentrism.” Reddy explains here that it is a result of his stipulation that emotives be conscious: “We utter (or execute) them in the hope that our actual full response will match the words we utter or gestures we make,” hopes that are frequently dashed. Thus described, the emotives go in only one direction—a disembodied mind manages or explores its “self,” which includes an unruly body. But the model of top-down processing Reddy proposes (“Saying Something New,” 17-21) includes bodily inputs, proprioceptive, and sensorimotor perceptions. A blush could thus be viewed as an emotive contributing to self-exploration. We have only learned to regard it as a “mark of sincerity,” giving it great power to bring our emotional experience in line with it.
94. Ibid.
95. This term as it is used in management seminars for businessmen and -women is from Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ (New York: Bantam, 1995).
widely through globalized media, thus modifying emotives and pushing the language of emotion in ever new directions.

Habits of naming emotions are clearly historically variable—new words emerge for new emotions all the time. In India, for example, the rise of the romantic narrative in Bollywood films has disseminated the use of the English phrase “I love you” in Hindi dialogue to perform a feeling hitherto not habitualized in marriages or courtship. If naming emotions makes them available to experience, then charting changes in naming means writing a history of feeling in the fullest sense.

3. Communicating

Emotions are perhaps most obviously practices when they are involved in communication. Because people know that emotions do things in social contexts, they use them as means of exchange. For this purpose, the expression of emotion is key, as is—in the terminology of speech-act theory already important in the discussion of emotives—the issue of whether and how they succeed. The success of an emotional performance depends on the skill of the performer as well as that of its recipient(s) to interpret it. Performances can indicate how important it is for the recipient to decode the expression in the way it is intended. The coach shouting loudly at her team is insuring that they understand she is communicating anger. The politician publicly expressing sadness at tragic events affecting his constituency will compose his face and modulate his voice in a manner that unequivocally conveys this feeling. Composing emotion is facilitated by clear, socially agreed-upon signs, but these are no guarantee that the message will be read as intended. Some politicians are unable to convince observers of their emotion, just as the expressions offered by some romantic partners leave their lovers in the dark about their feelings.

Reading emotion in faces, gestures, vocal patterns, bodily postures, or manifestations such as tears, changing skin color, or heavy breathing is a complex process that functions on a multisensory level and involves different modes of knowledge. It includes judgments about the situational context, the actors involved, and social expectations. Interpreting an emotion “correctly” is sometimes made more difficult by apparently contradictory bits of information that have to be accommodated and brought into a framework that makes sense. It is also complicated by the practical knowledge that expressions may not correspond with what is felt “inside.” The cultivation of a boundary between the inner and outer is achieved in a whole set of complex practices around the notion of sincerity, whose cultural variations have frequently been commented on. The accom-

plishment of sincere communication (or its discernment by an observer) depends heavily on bodily performances—tone of voice, facial expression, movements and gestures—that have been culturally transmitted. The stereotype of “Eastern” hypocrisy and insincerity included descriptions of bodily performances that did not conform to Western notions of honest expression.101 Reddy has also commented on the catastrophic effects of a rigid ideology of sincerity, which places high performative demands on actors.102 The deeply ingrained emotional practice of striving to bring avowal into congruence with “actual feeling,” to adapt Lionel Trilling’s famous definition,103 is what construes “inner” feeling as “actual,” rendering expression or avowal dependent on it. A “performance” can by this definition never be genuine.

Notions of interiority and sincerity are so deeply embedded in the modern Western habitus that they creep into scientific and scholarly definitions of emotion and inform research questions and interpretations as well. An “ethnopsychology”104 that emerges under specific historical and cultural circumstances can be universalized, turning other cultural and historical configurations into conundrums: Were the emotional expressions of medieval kings “mere” performances, planned and insincere?105 Are conventionalized emotions “real” at all? When one conceives of feeling as a kind of practice, these questions become the object of inquiry: In what historical situations do such issues become pertinent?106 Is involuntary bodily arousal construed as more “real” than deliberate expression, and if so, why? Rather than seeking to reconstruct emotional “truth,” the question becomes how and why historical actors mobilized their bodies in certain ways, cultivated specific skilled performances, and debated emotional practices among themselves.

4. Regulating

The study of emotional norms is one of the classic fields of emotion research. Terms such as “feeling rules,” “display rules,” and “emotionology” have been coined to denote the demands social etiquette places on the management of emotions,107 and historical studies have examined their transformations over time.


104. Lutz, Unnatural Emotions, 83-86.

105. See the current debate in medieval history between Gerd Althoff and Peter Dinzelbacher over “panritualism” and the interpretation of emotions, discussed in Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Thinking Historically about Medieval Emotions,” History Compass 8 (2010), 828-842.

106. Martin, Myths of Renaissance Individualism, 110: the “desire to connect speech with feeling” is a “characteristically modern” concern.

When such studies assume that the emotional experience itself is “hard-wired” or otherwise independent of societal expectations, they depart from the standpoint of practice theory, which assumes that emotions do not have an existence prior to or completely separate from social scripts. The expectations of the group are implicated in learned habits of feeling and stored in the habitus. The acquisition of the sensibility, or emotional style, of a group proceeds via tacit socialization as well as explicit instruction: boys are specifically told not to cry, girls to swallow their anger.

The acquisition of a general sensibility is also made explicit in concepts of éducation sentimentale and programs of teaching aesthetic appreciation of literature, art, music, and religion, which assume that some feelings (often viewed as the “highest” or “most true”) can be experienced only if one has acquired a certain acquaintance with the material. Here the training of feeling is—in practice—viewed as necessary and desirable (whereas the necessity of learning is denied to the emotions deemed more “primitive” and thought to be executed by the body as a mere reflex). Important from the perspective of practice theory is the assumption that this learning of emotional response is not only conceptual—an understanding of the catechism, the twelve-tone scale, or the ideological undertones of abstract expressionism—but also embodied, and that the imparting of the desired emotional response involves imparting the requisite bodily disposition, for example in the silent, reverent postures and minimal movements that support interiorization.

Emotional norms are informed and authorized by orders of knowledge, to use Foucault’s term, such as that which constitutes emotion and reason as opposites. This fundamental dichotomy correlates with a series of other homologous dualisms, such as female–male, nature–culture, savage–civilized, childish–mature, animal–human, exterior–interior, private–public, and so on, which provide mutual overlap and support. They inform the sense of what is “proper” feeling in the performance and reading of emotional expression. Investigating the habitus of a certain time period and social group also involves analyzing the epistemology implicit in the norms shared by what Barbara Rosenwein has called an “emotional community.”

Rosenwein has pointed out that her concept of “emotional communities” conceptually allows for more pluralism than Reddy’s “emotional regime” (and its complement, the “emotional refuge”). However, “community” or “regime” (like “habitus”) can suffer from the same problems as the concept of “culture” if it is seen as a coherent, somewhat mentalized, and rather static system of shared values, behaviors, and so on. In historical writing, these concepts need to be drawn into the everyday of social life via an emphasis on the practices that generate and sustain such a community or culture. A more flexible notion would be that of “emotional style,” a term less binding and more conscious than “habitus.”

109. Ibid., 23.
though a clear distinction is difficult to make. As Benno Gammerl has pointed out, emotional styles interact with spaces, construing them, for example, as public or private, and are in turn shaped by the kinds of spaces they are performed in. People inhabit and move around in spaces as much as in communities, and the notion of spaces emphasizes the body and its senses more than does the notion of the value system of a community.

The fashion of heightened emotionality in the Age of Sentimentalism in the eighteenth century, arguably the most intensely examined moment in the history of emotions in the modern period, might be viewed as an emotional style rather than habitus, because it was relatively easily reversed and many chose not to participate in it to begin with. The rejection of this style conformed to a bourgeois habitus that Bourdieu describes as “the refusal to surrender to nature, which is the mark of dominant groups—who start with self-control.” A dominant style or habitus is continually challenged by countercultures, be they sentimentalists, romantics, or the hippies of the 1960s. To describe their emotionality as “excessive” makes sense only in relation to a standard, which also changes through time and is bound to a dominant social group. Rather than conceiving of them as “less controlled,” a practice-theory approach looks for signs of emotional norms and expectations within this particular emotional style, which follows its own logic and provides its own meanings, and investigates just how it challenges the dominant group.

V. CONSEQUENCES FOR METHOD

A definition of emotion based on practice theory has the distinct advantage that it will not, in most cases, be found in the source material. It does not reproduce assumptions in the sources, confirming their “truth,” but provides an analytical perspective from the outside, allowing for a critique of past theories of emotion, especially their strategies of naturalization and interiorization as well as their implications in power relations and social hierarchies.

Methodologically, a history of emotions inspired by practice theory entails thinking harder about what people are doing, and to working out the specific situatedness of these doings. It means trying to get a look at bodies and artifacts of the past. Of course, these are always mediated by the source material available, but this is not a problem encountered by historians alone. All access to data is mediated by the tools of research, be they in the library or the lab. The objects used in emotional practices of the past—images, literature, musical notation, film, or household items—may still be available for direct observation and analysis. Fictional representations in literature, theater, and film can be analyzed

111. See Reddy, “Emotional Styles.” I thank Benno Gammerl for many fruitful discussions to clarify this term.
as artifacts used by actors in their emotional practices, as providers of templates of language and gesture as well as mediators of social norms. Texts will remain the main sources, not only for discourses and implicit orders of knowledge, but also for emotives and other emotional practices.

Practice theory also encourages us to read textual sources for traces of observable action. The history of emotions has traditionally viewed first-person accounts as the royal road to individual feeling, and as documents of emotives and the practice of introspection they remain important. But this method should not reproduce the assumption that “real” emotions—the ones worth writing about—are necessarily internal and private. Attending to practices means attending to observable behavior, suggesting that third-person accounts read with the requisite source criticism would also be valid documents of emotional practices. These could include reports by journalists, scholars, police, court reporters, stenographers, travelers, missionaries and so on.

Emotion-as-practice is learned, meaning that feelings are transferred between people intergenerationally or through socializing processes between adults. Historians can attempt to reconstruct the circulation and modification of emotional practices especially when there is contestation in this process, which could indicate that a certain emotional practice is no longer working for some people. Subversive performances, changes in ritual formulas, genres that fall out of favor can all be clues to follow. Conflicts over emotional practices will provide particularly rewarding objects of study, as they produce many sources for explicating clashing emotional styles. These contain explicit and implicit assumptions about how emotions work, how they should be lived out, and what they mean; they are also tied to underlying concepts of the self, personal agency, and the moral values that flow from them.

How do we know when a source is talking about an emotion? The use of language that links the body with the mind (metaphors that vary culturally and change over time) can serve as a signpost such as when actors speak of their “blood boiling,” when they “feel” and “sense” their thoughts, or describe a physical space or movement in their immaterial, “inner” parts. In these cases, the experience of emotions is very often described as a merging of body and mind, as a physical involvement in thought. Shifts in this language will likely be accompanied by shifts in bodily practices, as they support one another. An increase in talk of “interiority,” for example, will also involve the creation of private spaces and practices of outward stillness in public places. Criticism of other emotional styles will be associated with abstention from and denigration of concomitant bodily habits. And yet it is also likely that change in habitus and change in language can proceed at different rates, the body lagging behind language, for example, causing an emotional practice to acquire a new name but not yet be able to organize a feeling in the body. Relevant contexts could include instances of bodily training such as a highly developed ability to faint, an inability to produce tears, or the specifics of pain perception. All of these, of course, place clear limits on the

116. Bourdieu refers to the inertia of the body/habitus as “hysteresis” (Logic of Practice, 59).
historian’s ability to naively empathize with the emotions they find in sources, as their own bodies are likely trained differently.

The history of emotions has often been viewed as an enterprise plagued with the problem of reliable source material. How are we to know what people “really” felt if they kept it to themselves and left no historical record? What do we do with the emotions that we do not find in the source material even when we believe they should be there? What if soldiers at the front lines reveal no indication of fear, or victims of social discrimination show no anger, or violent perpetrators no remorse? Must we assume that the sources document dishonesty or even denial? It is, of course, necessary to look beyond first-person expression and consult a broad range of sources with observations from many different perspectives to confirm whether the expected emotion is missing in all of them. Explicit denials or prohibitions of certain feelings can be treated as emotives, an indication that the feeling is in the available repertoire. But understanding emotions as practices also means taking into account the practical uses of emotions in social settings, as sociologists of emotions have advocated from the beginning. If there is no relational reason to communicate or enact or guard against an emotion, then it should be considered absent.

We must also be aware that there may be a very different subjectivity in play that does not conform to the liberal notions that underlie our own assumptions about how psyches work. Historicizing emotion means scrutinizing these assumptions before coming to conclusions about our material. A “missing emotion” may be one heavily proscribed or inopportune but it may also really be missing. According to the embodied account of experience, there are no thoughts and feelings that are not manifested in bodily processes, actions, in spoken or written words, or supported by material objects. It is their materiality that makes them available to the senses and to memory. What’s more, emotions cannot be conjured out of thin air: The specific feeling of honor made available to bourgeois practitioners of dueling in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, for example, is lost when the duel falls out of use. 117

VI. CONCLUSION

Many historical studies of emotion have tended to base their definition of emotion on models from classic emotion psychology or philosophy, which tend to reduce it to either mechanical processes of the body or cognitive processes of the mind. Newer research from the emerging fields of extended mind theory and situated cognition proceeds from the thesis that thought and emotion are embodied and understandable only in their social context. This view is far more compatible with practice theory, an approach in the social and historical sciences that is gaining more attention from historians of emotion. It views emotion as an act situated in and composed of interdependent cognitive, somatic, and social components, mixed in varying proportions, depending on the practical logic of

the situation in which it takes place. It offers a way to integrate the material, bodily facets of emotional processes without having to resort to the ahistorical, universalist assumption that the body is conditioned only by evolution. From the perspective of practice theory, emotional arousals that seem to be purely physical are actually deeply socialized. The body’s capacities and functions change, not only in evolutionary time but also in human history, which is to say that societies shape brain structures and organic functions. If indeed fMRI scans show the neural correlates of emotion, then they must be read as images of a “used” brain, one molded by the practices of a specific culture, thus turning variations between scans of members of different social groups into meaningful data.

The use of the term “emotional practices” should imply 1) that emotions not only follow from things people do, but are themselves a form of practice, because they are an action of a mindful body; 2) that this feeling subject is not prior to but emerges in the doing of emotion; and 3) that a definition of emotion must include the body and its functions, not in the sense of a universal, pristine, biological base, but as a locus for innate and learned capacities deeply shaped by habitual practices.

Thinking of emotion as a kind of practice can help historians get over the sense that the history of emotions can only be a history of changing emotional norms and expectations but not a record of change in feeling. Emotions change over time not only because norms, expectations, words, and concepts that shape experience are modified, but also because the practices in which they are embodied, and bodies themselves, undergo transformation.

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