

Triggers and damages of organizational defensive routines

Abstract

Existing research on organizational defensive routines (ODRs) posits that they have strong and intertwined individual and organizational components. However, the literature has not yet systematically isolated and analyzed factors at both levels that trigger ODRs. This paper first utilizes theory on organizational routines to explain the characteristics of ODRs. Next, it identifies their individual and organizational level triggers. At the individual level factors generating ODRs are *general self-efficacy*, *locus of control*, and *neuroticism* while those operating at the organizational level are *organizational politics*, *red tape*, and *organizational structure*. The paper finally explores the potential damages ODRs could cause to individuals and organizations related to individuals' *job satisfaction*, *work engagement*, *organizational ambidexterity*, and *organizational learning*. The theoretical model in this paper builds a foundation for future empirical study and extends theoretically the nomological network of ODRs.

1. Introduction

Early conceptualizations of routines being inert and stable have been recently challenged by studies which portray routines as generative systems which can enact new routines endogenously (e.g., Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Sonenshein, 2016; Yi, Knudsen, & Becker, 2016). According to Feldman, Pentland, D'Adderio, & Lazaric's (2016) editorial in a Special Issue published in *Organization Science*, routine dynamics can connect inputs and outputs in organizations, but also act as sources of triggering change based on feedback, observation and communication. This overthrows the conventional concept of routines being inert, mindless and automatic (Becker, 2004; Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Gersick & Hackman, 1990; Nelson & Winter, 1982). The danger of over emphasizing the positive side of routines can possibly lead to a neglect of understanding the resistance to change in the routine.

Researchers who study routine dynamics focus on identifying endogenous triggers to change in routines. Talk is one trigger of routine change. For example, after studying a start-up company in the pharmaceutical industry, Dittrich, Guérard, & Seidl (2016) concluded that collective reflection through genuine talk enables organizations to find opportunities for routine change. Lebaron, Christianson, Garrett, & Ilan (2016)'s study showed that exchanging experience among physicians at treating patients through routine meetings contributed to successfully handle issues based on contingency. They did not consider the situation when individuals in organizations reluctantly provide candid information to avoid embarrassment and threat resulting in keeping old routines. Aroles & Mclean (2016)'s study indicated that managers ignored frontline workers' valuable opinion and instead were insisting that employees would follow standard rules. Why did managers not listen to the employees? Why are the issues not discussed in detail? One explanation is the existence of organizational defensive routines.

Organizational defensive routines (ODRs) are defined as “any actions and policies that organizations or segments used to avoid embarrassment and threat” (Argyris 1990, p.25). Such a defensive routine can work as a source of impeding change (Tranfield, Duberley, Smith, Musson, & Stokes, 2000), Employees often use covert behavior—one of the founding aspects of ODR—in the name of caring, diplomacy and appropriate conduct. Nevertheless, the unintended consequences of defensive behavior have adverse effects on organizational values, goals and productivity (Sales, Vogt, Singer, & Cooper, 2013). Argyris’ (1986) seminal work on defensive routines revealed how individuals’ good intention to avoid embarrassment results in a negative impact on organizational effectiveness. He concluded that “by adeptly avoiding conflict with co-workers, some executives eventually wreak organizational havoc” (Argyris, 1986, p. 74). ODRs are thought to be detrimental to organizational performance and a barrier to organizational learning (Argyris, 1990). They can damage organizations in the long term and cause disastrous results (e.g. Argyris, 1986; Holmer, 2013; Sales, Vogt, Singer, & Cooper, 2013).

Despite the potential damages arising from ODRs, the literature lacks systematic understanding of their triggers and consequences. Hence, this paper proposes a theoretical framework by using organizational routine theory to analyze the characteristics of ODRs, isolating antecedents and outcomes. The key research question is “What are the triggers and outcomes of organizational defensive routines?”

This paper sets out to conceptualize the *triggers* of organizational defensive routines for individuals as *general self-efficacy*, *locus of control* and *neuroticism*. Furthermore, triggers at the organizational level are *organizational politics*, *red tape*, *centralized organizational structure*. Finally, the paper also conceptualizes the potential *impact* (outcomes) of ODRs at the individual level as entailing job satisfaction and job engagement, as well as ambidexterity and learning at the organizational level.

With this paper, we make three contributions to the literature. First, we advance the literature on organizational routines by linking ODRs' characteristics with current studies on organizational routines. This provides a novel perspective to understand the concept of individuals being agents of routines (Feldman and Pentland 2003). Second, we extend the nomologic network of ODRs by theoretically deducting potential antecedents and outcomes. Third, the theoretical framework can be adopted by other researchers as a platform for future empirical studies.

2. Organizational routines

Theories on organizational routines can be divided into two aspects. The first aspect is dominated by traditional views of routines being a source of organizational inertia. The rigidity of organizational routines can be easily understood by three famous analogies, namely, individual habit (e.g., Cohen, 2012; Gersick & Hackman, 1990), performance programs (e.g., Cyert & March, 1963; Levitt et al., 1999) and biological genes (e.g., Nelson & Winter, 1982). These three analogies portray routines as being automatic, mindless and effortless (e.g. Gersick & Hackman 1990; Becker, 2004; Makowski, 2017). This way of understanding routines often depict routines as a singular unit, ignoring the fact that different routines in organizations exist interdependently (Spee, Jarzabkowski, & Smets, 2016). Also, the role of people who carry out these routines is overlooked by the conventional view (Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

The second aspect of routines posits that routines are not only a source of stability, but also one of change. Yi, Knudsen, & Becker (2016) suggested that inertia in routines could engender organizational adaptation. The dynamism of routines is also apparent in a study of a newspaper factory where standardized routines can either cause problems or generate change in everyday practices (Aroles & Mclean, 2016). This more current view provides the

theoretical foundation to understand how organizations with seemingly inert routines can survive the competition and adapt to a changing environment.

However, organizations are composed by various interrelated routines which can be divided into *enabling* and *defensive* (Tranfield, Duberley, Smith, Musson, & Stokes, 2000). The process of modifying and updating routines as a positive correlate of change requires reducing the defensive ones. In fact, a high level of resistance generated by routine-level inertia can block or slowdown organizational adaptation (Yi et al. 2016).

Usually ODRs coexist with other routines, even though they are not explicitly labeled as ODRs, as it emerges from existing research. For example, Gilbert (2005) suggested that leaders tend to increase standardization and reduce experimentation when they perceive themselves under a threatening situation. Aroles and Mclean's (2016) interview study showed that individuals resort to suppress their opinions to avoid getting into troubles. Bucher and Langley's (2016) study in a hospital showed that it took nurses four months to question the ambiguity of implementing new routines. Hence, ODRs are closely associated with organizational inertia.

2.1. Organizational defensive routines: Inertia

ODRs are repetitive and recurrent behaviors which individuals use to avoid possible embarrassment and threat (Argyris, 1990). Argyris clearly analyzed the aspect of ODRs being characterized by inertia through the lenses of a psycho-cognitive perspective. Among other factors, ODRs are composed by multiple individuals' habitual behavior (Argyris, 1993). These habitual behaviors are governed by the same tacit rules: "1) Achieve your intended purpose, 2) maximize winning and minimize losing, 3) suppress negative feelings, 4) behave according to what you consider rational" (Argyris, 1993, p.52). These governing rules guide individuals to apply ambiguous language to cover up their genuine opinions and avoid negative consequences. The receivers of ambiguous messages also avoid challenging the

inferences, hoping to prevent the senders from being embarrassed (Noonan, 2007). The strategies applied to avoid embarrassment and threat may include: (a) bypassing, that is overlooking problems and skipping to other tasks; (b) easing in, that is, for example, joining a process without asking challenging questions directly; (c) face-saving, where individuals master hiding strategies to mitigate threats or face losing; (d) mixed messages, the messages delivered by organizations are illogical, inconsistent and never up for discussion; (e) fancy footwork, that is work that looks professional and well-executed but is, in fact, imprecise, tentative and incompetent; (f) protective support, given to shelter employees or managers from experiencing the “real world;” and (g) self-censoring, in place every time strategies are utilized to suppress opinions which are potentially valuable for organizations, but are not preferred by some other employees in organizations (Argyris, 1990; Noonan, 2007; Wilson, 2001). Considered together, these elements can be summarized as being the core of defensive routines (Wilson, 2001). Moreover, these strategies make “the undiscussable” undiscussable and reinforce defensiveness on behalf of all the parties involved. It became an automated behavior which can be barriers at solving organizational issues efficiently and effectively (Makowski, 2016). Eventually, these routines become a big “elephant in the room” because people are afraid to talk about them. Hence, changing defensive routines becomes a tricky issue many organizations face.

This situation creates barriers for organizations to define the causes of embarrassment and make changes. From a social cognition perspective, ODRs are the outcome of individual personal attributes and organizational context (Yang, Secchi, & Homberg, 2018). Individuals’ personal preferences on avoiding embarrassment and conflict can lead them to adopt ambiguous language to communicate with other people. When other people receive the information, they can sense the senders’ intention and respond consistently (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). According to social conventions in most workplaces, not openly confronting people’s

reasoning and concealing your own weaknesses is considered acceptable behavior (Argyris, 1990). Therefore, people believe that it is rational to shy away from potential risks due to their cognitive limits (Simon, 1979; Secchi, 2011) and social cognitive thinking. This defensive behavior is encouraged by an organizational context in which disagreement and dissent are often avoided.

2.2. Organizational defensive routines and organizational adaptation

If ODRs are self-reinforcing and as inert as previous research suggested, how can many organizations survive through change? In a study of organizational change, Yi et al. (2016) state that “[i]nertia in routines resists and slows down the implementation of planned changes to the routines, which generates divergence between choices (planning) and actions (implementation)” (p. 785). Hence, according to them, inertia could be a source of change. The presence of ODRs hinders organizations from having radical learning, such as double-loop learning (Argyris, 1990), which requires individuals to reflect on their assumptions and beliefs. Learning requires individuals to identify and correct errors, which often is accompanied with challenging established routines. Opportunities for new routines to emerge are created by frankly reflecting on current routines and talking about the alternative routines with other organizational members (e.g., Dittrich, Guérard, & Seidl, 2016; Feldman, 2000).

The existence of ODRs makes it challenging to achieve an open discussion of ideas among employees though. Hence, only small changes leading to single-loop learning (instead of the more powerful double-loop learning) are implemented. Single-loop learning only changes behavior, but does not change its underlying values and beliefs (Argyris 1990). Such small changes can keep organizations alive for a while as they create a cosmetic solution to organizational issues and possibly contribute to organizational learning in the short term (Yang, Secchi, & Homberg, 2018). Framed differently, ODRs can be defined by the differences between what individuals think and what they actually do (Argyris 1990). If this

mismatch lasts long enough, individuals could feel dissatisfied with the working environment resulting in an impetus of radical change. Leaders' bounded rationality can either facilitate employees to conceal or reveal their genuine ideas (Yi et al. 2016).

3. Triggers of organizational defensive routines

Routine theories indicate that organizational routines are composed by two recursive aspects usually referred to as the *ostensive* and *performative elements of routines* (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Ostensive aspects are exemplifying "the routine in principle" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 101). They provide rough guidance for individuals' actions, but ostensive aspects of routines only become apparent in performance (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). The performative aspect of routines is understood as 'routine in action' in "specific time and places, by specific people" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 101). Hence, routines can be influenced by organizations through structured rules and principles, and these rules become alive through the action of individuals. The so-called human capital and individuals' abilities can influence the way of interpreting routines and interacting with other people (e.g., Felin, Foss, Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012; Howard-Grenville, 2005). This is also true for ODRs.

Existing research focused on identifying different defensive strategies people used in organizations which characterize ODRs, such as mixed messages, bypass, easing, face-saving, fancy footwork, protective support, self-censoring and forthrightness (e.g., Argyris, 1990; Wilson, 2001). To better understand the mechanics of these routines, we have divided them according to their impact on individual and organizational levels, and isolated six elements that are likely to manifest together with and affect ODRs. *Self-efficacy* (Ashforth & Lee, 1990), *neuroticism* (Yang et al. 2018), and *locus of control* (Judge et al. 1998) are three elements that, according to the literature, trigger defensive behavior in individuals. These have been selected because they have been directly tied to behavior, as discussed below. On the organizational side, *red tape* (Bozeman & Feeney, 2011), *organizational politics* (Rosen,

Harris, & Kacmar, 2009), and *centralization* (Damanpour, 1991) are considered since they have been traditionally related to some dysfunctional aspects of an organization's life. These two levels are intertwined and we are splitting them analytically with the sole purpose of gaining a better framework for interpreting and diagnosing defensive routines.

There are other factors outside organizations that could also trigger organizational defensive routines. For example, an economic crisis provides the perfect ground to put organizations in a "fight mode," and this could give rise to the defensive routines. This and similar other external factors have an impact on all organizations, and are out of their control. However, this does not necessarily mean that every organization reacts similarly. And this is where this paper comes in since it focuses on the factors for which we could deduce relationships between variables based on existing literature review and which can be managed by organizations. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the paper does not provide an exhaustive list of the triggers and outcomes of ODRs. It merely serves as a preliminary exploration for future studies of ODRs. The following section systematically discusses the triggers of ODRs at the individual and organizational levels.

3.1. Individual level triggers

The word "trigger" is here used to define elements and factors that makes it more likely for ODRs to develop, sustain themselves, and remain untouched. From a more canonical angle, we would have used the word "antecedents" however, we are not claiming a strict causality between the factors below and defensive routines. Given the core position routines occupy in an organization, they are influenced by most procedural, structural, and strategic aspects of organizational dynamics. For this reason, while we can claim that, according to the literature, some of the following elements facilitate the emergence and existence of defensive routines, it would be a stretch to indicate strict causality. However, it should be clear that we are not

providing an exhaustive list of the triggers here, many other triggers and outcomes of ODRs could be identified in the future studies.

General self-efficacy (GSE). GSE is defined as “individuals’ perception of their ability to perform across a variety of different situations” (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998, p.170). GSE is trait-like and can be applied to capture individuals’ tendency at viewing themselves capable of performing successfully in various situations (Chen, Gully, Whiteman, & Kilcullen, 2000). Individuals “of low self-efficacy are easily convinced of the futility of effort when they come up against institutional impediments, whereas those of high GSE figure out ways to surmount them” (Bandura, 2012, p.14). The belief of being able to make a difference in outcomes can motivate people with high GSE to voice their genuine opinions.

In contrast, people with low GSE tend to experience anxiety when dealing with difficult situations, such as embarrassment and threat. Results from the literature on organizational silence suggest that individuals with low GSE often feel they have little to offer, so that they tend to hold back their thoughts (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Self-censorship and bypassing strategies could be used to protect themselves from experiencing negative emotions. In their work on GSE, Ashforth and Lee (1990) also noted that newcomers with low self-efficacy tend to feel less confident to propose innovative ideas. Hence, low levels of GSE could trigger some of the elements we used above to describe ODRs.

Neuroticism. Neurotic individuals tend to feel depressed, fearful and anxious toward novel situations (Judge et al., 1998). Individuals with high neuroticism may find it challenging to cope with difficult situations, such as resolving conflicts and handling negative feedback. Studies show that neuroticism, in most cases, is negatively correlated with work performance (Judge et al., 1998) and participation in self-managed work groups (Thoms, Moore, & Scott, 1996). High neurotic people tend to feel uncomfortable to interact with other people, and this

restricts their ability to share knowledge (Borges, 2013). Researchers also propose that neuroticism could positively correlate with employee silence due to their tendency of feeling insecure and embarrassed (Brinsfield, 2013). A recent study conducted on a sample of $N = 351$ British employees by Yang et al. (2018) showed that high neuroticism is positively associated with ODRs.

Locus of control. Locus of control is an individual motivational trait and is source of psychological empowerment (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009). Individuals with an external locus of control are likely to feel less empowered to influence working environment than individuals with an internal locus of control (Judge et al., 1998). People high on external locus of control could feel it is meaningless to reveal their opinions and question the inference of decision making in organizations. Due to their pessimistic view of their ability to control the environment, people high on external locus of control could resort to bypass the problems by following the majorities. As a result, they will contribute to trigger ODRs.

3.2. Organizational level triggers

As mentioned above, some of the elements reviewed below may work under the premises that some key individuals show high neuroticism traits, are less confident in their abilities to perform organizational work, and/or assume an external locus of control. These psychological mechanisms cannot be excluded from the picture when reviewing organizational level phenomena such as *red tape*, *organizational politics* and *centralization*. However, these three elements below can be (and are) typically framed at the organizational level because they exist independently of the particular employee or manager that enforces them here-and-now. As such, and being the result of the combined work of multiple actors, constraints, structural elements, and cultural aspects, the following are both affected by and affect individual thinking and behavior.

Red tape. Red tape is conceptualized as “burdensome administrative rules and procedures that have negative effects on the organizations effectiveness” (Bozeman & Feeney, 2011, p.84). Red tape is often based on individuals’ subjective perception and it is an outcome of individuals’ psychological interpretation of organizational social dynamics (Davis & Pink-Harper, 2016). If individuals perceive that organizations have cumbersome rules to go through for making changes, they may abandon their initiatives to avoid the amount of effort and time involved to go through the procedures. Argyris (1990) posits that managers in organizations create many policies to protect themselves and avoid being blamed. Hence, the existence of red tape could be a sign of ODRs.

Organizational politics. Organizational politics are commonly viewed as “behavior that is strategically designed to maximize short term or long-term self-interest” (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997, p.161). This type of behavior is perceived to be dysfunctional (Cropanzano et al. 1997). People working in an environment entrenched with politics often feel uncomfortable and emotionally drained, resulting in increased organizational withdrawal, such as turnover (Rosen, Harris, & Kacmar, 2009). Additionally, political actors could hold important information to achieve personal interest. In this working environment, people tend to protect their own personal interest instead of thinking at organizational benefits. In order to protect their own interest, individuals could adopt some defensive behavior such as avoiding conflict, shining away from blames and self-censorship. Hence, we can infer that organizational politics can induce ODRs.

Centralized organizational structure. By referring to organizational structure one defines the way organizations distribute power, resources, and responsibilities. It also indicates the roles individuals are expected to play (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Centralization is characterized by decision-making power being controlled by a small group of individuals, normally top managers (Damanpour, 1991). When organizations have a high centralized structure, a small

group of elites are expected to be decision makers and they are positioned at the top of a hierarchical pyramid. This way of structuring organizations creates barriers for information flow and innovation (Damanpour, 1991). A centralized structure tends to fail to involve employees in decision making processes and it creates a power distance between managers and employees. This distance could discourage employees from coming up with new ideas challenging the status quo as it is risky to question managers' reasoning when inconsistent and irrational decisions when made. They may feel to put their job in jeopardy with speaking up. Managers also become less approachable for discussing sensitive issues that could contribute to the creation of new routines. As a result, centralization becomes a possible foundation for ODRs to grow and spread.

4. Outcomes of ODRs

The existing literature on ODRs mainly focuses on evaluating the negative outcome of ODRs on organizational learning through case studies (Argyris, 1990, 2001). Though the latest empirical study conducted by Yang et al. (2018) sheds some light on understanding the possible positive outcomes of ODRs on organizational learning, these results are rather in contrast with the well-established belief that ODRs have negative effects. This study suggests that the view on defensive routines may not be as clear-cut as originally thought, but a more nuanced perspective is needed. This may provide a more balanced view of organizational dynamics where some level of dysfunction (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) or disorder (Herath, Secchi, & Homberg, 2016; Herath, Costello, & Homberg, 2017) is actually necessary to successful management. On this respect, additional research is needed to find a more conclusive evidence on the subject. In fact, due to the lack of systematic studies on ODRs, theoretical reasoning on the outcome of ODRs is rather speculative. Future empirical studies would benefit from testing the relations between ODRs and other variables such as, for example, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and turnover. The following section

discusses the potential outcomes of ODRs on individuals in organizations and on the organization as a whole.

4.1. Outcomes of ODRs on individuals

Job satisfaction and engagement. ODRs could have an impact on many different aspects of employees' attitudes towards their jobs. For example, one may consider job satisfaction, employee engagement, work motivation and organizational commitment among many others. These may, in turn, affect other factors such as performance and/or intentions to leave. However, we selected job satisfaction and engagement due to four reasons. First, ODRs generate negative "energy" which would affect employees' attitude toward their job role through the selected two outcome variables. This is because ODRs create passive influence on individuals, especially through various strategies such as suppressing genuine feedbacks, avoiding conflict and applying ambiguous messages (Holmer, 2013; Sales, Vogt, Singer, & Cooper, 2013; Yang, Secchi, & Homberg, 2018). Employees resort to ODRs to deal with embarrassment and threat when they are not true to their feelings (Argyris 1990). Negative emotions often result to reduce the positive energy of employees' willingness to engage with their job (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014). Second, job satisfaction and engagement are often studied together in the literature (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014; Yalabik, Popaitoon, Chowne, & Rayton, 2013). The third reason is that these two selected outcomes are extensively studied because of their importance and relevance to performance, employee well-being, turnover intentions and, ultimately, business long term success (e.g. Kim et al., 2017; Holland, Cooper, & Sheehan, 2017 and Ruck, Welch, Menara, 2016). Finally, these two outcomes of ODRs directly relate to the type of work employees perform. Given their core position in organization and management research, it is particularly interesting to explore whether and how defensive routines affect them.

Routines, and defensive routines in particular, have been linked to learning and cognitive aspects of individual and organizational life. There are apparent reasons to value that type of contribution and, at the same time, a line of research that is more tied towards traditional management constructs (such as satisfaction and engagement) has potentials to provide more value to the traditional focus of ODRs. We detail why in the following pages.

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction focuses on employees' attitudes toward their job. Aspects of job satisfaction have been extensively explored from different disciplines. Individuals in the workplace usually interact with other people, such as colleagues and managers and, depending on the role, customers, suppliers, government officials, and/or other stakeholders. Hence, their perception of the work environment will have an influence on their behavior and attitudes toward their job. Research conducted by Meneghel, Borgogni, Miraglia, Salanova, and Martínez (2016), for example, found that a positive social context can improve individuals' job satisfaction. ODRs are collective behaviors which are triggered by individual's assumption of situations when embarrassment and threat are more likely to occur (Argyris 1990). In order to avoid embarrassment, individuals often adopt ambiguous or defensive language to conceal their genuine feelings (Noonan, 2011). In the short term, as everyone collectively applies the same routine to cope with sensitive issues, this can form a collective perception of the social context—organizations sacrifice effective decision making for playing safe and conflict avoidance. Collective perceptions of the social context positively relates to job satisfaction (Meneghel et al., 2016) hence, we can deduce that ODRs could create a harmonious working environment and lead to temporary increases in job satisfaction.

However, in the long term, the underlying issues resulting in organizational problems are swept under the carpet and become a barrier for job performance improvement. A case shown by Argyris (1990, p.5) shows that employees conceal their knowledge on how to improve cost reductions in order to avoid conflict with managers. Gradually, this avoidance

behavior can diminish the trust in the organization because it is perceived unsafe to voice divergent opinions. Suppressing voice is negatively related to job satisfaction (Knoll & van Dick, 2013). Therefore, the relation between ODRs and job satisfaction could be inversely U-shaped.

Employee engagement. Engaged employees are able to “employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p.694). Internal communication usually plays a crucial role in employee engagement. Specifically, the way senior managers are responsive to employees’ voice can either encourage or discourage employee engagement (Ruck, Welch, & Menara, 2016). Employees working in organizations with ODRs tend to experience defensive communication which is applied to hide the message senders’ inference (Argyris 1990). The way of crafting defensive communication is often self-referenced, such as “that is the way it is”, “it has been always like this,” and “ trust me, I know it.” Challenging this kind of communication could create an impression of being distrustful and incompetent. Questioning the inference of ambiguous communication could put the senders and recipients of such messages under embarrassment or threat. Consequently, people involved with ODRs have to suppress their genuine feelings toward issues in the workplace. This can demotivate employees in engaging their tasks and performing to their full potential in their job roles.

According to social cognition theories, people learn what is an appropriate way to respond to issues by observing other people (Bandura, 2012; Kunda, 1999). Defensive routines make people dislocate themselves physically from identifying the root causes of problems. Emotionally, people learn to self-protect themselves for their own interest instead of organizational goals. Hence, ODRs can decrease engagement.

Another consideration that supports the arguments above relates to the characteristics of the employee or manager under analysis. An employee characterized by significant levels

of neuroticism, low self-efficacy, and external locus of control may also show low engagement and low job satisfaction (e.g., Judge & Bono, 2001; Kim, Shin, & Swanger, 2009). The role of ODRs may be considered, in this case, a vehicle that brings these individual characteristics to the surface. In other words, it is likely that ODRs work as mediators for all three individual level factors discussed. We maintain that there may be a direct effect of these three on engagement and satisfaction but that ODRs is one of the vehicles through which these characteristics materialize on more organization-focused outcome variables.

4.2. Influence of ODRs on organizations

There are various aspects of organizational life that may be affected by routines in general and ODRs in particular, such as organizational performance, innovation and competitiveness. However, due to space limitation and focus, we concentrate on these two variables which literature shows to be some of the most relevant for ODRs. Learning is very much in line with the literature and is an obvious choice because of the way defensive mechanisms hinder cognitive processes (see below). In contrast, the link between ODRs and ambidexterity is a connection that we propose in this paper for the first time. Ambidexterity increasingly gains researchers' attention in management theory, as it has proven to be key to dynamism, adaptability, and sound performance, given turbulent environmental conditions (Meglio, King, & Risberg, 2015). In this respect, mechanisms that block innovation and adaptability such as defensive routines may be particularly harmful to this important element of current successful organizations. In the following, we specify how this connection works.

Organizational Ambidexterity. Ambidexterity is a key to organizational success and job performance (Gibson, Birkinshaw, Gibson, & Birkinshaw, 2004). Ambidextrous organizations have abilities to engage in dual aspects of organizational growth by exploiting the existing competencies, while simultaneously, exploring innovativeness to meet the

challenges in the current and future market requirement (Patel, Messersmith, & Lepar, 2013). In order to be ambidextrous, organizations need to develop a context that embraces open, candid, and rapid feedback. This encourages employees to have more ambiguous objectives, it maintains stable managerial support, and establishes trust (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). However, such conditions stand in extreme contrast to ODRs. The nature of ODRs is to use mixed messages to protect themselves from potential negative consequences, hence, a mode of communication that people adopt and that is mainly opaque and inconsistent (Argyris, 1990). Without genuine feedback and clear guidance, employees most likely do not have a focused vision and/or ambitious objectives for their job. This may decrease the chances that the organization develops some ambidexterity. On the one hand, mixed messages and covert communication contribute to set ambiguous objectives and this is, at least partially, in line with ambidexterity. On the other hand, however, ambiguity created via ODRs does not contribute to transparency or openness, and it does not work as a trust enabler. For this reason, ambiguity through ODRs is not perceived as a way to open further opportunities but as a blocking mechanism instead.

Additionally, employees working in organizations with ODRs tend to assume some issues to be undiscussable. This impedes employees from self-reflection on their own contribution to generating ODRs and prevents organizations from learning about the causes of these issues. For example, Sales, Vogt, Singer and Cooper's (2013) research on ODRs in a hospital pointed out that healthcare practitioners assume that errors in their practice are not acceptable, so these practitioners tend to conceal the errors and avoid blames. Consequently, the hospital lost chances to explore the possibilities of improving patients' safety. Furthermore, ODRs are known to prevent individuals from engaging in deep reflections and analyses of organizational issues. Instead, they only make incremental changes at a superficial level, by exploiting current resources. Lack of collective reflective talking could impede the

emergence of new routines (Dittrich et al., 2016) and restrict organizations at developing adaptability for future challenges. After considering all these aspects, it can be concluded that ODRs could be negatively related to organizational ambidexterity. Specifically, ODRs could induce individuals to play safe by aligning their performance with established formal processes rather than taking risks to explore new practices.

Organizational learning. As already mentioned above, the negative impact of ODRs on organizational learning is not new and it has been extensively investigated (e.g., Argyris, 2001). Surprisingly, this well-established understanding of ODRs and organizational learning has been challenged by recent studies (Yang et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a need to further clarify this relation and provide a solid ground for future research intended to replicate the study empirically.

Argyris (1990) explicitly defined organizational learning as identifying errors and correcting errors. Building on this definition, he clearly divided organizational learning into single-loop and double-loop learning. Most of Argyris' work (1990, 1993, 2002) endeavored to explain the relation between ODRs and double-loop learning. This is reflected in the assertion that people's tendency to avoid embarrassment and threat only leads to cosmetic solutions to organizational issues and single-loop learning. Hence, the claim at 'ODRs are anti-learning' needs to be more specifically narrowed down to double-loop learning. The current state of continuously changing markets requires double-loop learning since the generation of radical changes is important for organizations to survive and prosper, given the fierce competition (Lipshitz, 2000). However, it is of pivotal importance to make sure that available resources and skills create financial sustainability and reduce costs. Based on this reasoning, the relation between ODRs and organizational learning is inversely U-shaped. Empirical studies on testing this relation need to clearly measure both types of organizational learning to segregate the effect between variables.

Figure 1 summarizes the system of triggers and outcomes as explained above. On the left hand side of the diagram, triggers are split in individual and organizational triggers. Some of these are intertwined and related by a double-arrowed line to indicate that it is possible that, for example, *organizational politics* and *red tape* are enforced especially by *neurotic* individuals with low *general self-efficacy* and external *locus of control*. At the same time, an environment characterized by politics and red tape may work as a disabler of self-efficacy and exploit more externally-driven individuals. These constructs affect ODRs and have been considered as triggers in our reasoning above. On the right hand side of the diagram, outcomes are represented. These are such that ODRs have a direct impact on them but, at the same time, there are direct links between some of the triggers and the outcomes. This is because, for example, *red tape* and a *centralized formal structure* may hinder *ambidexterity* and make the more dynamic aspects of *learning* more difficult. At the same time, as already noted above, the individual characteristics indicated in this theoretical framework may affect *satisfaction* and *engagement* directly as well as via defensive routines.

Insert Figure 1 about here

One aspect of Figure 1 that is left ambiguous is the fact that individual and organizational triggers load on ODRs and these, in turn, then affect the outcomes. However, from this Figure 1, it remains unclear whether the individual triggers may affect organizational outcomes through ODRs. We have not argued one way or the other in the pages above but we have noted, at times, that there is broad interconnection between individual and organizational elements as far as defensive routines (and routines in general) are concerned. This leads to the claim that individual triggers may affect organizational outcomes only indirectly, that is via ODRs. The other cross-path—i.e. from organizational

triggers to individual outcomes—is also possible although the supporting literature is more limited in that respect.

5. Conclusion

The pervasiveness of ODRs in organizations is well-acknowledged by academics and practitioners. The emerging research on routine dynamics strives to decode the process of how new routines evolve. Considering the omnipresence of ODRs and their position within the wider context of the theory of routines, it is important for researchers to systematically explore ODRs and extend their current knowledge and understanding. It is also necessary to build on the literature of routine dynamics by understanding the reasons why some new routines take long time to have a breakthrough. Read from the lenses of ODRs, defensive routines show the interdependence of multiple routines existing in the same organizations such that one kind of routine can become an obstacle to the change, implementation, and development of other routines. The conceptual model presented in this paper is to be considered a stepping stone for future empirical studies.

The model focuses on collective defensive behavior in organizations characterized as mostly inert and resistant to change. These routines operate in many different forms such as fancy footwork, protective support, self-censoring and mixed messages (Argyris, 1990; Wilson, 2001), but they share the same pattern of bypassing and covering up embarrassment and threats. In this paper we have analyzed the triggers of ODRs by individual and organizational factors (see Figure 1). Also, the paper conceptually derived some of the potential outcomes of defensive routines. The discussion of ODRs' influence on individuals and organizations shows that, to a certain extent, ODRs might generate short-term gains, but that they gradually become pathological to individuals' attitude toward their job and organizations' adaptability.

The arguments in this paper provide some guidance for future studies. First, in order to systematically understand the mechanisms of ODRs, there is a need for researchers to empirically test and retest the newly developed scale developed by Yang, Secchi and Homberg (2017). It will also potentially facilitate the development of our understanding of ODRs by testing the relations as presented in this paper.

Future studies may also widen nomological networks of ODRs. The paper provides a brief review of the triggers and outcomes. ODRs could also be triggered by some other variables such as organizational culture, motivation systems and technologies. The outcome of ODRs could also be organizational performance, competitiveness, retention at organizational level. More theoretical and empirical research is much needed in order to attest the actual effect of ODRs on other organizational factors.

Finally, research should integrate ODRs with the theory of organizational routines, especially with the latest track of routine dynamics. For example, one may want to ask what roles do ODRs play in the emergence of new routines, or what cognitive perspective may be embraced to better understand the hidden nature of defensive routines.

Given the volatile of economic environment companies in the West are facing and the amount of changes many organizations need conduct to respond to unexpected international developments, it is important for researchers to understand ODRs systematically and provide suggestions for managers in practice to eliminate ODRs at their early stage of development.

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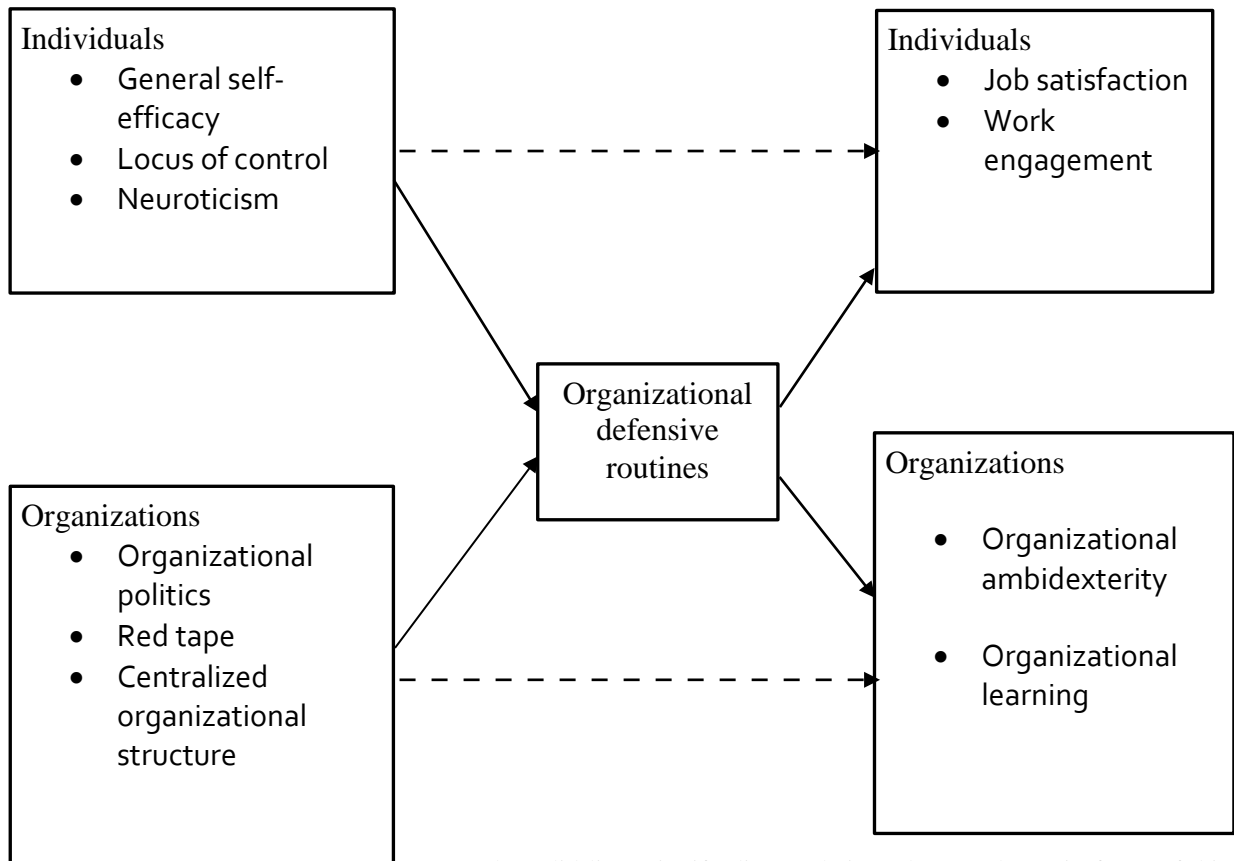
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Note: The solid lines signify direct relations that are the main focus of this paper. Dotted lines indicate a possible relation that usually appears in the literature. The double-headed line indicates a possible multi-level influence.

Figure 1: theoretical framework