

Empirical research on routines
The state of the art and its integration into the routines debate

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Abstract

One of the major contributions of the Nelson and Winter (1982) book was to introduce the concept of routines as units of analysis of economic behaviour. Many authors have picked up on the concept of routines and have attempted to use it in the analysis of various types of economic activity. However, in spite of this, many ambiguities and inconsistencies in the concept itself still prevail. This situation is aggravated by the fact that at the same time, contributions on the concept of routines have been quite rare and their impact has been quite limited. Overall, little progress has been made regarding our understanding of the concept of routines (Avery 1996). In short, 'a unified academic vision of the notion of routine does not exist' (Reynaud 1998, 468).

Why are conceptual problems pertaining to routines so persistent? Our conjecture is that at least one of the reasons has to do with empirical research on routines largely missing in the discussion of routines. Empirical research is necessary and important because questions like for instance 'What roles do routines have in organisations?' are empirical questions that cannot be answered on an *a priori* basis. Understanding these questions, however, is important for understanding the concept of routines, and for applying it in a productive fashion. If empirical research is not integrated into the debate, our understanding of the concept of routines will suffer, as will the analytical and explanatory power of the concept and therefore of the analyses carried out employing it.

There are two reasons because of which empirical could be missing in the debate. First, there could be a lack of empirical studies on routines. Second, there could be problems with the integration of empirical results into the literature on routines. Both conjectures are probed in the paper. As to the first paper, it reports the result of a review of the empirical literature on routines, identifying thirty-three studies. They include survey-based, case-based, and experimental studies, as well as published and unpublished work. In order to probe the second conjecture, a citation analysis of the empirical studies was conducted using the ISI Social Sciences Citation Index in order to assess the integration of the theoretical and empirical literatures on routines. The clear finding is that there are only very few citations of empirical work on routines.

The empirical and theoretical literatures on routines are not yet integrated very closely. Although there are some, empirical studies of routines, they appear to have been largely ignored. The paper presents a first step in integrating empirical research in the body of literature on routines.