


Beyond World Images: Belief as Embodied Action in the World

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Abstract

In this article, we outline the analytic limitations of action theories and interpretive schemes that conceive of beliefs as explicit mental representations linked to a desire-opportunity folk psychology. Drawing on pragmatism and practice theory, we recast the notion of belief as a species of habit, with pre-reflexive anticipation the primary mechanism accounting for both the formation of beliefs and their causal influence on action. We demonstrate the utility of this approach in three ways: first, by linking it with recent research on the cognitive and motor development of infants; second, by drawing out a typology of belief states that accounts for a range of different experiential traits; and third, by applying the new model to reinterpret two belief-based phenomena of broad sociological interest: “irrational” decision making and religious conversion.

Keywords

belief, practice, Bourdieu, field theory, dynamic cognition

INTRODUCTION

The theory of action has undergone in recent years what might be called a Weberian revitalization. Intrasubjectivity, “interior states,” and first-person meanings have again become the focus of sociological accounts of action (Hedström 2005; Reed 2011; Vaisey 2008). The claim that actions can be explained simply by “reference to the social context in which they occur” (Campbell 1996:40) has been augmented by approaches that are attentive to actor motivations, reasons, desires, attitudes, and beliefs. With this move toward actor subjectivity, causality and the theory of action have been joined together again (Martin 2011). Actor-level traits are again treated as analytically distinguishable from observable events and conditions. This gives subjectivity a decisive influence in shaping lines of action. In this way, this recent spate of claims mirrors Weber’s original emphasis on the interpretive recovery of the

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subjective meaning of action as the recommended means for generating causal claims in sociology (Turner 1983).

An important part of this renewal of subjectivity in the theory of action has centered around actor *beliefs*. This is not surprising given how closely intertwined the notion of belief has traditionally been for both Parsonian action theory (Parsons and Shils 1951) and the post-behaviorist philosophy of action (Bernstein 1971; Rosenberg 1995). The notion of belief refers, in this formulation, to an actor's "world-images" as representations *about* the world. Beliefs consist of ideas, often interrelated in systems, that link the actor to the world through the medium of symbolic meaning (Borhek and Curtis 1975:5). Beliefs provide a critical ingredient to causal accounts of action by maintaining the "autonomy" of the actor's interior states in the face of external or impersonal processes (Davidson 1980). The social-scientific notion of belief often serves as the intrasubjective mechanism linking cultural scripts, frames, codes, and ideologies with their inferred effects on observable lines of action. Belief is therefore frequently targeted as a central explanatory resource for producing "intentional" explanations of action (Hedström 2005). Together, these characteristic features are what we will refer to as the *representationalist model of belief*, and the Weberian revitalization of the theory of action overwhelmingly relies on it.

In this article, we argue that the representationalist model of belief is fundamentally limited and should be at least partially replaced. The model is appealing because it seems to give the social scientist interpretive access (via language) to the often mysterious interior well-springs of action (Henderson 1993). However, this appearance is misleading as the effectiveness of the model conceals the commonsense *intuitability* generated by its dual presence as both a folk "category of practice" and a scientific "category of analysis" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:235; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Jepperson and Meyer 2011). Thus, we analyze the predominant model of belief in sociology as a version of "folk psychology" and argue that in spite of its face validity, it makes problematic assumptions about the "interior" causes of action (Rosenberg 1995). We contend that in order to maintain an approach to the theory of action that has both causal and *intrasubjective* adequacy "at the level of meaning" (Weber 1978:12), it is necessary, drawing from pragmatism and practice theory, to redefine belief as a species of habit.

Representationalism in Contemporary Accounts of Belief

While implicitly or explicitly animating action-explanations of all theoretical stripes, the representationalist model is most explicitly articulated in contemporary versions of "sociological" rational actor theory (RAT). Allegiance to representationalism (sometimes referred to as "cognitivism") separates the "soft" sociological variation of RAT from its stronger counterpart in marginalist (nonbehavioral) economics (Goldthorpe 1998; Hedström 2005). As Boudon (1997:75) has argued, the orthodox model falters precisely because it is of "little use as far as the explanation of *beliefs* is concerned" (*italics added*; see also Morgan 2005). The basic insight of sociological RAT is that action is guided by potentially fallible beliefs about existing opportunities rather than by "objective" knowledge of the world (Elster 1984; Hedström and Swedberg 1996). Outlining the mechanisms that generate fallibility in the belief formation process thus becomes a central concern in this explanatory tradition (Rydgren 2009).

It is important to underscore, however, that the analytic problem of belief is not the localized affliction of rational choice sociologists. Instead, the representationalist model of belief evident in "Desire-Belief-Opportunity" (DBO) theory is found in nearly all *interpretivist* approaches to action that can trace their roots to Weber and the neo-Kantians. This includes most contemporary attempts to provide explanations of action for which "culture" and

“interpretation” feature prominently (e.g., Reed 2011). Thus, cultural theorists like Geertz (1973) and Archer (1995) propose that beliefs link to one another via chains of logical implication to form autonomous “belief systems” (Borhek and Curtis 1975; Rydgren 2009). The explicit theory behind these sometimes informal proposals is the Weberian idea that beliefs drive action by providing the input into a decision-making mechanism that matches goals to the conditions of their fulfillment (Turner 1983). Action is thus the pragmatic end of a “deductive chain” that starts with the high-level, antecedent premises provided by a cultural system, model, frame, code, or ideology (see Borhek and Curtis 1975; Swidler 2001).

While cultural systems provide one route to recover intrasubjectivity, interpretivists (alongside DBO theorists) draw this together with an additional set of substantive assumptions in order to theorize the causal efficacy of belief. Weber recognized that sociology could neither dispense with a focus on subjective meaning nor with causal explanations. His concern with intrasubjectivity (as a “subjective meaning-complex”) in opposition to the application of a natural-scientific rationality in sociology still grounds concerns with meaning in the discipline (Campbell 1996).

Importantly, Weber’s argument on these points converges with similar arguments in the philosophy of action (Turner 1983). Tracing the “irreducibility of the mental” was the post-behaviorist form taken by mind-body dualism, with philosophers seeking to explain how action could *not* be redescribed in a purely natural-scientific register of impersonal, material causation (Bernstein 1971). Among the most influential statements came from Donald Davidson (1980:217, 225) and his argument that irreducibility, in this sense, consists of holistic belief/desire complexes (“reasons”) that causally interact with the observable world of physical events as “mental events.”

While sharing almost nothing else in common, DBO and cultural-interpretive accounts both draw from Davidson’s (1980) argument in support of their shared claim that “reasons” are analytically distinguishable as an intrasubjective causal factor shaping courses of action (Hedström 2005; Reed 2011).¹ For DBO theorists, this involves beliefs that provide substantive variation in action otherwise geared toward the fulfillment of interests or desires (Rydgren 2009: 72–73). For interpretivists, culturally shaped world-images provide the analytically separable “forming” causes that mold motivations and reasons as “interior states” that serve as “forcing” causes of social action (Reed 2011: 135–36, 152). Thus, following Weber and Davidson, DBO theorists and interpretivists reference “intentionalist” properties like beliefs in order to provide their accounts of action with causal adequacy at an intrasubjective or “interior” level. The only relevant difference, in this last respect, is that interpretivists refuse to judge the propriety of beliefs according to an exogenous normative standard (e.g., “rationality”).

Enter Folk Psychology

The philosophical foundations of this argument have taken an important turn in recent decades, however, with the rise of the debate on the status of “folk psychology” (FP) in the Philosophy of Mind (see Rosenberg 1995). Here the argument about action-explanation becomes much more reflexive. The identification of actor-level “familiar mental states” (beliefs, desires, hopes, feelings) invokes a commonsense (or “folk”) accounting scheme that naturally credits mental states as the causes of action (Churchland 1981; Godfrey-Smith 2005). Rather than dispute the “dualistic” presence of mental events, FP treats them as part of a generalized action-accounting template that makes all actions seem reasonable by recasting them (post hoc) as the deductive consequence of belief/desire complexes understood as mental representations.²

For our purposes, it is important that Davidson's (1980) "reasons as causes" argument is here recast as a version of FP. Thus, sociological accounts that draw from it in order to lend intrasubjective adequacy to causal explanations of action become, in a basic sense, versions of FP. This folk "category of practice" lends validity to these arguments by introjecting scientific "categories of analysis" with commonsense schemas "that go without saying" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Rosenberg 1995). Since FP is seemingly the *most* intuitive accounting scheme available to lay actors and sociologists alike, its routine use to invoke "interior states" drives home the appeal of DBO and interpretivist arguments as giving a window of access onto the often mysterious interior causes of action. Yet FP's intuitive appeal also glosses the fact that, as a *theory*, it is fundamentally inconsistent with what is known about underlying cognitive, emotional, and neural mechanisms, committing sociological accounts of action to a problematic heritage of mind/body dualism (Clark and Millican 1999).

FP relies on an understanding of beliefs as holistic, well-structured "propositional attitudes." These are "semantically interpretable mental states that play a *causal role* in the production of other propositional attitudes and ultimately in the production of behavior" (Ramsey, Stich, and Garon 2006:1030, italics added).³ As an argument about cognition, this involves the rule-based manipulation of symbols derived from an interlinked conceptual system (Fodor 1987). However, the "language of thought" hypothesis underlying this claim has been challenged on the grounds that the cognitive or "interior" dimension of action only in rare instances consists of something that resembles this kind of "internal mental representation" (Lave 1994; Shapiro 2011; Strauss and Quinn 1997).

Outline of the Argument

The key implication, then, is that FP, as a highly intuitive set of explanatory categories, may work well as a folk accounting scheme, but it is less than adequate as an analytic resource for sociology. This problem has not gone unrecognized. Hedström (2005), for instance, contends that sociologists simply accept FP even if it is problematic because no other vocabulary is available that provides the same kind of interpretive access to the subjective meanings of action (see also Turner 1983). In this article we claim that, on the contrary, there *is* an alternative vocabulary available that retains the concept of belief as an intrasubjective resource for the theory of action yet dispenses with the problematic FP commitment to beliefs as mental representations that are *deductively* created according to the logic of propositional attitudes.

We claim that the sociological version of FP and its representationalist model of belief relies on a similar "logical logic" by relying on the "power of the logic of ideas" to produce causal inferences about action (Swidler 2001:187–88). This follows relatively straightforwardly from Weber's own contention that tracing the "logic" of believed-in ideas provides access to the "psychological" or motivational domain of action (Weber 1949:88–89).⁴

Yet there are two problems encountered by explanations of action rooted in this accounting scheme. First, it makes the causal effect of belief on action exclusively a matter of deductive logic from ideas. As Weber himself understood, however, this mechanism applies only in unique contexts or to socially rare groups of actors ("virtuosos"; see Lizardo and Strand 2010). This leaves unexplored the intrasubjective presence of belief in the vast majority of actions. Second, it cannot coherently link the beliefs or interior states imputed by the analyst using FP's logic to make an action "interpretable" (particularly if it appears "irrational") with the non-decisional belief formation *process* that results in the acquisition of those beliefs (see Elster 1983).⁵ In this regard, FP in sociology involves "sliding from the model of reality to the reality of the model" (Bourdieu 1990:39). A descriptive resource (deductive logic of "reasons" from belief/desire complexes) here becomes a rule that directly governs its object (intrasubjectivity).⁶

We argue that it is ontologically more accurate and interpretively more useful to understand beliefs as embodied in actors not primarily as ideas and representations but rather in *capacities* for action. An action-based formulation, in this respect, avoids the first problem by making belief an intrasubjective cause of action in the form of expectations and anticipations of situational contingencies, often manifested as “belief in” one’s capacity to engage in an action. It avoids the second problem by conceiving of belief formation as a nonrepresentational “conditioning” or habituation process that attunes actors to the conditions under which action is likely to unfold in the future (Bourdieu 1990, 2000; Joas 1996; Peirce [1905] 1998). We contend that, together, this *belief in action* model offers a *more* intuitive treatment of how beliefs form and how they affect action than the one made available by the FP accounting scheme.⁷

In what follows, we first outline the pragmatist and practice theoretical accounts of belief, both of which have rarely been the target of discussion among scholars in either tradition, and use it to construct the basis for our alternative model. We then establish the appeal for that model in three ways: first, by drawing it together with cognitive/motor development among infants as a close analogue for a practice-based belief formation process; second, by developing a typology of “belief states” that account for the same intrasubjective or “folk psychological” states that provide the intuitability of DBO and interpretivist accounts; and third, by reinterpreting two case studies of processes that involve belief but that can be enhanced by recasting them using belief in action: the seemingly irrational decision making of poor teens to have children out of wedlock (Edin and Kefalas 2005) and the process of religious conversion (or “choosing to believe”) among poor men (Smilde 2007).

PRAGMATISM AND PRACTICE THEORY: BELIEF AS DURABLE HABIT

Pragmatism is not generally recognized for making a contribution to an understanding of the notion of belief, although it is clear that the concept of belief and the belief formation process were significant for classical pragmatist arguments (Habermas 1971; Joas 1993; Rochberg-Halton 1986). In recent work in the theory of action, pragmatism has been primarily used as a resource to combat the goal-based understanding of action characteristic of Parsonian and DBO models. As pragmatist critics have noted (see especially Gross 2009; Joas 1996; Silver 2011; Whitford 2002), this explanatory strategy relies on a *teleological* definition of intentionality that makes the determinants of action (the deductive logic of desires, beliefs, opportunities) “*prior* to the actual action.” Sociological RAT is therefore no different from Parsons’s “voluntarist” theory of action as both make desires and beliefs exogenous to action (Whitford 2002). Here, pragmatist critics rely on Dewey’s (1939:33) claim that consciousness of desires and “ends-in-view” arises only when action stops “going smoothly.” Otherwise, “vital impulses and acquired habits . . . operate without the intervention of an end-in-view or purpose.” The desires and ends that provide the basis for active “goal-setting” are not located in an “act of the intellect *prior* to the actual action”; they are instead “the result of a reflection on aspirations and tendencies that are pre-reflective and have already always been operative” (Joas 1996:158).

For the pragmatists, the intentionality that both RAT and Parsonian (voluntarist) models treat as independent of action emerges in the self-reflective control applied to *already* ongoing courses of action. Desires, ends, and interests are situationally bound and only explicitly thematized in “problem-situations” that challenge the “automatic procedure of action” (Joas 1996:129; Whitford 2002:355). What is missing from the neo-pragmatist critique, however, is a reconsideration of the role of *belief* in action from a nonrepresentationalist perspective. For this task, it is Peirce who provides the most promising starting point.

Peirce on Belief

The focus on the “problem-situation” as the occasion for having the desires, ends, and interests is ultimately rooted in the pragmatist notion of *inquiry*. This relates directly to a pragmatist reframing of the concept of belief, a task that was launched in Peirce’s earliest essays. According to Peirce, belief refers to a sense of certitude or “fixity” about habits. The “essence of belief” is the “establishment of habit,” or the establishment “in our nature of a rule of action” (Peirce [1878] 1992:129) or “cerebral habit . . . which will determine what we do in fancy as what we do in action” (Peirce [1880] 1992:201; Peirce [1905] 1998:333). Consequently, “the feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions” (Peirce [1877] 1992:114).

It is not surprising, then, that Peirce founded pragmatism in the spirit of challenging alternative explanations for a process he referred to as belief “fixation,” which involved the acquisition of habits having the quality of “self-evident certitude” (Bernstein 1971:174–75; Peirce [1877] 1992; Rochberg-Halton 1986). In non-pragmatist accounts, fixation may be produced by tenacity (e.g., refusing to do anything that challenges established belief), authority (e.g., religious or political enforcement of belief), or the “*a priori* method” characteristic of Descartes (Peirce [1877] 1992, [1878] 1992). For Peirce, the problem of each of these belief fixation methods is that they cannot acknowledge the capacity to change *any* fixated trait, including “instincts” (Rochberg-Halton 1986:10). In this sense, all beliefs are potentially dubitable (there are no “indubitable” certainties) because they are acquired from action in the world. As *acquired* capacities, beliefs remain fundamentally open to creative transformation because we remain capable of experiencing a sense of *doubt* about them.

Peirce defines doubt as the opposite of belief. “Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state” that arises from a lack of fully effective application of habits in action (Peirce [1877] 1992:114). As we “body forth” preformed habits, we may experience an “irritation of doubt” due to the resistance of the world and the failure of effective action. This recurrent phase is characterized by a “shattering of belief” (Joas 1996; Peirce [1877] 1992). “Inquiry” refers here to the struggle to retain a “state of belief” by establishing a more or less fixed set of habits (Peirce [1877] 1992:114). It is therefore a method of “fixating” (or forming) belief that does not involve tenacity, authority, or a priori reasoning.

Thus, understood broadly in Peirce’s formulation, inquiry is a process of belief formation rooted in the creative adaptation of habits to the situation-specific conditions of their application. Importantly, as Peirce continues, inquiry as belief formation involves a dialectic between “self-reproach” (doubt) and “self-control” (belief) (Peirce [1905] 1998:337). As habits meet situations that present problems, actors experience a feeling of “self-reproach.” Actors respond *inquisitively* when they deploy habits that facilitate a sense of “self-control” in the situation.

When faced with a challenge to action, then, actors creatively attempt to develop new habits that reestablish situational control and thus belief. Peirce ([1905] 1998:337) describes this state as the “self-preparation for action on the next occasion.” Further action may encounter unanticipated challenges, which renews the process of creative formation of novel modes of action through inquiry. Eventually, through the continuous iteration of this process, modes of acting begin to approach “that fixed character, which would be marked by the entire absence of self-reproach” (Peirce [1905] 1998:337). This stage is characterized by the “ultimate state of habit to which the action of self-control ultimately tends, where no room is left for further self-control,” or what Peirce calls “the state of fixed *belief*, or perfect knowledge” (p. 337, italics added). Most importantly, the general dynamic at work, involving a dialectic between doubt and belief, anchored in action, and linked to securing belief (“self-control”) through the creative formation of habits, is also characteristic of later

pragmatist thought as the principal mechanism responsible for the formation of belief (see Dewey 1938: 104ff, 1905: 393ff; James [1890] 1983: 913-914, 946ff).

The Self-fulfilling Nature of Belief

Before addressing the relevance of more contemporary pragmatist theorizing for our argument, it is helpful, particularly given how counterintuitive Peirce's notion of belief as unreflective habit might seem, to elaborate its implications for a classic sociological argument involving belief: Merton's (1948) "self-fulfilling prophecy."⁸

In the canonical statement of the argument, beliefs modulate action in such a way that actors alter reality to fit them. The "initial definition of the situation" (e.g., "the bank is going to fail") sets off a wave of action (withdrawing money from the bank) that eventually changes the situation to mirror the initial belief (the bank fails) (Merton 1948). This reverses the "normal" relationship between belief and reality in the representationalist account, since beliefs are supposed to reflect reality rather than reality reflecting belief. In this sense, the self-fulfilling prophecy is one of those curious cases in the (normative) sociology of belief where we can observe the "subversion of rationality" (Elster 1983).

However, rather than being a deviation from the "normal case," we propose that the modal form of belief in action is *essentially* self-fulfilling. For this statement to go from assertion to substantive proposal requires that we abandon the representationalist understanding of belief in favor of Peirce's notion, in which beliefs subsist in habits and are only derivatively representational. This suggests that *normally* the future orientation of action is realized via nonreflective anticipations of the immediate future; in other words, actors *enact* a present based on beliefs about the forthcoming. This implies no commitment to beliefs as representations but rather to anticipated lines of action as concrete actualizations.

The key is to realize that actors engage in situations "as if" certain things were already present or certain events had already happened (Merleau Ponty [1962] 2002:512). Elaborating this point, the temporality of action requires that actors "self-posit" what they believe will be present (as reality) in the forthcoming moment (Bourdieu 2000; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013).⁹ In this sense, belief in action has a "self-fulfilling" tendency operating as a medium of commitment to an anticipated reality. Belief in action thus partakes of the "pre-verbal taking-for-granted" of the world that is a precondition for practical action, manifesting itself in the capacity to find "immediate adherence" with a distinct set of *possibles* in a field of action (Bourdieu 1990:68).

Importantly in this respect, action is always action in *situations*, and these situations carry their own objective tendencies that are empirically and analytically separable from the intrasubjective reality of belief (Martin 2003:44; Silver 2011; see also Campbell 1996:159-60).¹⁰ This means that belief, as a kind of practical "prophecy," can also *fail* in its commitments and anticipations.¹¹ This "failure," however, is not a demonstration of the actor's incompetence or irrationality (as implied by strong rational choice theory), but a revelation of her *practical* rationality (Ermakoff 2010). At each moment, multiple possibilities for action are potentially realizable; yet once one of them is actualized in belief, others are closed off. Anticipated reality can thus "fall out of sync" with the situation, as actors bootstrap themselves into the immediate future under the now "unreal" sway of previous anticipations. This breaks (for the moment) the tacit complicity between beliefs and the micro-anticipated reality.

We claim that these instances of *belief-situation mismatch* are of crucial theoretical interest, and not only because they bring the actor's prereflexive contribution to the reality of the situation into relief, making it available for empirical inspection. These moments are also the

occasion of *creativity* in the pragmatist sense of actors “reconstructing” their involvement in a situation to restore or repair a state of “unreflective belief” (Joas 1996). As we elaborate in the following, belief-situation mismatch may also result in a condition of chronic lag and misfiring of dispositions and habits—“hysteresis” (Bourdieu 1988:157)—or even the complete withdrawal of belief from the world and the resulting chronic inability to act in relation to situations (“radical doubt”).

Belief and Creativity

To summarize, then, the pragmatist account emphasizes that belief originates in practice, with “believing” a form of commitment rooted in the development of habits. To further clarify this point, consider the role that belief plays in what is likely the most influential strain of pragmatism in contemporary social theory—Joas’s pragmatic (1996:128, italics added) “theory of situated creativity”:

All perception of the world and all action in the world is anchored in unreflected *belief* in self-evident facts and successful habits. However, this belief, and the routines of action based upon it, are repeatedly shattered; what has previously been a *habitual*, apparently automatic procedure of action is interrupted. . . . This is the phase of real doubt. And the only way out of this phase is a reconstruction of the interrupted context.

Contrary to “situationalist” readings of Joas’s argument, actors are not creative in order to solve emergent problems involving “how to organize action over time” (Swidler 2001:82). Actors are creative, rather, in order to restore their unreflected *belief* built on habit whenever this is thrown into doubt by situational challenges. While this often does involve actors creatively developing or deploying modes of action, the central (non-teleological) motivation behind episodes of creativity involves actors restoring their implicit (intrasubjective) sense of belief. Under this account, the self-fulfilling prophecy of action is routinely realized via the “unreflected belief in self-evident facts and successful habits” (Joas 1996:128).

To the extent that actors succeed in creatively altering their circumstances, “something new enters the world: a new mode of action” (Joas 1996:129). When confronting challenges due to the resistance of situations, the effect is analogous to the “dissolution of belief by surprise” in Peirce’s sense. The expected response is a reconstruction of the situation involving a belief-based anticipation of “new or different aspects of reality” (Joas 1996:129). Yet this process of belief formation is “essentially a by-product”—if it was teleologically intended, it would not have come about (Elster 1983:53)—of the actor’s effort to restore her prereflexive and unreflected “fixity” of belief by generating new modes of action.

Pragmatism and the Plasticity of Belief

If there is a shortcoming in the pragmatist model of belief, it involves its “shallow” conception of the ontogenetic (developmental) consequences of habituation. The pragmatist account ends up downplaying the partial *indubitability* and inertial tendency of all habits and, by consequence, the inherent “stubbornness” of belief. In this way, the pragmatist account comes close to presuming that all habits are equally open to creative transformation (even habits that seem instinctual or equivalent to a priori categories). This problem is evident even in theoretical efforts that emphasize the embodiment, and thus apparent durability, of beliefs.

Joas (1996), for instance, emphasizes the corporeality of habits and capacities for action, as well as aspirations, tendencies, and goals. Insofar as “situation-relatedness is constitutive

of action,” the actor’s vague disposition toward goals and aspirations, and her unreflected belief in routinized habits mobilized toward these “ends-in-view,” are all effects of her “personal body” (Joas 1996:161). Joas dismantles RAT assumptions regarding the dependence of action on noncorporeal (representationalist) elements, making habits the main support for action. These habits are acquired via the “actor’s instrumentalization of his [*sic*] body” in the development of a particular body schema (Joas 1996:175).

An important precedent for this argument is James’s ([1890] 1983) emphasis on the interaction between the development of habits and the “plasticity” of the human brain. Habits involve “extreme facility paths which do not easily disappear” as they are “grooved into” the plastic structure of the brain (James [1890] 1983:112). Plasticity refers here to the “possession of a structure weak enough to yield and influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once. Each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits” (James [1890] 1983:110). As we “groove out” habits in the plastic structure of the brain (principally, it seems, through repetitive action), those habits achieve an embodied type of fixity, in turn making unreflected belief a function of their degree of embodiment (James [1890] 1983:130). Importantly, both James’s and Joas’s accounts imply that the human actor is more malleable and “plastic” than they are inertial. The past does matter for the present, but this is always a *revisable* past.

However, this provisional malleability prevents pragmatists from developing a coherent theory of belief, especially as belief links to subjectivity (Bernstein 1971). We can see an extension of this line of critique in contemporary debates in cultural theory (Lizardo and Strand 2010; Vaisey 2008; see also Campbell 1996) revolving around Swidler’s (2001) model of the culture/action link: namely, the relative neglect of actor-level motivation in favor of an emphasis on the situational utility of cultural “tools.” In both cases, a pragmatist-inspired model is faulted for not specifying “what is it that exercises the control” in a belief formation or belief in action process (Bernstein 1971:197). This analytic blind spot prevents pragmatist theorists from considering whether the actor might not change or preserve belief without mitigating doubt or reconstructing a problem situation (Dalton 2004). For our purposes, this means that pragmatism is limited in the kind of insights it can provide about the intrasubjective causes of action.

To address this shortcoming, we draw on sources that provide us with a more robust conception of enculturation, namely, “strong” practice theory (Bourdieu 1990; Lizardo and Strand 2010; Wacquant 2004).¹² Our basic proposal is that actors are *durably* imprinted by the “continuous, unconscious conditioning that is exerted through conditions of existence” (Bourdieu 1990:50). If beliefs are unreflective habits, this means that not all beliefs are of the same nature and not all beliefs are equally liable to revision via creative action. In the same way, actors do not retain a “constant” capacity for creative retooling at all points in the life-course (Bourdieu 2000). The accumulation of durable habits puts constraints on the acquisition of new ones. Accordingly, rather than being immediately altered or changed when faced with a problem-situation, habitualized beliefs lead the actor to respond in a way that capitalizes on whatever remaining commonalities the present situation has with previously encountered ones. This means that action capacities acquired through “conditionalization” do remain *indubitable* in the pragmatist sense, or at the very least resistant to doubt in the face of short- and even medium-term situational resistance.

Practice Theory and the Durability of Belief

The rise of belief as a central concern in practice theory can be seen in the evolution of Bourdieu’s thinking on the issue. Between the publication of the *Outline of the Theory*

of *Practice* ([1972] 1977) and (its revision) *The Logic of Practice* ([1980] 1990) Bourdieu's early concern with rule following and strategies was almost entirely replaced by a new focus on the unconscious schemas constitutive of "embodied belief." This is evidenced most clearly in the chapter added to the later book: "Belief and the Body."

The key contrast Bourdieu develops here is between his notion of "practical belief" and both a RAT (exemplified by Elster 1983) and voluntarist (Sartrean) philosophy of action. These last are taken as standpoints that put conscious decision making (either in terms of the generation of belief *ex nihilo* in the existentialist case, or belief change by "rational" adaptation to the world in the RAT case) at the basis of an actor's involvement with the world. The basis of Bourdieu's critique is that like all normative models of action, existentialism and RAT project an *idealization* of the relationship between belief and action into their action descriptions. One way to avoid this trap is to deny that "decision" is the default relation between actors and their commitments to either ideas or actions (Bourdieu 1990, 2000). Against this, Bourdieu substitutes "belief" as the default relation between actors and these commitments. Thus, a committed action implies the existence of a belief that supports that action; but the type of intrasubjectivity present here does not involve a decision to believe or act. Rather, actors believe when they maintain a relationship of "immediate adherence" (not "mediated" by representations) to a *field* of possible action (Bourdieu 1990:68).

The notion of belief as an un verbalized disposition generative of action-commitments is not separable from an account of belief formation aimed at accounting for the sources of "adhesion" to acquired beliefs. Of crucial significance is the "early and lasting insertion" of an actor "into a condition defined by a particular degree of power [and the] experience of the possibilities offered or denied by that condition" (Bourdieu 2000:217; see also Martin 2011:314ff). Actors who are durably conditioned acquire a disposition for what Bourdieu (2002:217) calls "being fundamentally *realistic*" (italics added).¹³ This means that actors cannot will themselves to believe in something, or, more precisely, *believe in themselves* doing something, that does not fall within the ambit of possibles available from this (formative) position. Rather, a relationship of "immediate adherence" applies to those possibles that appear *realistic* in relation to what is "statistically common to members of the same class" (Bourdieu 1990:60).

Based on repetitive exposure to structured regularities, then, beliefs "pre-reflexively [aim]" at things that *will be* present in forthcoming moments. The formation of durable beliefs from the recurrent experiential patterns that characterize an actor's occupancy of a position ensure that forthcoming, probable, or possible actions are made "quasi-present" or real *ex ante* to the actor. They possess "the same *belief status* . . . as what is directly perceived" (Bourdieu 2000:207).¹⁴

When considering action-environments that go beyond the immediate situation, however, we can think of belief as indexing membership in a field as a kind of "*practical faith*" that is a condition of entry (Bourdieu 1990: 68). In this sense, belief is the basis for taking seriously what happens there. As it involves an anticipatory claim on what reality should be like, this kind of faith must also remain immune to the "logic of decision" and instead be acquired through belief formation. To choose or decide is an "act of commission" that takes place according to belief-based assumptions that bootstrap the actor into his or her decisions by omitting all but a few possibilities from which to choose.

Outside of exceptional circumstances, actors do not rely on a reflective examination of expected consequences in order to develop "rational anticipations" or a "rational degree of belief" (Bourdieu 2000:219; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:131). In this respect,

Times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures [e.g., between expectations and chances, the basis of realistic belief] is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed “rational choice” may take over, or at least among those agents who are in a position to be rational. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:131).¹⁵

As we describe below, the opposition here parallels the opposition between scholastic reason (or the absence of realism) and practical reason (or realistic belief) (see Bourdieu 2000: 12ff).

To summarize, for practice theory belief is best thought of as a relational condition of prereflexive, socially patterned *adherence* to objects, ideas, and future sets of action. In principle this includes every “possible” future confronted by the actor as these possibilities are distributed across positions in a field. Belief requires a durable *level* of enactive involvement with the world shaped by its own time trajectory. Belief is also a function of habits that are relatively malleable by creative action whenever they are disrupted. However, because actors acquire beliefs in a time-ordered fashion during their life span, not all beliefs are created alike: Some are malleable, but some are less so. Durable beliefs exercise a *conservative* effect in situations that call for change before retooling or creative adaptation can become a feasible project. In both cases, however, belief is a constitutive aspect of action. As part of its temporal passage through environments that (as a rule) change faster than actors can adapt, action must be exercised as (or led forward on the tracks of) beliefs that anticipate forthcoming moments.

BELIEF FORMATION, HABITUATION, AND ASYNCHRONICITY

So far we have argued that belief is a species of (more or less) durable habit and that because of this durability, belief may fall out of synchronicity with environmental regularities, such that the time scale of belief needs to be analytically and empirically separated from the time scale of the world. While the contrast with FP might make these claims seem like exotic propositions, in this section we show that the pragmatist and practice-theoretical intuitions of (1) belief as a species of habit, (2) belief formation as a habituation process, and (3) the durability of belief as an inertia exercised by past habits in fast-changing present situations are redeemed by a rather unusual (but ultimately very good to think with) line of empirical research: psychology on the dynamics of motor cognition in infants.

A Not B

Recent research in developmental psychology shows that expectations and beliefs “about” the world are routinely formed without the need to postulate the existence of mental models of the natural and social environments, nor the need to presume that persons “run” those models inside their head in order to form expectations. The key theoretical breakthrough has come from the reconsideration from a “dynamic cognition” perspective (see Thelen and Smith 2002) of an old, well-established empirical regularity—in fact, the most widely studied phenomenon in the entire field of developmental psychology (Thelen and Smith 2002)—the *A-not-B phenomenon*, first discovered by Jean Piaget in the early 1950s.

Following Piaget’s original setup (see Piaget 1954:58), a young infant (usually between 7 and 12 months) is shown a desirable physical object (an attractive toy) the experimenter hides in plain view of the child (behind a small curtain or under a bucket) located at one of two clearly visible locations (locations A and B) that contain visually identical obstructions

(a screen) or containers (a bucket) behind or within which the toy can be hidden from view. After a short delay (usually a few seconds), the experimenter allows the infant to search or *grab* for the object in order to recover it.

Not surprisingly, the infant searches at the location where she saw it hidden. The experimenter then takes the object from the infant and once again hides it behind the obstruction at location A. The experimenter waits for the infant to grab for and retrieve the object again. This same sequence of events is repeated for a predetermined number of trials. After this number has been reached, the experimenter then takes the object away from the infant and hides it behind the obstruction at *location B* while making sure that the infant watches her do this. She then allows the child to reach for the toy again. Even though the infant saw the object being hidden at location B, however, she invariably reaches behind the obstruction at *location A*, appearing surprised (and upset!) that the object she grabs for is not there.¹⁶

Piaget (1954) famously referred to this “error” as evincing a lack of “object permanence” at the cognitive level and thus providing key evidence that the adult’s conceptualization of objects is absent in the child at this stage. He reasoned that young infants lacked a cognitive “scheme” or concept for objects, which he defined as “the *belief* that objects persist in space and time independent of one’s own perceptual and motor contact with them” (Smith 2005:280, italics added). Infants failed to understand that objects are self-contained totalities, which are constrained to have fixed and mutually exclusive locations in space and remain independent from their own actions and perceptions. According to Piaget, without this concept, the sensory evidence showing the shift in location was meaningless to the infant, as it could not be filtered through an appropriate object scheme. Piaget’s explanation for the A-not-B error thus relies on the same sort of explicit representationalist account that we have critiqued.

Smith and Thelen’s Dynamic Cognition Approach

Smith (2005) and Thelen (2000) (for a review of the evidence, see Smith et al. 1999) provide a more satisfactory theoretical interpretation of the phenomenon. They explain the “error” as emerging from “repetitive perceptual-motor activity in novel or difficult contexts.” In their account, “repetitive activity strengthens the memory for a particular action, thereby increasing the likelihood that the action will be repeated again. The more consistent and repetitive the initial perceptual-motor acts, the more likely the perseverative behavior” (Thelen 2000:18). Thus, in the Smith-Thelen rendering, rather than stemming from the *lack* of an object scheme, the A-not-B error results from the acquisition of a set of motor-schematic dispositions to act in particular way.

We propose that this explanation of the A-not-B error provides convergent evidence consistent with the fundamental pragmatist insight that belief is specified as a habit that emerges from repetitive experience. It is also consistent with the insight that beliefs are perceptual and sensory-motor and nonpropositional in the traditional sense. In this sense, the error occurs because past embodied expectations and “practical beliefs” about the stability of the world are violated when the experimenter “conspires” to suddenly change the external makeup of the situation. However, they remain *ecologically* rational in natural settings where actors are able to slow down the environmental pace of change so that it comes to correspond with their beliefs (Martin 2010).

The act of grabbing is best conceived as a motivated, *belief-based judgment* generated by the infant’s own “projection” into the current state of affairs of a belief in a possible future, which is conditioned to correspond at a prereflexive, directly embodied level with her past

experiences in that particular action context. The fact that the infant may have perceived a change in the current setup of the phenomenally experienced world does not help her inhibit the most powerful, already habituated belief that the object is still located in the original A location.

In this way, success or failure in the A-not-B task depends on processes that occur in real time (not in the suspended time of ideational deliberation) and that are keyed to generating action in the world. This explanation does not require—like Piaget’s (1965) original account did—any resort to the notion of an “object concept.” More importantly, the belief that the object is at a given location is not a self-contained proposition stored in the infant’s head but an active pattern of movements, sensory stimulation, and motor schemes activated through her presence in the local setting. The “belief” that the world is a certain way is thus “stored” directly in the contextually habituated pattern of perception and postural schemes that have been instantiated in the past leading up to the present moment. This means that “the motor plan, necessary in any account of infants’ actual performance in this task, in and of itself, implements a ‘belief’ on the part of the system that objects persist in space and time.” In this manner, “sensory-motor processes create a stability in the system that from the outside might look like a belief about objects but that is instead embedded in—not mediating between—processes of perceiving and acting” (Smith 2005:281–82).

Importantly, Smith (2005) and Thelen (2000) note that the multiple object locations provide the infant with “a continuous *field* of decision possibilities depending on the location and differing salience of the two targets at A and B” (Smith 2005:20, italics added). In this manner we can think of the decision to grab as “a cognitive act. It is based on motivation, recent and longer term memory, and the qualities of the immediate visual input. It is also an embodied act” (Smith 2005:20). Decision making from this perspective is not the result of reasoning from an explicit set of beliefs that contain a “model of the world” but from treating the world as consistent with a history of environmental conditioning.

Of course, it is conceivable that the A-not-B error is simply an artifact of the immature cognitive system of the infant and therefore not applicable to adult cognition. However, Thelen (2000:24) argues that this is not the case. Instead, it, and other perceptual and motor processes characteristic of the developing infant, should be seen “not as only stages or weigh stations to higher forms of cognition but truly as the dynamic grounding of cognition throughout the lifespan.” Smith (2005:288) concurs, noting that “the A not B error may not be so important for what it tells us about infantile incompetence as for what it tells us about cognition [in general] as fundamentally bound to the real-time bodily processes through which we act in a physical world.”

A TYPOLOGY OF STATES OF BELIEF

While the A-not-B error reveals the source of nonrepresentational belief, it also depicts the elementary form in which belief relates an actor to a situation through anticipation. The effect of both successful anticipation through belief and the misfiring of belief are put on stark display in the experiment, particularly when the infant “grabs and misses.” With beliefs formed to anticipate the object in the A location, the infant *mismatches* with the situation when the object is placed in the B location. In what follows, we build on this rudimentary framework—which we treat as an accurate *phenomenological description* of belief in action—to distinguish four types of belief-based relationship between actors and the potentially asynchronous conditions that, as pragmatists and field theorists agree, necessarily situate the performance of action.¹⁷ Our goal here is to offer this as a replacement to the standard problematic of accounting for “degrees of belief” by focusing on the level of “commitment”

actors have to a given belief system (Borhek and Curtis 1975; Rydgren 2009). We propose instead that *illusio*, *creativity*, *hysteresis*, and *radical doubt* index different levels of fit between beliefs and situations.

Importantly, we do not eliminate the folk-psychological vocabulary, neither do we completely collapse belief into action.¹⁸ Rather, the practical categories constitutive of the FP intentional lexicon (“believing,” “hoping,” “wanting,” “being interested in,” “being motivated by,” “doubting,” “being uncertain,” “second guessing”) can be rethought as pragmatic indicators of the degree of *integration* between actors and their conditions of action, in the same manner that the infant’s response to the A-not-B error reveals her degree of belief-based integration with her conditions of action, consisting in this case of beliefs keyed toward the A location and the object placed in either the A or B location.

Under this formulation, folk-psychological attitudes that the representationalist model treats as antecedent *causes* of action become instead an experiential *outcome* or corollary of empirically specifiable factors retrieved from the relation between a believing (habituated) actor and a dynamically unfolding situation, revealing a fundamental compatibility between these two “vocabularies of belief” (see Leschziner and Green 2013:135). We argue that within the broader framework of belief in action, both are applicable to two different types of belief/situation mismatch: the first involving action with a *dispositional* orientation and the second involving action with a *reflexive* orientation. In this sense, our classification of ideal-typical belief-action relations only dispenses with the substantive folk-theoretical assumption that internal mental representations must play a role in producing normatively or culturally sanctioned action.

Figure 1 distributes the four types of belief-situation relationships on two axes: first, according to whether they involve a belief/situation match (when practical beliefs anticipate and “objectively fit” situational exigencies) or mismatch (when these beliefs conflict with or misfire relative to those conditions), and second, whether they involve a dispositional (pre-reflexive, automatic, nondeclarative) orientation to action or a reflexive (conscious, intentional, declarative) orientation.

Illusio

Illusio is the baseline (or optimal) condition in which practical beliefs self-fulfill a reality that maintains a tight correspondence (or “ontological complicity”) with the objective tendencies found in situations. In this regard, the actor’s belief in his or her capacities for action is durable to the extent that what he or she “confers upon . . . as things” through anticipation *actually assume* the “form of things” in the forthcoming moment (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 2002:512).¹⁹

In this condition, conscious deliberation (or deduction from explicit principles) does not motivate action. Rather, action is dispositionally motivated by felt imperatives made present through relationships in a field of action and actors with the capacity to respond to them (Martin 2011). Among other things, this results in an actor’s prereflexive and non-negotiable sense that his or her motivated action is *worth* doing. As Bourdieu (2000:135) describes it, *illusio* is a “way of being in the world” that “constitutes the field [of action] as the space of a game.”

The folk-psychological vocabulary that fits this condition includes those traits that appear most constitutive of the actor’s subjectivity, such as the pragmatic category of “self-identity” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In addition, the trustworthiness of beliefs as shaped by the successful interplay of habit and environment results in the (Weberian) folk psychology of “having an interest” and being guided by a “value” (Bourdieu 1990:66). These “values” should not be taken as evidence of a subjective choice on the part of the actor or determination by a cultural model or norm-instituting structure. Rather, they indicate a *relational* dynamic at

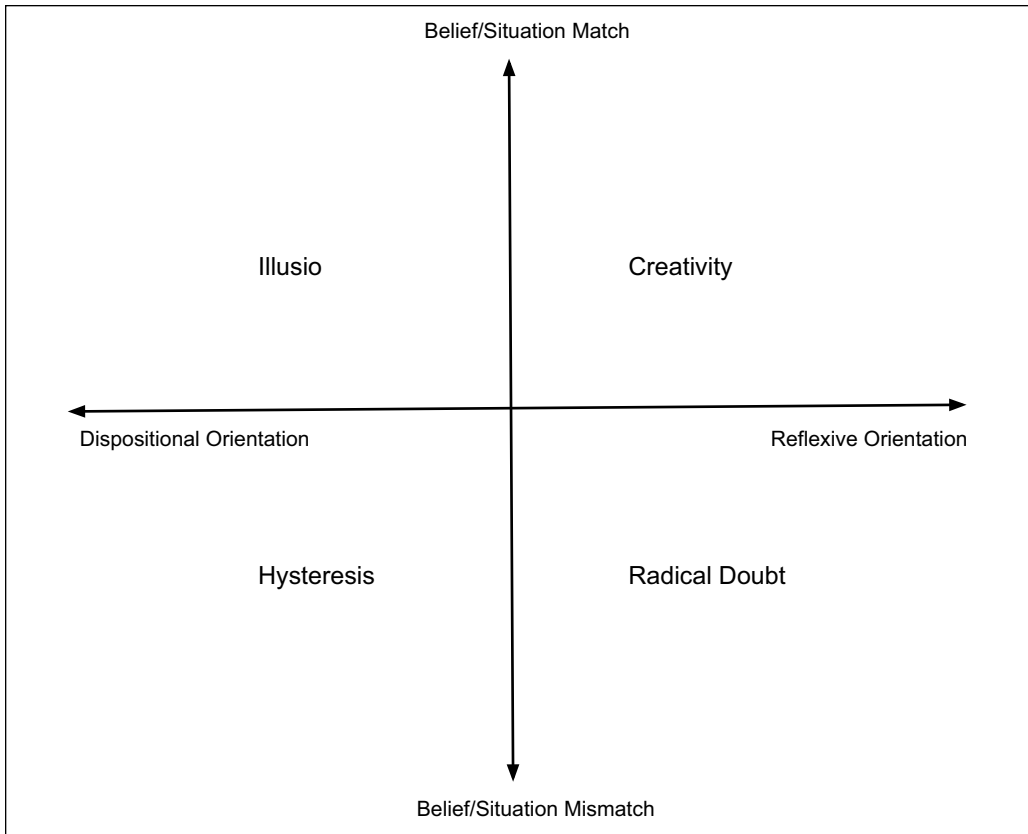


Figure 1. Belief/situation relationships and corresponding folk-psychological states.

work in which practical belief (temporally structured) allows for perceptual and practical fluency toward an “end-in-view” that organizes a field of action. The more fluent the action, the more valued the goal becomes (Reber et al. 2004).

Thus, instead of saying that “we all strive for X because it is an instantiation of some value,” when the condition of *illusio* applies, it is more accurate to say that “what we call a value is something that we happen to be striving for” (Martin 2011:250). More generally, identity is not a culturally derived “self-understanding” consciously held by the actor, presumably at all times (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000:17). Instead, it designates the actor’s practical sense of “social position” as acquired through belief-based participation in a “nonproblematic” field of action, perhaps only at *one* time.

The “socially situated family group” is (in normal circumstances) the initial site for the constitution of a relationship to the world with *illusio* (Bourdieu 2000: 166–67). The practical beliefs that enable this initial *illusio* are transformed as actors move between this “domestic field” and others. The “transformation through which one becomes a miner, a farmer, a priest, a musician, a teacher, or an employer is long, continuous and imperceptible” (Bourdieu 2000:165). Yet the end-state (in ideal circumstances) is a condition of *illusio* that obtains in relationship to a secondary environment as a nonproblematic field. When actors have been firmly imprinted in the family with a disposition for “being fundamentally realistic,” that end-state recovers a more primitive *illusio* (he or she feels “in the right place”) as the actor self-fulfills a reality to which he or she is “as pre-adapted as possible” (Bourdieu 1990:61).²⁰

Creativity

Like *illusio*, creativity also involves a belief-situation match, though it involves a reflexive orientation toward action. In other words, a reality is self-fulfilled through belief in action that is only *partially* prereflexive. Creativity is linked closely with “indeterminate” or “unsettled” (Dewey [1938] uses the terms interchangeably) situations that lack the certitude of *illusio*. A heightened degree of consciousness (or “conscious control” of action) and deliberation characterize this condition, as actors adapt or change habits in order to “make concrete” deep-seated, dispositional commitments. In this sense, *illusio* is a necessary condition for creativity: “No creative action would be possible without the bedrock of pre-reflective aspirations towards which the reflection on the concretization of values is oriented” (Joas 1996:163). The “fundamental belief” (which Joas also classifies as “corporeal”) in a field of action drives actors’ efforts to be creative in ways that retain a dispositional state of *illusio*. For instance, chefs in a culinary field can deliberate over and develop new recipes while *not* deliberating over their fundamental (and unwilling) belief in the field; actors in a sexual field can deliberately augment their appearance in order to improve their sexual appeal without questioning their prereflexive commitment to the sexual field (Leschziner and Green 2013).

The folk psychology that applies to this condition is characterized both by attentiveness and increased awareness of environmental affordances. As Dewey (1938:109) writes, the creative “pattern of inquiry” is marked most of all by an actor having “ideas” (the passive voice is important here): “Ideas are anticipated consequences (forecasts) of what will happen when certain operations are executed under and with respect to observed conditions.” They involve deliberation about possible consequences. In creative situations, actors *get ideas* in correspondence with a close “observation of the facts” at hand and their suggested meanings. “The more the facts of the case come to light in consequence of being subjected to observation, the clearer and more pertinent become the conceptions of the way the problem constituted by these facts is to be dealt with” (Dewey 1938:109).

Elsewhere, Dewey (1905) gives the example of hearing a “fearsome noise” and not knowing its source. The actor becomes highly attuned to her surroundings in this situation and has ideas about what the noise might be. Ultimately she concludes that the noise is just a shade tapping against a window and not a prowler and is therefore “practically indifferent to [her] welfare” (Dewey 1905:395). The actor’s heightened perception and flow of ideas ends as her habitual engagement (as unreflected belief) in the situation returns, and she has no further need to forecast ideas about possible scenarios (see also Joas 1996:128–29). A creative situation like this can last “a fraction of a second, an hour or long years,” that is, until the indeterminacy that sparked the situation is settled once again (Peirce [1878] 1992:128).

But can creative situations be willingly created, or do they instead have to be sparked by a “surprise” that leads to an *unwilled* dissolution of belief? We can shed light on this question by noting that deliberate creativity is built on a foundation of prereflexive belief. Chefs in a culinary field or players in a sexual field may be deliberately creative, but their motivation requires an unwilling situational shift. More precisely, the motivation to be creative is a “felt imperative” associated with a position that is threatened or undergoing change: for instance, a competing chef comes up with a new recipe or the aging process threatens a person’s sexual appeal (Leschziner and Green 2013).

The presumption is that creativity (even deliberate creativity) follows on the heels of a dissolution of belief by “surprise” or, in the same manner, when a new dynamic of imperatives is introduced into the field (Peirce [1878] 1992:129). This removes the realistic bias from actor beliefs (their hold on the field) by enabling their recognition of a broader array of possibilities, thus allowing them to *deliberately* forecast ideas about possible scenarios. A

further instance is when actors have yet to form realistic beliefs. This creativity is evidenced by new entrants to a field and involves breaking the “patterns of regularity” (or “laws”) that are the aggregate effect of realistic belief in action (Martin 2011:331; see also Gross 2009).

Hysteresis

On the surface, hysteresis may seem closely related to creativity; however, where creativity ultimately involves the effort to “concretize” or self-fulfill deep-seated aspirations that constitute a “fundamental belief,” hysteresis is highlighted by the absence of creativity in the face of objective forces that *block* a correspondence between the reality that actors attempt to self-fulfill and the objective tendencies of the situation. In contrast to *illusio*, what an actor “confers upon . . . as things” through anticipatory beliefs *don't* assume the “form of things” in the forthcoming moment (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 2002:512). As a result, and like the habituated infant, the actor “grabs and misses.”

This kind of scenario is

most clearly seen when the sense of a probable future is belied and when dispositions ill-adjusted to the objective changes because of a *hysteresis effect* (Marx's favorite example of this was Don Quixote) are negatively sanctioned because the environment they encounter is too different from the the one to which they are objectively adjusted. (Bourdieu 1990:62, italics added).²¹

As actors attempt to self-fulfill a reality “preadjusted” to specific conditions, they retain a dispositional orientation to action, and their involvement in the situation can therefore feel like *illusio*. Yet that capacity to respond to this new set of effects (dynamically structured in a field) becomes painfully obvious in this instance, as (to an observer) what actors try to self-fulfill clashes so directly with the objective tendencies a situation makes available or “calls for.” The practical beliefs that allow actors to smoothly anticipate the tendencies in one objective environment act as a sunk cost in this different environment (see Martin 2011: 266).

The “shock” that comes from this is unlike the “surprise” that applies to creativity. As Bourdieu (1984:144) puts it (with the paradigmatic case of the student revolts of May 1968 in mind), the “hysteresis effect” does not lead to creativity that can retool a habit in the face immediate pressures, but rather to an attitude of “total refusal . . . an anti-institutional cast of mind [denunciating] the tacit assumptions of the social order, a practical suspension of doxic adherence . . . and a withholding of the investments which are a necessary condition for its functioning.”

This clash between practical beliefs that are “hysteretical” because they are preadapted to a past environment and ill adjusted to the present but unable to be changed or retooled puts actors in a “critical state.” This disrupts the “pre-perceptual anticipations and expectations that form the basis of . . . the perceptions and actions of common sense” (Bourdieu 1988:182). The result is often a state of *cynicism*, as the actor is afforded a “margin of freedom” from objective conditions but participates in a situation while cognizant of how it fails belief. Hysteresis also puts actors in a position in which “critical discourses” that attempt to *discursively* break an “immediate adherence” to the world can become compelling (Bourdieu 2000:236). However, whatever effect this representational belief system has on action is conditional on the actor's *already* having been placed in a “critical state” because of hysteresis. Indeed, in situations (globally) characterized by the radical degree of mismatch found in hysteresis, other sources of non-decisionist belief formation, including social authority and emotional effervescence, become effective (Collins 2004; Martin 2002).

Radical Doubt

The state of radical doubt brings the actor's disposition to be "fundamentally realistic" into starkest relief. Here, the belief-situation mismatch does not arise from beliefs that are out of sync with the temporality of the situation (as in hysteresis), but rather from the complete *absence* of a realistic commitment to the world. Without a realistic attunement to the chances available in a situation, which provides a *practical* fluency with forthcoming moments, everything seems possible, as no particular set of possibilities seem "inscribed in the present." Lacking any *sens de l'avenir*, actors confront a fully contingent field of action and respond with an entirely reflexive orientation to action. Able to entertain and perceive all options, they cannot practically self-fulfill the reality of any of them (see Merleau-Ponty [1962] 2002: 507ff). In this instance, they lack the "minimum hold on the present" made available through realistic belief "which is the precondition for a deliberate effort to take hold of the future" (Bourdieu [1963] 1979:69).

The folk-psychological vocabulary that applies to radical doubt is characterized most of all by a wildly incoherent sense of identity—an "identity crisis" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:2)—that lacks the durability and consistency of a "sense of position." Actors pass easily from wild fantasy to dejected resignation, as they are not practically sensitive to the qualities of action environments. A kind of generalized "anomie" applies to the condition of radical doubt, as there is no force (like sense of position or habit) that can lend the actor a coherent subjectivity sustainable across time (see Martin 2011:319–20)).

In contrast to hysteresis, however, actors do not pass into a "critical state" in this condition. Lacking an "open and rational temporal consciousness," they cannot develop "actions, judgments and aspirations in relation to a life-plan." They tend to "escape into daydreams or fatalistic resignation" rather than entertain revolutionary aspirations (Bourdieu [1963] 1979:62).

Radical doubt appears most often in instances of social displacement and rapid social change. These are instances when the objective environment changes so radically that even hysteresis (as an attempt to preserve the past) cannot allow a relative hold on reality. Bourdieu's theorization of radical doubt is rooted in his ethnology of colonial Algeria during the 1950s (see Bourdieu [1963] 1979), a time when Kabyle peasants confronted the wholesale "uprooting" of their traditional lifestyle as a result of the "modernizing forces" of capitalism and colonial authority, not to mention colonial war.

Ironically, the condition of radical doubt he describes shares distinct characteristics with the "scholastic" condition, or the condition of being freed from the "immediate urgencies" of practice and therefore able to remake the world as a "problem of representation" (Bourdieu 2000:16). This is the situation in which rational choice seems possible because, removed from the foreclosing effects of belief, which allows commitment by omitting options, all options can be perceived (Ermakoff 2010). However, and like radical doubt in this respect, the scholastic "*lack of realism*" paralyzes action. Being aware of all the options or (likewise) being unable to automatically omit *any* options in both cases forbids a practical handhold on situations and their objective tendencies.²²

ACCOUNTING FOR BELIEF IN ACTION SUBSTANTIVE SETTINGS

Given the largely conceptual treatment provided here, the reader may ask whether there is a substantive explanatory incentive for going along with the seemingly counterintuitive approach to belief underlying this typology. More specifically, the key question becomes whether we can retain the concept of belief while distancing it from the FP accounting scheme's focus on deductive logic and internal mental representation. To demonstrate that

we can, consider the following two phenomena: first, the “mystery” of why poor women in the United States have become increasingly likely to do something that clearly goes against “their best interest” (as conceived by the usual institutional authorities): conceiving children out of wedlock, sometimes at an age (mid to late teens) that would simply be unthinkable to their middle-class counterparts; second, the decision of poor men confronting the “microsocial problems” of life in the barrios of Caracas, Venezuela, to convert to Evangelical Protestantism, and the mystery of whether people (like them) can “really decide to believe in a religion because it is in their best interest to do so” (Smilde 2007:7).

“Choosing” to Be a (Poor) Mother

Edin and Kefalas (2005:5) have rightly referred to the first problem as the “biggest demographic mystery of the last half of the twentieth century.”²³ The question here becomes is early childbearing an action driven by belief?

In the traditional formulation in cultural sociology, beliefs link to identity (and subsequently motivation) as reflexive propositions that take the self as an object (“I believe that I am . . .”) having explicit action projects located in the phenomenologically distant future (e.g., “aspirations,” “goals,” “plans”). In most accounts, this reflective “belief that” is seen as directly linked to action. In the account that we propose, beliefs link primarily to habitualized capacities that are normally nonreflexive and only *secondarily* to reflective statements of identity. In other words, through habitualization and conditionalization, persons acquire beliefs in the form of dispositions for action (“I believe that I can . . .”) that need not (but may) be linked to discursively formulated identities in order to generate coherent lines of action. In addition, once fixated via habituation and the related acquisition of action capacities, these beliefs will play an independent role beyond the reflective inferences that an outside observer might draw based on reflective beliefs communicated through language.

If belief were defined in the traditional sense (e.g., belief that conceiving children before marriage is the right thing to do or belief that marriage is not a necessary component of the definition of family), then this early childbearing among inner-city poor women would not seem like a belief-driven action. After spending five years eliciting the reflexive self-understandings of poor inner-city young women, Edin and Kefalas (2005:6) found that these women were no different than their middle-class counterparts. Most aspired to get married and believed that an intact household was the best place to raise a child. Holding on to the representational (or propositional) conception of belief would therefore only deepen the mystery.

What Edin and Kefalas’s (2005:11) research reveals is not that the reflexive valuation of children *drives* the early conception behavior; instead, most of the performative acts of valuation are post hoc as revealed by the fact that they invariably take the form of *if-then counterfactuals*. Edin and Kefalas refer to this as an “odd logic”: *If I didn’t have children, then “I’d be dead or in jail,” or “I’d still be out partying,” or “I’d be messed up on drugs,” and so on.* Children emerge as the solution to the dilemma of avoiding prefigured (negative) outcomes for women placed in a tough situation. This logic would indeed be “odd” if it was descriptive of the actual decision-making process of Edin and Kefalas’s informants.

But as we have argued, this “logic” is descriptive of *nobody’s* decision-making process for the simple fact that belief does not link to the future assignment of outcome probabilities in the way described by standard decision theory. This in fact falsifies the way belief enters into the explanation by reversing the underlying process. For instance, in Edin and Kefalas’s (2005) telling, the reader is invited to draw the inference that inner-city poor women are *motivated* to have children early in life *because* children are seen as the means of avoiding

the counterfactual negative outcomes reported in the interview context. In this way, we are right back to the flawed representationalist model of belief. Fortunately, Edin and Kefalas's own exemplary empirical work reveals that it is not belief as a reflective assessment of the link between childbearing (as an action) and the "utility" associated with the probability of two counterfactual worlds (one with children; the other without) that *drives* the "decision" to have children.

First, it is clear that there is no *single point* at which a "decision" to have children is made. Instead, various micro-activities joined into a single "flow of action" (e.g., front-stoop flirting, "jumping" into unprotected sexual relationships during the early stages of courtship) almost inexorably lead to pregnancy without childbearing arising as an explicit goal.²⁴ This does not mean that childbearing is not *anticipated*, it is just that this anticipation treats it almost as a *fait accompli* rather than as a phenomenologically distant goal that requires effort, planning, and "motivation" to reach (Silver 2011).

Second, and in one of the most perceptive parts of their empirical work, Edin and Kefalas (2005) note how the act of childbearing cannot be decoupled from a nonreflective, habitualized belief, acquired early in life, in the capacity to be a good (capable) mother. In this way, while inner-city poor women may not differ much from middle-class women at the level of *reflective* belief, they are worlds apart at the level of the *nonreflective* beliefs underlying their capacity to mother (as an activity). This kind of belief, as we have argued, should be kept distinct from their reflexive capacity to think of themselves "as mothers" (as a reflexive self-identity).

Edin and Kefalas (2005) admit as much when they note that the key issue is not about belief *in* culturally approved symbols (e.g., "the sanctity of marriage") that accounts for the "demographic mystery" of inner-city poor women's early childbearing behavior. Instead, it is the (usually nonreflective) belief *in their capacities* to mother: "In motherhood, young women who live in the city's hardscrabble core can find a powerful source of validation, for they believe that childrearing is something they can be good at, a meaningful and valued identity they can successfully realize" (Edin and Kefalas 2005:176).

Note that in this analytic description, reflective identity is put in the right place in the causal process as an *outcome* of preexisting beliefs possessed by the actor as a set of proficiencies for (successful, fluid) action in relation to a field ("the neighborhood") and a set of valued social objects (children). This interpretation is not only more empirically consistent with the evidence but also more phenomenologically consistent with the way in which informants describe their own flow of action and decision making.

Choosing to Believe

We have argued that a belief-in-action approach sidesteps the representationalist problematic of the relation between belief and intention (or "deciding to believe"). Under this formulation, belief formation can never result from an act of choice, since this would imply that persons adopt beliefs not because they have the right "reasons", but due to extraneous consequences unrelated to the validity of the belief. This represents a problem for representationalist (and voluntarist) accounts because it means that if a person believes by choice, then there must be some mechanism that allows them *to forget* that they ever made that choice in order for their state of belief to be genuine (Bourdieu 1990; Williams 1973).

We argued that this is a misleading problematic that appears when conceptualizing belief as an abstract representation ("propositions") toward which persons have a given attitude. Once belief is conceptualized as a species of habit, however, it is easy to see that by the time a person is assenting to abstract propositions, they *already* believe in a way that is more

fundamental than assent to the abstract statement. Because belief is always rooted in concrete situations, assent to propositional statements is always derivative and only connected to action after the fact.

Smilde (2007), in his exemplary study of Protestant converts in Venezuela, tackles this problematic head on. Surprisingly, he opts to confront Elster's (1983) challenge directly, arguing that it is in fact possible to *choose to believe* (Smilde 2007:8). In Smilde's argument, Evangelical converts, via a cultural process of narrative reconstruction, are able to *forget their decision to believe*, thus meeting Elster's (largely hypothetical) condition for a situation in which a belief could be both intentional and binding.

Smilde's (2007) argument is ambitious and provocative and seemingly at odds with the enactive approach that we advocate. However, we argue that this seeming incompatibility is more illusion than substance. While Smilde presents his theoretical solution—cultural narratives of supernatural agency provide a mechanism via which belief-decisions can be erased—as an *empirical* conclusion from his field research, it is important to note that this conclusion is largely speculative. Nowhere does Smilde actually witness such a memory erasure event if only because the very nature of the mechanism proposed (involving reconstruction from a stated narrative) dooms it to be an *ex post* postulation introduced by the analyst.

Crucially, by making a cultural narrative play the “Orwellian” (Dennett 1991:125) role of master rewriter of the past, Smilde (2007) comes perilously close to a model of culture as a mystifying veil hiding the subject's own complicity in his or her self-deception, a formulation that he decisively (and correctly) rejects at the outset (Smilde 2007:10–11). Even more importantly, Smilde's theoretical solution is an ingenious fix applied to a non-problem: The intention-erasure account is largely unnecessary given his own conceptualization of the belief-formation process, which is much closer to belief in action than to a representationalist account.

Precisely because Smilde (2007) rejects a pure “contemplative” account of belief, there is no need to presume that persons *choose* to believe in the first place and that this choice is later elided under the weight of a supernatural agency narrative. For instance, Smilde (2007:143) acknowledges that via the interplay of “canonicity and particularity,” persons never really assent to belief systems as abstract (representationalist) meaning systems. Instead, the “[e]vangelical narrative predicates religious significance of the evangelistic encounter itself.” In this respect, assent to the belief system is generally “an assent to a definition of the present situation more than an abstract leap of faith” (Smilde 2007:144ff). This assent is not contemplative but largely situational.

In this respect, a more parsimonious account would take his (newly Evangelical) informant's phenomenological description of his or her belief formation process as involving very little subjective volition. Under this description, persons never “choose” to believe, but are instead “called” to believe by an external force. Instead of assenting, they “surrender,” are “called,” or are “chosen” to believe (Smilde 2007:146). These narratives, rather than “minimizing” the individual's responsibility for his or her belief, and thereby increasing that belief's external validity, actually point to the fact that a person ends up in a “state of belief” precisely because by the time they reflect on the process, the external validity of the belief is no longer problematic because it has been *enacted*.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have developed a novel conceptualization of belief that draws on pragmatism and practice theory. Our formulation aims to move the predominant understanding of

belief away from the representationalist or folk-psychological accounting scheme and toward one rooted in practical and embodied action in the world. In our proposed *belief in action* model, the notion of belief is recast as anticipatory or synchronized involvement in situations in which the intrasubjective sense of belief becomes a function of the successful enactment of habit. Belief is thus enacted in a field of objective tendencies, constituted by the “pushes and pulls” that serve as the non-neutral or “dynamic” conditions that provide action with an irreducible temporality. Within this temporal flow, actors attempt to “self-fulfill” a reality via the practical enactment of belief, bringing to fruition something that may or may not have reality in a forthcoming moment. Variable “degrees” of unreflective belief result from this process depending on how successfully actors synchronize with situational tendencies. We’ve developed this framework by showing how four ideal-typical variations in the belief-situation relationship can be identified according to how they provide the emergent conditions for the types of experiences tracked, with varying degrees of success, by the folk-psychological vocabulary.

One way to read our argument is as a kind of “replacement” critique of the FP accounting scheme characteristic of almost all forms of social-scientific explanation of action. DBO and soft rational choice theories of action are the most explicitly folk psychological, although the latent influence of this action-accounting scheme extends to all interpretive approaches to the explanation of action. We have argued that the most problematic feature of folk psychology is its commitment to a representationalist “symbol manipulation” model of cognition, in which the interaction between actor interiority and cultural systems involves deductive logic. By contrast, our approach develops a new way of thinking about the relationship between the actor, his or her capacity for action, and the conditions found in his or her situation or field of action that go beyond the representationalist problematic. In this article, we have attempted to capture these insights by reframing the process of belief formation as non-decisionist, involving habituation or conditionalization to environmental characteristics and tendencies, through which actors acquire beliefs as they acquire capacities for action.

There are two ways to judge our efforts to at least partially replace the representationalist model of belief with belief in action. First, from a pragmatist standpoint the main problem with folk psychology is that it functions as an indubitable principle that pins action-explanations to a foundation (Brandom 2013). Our account, by contrast, attempts to establish a critical distance from folk psychology. As Peirce would argue, doubting FP in this regard engages the possibility of scientifically (e.g., democratically) “fixating” new criteria for developing meaningful and *causal* accounts of action. Second, and relatedly, our approach demonstrates that the effort to establish intrasubjective validity (“at the level of meaning”) for sociological accounts of action need not ignore “first-person” reports of action (and even abstractions like folk psychology itself) even while still objectivating them as part of social circumstances. The Weberian ambition of rendering other subjectivities intelligible is realized here through a nondualistic and, we claim, empirically plausible way of making understanding synonymous with explanation.

NOTES

1. Critical realists also draw from Davidson’s (1980) argument. Here, beliefs constitute a crucial part of what Bhaskar calls the “principle of psychic ubiquity” according to which “states of the mind” serve as the irreducible foundation of agency (see Bhaskar 1998:96–97).
2. The sequence linking belief and action, mediated by goals/desires, is so common in scholarly and folk accounts of action that it is referred to as the *law* of folk psychology (FP): “*x* desires that *p*; *x* believes that if *q* then *p*; *x* has the opportunity to bring it about that *q*; therefore *x* brings it about that *q*” (see Bernstein 1971: 277ff; Churchland 1981:71; Rosenberg 1995:37). Plug any desire/belief combination

- into p and q and you can retrieve a “common sense” meaning of action (Fodor 1987:xii). For parallel examples of the FP “law” in sociology, see (Reed 2011:160–61) and Hedstrom (2005:120ff).
3. Note that the concept of “propositional attitudes” is indistinguishable from the classical notion of “ideas” found in post-classical action theory (Parsons 1938). Both are content-bearing states to which the actor stands in a certain relationship (e.g., acceptance/nonacceptance).
 4. Dilthey’s development of *verstehen* recommends a similar mode of analysis: to “objectify” the contents of life as the logic of ideas; this “spiritual object” then gives access to the “psychic nexus” of action (Dilthey 1985:106–07, 187). The best example of the “logic of ideas” approach remains Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis. Here, the intrasubjective effects on “self-confidence” (or the creation of what Weber calls the “inner habitus” of Puritans) of systematic work in a calling is taken to be the deductive conclusion reached by actors who believe in both the idea of predestination and Luther’s decree of the moral value of work (Weber [1904–05] 2002: 64ff, 202). Interestingly, the logical analysis of delimited “concepts” identified through language in this sense was Gottlob Frege’s method of “extruding thoughts from the mind,” and it stands at the basis of analytic philosophy. It remains distinct in this respect from the competing approach developed by Frege’s young rival, Edmund Husserl, and his phenomenology (Dummett 1996).
 5. In the following, we argue that our model of belief formation serves to highlight important preconditions for the exercise of other processes that form beliefs outside of decision, specifically authority (Martin 2002) and emotion (Collins 2004).
 6. Henderson (1993) claims that the Davidsonian “reasons” framework should be treated as a “nomic generalization” that is continuous with all action-explanations.
 7. As Geertz (1975) argues, “common sense” is essentially a perseverative *accounting* system constructed of presuppositions invulnerable to disconfirmation. It does not encompass intuitibility. Commonsense accounts (like FP) can be highly intuitive, but only as post hoc explanatory schemes that are “totalizing” in their application (Geertz 1975:16). Here we distinguish common sense from intuition as *anschaulichkeit* (“intuitive accessibility”) or what field theorists (drawing on Gestalt psychologists) claim is a form of action-explanation that “[allows] others to inhabit a coherent world [and] ‘get’ the principles at work” but without the filtering effect of a nomic accounting scheme like FP (see Martin 2011:334).
 8. Hedström and Swedberg (1998:18) refer to the self-fulfilling prophecy as perhaps the “most famous of all mechanisms-based theories in sociology.”
 9. As Tavory and Eliasoph (2013:913) point out, this is particularly evident in conversation analysis, where turn-taking requires that actors “begin formulating their talk milliseconds before the other person’s turn ends” or begin acting according to an anticipatory belief about reality and not in pure (quasi-empiricist) reaction to it.
 10. Pragmatists have recommended that “the situation” replace the “means-ends schema” characteristic of the “Desire-Belief-Opportunity” (DBO) model as the “primary category of the theory of action” (Silver 2011:108; see also Joas 1996:160). While we accept the pragmatists’ claims for the “non-neutrality of situations,” we argue further that the conditions present in situations find a more global organization as the local environment of a larger field, with the relationship between actor and situation being the “encounter of two histories” (Bourdieu 2000:150ff, 160; see also Martin 2011:317).
 11. This is a practical case of the classic phenomenon dealt with by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1956) in the case of standard (reflective) “belief systems.” Our proposed prediction is the same as that of cognitive dissonance theory: When practical prophecy fails, actors stick (at least for medium term) with their beliefs rather than giving them up.
 12. The distinction between strong practice theory and what we might call “weaker” practice theory is that while the latter version focuses on *specific* social practices that are analytically distinguishable from individual actors (who are “carriers” of practices in this regard), strong practice theory is concerned with a transposable *capacity* to practice or generalized *way* of practicing (see Reckwitz 2002).
 13. The sense of reality attained through attunement to “objective chances” is most readily apparent in negative instances when people fail to acquire a “minimum hold on reality” (see Bourdieu [1963] 1979:62–69).
 14. This touches on many issues found in longstanding debates over the “habitus” concept in Bourdieu’s practice theory (see Lizardo 2004). Yet while the habitus is likewise formed of dispositions that are “objectively compatible and pre-adjusted” to the conditions of its formation, here we avoid that

discussion for the same reason that Bourdieu distanced himself from his early ([1972] 1977, 1990) formulation of habitus. In his last statement on the notion of habitus, far removed from the influence of the postwar Parisian intellectual field, Bourdieu (2000:210) pares it down almost entirely to refer to “that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forthcoming.” In certain essential respects, belief (in its nearly analogous effect on action) replaces the role of habitus in Bourdieu’s later work.

15. Ermakoff (2010:541) builds on this insight when he notes the existence of a unique “decisional conjuncture” that enables “a conscious mode of action whereby actors select a course of action after having assessed the probable consequences of alternative options.” This formulation, however, misses the central condition for this kind of decision making: the absence of belief that makes a “conscious decision” possible because it breaks the tendency toward realism (as a realistic claim on the future) and thus enables the perception of, and reflective evaluation between, all available options (instead of only those that are “realistic”).
16. For a demonstration of the A-not-B paradigm, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=lhHkJ3InQOE.
17. Martin puts this well when he claims that “the only way to reach conditions we cognize and wish for is to make use of conditions that we have not wished for” (2003:45; see also Merleau-Ponty [1962] 2002:509).
18. This means we recognize the “in corrigibility” of “first-person contemporaneous reports of thoughts and sensations” (Rorty 1970:413; (see also Martin 2011:290)).
19. The actor doesn’t, in this sense, “grab and miss.”
20. Everything else being equal, barring transformative changes to the secondary environment or political and economic forces that preclude the actor’s re-creative fulfillment of illusio.
21. Don Quixote tilted at windmills believing he was slaying giants. Chivalry seemed possible according to Quixote’s beliefs, and he self-fulfilled a reality guided by the archaic logic of the chivalrous quest. Naturally he expected to be rewarded for his knight-errantry. Yet the stark incongruity between his hysteretical beliefs and the reality of Habsburg Spain rendered his behavior baffling (for Sancho) and hilarious (for observers). Spectacularly disconfirmed in his pursuit though unable to shake his beliefs, Quixote returns to his village to immerse himself once again in the romantic literature that formed his beliefs and where, for this reason, he can alone “feel at home.”
22. In many ways, the fictional actor of mathematical decision theory, going through all objective possibilities in a dispassionate way, is a radical doubter. Research in the neuroscience of decision making reveals that such a radically “rational” actor is also a radically *impaired* actor. Perceiving all possibilities as equally plausible futures results in paralysis rather than decision (Bechara and Damasio 2005).
23. And, presumably, the first decade of the twenty-first century.
24. As Edin and Kefalas (2005:7) note “children are seldom conceived by explicit design, yet are rarely pure accident either.”

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