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Towards Artifacts Assemblage In Routine Dynamics: The Exploratory Case Of Nurses’ Handoff In A Neonatal Unit

ABSTRACT

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Our study addresses a main topic of interest in routine theory: how do artifacts matter in the production and/or re-production of routines? The purpose is to further current understanding of how artifacts matter in routines’ dynamics (D’Adderio, 2008, 2011, 2014; Bapuji et al., 2012; Cacciatori, 2012; Turner & Rindova, 2012). Throughout the paper, we stick to Feldman and Pentland’s definition of routines as “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors” (2003, p.95).

There is a wide agreement on two features of routines in literature on the topic. On the one hand, routines are often presented as necessary for effective coordinated actions because they save time, energy, and cognitive resources and so on. In other words, routines are stabilized collective know-how necessary for effective coordinated action. On the other hand, routines have to bring about change in order to meet the challenges of an evolving organizational environment. That is why routines must be dynamic.

Incorporating the idea that stability and change are mutually constituted processes rather than dichotomous states (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Farjoun, 2010), some authors have focused their attention on how organizational routines (as practices) are created and re-created in space and over time (e.g., Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Feldman et al., 2016). In this branch of research, the routine’s dynamics is not seen as driven by exogenous factors but by endogenous processes. In other words, routines are defined as intrinsically dynamic processes. According to Feldman and Pentland (2003) -- and their followers -- routines are practices with an internal dynamics that contributes to both stability and change, and this dynamics deserves to be further studied.
More and more authors are suggesting that artifacts play an important role in the dynamics of routines (e.g., Pentland & Feldman, 2005, 2008; D’Adderio, 2011). They are especially fundamental regarding the sociomaterial understanding of routines as involving both human (social) and non-human (material) agencies (Leonardi, 2011; Pentland et al. 2011). The main idea is that routines are dynamic through the ongoing effort of actants consisting in both people and things (e.g., Pentland et al., 2012; Feldman et al., 2016). Ultimately, there is a call for more attention both to how and to what extent artifacts matter in routines’ dynamics (D’Adderio, 2008, 2011; 2014; Pentland et al., 2011; Turner & Rindova, 2012; Pentland & Haerem, 2015). Some scholars have made major advances in studying how artifacts and routines are entangled (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2016). However, there are only a few instances investigating explicitly the role of artifacts in the dynamics of routines (e.g., Turner & Rindova, 2012; Bapuji et al., 2012; Cacciatori, 2012; D’Adderio, 2014; Glaser, 2017). Further empirical investigations and theoretical developments are still needed. Especially, a question still remains understudied: how and to what extent are artifacts involved in the (re)production of routines, i.e., in the dynamics of routines?

This question is also important to address in many organizational contexts. These contexts include some involving low levels of uncertainty -- e.g., hotel (Bapuji et al., 2012), waste management organizations (Turner & Rindova, 2012). Obviously, artifacts also play an important role in organizational areas with higher levels of uncertainty, strong dynamic and emerging phenomena requiring crucial constant adaptation -- e.g., a large electronics manufacturer (D’Adderio, 2014), law enforcement agency (Glaser, 2017). In very sensitive fields where members of the organization must constantly adapt their behaviors, both between themselves and with artifacts, improper adaptations can have very harmful impacts. In some contexts, errors can lead to millions of dollars in damages, or, more critically, to losses of lives (Courtright et al., 2012). In this paper, we propose an empirical study of the role of artifacts in the dynamics of routines within the organizational context of a neonatal unit in a French hospital. More precisely, we study the handoffs routines of nurses, i.e., how two teams of nurses – one leaving the workplace and one arriving to the workplace – coordinate themselves to ensure the continuity of care 24/7. This context involves high levels of uncertainty given the critical health conditions of premature babies whose lives are at stake.

We conduct an abductive exploratory case study (Wynn & Williams, 2012; Avenier & Thomas, 2015). Our goals are twofold: to provide an in-depth analysis of how handoffs seen as sociomaterial practices are performed and have evolved over time; to identify the
underlying mechanisms that are responsible of such an evolution, as well as the manner by which they are contingently activated.

Based on our findings, we identify two underlying mechanisms by which artifacts support the dynamics of routines: a) the declination of artifacts and vocabularies, and b) the combination of artifacts and vocabularies. Identify these two mechanisms help us to reinforce and/or enrich existing results about 1) artifacts affordances in routines’ dynamics, and 2) inscription and vocabulary in routines’ dynamics.

References


