Designing Organizational Routines
From the Bottom-Up

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Background

Considered “the building blocks of organizations” (Becker, 2008, p. 3), organizational routines are elementary processes by which employees accomplish their work. Academically, they are a contemporary object of study in a multitude of scientific disciplines. In the domains of economics, organization science, sociology and psychology alone, three special issues on routines have been recently published (Felin, Foss, Helmertik & Madsen, 2012; Jack & Mondy, 2013; Lazaric, 2011), and three others are forthcoming (D’Adderio, Feldman, Lazaric & Pentland, 2012; Gevers, Passos & Uitdeeswillegen, 2014; Muri & Neal, 2014).

Although scientists agree on their significance as an organization's basic behavioral unit, understanding the explicit role routines play in forming organizational behavior is still the core of their interest and debate. There is a plethora of empirical work on organizational routines (Narduzzo & Warglien, 2008; Pentland & Feldman, 2008), as well as an increasing number of agent-based models simulating them (Breelin, 2014; Holz, 2014; Kunz, 2011; Miller, Pentland & Choi, 2012; Miller, Choi & Pentland, 2014; Pentland, Feldman, Becker & Liu, 2012; see also Balke, Vos & Padget, 2013; Dignum, Hofstaede & Praha, 2014; Parsons, Vital, Huynh & Snyder, 2014). Yet although this method is quite suitable for modeling emergent social behavior (Edmonds & Meyer, 2013), it is not a panacea for resolving open questions about organizational routines.

Specifically, routines are difficult to investigate, as their conceptualization and measurement have many degrees of freedom. Moreover, the “same” routine can vary starkly depending, for instance, on the organization, observer-dependence, and gaps between what employees do and report they do (Pentland & Feldman, 2008). A question arising in this respect is whether the vast diversity and ostensible incongruity of results and insight is due to the sheer complexity of routines, or perhaps to our way of perceiving them? The purpose of this chapter is to address this question by offering a different look at organizational routines, or rather, a differential look at how they are depicted in research. The underlying idea is that diverse and incongruous information may appear less incompatible if it is conceived and framed in an alternate way.

What is a routine?

Routines are defined as having ostensive and performative aspects. The ostensive aspect of a routine refers to its “abstract or generalized pattern” (Pentland & Feldman, 2005, p. 796). It can be envisioned as people’s accounts of how something is, can, should or must be done. Ostensive aspects are an abstraction in the sense they are the general case for specific instances. Performative aspects of a routine refer to “actual performances by specific people at specific times in specific places” (Pentland & Feldman, 2008, p. 286). They are demonstrative, that is, represent concrete instances of the ostensive, the interplay between ostensive and performative aspects of a routine is constitutive and generative to a certain extent depending on the context. Ostensive aspects have the function of guiding and (re)producing performances. Performed instances of routines may create and (re)establish the abstract pattern used to later guide performances.

Idea & Application

The idea is to highlight degrees of freedom in conceptualizing, operationalizing and generalizing routines as models of organizational behavior. The intention is to unravel which decisions are commonly made when constructing routines, that is, which “variables” are declared and which “values” they can assume. By explicating these aspects, the intention is to facilitate the comparison and integration of information gained by studying organizational routines, and to better recognize the diversity of perspectives of organizational behavior. This compilation is not exhaustive, but it relay’s our current view on which implicit decisions are made when constructing a routine as a model of organizational behavior.

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