Routine dynamics: Toward a critical conversation

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Abstract
In this essay, we suggest new research directions for the study of routines that intersect with and draw upon conversations about the reproduction of privilege and oppression as a strategic issue in organizations. We focus on how social inequality is reproduced and normalized by routines. We describe and illustrate how analyzing the dynamics of organizational routines can help us understand the production and reproduction of social inequality and the possibility of amelioration.

Keywords
behavioral strategy, corporate culture, diversity management, organizational change, organizational routines, topics and perspectives

Introduction
Routines are an essential part of strategy because they are the central mode of production in organizations. But what do routines (re)produce? From an economic perspective, routines produce goods and services. From a practice perspective (Feldman, 2021), routines (re)produce patterns of action and social structures (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Giddens, 1984). From a critical perspective (Geuss, 1981), routines reproduce patterns of social equality and inequality.

In this essay, we suggest new research directions for the study of routines that intersect with and draw upon conversations about the reproduction of privilege and oppression as a strategic issue in organizations (Ray, 2019; Ray and Purifoy, 2019; Wooten, 2006, 2019; Wooten and Couloute, 2017). We focus on how social inequality is reproduced and normalized by routines. We recognize that privilege and oppression form a duality that perpetuates social inequality and that wherever there is privilege, there is oppression. We envision a critical conversation that explores the role of organizational routines in producing, reproducing, and altering patterns of privilege and oppression.

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By critical, we mean “. . . a reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge that is inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation” (Geuss, 1981: 2–3). Our exploration is informed by practice theory as the theoretical base for Routine Dynamics. Practice theory questions taken-for-granted ontological and epistemological assumptions and, thus, can be used critically when engaged to question “the emancipatory or exploitative effects of a social practice” (Gherardi, 2009: 119). While the ultimate goal is emancipatory, attempting to achieve emancipatory actions without questioning assumptions and understanding social dynamics can produce more harm than good (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Rawls and Duck, 2020; Wooten and Couloute, 2017).

We seek to show how Routine Dynamics can contribute to this critical conversation. We show that key concepts used and developed in Routine Dynamics can be fruitfully applied to conversations around race, gender, class, sexual orientation, caste, and other forms of privilege. We provide examples of routines that scholars have identified as reproducing social inequality. We suggest that people studying the dynamics of routines have a powerful set of tools for understanding the role of routines in perpetuating social inequality. These conceptual tools have already been used to question taken-for-granted assumptions about the relationship of routines to the duality of stability and change (Feldman et al., 2021). We now propose that the same conceptual tools can be used to question assumptions about the duality of privilege and oppression. As we show, through several examples, organizational routines play important roles in normalizing privilege and oppression. In so doing, they produce privilege by oppressing and produce oppression by privileging. Rather than seeing routines and the social order they reflect as neutral, we focus on how routines participate in the “reciprocal cyclical relationships through which practice creates and recreates the objectified social structures and the conditions in which [practice] occurs” that Bourdieu (1972) referred to as “circuits of reproduction” (Gherardi, 2009: 118). This kind of inquiry is not easy. The exploration of privilege and oppression involves questioning features of social reality that implicate each of us in ways that are immediate and personal.

The managerial/economic conversation about routines

When we entered the conversation on organizational routines (Feldman, 2000; Feldman and Pentland, 2003; Pentland and Rueter, 1994), the idea of “routine” (though not always the term) was already well-established in Scientific Management (Taylor, 1911), the Carnegie School (Cyert and March, 1963), and in evolutionary economics (Nelson and Winter, 1982). Much of our work over the last 20 years has been an effort to extend our understanding of the processual nature of routines. As Tsoukas (2021) notes, Routine Dynamics “challenged what the entitative approach took for granted: the key question is not what routines do, as it was for Nelson and Winter (1982), but ‘how routines are done’” (p. 37). Of course, routines are performative, so how routines are done affects what they do.

While they differ in many ways, Scientific Management, the Behavioral Theory of the Firm, and Evolutionary Economics are focused on efficiency and the economic logic of markets. Routines are things (e.g. Standard Operating Procedures, production functions, genes . . .) characterized by one main quality: how well they convert inputs to outputs. Routines are central to strategic organization for at least two reasons. First, routines can resolve uncertainty and promote efficiency (Cyert and March, 1963; Nelson and Winter, 1982). When aligned with strategic goals, such as low cost or high quality, routines are a competitive asset (Salvato, 2021). Second, routines can be a source of inertia and a competitive liability, especially in a rapidly changing environment. When change is needed, dynamic capabilities or routines that bring about change are an important strategic asset.
(Salvato, 2021; Winter, 2003). In short, from an economic perspective, routines can tip the balance between survival and failure of an organization. Recent developments in the study of routines, however, have shown that the effects of routines are even greater than already recognized.

**Routine dynamics and the turn toward practice**

Over the past 20 years, Routine Dynamics has emerged as “a practice perspective that sensitizes the researcher to . . . particular action patterns” (Feldman et al., 2021: 4). It adopts a processual view in which stability and change are both ever present and integrated (Farjoun, 2010). The practice perspective recognizes that routines are the building blocks of an organization’s economic capabilities, but emphasizes that they are simultaneously much more than that (Feldman, 2021). The practice view of routines adopts a broad view of antecedents and consequences that includes the routine itself, as well as its social, material, and cultural context. Like theories of practice in general (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Schatzki, 2002), Routine Dynamics examines how actions (re)create structures that constrain and enable ongoing actions. If we start by asking how and why routines are performed as they are, this quickly leads to larger questions about how routines produce and reproduce organizational and social consequences. This practice-based approach has changed what we take for granted in the study of routines. Routine Dynamics treats a routine as a lived experience rather than an abstraction. In practice, routines are situated; they are performed and experienced by specific people at specific times and places (Dittrich, 2021; Feldman et al., 2016, 2021).

As part of their lived experience, people perform routines in particular situations. Through these situated performances, they reproduce existing patterns and create new ones. In this sense, routines sit at the nexus of stability and change, imperfectly reproducing the past while inevitably producing the future. One of the foundational insights from Routine Dynamics is that routines are engines of both stability and change (and of both at the same time), depending on how they are performed. Because routines take place in contexts that vary from one performance to another, people enacting routines often have to change actions to reproduce patterns. Hence, routines are effortful. Moreover, these efforts to reproduce patterns may also result in subtle and not so subtle changes to the patterns they (re)produce. Hence, routines are emergent. It is through these dynamics that economic, material, social, and cultural dimensions are entangled through routines.

The strategic importance of practices and routines has been most explicitly developed in the field of Strategy as Practice, which has emerged as a way of understanding the strategic importance of the everyday and repeated actions taken in organizations (Seidl et al., 2021). Central to Strategy as Practice is the idea that the practice is the strategy and changes in practice indicate changes in strategy (Vaara and Durand, 2012). Strategy as practice research shows that the practices and routines of an organization both indicate and produce an organization’s strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006).

Routine Dynamics scholars have recognized that routines contribute to the production of social and environmental dynamics that underlie some of the grand challenges of our time (Danner-Schröder et al., 2022). Grand challenges, including such things as global climate change and systemic injustice, are enacted not only through the actions of individuals but also through the institutional and social structures that organize these actions. Because practice-based approaches such as Routine Dynamics and Strategy as Practice “are joined in the belief that social phenomena should be analyzed by reference to practices, actions, and the organizations of and relations among practices” (Schatzki, 2016: 29), they provide tools for understanding the dynamics that have produced these grand challenges and the possibilities for addressing them.
Routine dynamics and the (re)production of privilege

In this essay, we focus on the role of routines in reproducing privilege and oppression because it is both strategically relevant for organizations and foundational to social order. As Vaara and Durand (2012) note, the “critical analysis of underlying beliefs and norms” is an important step toward making strategy relevant to the issues of our day. Wooten (2006, 2019) and Bapuji and Neville (2015) make this argument about our understanding of organizations with respect to social inequalities based respectively on race and income. “Understanding how racial policy influences the demography of organizations can provide answers to the most central questions in organization theory: why do organizations exist and why do organizations have the structure that they do?” (Wooten, 2006: 194). “[T]he time is ripe for a research agenda paying attention to not only how firms shape inequality but also how income inequality shapes firms” (Bapuji and Neville, 2015: 241). We make a similar argument for the strategic relevance of studying how routines participate in reproducing privilege and oppression. Because of the deeply held and often unconscious nature of the assumptions related to social inequalities, understanding how routines reproduce social inequalities opens a window to the strategic consequences of reproducing underlying norms and beliefs.

While clearly relevant to strategic organization, there are deeper issues to consider. Rawls et al. (2021) have argued that the study of exclusion is at the center of understanding social order. “It is by focusing on Race and exclusion—on the social problems and ‘troubled’ interactions that indicate breakdowns in reciprocity—that we can best reveal how society works” (Rawls et al., 2021: 5). The assumption that everyone has the same lived experience as the privileged few is a mistake that masks important facts about the social order. To see these facts, we need to understand stated and unstated (taken-for-granted or actively hidden) assumptions that maintain the social order as it currently exists. For instance, everyday interactions, such as how we introduce ourselves, develop in relation to the distribution of societal privilege and then perpetuate misunderstandings and stereotypes (Rawls and Duck, 2020). If we want to change or influence the social order, we need to understand how routines enact assumptions that perpetuate privilege and oppression. Exploring the role of routines in the production of inequality in the social order entails questioning not only the stability but also the neutrality of routines.

To summarize, understanding how routines participate in the perpetuation of organizational and societal inequalities is central to strategic organization. Routines do not just produce goods and services; they (re)produce the social order in which those goods and services have value. Routines enact and thereby reproduce assumptions about what is familiar, what is “normal,” and what is appropriate. Ignoring these issues limits not only our understanding of routines but also our understanding of organizations. The practice perspective on routines provides an opportunity to enter conversations on social inequality and privilege, including race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and caste. These are conversations where lived experience and the repetitive cycle of performing/patterning are particularly relevant. It is clear that organizational routines are implicated in reproducing and reinforcing privilege within society and within organizations (Diamond and Lewis, 2019; Ray, 2019; Wooten, 2019; Wooten and Couloute, 2017) and can be part of the process of challenging privilege within organizations (Gray and Kish-Gephart, 2013; Ortlieb and Sieben, 2019). In the following sections, we show how concepts central to Routine Dynamics can be used to explore the role of routines in the production of privilege and oppression.

Performing and patterning

The relationship between specific performances of routines and larger, enduring patterns is central to Routine Dynamics. Patterns are the result of performances and also constrain and enable what
actions people take as they perform a routine. We originally described this performative cycle as
the interplay between the performative and ostensive aspects of the routine. To better express the
processual dynamics of stability and change and to acknowledge the many different abstract pat-
tterns that affect the actions people take in routines, we have more recently described the cycle as
performing and patterning (Feldman et al., 2021). Performing refers to the actions we take in per-
forming routines; patterning refers to the impact of patterns on actions and the ongoing creation of
patterns through actions. Performing and patterning reflects a further shift from the entitative
mindset (typical of managerial/economic theory) to a more processual mindset (typical of the
practice-based theory). It also reflects a recognition that emergent patterns may be intended or
unintended consequences of performance. To reiterate the point made in the introduction, routines
(re)produce much more than goods and services; they (re)produce patterns of many kinds. The
performing/patterning duality draws attention to the processual, action-centric nature of routines
and encourages a broad focus on the abstract patterns that are implicated in enacting routines.

Privilege and the resultant inequalities are enacted patterns. Historical patterns of privilege and
inequality flow through the routines we enact. We use routines to hire and fire, to reward and pro-
mito, to train and discipline, to allocate funding and other resources, to organize work processes.
All of these routines rely on societal patterns about what is acceptable, who is worthy, and what
combinations of actions, things, places and people are appropriate. Thus, a hiring routine not only
enacts or performs the idea of what a hiring routine is (some of which is included in formal, written
rules) but also performs societal patterns that relate to the routine (e.g. gendered job patterns). To
help make our argument more concrete, in the following subsections we discuss research on rou-
tines related to discipline, recruitment, and mentoring that has shown how privilege and oppression
are reproduced through the enactment of these routines. These examples each illustrate the basic
dynamics of performing and patterning described above.

**Disciplinary routines.** Disciplinary routines in schools are a central means for maintaining order.
They are also an arena that is loaded with opportunities to generate oppression of some students
and privilege for others. Field studies have shown that disciplinary routines can reproduce privi-
lege/oppression even where conscious efforts are made to counter such reproduction. A study by
Diamond and Lewis (2019) of school discipline routines illustrates the role of cultural stereotypes
in how routines are performed and the production of outcomes that are at odds with the stated goals
of these color or gender “blind” or “neutral” routines. They show how the abstract rules about such
things as hall passes are practiced by people patterning cultural stereotypes. As a result of these
cultural stereotypes, informants (administrators, teachers, and students) indicated that White stu-
dents are seldom asked to give evidence that they are in the right place and doing what they are
supposed to be doing. When White students are caught doing something wrong, they are often
perceived as innocent or mistaken. Black and Brown students are less likely to receive the same
privileges. Diamond and Lewis (2019) argue that the people who carry out the school’s discipli-
nary routines are influenced by patterns or “narratives that associate blackness with criminality
and whiteness with innocence” (p. 833). They argue that “the practice of organizational routines repro-
duces inequality, while the idealized version of these routines (race-neutral rules) continues to
justify or legitimize the routine itself” (Diamond and Lewis, 2019: 850). As with all the routines
we discuss, the effects are not limited to a single routine as the dynamics of routines (including
privilege and oppression) operate through clusters or networks of routines (Rosa et al., 2021).
Thus, even if such differences are only enacted some of the time, the effects aggregate to signifi-
cant differences in time spent in detention, in suspensions and expulsions and in feeling like one
doesn’t belong here (Diamond and Lewis, 2019: 832).
Recruitment routines. Recruitment and hiring practice is another arena that is loaded with possibilities for reproducing privilege. Despite widespread evidence of discrimination in the outcomes of these practices (Acker, 2006; Burris, 2004; Raynard et al., 2021), there is little research on the specifics of how organizational routines produce these outcomes. One notable exception is the work by Goldin and Rouse (2000) on the practice of blind auditions for symphony musicians. Noting the considerable evidence of misogyny including claims that, for instance, “the more women [in an orchestra], the poorer the sound” (Goldin and Rouse, 2000: 719), the authors show that changing the hiring routine by implementing blind auditions produced a marked increase in the number of women hired by major symphonies, even when only the first round of auditions is blind. “[T]he switch to blind auditions can explain 30 percent of the increase in the proportion female among new hires and possibly 25 percent of the increase in the percentage female in the orchestras from 1970 to 1996” (Goldin and Rouse, 2000: 738).

Hiring routines often incorporate conceptions of ideal or appropriate workers that are systematically biased. Take, for instance, the partnership designed to recruit Indigenous Canadians to deal “with a key strategic problem—an impending shortage of skilled workers caused by declining birth” (Sloan and Oliver, 2013: 1838). Based on assumptions about the importance of continuous work experience, the hiring routine screened out people who had not worked in the past year. For a population in which it was “not uncommon to go 18 months without a job” (Aboriginal community member, quoted in Sloan and Oliver, 2013: 1850), this part of the routine systematically reproduced the unemployment that the partnership was meant to reduce. Similarly, Acker has identified assumptions about the importance of hiring the “unencumbered worker” who can “be at work at set times, focused only on the tasks at hand, responsive only to demands of supervisors, available for long working hours, and unhampered by other responsibilities, such as for children and housework” (Acker, 2011: 67). Hiring routines that seek unencumbered workers will systematically reproduce gender and class privilege.

Mentoring routines. Mentoring routines provide yet another example of how inequalities can be re-enacted and exacerbated through the routine. Janssens and Steyaert (2019) show us how understanding a routine like career mentoring requires us to understand both the specific situation as it is unfolding in real time and the patterns that inform the specific situation that have long historical tails. Using the example of a White man mentoring a Black woman, they show how in responding to historical patterns each may engage in the interaction in ways that inhibit the trust and open communication that allows a mentoring relationship to work.

Damaske’s (2009) study of a career mentoring center and its routine for vetting students to receive their services provides an example of what Janssens and Steyaert (2019) argue and has eerie overtones of the discipline routine discussed above. The center served a student population that was predominantly students of color from working-class families. Under pressure to place students in jobs in the surrounding community, the administration instituted a qualifying routine based on GPA. But this routine—much like the disciplinary routine—was systematically applied to grant benefits to some groups and deny benefits to other groups, regardless of whether they met the formal qualifications. “The staff often made exceptions from the GPA requirements for international male students and white women. African-American and Latino male and female students, on the other hand, often were denied services even if they qualified for them” (Damaske, 2009: 415).

The perceived likelihood of placing the students in jobs was provided as an explanation for these consistent biases in enacting the routine. “The staff felt that these students would be harder to market and would, therefore, make their jobs more difficult. Additionally, providing
‘unmarketable’ students to employers might suggest that the Center staff could not properly screen students” (Damaske, 2009: 419). Cultural stereotypes played a large role here.

In contrast to the images of rappers and athletes that were associated with the black and Latino students, international male students were stereotyped as scientists and engineers and white women were seen as already being part of the middle class. (Damaske, 2009: 419)

As a result, mentoring that helped students have access to information about jobs and prepare for interviews was systematically allocated according to race and gender.

**Performing neutrality and patterning privilege**

The reproduction and, hence, patterning of privilege is a common outcome (Bourdieu, 1984). Research has shown that personnel rules promoting meritocracy and proclaiming neutrality do not live up to the promise of disrupting privilege and oppression (Dobbin and Kalev, 2022). The examples here show how routines contribute to this outcome and specifically how patterns of privilege and oppression are reproduced as people perform routines.

Some examples take place in the context of organizational declarations that the routines are officially neutral, sometimes referred to as color- or gender-blind. Such practices provide a particularly vivid example of how societal patterns play a role in the production and reproduction of privilege and oppression (Acker, 2006; Burke, 2016; Ray and Purifoy, 2019; Thun, 2020). As Thun notes, “A utility argument that emphasizes sameness (women as equally talented as men), is not in itself negative for gender equality, however, it can lead to gender blindness when structural inequalities in the organization are silenced” (Thun, 2020: 177). Ray and Purifoy (2019) put the case more baldly:

> Colorblind organizations are de facto White organizations whose policies and practices—explicitly or implicitly—reproduce a naturalized racial hierarchy. . . . Policies that appear to be neutral generate broad support. However, discretion in their application allows for racial bias in outcomes. (Ray and Purifoy, 2019: 138, 140)

Such routines reproduce patterns of oppression by failing to alter the fundamental dynamics of privilege while providing cover for the systems (e.g. organizations, institutions) that perpetuate such privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Wooten and Couloute, 2017). Rather than focusing on the culturally and materially embedded assumptions enacted as they are implemented, outcomes reinforce explanations that individuals are at fault—either that individuals (not hired, not promoted) are inadequate or that individuals (not hiring, not promoting) are perpetuating discrimination through their individual animus.

The resulting patterning tends to be self-reinforcing because privilege affords a false sense that a narrow subset of lived experience is universal or that current ways of doing work are justified by purely economic rationales. Differences get covered up by false assumptions of universality. Staying within assumed universals is a recipe for misrecognizing what is going on and for perpetuating the status quo. Of course, these examples are just the tip of the iceberg. Oppression/privilege are reproduced and perpetuated through a vast array of interconnected routines and practices. Yet research on specifically how routines contribute to oppression/privilege and how the dynamics of routines can be mobilized to mitigate inequality and its effects is relatively new. There is much more to be done.
Advancing the critical conversation on routines

So far, we have emphasized performing and patterning: the dynamic relationship between the performances of routines and the organizational and societal patterns that inform the performances and that the performances collectively produce and reproduce. In the following sections, we discuss some of the other steps needed to advance this agenda: finding relevant routines; analyzing those routines; and moving toward ameliorating their negative effects. Understanding is the first step, but the last step is the payoff: a critical perspective should help encourage routines that reduce rather than exacerbate social inequalities. If enough people walk in new directions, it makes new paths.

Finding relevant routines

As the examples we discussed in the previous section show, routines can (re)produce privilege and oppression in many ways. While overt discrimination persists, scholars argue that the search for individual culprits or bad apples distracts from our understanding of systemic patterns that persist despite efforts to root out bad actors. “The difference between the concept of discrimination and the concept of oppression emerges most clearly with the insight that oppression often exists in the absence of overt discrimination” (Young, 1992: 177). Searching for relevant routines, then, is not only a search for routines that can be abused by individual bad actors, but also a search for the ways in which routines allow organizations to naturalize oppression (Bapuji and Chrispal, 2020; Chrispal et al., 2021; Wooten and Couloute, 2017). As Bonilla-Silva (2015) argues in relation to racism, “the analytical crux for understanding racism is uncovering the mechanisms and practices (behaviors, styles, cultural affectations, traditions, and organizational procedures) at the social, economic, ideological, and political levels responsible for the reproduction of racial domination” (2015: 75).

Young (1992) developed an analytic typology of oppression that helps us see beyond individual discrimination and locate examples of routines that naturalize oppression. The five faces she identified are based on the experience of people subjected to a wide range of oppression. The list below identifies the kind of routines associated with each face:

- Exploitation: routines that define what labor is worth and whose labor is worth what.
- Marginalization: routines that oversee and make decisions for marginalized people.
- Powerlessness: routines that enact status, autonomy and respect.
- Cultural imperialism: routines that define what is normal and considered universal.
- Violence: routines that enact and justify violence.

We offer this list as a way of encouraging scholars to look for routines they can study where privilege and oppression are operating even when, at first glance, they may be masked by rhetoric of neutrality or economic logic.

Additional analytical concepts

The examples we presented above show how the process of performing and patterning can be used to question and analyze the assumptions underlying routines. In the following, we identify other
concepts used in Routine Dynamics that can help us unpack assumptions and enrich the critical conversation about routines.

**Artifacts and materiality.** The material world, including the bodies of the actors themselves, cannot be underestimated in its effect on the dynamics of routines or the dynamics of privilege and social inequality. Materiality pervades organizational practice (Orlikowski, 2007) and routines (D’Adderio, 2021). As D’Adderio has articulated and every example of empirical research in Routine Dynamics shows, routines entail materiality, and materiality, performance, and patterns are thoroughly entwined. The domain of materiality is clearly broad, including but not limited to written rules, forms, categories, technologies, algorithms, and bodies.

Privilege is embedded in materiality in ways too numerous to recount (Bowker and Star, 2000; Star, 1991). How materiality in routines in its many forms helps to reproduce privilege and social inequities is clearly a rich vein for future research. For example, algorithmic artifacts can be particularly powerful because they can encode and reproduce history in ways that are not immediately obvious (Glaser et al., 2021). And because algorithmic artifacts are an increasingly pervasive part of contemporary organizations, their role in the production of privilege needs to be carefully and continuously scrutinized. For example, research on the use of big data in criminal justice work “hides both intentional and unintentional bias in policing and creates a self-perpetuating cycle: if individuals have a high point value, they are under heightened surveillance and therefore have a greater likelihood of being stopped, further increasing their point value” (Brayne, 2017: 997).

**Relationality.** The significance of each action, actor, and outcome of a routine depends on its relation to the other actions, actors (including non-human actors), and patterns in the current moment and over time (Feldman et al., 2021). Relationality is important for analyzing the reproduction of privilege for at least two reasons. First, as noted earlier, privilege exists in relation to oppression, and the routines that indicate privilege exist in relation to other routines. Code switching, for example, is a deeply relational practice used by people on the margin to fit in and obtain the advantages of being part of the dominant culture or coalition. The burden of fitting in rests disproportionately on those who have to make an adjustment, and privilege is reproduced by those who do not need to make an adjustment to sound or look or act like the dominant group. McCluney et al. (2021) point out that people who do not codeswitch are seen as less competent, are less likely to be hired, and are paid less.

Second, but no less important, privilege is neither individual nor societal but both in relation. Societal patterns of inequality are enacted and experienced by individuals taking action in their everyday lives. Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013), for instance, show us that the maintenance of class distinctions requires “classwork” at both the individual and collective levels. For instance, they point out that “impression management” such as the codeswitching McCluney studies is an individual practice that takes place within and must be understood in the context of “the prevailing organizational myths that promote such tactics” (p. 691). Moreover, they note that “studying institutionalization processes per se, without acknowledging their normalizing and subjectifying function in promoting certain organizational values over others, fails to acknowledge how power enables domination and oppression to masquerade as normal” (Gray and Kish-Gephart, 2013: 691). The work of maintaining such inequalities is both individual and collective with individual actions enacting the rituals, rules, and routines that institutionalize and normalize inequalities.

**Multiplicity.** Any routine can be performed in many possible ways and still be perceived as repetitive and recognizable. The image is as much a kaleidoscope as a flow chart. The multiplicity of
possible performances can make routines hard to grasp, because a routine is not a thing; it is a space of possible performances (Pentland et al., 2020).

Privilege and its counterpart, oppression, are also multiplicities. As Collins notes in relation to the oppression of Black women in the United States,

because oppression is constantly changing, different aspects of an individual U.S. Black woman’s self-definations intermingle and become more salient: Her gender may be more prominent when she becomes a mother, her race when she searches for housing, her social class when she applies for credit, her sexual orientation when she is walking with her lover, and her citizenship status when she applies for a job. In all of these contexts, her position in relation to and within intersecting oppressions shifts. (Collins, 2002: 274–275)

The faces of oppression are multiple and “Only a plural explication of the concept of oppression can appropriately capture these insights” (Young, 1992: 181). Seen as processes, privilege, and oppression are not static states of being. They, like routines, are multiplicities constituted of many paths (Pentland et al., 2020). To the extent that privilege and oppression are performed through routines, they will be manifest in a multitude of different, specific paths. Understanding routines as multiplicities can help us understand the many ways that oppression expresses itself.

Moving to amelioration

To make progress, we need to understand how routines participate in producing privilege and oppression before we promote solutions. The history of color-blind and gender neutral solutions shows what happens when we try to provide fixes without addressing the underlying dynamics (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Burke, 2016; Delgado, 1989; Ray and Purifoy, 2019; Thun, 2020). Declaring “blindness” does not automatically change how people perceive and interact with each other. Becoming more aware of differences and the universalizing assumptions that make those differences seem irrelevant when they are not is part of the process of change (Gray and Kish-Gephart, 2013).

We do not imagine that anything we have said here provides a simple solution. The structures of privilege are deeply embedded. But “Practice theory argues that everyday actions are consequential in producing the structural contours of social life” (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 1241). Not only do our actions reproduce patterns of social inequality but for patterns of social inequality to persist we must continue to enact them. Building on this relation between actions and social structures, Routine Dynamics enables us to analyze how the mundane actions that we take as we enact organizational routines can reinforce, modify, and alter the social structures we inevitably produce and reproduce. Our discussion of the pernicious effects of color- and gender-blind routines sounds a cautionary note. Simply taking new actions, even actions that we label as neutralizing privilege, may reinforce the same (or even worse) patterns of social inequality. That said, we can change patterns by changing the actions we take (Janssens and Steyaert, 2020). We can create new paths by walking in new directions. Analyzing the patterning effects of performing actions enables us to identify pernicious effects and can help us choose new directions more wisely.

Conclusion

There are established, ongoing bodies of scholarship and critical discourse on all of the topics we have mentioned here. As we did 20 years ago, we are joining these conversations, not starting them. In doing so, we envision the possibility of adding more voices that speak to the role of
organizations and organizational routines in privilege and oppression. We believe that the conceptual tools that Routine Dynamics scholars have relied on to unpack the dynamics of stability and change in organizational routines can be used to alert us to the various ways that routines participate in the stability and change of pernicious social dynamics that play out in and through organizations.

In the examples we have discussed here, we are focusing on how organizational routines participate in the production and reproduction of privilege and oppression in organizations and, through organizations, in society as a whole. Routine Dynamics scholars have made the point that it takes effort on the part of routine participants to enact routines (Feldman et al., 2021). How these effortful accomplishments reproduce and exacerbate or mitigate and ameliorate inequalities is an empirical question. Studying routines and how they reproduce patterns of inequality is not the whole answer. Change clearly takes more than knowledge. But knowledge is a good place to start. And following the dynamics of routines in relation to inequality can help us understand both routine and inequality.

Routine Dynamics, with its emphasis on lived experience, has relied on and developed conceptual tools that have been useful in exploring assumptions that were previously taken-for-granted. What we hope to have shown here is that these conceptual tools can also help scholars explore the way that routines participate in the reproduction of privilege and social inequality. Through our discussion of the concepts and how they relate to existing examples of research on social inequality, we seek to contribute these tools to this important conversation.

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