

ROUTINE DYNAMICS

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF
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ROUTINE DYNAMICS: ORGANIZING IN A WORLD IN FLUX

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

Research in the Sociology of Organizations (RSO) publishes cutting-edge empirical research and theoretical papers that seek to enhance our understanding of organizations and organizing as pervasive and fundamental aspects of society and economy. We seek provocative papers that push the frontiers of current conversations, that help to revive old ones, or that incubate and develop new perspectives. Given its successes in this regard, RSO has become an impactful and indispensable fount of knowledge for scholars interested in organizational phenomena and theories. RSO is indexed and ranks highly in Scopus/SCImago as well as in the Academic Journal Guide published by the Chartered Association of Business Schools.

As one of the most vibrant areas in the social sciences, the sociology of organizations engages a plurality of empirical and theoretical approaches to enhance our understanding of the varied imperatives and challenges that these organizations and their organizers face. Of course, there is a diversity of formal and informal organizations—from for-profit entities to non-profits, state and public agencies, social enterprises, communal forms of organizing, non-governmental associations, trade associations, publicly traded, family owned and managed, private firms – the list goes on! Organizations, moreover, can vary dramatically in size from small entrepreneurial ventures to large multi-national conglomerates to international governing bodies such as the United Nations.

Empirical topics addressed by RSO include the formation, survival, and growth of organizations; collaboration and competition between organizations; the accumulation and management of resources and legitimacy; and how organizations or organizing efforts cope with a multitude of internal and external challenges and pressures. Particular interest is growing in the complexities of contemporary organizations as they cope with changing social expectations and as they seek to address societal problems related to corporate social responsibility, inequality, corruption, and wrongdoing, and the challenge of new technologies. As a result, levels of analysis reach from the individual, to the organization, industry, community and field, and even the nation-state or world society. Much research is multi-level and embraces both qualitative and quantitative forms of data.

Diverse theory is employed or constructed to enhance our understanding of these topics. While anchored in the discipline of sociology and the field of management, RSO also welcomes theoretical engagement that draws on other disciplinary conversations—such as those in political science or economics, as well as work from diverse philosophical traditions. RSO scholarship has helped push forward a plethora of theoretical conversations on institutions and institutional change, networks, practice, culture, power, inequality, social movements,

categories, routines, organization design and change, configurational dynamics, and many other topics.

Each volume of RSO tends to be thematically focused on a particular empirical phenomenon (e.g., creative industries, multinational corporations, and entrepreneurship) or theoretical conversation (e.g., institutional logics, actors and agency, and microfoundations). The series publishes papers by junior as well as leading international scholars and embraces diversity on all dimensions. If you are a scholar interested in organizations or organizing, I hope you find RSO to be an invaluable resource as you develop your work.

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ROUTINE DYNAMICS: ORGANIZING IN A WORLD IN FLUX

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ABSTRACT

In this editorial, the authors present an overview of the papers featured in this volume, all centered around the theme of “Routine Dynamics: Organizing in a World in Flux.” Recognizing the omnipresence of flux in organizational life, the authors identify key themes that emerged across the papers. These encompass temporality, improvisation, process and multiplicity, power and political dynamics, and scale. The authors elucidate the significance of each theme in the context of routine dynamics, highlight the advancements made by the respective papers in this volume, and underscore questions that warrant further exploration.

Keywords: Routine dynamics; process; practice theory; change; improvisation; process multiplicity; power; politics; temporality; scale

INTRODUCTION

At first sight, it seems that organizational routines and flux are in opposition. Routines are associated with stability and inertia, whereas flux is associated with novelty and continuous change. Yet, when we adopt a process ontology

Routine Dynamics: Organizing in a World in Flux

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(Cloutier & Langley, 2020; Langley & Tsoukas, 2017; Rescher, 1996; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), it makes sense to consider the relation of organizational routines, and flux as a generative nexus of constant becoming.

Routines are inherently processual and the stream of research that we call *routine dynamics* is rooted in process ontology (Feldman, 2016; Feldman et al., 2021). This commitment to process ontology is signaled by the slogan “beyond routines as things” (Feldman et al., 2016). Routines are “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 95), but they are effortful and emergent accomplishments, not mindless. In the *Constitution of Society*, Giddens (1984, p. 86) argues that:

Routine is founded in tradition, custom or habit, but it is a major error to suppose that these phenomena need no explanation, that they are simply repetitive forms of behavior carried out “mindlessly.” On the contrary, as Goffman (together with ethnomethodology) has helped to demonstrate, the routinized character of most social activity is something that has to be “worked at” continually by those who sustain it in their day-to-day conduct.

While Giddens (1984) argued that routines are essential to all social phenomena, routines are especially prominent in organizations and are widely considered their building blocks (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Routine dynamics scholars have examined how day-to-day routines in organizations are shaped and sustained over time. Through dozens of field studies (Dittrich, 2021), we have learned that routines are as much engines of stability as they are engines of change (Danner-Schröder & Geiger, 2016).

For this reason, organizational routines are essential to understanding the process of organizing in a world in flux. The notion of flux is exemplified by the idea that one can never step into the same river twice (Birnholtz et al., 2007; Cohen, 2007). As ever, the world remains in flux in countless ways, from social phenomena to the ongoing reproduction of nature. Taking flux as given invites us to examine and explore how social and organizational phenomena remain seemingly stable. Routines, as conceptualized in the literature on routine dynamics, offer a particularly appropriate lens for organizing in a world in flux.

The remainder of this editorial unfolds as follows. First, we offer a brief background to the origins of this volume. Second, we introduce the papers in this volume, which place an emphasize on five main themes (i.e., temporality, improvisation, process and multiplicity, power and political dynamics, and scale). For each of those themes, we also identify avenues for future research.

BACKGROUND TO THE VOLUME

The idea of the volume was sparked during a meeting arranged by the “Routines. Research. Community,”¹ hosted by Aalto University (Helsinki) in May 2019. The meeting was intended to mark the 20th anniversary of Feldman’s (2000) landmark publication on organizational routines. Martha Feldman and Brian Pentland kicked off the program with an experiential “keynote” event entitled, “Routine Dynamics: 20 Years In and Just Getting Started.” As the title suggests, the idea was to summarize accomplishments and identify new directions.



Fig. 1. Toy Handbells Provide an Unexpected Insight.

To set the stage, they distributed two sets of children’s toy handbells to the participants (see [Fig. 1](#)). Each bell could sound one note in a scale (do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do). Martha instructed the participants to “play a song.” As expected, the bell holders looked at each other, and played one note at a time (at first rather cautiously), each note triggering the next, like the card players in [Cohen and Bacdayan’s \(1994\)](#) classic experiment on routine formation. The toy bells provided an engaging, hands-on experience with forming, repeating, and varying sequences of action visible to those observing.

Everything was going as planned until someone handed a bell to Kenneth Goh. When Martha asked the participants to play another song, Kenneth started playing his bell with a steady, repetitive beat. Instead of just playing one note and then letting the next person play the following note, like everyone else, he just kept ringing his bell at a moderate tempo (not too fast and not too slow). People around the room gave him the evil eye, but he persisted, loud and steady. Eventually, the others chimed in, and the group started to play a rhythmic chorus.

The effect was electrifying. Together, they created a new “repetitive, recognizable pattern of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors” ([Feldman & Pentland, 2003](#), p. 95) but sequential triggering from one action to the next no longer had anything to do with it. The persistent beat of Kenneth’s bell had transformed the lecture hall into a rhythmic rave. We went from notes to chords, from threads to fabric ([Gherardi, 2016](#)).

This anecdote helps illustrate two things about routine dynamics. First, as a research community, we have been studying repetitive patterns of action for quite a while (for literature overviews, see [Feldman et al., 2021](#); [Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011](#)). We have an established research tradition based on close ethnographic observation of practices in organizations: the doings and sayings of specific people in specific situations (e.g., Kenneth ringing the bell). Second, the example demonstrates the excitement and surprise that we feel when we see or experience something new. In Helsinki, when Kenneth kept ringing his bell, he pointed us towards a richer, rhythmic way to think about “patterns of action” in

organizing. We can zoom in to see the individual threads or we can zoom out to see the fabric.

The papers in this volume offer similarly exciting, provocative examples of routine dynamics in a world in flux. These concrete examples are useful for advancing the sociology of organizations because science progresses when we take a closer look at the phenomena we study. In physics, they take a closer look at sub-atomic particles. In biology, they take a closer look at proteins. In organizational studies, we take a closer look at routines. Routine dynamics provides a lens for taking a closer look at the repetitive, recognizable patterns of action that are constitutive of social organization.

Looking back over the last 20 years, scholars working on routine dynamics have placed an emphasized on stability and change in routines (e.g., [Bucher & Langley, 2016](#); [D’Adderio, 2014](#); [Danner-Schröder & Geiger, 2016](#); [Dittrich et al., 2016](#); [Feldman, 2003](#); [Goh & Pentland, 2019](#); [Kremser & Schreyögg, 2016](#); [Pentland et al., 2020](#); [Turner & Rindova, 2012](#)). The papers in this volume continue and extend that tradition in a variety of ways. We asked scholars who had participated in the routine dynamics subtheme at the EGOS colloquium in recent years to speak to a common theme: “A World in Flux.” The papers here provide a remarkable variety of examples and interpretations of that theme, from pop music creation ([Schwendener & Grand, 2024](#)) to industrial restructuring ([Balzarín & Zirpoli, 2024](#)) to unicorns ([Birnholtz, 2024](#)).

THEMES IN THIS VOLUME

Building on the papers in this volume (see [Table 1](#) for an overview), we emphasize five distinct themes to further our understanding of routines in a world in flux: temporality, improvisation, process and multiplicity, power and political dynamics, as well as scale. Each theme provides a research avenue expanding the research foci on routines dynamics.

Table 1. Overview of the Papers in this Volume.

Papers	Empirical Case	Key Insights
Alvarenga et al. (2024)	Integration of first female officers in the Royal Air Force’s ground combat training course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Truce-making is an effortful process as new routine participants are integrated • Evolution of routine adaptations and truce reformations characterized by three dialectical cycles: tentative truces, experimental truces, and enacted truces
Balzarín and Zirpoli (2024)	Transition from internal combustion to electric propulsion systems at an automotive supplier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Costly side effect of routine change: established connections decay and lead to relational and temporal voids • Highlight the importance of connections within configurations of routines

Table 1. (Continued)

Papers	Empirical Case	Key Insights
Birnholtz (2024)	Evolution of the “Unicorn” tradition (i.e., a staffer dressed as a magician riding on a horse that wears a horn) at the summer camp “Sherwood”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditions change over longer periods of time • Which audiences are engaged (e.g., curators, regulators, and participants) shapes how traditions evolve • The study sheds light on the mutual relationships of traditions, rituals, and routines
Desbiens and Langley (2024)	“Lean” process improvement in a hospital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power relations drive the micro-dynamics of routines • Truces are constantly re-negotiated among different occupations in different parts of their work
Dillenberger (2024)	Covid-19 induced disruptions of teaching routines at a German business school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new normal is defined as the accepted patterns of actions at a particular point in time. As these patterns change in waves, the new normal is better understood as a pulsating process of normality formation • The study identifies six patterning mechanisms that underpin normality formation. Some of these mechanisms help to seize changes in routines (i.e., experimenting, maturing, and praising), while others help to minimize change (i.e., simplifying, enduring, and debasing) • These patterning mechanisms emphasize the role of improvisation in routines
Kremser and Geiger (2024)	Conceptual paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research on routine dynamics depends on the granularity of data • Phenomena look different depending on the granularity • Granularity of actions/events depends on the number of actors and locations, as well as the duration
Ritter et al. (2024)	Agile software development teams of an IT firm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each routine within the Scrum framework has a designed temporal orientation toward the past, present, or future • Performing this single temporal orientation through temporal demarcating enables organizational benefits • Temporal integrating (i.e., performing multiple temporal orientations) enables learning and anticipating problems
Schwendener and Grand (2024)	Creation of songs in the German electro pop band ‘We Are Ava’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovation in digital recording technology allows musicians to capture improvisations in the studio through a new routine called “looping” • The looping routine provides a practical nexus between strategy and improvisation

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Papers	Empirical Case	Key Insights
Spee et al. (2024)	Routine formation in the technology-enabled startup “MatchMe”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequences of routines inform their formation • New routines form and established routines remain in place • Routine formation as a layered process, guided by performance aspirations and monitoring of their attainment
Stanway and Meisiek (2024)	Uptake of the Chinese social media platform WeChat at an Australian university before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvisational expansions in routine paths may or may not stick (lead to new patterns) over time • Identification of improvisational conditions (i.e., whether actors respond to opportunities or unexpected events) and how they enable respectively constrain how improvisations influence paths or patterning
Xu and Carlile (2024)	Conceptual paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational approach to agency and action (temporal, spatial, and social dimension) • Transaction between intentionality of individual action and directionality of social action • Preserving, sustaining, and transforming change as three possible modes of routine dynamics

Theme 1: Temporality

Flux is an inherently temporal phenomenon. Without temporality, there is no flux. Temporality has always been a core aspect of routine dynamics research, but it has only recently been examined more explicitly (Bygballe et al., 2020; Geiger et al., 2021; Turner & Rindova, 2018). As Turner and Rindova (2021, p. 266) note, “although time plays a vital role in understanding Routine Dynamics, research on the topic remains scant.” Scholars, thus, started to examine various characteristics of temporality, such as clock and event time (Turner & Rindova, 2018), temporal orientations (Howard-Grenville, 2005), or timing (Geiger et al., 2021). Several papers in this volume advance our understanding of temporality in the context of organizational routines.

Xu and Carlile (2024) point out that routine dynamics has a theoretical blind spot regarding the future. They start from Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) influential framework, which states that agency is oriented toward the past, present, and future. Xu and Carlile argue that the current theory on routine dynamics is oriented towards the present (performing) and the past (patterning), but they argue that there is a theoretical gap when it comes to the future. To the extent that agency is an essential engine of routine dynamics, there should be a future-oriented component. To fill this gap, they suggest the idea of “projecting.” Spee et al. (2024) focus on routine formation at new ventures. They regard routine formation as a layered process. Thus, looking at the routine formation from a temporal lens shows its sequentiality, that is, that new routines do not replace

established routines but continue to run in parallel. Ritter et al. (2024) show how temporal orientations matter in the performances of routines. In their study of Scrum teams, they show that different routines may enact different temporal orientations towards the past, present, or future. Balzarín and Zirpoli (2024) show in their study of a major transition of an automotive supplier how routines, and by that temporal continuity, were interrupted. Actors experienced temporal voids, that is, they did not know what to expect in the future and felt disconnected. As these studies show, temporality is not only a matter for researchers, but it is also important to consider temporality “from within,” that is, from the perspective of people performing routines.

Building on the contributions in this volume, we believe that there are ample opportunities to further advance our understanding of the relationship between routines and temporality. This may also enable closer connections between routine dynamics scholars and scholars that focus on the role of temporality in organizing more specifically (e.g., Bansal et al., 2022; Hernes et al., 2021; Stjerne et al., 2022). Some relevant questions are:

- *Questions related to temporal orientations (i.e., past, present, and future):* How do the temporal orientations of insiders and outsiders matter for the dynamics of routines? How do temporal orientations of specific routines change over time? What happens when multiple routines in a routine cluster have different/similar dominant temporal orientations? Could we open up the notion of the future, for instance, by differentiating between close and distant future, and how would this shape our understanding of routines?
- *Questions related to clock and event time:* How do clock and event time relate to the dynamics of routines? When and how are actors oriented toward the clock and when toward event time? How “objective” is clock time, and may actors construct clock time as well? How are the performances of routines entrained in larger institutional temporal structures?
- *Questions related to rhythm and tempo:* How are actors patterning the rhythm of a routine, and how do multiple actors align on a certain rhythm (reconsider Kenneth ringing the bell)? When do the performances of routines speed up or slow down? Which processes accelerate, paralyze, or freeze routine performances? How do different tempos interrelate in the performance of routines, for instance, are phases of low tempo required for subsequent phases of high speed, or vice versa? How does the rhythm of a routine change over time?

Theme 2: Improvisation

Improvisation has been a central theme in routine dynamics from the start (Feldman, 2000). When confronted with situational contingencies, actors need to improvise to keep routines on track. Feldman and Pentland (2003, p. 102) suggested that “just as musical improvisation involves listening to what others are playing, improvisation in organizational routines involves attending to the actions taken by relevant others and the details of the situation.” Several of the papers in this volume shed light on the relationship between improvisation and routines.

Schwendener and Grand (2024) take us into the recording studio with the pop artists “We Are Ava.” They show how the digitalization of the recording process enables the artists to capture improvisation in a way that is not possible in live performance. They refer to this routine as “looping.” This technological innovation forces a new understanding of concepts like “performance” and “improvisation.” It also provides a dramatic example of strategy-as-practice because the improvised performances are captured and deployed *strategically*, to position recordings to compete in various markets. By connecting the dots from improvisation to strategy, via the looping routine, the authors offer a novel example of how organizational routines can be integral to organizational strategy. Dillenberger (2024) examines the disruptive influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching and student coaching routines at a business school. She shows how actors changed their routines, which over time led to the emergence of a new normal. In this process, improvisation was crucial as it enabled actors to come up with new ways of performing their routines. Stanway and Meisiek (2024) focus on how some improvisations stick while others don’t. They trace the use of the Chinese social media platform WeChat at an Australian university and show how improvisations (i.e., path expansions and contractions) were a thing of the organizational underlife up to the point that the organization was faced with the Covid-19 Pandemic requiring them to rethink how they communicate with their international students. Suddenly, WeChat was no longer the unwanted or risky tool but turned into a critical means for interacting with students. Consequently, improvisations were transformed from hidden acts into overt acts.

Going forward, there are a number of ways that research on improvisation could contribute to research on routine dynamics, and vice versa. Addressing these questions may help to foster closer connections between the routine dynamics community and scholars of improvisation (e.g., Ciuchta et al., 2021; Cunha et al., 2017).

- *Conceptual issues*: What are the conceptual similarities and differences between routines and improvisation? Does performing and patterning always include improvisation or are there cases in which improvisation does not play a role? What does each lens (i.e., routine vs improvisation) help us see and what does it hide?
- *How improvisation occurs in routine performances*: When does an improvisation “stick” and become part of a new, ongoing pattern? When do routine participants try to prevent improvisation, and how do they accomplish this (or not)? How do patterns of actions enable or prevent improvisation? When routines become increasingly populated with technology, such as artificial intelligence, how does this influence improvisation?

Theme 3: Process and Multiplicity

Over the last years, organization studies have increasingly adopted a strong process ontology to better understand organizational phenomena (Cloutier & Langley, 2020; Hernes, 2008; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Through this lens, the social