

A Tasty Encounter with Routine Dynamics Ideas: Some 'after action' reflections

Huayi Huang

Usher Institute, The University of Edinburgh, UK

Correspondence: huayi.the.researcher@gmail.com

ORCID: [0000-0003-1166-485X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1166-485X)

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Abstract

On Friday 9th April 2021, I attended my first conference with the Routine Dynamics research community. As an interested newcomer to this scene, the event inspired some personal reflections for my own work. To go beyond these personal benefits though, I was also inspired to share the new thinking and wider research directions from this research encounter, with our Exchanges readership. The emerging thoughts and practices from the Routines Dynamics community seems to be a welcoming and inclusive oasis, in the latticework of ideas being developed across our natural, social, and humanities worlds of scholarship. What follows is my attempt to make a little difference to the work of colleagues, in sharing the impact of this intellectual encounter for a wider audience. In reflecting on the events of this conference, I was guided by Johnson (2018)'s suggestions for possible structure and content for this type of article (as distinct and different from original empirical contributions).

Keywords: Routine Dynamics; post conference; critical reflection

Introduction

As developing scientists and scholars, we are intrigued by new ideas, technologies, or practices with the potential to fruitfully change our minds. Particularly, when these proposals and emerging innovations have a potential for a last impression, on our academic development, learnings, and careers.

I'm thinking more intensely recently, around ideas of change and stability and how this may play out in making sense of our research data, evidence, and phenomena. With this concern in mind, I approached the recent Routine Dynamics Zoom conference – a half day conference taking place on Friday 9th April 2021.

What I found in this introduction to the Routine Dynamics (RD) research community, seemed worth sharing. Like others I critically reflect on the thoughts and ideas exchanged during this excellent conference below (**Crealock-Ashurst et al. 2018, Mulcahy 2018**), in hope of these first-order constructs (**Toye et al., 2014, Dixon-Woods et al., 2007**) from my first hand experiences in this scholarly encounter, making a difference to your academic life. Because this critical reflection is limited to an initial taster of developing ideas from the Routine Dynamics community, the reader may benefit from more in-depth reviews of *emerging intentionality* (**Dittrich & Seidl 2018**), *complexity* (**Hærem et al. 2021**), *design issues* (**Wegener & Glaser, 2021**), and the *interplay between spaces for reflection and experimentation* (**Bucher & Langley 2016**) in routine dynamics, to complement my later reading of *RD ideas on tasks and 'guiding artifacts' for thought or action*, and the *performative and ostensive aspects of routines and their abstractions*.

The Event

In participating as a 'new researcher' in this conference, I was welcomed into the community. The theme for the day was of course the exchange of old and new ideas in Routine Dynamics research – which turns out to be an ongoing blending, mix, and 'latticework' of ideations – aimed at enriching our understanding of the *routinised* and *dynamically emerging* faces of our thoughts and actions (**Feldman et al., 2020**).

This understanding is asserted to be different, from received wisdom shaping the new ideas shared by this coalescing academic community. As a new way of seeing, and exchanging knowledge on the unfolding of our professional and personal routines (e.g. from brushing your teeth, to more complex examples), this community currently includes a rich panoply of academic thoughts contributed from colleagues across 17 countries (including Europe, North America, Brazil, China, Singapore, Turkey and

Australia). In terms of its academic heritage, the roots of Routine Dynamics thinking can be traced back to at least the 1950s in time, and intellectually located as outgrowths from studies of *organizational routines*, receiving increasing attention in the Organization Sciences (**Howard-Grenville et al., 2016**), Sociology of Organizations (**Feldman et al., 2019**), and studies on *processes* of organization (**Howard-Grenville et al., 2016**) over the last 20 years in particular

The specific events I participated in were:

1. The introduction to the field by senior Routine Dynamics researchers: Drs *Katharina Dittrich* (Associate Professor in Organisation Studies, Warwick Business School) and *Luciana D'Adderio* (Chancellor's Fellow, University of Edinburgh College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine).
2. A keynote presentation about 'Recent developments in process based research' by a leading organisational and RD theorist: Professor Haridimos Tsoukas (Columbia Ship Management Professor of Strategic Management, University of Cyprus).
3. A round table session about The Paradox of Temporary Organising by an experienced RD researcher: Dr Simon Addyman (Associate Professor in Project Management, UCL Faculty of the Built Environment).
4. And, finally an excellent open session for all members old and new, on the future governance of this coalescing community of thought, hosted by the excellent Dr Conor Horan (Lecturer, Technological University Dublin School of Marketing).

Many informative contributions were also made by other colleagues, too many to name individually here. In the next section, I will try to introduce some of the key ideas we discussed in this research event and community; illustrated through reflecting on examples from 'routines'...drawn from my music performance (BMus) and academic experiences in the safety sciences (**Huang, 2015**), computing sciences and Artificial Intelligence (BSc) (**Masci et al., 2012**).

New Thinking and Directions from this Intellectual Encounter

To start understanding the basics of Routine Dynamics thought, we might start by wondering why the diverse routines we are intimately familiar with (eg brushing teeth, taking your children to school, doing 'research', etc.) almost never remain *entirely static* entities in our empirical worlds. When you brush your teeth for the *n*th time later today for example, the patterning and sequencing of actual actions as they will unfold is unlikely to be absolutely identical or replicated identically, to those you did

yesterday; maybe you are a little more tired, bored, or perhaps have a toothache today...yet you will still manage to muddle through and get your teeth done?

Broadening this illustrative example out to the empirical observations from RD researchers of the past, evidence increasingly suggested a need to be more attentive to seemingly significant variation and changes, to 'the routine' of performing music on the piano for example. The key paradox to be addressed here is the existence of both *stability* alongside *change* within the 'same routine' – which when studied across various organizational contexts seemed to suggest the regular co-presence of both the new and unstable, and the old and stable – often *mutually constituted* with each other (Tsoukas & Chia 2002). In another words, the *dynamic adaptations* we make when going through a 'new research day' for example, cannot readily exist without the co-existence of a background of somewhat routinised practices, that then provide at least a semi-stable infrastructure upon which we can then enact the *dynamic adaptations* of 'that research day', as it unfolds. Perhaps memorably summarised in the 'paradox of the (n)ever-changing world' (Birnholtz et al., 2007: 316), of many of the organisational routines we engage in.

To deepen our conception of this 'dynamic routine', it may help to not only consider the 'dead' and fairly mindless facets of our conventional/habitual patterns and sequences of thoughts and actions, but also pay attention to those *lively, reflective, moral, and emotional* facets of how we *habitualise* and *routinise* (Feldman et al., 2020). These *lively* and *reflective* dimensions of our thoughts and ongoing actions, speaks strongly to our place in the world as agents with conscious wills – to actively change, consolidate, and move each other, etc. The *moral* and *emotional* dimensions of our actions, perhaps then speaking to our general strivings to accomplish our social roles in service of some sense of a 'greater good' (including 'instrumental goods' of simply getting stuff done), alongside phenomena of 'routine repairs' and 'expansions' of the portfolios of action patterns and sequences we direct towards some accomplishment (spoken about in Tsoukas's unpublished keynote from the RD conference, see also Sinnicks 2019). Sometimes we might fall back on simply continue to try...even as our efforts to 'repair' our task and routines continue to fail us in a situation (eg. when we hear of hear of heroic last-minute efforts from pilots of planes which still end up crashing).

Tasks and 'Guiding Artifacts' for Thought or Action?

Routine Dynamics theorists find it useful to consider the idea of *tasks*, as well as the *artifacts* guiding 'routinely dynamic' processes - as referring ultimately to the particular thought and action sequences of these processes unfolding in particular circumstances. In reviewing across the

cognitive, practice, and ontological dimensions of existing knowledge on routines (**Wegener et al., 2021**), we learn that understanding of core problems in changing our routines and habits of thought, may lie partly in empirical contradictions to a common assumption: that once tacit knowledge has been articulated by actors, subsequent change implementation (as planned) unfolds unproblematically. This common assumption can be seen in the general strategy prevalent in the management of health services and medical knowledge (**Wyatt, 2001**), prioritising codification practices *for* explicit knowledge forms (from people -> documents), at the expense of *personalised, more tacit*, forms of knowledge sharing (people <-> people). Linking then to Schon's (**1991; 2016**) documentation of the 'Technical-Rationality' image of knowledge production, circulation and dissemination, where the professional branches (and practitioners) of some knowledge discipline is left simply in the role of 'application' – of the ideally 'basic', 'general', and ideally explicit knowledge forms produced by its home knowledge discipline (e.g. mathematics being home discipline to the 'less prestigious' applied-maths of statistics).

As noted in Feldman et al (**2020**)'s recent introductory chapter, 'one aspect that characterizes routines as particular practices is the fact that routines are ostensibly directed at the accomplishment of particular tasks'. In terms of artifacts 'acting' to sometimes guide our actions, action sequences and routines then, referents for RD conceptions of 'artifact' may be drawn from across diverse practice domains – referring to musical scores, clinical guidelines, Standard Operating Procedures, and algorithms, for example.

A Routine Dynamics lens then, directs research attention to the 'assumptions, views and goals embedded in the [guiding artifact] at design and/or usage stage' (**Feldman et al., 2020**), in considering the abstractly expressed and defined contents of artifacts (such as musical scores and algorithmic procedures). In considering the wider circumstances in which these abstract contents play out in the unfolding of routines in practice, RD theorists also attend to the wider socio-technical or social-material 'assemblages' (**D'Adderio & Pollock, 2020**) or underlying 'infrastructures for action', shaping the empirical expressions and 'playing out in practice' of our daily routines. For a musical score, part of its 'infrastructures for action' might be the underlying influences from the particular musical training previously received by a performer, on the routines in a musical performance today; for an abstractly defined algorithmic procedure, part of its 'infrastructures for action' could be the particular range of instantiations made possible by the particular programming environments available at an institution, which both opens up and delimits particular possibilities for actual routines and subroutines to be readily writable, in the computer code to implement the algorithm more concretely. The

musician's previous training, and the routines and subroutines of the programming environment software in interaction with the programmers then – illustrate some of the elements from the wider circumstances contextualising the particular routine dynamics being studied.

To encourage us to dissolve some of our received distinctions – between *actors* and *artifacts*, and the *animate* and *inanimate* for example – Routine Dynamics theory currently encourages a sort of research reality which is neither overly anthropocentric or ethnocentric, or overly materialist in its conception of the sort of world that is possible to know. In particular, offering a *network* and *process* centric approach to ontology for underpinning applied RD studies – where 'actions' are not only an idea born of our imaginations, but refer to *those 'empirical things' enacted in time and in space –which tend towards 'displays of intentionality, control over [our] body, and social autonomy'* (Wegener & Glaser, 2021). In such a revised conception, the *processes* and *networks* which we are able to document hold centre stage – on which 'routines are ontologically processes rather than entities' (Feldman et al., 2020); the various *actors* and *entities* being brought into particular relationships by these processes and networks – are demoted to the background of a study.

D'Adderio (2011) provides a good introduction to some of the new ideas in this way of thinking about artifacts and materiality, in differentiating the RD view from realist and social constructivist insights on agency and artifacts. In this reading, properties of artifacts (such as 'agency') can be both *stable* and *inherent* to their existence (realist), but could also result from an artifact's *relational* and *emergent* roles within networks of 'actants' (social constructivism, see e.g. Jones 2009) as processes and networks shift, reconfigure themselves, and evolve.

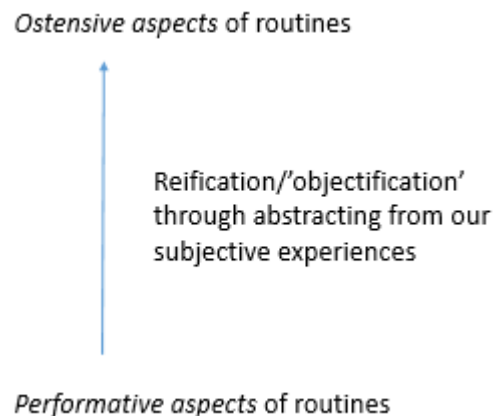
The identification of 'artifactual actants' and their properties in Routine Dynamics studies and theorising then, will often be interwoven with the sources and insights 'from the field' (in a qualitative research sense), perhaps in addition to the predefinitions of key artifacts, things, and their properties typical of quantitative studies of routines. An example from the domain of science and technology studies, could be the 'artifactual actants' identified as the books, papers, etc., and the emerging properties such artifacts take on - in *processes* of knowledge circulation within networks of Science documents and 'scientific actors' in labs and elsewhere (Latour, 1987). A more recent example (D'Adderio, 2014) extensively studied ethnographically the 'replication dilemma' as a property of routines – arising in their transfer between sites of replication and innovation in a Fortune 500 electronics manufacturer.

When one juxtaposes a current definition of ‘work’ as ‘activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a result’ (ODE, 2011), alongside the RD focus on patterns of *actions/action sequences* as its primary research objects for empirical investigation (Feldman et al 2020), a thought emerges around the patterning of sequences of mental or physical activity directed at some organising aim or goal. In another words, could Routine Dynamics research evolve in the future to also overcome known difficulties around investigations of empirical patterns of *ideations/thought sequences*, in addition to its foundational focus on *actions/action sequences* (Feldman et al., 2020) in service of the purposes of organising and organisations?

Performative and Ostensive Aspects of Routines and their Abstractions

In reflecting on the various ‘guiding artifacts’ for our thoughts or action then, Routine Dynamics theorising places a strong emphasis on the distinction between the ‘performative’ and ‘ostensive’ aspects of our routine actions (Feldman et al., 2020).

Figure 1: Ostensive and Performative Aspects of Routines



(adapted from **Feldman et al., 2020**)

In my current reading, the *ostensive* in this context refers to the ‘more portable’ ideas we try to exchange with each other, as we seek to share abstract understanding of processes for example. In discussing the *ostensive aspects of routines*, RD theorists highlight the point that we cannot avoid some degree of ‘thing-ification’ – in making ‘more fixed’ the substance of what we are trying to communicate about, in the very process of exchanging abstractions from our experiences with each other. Examples from qualitative research include the often encountered difficulties of its practitioners around pinning down ‘the’ qualitative research process as an ‘overarching ostensive pattern or goal’ in the abstract (cf. **D’Adderio, 2014**) – in exchanging knowledge on study plans

with ethics processes and committees; In exchanging knowledge on that which was found from studies, qualitative researchers may also face demands from funders and reviewers for ‘a couple of high level diagrammatic summaries’, of what in practice are highly emic processes or practices at the level of field observations of phenomena (**Routine Dynamics Conference, 2021**).

As a way to refer to those emic experiences ‘less portable’ across particular minds, times, and spaces then, Routine Dynamics theorists discuss the *performative aspects of routines*, routinely through narrative (and natural languages like English); as the empirical counterpart to our more etic and *ostensive* languages of representation (e.g. maths, or controlled vocabularies as used in medicine for example). With the insight (**Feldman et al., 2020**) that whilst we can and sometimes do create artifacts with only the most tenuous link to the far more *fluid, plastic*, etc. existence of ideas as we experience them ‘in the moment’ (e.g. some new policy with little thought from anyone...to its mechanisms of implementation), to do so risks creating systems of abstract thought and possible actions devoid of strong empirical meaning, or clear implications for action in the real world.

Routine Dynamics theorists also commit to the idea that both the performative and ostensive aspects of routines ought to be *mutually constitutive* of each other – in delivering fruitful knowledge on the dynamics of our routines. Perhaps in this commitment then, opening up a productive link with mixed methods of (academic) knowledge, in the shared commitment to integrating the more *fluid, plastic*, etc. existence of key ideas as e.g. discovered through qualitative inquiry practices, with the more ‘thing-ified’ and predefined ideas...about which we may learn – typical of quantitative study processes and learning patterns. In the mixed methods spirit, perhaps the (qualitative) commitment to more *fluid, plastic*, etc. relationships with the key ideas driving our learning in and of the field, speaks to our broader need for ‘performative aspects of concepts’ in their practice and everyday expressions; but in speaking more strongly to the need for ‘ostensive concepts’ we can ‘point to’ in theorising then, perhaps finding satisfaction in the language and analyses of statistics for example.

Task analyses and business process modelling then (e.g. how does a member of a family ‘do schooling’ in general terms, or how does a customer service department ‘do tendering for new business’), involve a kind of move from the *performative* to *ostensive* aspects of routines; in trying to produce abstract descriptions largely removed of their dynamicism as experienced practically – which nevertheless try to reasonably cover a diversity of real performances of tasks and business processes (in their circumstantial particularities). In doing so inevitably

leaving out *some* of the substance of that which is being described – depending on the partialities of the unfolding abstraction processes of the analysis or modelling (as their own actions are performed in context of particular minds, times, and places).

In Conversation with Academic Pasts and Present

For me, Routine Dynamics has fruitful links which might be explored, in connection with the current interest in a new ontology of ‘Safety II’ developing across the safety sciences (Sujan et al., 2017). In this connection, perhaps asking the (theoretical) research question, of how the *network* and *process* centric approaches to ontology for RD theorists, might be brought into fruitful collaboration: with the idea of safety (II) evidence as being about the *presence* of safety things and related ideas in our empirical studies, in contrast to the received wisdom of focusing on things and ideas relating to the *absences* of safety (e.g. accidents and incidents, risk assessments to try to predict the unsafe). Perhaps there is a productive place for this connection, in the intersection between the emerging sciences and realities of the Routine Dynamics and Safety II communities.

In living through the *meaningful* moments and *purposeful* experiences of praxis, in the routines we engage within our individual and collective ‘practice worlds’, the *phenomenological connection* is actively being explored by Routine Dynamics researchers such as (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). As qualitative researchers we are of course interested in Sandberg and Tsoukas’s distinction between language in its *performative and prereflective* roles and functions (of somebody shouting ‘fire’ to get fire-fighting started for example, cf. Given (2011), and at other times as a way to *represent and reflect* on the routines we’ve already participated in (e.g. at time of the ‘performance and progression review’). In all of this perhaps joining in the recent turn towards practice, and emerging interest in studying the complexity of routines as an enacted phenomenon (Hærem et al., 2021). Also being intrigued by Routine Dynamics research questions around how the *lively, (pre?)reflective, moral, and emotional* dimensions of our efforts at routinising the new ideas, technologies, and practices encountered in our lives and circumstances – can be placed into more meaningful roles within the networks of ideas, things, actions, and meanings already intelligible to us prior to these intrusions of the ‘new’.

In seeking to relate existing work treating learning as expansion (Engeström, 2015), to the ‘latticework’ of ideations developing within the Routine Dynamics community, a fruitful connection might be in more deeply exploring (in another study) the similarities and differences across these two bodies of thought: on mediating/‘guiding artifacts’ for thoughts or actions, and their performative and ostensive aspects. Perhaps a

comparative study describing what the routine, dynamic, or expansive facets of learning processes are, in service of ‘central activities’ (Engeström, 2015) of reorganisations in existing forms of work and systems of activity (Charitonos & Littlejohn, 2021) – e.g. in ongoing reorganisations to reduce the burden on specialised curative or palliative care services through changing existing way of patient treatment, triage, routing, etc. in primary care (NHS, 2019)? A related question then, might be in how the expansive facets of learning are born: from changes in the range of professionals involved, in their divisions of labour/job descriptions, repertoires of actions/action sequences, and sites of work established in the unfolding of larger projects of change (Charitonos & Littlejohn, 2021); which empirical data are reflective of key ideas in these ‘master conceptual schemes’ (Merton, 1968) on offer for example, in considering the routine, dynamic, or expansive ingredients of change?

Finally, in my ongoing attempt to find general senses and meanings from existing academic ideas around ‘generative mechanisms’, ‘generative systems’, etc., perhaps worth sharing here my idea from attending the Routine Dynamics conference – of drawing a distinction between *sterile* and *fruitful* resources for our mutable routines of thought and action. In this conception, ‘old’ facets of the *wilful* routines we engage in helping to give us the relatively stable yet flexible ‘infrastructure’ with which to govern and order our existing lives, in co-reproduction and adaptive constitution with the ‘new’ ideas, technologies, and elements of practice(s) we are exposed to as we develop through a new day.

In this daily interplay between the *fruitful* sources of active consolidation or change in our ideas and actions then, perhaps becoming excited together – to develop collectively the generative mechanisms and systems of Routine Dynamics ways of seeing and knowing.

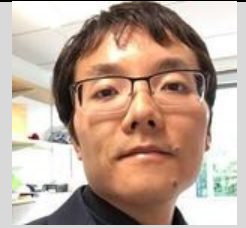
A Short Note on these ‘Observations’

For those colleagues insistent on the distinction between *description*, and *interpretation* in knowledge shared, it might be informative to have a look at Bogen’s (2020) account of ongoing evidence and arguments over whether observation is theory laden within ‘scientific’ knowledge systems. For now let’s just see as a limitation in the active interpretative-descriptions above, the paucity of clearly passive-descriptive abstractions of the events shared.

But the liberal sprinkling of citations to original and secondary sources of related knowledge throughout should hopefully provide reassurance to these colleagues, and strengthen the case for the idea that the interpretations offered here go beyond 1 early career researcher ‘doing

their own thing'. In deriving sense, wider meaning, and inspiration, from this exciting intellectual intervention and encounter on Friday.

Huayi has mixed-methods experience and research expertise across both academia and industry, routinely collaborating with senior colleagues in both spheres. Huayi works mostly as a qualitative primary care health scientist currently, but past collaborations include for example working with a chief statistician in searching for new variables viable for statistical modelling. His original research has been published in top Elsevier publications such as *Safety Science*, as well as *Lecture Notes in Computer Science* and journals for secondary and primary care (e.g. a recent editorial in *British Journal of General Practice*). He is also an occasional columnist for drkriukow.com.



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