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Frontiers in Organization Science:
Celebrating the Contributions of Arie Y. Lewin

Panel Session Proposal

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Routines, Artefacts and Performativity
What STS has to say about Routines

The aim of this panel is to discuss how the scholarly field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) can provide crucial standpoints for deepening our understanding of routines dynamics. We argue that recent advances in STS can allow us to capture the micro dynamics underpinning routines evolution and adaptation which, in turn, support the emergence and persistence of firms’ capabilities, a concern that lies at the heart of Arie Lewin’s contribution (Lewin and Volberda 1999, see also Zbaracki and Bergen, forthcoming). In particular, our panel will show how STS and Performativity Theory can provide entirely new grounds to characterise the complex and situated contextual dynamics that influence routines change and stability (Ventresca and Kaghan 2008).

Context has been considered a key feature of routines from the outset (Cohen et al 1996, Winter and Szulanski 2001, Massini et al. 2002, Becker 2004). Winter (in Cohen et al 1996), for example, identifies context dependence as a fundamental feature of routines, encompassing a physical/artefactual dimension, expressed in the artefactual complements to the routine (i.e. material tools, plant layout and equipment, rules and procedures); and a motivational/relational dimension, which captures the agents’ discretion to decide whether, when and how to perform a routine. The clear emphasis on the role of social and material context that we find in the earlier Routines literatures, however, has not been carried forward to the same extent in subsequent studies. While recent literatures have made important inroads in characterising the role of artefactual representations, including rules and SOPs, as key resources in guiding routines (Becker et al. 2005, Pentland and Feldman 2005 and 2008), we are still lacking a full characterisation of the relationship between artefacts and performances (or routines-in-practice), on one side, and artefacts and ostensive views (or routines-in-theory), on the other (D’Adderio 2008).
Despite the progress achieved by recent contributions, we have thus only begun to explore the role of the social and material context in routines evolution. Artefacts, for example, are often treated as opaque objects that lie outside the routine - black boxes that are either adopted or rejected (ibid, Pollock and Williams 2009). This view does not allow us to capture the situated (Suchman 1987) and distributed (Hutchins 1995) dynamics by which artefacts influence routines, and vice versa. In respect to the motivational side of context, not enough attention has been paid to date on the role of complementary and conflicting views and goals by distributed and heterogeneous agencies which play a key role in the production and reproduction of routines (D’Adderio 2008). This includes the dynamics by which truces among conflicting agencies and rationales or logics are achieved and how they fall apart (Zbaracki and Bergen, forthcoming).

In order to make progress in this direction, we require new theoretical tools that are able to capture the complex interactions between artefacts, human agency and routines. We argue that new approaches in STS and Performativity Theory (MacKenzie 2006, Callon 2007) are providing new ways to capture the crucial contextual dynamics that lie at the basis of routines evolution.

Such theories, for example, can help us move beyond reductive notions of artefacts so as to study them as complex entities that influence the course of routines, while at the same time showing how the artefacts themselves evolve as a consequence of their appropriation (Lewin and Massini 2003) by specific agencies in specific contexts. Once we open up the black box of artefacts we can explore how assumptions by different agencies can become inscribed in artefacts (Barley 1986, Akrich 1992, Latour 1992, Grint and Woolgar 1992, Leonardi forthcoming) and shape the course of routines, and vice-versa (D’Adderio 2008).

Advances in Performativity Theory can also provide important new inroads into a dynamic characterisation of routines as the outcome of locally solved conflicts of interests (March and Simon 1958, Nelson and Winter 1982), by showing how truces are stabilised and destabilised (Zbaracki and Bergen, forthcoming). A focus on routines-as-theories and their realisation (Ferraro et al. 2005) can reveal the efforts required by organisational agencies holding different ostensive views (Pentland and Feldman 2005), logics (Lewin and Volberda 1999), motivations (Coriat and Dosi 1999), values (Buenger et al. 1999) and dispositions (Birnholtz et al. 2007) to influence the course of routines and prevail over competing agentic programs (D’Adderio 2008).

In synthesis, an approach based on STS and recent developments in Performativity Theory promises to further our understanding of the role of the social and material arrangements that influence routines change and stability (Ventresca and Kaghan 2008). To address these crucial but as yet underexplored issues our panel includes some of those scholars that have made key contributions to understanding
the role of STS theories and their application to studies of organisations, routines and practice. Our proposed panel includes: Mark Zbaracki (Ivey), Paul Leonardi (Northwestern), Fabrizio Ferraro (IESE), Marc Ventresca (Oxford), Neil Pollock (Edinburgh) and Luciana D’Adderio (Edinburgh) (panel coordinator).

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Please see Luciana’s Fellowship Webpage at: http://www.dependableinnovation.org/
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Selected references


