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TOMAS DA COSTA

Bergische Universität Wuppertal

tomasdacosta@gmail.com

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# BETWEEN RELEVANCE SYSTEMS AND TYPIFICATION STRUCTURES: ALFRED SCHUTZ ON HABITUAL POSSESSIONS

*abstract*

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*Alfred Schutz's characterization of the interrelationship between relevances and typifications includes an analysis of the phenomenon of habit that, in his theory of knowledge, clarifies some essential aspects of common-sense interpretations in the reality of daily life. In form of "habitual possessions", habit becomes in Schutz an element of knowledge, is characterized as a potential set of typical expectations to be actualized under typical circumstances. In this article, the constitution process of habitual possessions are analyzed considering its place in the interplay between relevance systems and typification structures in common-sense thinking - by pointing out that, for Schutz, habitual possessions must always be understood as habitual possessions of knowledge.*

*keywords*

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*Habitual possessions, familiarity, typification structures, systems of relevance, Alfred Schutz*

In his theory of the social distribution of knowledge, Alfred Schutz develops a concept of *habit* in order to clarify a specific aspect of the structuration of interpretative meaning in the reality of daily life. Within the framework of the action theory – specially in the Weberian tradition –, the term “habitual” is commonly used in contrast to the category of rationality. But, in Schutz, understood as “habitual possessions”, the phenomenon of habit becomes a central moment of the distribution of knowledge that functions as a binding notion between “familiarity”, “routine” and “interpretative meaning structures” or “systems of knowledge”. Schutz conceptualizes habit through an investigation of the interplay between emergence processes of systems of common-sense relevance and of structures of typification in the life-world. In the present study, the main interest is to show that habitual possessions must always be understood, from a Schutzian perspective, as habitual possessions of *knowledge*. In the first part, dedicated to a characterization of central functions of the habitual in Schutz’s phenomenology, the object of analysis is the way in which objects and behavior are *typically* interpreted. Then, the attention will turn to the results of processes of sedimentation, structuration and transmission of *relevance systems* involved in the *social* distribution of knowledge. After these two steps it will become clear in which sense, according to Schutz, habitual possessions make possible for interacting individuals to learn to recognize a specific typicality, as well as the sedimentation of familiarity and the structuration of relevance systems.

### 1. Types as Instruments of Habitualization

In his analysis of how knowledge and experiences are applied and sedimented in everyday life, one of Schutz’s interest is the constitution of general *types* characteristic of the common-sense thinking – in contrast to the “nonessential” types of the social sciences. Following Edmund Husserl’s description of typification processes, Schutz considers the world of everyday life as constituted from the outset through typified experiences and expectations of the individual. According to Husserl, even in the first experience of a given object, we have a *pre-knowledge* of some of its aspects and a scope of anticipated possibilities that guide, at some level, the process of experiencing. In *Experience and Judgment* Husserl writes: “The factual world of experience is experienced as a typified world. (...) What is given in experience as a new individual is first known in terms of what has been

genuinely perceived; it calls to mind the like (the similar). But what is apprehended according to type also has a horizon of possible experience (...) and has, therefore, types of attributes not yet experienced but expected. (...) To begin with, what is experienced about a perceived object in the progress of experience is straightway assigned 'apperceptively' to every perceived object with similar components of genuine perception" (Husserl 1976: 331). These anticipations are, in Schutz's words, "typically determinate by their *typical* pre-familiarity, as *typically* belonging, that is, to the total horizon of the same and identifiable objectivity, the actually apperceived properties of which show the same general *type*. Thus, it is the horizontal anticipations which predelineate the typical preacquaintedness and familiarity of the objectivity given to our apperception" (Schutz 1970: 94). Thus, to understand how these typifications are constituted and how they function, implies an understanding of the constitution of the *unquestioned*. In his article "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action", published for the first time in 1953, Schutz speaks of how types must be formed in order to determinate what individuals consider natural, and indicates an important aspect of typification processes. As he points out: "in the natural attitude of daily life we are concerned merely with certain objects standing out over against the unquestioned field of pre-experienced other objects, and the result of the selecting activity of our mind is to determine which particular characteristics of such an object are individual and which typical ones (...). The construction consists, figuratively speaking, in the suppression of the primes as being irrelevant, and this, incidentally, is characteristic of typifications of all kinds" (Schutz 1962: 9; 21). Grasping the meaning of objects implicates, in other words, ignoring some particularizing traits, aspects or features of it that are not important for the specific context or purpose in which the object becomes *thematic*, in which is manipulated or arises for consciousness. Here lies the essence of typification: "Typifying consists in passing by what makes the individual unique and irreplaceable" (Schutz 1964: 234). In any typification process, qualities of the object are perceived in reference to a pre-conceived *type* of bundle aspects; a recollection of similar objectivities constitutes a ground of typicality for the experiencing as of an object of same type. Now, this selectivity or suppression shows that perception implicates choice, but, in this process, at the level of *passivity*, presupposing, as described by Schutz in "Types and Eidos in Husserl's Late Philosophy" of 1959, an apperceptive "automatism" which seems, for us, to underlie every process of *habitualization*: "No apperception is merely *instantaneous* and transient; any apperception becomes a part of habitual knowledge as a *permanent* result" (Schutz 1970: 96).

Indeed, as Lester Embree indicates, it is possible to identify different usages of the term “type” in Schutz’s phenomenology. In his theory of typification, Schutz speaks, following Max Weber, of “ideal types” as concepts or constructs of common-sense as well as of scientific thinking, since his interest, in many of his writings, is also of methodological nature. As Embree points out, Schutz uses “typification” and “typicality” in “broad significations that include both concepts of type, but with the former tending both as a noun and with reference to interpretation to express the narrower signification of ‘ideal type’ and the latter tending to express the narrower signification of Husserl’s ‘empirical type’” (Embree 2012: 126). Yet, as mentioned previously, Schutz’s concept of typification structures has also an origin in Edmund Husserl’s theory of types, where *the habitual can already be found as related to the notion of typicality*. For instance, in Husserl’s *Experience and Judgement*, as shown above, typicality is described as genetically pre-constituted in past experiences, forming, following Schutz’s interpretation, habits or “latent habitual possessions, and are called forth or awakened by a passive synthesis of congruence if we apperceive actually a similar object. At the same time, by apperceptive transference a set of anticipations is created which attach themselves to the givenness of a newly encountered objectivity of the same type” (Schutz 1970: 110). In *Krisis*, Husserl, according to Schutz, modifies and complements some aspects of his theory of typicality and stresses the typical regularity in the changeability of qualities and of the position of objects in space and time, it is to say that under typical circumstances some objects behave similarly (Husserl 1976: 22), or, as Schutz puts it, that they have *habits*: “The notion of typicality as used in the *Krisis* is the form in which the objects within our intuitive environment – the *Lebenswelt* – together with their properties and their changes are given to our natural attitude. This form is that of a vacillating approximation. All regularities, even the causal ones, belong to the typical ‘habit’ in which things behave, as it were, under typical similar circumstances“ (Schutz 1970: 111). This problem of the different usages of the term “type” is also addressed by Ronald Cox, who suggests: “The automatic intending of typifications in perceptual experience founds the grasping of eidetic concepts (...). It is, then, genuinely the founding level of the actional processes. The usage of the term ‘typification’ should accordingly be restricted to the level of automaticity” (Cox 1978: 172). In any case, we always find “typification” referred, at first, to everyday understandings and to the constitution of familiarities; in this sense, also related to the dimension of automaticity and, therefore, to habitualities in a broader sense, that is, as habits of the

object and as habitual possessions of individuals – as elements of the stock of knowledge at hand of the subject which constitute a potential set of typical expectations.

2.  
**Familiarity  
 and Validity:  
 Habitual  
 Possessions as  
 Elements of  
 the Stock of  
 Knowledge**

Schutz's theory of typification can be considered an effort to describe the structure of mundane experience by pointing out, following Husserl, that the phenomena constituting everyday life are given according to *typicalities*. As described above, we are given, in our everyday life, typified patterns of knowing and acting – our experience of objects in the world is defined through pre-acquaintedness. In other words: any object of interpretation is, from the outset, taken not only within a context of significance, but of a horizon of *familiarity*. States of affairs are grasped in reference to similar ones and to typical ways to deal with them. Experiences constituting this context are, in this sense – considering the familiarity involved –, unquestioned taken. This does not mean that the concrete, experienced object cannot show individual characteristics, only that these qualities will also assume, for the interpretation, the form of typically apperceived individual aspects. Even when objects are experienced as unique, this uniqueness is, thus, a typical character, the phenomena are of a determined kind, recognizable.

In an analysis of Schutz's application of eidetic methodology, Michael Barber shows that Schutz's critical attitude towards some aspects of the phenomenological reduction had consequences also for his theory of meaning formation in the everyday life: "Schutz's study of the meaning-structures of ordinary social life relies upon a form of eidetic analysis which aims at uncovering the invariant, unique, a priori meaning-structures necessary to any concrete social world. Thus (...), Schutz engages in a constitutive phenomenology of the entire natural attitude itself (...).The invariant structures which Schutz unearths – the structure of consciousness, the corresponding forms of interpersonal understanding, and spatio-temporal stratification of relationships – these invariant structures emerge out of concrete social worlds and carry their sociality as one of their essential characteristics" (Barber 1987: 111; 117). According to his "antireductionist turn", typifications, as instruments of the *habitual*, become a feature not only of our experience of things, but also of our experience of the *social*.

As mentioned previously, Schutz uses the Weberian term "ideal type" to characterize instruments not only of scientific analysis, but, at first, of interpretations in real life. These typified schemes or models of experienced motivations and purposes make possible the apprehension of the meaning

someone else's action. Ideal types can, in this sense, be understood as instruments through which the world becomes *intersubjectively* real. They are "ideal" since are constituted through abstraction. This abstraction makes possible his use in different situations. This is the reason why, for Schutz, typifications and typification structures are responsible for the *sedimentation* of the social and social in nature – their social aspect is invariant and essential. Typification and its structures are always shared, always transmitted and reinforced within intersubjective processes. In his book on Schutz's sociology of knowledge, Barber emphasizes that "there cannot be typifications that do not reflect the social milieu from which they originate and in which they are used. The social is not just accidentally affixed to necessary structures of typifications whenever they are concretely instantiated, but it is intrinsically necessary to every life-world typifications pattern" (Barber 1989: 79). That's why, for Barber, Schutz's account of the social distribution of knowledge results from his effort to combine a concept of sociality – considered as a strand sedimented in the typification structure of daily life – with Husserl's theory of the intentional structures of consciousness.

In society, the distribution of knowledge refers not only to the differences between the content of what individuals know (considering their particular perspectives and biographical circumstances), but also to the different ways they know or have access to the same fact. With his contemporaries "consociates", the individual shares not only knowledge, but, in Schutz's terms, a community of space and time (of chronological and also of inner time) where the "vis-à-vis" relationship prevails. But the individual is never fully involved in this kind of interaction. In processes of everyday interpretation that concerns contemporary individuals, they also move away from the face-to-face interaction. Through a specific form of typification, the individual is able to grasp<sup>1</sup> his fellow-men beyond the vis-à-vis interaction or we-relationship "by forming a construct of a typical way of behavior, a typical pattern of underlying motives, of typical attitudes of a personality type" (Schutz 1962: 17). From this perspective, types configure a turning point between the intersubjective validity of the social world and the subjective access to this reality, between intersubjectivity and perspectivity. Typicality carries out the intersubjective *validity* of meaning in the everyday world, it maintains everyday knowledge in its *Geltung*. In daily life, individuals

1 In the common-sense thinking related to the social, ways of grasping this meaning is through (subjective) personal types – ideal types of personalities – and (objective) course-of-action types – ideal types of behaviors and course-of-action types. While the course-of-action type is based upon experience of acts of the same type, a personal type, as Barber points out, refers to "a point of reference where all his personal characteristics as they existed when he departed intersect. In this case (...) Naturally, such a type abstracts from the fullness of the individuality of the Other" (Barber 1989: 47). In the interpretative context, the Other becomes an ideal object, an ideal construct through typification constellations.

expect that what is been once verified as valid, will *remain* valid, in an idealization<sup>2</sup> that constitutes *an essential aspect of the phenomena of the habitual in the social sphere: the familiarity*. In his book *Reflections on the Problem of Relevances*, Schutz writes: “*familiarity itself, and even knowledge in general (considered as one’s habitual and dormant possession of previous experiences), presupposes the idealizations of the ‘and so forth and so on’ and the ‘I can do it again’.* (...) *Familiarity thus indicates the likelihood of referring new experiences, in respect of their types, to the habitual stock of already acquired knowledge of a passive synthesis of recognition*“ (Schutz 2011: 126). Familiarity has, therefore, a dual character. In an objective sense, familiarity means the aspect of the already experienced. In a subjective sense, it refers to *individual habits* in recognizing and choosing actual experiences considering the types at hand in his stock of knowledge. Moreover, Schutz shows that this *habitual* selection is also related to the *interest* and to the *relevance* implicated in the concrete situation. Schutz calls this situational background “system of relevances”; it is responsible to determinate the characteristics that are *selected as typical* and must, therefore, be considered in a necessary relation with typicality<sup>3</sup>. Thus, habits are not only results of sedimentations of social experiences, but also assume a constitutive function in their situational setting, supporting relevance structures.

**3. Conclusion: Relevance and Recipe in the Origin of Habitualizations**

In *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*, Schutz defines habitual possessions as follows: “It is the main characteristic of habitual possessions, that is of the knowledge we take for granted as beyond question (whether it be familiarity of thinking or of practice which is involved), that they carry along with themselves expectations (...) that the same or the typically

<sup>2</sup> The common-sense thinking exists despite the differences in the biographical situations and of “here-and-there” between individuals in the social world. And this due to two kinds of idealization: the idealization of the interchangeability of the standpoints and of the congruency of the system of relevances. The presuppose in this idealizations – that actually configure a knowledge – is that the specificity of each biographical circumstances and of the different standpoints doesn’t interfere or are irrelevant for the interpretation. They constitute therefore what Schutz calls the general thesis of reciprocal perspectives and consist in typifying constructs “of objects of thought which supersede the thought objects of my and my fellow-man’s private experience” (Schutz 1962: 12).

<sup>3</sup> For Schutz, relevances can be of three, interrelated types: topical, interpretational and motivational. Due to the topical relevance, things can, from the grounding field of familiarity, become problematic. The topical relevance is directly related to the object of attention. Everything else “is in the margin, the horizon, and especially all the habitual possessions we have called the stock of knowledge at hand” (Schutz 2011: 131). Interpretational relevance refers to the typifications that are decisive to the interpretation of an object or of a state of affairs. Motivational relevances, in the form of in-order-to and because-motives, are, on the other hand, always referring to future action, constituting the interest, here understood as “the set of motivational relevances which guide the selective activity of my mind” (Schutz 2011: 129). Relevances can, moreover, be *intrinsic* or *imposed*. Referring to the topical relevances, Schutz characterizes this contrast as follows: “Whereas in the latter [imposed] system the articulation of the field into theme and horizon is imposed by the emergence of some unfamiliar experience, by a shift of the accent of reality from one province to another, and so on, it is characteristic of the system of intrinsic topical relevances that we may or may not direct our attention to the indications implicit in the paramount theme – indications which have the form of inner or outer horizontal structurizations or forms of topical relevances – that is, we may or may not transform these horizontal surroundings into thematic data” (Schutz 2011: 111).

similar experiences will recur” (Schutz 2011: 132). In this sense, when an experience becomes part of our habitual possession, it becomes familiar. As soon as we acquire a habitual possession, we learn, in other words, to recognize a specific typicality. Moreover, we don’t know the exactly moment and why we possess a specific habit, in the sense that, in daily life, it doesn’t become topically relevant. For instance, considering fear as habitual possession, all we know is that it has its history and refers to a biographical situation. We learn typical ways to avoid what we fear and also to identify the characteristics of the object we fear, to identify its *type*: “The habitual possession of familiarity thus acquired is called our knowledge of this object of experience in respect of its type. *The type is therefore the demarcation line between the explored and unexplored horizons of the topic at hand and the outcome of formerly valid systems of interpretational relevances*” (Schutz 2011: 129). In Schutz’s social theory of knowledge, these “systems of relevance” are only another term for frameworks of alternative actions. In dealing with a specific situational arrangement in the world, the consciousness will always seek for interpretative solutions in sedimented experiences that shows a thematic relation with or are relevant to the problem at hand, to the setting it is confronted with. As shown, it is the typicality involved in this process that makes possible, according to Schutz, the *habit*, the emergence of common-sense recipes for action, since there is an increment in knowledge – which must be understood not only as knowledge *of or about* something, but also as knowledge of *how* to perform an action, to handle under typical circumstances – with every new experience. “To sum up”, writes Schutz, “we have found that what we call our stock of knowledge at hand is the sedimentation of various previous activities of our mind, and these are guided by systems of prevailing actually operative relevances of different kinds. These activities lead to the acquisition of habitual knowledge which is dormant, neutralized, but ready at any time to be reactivated” (Schutz 2011: 130). As Ronald Cox points out, systems of relevances are items of stocks of knowledge at hand “along with the sedimentations of previous mental activities, all being habitual possessions (...)”. Hence, habitual possessions “also includes what Schutz has (...) called the ‘recipes’ of everyday action and knowledge in the world” (Cox 1978: 91).

For Schutz, our daily activities are performed through recipes reduced to “automatic habits”, through a knowledge referred to the regularity of events. In habits and in the routine in daily life, recipes of action are followed in an application of typification constructs. Typification and system of relevances determinate, *together*, according to Schutz, the emergence of constructs in common-sense thinking. Habits, on the other

hand, have their origin in the necessary typicality of daily life, they are only possible because *the world cannot be experienced in totality, but through the selection of relevances, through typifications*. Thus, by defining habit within the framework of a theory of distribution of knowledge, that is, as habitual possessions of *knowledge*, Schutz clarifies his concept of knowledge in an essential, constitutive feature. In his words: “it has to be kept in mind that our stock of knowledge at hand not only contains habitual possessions originating in our theoretical activities, but also it contains our habitual ways of practical thinking and acting (e.g., ways for solving practical problems), habitual ways and patterns of behaving, acting, working, and so on. The stock of knowledge at hand includes, therefore, the set of practical recipes for attaining typical ends by typical means (...)” (Schutz 2011: 134).

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