

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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Martha S. Feldman, Brian T. Pentland, Luciana D'Adderio, Katharina Dittrich, Claus Rerup, David Seidl
Frontmatter

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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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