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# **THE ROLE OF MULTIPLE OSTENSIVE ASPECTS IN PRACTICING CHANGE AND STABILIZING ROUTINES: A CASE STUDY OF AN EGOGENOUS CHANGE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on recent debates on performative-ostensive cycles in routine theory, combined with an exploratory case study of an exogenous change, this paper proposes a better understanding of the structural variations in routine dynamics by depicting the recursive relationship between multiple ostensive aspects created by different pressures for consistency and change (or stabilization) in performances in the merged entity.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Past studies of the internal structure of organizational routines and the recursive relationship between their ostensive and performative aspects have provided useful insights (Feldman 2000, Feldman and Pentland 2003, Zbaracki and Bergen 2010). Those studies have drawn our attention to the tension between routine dynamics and the achievement of efficiency through behavioral standardization and consistency in performance (Cohen 2007, Turner and Rindova 2012). Nevertheless, only a few empirical works have examined how the internal structure of routines underpins organizational phenomena such as change, transformation, adaptation, and stabilization (D'Adderio 2008, Rerup and Feldman 2011). Consequently, we still lack full understanding of how exogenous changes affect the recursive relationship between the multiple ostensive and performative aspects of routines (Jarzabkowski et al. 2012).

In this article, we take organizational routines as the unit of analysis (Pentland and Feldman 2005) and focus on their internal structure and dynamics, content-process interrelationships, and connections to other facets of organizational life. We do this by asking how individuals performing routines balance competing needs for consistency in delivering collective performances in organizations undergoing change. We adopt a practice lens to consider the structural variations in the admissions routine of an art college as it is merged with a large university. The variations grow out of conflicting preexisting routines used by the two institutions and the need for consistency in the merged entity. Differences between the way students are taught and, hence admitted to the institutions, make it difficult to have a common admissions routine. This is a good context for the study of how routines change and/or stabilize (Leidner 1993, Feldman and Pentland 2003). Many factors, such as the far bigger size of the university, the predominance of university managers in top management positions of the new entity, as well as the need for economies of scale, would predict the adoption of the university admissions routine by the college. Yet the case study shows that the college is able to keep its admissions routine. Our findings suggest that this is because multiple ostensive aspects of routines are not only used by the college, but also in the wider context in which it is embedded. The embeddedness of the art college's way of admitting students in the broader context of the art world and of creative industries makes it very difficult to change the routine.

## THEORITICAL ORIENTATION

Consistent with a performative perspective, routines are defined in this article as “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors” (Feldman and Pentland 2003, p. 95). Organizational routines are complex phenomena, largely pictured as being comprised of two interacting aspects, namely ‘ostensive’ and ‘performative’ schemata, which are constructed mutually, shaped and reshaped recursively, and have a distributed nature (Feldman 2000). In theories of practice, especially structuration theory (Bourdieu 1977, 1990, Giddens 1984, Ortner 1984, 1989), the performative and ostensive aspects of organizational routines have a recursive relationship; that is, the performative aspects (re)create the ostensive parts through everyday practice of the routine, while the ostensive aspects, in turn, enable and constrain performance (Pentland and Feldman 2005). This creates an “on-going opportunity for variation, selection, and retention of new practices and patterns of action within routines and allows routines [participants] to generate a wide range of outcomes, from apparent stability to considerable change” (Feldman and Pentland 2003, p. 94).

The multiple actors who shape and carry out routines have diverse subjective understandings. Thus, although the ostensive aspects conventionally represent the structured, principled side of routines, variation can be observed across practitioners, giving rise to multiple ostensive aspects of routines. These socially distributed understandings, like any socially distributed stock of knowledge, are not monolithic, and are likely to be distributed unevenly (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Schutz 1967). In these situations, everyone who engages in a given set of activities is not necessarily seeking the same outcome. Here, the emergent meaning of the ostensive parts depends on the somehow different viewpoints of the routine participants; that is, routines’ ostensive aspects are multiple and no routine exists as a stand-alone entity (Pentland and Feldman 2005, Howard-Grenville 2005, Rerup and Feldman 2011).

It is easy to overlook the variety of ostensive and performative aspects of organizational routines when the environment is stable. However, when there is organizational change, for example when organizations merge, the clash of processes and routines is of concern to everyone involved. Scholars have for some time admitted that routines may have multiple ostensive aspects because different participants may have different understandings of how a routine should be carried out. Ironically, in the research literature and in practice, this multiplicity is still often overlooked in favor of the simplifying assumption that a given routine has a single ostensive aspect. Scholars have rather pursued the variety in the performative aspects of routines and their role in shaping ‘the routine in principle’ while studying organizational phenomena such as learning, change, adaptation, and stabilization (Rerup and Feldman 2011).

Admitting the multiplicity of ostensive aspects in the understanding of actual performances unfolds many of the yet unanswered questions. These include: how do the multiple ostensive aspects of routines affect a specific action, in a specific context, at a specific time, by a specific group of actors engaging in an organizational routine while experiencing change and adaptation? And how (and why) do the multiple ostensive aspects of routines come together to shape the collective performance at a single iteration of the relevant routine, and how can one then justify the observed consistency in the daily accomplishment of that routine in the face of ongoing internal and external changes? This paper is as an endeavor to answer these important, though underappreciated queries within the organizational setting of the current study.

## RESEARCH SETTING

A case suitable to the phenomena under investigation was chosen for this study (Eisenhardt 1989, Yin 2003): an academic merger between a university and an art college. Despite their pre-merger collaborations, the two institutions had very diverse epistemologies, methods and ethos in conducting daily tasks. Hence, different support systems were developed to support the two institutions' daily activities. The smaller size of the college made it even more different (almost 300 versus over 3000 employees of the university). In the college, many of the administrative tasks and issues could be managed through face-to-face interactions and discussions, creating a kind of exception or one-off bespoke model. In contrast, administrative processes in the university had been made more uniform through systematized procedures.

As a result of the merger, the art college had to centralize most of its administrative activities within the university's central services in order to achieve economies of scale out of the merger. Thanks to the merger of those two diverse attitudes and ways of carrying out daily tasks, the clash of administrative routines became a significant practical issue. For many administrative tasks (e.g., payroll), the performances and the understanding of the expectations of those administrative jobs were quite similar in the two contexts. However, for a few administrative tasks which were more directly interconnected with students and academic staff performances (e.g., admissions), the way of conducting business and the understandings of the expectations of those administrative jobs were quite different.

The art college admissions were based on portfolio as well as academic grades. Portfolios are the artifacts showing the works of art students as a part of their application. As a result, the admissions process in the art college was split between the registry and academic staff. While the academic staff assess portfolios, the registry staff would assess the academic qualifications. Then, when it comes to inviting students for interview, the students would need to bring a bigger, more detailed portfolio which would go through an assessment by academic staff again. As a result, the academic staff were quite heavily involved with the admissions. In the university, in contrast, the way of admissions for most of the main stream subjects, still remains as an administrative process based mainly on just students' academic attainment.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This article closely examines multiple ostensive aspects of the admissions routine in the art college created and shaped by multiple pressures for consistency in the merged institute. Longitudinal qualitative data is collected over 24 months, tracing in real time the restructuring of the art college admissions routine. A grounded theory approach is adopted based on the triangulation of insights from 38 interviews, roughly 21 months of non-participant observation and the minutes of monthly meetings of the (pre- and post-merger) integration working groups with an extensive analysis of secondary documents developed by the merger communities. The mode of reasoning in this research project was primarily inductive and the analysis was conducted in an iterative fashion in order to satisfy the development of inductive theory. Hence, we were constantly traveling back and forth between the collected data, emerging findings, and extant literature (Locke 2001). The rich data resulting from appropriate coding and memoing, form the basis of the discussion in the next sections. The analysis is heavily relied on constant comparison of multiple respondents over time (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

## EMERGENT FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Moving from the familiarization into the sampling stages, we became increasingly aware of the existing, diverse pressures for consistency in conducting the admissions routine in the new college of art. On the day of the merger, all processes related to the art college's admissions routine stopped and were centralized into the university's administrative systems. However, the clash between various understandings among the routine participants created difficulties in conducting the admissions routine in the new way. Based on these explanations, we categorize our first-order themes (empirical codes) into four groups as follows.

### **Pressures for consistency to achieve economies of scale out of the merger**

The merger dictated a need to achieve economies of scale by reducing parallel tasks. To do so, the university had to centralize administrative processes and resettle previously local administrators in the art college. Due to the huge difference in the size of the two institutions, it was reasonable to both groups of administrators that the art college should adopt the university's way of doing admissions. Consistent with the findings of Turner and Rindova (2012), achieving efficiency and economies of scale in administrative routines depends most of all on the nature of the 'process technology' employed in the organization. Here, centralized technologies as a distributed computer system help the routinization to guarantee consistency in performances. The codified knowledge of conducting the admissions routine embedded in the technology was a tool for the university to achieve efficiency and economies of scale.

### **Pressures for consistency from the university (rules, regulations, interconnectedness)**

From the university's point of view, the existing central rules and procedures work as an umbrella concept for overarching all the subunits of the institution. This umbrella concept allows the subunits to have slightly divergent interpretations of administrative routines, and, hence, to perform their daily routines in marginally different ways in order to meet their somehow unique local needs. This was not an exception for the recently joined art college. The first two groups of our emergent empirical observations (A and B) together make our first overarching theoretical construct. We label this construct '*upstream stability*', since both groups of observation are depicting the top-down, managerial willingness for continuity of practices and stability.

### **Pressures for consistency from the art college academic staff and Students**

The reality is not shaped only by management desires (upstream pressures). As we see from Cohen's (2007) paradox of the (n)ever changing world of organizational routines, there are cases in which the higher level authority clearly sees either no alternative in conducting the downstream activities or (in very rare cases) admits the superiority of the partner's procedure. As a result, the university had to modify its practices and adopt the art college way. In some cases, this occurred immediately; more often, it became a long-term plan while temporary routines were produced in the meantime. This is specially the case in our setting since academic institutions are very bottom-heavy (Clark 1998), and hence resistance from the bottom inhibits upstream pressures from dominating for very long.

## **Pressures for consistency from the network of actants outside the art college**

The degree to which a routine is embedded in broader organizational settings can influence its flexibility and the ongoing consequences of its changeability (Howard-Grenville 2005). This was especially the case for the art college, belonging to a unique world of art, and the merits it had developed in order to achieve worldwide renown. The normative side of the art and design world is collectively strong enough to dominate. Although actions are still taken by individual artists, the understanding of the outcomes and how they relate to ideals and values is often socially constructed in a much broader sense; too broadly for a single art college to deviate. The last two groups of our emergent empirical observations (C and D) together form our second theoretical construct, namely ‘*downstream stability*’, since both groups of observation depict the bottom-up willingness for continuity and stability of their practices. Our entire first-order themes (the four major pressures for consistency) indeed form the main theoretical construct, which is the “*multiple ostensive aspects*” in the admissions routine.

## **Theoretical Contributions**

Several factors emerge from the data as central to multiple ostensive understandings created by multiple pressures for consistency and their impact on performative routines. First, our analysis reveals that individuals from the two organizations approach the admissions routine with different orientations (Howard-Grenville, 2005) residing in their depth of knowledge. This leads to multiple, distributed ostensive aspects of the admissions routine which can potentially result in divergent performances. This puts agency at the center of attention once again as it shows that organizing routines - here the admissions routine - are indeed created as they are performed and enacted by the routine participants in practice.

In line with Feldman and Pentland (2003), we also found that to control the actual performances, modern management - crystallized here in the university way of administration - needs to control the decisions made in the course of conducting a routine. As a result of this upstream pressure, any variation would be regarded as resistance. In Feldman and Pentland’s (2003, p. 110) words, “this analysis might suggest that the ostensive aspect of a routine is aligned with managerial interests (dominance), while the performative aspect is aligned with the interests of labor (resistance)”. However, in contrast to their analysis, our findings show that the ostensive aspects can be aligned with different constituencies within an organization including managerial, institutional and/or labor interests. The routine performance in practicing changes might be aligned with managerial (dominance, or change in our model) or administrators’ (resistance, or stabilization in our model) interests, depending on the domination of upstream or downstream pressures for consistency. This is also in sharp contrast with what Zbaracki and Bergen (2010, p. 13) found in their longitudinal study of price-adjustment routines. As their argument implies, the more abstract ostensive aspects are usually dominant in larger changes, as upstream pressures from managers determine the courses of action and overcome downstream resistance. Our findings, on the contrary, show that whether in small or large changes, either upstream and downstream pressures may dominate and shape the course of action.

Another very important aspect of our findings contributes to the change and stabilization of ‘the routine in principle’ (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011). As the findings show, either change or stabilization in the performance of the admissions routine could lead to change in ostensive understanding of the routine among various administrators (and stabilization of the

understanding of others). This is critical when it concerns learning in organizations and when it comes to changes in ostensive aspects without any changes in the performance. It reemphasizes that learning can actually take place in organizations without an immediate change in action.

The next factor, one that has been largely ignored in previous research by routine scholars, is the creation of temporary routines in which neither upstream nor downstream pressure dominate but the course of action is shaped by symbiosis of different pressures for consistency. This was the case in portfolio management in this case study, where the use of an external commercial system (Dropbox) was agreed on as an interim arrangement while the merged institution was developing the capacity to incorporate the technological complexities of the college's practice. The creation of temporary routines calls for changes and stabilizations in the ostensive aspects in the long term which plays an important role in the shaping of convergent or divergent routine performances.

Our findings also confirm (in line with Feldman 2000, and Feldman and Pentland 2003) that organizational context, which is the result of the interaction of internal upstream and downstream pressure and external institutional pressures, shapes the course of action by making it easier, and hence more likely, to take some actions, while making other actions harder and therefore less likely. The resultant performance, in response to external and internal changes, creates and recreates the ostensive aspects of organizational routines through time, which makes change conceivable from one action to the next.

Finally, the ostensive aspects are not only the result of existing performances and exogenous changes (hence upstream and downstream pressures for consistency), but are also "influenced by institutional dimensions such as the complex web of historical local institutions and systems of routines in which subroutines are involved" (Labatut et al. 2012, p. 65). This was demonstrated by the way interconnectedness of the admissions routine with other academic activities in the art college and broader institutional structure in the art world, could shape the chain of interrelationships. This results in multiple ostensive aspects leading to stabilization (or change in different circumstances) in the performance of the admissions routine. The more the administrative routines are connected with academic activities and the outside world of art, the less possible it becomes to change the routines as a result of the merger (Howard-Grenville 2005). Hence, the multiple ostensive aspects of routines are not only distributed all over the organization from the bottom to the top, but also extend over the vanishing boundaries of the organization into the institutional framework in which the organization performs.

## **CONCLUSION**

This multiplicity of ostensive aspect of organizational routines is often overlooked and the simplifying assumption adopted that a given routine has a single ostensive aspect. When an organization experiences an exogenous change, this multiplicity becomes a vital issue. This paper tries to make a contribution towards the understanding of the dynamics of routines by providing a finer-grained picture of the interaction between multiple ostensive aspects of routines and actual performances in the ostensive-performative cycles, in the presence of an exogenous change. The article extends routine theory by explicating the formation of multiple ostensive aspects as a result of multiple pressures for consistency, distributed throughout the organization, from bottom to top, and extended beyond its vanishing boundaries.

## **REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR**