

Cambridge Handbook of Routine Dynamics

Over the last two decades, Routine Dynamics has emerged as an international research community that shares a particular approach to organizational phenomena. At the heart of this approach is an interest in examining the emergence, reproduction, replication, and change of routines as recognizable patterns of actions. In contrast to other research communities interested in those phenomena, Routine Dynamics studies are informed by a distinctive set of theories (especially practice theory and related process-informed theories). This Handbook offers both an accessible introduction to core concepts and approaches in Routine Dynamics, as well as a comprehensive and authoritative overview of research in different areas of Routine Dynamics. The chapters of this Handbook are structured around four core themes: (1) Theoretical resources for research on the dynamics of routines, (2) Methodological issues in studying the dynamics routines, (3) Themes in Routine Dynamics research and (4) Relation of Routine Dynamics to other communities of thought.

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Edited by Martha S. Feldman , Brian T. Pentland , Luciana D'Adderio , Katharina Dittrich ,
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Contents

List of Figures	page ix
List of Tables	x
List of Contributors	xii
Preface	xv
1 What Is Routine Dynamics?	1
<i>Martha S. Feldman, Brian T. Pentland, Luciana D'Adderio, Katharina Dittrich, Claus Rerup and David Seidl</i>	
PART I THEORETICAL RESOURCES FOR ROUTINE DYNAMICS RESEARCH	
2 Practice Theory and Routine Dynamics	21
<i>Martha S. Feldman</i>	
3 Process Theorizing and Routine Dynamics: The Case for Performative Phenomenology	37
<i>Haridimos Tsoukas</i>	
4 Ethnomethodology and Routine Dynamics	49
<i>Juan López-Cotarelo</i>	
5 Pragmatism and Routine Dynamics	62
<i>Dionysios D. Dionysiou</i>	
6 Actor-Network Theory and Routine Dynamics	73
<i>Kathrin Sele</i>	
7 Materiality and Routine Dynamics	85
<i>Luciana D'Adderio</i>	
PART II METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN ROUTINE DYNAMICS RESEARCH	
8 Ethnography and Routine Dynamics	103
<i>Katharina Dittrich</i>	

9	Video Methods and Routine Dynamics	130
	<i>Curtis LeBaron and Marlys K. Christianson</i>	
10	Field Experiments and Routine Dynamics	147
	<i>Hari Bapuji, Manpreet Hora and Huashan Li</i>	
11	Agent-Based Modelling in Routine Dynamics	159
	<i>Dehua Gao</i>	
12	Sequence Analysis in Routine Dynamics	172
	<i>Christian A. Mahringer and Brian T. Pentland</i>	
13	Narrative Networks in Routine Dynamics	184
	<i>Brian T. Pentland and Inkyu Kim</i>	
14	Bakhtin’s Chronotope and Routine Dynamics	196
	<i>Simon Addyman</i>	

PART III THEMES IN ROUTINE
DYNAMICS RESEARCH

15	Truces and Routine Dynamics	209
	<i>Luciana D’Adderio and Mehdi Safavi</i>	
16	Context, Embeddedness and Routine Dynamics	229
	<i>Jennifer Howard-Grenville and Jan Lodge</i>	
17	Routine Interdependence: Intersections, Clusters, Ecologies and Bundles	244
	<i>Rodrigo A. Rosa, Waldemar Kremser and Sergio Bulgacov</i>	
18	Cognition and Routine Dynamics	255
	<i>Nathalie Lazaric</i>	
19	Time, Temporality and History in Routine Dynamics	266
	<i>Scott F. Turner and Violina P. Rindova</i>	
20	Replication and Routine Dynamics	277
	<i>Charlotte Blanche and Patrick Cohendet</i>	
21	Innovation Work and Routine Dynamics	288
	<i>Fleur Deken and Kathrin Sele</i>	
22	Design and Routine Dynamics	301
	<i>Frithjof E. Wegener and Vern L. Glaser</i>	
23	Algorithms and Routine Dynamics	315
	<i>Vern L. Glaser, Rodrigo Valadao and Timothy R. Hannigan</i>	

24	Complexity in Routine Dynamics	329
	<i>Thorvald Hærem, Yooeun Jeong and Mathias Hansson</i>	
25	Bodies and Routine Dynamics	343
	<i>Charlotte Blanche and Martha S. Feldman</i>	
26	Emotions and Routine Dynamics	357
	<i>Giada Baldessarelli</i>	
27	Professional Identity and Routine Dynamics	370
	<i>Emre Karali</i>	
28	Occupations, Professions and Routine Dynamics	380
	<i>Joanna Kho and Paul Spee</i>	
29	Routine Dynamics and Management Practice	397
	<i>Simon Grand</i>	
30	Project-Based Temporary Organizing and Routine Dynamics	407
	<i>Eugenia Cacciatori and Andrea Prencipe</i>	
31	Self-Managed Forms of Organizing and Routine Dynamics	421
	<i>Waldemar Kremser and Jun Xiao</i>	
32	Unexpected Events and Routine Dynamics	433
	<i>Daniel Geiger and Anja Danner-Schröder</i>	

PART IV RELATED COMMUNITIES OF THOUGHT

33	Carnegie School Experiential Learning and Routine Dynamics	445
	<i>Claus Rerup and Bryan Spencer</i>	
34	Dynamic Capabilities and Routine Dynamics	460
	<i>Carlo Salvato</i>	
35	Strategy as Practice and Routine Dynamics	481
	<i>David Seidl, Benjamin Grossmann-Hensel and Paula Jarzabkowski</i>	
36	Path Dependence and Routine Dynamics	501
	<i>Jörg Sydow</i>	

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Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

37	Business Process Management and Routine Dynamics	513
	<i>Bastian Wurm, Thomas Grisold, Jan Mendling and Jan vom Brocke</i>	
	Author Index	525
	Subject Index	530

Figures

9.1	Video captures meaningful aspects of human interaction	<i>page</i> 138	
9.2	(a–c) Video captures unfolding social action	139	
9.3	(a–c) Video captures recurring patterns in organizational routines	141	
9.4	(a–c) Video captures Routine Dynamics	142	
10.1	Designing and conducting field experiments	154	
11.1	Six main steps for developing ABMs	161	
12.1	Mutually contextualizing visualizations and narratives generated by sequence analysis	180	
13.1	Narrative network	185	
13.2	ThreadNet weaves threads into networks	187	
13.3	One day in one clinic from different points of view	188	
13.4	Changes in narrative networks in four clinics over two years	192	
16.1	Overview of evolution of routine embeddedness aspects: 2005–2020		232
19.1	How time affects the performance of routines	267	
25.1	Embodied orientation to/from patterns, performance and materiality	351	
26.1	Emotions in Routine Dynamics	360	
31.1	A typical Sprint iteration according to the Scrum framework	422	
33.1	Heat-map of 142 papers	449	
33.2	Heat-map of nine papers	449	
34.1	Future research directions	474	
35.1	Successive stages of development of the Routine Dynamics framework	485	
35.2	Development of the strategy as practice framework	486	
36.1	Constitution of an organizational path	503	
37.1	The business process management lifecycle	516	
37.2	Inductive and deductive theorizing with process mining	519	

Tables

2.1	Practice Theory in Routine Dynamics articles	page 27	21.1	Key differences between evolutionary economics and Routine Dynamics studies on innovation routines	291
5.1	Shared assumptions between Routine Dynamics and classical pragmatism	65	24.1	Examples of empirical studies (including simulations) on organizational routines and Routine Dynamics using different conceptualizations of complexity	331
7.1	Artifacts and materiality in Routines Theory: Papers and constructs	95	24.2	Assumptions of three approaches to routine complexity	338
9.1	Research using video data to study organizational Routine Dynamics	132	25.1	Selected excerpts providing clear indications of the body explicitly expressed by the authors	345
9.2	The practical and theoretical implications of cinematic decisions	135	26.1	Emotions in Routine Dynamics: Empirical evidence and future research	361
10.1	Advantages and disadvantages of field and experimental methods	149	27.1	Routine Dynamics studies at the intersection of the professional identity literature	373
10.2	Field experiments on organizational routines	152	28.1	An overview of the salience of occupations and professions in Routine Dynamics	383
11.1	Summary of articles using ABM in Routine Dynamics	164	30.1	Examples of Routine Dynamics empirical studies in project-based contexts	408
11.2	A comparison of ABMs in Routine Dynamics	166	31.1	Overview of Routine Dynamics research on SMOs	424
12.1	Three types of sequence analysis in Routine Dynamics	174	33.1	Overview of nine papers that connect experiential learning and Routine Dynamics	450
13.1	Empirical studies using narrative networks	190	34.1	Routine Dynamics and Dynamic Capabilities: Commonalities and differences	462
13.2	Strategies for creating narrative networks	191	34.2	Key definitions of Dynamic Capabilities and connections to organizational routines	464
14.1	Categories of the chronotope	199	34.3	Instances of Routine Dynamics in ten selected DC fieldworks	465
14.2	Categories of the consenting routine chronotope	200	34.4	Instances of Dynamic Capabilities in ten selected RD fieldworks	468
15.1	Truces in Routine Dynamics literature	212			
16.A1	Overview of central works on routine embeddedness	241			
17.1	Different lenses in research on routine interdependence	245			
17.2	Summary of most important studies	246			
20.1	Spectrum of research on replication strategies	281			

35.1	Comparison of Routine Dynamics and Strategy as Practice	490	37.1	Contrasting routines and business processes	514
36.1	Similarities and differences between research on organizational path dependence and routines	509	37.2	Contrasting Routine Dynamics and Business Process Management	514

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Preface

At first glance, *Routine Dynamics* is a strange topic for a scholarly handbook because *Routine Dynamics* is an oxymoron. The word *routine* has a lot of connotations, but *dynamic* isn't usually one of them. From a distance, routines seem like habits: mindless, repetitive and notoriously hard to change. Routines seem *static*, so inquiring about routine *dynamics* seems like a waste of time. Yet here we are.

Routine Dynamics started with a simple but counterintuitive observation: If we look closely, the patterns of action we see are not as 'routine' as they seem from a distance (Feldman, 2000). From staging a ballet (Blanche and Cohendet, 2019) to drilling for oil (Bertels, Howard-Grenville and Pek, 2016), careful observation reveals patterns of action that are repetitive but also emergent, effortful and surprisingly dynamic. For instance, in a study of sequential patterns of action in a call centre, Pentland and Rueter (1994) initially found that the work was characterized by many exceptions, interruptions and deliberations, which led them to conclude that the work was non-routine. On closer inspection, however, they found that most of the interactions in the call centre followed a repetitive, functionally similar pattern, which made them conclude that the work was performed through routines. In this respect, Routine Dynamics embodies the same spirit of two-eyed inquiry that has led to progress in every empirical science. On the one hand, we see more clearly when we take a closer look. On the other hand, we also need to occasionally step back and see the big picture.

An important feature of Routine Dynamics is to see organizational routines as patterns of interdependent action (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). By looking at how actions unfold over time, we see how a single routine can embody a multiplicity of

performances that (re)create the routine itself (Feldman, 2016). The actions follow patterns but, at the same time, the actions make the patterns. The emphasis on actions – situated actions and patterns of actions – is central to understanding why routines are inherently dynamic. A major goal of this Handbook is to introduce readers to this way of seeing, analysing and understanding patterns of action.

As this Handbook demonstrates, research on Routine Dynamics has begun to enjoy increased visibility in recent years. This is a remarkable accomplishment because, at its heart, the action-centric perspective is unorthodox. Traditional organizational theory and research revolves around actors (people, groups and organizations). Against this dogma, Routine Dynamics asks a heretical question: *What can we learn from the actions?* Putting actions in the foreground emphasizes the processual side of organizing (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017). Of course, there is no action without actors – foreground and background are needed for a complete picture – but emphasizing actions has been a distinctive feature of Routine Dynamics. This Handbook is focused on organizational routines, but the action-centric mindset translates to a broad range of social phenomena at different time scales and different levels of granularity. Whether action-centric thinking will have a transformative impact in Organization Theory and beyond remains to be seen, but the seeds have been sown.

By assembling this Handbook, we hope to help these seeds grow. The chapters provide grounds for engaging in deeper theoretical inquiries into organizational change and stability. Chapters also link to new topics and themes that have not been investigated from a Routine Dynamics perspective. In this way, the Handbook aims to create a big tent

where there is room for exploration of new topics: new forms of organizing (e.g., holocracy); grand challenges (e.g., climate change); algorithms and artificial intelligence; and time and temporality.

Our goal is twofold. First, we take stock of how the field of Routine Dynamics has developed over the past twenty years, map where the field could be going and provide resources for scholars to invigorate and renew their scholarship and horizon on routines. More than a decade ago, Michael Cohen (2007: 774), reflecting on the history of research on organizational routines, wondered ‘why it has proven so difficult to give really useful, research grounded answers to these questions about how routines arise, are maintained, change, or resist change’. After compiling this Handbook, we find ourselves on more solid ground and believe answers to these questions are starting to crystallize, and that we can put this knowledge to use to understand important topics in organizational research. Second, we want to help scholars from related areas (e.g., Strategy-as-Practice) and more distant communities (e.g., institutional theory, Dynamic Capabilities, social networks, behavioural strategy, Carnegie School) to join and enrich the conversation.

To encourage these connections, the Handbook is structured into four parts: (1) Theoretical Resources for Routine Dynamics Research, (2) Methodological Issues in Routine Dynamics Research, (3) Themes in Routine Dynamics Research and (4) Related Communities of Thought. We invited authors contributing to each of the four parts to answer the question: *What does someone need to know about this area to get started?* In the part on theoretical resources, topics as diverse as ethnomethodology, practice theory, process theorizing, socio-materiality, actor-network theory and pragmatism provide ideas to help scholars renew their approach to routines. The part on methodological issues expands the ways in which we can study Routine Dynamics by covering topics such as ethnography, sequence analysis, simulations, field experiments and video data. The most extensive part of the Handbook covers established and emerging themes in Routine Dynamics. The established themes range from ecologies of routines to truces while the

emerging themes introduce ideas related to emotions, bodies, occupations and identities. Finally, the part on related communities plants ideas to create bridges between Routine Dynamics and Carnegie School learning, Dynamic Capabilities, Strategy-as-Practice, path dependence and Business Process Engineering.

The Handbook is a testament to the vibrant community that has emerged around Routine Dynamics. The community of scholars working on Routine Dynamics has grown over the past twenty years and has engaged in conscious community-building practices that have developed connections among scholars and promoted high-quality scholarship as well as camaraderie. By community, we mean not just people who publish in this field but also people who regularly gather to discuss their work, creating opportunities for collaboration and the development of new ideas. For years, members of the community have gathered regularly at the annual European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) conference, as well as other international venues. From 2005 to 2013, five EGOS subthemes related to what has become Routine Dynamics were held at various EGOS conferences and, from 2015 to 2020, Routine Dynamics has been an EGOS standing working group. As a standing working group, the community not only convened subthemes at the annual conference but also sponsored several Paper Development Workshops. These subthemes are attended not only by people presenting their own papers but also by people who consider themselves to be part of the community and want to participate in the ongoing conversation. At the same time, the community developed special issues in *Organization Science* in 2016 (Feldman et al., 2016) and *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* in 2019 (Feldman et al., 2019); produced an edited volume in the series *Perspectives on Process Organization Studies* (Howard-Grenville et al., 2016); and undertook the Handbook that this preface appears in. In 2018, the Routines.Research.Community began to meet quarterly and continues these quarterly meetings at the time of writing.

This volume would not have been possible without this community, including authors who agreed

to write a chapter; the authors and reviewers of articles published in various journals on Routine Dynamics; participants in conferences such as EGOS and AOM; and Cambridge University Press. Thank you for your contributions to the community and to this Handbook.

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