Organizational Routines as a Source of Ethical Blindness

Barbara Kump¹ and Markus Scholz²

Abstract

Organizational research has shown that decision-makers can be subject to ethical blindness, a temporary inability to see the ethical dimension of a situation at hand. Previous theoretical approaches have identified organizational routines—recurring multi-actor practices—as important indirect context factors of ethical blindness. The present article argues that earlier theorizing is incomplete. Organizational routines may be a much more direct cause of ethical blindness and they may play a much stronger role in fostering unintentional unethical behavior than is currently acknowledged. As its main contribution, the article synthesizes research on unethical organizational behavior with findings on the micro-foundations of organizational routines to systematically theorize about when and how routines can directly cause ethical blindness. Given that organizational routines are not only a main pillar of organizational research but an indispensable part of organizational life, an increased understanding of their role in creating ethical blindness is of high theoretical and practical relevance. In particular, a routine-based explanation of ethical blindness may help in identifying and counteracting “everyday” unethical practices that are prevalent in modern business organizations.

Keywords

ethical blindness, ethical decision-making, ethical organizational behavior, micro-foundations, organizational routines

¹WU Vienna, Vienna, Austria
²Vienna University of Applied Sciences, Vienna, Austria

Corresponding author:
Barbara Kump, Department of Global Business and Trade, WU - Vienna University of Economics & Business, Welthandelsplatz 1, Building D1, Vienna, 1020, Austria.
Email: bkump@wu.ac.at

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**Introduction**

Ethical blindness, or organization members’ “temporary inability to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake” (Palazzo, Krigs, & Hoffrage, 2012, p. 324), is a well-documented phenomenon in the literature (e.g., Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; de Klerk, 2017; Drumwright & Murphy, 2004; Sezer, Gino, & Bazerman, 2015). It was found to be involved in infamous incidents such as the Challenger space-shuttle disaster (Vaughan, 1996, 2004), the so-called Pinto fire cases (Gioia, 1992), as well as the Volkswagen diesel scandal (Smith & McCormick, 2018; Useem, 2016).

Besides these breaking-news types of events, recent research has pointed to ethical blindness as a cause of many less salient, more “ordinary” unethical business practices, such as questionable performance management systems or exploitative profit-making on the part of financial institutions (Rendtorff, 2020). These latter examples suggest that ethical blindness can be ingrained in an organization’s routine activities.

In fact, earlier research has identified organizational routines—that is, recurring, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions by multiple actors (Feldman & Pentland, 2003)—as sources of ethical blindness. In concrete terms, routines were portrayed as “proximal context factors” of rigid cognitive frames that lead decision-makers to neglect the ethical dimension of a situation (Palazzo et al., 2012).

It was further proposed that routines are involved in the normalization of unethical behavior because the more often an unethical practice is carried out, the more “normal” it seems to its actors (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). This particular view of routines as an indirect trigger or factor is based on cognitive explanations of ethical blindness, such as biases (Sezer et al., 2015; Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010), rationalization (Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004; Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Spicer, 2009), psychological defense (de Klerk, 2017), or—as mentioned above—rigid framing (Gioia, 1992; Palazzo et al., 2012). In short, these cognitive explanations suggest that routine execution leads to changes in routine participants’ cognitions, thereby indirectly contributing to the occurrence of ethical blindness.

Notwithstanding the relevance of these earlier works, we argue that this view of routines is incomplete and neglects an important fact, namely, that routines are *practices* (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Executing a routine may not just change the way actors think about a situation; instead, the routine itself is the way in which certain tasks are regularly executed. Organizational routines may thus be a direct source of ethical blindness—a possibility that has so far received little scholarly attention.

Consequently, the impact of organizational routines on ethical blindness is undertheorized and underemphasized. Routines may play a much more important role in the occurrence of unintentional unethical practices and may be more dangerous in this regard than is currently acknowledged. Given that routines are an omnipresent feature of organizations (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Nelson & Winter, 1982) and a central “explanatory mechanism in many of our most widely accepted theories” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 94), this lack of understanding of the role of routines in the occurrence of ethical blindness presents a serious limitation to the current literature.

In order to close this research gap, we will develop theory on organizational routines as a source of ethical blindness. In concrete terms, we will argue that routines can directly cause ethical blindness for two reasons. First, they can be executed in a semi-automatic way, that is, without constant conscious oversight and deliberate decision-making (Becker, 2019; Cohen, Levinthal, & Warglien, 2014; Pentland & Hærem, 2015; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Hence, once established, unethical routines may be executed without being questioned. Second, routines are multi-actor processes (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Hærem, 2015). When actors repeatedly carry out unethical tasks together, they may not be fully aware of the overall outcome and their contribution to it, and may not feel responsible for their actions. Some precursors to these
arguments can be found in Ashforth and Anand’s (2003) article on the normalization of corruption. However, because their goal was to give a broad overview of how corruption comes to be seen as normal within organizations, Ashforth and Anand (2003) did not systematically theorize on the underlying mechanisms.

In this article, we go beyond earlier works by specifying when and how organizational routines can directly cause ethical blindness. In pursuit of this aim, we synthesize and extend arguments from the domain of business ethics (e.g., Anand et al., 2004; Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Palazzo et al., 2012) with research on organizational routines (e.g., Cohen et al., 2014; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Howard-Grenville, Rerup, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2016; Pentland & Hærem, 2015; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020) and present a process model of the occurrence of this phenomenon. Our approach to routines throughout the paper is a behavioral one (rather than, say, one rooted in practice theory; Pentland & Feldman, 2005), where routine behaviors of actors mesh “with the psychological processes of actors whose actions are determined in large part by learned habits and associations” (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 331).

Overall, we contribute to the ethical blindness literature by providing a routine-based view of the emergence of unintentional unethical actions. In so doing, we respond to recent calls for theorizing on the “structural features of organizations […] that may contribute to unethical behavior” (Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014, p. 653). In particular, while earlier research on ethical blindness has mostly focused on the above-mentioned dramatic incidents (i.e., the Challenger disaster, Pinto fire cases, and Volkswagen diesel scandal), our routine-based explanation may also contribute to a better understanding of everyday unethical practices in modern business organizations (Rendtorff, 2020).

This article is organized as follows. We begin with an overview of the current view of the role of routines in ethical blindness to position our contribution in the literature. In the main part of the article, we advance the current understanding by elaborating on when and how routines can directly lead to ethical blindness. Moreover, we theorize on how routines for ethical blindness are being formed within organizations. We close with a discussion of implications of our novel arguments and devise avenues for future work.

The Current View of Organizational Routines in the Context of Ethical Blindness

The concept of ethical blindness

Many scholars have theorized on the phenomenon of ethical blindness (Palazzo et al., 2012; Rendtorff, 2020) using related notions like unintentional unethical behavior (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), blind spots (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Sezer et al., 2015), moral unawareness (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), moral blindness (de Klerk, 2017), moral myopia (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004), or ethical fading (Rees, Tenbrunsel, & Bazerman, 2019; based on Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004; Tenbrunsel et al., 2010). In this article, we use Palazzo et al.’s (2012, p. 324) definition of ethical blindness as the “decision maker’s temporary inability to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake”.

As one of the first empirical investigations, Drumwright and Murphy (2004) observed evidence of ethical blindness in a study of senior advertising practitioners. They found that many of their informants did not see any ethical problems related to their common advertising practices (e.g., deliberate misinformation, whitewashing, excessive image editing). When asked directly, practitioners rationalized and justified their practices by claiming that customers were too smart to be fooled anyway, or by shifting responsibility to “current trends in society”.

The arguably best-known and best-documented empirical account of ethical blindness is the detailed self-report by the (now) renowned management researcher Dennis Gioia on his own experiences as a field recall manager at Ford in the 1970s (Gioia, 1992). In 1970, Ford
introduced the Ford Pinto, a small car at low cost. Despite multiple reports about the Pinto catching fire after minor rear-end accidents with several people dying, Gioia and the rest of the field recall office repeatedly voted against field recall. Only later did Gioia realize that he had acted in an unethical way by putting people’s lives in danger.

The Pinto fire case illustrates that “ethically blind” actors have normal or even high ethical standards; they temporarily depart from their values without being aware of it (Palazzo et al., 2012). Hence, ethical blindness refers to a temporary state where actors lack awareness of the unethical implications of their actions. With this emphasis, the concept of ethical blindness differs from “pluralistic ignorance” (Centola, Willer, & Macy, 2005, p. 1010) “where a majority of group members privately reject a norm, but assume (incorrectly) that most others accept it”. In cases of pluralistic ignorance, people do not speak up because they are afraid of the consequences. In contrast, in situations of ethical blindness, they do not speak up because they do not actively perceive their practices as wrong or unethical.

Furthermore, ethical blindness differs from the related concept of normalization (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Normalization refers to a state where organization members are aware that practices like corruption are unethical, but they have through socialization and repetition come to be seen as “normal” and accepted in the organization (Anand et al., 2004; Spicer, 2009). In a state of ethical blindness, however, actors are (temporarily) unaware that their actions may be unethical. On the contrary, they may even believe that they are doing something good.

**Organizational routines as indirect sources of ethical blindness**

Within the literature on ethical blindness, only a small fraction of authors have mentioned the role of organizational routines. Palazzo and colleagues (2012) argued that ethical blindness is due to cognitive processes of rigid framing and described organizational routines as possible precursors of such rigid framing. Similarly, with their focus on mechanisms underlying the normalization of corruption, Ashforth and Anand (2003; see also Anand et al., 2004; Campbell & Göritz, 2014; Spicer, 2009) mentioned routines as one of the central factors that lead to the acceptance of corruption as a collective norm.

As its common denominator, the current literature has treated organizational routines as indirect triggers or sources of ethical blindness that can change the way decision-makers (cognitively) interpret a situation at hand. Palazzo and colleagues (2012) suggested, for example, that routines provide the “proximal situational context” for actions and decisions within organizations. Moreover, Palazzo and colleagues (2012) assumed that routines tend to reinforce existing perceptions (whether or not they are still appropriate) and put an overemphasis on technical rationality. They proposed that, by these processes, routines can contribute to rigid cognitive framings of a situation as “rational”, thereby indirectly causing ethical blindness. Similarly, earlier research suggested that through repeated execution, unethical practices may come to be seen as “normal” and “expected”, despite the fact that they contradict informal rules or expressed moral sentiments (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Campbell & Göritz, 2014; Spicer, 2009).

What has been undervalued in the context of ethical blindness, however, is that organizational routines pertain to well-established, recurring organizational practices (Pentland & Hærem, 2015). As such, routines do not just indirectly cause ethical blindness because they influence their actors’ cognitive worldviews, but they are the way of how tasks are actually carried out within an organization. Once routines are in place, actors may initiate certain actions automatically, without conscious decision-making, and execute routine tasks without reflecting in depth on what they are doing and why they are doing it (Cohen et al., 2014). Furthermore, because routines are multi-actor processes (Feldman & Pentland, 2003), their execution may involve distributed knowledge
as well as a sense of dispersed responsibility. The distribution of knowledge and responsibility have in past research been assumed to be related to unintentional unethical behavior (Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

In their article on the normalization of corruption—which covers a wide range of mechanisms related to institutionalizing, rationalizing, and socializing actors into corrupt practices—Ashforth and Anand (2003) suggested that routines remove decision points that could trigger reflective thought, lead to task dispersion and specialization, create momentum, and focus participants’ attention on the processes instead of the outcome. Moreover, they pointed to the possibility that routines are executed rather mindlessly. Nevertheless, Ashforth and Anand (2003) mainly considered the related cognitive mechanisms of how these practices become “normative” and how participants of corrupt routines are “desensitized” and “habituated” over time. Hence, these authors neglected either to systematically theorize on the circumstances under which routines can contribute to ethical blindness, or to explain when and how routines for ethical blindness are being formed.

By the same token, in the broader research area of organizational routines, unethical practices have received little attention so far. Only recently have researchers begun to explore “the dark side” of routines. As one of the few studies, Eberhard, Frost, and Rerup (2019) investigated the role of deceit (i.e., pretending romantic interests) in the routines of “Romeo pimps” when tricking women into prostitution. As a second example, den Nieuwenboer, da Cunha, and Treviño (2017) examined how middle managers used routines as tools to coerce subordinates into deceiving upper management about their performance. While both studies dealt with routinized unethical behavior, at the same time these studies did not theorize specifically about routines as a direct source of ethical blindness.

In conclusion, scholarly awareness seems to be arising suggesting that routines may be involved in unethical organizational practices. Nevertheless, their role as a direct organizational source of ethical blindness is underemphasized and the underlying mechanisms are undertheorized accordingly. In what follows, we attempt to close this gap. We synthesize earlier research on ethical blindness and organizational routines and use that as a base to theorize on when and how routines can directly contribute to ethical blindness.

**Organizational Routines as Direct Sources of Ethical Blindness**

In contrast to the existing literature that primarily understands organizational routines as context factors indirectly causing ethical blindness, we argue that routines can serve as a direct source of ethical blindness since they influence how organization members carry out their everyday practices. From this perspective, we argue that unethical behavior may be deeply ingrained in an organization’s routine procedures, including its related artifacts (e.g., forms, standard operating procedures). In particular, when carrying out “everyday” (versus “extreme”) unethical practices, routine participants may execute routines without questioning (or even considering) their ethical dimension—it is just the way things are done. Hence, once unethical practices have become routinized, the actors involved may collectively reproduce unethical behavior without being aware of the related ethical issues. In the following sub-sections, we further specify characteristics of organizational routines before we develop theory on when and how exactly they might lead to ethical blindness. We then theorize on how routines for ethical blindness may emerge.

**Characteristics of organizational routines**

An organizational routine is defined as “a repetitive, recognizable pattern of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 96; see also Pentland & Feldman, 2005; Pentland & Hærem, 2015). That is, routinized practices are executed repeatedly in a similar, “recognizable” way.
Organizational routines play an important role in organizational life because they ensure reliable and effective goal achievement over time, reduce uncertainty, ensure stability, and serve as knowledge repositories (e.g., Becker, 2004, 2019; Cohen et al., 2014; Cyert & March, 1963; Feldman, 2000; Levitt & March, 1988; March & Simon, 1958; Nelson & Winter, 1982).

In the context of ethical blindness, routines may also, however, preserve unintentionally unethical practices. Consider, for example, the “field recall” routine in the Ford Pinto fire case introduced above. When realizing that there were fatal fire accidents and people were actually dying, Gioia—then field recall officer—did not experience an ethical dilemma. Instead, he just followed the standard procedure for dealing with potentially dangerous cars (Gioia, 1992).

As a second example, consider various practices of “racial profiling”, “the systematic association of sets of physical, behavioural or psychological characteristics with particular offences and their use as a basis for making law enforcement decisions” (United Nations, 2019, p. 1). For instance, in routine “investigatory” car stops by police officers, people of color are stopped much more frequently (Rushin & Edwards, 2021) and also treated much more aggressively (Baumgartner, Epp, & Shoub, 2018) than others. Police officers do not necessarily see ethical problems with such racist routines. As one explained, “[that they are people of color is] not the reason I’m stopping them. I’m stopping them because that’s where the drug trade is here [. . .]” (Williams & Stahl, 2008, p. 234). As a third example, take “forced distribution”, a controversial yet widespread performance review procedure where managers regularly have to rank a certain percentage of their employees at the lowest tier (e.g., the bottom five percent in the case of Amazon, according to a recent news article by Kim & Stewart, 2021a). Based on this list, “low performers” are then usually released and replaced by new employees. The routine has led to paradoxical workarounds such as “hire-to-fire” practices, where people are regularly hired to be put on that list, in that way saving long-term employees’ jobs in the next round of “forced distribution” (Kim & Stewart, 2021b).

Many managers nevertheless see no ethical issues here. As one explained, “[f]iring people and making some people feel bad—that’s unfortunate, but it’s not the end of the world [. . .]. What’s the end of the world? It’s when you don’t hit your goal, don’t get something done, and have a bad impact on the customer” (Kim & Stewart, 2021a, n. p.).

Importantly, we are not suggesting that all participants in these routines are acting automatically and ethically blindly. Many of them will experience ethical dilemmas but find ways to rationalize their decisions (Anand et al., 2004). Others, who do not see the ethical dilemma, may have biased cognitive frames (Palazzo et al., 2012; see also Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Chugh, Bazerman, & Banaji, 2005; Sezer et al., 2015; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), or apply other strategies of self-deception or defense (de Klerk, 2017; Lenthall, 1998) or moral disengagement (Treviño et al., 2014). Nevertheless, many routine participants enact a routine without reflecting on its ethical aspects. Just like a well-rehearsed team of firefighters may not consider possible alternative sequences of action or potential collateral damage when proceeding to extinguish a fire, organization members executing a routine may only follow one step after the other to achieve their goals without deliberate (cognitive) decision-making.

The general way that a routine is executed, its abstract and schematic form, is referred to as the routine’s ostensive aspect. The “specific actions, by specific people, in specific places and times” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 101) constitute the routine’s performative aspect. Using the example of a “forced distribution” performance evaluation routine, the general procedure within an organization, including the steps involved in the process and artifacts (e.g., performance evaluation forms) belongs to the routine’s ostensive aspect. Meanwhile, the concrete execution of the routine by a manager on September 30, 2021, pertains to its performative aspect. While the ostensive aspect of a routine may remain largely stable, there is variety
to its performative aspect (Cohen et al., 2014; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Hærem, 2015)—including an entire range of possible paths as to how a certain goal can be attained (Pentland, Mahringer, Dittrich, Feldman, & Wolf, 2020).

One inherent characteristic of organizational routines is their semi-automatic nature. Routines are based on actors’ individual habits (Cohen et al., 2014; Pentland & Hærem, 2015; Turner & Cacciatori, 2016; Winter, 2013). Thus, in the course of routine execution, individual behaviors are carried out as a matter of due course more or less automatically, and attention can be focused on other stimuli (Danner, Aarts, & de Vries, 2007; Graybiel, 2008; Ouellette & Wood, 1998). Habit formation is one of the great benefits of routinization because it enables participants to economize on their limited cognitive capacities: “[t]he semi-conscious processing of repetitive events requires less cognitive resources” which “leads to an increase in the available cognitive potential that may be used to attend to non-routine events” (Becker, 2004, p. 657). The automatic processing of routines is especially beneficial under time pressure and in situations of heavy workload (Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

Moreover, besides being “repetitive” and “recognizable”, Feldman and Pentland’s (2003, p. 96) definition of an organizational routine includes a “pattern of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors”. For example, the field recall routine at Ford involved a field recall officer who received crash-test reports by another team and had to decide whether to call in a field recall office meeting to vote on the case. The routine was thus distributed among multiple actors in different roles (e.g., accident surveyor, field recall officer). Due to their distributed nature, Pentland and Hærem (2015) suggested viewing routines as networks of actions and decisions. In that way, routine execution is generally independent of the concrete individuals who execute them; given that they have the required knowledge (Turner & Cacciatori, 2016), different actors may carry out a routine in a similar, reliable way (Cohen et al., 2014; see also Pentland & Hærem, 2015).

**How organizational routines may directly cause ethical blindness**

We argue that organizational routines can be a direct source of ethical blindness due to two inherent characteristics, namely, their semi-automatic and their distributed nature. In the following sub-sections, we elaborate on these arguments.

**Effects due to the (semi-)automatic nature of routines.** The current understanding of the role of routines in ethical blindness is that decision-makers may become ethically blind because they rely on rigid cognitive frames when interpreting a routine situation (Palazzo et al., 2012; for similar arguments, see Gioia, 1992). According to this perspective, for example, a manager may actively decide to practice “forced distribution” because she thinks it is a good business decision, thereby neglecting the ethical issues at stake. This view, however, presupposes the involvement of cognitive interpretation and decision-making (i.e., the situation is interpreted as a “business situation”, not as an “ethical situation”) and neglects the possibility of (semi-)automatic action. In contrast, building on research into routines, as well as into the normalization of corruption (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), we argue that routines may at least, in part, be executed without cognitive involvement (Becker, 2004, 2019; Cohen et al., 2014; Pentland & Hærem, 2015), that is, without applying (rigid) cognitive frames.

Routines can be seen as established collective practices (e.g., performance evaluations; police controls) to achieve a desired outcome (e.g., improved team performance; crime prevention) for a situation at hand (Cohen et al., 2014). These routinized responses are initiated largely automatically without deliberation. For instance, when the time for performance evaluations has come, the manager from the example we have introduced above may not deliberately think about whether or not to apply forced distribution. Instead, triggered by the situation (e.g., the annual time for performance evaluations), she may initiate the respective procedures,
schedule the required meetings, use the respective forms, and execute the usual performance rating procedures. That is, we suppose that the manager at hand does not make a conscious decision at all, but practices the “forced distribution” routine without thinking about it because this is the way things are done. Equally, one could assume that police officers may not make conscious decisions when disproportionately stopping people of color, but “only” enact routines that involve “racial profiling”.

We argue that the most important mechanism of how routines cause ethical blindness is due to actors’ underlying habits, which can circumvent cognitive processing (Graybiel, 2008). In case of very strong habits, a certain situation (e.g., a fire alarm) can fully automatically trigger the associated behavioral response (e.g., firefighters getting up in the middle of the night to get ready for firefighting) without further consideration (Wood & Neal, 2007). In an analogous manner, we suggest that the likelihood of routine-based ethical blindness is higher, the more automated the involved actors’ habits are enacted.

Habits emerge from repetition of responses to similar situations (e.g., through the drill of firefighters; Turner & Cacciatori, 2016). Hence, the likelihood for strong habits to form and, in consequence, ethical blindness to occur, may be related to the degree of variation in a routine. As indicated above, routines are not necessarily stable entities, but they can exhibit variation in their performative aspect and may even be a source of change (Feldman, 2000; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland, Hærem, & Hillison, 2011). When performance conditions are varying, routine participants may have to fine-tune their responses; in consequence, the resulting habits will be less automatic, and flexible rather than rigid (Turner & Cacciatori, 2016). Hence, we argue that routines that exhibit variety may be a lesser source of ethical blindness. Vice versa, routines with little variations can make the occurrence of ethical blindness more likely.

Ethical blindness, however, may not only result from fully automatic, mindless responses. In most business contexts aside from assembly lines, some basic deliberation will always be involved on how to respond to a situation at hand (Cohen et al., 2014; Dittrich & Seidl, 2018; Turner & Cacciatori, 2016). Nevertheless, this cognitive involvement can be rather superficial and take the shape of “immanent sensemaking” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). In immanent sensemaking, sense and action are “merged as a single ongoing response to the particularities of the unfolding situation” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020, p. 10); when there is no severe interruption, actors are able to calibrate their responses without conscious thinking to slightly changing situational requirements. In more simple terms, in this cognitive state, actors are fully attached to the task at hand and there is little reflection, for example, on whether the task is appropriate and thus on whether it is ethical. Only when they are interrupted, for instance, by an unexpected event or anomaly that cannot easily be restored by slight adaptations do routine participants shift gears into a mode of “detached-deliberate sensemaking”, where they pay conscious attention to what is going on (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). However, when there are only few and minor interruptions that require deliberate decision-making, and when established routines are considered reliable and effective for goal achievement, there may be a high likelihood that routine participants continue to act in an ethically blind manner.

Finally, whenever a routine situation suggests routinized behavior, there is basically always the possibility of resisting expectations and behaving differently (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Referring back to our examples, managers may develop alternative assessment strategies than “forced distribution”, or police officers may change their racially biased practices of investigatory car stops. Deviating from habits, however, comes at the price of using substantial cognitive resources. As Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 11, emphasis as original) put it for the case of corruption, once it is ongoing, “it takes more conscious effort to discontinue it than to continue it”. That being the case, in many typical organizational situations, organizational members do not make use of conscious
processing, but respond to situational cues with automated, routinized behavior (Pentland & Hærem, 2015). That is, in routine situations, they are unlikely to deliberately consider multiple behavioral alternatives and weigh them according to certain criteria. Instead, they will respond with routinized behavior (Turner & Cacciatori, 2016), without making ethical considerations.

In conclusion, we argue that the more mindlessly and automatically routines are triggered and executed, the higher the extent of routine participants’ ethical blindness will be. We further suggest that strong habits, partly caused by repetitive tasks with little variation, as well as tasks that can be executed in states of immanent sensemaking contribute to this semi-automatic, mindless behavioral response, and therefore to ethical blindness.

**Effects due to the distributed nature of routines.** The second reason why we argue that organizational routines may directly contribute to ethical blindness is due to their distributed nature. Ashforth and Anand (2003) already mentioned problems related to specialization in dispersed routines. Building on more recent insights into organizational routines (e.g., Collins, 2019; Pentland & Hærem, 2015), we are able to theorize further on the related problems.

As a first problem, when tasks are highly fragmented and distributed, routine participants may act in an unethical way without knowing it, and they may even unwillingly reinforce the harm which the actions on the part of every single actor inflict (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). We argue that such distributed routines are associated with perceptions of the issue’s complexity (Schwartz, 2016), which has been suggested as a cause of ethical blindness. When the issue is too complex, people tend to shift their attention from the morality of what they are doing to the specific outcome they ought to deliver—that is, on the details and efficiency of their own job (Bandura, 1999; see also Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Hence, we suggest that routines where tasks are fragmented and distributed among many actors may increase the likelihood of ethical blindness because actors fail to see their own contribution to the ethical problem.

Relatedly, participants who carry out different parts of a routine usually also require assorted knowledge (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Cohen & Baccayian, 1994). More recent views of organizational routines as networks of decisions and actions (Miller, Choi, & Pentland, 2014; Pentland & Hærem, 2015) have linked routines to the formation of transactive memory systems, that is, systems of distributed and shared knowledge and cognitive labor that develop within a group of actors (Lewis & Herndon, 2011). Transactive memory systems can have a differentiated structure where actors have distinct knowledge and skills, or an integrated structure where actors’ knowledge and skills overlap. One of the core functions of organizational routines is to align activities of actors with different skill sets into a coherent outcome (Miller et al., 2014); hence, transactive memory systems related to organizational routines can be highly differentiated. As a consequence, routines as action and decision networks (Pentland & Hærem, 2015) can become very obscure and difficult to understand for the individual actors. For instance, each case to be processed at Ford’s field recall office “required a myriad of information-gathering and execution stages” (Gioia, 1992, p. 382), each of which involved different participants with different knowledge and skill sets (e.g., technical knowledge, legal knowledge, knowledge of the sales processes). While routine participants may largely know “who knows what”, they often would have to invest substantial efforts to get the “full picture” of the situation or gain an understanding of the consequences of their own decisions and actions in the routine (e.g., a certain statement in a crash report). Hence, we argue that routines that are based on highly differentiated transactive memory systems are more likely to cause ethical blindness. Due to lacking knowledge and understanding of the consequences of their actions, individual actors may fail to understand their contribution to the unethical practice.

As a second problem related to the distributed nature of routines, when actors only contribute small tasks to a larger routine, this can
lead to a diffused, and thus diminished, sense of responsibility (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Bandura, 1999). By taking a network perspective on routines (Pentland & Hærem, 2015), and based on more recent arguments from the business ethics literature on collective responsibility gaps (Collins, 2019), we suggest that this distribution of responsibility has an individual and a collective dimension.

Concerning routine participants’ individual responsibility, when labor is subdivided, each participant’s tasks may seem harmless in isolation; only in combination do they produce harmful behavior (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Bandura, 1999). In this context, Rendtorff (2020) pointed to the potential dangers of highly routinized bureaucratic structures that emphasize efficiency. Individual actors in such bureaucratic structures may morally disengage from a situation, for instance, by placing responsibility for one’s actions on authorities or formalities (e.g., hard criteria for field recall at Ford), or by distorting in their minds the possible consequences (see also Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). In its extreme form, an employee in a hierarchical structure can be “so interested in doing his job as well as possible that he forgets to question the legitimacy of what he is doing” (Rendtorff, 2020, p. 181). Furthermore, individual actors in such structures may be primarily interested in achieving their individual sub-goals; hence, they do not monitor and evaluate the overall collective behavior, but just their parts in it (Cohen et al., 2014). When only focusing on the completion of their own tasks, routine participants may not have an individual sense of responsibility for the overall routine (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). For example, in the Ford Pinto fire case (Gioia, 1992), people working at the Ford depot inspected the accidents and wrote crash reports; however, what happened to these crash test reports at the field recall office was then no longer their responsibility. Moreover, when their own contribution to the overall outcome is considered as small, the ethical issue involved may have low moral intensity, that is, a low “extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation” (Jones, 1991, p. 372). Because, among others, moral intensity depends on the magnitude of the consequences, actors who only contribute small tasks to an overall routine may not be aware of any ethical dilemma (Jones, 1991; Kelley & Elm, 2003). For those reasons, we assume that routines, where unethical actions are distributed among many actors, may diminish individually perceived moral intensity and increase in turn the likelihood of ethical blindness.

Furthermore, as recent theorizing suggests, the distribution of labor in a routine can lead to a collective responsibility gap also (Collins, 2019). A collective responsibility gap emerges when routines have been established in such a way that there is no opportunity to raise and process ethical issues and there are no evaluations included that take ethical aspects into account. Consider, again, the Ford Pinto case (Gioia, 1992), where existing routines included the evaluation of “abnormal accidents” with respect to human injuries or deaths. These evaluations however focused on financial aspects ($67,000 per injury and $200,000 per death) and neglected the ethical dimension of the situation. As Gioia (1992, p. 382) described his evaluation of the Ford Pinto, “the case was actually fairly straightforward. It was a good business decision, even if people might be dying”. Only later did Gioia come to understand that the “philosophical and ethical implications of assigning a financial value for human life or disfigurement” were not considered in the routine (Gioia, 1992, p. 381). As the example illustrates, routines can be set up in such a way that there is no space for ethical concerns and evaluations. In such situations, routine participants as a collective can be “constitutionally incapable of recognizing moral reasons” (Collins, 2019, p. 952). Routines with collective responsibility gaps can reduce the sense of collective responsibility, thereby increasing the likelihood of ethical blindness.

In conclusion, we suggest that organizational routines can contribute to ethical blindness because they can cause diffusion of knowledge and a lack of individual and collective responsibility for the overall outcome. We assume that
the more fragmented the tasks are and the more distributed the knowledge about and responsibility for the overall outcome are among routine participants, the higher will be the likelihood for ethical blindness to occur.

How routines for ethical blindness are being formed

So far, we have laid out arguments as to when and how routines may directly contribute to ethical blindness. We will now theorize on how routines that have the potential to cause ethical blindness come into being. The core processes of routine formation are displayed in Figure 1.

Initial decision or act. The origin of a routine is a novel, unfamiliar situation where a certain goal has to be achieved (e.g., the goal of increasing team performance through a new performance measurement system). In such a situation, individual actors cannot rely on their past experience but have to introduce intention and choice to deal with the new situation and try out new actions (Cohen et al., 2014). Hence, at the origins of a routine, individuals form goals (e.g., increase team performance) and act purposefully and mindfully in pursuit of achieving those goals (Bapuji, Hora, & Saeed, 2012; Dittrich & Seidl, 2018; Ouellette & Wood, 1998).

Previous authors suggested that the normalization of corrupt behavior starts with an “initial corrupt decision or act” (Ashforth & Anand, 2003, p. 5). In contrast, we argue that a routine that may cause ethical blindness does not necessarily begin with an unethical initial decision or act, but with a decision or act that potentially has negative ethical implications. For example, top management’s initial decision to apply “forced distribution” and lay off five percent of their workforce, targeting specifically “the low performers”, is not unethical under any circumstances. In a situation where many employees “work to rule”, or where personnel costs have to be reduced (e.g., due to the Covid-19 pandemic), “forced distribution” may be considered a fair management instrument. Likewise, police officers’ initial decision to target a dominantly Hispanic neighborhood for investigatory car stops is not necessarily unethical, if on other

| Initial decision or act | Emerging organizational routine | Established organizational routine |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| **Context factors:**    | **Emerging organizational routine** | **Established organizational routine** |
| • Individual factors    | • Decision to initiate behavior | • Semi-automatic and mindless execution of collective behavior |
| • Situational factors   | • Interaction to achieve common goal | • Distributed action |
| • Organizational factors|                                 | • Dispersed knowledge |
| **First execution of collective behavior with potentially negative ethical implications** | **Repetition of collective behavior with potentially negative ethical implications** | **Routinized execution of collective behavior with potentially negative ethical implications** |
| • Decision to initiate behavior | • Lack of conscious deliberation on ethical issues | • Embeddedness in human storage bins (e.g., culture, job roles, ethical infrastructure) |
| • Interaction to achieve common goal | • Repeated interaction | • Embeddedness in non-human storage bins (e.g., artifacts, standard procedures) |
| **Consequences:**       | **Consequences:** | **Consequences:** |
| • Experience that behavior leads to desired outcome | • Experience with collaboration and alignment of actions by multiple actors | • Routines in human storage bins (e.g., culture, job roles, ethical infrastructure) |
| • Experience with collaboration and alignment of actions by multiple actors | | • Embeddedness in non-human storage bins (e.g., artifacts, standard procedures) |

Figure 1. Core process model of the formation of routines that may cause ethical blindness.
occasions, other neighborhoods are targeted, too. When they are used selectively and reflexively, such actions may well be justified, also from an ethical perspective. Nevertheless, such actions and decisions at the origin of a routine for ethical blindness have the potential to cause harm for certain stakeholders (e.g., long-standing employees; people of color), and thus have potentially negative ethical implications.

The initial actors of the nascent routine may reflect on the underlying ethical issues and may be aware of the potential negative ethical problems. Yet, they still may act against their moral principles. For instance, top managers may feel bad that some of their elderly long-standing organization members may not be able to find a new job, but they may nevertheless decide to put business interests first. In many other situations, however, the ethical dimension may escape actors’ attention and they act unethically unintentionally (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). For example, top managers may not see individual members’ personal problems as their concern—seeing as their concern is to maximize output and profit. Others may believe that “everybody likes competition” and that this spurs motivation. In these cases, actors fail to see that their decision entails ethical elements and only focus on the business aspects (e.g., efficiency improvements). In so doing, they act ethically blindly from the very outset of the routine.

The question as to whether actors are already ethically blind at the initial decision or act depends on multiple context factors, including individual, situational, and organizational variables (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). Regarding individual factors, research has identified cognitive mechanisms of self-deception (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) and defense (de Klerk, 2017; Lenthall, 1998), moral disengagement (Treviño et al., 2014), bounded ethicality (Banaji, Chugh, & Bazerman, 2003; Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Chugh et al., 2005; Sezer et al., 2015), rigid cognitive models and frames (Gioia, 1992; Palazzo et al., 2012; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), and rationalization (Anand et al., 2004). Concerning situational factors, characteristics of the issue, such as moral intensity and issue complexity (Jones, 1991; Kelley & Elm, 2003), as well as social pressure by authority figures or majorities (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Palazzo et al., 2012) were found to be predictors of ethical blindness. Regarding organizational factors, the organization’s “ethical infrastructure” (Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008, p. 560; see also Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011) will likely have an impact on ethical decision-making. It includes such matters as the organization’s ethical climate, formal and informal systems of communication, surveillance, and sanctioning, as well as normative structures, policies, and procedures (Dedeke, 2015; Schwartz, 2016; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño et al., 2014). All these variables may influence whether the initial actors act in an unethical way to achieve the goal at hand, and whether they do so intentionally or unintentionally.

Further, by definition of a routine as a multi-actor process (Feldman & Pentland, 2003), at the outset of a routine, individuals start interacting with other actors from whom they seek a particular response or input. When theorizing on the normalization of unethical practices, Ashforth and Anand (2003) focused on the role of leadership and obedience. They argued that individuals who perform unethical acts are often not the actual agent and can have little power to resist. Similarly, in business ethics research, Palazzo and colleagues (2012) highlighted this influence of strong authority on ethical blindness. For example, at the outset of an organizational routine that bears the risk of causing ethical blindness, organizational members may just be following orders and performing some actions without questioning them due to the simple fact that their supervisors or other authorities told them so or did not intervene (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Bandura, 1999; Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow, 2000). In an ethnographical study at a desk sales unit within a telecommunication firm, den Nieuwenboer and colleagues (2017) showed how middle managers translated upper management’s abstract routines into corrupt versions of that routine for
frontline employees, thus inducing deceptive performance in their subordinates.

Despite the importance of this research, we argue that leader–follower relationships are hardly the only form of interaction in organizational routines. Cohen and colleagues (2014) provided a detailed theoretical analysis of different forms of interrelations between routine participants. They regarded the interplay of routine participants as a combination of “mutually compatible actions” (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 348) and distinguished situations where several individuals act on a common target (e.g., two experts investigate why a Ford Pinto vehicle exploded) and situations where the first actor’s outcome serves as an input for the second actor or group of actors (e.g., the experts’ damage report serves as an input for the field recall officer).

We suggest that in cases where individuals are collectively executing unethical behavior to achieve a common target, all individual actors may be equally affected by the same “business frames” of the situation (Palazzo et al., 2012; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). For example, managers in a company applying “forced distribution” for the first time may perceive it as the “natural” way that performance evaluations should be conducted, or police officers in a certain district may find it reasonable to focus their controls on people of color because, in their view, “that’s where the crime is”. The overall organizational culture and ethical infrastructure may reduce the awareness of ethical dilemmas (Campbell & Göritz, 2014; see also Dedek, 2015; Schwartz, 2016; Treviño et al., 2014). Thereby, actors may begin to adjust their own ethical standards to their peers’ standards—a phenomenon that has been referred to as “ethical spillover” (Pierce & Snyder, 2008).

Moreover, in cases where the first actor’s outcome serves as input for the later involved actors, these later involved actors do not act independently, but earlier acts may have enabled or closed off behavioral alternatives (Feldman & Pentland, 2003), or rendered certain practices more promising than others for achieving the desired outcome. For example, once top management has defined objective performance criteria, such as sales figures, for their staff members, subsequent human resources procedures and decisions may be based on these criteria.

In any case, at the outset of a routine that may cause ethical blindness, organization members combine their—at least potentially—unethical actions to achieve a desired outcome. At its first instance of execution, collective behavior can be seen as a single-situation interaction process “[c]onfined to the immediate context of a specific [. . .] situation” (Soderstrom & Weber, 2020, p. 235). Yet, successful task execution leaves “trans-situational traces—such as shared concerns and expectations of next steps [. . . or] interest in repeated interactions” (Soderstrom & Weber, 2020, p. 242). In more simple terms, if the potentially unethical collective behavior has led to goal achievement, the involved actors have gained experience with one possible way of dealing successfully with a situation at hand and learned how they can align their actions accordingly. They will likely remember this experience of success in a similar novel situation, which increases the chances that the behavior is repeated.

**Emerging routine for ethical blindness.** Repetition is the core mechanism underlying routine formation (Cohen et al., 2014; Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Hence, in line with earlier arguments on the normalization of corruption (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), we suggest that a routine that may cause ethical blindness begins to form when organization members respond to a novel situation (e.g., the need to increase team performance indicators) with potentially unethical behavior that has led to success in the past (e.g., applying “forced distribution”).

Whether a certain collective behavior is repeated largely depends on how actors (explicitly or implicitly) evaluate the effectiveness of these actions and interactions in pursuit of achieving the joint desired outcomes (Cohen et al., 2014; Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Felin & Foss, 2011; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). If this evaluation does not include ethical considerations, unethical practices may be repeated.
without routine participants’ awareness of ethical issues—they may have become ethically blind at this point.

The process of routine formation is then self-reinforcing. Through repeated execution, individual routine participants gain more and more experience, develop habits, and begin to produce and rely on extant artifacts (e.g., forms, tools, computer programs) to achieve their outcomes (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). Through repeated interaction, routine participants subsequently further build on their knowledge of how others may react in a situation at hand and of what they can expect from each other in terms of input (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Cohen et al., 2014; Hong, Easterby-Smith, & Snell, 2006). Over time, through mutual learning and through the formation of reciprocal expectations, collective actions and interactions become even more coherent and aligned (Cohen et al., 2014; Feldman & Pentland, 2003). For example, in the Pinto fire case, Gioia (1992, p. 386) had gained experience with “normal accidents” versus other types of accidents that should not occur. Moreover, through repeated interaction with his colleagues at the field recall office, Gioia had learned which cases would be further considered for field recall, and which cases would probably be discarded by the team. By that means, routine participants’ behavior as a collective improves and becomes more efficient concerning the desired outcomes (e.g., fast and accurate decisions regarding field recall). Hence, the repeated execution of a certain (unethical) behavior further increases the likelihood of successful outcomes; this, again, increases the likelihood of repetition.

In addition to improved task performance, repetition indirectly contributes to ethical blindness via cognitive mechanisms. Even if actors were initially aware of the unethical dimension of their decisions, repeated exposure to ethical dilemmas—and repeated decisions against ethical principles—may produce a form of “ethical numbing” (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Ethical numbing means that when it is repeated over and over again, a certain behavior will be questioned less and less from an ethical perspective and self-reproof will be diminished. On a related note, Tenbrunsel and colleagues (2010) argued that unethical practices may be reinterpreted after the action to keep them aligned with one’s ethical self-perceptions and that individuals gradually adjust their own ethical standards to overcome discrepancies in ethical self-perceptions and actions. Furthermore, past practices may serve as a benchmark for current practices (Palazzo et al., 2012). This is related to the legitimization feature of a routine as described in the routine dynamics literature (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). In simple terms, if it was fine to exhibit a certain behavior in the past, then similar practices are also acceptable in a situation at hand.

For all those reasons, the more frequently an unethical collective practice is executed, the stronger participants’ individual habits and reciprocal expectations will become. Furthermore, due to repeated execution, actors will experience “ethical numbing” and become less likely to question the emerging routine.

Established routine for ethical blindness. Through ongoing execution, the potentially unethical collective behavior turns into an established organizational routine, “a repetitive, recognizable pattern of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 96). By means of an ethnographic study, Soderstrom and Weber (2020, p. 255) detailed how repeated actions and interactions within an organization gradually accumulate into “trans-situational traces” of attention, motivation, knowledge, relationships, and artifacts and how, over time, these traces become embedded in organizational routines. Once this is the case, organization members will routinely respond to a recurring situation in a potentially unethical way.

As we have argued above, routine participants have likely become ethically blind at this point in the process of routine formation. Because routines are based on habits that bypass cognitive processing (Cohen et al., 2014), they can be executed semi-automatically and partly mindlessly. Police officers, for example, may
routinely take their common routes through “problematic neighborhoods” when riding on patrol, and carry out investigatory car stops with “the usual suspects”. Likewise, when the time has come for annual performance reviews in a company, managers may habitually initiate the routinized performance assessment procedures of “forced distribution” and involve other relevant roles (e.g., human resources) to prepare terminations and replacements. Conscious cognitive processing is likely to be involved at all points in the process (e.g., police officers consciously deciding where to stop; managers consciously deciding when to schedule performance evaluations). Yet, these cognitive efforts are focused on task execution and not directed to questioning the practices themselves (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Instead, the very existence of a certain routine legitimizes the underlying behavior (Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

Moreover, as we have discussed, when organizational routines are complex and involve multiple actors, knowledge may be dispersed and responsibility distributed. Hence, once a complex routine involving potentially unethical practices or consequences has been established, routine participants who do not make explicit efforts to understand the entire routine and their part in it may experience ethical blindness because they fail to see what they are contributing to. On a related note, when responsibility is distributed across individuals (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), and when the routine does not foresee evaluations with regard to ethical criteria (Collins, 2019), individual actors may automatically take part in unethical practices, without being aware of it.

With each execution that leads to a successful outcome, an organizational routine will be further reinforced. The routine becomes increasingly embedded in an organization’s memory (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), a metaphor for all entities that store information from an organization’s history (Cross & Baird, 2000; Tsang & Zahra, 2008; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). In the wording of the “organizational memory” metaphor, established formal and informal routines are stored in two types of storage “bins”, human and non-human (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Human storage bins refer to those aspects of organizational memory that are tacit and experience-based, and thus tied to organizational members (e.g., individual habits, collective culture); non-human bins refer to material or digital artifacts that store information (e.g., file shares, reports, process software).

In the context of ethical blindness, we argue that the related human storage bins pertain to the organization’s culture or “ethical infrastructure”, which shapes the social acceptance attached to these unethical practices (e.g., implicit norms, reward systems, language, rituals; Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Treviño et al., 2014; see also Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008). For example, Campbell and Göritz (2014) found that corrupt organizations perceive themselves to be “fighting in a war” (instead of ordinary competition), which they use as justification for unethical behavior. Furthermore, Soderstrom and Weber (2020) identified knowledge-in-practice, a shared understanding of the problem structure, established working groups and task forces, as well as formalized organizational roles as relevant “trans-situational traces” that are stored in human storage bins.

The non-human storage bins for routines that can contribute to causing ethical blindness may include all kinds of material and digital artifacts (Pentland & Feldman, 2005; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). They can be related to both a routine’s ostensive and performative aspects (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). For instance, standard operating procedures (e.g., documented steps of how to execute “forced distribution” in performance appraisals), rules, or a process software belong to the routine’s ostensive aspect; photographs or reports (e.g., performance reports of a concrete team) may pertain to its performative aspect. Moreover, there are dedicated artifacts related to the ethical dimension of routines such as codes of conduct, or compliance policies (Dedeke, 2015; Schwartz, 2016; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008; Treviño et al., 2014).

As shown in Figure 1, there is a recursive relationship between these storage bins and
organizational routines. Not only does routine execution lead to an accumulation of knowledge and experiences in organizational memory bins but, vice versa, existing organizational structures further increase the likelihood that a certain unethical routinized behavior continues to be carried out unquestioningly. In this context, artifacts play a crucial role (Pentland & Feldman, 2005; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020). Although even strong artifacts like standard operating procedures do not determine action and there are always details that remain open for routine participants to execute the routine (Pentland & Feldman, 2005), artifacts reinforce certain actions and interactions. For example, Royer and Daniel (2019) showed that legal artifacts in an organization promote compliance with regulations. Likewise, for instance, software designed to support performance appraisals that reveal performance rankings may foster the application of “forced distribution”. More generally speaking, unethical procedures may be cemented when they have become part of organizational artifacts. Vice versa, when they are not represented in these artifacts, ethical issues may tend to be neglected, thus further reinforcing ethical blindness.

**The stickiness of unethical routines**

It is well-known in the literature that, once established, organizational routines are sticky. Even when circumstances have changed, routine participants tend to fall back into their routinized behaviors (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; see also Fiol & O’Connor, 2017). This also applies to routines that promote ethical blindness.

As we have theorized so far (based on Cohen et al., 2014 and Soderstrom & Weber, 2020), routines emerge when they lead to successful goal achievement. If an unethical practice leads to favorable outcomes, it is unlikely that the underlying premises will be questioned. As an illustration, consider Williams and Stahl’s (2008) study on investigatory police car stops. Based on a sample of approximately 93,000 stops, the authors found that African American motorists were searched 1.44 times more frequently and Hispanics 5.51 times more frequently than white American motorists. That is, police officers applied racial profiling in their car patrol routines. While statistics clearly showed that “[t]he odds of police having positive search results are no different between racial or ethnic groups” (Williams & Stahl, 2008, p. 230), the practice of racial profiling revealed a larger absolute number of people of color convicted of a criminal act. Hence, in subsequent interviews, police officers considered their (discriminatory) car-stopping routines as efficient and justified.

In this context, it is also known that “good-enough” performance with an inferior procedure does not generally trigger reflection. That is, even if routines do not lead to perfect outcomes and smaller problems occur, routine participants are more likely to behave in their well-known, routinized way to achieve results that are “good enough” than to change their behavior (Levitt & March, 1988; Palazzo et al., 2012; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). The reason is that routine change is costly. First, routine participants have to intentionally change their habits and slowly learn new, initially less efficient and effective behaviors (e.g., different police control routines) for achieving the same goals (Fiol & O’Connor, 2017). Second, routine change is costly because routines are multi-actor processes. In addition to changing their own behavior, routine participants have to change their interactions with others (Cohen et al., 2014). In the beginning, discarding old practices and building new, efficient multi-actor routines comes with additional communication effort and new shared artifacts may have to be created (Pentland & Feldman, 2005; Tsang & Zahra, 2008). Especially if routine participants experience delays through errors and failure, they will be tempted to return to their old “efficient” collective practices if they have the possibility to do so (Fiol & O’Connor, 2017).

Furthermore, the network characteristics of routines can make it difficult for individuals to deviate from established unethical practices. In the context of corruption, Ashforth and Anand (2003, p. 12; emphasis in original) argued that
“by embedding corruption in a system of interdependent processes, routinizing yokes the individual to other role occupants. One is effectively locked in by dense task connections such that the whole sustains each part; one is swept along by the momentum of the system.” As an example, consider Gioia’s (1992, p. 387) description of a situation where he had decided to deviate from Ford’s usual field recall routine after he had seen a burned vehicle at the return depot:

That event was so strong that it prompted me to put the case up for preliminary consideration [. . .]. I soon “came to my senses,” however, when rational consideration of the problem characteristics suggested that they did not meet the scripted criteria that were consensually shared among members of the Field Recall Office. At the preliminary review, other members of the decision team [. . .] wondered why I had even brought the case up.

This example illustrates that it can be hard for individuals to break automated collective patterns of behavior. Even if one person deviates from a routine performance, the others may bring the deviating party “back on track” through their reactions and behavior.

For all those reasons, we conclude that, if an established unethical organizational routine has proven effective in achieving a desired outcome, organization members will stick with the established routine, rather than question or change it.

**Discussion**

The aim of this article was to develop theory on the role of organizational routines in ethical blindness. We will now discuss the contributions and implications of our work.

As our first theoretical contribution, we have improved the current understanding of when and how organizational routines can be sources of ethical blindness. Existing research has portrayed routines as “proximal context factors” of ethical blindness (Palazzo et al., 2012) that have an indirect effect via cognitive mechanisms such as rationalization and normalization (Anand et al., 2004; Ashforth & Anand, 2003), cognitive biases (Sezer et al., 2015; Tenbrunsel et al., 2010), or rigid framing (Gioia, 1992; Palazzo et al., 2012). We argued that this current view of organizational routines as an indirect source of ethical blindness is incomplete and somewhat misleading because it overemphasizes cognitive mechanisms and neglects that routines are practices (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Hærem, 2015). In this article, we have synthesized research on business ethics and micro-foundations of organizational routines to elaborate that routines should be considered as potential direct causes of ethical blindness due to two of their core characteristics, first, their semi-automatic and, second, their distributed nature.

More precisely, regarding the first of these characteristics, we theorized that routines may cause ethical blindness when they can be initiated and executed largely automatically. Building on novel work on sensemaking, we suggested that, once a routine that entails potentially unethical behavior has been triggered by a situation at hand (e.g., field service of police officers), the involved actors may be in a state of “immanent sensemaking” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020); that is, they may be fully engrossed in their practices and know what they need to do to achieve their tasks. They will likely focus on their desired ends (e.g., identifying as many criminals as possible), and carry out tasks to achieve those ends that have proven effective in the past (e.g., focusing investigatory car stops on people of color), without deliberately reflecting on these practices (Cohen et al., 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). If it leads to desired outcomes (e.g., a certain number of criminals identified), actors will likely see their routines through. Only when problems or errors occur, actors will change to a more detached mode of sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) and begin to question their behavior. Hence, routines may be particularly prone to cause ethical blindness, when they are initiated and can be executed without much deliberation and when they reliably lead to desired outcomes. Regarding the
second characteristic of routines, their distributed nature, we argued that if routine execution is based on distributed knowledge and distributed responsibility, the routine may be a source of ethical blindness. What follows from this is that routines may be particularly dangerous when tasks are fragmented and distributed among many participants, and organization members are discouraged from questioning established practices. Typical examples of settings where routine tasks can be executed without much deliberation and are distributed across many individuals are large bureaucratic organizations. In such organizations, individual organization members are expected to obey orders from “the top” and rewarded to work on their individual, delineated tasks without questioning decisions. Rendtorff (2020) made a similar argument that large bureaucratic organizations may provide fertile soil for ethical blindness because they prevent organization members from seeing the “big picture”.

On a related note, building on recent theorizing on collective responsibility gaps (Collins, 2019) we have suggested that routines may be (unintentionally) designed in a way that they neglect moral considerations—even if all routine participants act ethically and responsibly. In this context, for example, Smieliauskas, Bewley, Gronewold, and Menzefricke (2018) elaborated on how accounting standards can cause ethical blindness. If such standards allow overly large ranges for accounting estimates, managers’ forecasts may be acceptable and approved by the auditors despite the fact that these forecasts can be very unrealistic. However, when the routine does not include an assessment of how realistic forecasts are, this is a potential source of ethical blindness (Smieliauskas et al., 2018)—and, as we would argue, an instance of a collective responsibility gap in an accounting routine. When a routine involves many sub-steps which are distributed among participants (or even institutions), such collective responsibility gaps, as sources of ethical blindness, may get easily overlooked.

As a second contribution, we developed theory on how organizational routines for ethical blindness come into being. Integrating findings from research on business ethics (Gioia, 1992; Palazzo et al., 2012) and the normalization of corruption (Ashforth & Anand, 2003) with research on the micro-foundations of routines (Cohen et al., 2014; Pentland & Hærem, 2015) as well as their emergence and retention (Fiol & O’Connor, 2017; Soderstrom & Weber, 2020), we theorized on the initial decision or act, the emerging routine, and the established routine as the three core stages in the formation of a routine that has the potential to cause ethical blindness. Going beyond existing research, we described how an initial decision with potential ethical consequences may gradually transcend into routinized unethical behavior (i.e., through habit formation; Cohen et al., 2014). Thereby, some of the routines causing ethical blindness may emerge from intentional unethical decisions, such as engaging in corruption, which then become ingrained in organizational structures (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Nevertheless, as we have argued when theorizing on the formation of routines for ethical blindness, many individual actions underlying such routines (e.g., forced distribution) are not necessarily unethical per se, at least not in a categorical black-and-white manner. When carried out selectively and with deliberate reflection, they may be justified also from an ethical perspective (e.g., forced distribution as a means of making fair personnel decisions). However, when carried out regularly and mindlessly without conscious consideration of ethical issues, these practices bear the potential to become harmful and unethical.

Our analysis implies that, at the outset of the formation of routines for ethical blindness, cognitive mechanisms may still play an important role, because actors make intentional choices and decisions. They will therein rely on their cognitive frames (Gioia, 1992; Palazzo et al., 2012) to interpret the situation. At this stage, they may be subject to bounded ethicality (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Chugh et al., 2005; Sezer et al., 2015), defense mechanisms (de Klerk, 2017), or moral disengagement (Treviño et al., 2014). However, once an
unethical routine has been established, cognitive mechanisms become much less relevant than indicated in earlier conceptualizations of ethical blindness (e.g., by Gioia, 1992 or Palazzo et al., 2012). Instead, routine performance can bypass deliberate thinking and reflection (Becker, 2019; Cohen et al., 2014), therein causing unintentional unethical behavior.

In addition, we extended earlier theorizing by synthesizing arguments from research into organizational routines (Cohen et al., 2014) with findings on processes of how the unethical aspects become gradually less salient or intense, such as ethical “numbing” (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Our arguments imply that, once a routine has been established, the unethical practice does not seem harmful to its participants. It is often only in the face of a strong shock (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Fiol & O’Connor, 2017; Palazzo et al., 2012), that is, severe negative events or undesired outcomes that organization members may start questioning an established unethical routine. Without such a strong shock, chances are high that unethical practices that produce adequate outcomes will last, as routine participants have become ethically blind. At this point, the greatest benefit of routinization regarding organizational efficiency—their semi-automatic nature—has turned into a liability.

On a more general level, our research contributes to a broader debate on the “dark side of organization” (Linstead, Maréchal, & Griffin, 2014). Much of this stream of research has focused on abnormal or deviant practices at work (e.g., violence, aggression). In fact, also the sparse extant research on unethical routines (den Nieuwenboer et al., 2017; Eberhard et al., 2019) has mainly dealt with how actors intentionally created or modified routines to enforce goal achievement through unethical means. In contrast, others researching the “dark side of organization” have investigated negative side effects or “flip sides” of otherwise positively connoted phenomena, such as leadership, or self-management (Linstead et al., 2014). The theorizing put forward in this paper is in line with this latter perspective because we have portrayed ethical blindness as the potential “dark side” of routinized task execution. While the semi-automatic execution of routine tasks is beneficial, for example, regarding efficiency and quality standards (Becker, 2004), it may cause unintended harm.

If the harmful outcomes are dramatic and salient, like, for instance, in the Pinto fire cases, where several people died, routine participants may exit the mode of “immanent sensemaking” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020), reflect upon their practices, and start questioning their behavior. However, if no major disturbances occur during routine execution, and if routine execution leads to desired outcomes, the unethical practices are unlikely to be questioned. We thus argue that routines may be particularly relevant when it comes to explaining ethical blindness in comparatively “mild” (and legal) unethical practices as embedded in many standard business processes (Davies, 2019; Rendtorff, 2020), which are executed frequently and reliably lead to the desired outcomes. Such comparatively “mild” unethical practices, however, should not be underestimated. With reference to the examples used in this article, we remind that racial profiling is a serious form of everyday racism with numerous negative consequences for the affected individuals or groups (United Nations, 2019), and forced distribution may drive people into unemployment and precarious circumstances and contribute to a workplace culture of competition and denunciation. Hence, also in comparatively “mild” contexts, routine-caused ethical blindness is a phenomenon with potentially serious outcomes for individuals, organizations, and society.

**Conclusion and Future Work**

We started this article from the observation that earlier research on ethical blindness has underemphasized the role of organizational routines, a central and omnipresent feature of organizations (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Nelson & Winter, 1982). So far, they have mainly been seen as indirect, “proximal
context factors” of cognitive mechanisms (Palazzo et al., 2012). In contrast, our theoretical analysis suggests that routines, as recurring multi-actor practices, can also be a direct, non-cognitive source of ethical blindness.

Organizational routines may have been involved in the breaking-news organizational scandals and disasters mentioned in the introduction, ranging from the so-called Pinto fire cases (Gioia, 1992) to the Challenger space-shuttle catastrophe (Vaughan, 1996, 2004) and the Volkswagen diesel scandal (Smith & McCormick, 2018; Useem, 2016). These incidents cost human lives and, in addition, created billions of dollars worth of damage to the organizations at hand. Equally relevant, however, routines may be at play in many “everyday” instances of ethical blindness. Examples include regular corporate practices that continuously damage the environment, pose security problems, or exploit local communities (Rendtorff, 2020), as well as the common management practice of “forced distribution” and the practice of “racial profiling” in law enforcement routines, that we have used as illustrations in this paper.

Given the prominence of routines in organization theory and against the relevance of the phenomenon of ethical blindness, future work should be dedicated to better understanding contingencies of routines that contribute to unintentional unethical practices. For example, we have suggested that routines may be particularly dangerous when there are few variations and rare interruptions—that is, when they regularly lead to satisfactory outcomes. Moreover, we have argued that they will be dangerous when they are fragmented and distributed among a large group of actors, in particular when these actors are expected to execute tasks without questioning them. These ideas lend themselves to empirical testing in future research.

Further, concerning the formation of routines for ethical blindness, future studies may analyse how processes of habit formation interact with individual-level aspects, such as moral character disposition (Schwartz, 2016), and with situational effects, such as moral intensity or issue complexity (Jones, 1991; Kelley & Elm, 2003).

Moreover, future theoretical and empirical work may be dedicated to studying the relationship between certain characteristics of an organization’s culture (Campbell & Göritz, 2014; Treviño et al., 2014) and the formation of “ethically blind” routines. Subsequent studies may also investigate the concrete characteristics under which routines, as networks of actions and practices (Pentland & Hærem, 2015), are likely to produce ethical blindness, and cause collective responsibility gaps (Collins, 2019). Overall, we need a better understanding of which organizational characteristics encourage reflection on ethical issues, and which foster ethical numbing.

Finally, future research should improve the current conceptualization of how to protect and cure organizations (and their members) of ethical blindness. Since earlier research has mainly focused on the cognitive elements of this phenomenon, researchers primarily suggested cognitive cures for ethical blindness, such as “flexible framing”, or “moral imagination” (Palazzo et al., 2012, p. 333). We agree that these cognitive counter-measures will arguably have an impact in fighting ethical blindness. However, our theorizing on the role of routines emphasizes the non-cognitive elements that may cause ethical blindness. Hence, fighting routine-caused ethical blindness may require practice-based techniques of unlearning and re-learning (Fiol & O’Connor, 2017) with a particular focus on changing related organizational artifacts (e.g., evaluation forms, process software). Future work may be dedicated to developing such techniques.

Since organizational routines figure prominently not only as pillars of organizational research but likewise play an indispensable part in organizational practice, future research should help to increase our knowledge of how to set up and control routines such that they prevent or counteract ethical blindness.

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ORCID iD
Barbara Kump https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7513-8659

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**Author biographies**

**Barbara Kump** is an assistant professor at the Institute for Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship at Vienna University of Economics and Business. Her research interests include cognitive and behavioral micro-foundations of organizational change, in particular, changes toward sustainable practices. She is also interested in why and how organizations change their dominant logics, and what prevents them from doing so. Her work has been published in, among others, *Human Relations, Industrial and Corporate Change*, the *International Journal of Management Reviews*, and *Business Strategy & the Environment*.

**Markus Scholz** is the chair for Corporate Governance & Business Ethics, the head of the Institute for Business Ethics and Sustainable Strategy (IBES), and the head of the Josef Ressel Center for Collective Action and Responsible Partnerships at the University of Applied Science Vienna. His research interests include business ethics in general, with a particular interest in better understanding how businesses can live up to their political responsibilities. He is also interested in exploring how organizations fail to become more sustainable and in developing strategies for dealing with failure to change. He has published in journals including the *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, Business Ethics Quarterly*, and *Organization Studies*. 