

Proposal for a Standing Working Group on Routines and Routine Dynamics

OVERVIEW

The increasingly uncertain and fast-changing environments in which today's organizations operate call for a shift of attention from organizations—and organizational practices or routines—as fixed entities to the study of the distributed (Hutchins 1995) and situated (Suchman 1987, Lave 1988) dynamics by which they emerge and are constructed. Capturing how organizations learn to strike a balance between stability and coherence, on one hand, and flexibility and change, on the other, however, is non-trivial (Tsoukas and Chia 2002, Farjoun 2010). It requires abandoning static views of organization to reveal the microdynamics of organizing, including the processes through which organizational routines and capabilities emerge and evolve.

The first crucial step forward in this direction has been to relinquish a fixed characterization of routines as monolithic objects to study the internal mechanisms by which they emerge as practices (Feldman 2000, Feldman and Pentland 2003). As a result, we have moved from conceptualizing routines as automatic, as dead or as opaque black boxes, to seeing them as alive, embodying agency and the potential for change (Cohen 2007, Pentland and Feldman 2008). In particular, this reconceptualization has proposed that routines themselves have dynamics. These routine dynamics have generally been theorized around the interaction of performative and ostensive aspects of routines. Empirical research and modeling of routine dynamics has extended our understanding of the role of routines in producing stability and change (Howard-Grenville 2005, Levinthal and Rerup 2006, D'Adderio 2008 and 2011, Salvato 2009, Zbaracki and Bergen 2010, Lazaric 2011, Rerup and Feldman 2011, Pentland, Haerem and Hillison 2011, Salvato and Rerup 2011, Turner and Rindova 2012; Pentland, Feldman, Becker and Liu 2012).

We also propose to unpack routines to scrutinize the multiple levels of habits, recurrent interactions and patterns embedded within and across organizations and institutional context. By tackling the micro foundations of imprinting and routines creation without neglecting the macroeconomic context, we assume that sectors, industries and countries form a large diversity of experience and knowledge that may significantly impact the development and replication of routines. This will allow us to consider macro dimensions founding and shaping routines and their evolution. Entrepreneurship will be, one among other examples, of this potential entanglement.

While some of the questions made possible by the practice turn in research on organizational routines have been addressed, many questions remain.

EGOS has hosted a subtheme on routine dynamics every other year starting in 2007 in Bergen. The first subtheme entailed routines as learning, the second was on routines and communities of practice, the third was on routines and materiality, the fourth is on routines and time. Each of the subthemes have attracted large numbers of submissions, with the fourth attracting over 60 short papers. We have also hosted a number of additional panels and symposia at leading conferences including the Academy of Management Conference where we organized a panel on routines and materiality (2010), and a symposium on

routines, order and disorder (2012). In addition, we have contributed as organizers, convenors and panelists at several meetings of the International Routines Conference. Four international conferences have been organized at Odense, Nice, and Strasbourg between 2002 and 2010 that have contributed to the consolidation of the community while enabling the creation of an important network of researchers engaged in this field. Debates around routines concepts and their operationalization have been shaped through the edition of special issues in *European Reviews* (*Industrial and Corporate Change* in 2005, *Journal of Institutional Economics* in 2011).

Our engagements with the Routines community over the years reveal a rapidly growing commitment and enthusiasm towards this scholarly endeavour. Propelled by the increasing energy revolving around the topic the four of us are currently hosting a Special Issue of the journal *Organization Science* which specifically focuses on routines dynamics (with the forthcoming deadline of 1 September 2013). We envisage important synergies between the special issue and the EGOS SWG, with the latter providing venues for advancing and testing ideas developed in the former. Together with the SWG, the special issue will help develop and consolidate our routines dynamics community. The more than 85 scholars supporting a Standing Working Group as well as the increasing number of published articles and special issues of journals indicates the interest in this topic and the large number of open questions.

The following are 4 subthemes that we propose to co-convene. We do not propose these themes as mutually exclusive as we recognize the substantial interconnection among them. Instead we suggest the themes as points of entry that provide opportunities to explore the effects of routine dynamics in complex empirical field settings.

THEMES

Subtheme 1 (2015): Routines, innovation and creativity

What role do routines play in innovation and creativity? Traditionally, routines have been seen as the antithesis of innovation and creativity. Increasingly, however, scholars of innovation and creativity have argued that we have to understand not only the ways in which routines may inhibit and constrain novelty but also the ways in which they support it.

We know that some routinized processes (e.g., project management routines) are capable of producing significantly different substantive results each time they are performed. For example, an architectural firm may use a recognizable, repetitive process for designing buildings, yet each design is different. Other routines are focused on producing exactly the same result every time. What conditions support the routines that create different outcomes? Are the routines different? Are they enacted, regulated or managed differently? What is the role of formal descriptions of routines (such as standards or “best” practices) and templates (actual examples) in guiding and shaping innovation and creativity? At what point, and in which circumstances, does innovation/adaptation erase the value of the template or model? And what implications should we expect for innovation and creativity when formal routines and models become embedded into artifacts?

Other questions we might consider in this subtheme include the role of recombination and mashups in creativity and innovation. While evolution through variation, selection and retention is one way that routines change, change through this means is likely to be incremental. Are recombination (e.g., recombining chunks of routines to create a new

routine) and mashups (e.g., combinations of ostensive patterns that are impossible to describe separately) ways that routines change that are more conducive to innovation and creativity? If so, when are recombination and mashups possible and what factors facilitate or limit recombination and/or mashups?

Subtheme 2 (2016): The entrepreneurial foundations of organizational routines and the development of organizations

Entrepreneurs found organizations and shape them. Hence, the role of entrepreneurs in founding and imprinting processes is fundamental for the creation of routines and their development within new organizations. Investigating the role of entrepreneurs in shaping organizations and the routines within them can therefore shed light on one of the “origins” and antecedents of organizational routines, as well as on the development of organizations. Entrepreneurs can provide several types of antecedents to organizational routines, such as individual habits and values, or experience with prior organizations that is carried over in form of for instance plans, rules, or guidelines for the organization (Lazaric, 2011). Through these antecedents, entrepreneurs shape the organizations they found, having an impact in various dimensions: on the shared values of the firm, on the knowledge to be developed and organizational procedures (Howard-Grenville, 2006), but also on organizational routines and the organization structure and more largely, the organizational environment that will in turn influence organizational routines and their replication (Becker, 2012). Such knowledge of the “origins” can thus inform understanding of the development of organizational routines and of organizations, but also the creation of future business models and the routines to realize them, as well as their potential replication (Becker, 2012). It can, however, also shed light on the degree to which this capacity is limited by the legacies of imprinted founding characteristics (Bryant, 2012). Identifying and understanding the process by which founders shape organizational routines and organizations may contribute to a better understanding of organizational evolution and the development of routines, and thereby, also to the entrepreneurship literature.

We address this issue by tackling the micro foundations of imprinting and the creation of routines without neglecting the larger, e.g., macroeconomic context. In framing this program, we assume that sectors, industries and countries form a large diversity of experience and knowledge that may significantly impact the development and replication of routines. In short, we propose to explore the dynamics of routines by exploring the micro foundations at the level of the entrepreneurial individual who expands habits, routines and knowledge and tries to replicate some of them for building a suitable organization and business model. This historical perspective is a key issue for scrutinizing the routines dynamics and the source of a potential “governance gap” illustrated in the literature, notably when ostensive aspects of routines appear to be very distant from their effective performance (Becker and Zirpoli 2005).

Subtheme 3 (2017): Routines, transfer and transformation

The debate around the creation, transfer and recreation of a firm’s ‘best practices’ has been typically polarised around two main contrasting positions: the “replication perspective” (Winter et al. 2012), which has emphasised the importance of sticking as close as possible to the template in order to preserve its original value; and an “adaptation perspective” (Williams 2007) which has instead highlighted the importance of adapting a formula to the

new context for increasing the effectiveness of the transfer as well as exploiting any learning opportunities. As organisational scholars, we are presented with the exciting challenge of finding new ways to capture and theorize the tensions between replication and adaptation and understand the implications of how this trade-off is managed for organisations (D'Adderio 2014). Accounting for the role of context in routines reproduction calls for further exploring the key role of its social and material dimensions. Features of context include the role of individuals, groups and communities (Bechky 2003) holding different knowledge, goals and understandings in enacting the working template, thus influencing the precision with which it is reproduced; and the role of artefacts and technologies, such as formal procedures and computer models, but also informal tools and artifacts as intermediaries and mediators in the transfer (D'Adderio 2008, 2011). In addition to the spatial context, the time dimension presents important challenges to transferring and recreating routines (Zollo and Winter 2002). These include the timing of replication in a lifecycle perspective and how the tensions between replication and adaptation vary over time. In this track we focus on routines dynamics (Feldman 2000, Feldman and Pentland 2003) as a novel and promising standpoint to explore these tensions, how they are resolved and the implications for organisations.

Subtheme 4 (2018): Routines, stability and change

Across all of the topics related to this working group, we find an underlying theme of stability and change. Our core concern has been on stability and change within routines themselves and explaining phenomena such as formation, endogenous change, inertia, adaptation, and other aspects of routine dynamics. As our knowledge base around these issues continues to grow, it will make sense to consider the implications of routine dynamics for stability and change in related social structures.

Therefore, in this subtheme, we invite scholars to consider the implications of routine dynamics and its relationship to research on institutions, culture, networks, organizational fields and other large scale structures. While the micro-macro connection is traditionally framed in terms of the relationship between individuals and society (Giddens, 1979; Alexander, 1987; Coleman, 1990; Sewell, 1992; Archer, 1995), for the purposes of this subtheme, we conceptualize the "micro" end as consisting of routines. Individual level phenomena such as agency, motivation and habits are obviously important, but for this subtheme, we are hoping to look outward, taking routines as the unit of analysis in a larger, macro context. The "macro" end of the continuum can be conceptualized in many ways, and at different levels of analysis. We expect that scholars who participate in this subtheme will benefit from this diversity. We hope that by grounding the discussion in the dynamics of particular routines and practices, we may develop new perspectives on questions of stability and change in larger structures.

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