

Routine Dynamics

Anja Danner-Schröder, RPTU Kaiserslautern, Germany
Christian A. Mahringer, University of Stuttgart, Germany
Kathrin Sele, Aalto University, Finland

Routine Dynamics and Strategy-as-Practice (SAP) are two scientific communities that both build on practice theory and are thus key drivers of the **practice turn** in management and organisation studies. Even though they have many commonalities and are highly compatible in ontological and epistemological terms, these communities have emphasized different aspects of organizational work and they have developed different concepts to describe organizing. This offers excellent opportunities to forge connections across both communities, enhancing the overall progress of the practice turn (Schatzki et al. 2001).

Building on scholars who examined linkages between both communities (Feldman, 2024; Grand 2016; Seidl et al., 2021), we first briefly introduce Routine Dynamics and its main features before we discuss the conceptual relationships between routines and strategizing (practices) and elaborate on how Routine Dynamics can contribute to the advancement on SAP. We conclude with a call for cross-fertilization across the two communities.

What is Routine Dynamics?

Organisational routines are commonly defined as “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 95). For example, a hiring routine is repetitive, as each position to be filled requires one iteration of the routine; it has a recognizable pattern including actions of posting the job, screening applications, interviewing candidates, et cetera; and it involves multiple actors such as applicants and committee members. The interest in routines and the role they play in how organizations work has a long history in organisation and management studies. However, they

have traditionally not only been viewed as entities but as primarily producing stability (Feldman et al., 2021). Routine Dynamics—also called the practice perspective on routines—challenges this view in at least three ways:

First, Routine Dynamics builds on **practice theory**, examining the actual work of performing routines. Through this perspective, it becomes evident that routines are not entities but **practices** which actors flexibly carry out to meet the demands of the situation. This can lead to both **stability and change**, understood as a duality.

Second, Routine Dynamics employs a **process perspective**. Therefore, scholars often use longitudinal, in-depth methods, such as **ethnography**, to understand how routines unfold over longer periods of time. This allows scholars to examine the entwinement of stability and change in the performances of routines over time.

Third, Routine Dynamics provides a set of concepts to describe the dynamics of routines. These include the notions of patterning and performing (Feldman et al. 2021), narrative networks (Pentland & Feldman, 2007), multiplicity of patterns and goals (Turner & Rindova, 2012), as well as paths (Pentland et al., 2020). Taken together, these aspects enable Routine Dynamics scholars to understand the dynamic and generative nature of organisational work.

How Routine Dynamics and Strategy-as-Practice Relate to Each Other

Routines and strategizing are recursively related (Feldman, 2024). On the one hand, strategy, as something that organizations do instead of have, is enacted through strategizing routines as well as through operative routines in various parts of the organization. Hence, from a Routine Dynamics perspective, the lived strategy of an organization (i.e., strategizing) is shaped through routines. On the other hand, strategizing in the sense of a dynamically evolving set of practices enables and constrains the actions that people can take, and thus influences the action patterns of routines. Rerup and Feldman (2011), for instance, show how strategizing at the ‘Learning Lab Denmark’ was shaped through trial-and-error learning processes that occurred

in mundane routines. At the same time, the strategic schema of the organization influenced how the particular routines were performed. In sum, routines and strategizing form a duality that spans analytical levels (Salvato & Rerup, 2011).

Routine Dynamics and SAP offer different yet highly complementary concepts. Routine Dynamics, for instance, suggests that routines include processes of performing and patterning, which helps to describe the mutually constitutive nature of routines and their situated enactment in detail. Performing refers to the actions that people take in practice, whereas patterning refers to how people create and recreate the patterns characteristic of routines. In comparison, SAP offers conceptual frameworks, such as the 3Ps framework (e.g., praxis, practices, practitioners), which go beyond explaining the dynamics of particular routines as they capture broader aspects involved in strategizing. Accordingly, they provide scholars with a multitude of opportunities for approaching their research and making new discoveries. Seidl et al. (2021) suggest that the tight concepts in Routine Dynamics and the looser/broader concepts in SAP both have merits in explaining the relationship between routines and strategizing, but also argue that a more explicit cross-fertilization would be valuable. While Routine Dynamics is well suited to explain the internal dynamics of routines and their role in organizational processes such as change and innovation (Deken & Sele, 2021), SAP helps to understand how these dynamics relate to the broader organizational context.

How Routine Dynamics Can Inform Strategy-as-Practice

Seidl et al. (2021) and Feldman (2024) provide detailed discussions of the relationship between Routine Dynamics and SAP. Here, we discuss future possibilities of how Routine Dynamics may help to understand strategizing. First, Routine Dynamics could enhance our understanding of how **strategizing** changes over time. Strategy work is enacted through **strategizing routines** (e.g., decision-making routines, strategy workshop and meeting routines) at the management level, but also through operative routines (e.g., market research routine, recruiting routine). So

far, we have a rather good understanding of how operational routines develop over time from extensive research in the field of Routine Dynamics (Feldman et al. 2021). These insights can help to examine the dynamics of strategizing routines, such as how they are generative systems creating both stability and change. Alternatively, it is possible to explore how actors develop new paths in the performances of routines, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of change in strategizing.

Second, Routine Dynamics can help understand how actors balance multiple goals in strategizing. Strategizing typically involves various goals. The strategic concept of **ambidexterity**, for instance, emphasises that organisations must exploit their current capabilities while exploring new ones. These tensions also play out in strategizing routines. Routine Dynamics has provided insights into how actors balance competing goals through routine performances (e.g., Salvato & Rerup, 2018; Turner & Rindova, 2012). These insights could also be applied to understand how actors balance competing goals in strategizing, such as cost reduction versus quality, or innovation versus efficiency.

Third, Routine Dynamics can inform our understanding of situated actions and their consequentiality for strategizing. Routine Dynamics scholars often pay meticulous attention to how routines are performed in situ. Hence, they show how mundane, situated actions are consequential for larger phenomena (Sele et al., 2024). These insights can contribute to a better understanding of how situated actions are consequential for strategizing, such as recruitment routines' influence on inclusion or exclusion, or travel routines' impact on the climate crisis.

Fourth, there are also methodological opportunities. SAP and Routine Dynamics have both relied on detailed qualitative studies. A key strength of Routine Dynamics is its rigorous focus on patterns of actions. For instance, Routine Dynamics scholars often study routines by mapping them through narrative networks, which are detailed visualizations of the patterns of actions in particular periods of time. This approach could be useful for SAP, as it enables SAP

scholars to examine how strategizing routines remain stable and change over time (visualized through the narrative network), or how strategizing routines change operational routines and vice versa. Moreover, comparing narrative networks over time indicates relations (or the lack thereof) between actors and actions that might be conducive or detrimental to strategic outcomes (Sele et al. 2024).

We believe that there are ample opportunities for the SAP and Routine Dynamics communities to achieve cross-fertilization. While we have detailed some ideas of how Routine Dynamics could inform SAP, it is equally clear that SAP offers new insights for Routine Dynamics research. Echoing Seidl et al. (2021), these opportunities include an empirical focus on strategizing routines, consideration of discursive dynamics, linking micro (routines and practices) and macro (strategizing), and the application of broader theoretical concepts. Emphasising the need for such cross-fertilization, Seidl et al. (2021, p. 494) stress that it is important to “provide platforms that allow for fruitful exchange between the communities.” We wholeheartedly agree with this suggestion and look forward to witnessing such exchanges at conferences, workshops, and in publications.

See also

Practice Theory (Theorists)
Strategizing Routines (Phenomena)
Ethnography (Methods)
Process Perspectives (Methods)
Ambidexterity (Concepts)
Practice Turn (Concepts)
Practices (Concepts)
Stability and Change (Concepts)
Strategizing (Concepts)

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