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Understanding organisational gestures: Technique, aesthetics and embodiment

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Summary By defining gestures as recognisable patterns of recurring oriented body movements, this article aims to offer a conceptual framework that accounts for the features of organisational gestures. Viewing them as routines of bodily movements is proposed, and technique, aesthetic and embodiment will appear to constitute their three generative dimensions. This article participates to the corporeal and aesthetic perspectives on organisations and enriches the literature on routines through an extension to gestures and embodied artefacts. Choosing a field study that is embedded in the repetitive lines of factory production will offer a challenging context to observe the inclusion of an aesthetic dimension within every gesture and leads to discuss dynamics of learning, control and elegance.

Introduction

For more than a decade, corporeality has become an important and institutionalised approach to organisations (Casey, 2000; Dale, 2001; Hassard, Holliday and Wilmott, 2000; Shilling, 2003). Indeed, even in our modern, computerised and digital era, no professions or organisations function without bodies and gestures. Third-sector employees are still using their hands, eyes and feet, negotiators still must meet face-to-face on occasions, managers often must 'get their hands dirty' and craftsmen are far from disappearing. Even industry workers need some degrees of liberty between prescribed actions and actual practices. Considering these realities, the Taylorian attempt to reduce organisational gestures to purely fixed, standardised body movements is clearly out-of-date. Indeed, the corporeality of bodies has imposed itself, and a strict cognitive approach is now known to be incomplete at best; thus, understanding gestures in modern organisations becomes essential for scholars as well as for managers. Gestures involve body movements, repetition, appropriation and tool uses; thus, focusing on them is, *de facto*, fully inscribed in a corporeal approach to organisations, populating them with moving, feeling, sensing, hurting, enjoying, tiring, and resting bodies. Consequently, this article aims at answering the following question: what are the specific features of gestures within the context of organisations?

The 'gesture studies' are predominantly structured around several main approaches (Bernstein, 1926; Efron, 1941; Jousse, 1974; Kendon, 2004; La Barre, 1947; Leroi-Gourhan, 1965; Mauss, 1934), which offer strong but often

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isolated accounts of specific aspects of the notion. Moreover, because 'gesture' remains a fairly common noun, many scholars do not even bother with a definition. For example, McNeill (2000), even though he elaborates further, clearly states on the first page of his book that: ''the word 'gesture' needs no explanation'' (McNeill, 2000, p. 1). Therefore, we must propose here a starting definition that is enriched by these enlightening fundamental studies before building a conceptual framework.

Based on these considerations, gestures are first defined here as recognisable patterns of recurring oriented body movements. Then, this article integrates these main elements by conceptualising organisational gestures as routines of bodily movements. The perks for bringing closer gestures and routines unfold in two directions. First, building on the existing literature on organisational routines, and more precisely on Martha Feldman's analysis (Feldman & Pentland, 2005; Feldman and Rafaeli, 2002; Feldman, 2000), allows for an integrative framework of organisational gestures. Indeed, exploring this conceptual framework leads to describing gestures under three different dimensions: technique, aesthetics and embodiment. Considering how technical and teleological aspects of routines have already been widely and rigorously discussed, other dimensions of gestures, which have often been forgotten, will be emphasised here. There lies the second, and most interesting, perk: offering a more corporeal, sensorial and aesthetic viewpoint to organisational routines. This 'gesture perspective' imposes the centrality of bodies and knowing in the actual practice of everyday routines.

From that perspective, using factory production lines in an empirical study appears to be appropriate. Indeed, exploring the aesthetics of sportive and artistic gestures seems fairly trivial. Instead, finding beauty, tool mastery, corporeality and a sense of elegance along the repetitive line of industrial production shows how much the aesthetics and embodiment dimensions of gestures are as fundamental as their technical efficiency. By studying three books that were written by factory workers (Hartzfeld, 2002; Linhart, 1981; Navel, 1979), four main topics will appear: corporeality, learning, controlling and aesthetics. This perspective will lead to discuss the notion of elegance as a degree of mastery at which the technique and aesthetics occasionally merge as well as the role of embodiment in the use of artefacts and the importance of organisational control regarding gestures.

Gestures: between techniques and aesthetics

The concept of gesture has been studied through eclectic accounts of different aspects of the notion: Mauss (1934) on the body, Leroi-Gourhan (1965) on tool uses, Heath (2002) and Kendon (2004) on communication, Bernstein (1926) on motion control or Jousse (1974) on mimicry, for example. With the intent of building a theoretical framework, we first offer a definition that integrates these aspects: gestures are recognisable patterns of recurring oriented body movements. Next, we explain how the notion of routine can provide a strong conceptualisation of organisational gestures that leads to three main dimensions: technique, aesthetics and embodiment.

Defining gesture: a recognisable pattern of recurring oriented body movements

Oriented body movements

When talking about gestures, the first element involved is a living, corporeal body. Indeed, in the Latin etymology, *gestus* corresponds to a movement of the body and, although the whole body is not directly involved, it is impossible to truly understand a gesture by isolating the hands, feet or fingers from the other parts. A gesture cannot be reduced to a simple sequence of body parts in motion; it must be embraced as an undividable whole, not as a set (Jousse, 1974). To Mauss (1934), gestures are specific functional actions that always imply movements; even what he calls ''techniques of rest'' are active, precisely defined and fulfilling a function: squatting down, sitting, stretching out. What he detects here is the fact that gestures are always oriented towards something. A gesture is not a random sequence of body movements, chaotically set in motion. It has an orientation, but not in the sense that it requires an intentional, well-defined purpose but rather that it unfolds in a direction. According to Clot (2002), gestures operate under functional relationships that give sense and purpose to actions. Therefore, in every gesture, there is an idea of a result, a goal to achieve. This goal can be a clear, explicit, measurable objective, and it can be an emergent and vague idea, a pre-conscious intention waiting for an occurrence to be articulated. However, a gesture does not emerge as soon as a body moves towards something; it is the regularities that several actors share and recognise that make a gesture.

Recurring

A gesture is not random or isolated in time and space; it is a recurring occurrence. It emerges through its own reproduction, several times by several actors. Recurring does not necessarily imply a strict replication but instead implies the acknowledgement of sufficient similarities, and it is this re-production that allows gestures to be transmitted and, thus, to exist. Inspired by Aristotle's consideration that ''human is the most miming animals'', Jousse (1974) found all gestures on *mimèmes*, describing them as: ''things that are played, again and again, and that we can record'' (Jousse, 1974, p. 50). However, only imitating does not build an ability to perform in different contexts and gestures that must be appropriated by the apprentice. The more that an apprentice practises his/her gestures, the less his/her brain must focus to perform it; it becomes one of his/her reflexes, one that s/he partly shares with his/her model (Bernstein, 1926). Consequently, gestures are recurrences that are embedded in a collective context in which actors will alternately be copying and be copied. Clot (2002) differentiates *collective gestures* that are shared realisations (professional gestures, for example) and *the gesture collective* that has a part of an appropriation by and for actors. He considers that every profession has its own referential of gestures that are characteristic of its practice. Therefore, a gesture is not a simple outcome of someone's habit; it is the mastering of recurring adaptations around a gesture of reference (Bernstein, 1926). Thus, it is understandable and recognisable for other actors; it has a meaning in the sense that it refers to a specific signification within a community (Kendon, 2004). It