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Triggers and Damages of Organizational Defensive Routines

Yumei Yang*, **Davide Secchi****, **Fabian Homberg*****

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According to research, organizational defensive routines (ODRs) have strong and intertwined individual and organizational components. However, the literature has yet to systematically isolate and analyse ODR-triggering factors at both levels. In this paper, we shall first refer to organizational routine theory to expound the characteristics of ODRs. Next, it identifies their individual and organization-level triggers. At the individual level factors generating ODRs are *general self-efficacy*, *locus of control*, and *neuroticism*, while those operating at the organizational level are *organizational politics*, *red tape*, and *organizational structure*. Finally, the chapter explores potential damage ODRs could cause to individuals and organizations related to individuals' *job satisfaction*, *work engagement*, *organizational ambidexterity*, and *organizational learning*. The theoretical model presented in this paper forms a foundation for a future empirical study and theoretically extends the nomological network of ODRs.

Keywords: organizational defensive routines, general self-efficacy, locus of control, neuroticism.

Przyczyny i negatywne skutki stosowania praktyk obronnych w organizacjach

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Dotychczas w badaniach nad praktykami obronnymi w organizacjach wskazywano na ich wyraźne i wzajemnie powiązane elementy indywidualne i organizacyjne. Nie wyodrębniono jednak i nie przeanalizowano czynników wywołujących praktyki obronne na obu tych poziomach. Charakteryzując praktyki obronne, autorzy artykułu odwołują się do teorii praktyk organizacyjnych. Następnie identyfikują czynniki wyzwalające je na poziomie indywidualnym i organizacyjnym. Do tych zidentyfikowanych na poziomie indywidualnym należą ogólne poczucie własnej skuteczności, poczucie umiejscowienia kontroli i neurotyczność, natomiast na poziomie organizacyjnym wskazano politykę organizacyjną, biurokrację i strukturę organizacyjną. Autorzy artykułu analizują potencjalne szkody, jakie praktyki obronne mogą powodować u osób i organizacji, związane z satysfakcją z pracy, zaangażowaniem w pracę, „oburęcznością" (*ambidexterity*) organizacji i procesami uczenia się organizacji. Zaproponowany przez autorów model teoretyczny stanowi fundament

* **Yumei Yang** – PhD, Bournemouth University, Department of Leadership, Strategy and Organization.

** **Davide Secchi** – Associate Professor, COMAC Research Cluster, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark.

*** **Fabian Homberg** – Associate Professor, Department of HRM and Organizational Behavior, University of Southampton, UK.

Correspondence address: Bournemouth University, Fern Barrow, Poole, Dorset, BH12 5BB, United Kingdom; e-mails: yangy@bournemouth.ac.uk; secchi@sdu.dk; fhomberg@luiss.it.

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dla przyszłych badań empirycznych i poszerza na poziomie teoretycznym sieć nomologiczną praktyk obronnych w organizacjach.

Słowa kluczowe: praktyki obronne w organizacjach, poczucie własnej skuteczności, poczucie umiejscowienia kontroli, neurotyczność.

JEL: J24, J53, M31, Z12.

1. Introduction

Early conceptualizations of routines being inert and stable have recently been challenged by studies that portray routines as generative systems that can enact new routines endogenously (e.g., Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Sonenshein, 2016; Yi, Knudsen, & Becker, 2016). According to Feldman, Pentland, D'Adderio, & Lazaric's (2016) editorial in a Special Issue published in *Organization Science*, routine dynamics can connect inputs and outputs in organizations, but also act as sources of triggering change based on feedback, observation and communication. This overthrows the conventional concept of routines being inert, mindless and automatic (Becker, 2004; Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994; Gersick & Hackman, 1990; Nelson & Winter, 1982). The danger of over emphasizing the positive side of routines can possibly lead to a neglect of understanding the resistance to change in the routine.

Researchers who study routine dynamics focus on identifying endogenous triggers of change in routines. Communication is one trigger of routine change. For example, upon studying a start-up company operating in the pharmaceutical industry, Dittrich, Guérard, & Seidl (2016) concluded that collective reflection through a genuine talk enables organizations to find opportunities for routine change. In their study, Lebaron, Christianson, Garrett, & Ilan (2016) evidenced that an exchange of experiences and insights about treatment methods during routine meetings of physicians contributed to successfully handling issues. They failed to consider situations in which individuals in organizations are reluctant to provide information in an attempt to avoid embarrassment and threat, which results in maintaining existing routines. In their study, Aroles & Mclean (2016) argued that managers ignored frontline workers' valuable opinions and, instead, insisted that employees follow standard rules. Why did managers not listen to employees? Why were the issues not discussed in detail? One explanation lies in the existence of organizational defensive routines.

Organizational defensive routines (ODRs) are defined as "any actions and policies that organizations or segments use to avoid embarrassment and threat" (Argyris 1990, p. 25). A defensive routine can serve to impede change (Tranfield, Duberley, Smith, Musson, & Stokes, 2000). Employees often use covert behaviour – one of the basic aspects of ODR – in the name of care, diplomacy and appropriate conduct. Nevertheless, the unin-

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tended consequences of defensive behaviour erode organizational values, goals and productivity (Sales, Vogt, Singer, & Cooper, 2013). Argyris's (1986) seminal work on defensive routines revealed the negative impact of individuals' good intention to avoid embarrassment on the effectiveness of an organization. He concluded that "by adeptly avoiding conflict with co-workers, some executives eventually wreak organizational havoc" (Argyris, 1986, p. 74). ODRs are thought to be detrimental to organizational performance and a barrier to organizational learning (Argyris, 1990). They can damage organizations in the long run and bring disastrous consequences (e.g. Argyris, 1986; Holmer, 2013; Sales, Vogt, Singer, & Cooper, 2013).

Despite the potential damage arising from ODRs, a thorough understanding of their triggers and consequences is lacking in literature. This paper presents a theoretical framework: organizational routine theory is applied to analyse the characteristics of ODRs, to identify antecedents and consequences. The key research question is: "What are the triggers and consequences of organizational defensive routines?"

This paper sets out by identifying the *triggers* of organizational defensive routines for individuals, i.e. *general self-efficacy*, *locus of control* and *neuroticism*. Furthermore, organizational-level triggers at the organizational level are *organizational politics*, *red tape* and *centralized organizational structures*. Finally, the chapter conceptualizes the potential *impact* consequences of ODRs at the individual level as entailing job satisfaction and job engagement, as well as ambidexterity and learning at the organizational level.

With this paper, we make three contributions. First, we advance the existing research on organizational routines through linking ODRs' characteristics with current studies on organizational routines. This provides a novel perspective for understanding the concept of individuals as agents of routines (Feldman and Pentland 2003). Second, we extend the nomologic network of ODRs by theoretically deducting potential antecedents and consequences. Third, the theoretical framework can be adopted by other researchers as a platform for future empirical studies.

2. Organizational Routines

Theories on organizational routines can be divided into two aspects. The first is dominated by the traditional view of a routine as a source of organizational inertia. The rigidity of organizational routines can be easily understood by three famous analogies, namely, individual habit (e.g., Cohen, 2012; Gersick & Hackman, 1990), performance programs (e.g., Cyert & March, 1963; Levitt et al., 1999) and biological genes (e.g., Nelson & Winter, 1982). These three analogies portray routines as automatic, mindless and effortless (e.g. Gersick & Hackman 1990; Becker, 2004; Makowski, 2017). This understanding of routines often depicts them as singular units, ignoring the fact that different routines co-exist in organizations interde-

pendently (Spee, Jarzabkowski, & Smets, 2016). Also, the role of those who follow these routines is overlooked in the conventional view (Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

The second aspect of routines posits that routines are not only a source of stability, but also of change. Yi, Knudsen, & Becker (2016) suggest that inertia in routines could engender organizational adaptation. The dynamism of routines is also apparent in a study of a newspaper factory where standardized routines can either cause problems or generate change in everyday practices (Aroles & Mclean, 2016). This view, which is more current, provides a theoretical basis for understanding how organizations with seemingly inert routines can survive competition and adapt to a changing environment.

However, organizations consist of various interrelated routines that can be classified as *enabling* and *defensive* (Tranfield, Duberley, Smith, Musson, & Stokes, 2000). The process of modifying and updating routines as a positive correlate of change requires reducing the defensive ones. In fact, the high level of resistance generated by routine-level inertia can block or slow down the process of organizational adaptation (Yi et al., 2016).

Usually, ODRs coexist with other routines, even though – as evidenced by research -they may not be explicitly labelled as ODRs. For example, Gilbert (2005) suggests that leaders tend to increase standardization and reduce experimentation when they believe themselves to be under threat. Aroles and Mclean's (2016) interview study showed that individuals resort to suppressing their opinions in order to avoid getting into trouble. Bucher and Langley's (2016) study in a hospital showed that it took nurses four months to question the ambiguity of implementing new routines. Hence, ODRs are closely associated with organizational inertia.

2.1. Organizational Defensive Routines: Inertia

ODRs are repetitive and recurrent behaviours used by individuals to avoid possible embarrassment and threat (Argyris, 1990). Argyris clearly analysed the aspect of ODRs being characterized by inertia through the lens of a psycho-cognitive perspective. Among other factors, ODRs are composed of multiple individuals' habitual behaviour (Argyris, 1993). These habitual behaviours are governed by the same tacit rules: "1) Achieve your intended purpose, 2) maximize winning and minimize losing, 3) suppress negative feelings, 4) behave according to what you consider rational" (Argyris, 1993, p. 52). These governing rules guide individuals to apply ambiguous language to cover up their genuine opinions and avoid negative consequences. The receivers of ambiguous messages also avoid challenging the inferences, hoping to prevent the senders from embarrassment (Noonan, 2007). The strategies applied to avoid embarrassment and threat may include: (a) bypassing, that is, overlooking problems and skipping to other tasks; (b) easing in, for example, joining a process without asking challenging questions directly;

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(c) face-saving, where individuals master hiding strategies to mitigate threats or the risk of losing face; (d) mixed messages, when messages delivered by organizations are illogical, inconsistent and never subject to discussion; (e) fancy footwork, that is work that looks professional and well-executed but is, in fact, imprecise, tentative and incompetent; (f) protective support, given to shelter employees or managers from experiencing the 'real world'; and (g) self-censoring, every time strategies are used to suppress opinions which are potentially valuable for organizations, but are not preferred by certain other employees in the organization (Argyris, 1990; Noonan, 2007; Wilson, 2001). Considered together, these elements can be summarized as being the core of defensive routines (Wilson, 2001). Moreover, these strategies make 'the undiscussable' undiscussable and reinforce defensiveness on behalf of all the parties involved. It becomes an automated behaviour that can prove an obstacle to solving organizational issues efficiently and effectively (Makowski, 2016). Eventually, these routines become a conspicuous 'elephant in the room', as people are afraid to talk about them. Hence, changing defensive routines becomes a tricky issue many organizations face.

This situation creates barriers that prevent organizations from identifying the causes of embarrassment and making changes. From the perspective of social cognition, ODRs are the outcome of individual personal attributes and organizational context (Yang, Secchi, & Homberg, 2018). Personal preferences of individuals who wish to avoid embarrassment and conflict can lead them to use ambiguous language in communication. When other people receive information, they can sense the intention and respond consistently (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). According to social conventions that predominate in the majority of workplaces, abstaining from openly confronting other people's reasoning and concealing one's own weaknesses is considered acceptable behaviour (Argyris, 1990). Therefore, cognitive limits and social cognitive thinking make people consider it rational to shy away from potential risks (Simon, 1979; Secchi, 2011). This defensive behaviour is encouraged by the organizational context in which disagreement and dissent tend to be avoided.

2.2. Organizational Defensive Routines and Organizational Adaptation

If ODRs are self-reinforcing and as inert as previous research has suggested, how can many organizations survive change? In a study of organizational change, Yi et al. (2016) state that "[i]nertia in routines resists and slows down the implementation of planned changes to the routines, which generates divergence between choices (planning) and actions (implementation)" (p. 785). Hence, according to them, inertia could be a source of change. The presence of ODRs prevents organizations from radical learning, such as double-loop learning (Argyris, 1990), which requires individuals to reflect on their assumptions and beliefs. Learning requires individuals to identify and correct errors, which often involves with challenging the

established routines. Opportunities for new routines to emerge are created through frankly reflecting on current routines and talking about alternative routines with other organization members (e.g., Dittrich, Guérard, & Seidl, 2016; Feldman, 2000).

The existence of ODRs makes it challenging to have an open discussion about ideas among employees. Hence, only small changes leading to single-loop learning (instead of the more powerful double-loop learning) are implemented. Single-loop learning modifies behaviour, but it does not impact its underlying values and beliefs (Argyris 1990). Such small changes can keep organizations alive for a while, as they create a cosmetic solution to organizational issues and possibly contribute to short-term organizational learning (Yang, Secchi, & Homberg, 2018). Framed differently, ODRs can be defined by differences between what individuals think and what they actually do (Argyris 1990). If this mismatch lasts long enough, individuals could feel dissatisfied with the working environment, which would result in an impetus for radical change. Leaders' bounded rationality can induce employees to either conceal or reveal their genuine ideas (Yi et al., 2016).

3. Triggers of Organizational Defensive Routines

Routine theories indicate that organizational routines are composed of two recursive aspects usually referred to as the *ostensive* and *performative elements of routines* (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Ostensive aspects are exemplifying 'the routine in principle' (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 101). They provide rough guidance for individuals' actions, but ostensive aspects of routines only become apparent in performance (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). The performative aspect of routines is understood as 'routine in action' in "specific time and places, by specific people" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 101). Hence, routines can be influenced by organizations through structured rules and principles, and these rules become alive through actions taken by individuals. The so-called human capital and individuals' abilities can influence the interpretation of routines and interaction with other people (e.g., Felin, Foss, Heimeriks, & Madsen, 2012; Howard-Grenville, 2005). This is also true of ODRs.

Thus far, researchers have focused on identifying different defensive strategies employed by individuals in organizations, such as mixed messages, bypass, easing, face-saving, fancy footwork, protective support, self-censoring and forthrightness (e.g., Argyris, 1990; Wilson, 2001). To better understand the mechanism of these routines, we have classified them according to their impact on individual and organizational levels, and identified six elements that are likely to manifest together with and affect ODRs. *Self-efficacy* (Ashforth & Lee, 1990), *neuroticism* (Yang et al. 2018), and the *locus of control* (Judge et al. 1998) are three elements that, according to the literature, trigger defensive behaviour in individuals. They have been selected,

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because they are directly related to behaviour, as discussed below. On the organizational level, *red tape* (Bozeman & Feeney, 2011), *organizational politics* (Rosen, Harris, & Kacmar, 2009), and *centralization* (Damanpour, 1991) are considered, as they have been traditionally related to certain dysfunctional aspects of organizational life. These two levels are intertwined and we split them analytically in order to create a better framework for interpreting and diagnosing defensive routines.

There are other factors external to organizations that could also trigger organizational defensive routines. For example, an economic crisis provides the perfect ground for putting organizations in a 'fight mode', which may give rise to defensive routines. This and similar external factors have an impact on all organizations, and remain outside of their control. However, this does not necessarily mean that every organization reacts similarly. This is precisely where this paper comes in, as it focuses on factors with respect to which we deduced correlations between variables based on literature review, and which can be managed by organizations. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that the paper does not provide an exhaustive list of triggers and consequences of ODRs. It merely serves as a preliminary input for future studies of ODRs. In the following section we shall discuss the triggers of ODRs at the individual and organizational level.

3.1. Individual Level Triggers

The word 'trigger' is here used to define elements and factors that favour ODRs' development, allow them to sustain themselves and remain untouched. From a more canonical angle, we would have used the word 'antecedents'; however, we do not claim there is a strict causal link between the factors below and defensive routines. Given the core position that routines occupy in organizations, they are influenced by the majority of procedural, structural, and strategic aspects of organizational dynamics. For this reason, while we can claim that, according to literature, some of the following elements facilitate the emergence and existence of defensive routines, it would be a stretch to indicate strict causality. However, it should be clear that we are not providing an exhaustive list of triggers. Numerous other triggers and consequences of ODRs could be identified in future studies.

General self-efficacy (GSE). GSE is defined as "individuals' perception of their ability to perform across a variety of situations" (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998, p.170). GSE is trait-like and can be applied to capture individuals' tendency to consider themselves capable of performing successfully in various situations (Chen, Gully, Whiteman, & Kilcullen, 2000). Individuals "of low self-efficacy are easily convinced of the futility of effort when they come up against institutional impediments, whereas those of high GSE figure out ways to surmount them" (Bandura, 2012, p.14). Belief in one's capability to make a difference and affect the outcome can motivate people with high GSE to voice their genuine opinions.

In contrast, individuals with low GSE tend to feel anxious when dealing with difficult situations that involve embarrassment and threat. Studies of organizational silence suggest that individuals with low GSE often feel they have little to offer, and therefore they tend to hold back their thoughts (e.g., Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Self-censorship and bypassing strategies could be used to protect oneself from experiencing negative emotions. In their work on GSE, Ashforth and Lee (1990) also noted that newcomers with low self-efficacy tend to feel less confident when proposing innovative ideas. Hence, low levels of GSE could trigger some of the elements we referred to above to describe ODRs.

Neuroticism. Neurotic individuals tend to feel depressed, fearful and anxious in new situations (Judge et al., 1998). Highly neurotic individuals may find it challenging to cope with difficult situations, such as resolving conflicts and handling negative feedback. Studies show that neuroticism, in most cases, is negatively correlated with work performance (Judge et al., 1998) and participation in self-managed work groups (Thoms, Moore, & Scott, 1996). Highly neurotic people tend to feel uncomfortable when interacting with other people, and this restricts their ability to share knowledge (Borges, 2013). Researchers also propose that neuroticism could be positively correlated with employee silence due to their tendency to feel insecure and embarrassed (Brinsfield, 2013). A recent study conducted on a sample of $N = 351$ British employees by Yang et al. (2018) showed that high levels of neuroticism are positively correlated with ODRs.

Locus of control. Locus of control is an individual motivational trait and a source of psychological empowerment (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009). Individuals with an external locus of control are likely to feel less empowered to influence their working environment than individuals with an internal locus of control (Judge et al., 1998). People with a strong external locus of control may feel it meaningless to reveal their opinions and question the inference of decision making in organizations. They have a pessimistic view of their ability to control the environment and tend to bypass problems by following the majority. As a result, they contribute to triggering ODRs.

3.2. Organizational Level Triggers

As mentioned above, some of the elements reviewed below may work under the assumption that certain key individuals are highly neurotic, less confident in their ability to perform organizational work, and/or assume an external locus of control. These psychological mechanisms cannot be excluded from the picture when reviewing organizational-level phenomena, such as *red tape, organizational politics* and *centralization*. However, these three elements can be (and are) typically framed at the organizational level, because they exist independently of particular employees or managers that enforce them here-and-now. As such, and as a result of the combined work

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of multiple actors, constraints, structural elements, and cultural aspects, the following are both affected by and affect individual thinking and behaviour.

Red tape. Red tape is conceptualized as "burdensome administrative rules and procedures that have negative effects on organizations' effectiveness" (Bozeman & Feeney, 2011, p. 84). Red tape is often based on individuals' subjective perception and it is an outcome of individuals' psychological interpretation of organizational social dynamics (Davis & Pink-Harper, 2016). If individuals find organizations' rules too cumbersome rules, they may abandon the idea to introduce changes and abstain from any initiatives to avoid a great amount of effort and time that the process would require. Argyris (1990) posits that managers in organizations create many policies to protect themselves and avoid being blamed. Hence, the existence of red tape could be interpreted a sign of ODRs.

Organizational politics. Organizational politics are commonly perceived as "behaviour that is strategically designed to maximize short-term or long-term self-interest" (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997, p. 161). This type of behaviour is considered dysfunctional (Cropanzano et al., 1997). People working in an environment entrenched with politics often feel uncomfortable and emotionally drained, resulting in increased organizational withdrawal, e.g. high turnover (Rosen, Harris, & Kacmar, 2009). Additionally, political actors could hold important information for their own personal interest. In this working environment, people tend to protect their own personal interest instead of thinking in terms of the organization's interest. In order to protect their own interest, individuals could resort to defensive behaviour: avoiding conflict, shying away from responsibility and self-censorship. Hence, we can infer that organizational politics can induce ODRs.

Centralized organizational structure. Organizational structure defines the way organizations distribute power, resources, and responsibilities. It also indicates roles that individuals are expected to play in it (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). In centralized organisations, decision-making power is controlled by a small group of individuals, usually top managers (Damanpour, 1991). In organizations with a highly centralized structure, members of a small elite group are expected to act as decision makers, and they are positioned at the top of the hierarchical pyramid. This way of structuring organizations creates barriers for information flow and innovation (Damanpour, 1991). A centralized structure tends to fail to involve employees in decision making processes and it creates a power distance between managers and employees. This distance could discourage employees from coming up with new ideas challenging the *status quo*, as it is risky to question managers' reasoning when inconsistent and irrational decisions are made. Employees may fear that they would to put their job in jeopardy if they speak out. Managers also become less approachable and willing to discuss sensitive issues that could contribute to the creation of new routines. As a result, centralization may contribute to the growth and spread of ODRs.

4. Consequences of ODRs

The existing literature on ODRs mainly focuses on evaluating the negative consequences of ODRs for organizational learning through case studies (Argyris, 1990, 2001). Though the latest empirical study conducted by Yang et al. (2018) sheds some light on the possible positive consequences of ODRs for organizational learning, these results contrast with the well-established belief that ODRs have negative effects. This study suggests that the view on defensive routines may not be as clear-cut as initially thought, but a more nuanced perspective is needed. This may provide a more balanced view of organizational dynamics where some level of dysfunction (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) or disorder (Herath, Secchi, & Homberg, 2016; Herath, Costello, & Homberg, 2017) is actually necessary for successful management. In this respect, additional research is required to collect more conclusive evidence. In fact, due to the lack of systematic ODRs studies, theoretical reasoning about the consequences? of ODRs is rather speculative. Future empirical studies would benefit from testing relations between ODRs and other variables, such as job satisfaction, affective commitment, and turnover. In the following section, we shall discuss the potential consequences of ODRs on individuals in organizations and on the organization as a whole.

4.1. Consequences of ODRs for Individuals

Job satisfaction and *engagement*. ODRs could have an impact on many different aspects of employees' attitude towards their jobs. For example, one may point, among many others, to job satisfaction, employee engagement, work motivation and organizational commitment. These may, in turn, affect other factors, such as one's performance and/or intention to resign. However, we selected job satisfaction and engagement for four reasons. First, ODRs generate negative 'energy' that would affect employees' attitude toward their job through two selected outcome variables. This is because ODRs has a passive impact on individuals, especially through various strategies, such as suppressing genuine feedback, avoiding conflict and sending ambiguous messages (Holmer, 2013; Sales, Vogt, Singer, & Cooper, 2013; Yang, Secchi, & Homberg, 2018). Employees resort to ODRs to deal with embarrassment and threat when they are not true to their feelings (Argyris 1990). Negative emotions often reduce the positive energy that stems from employees' willingness to engage with their job (Rayton &Yalabik, 2014). Second, job satisfaction and engagement are often studied together (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014; Yalabik, Popaitoon, Chowne, & Rayton, 2013). The third reason is that these two selected consequences have been extensively studied because of their importance and relevance for performance, employee well-being, turnover and, ultimately, long-term business success (e.g. Kim et al., 2017; Holland, Cooper,

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& Sheehan, 2017 and Ruck, Welch, Menara, 2016). Finally, these two consequences? of ODRs directly relate to the type of work employees perform. Given their core position in organization and management research, it is particularly interesting to explore whether and how defensive routines affect them.

Routines, and defensive routines in particular, have been linked to learning and to cognitive aspects of individual and organizational life. There are apparent reasons for valuing this type of contribution and, at the same time, a line of research that is closer to traditional management constructs (such as satisfaction and engagement) has the potential of providing more value to the traditional focus of ODRs. We shall discuss why in detail below.

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction focuses on employees' attitude toward their job. Aspects of job satisfaction have been extensively explored by different disciplines. Individuals in a workplace usually interact with other people, such as colleagues and managers and, depending on their role, also with customers, suppliers, government officials, and/or other stakeholders. Hence, their perception of the work environment will have an influence on their behaviour and attitude toward their job. Meneghel, Borgogni, Miraglia, Salanova, and Martínez (2016), for example, found that a positive social context can positively affect individuals' job satisfaction. ODRs are collective behaviours triggered by the individual's assumption regarding situations in which they are more likely to feel embarrassed or threatened (Argyris 1990). In order to avoid embarrassment, individuals often use an ambiguous or defensive language to conceal their genuine feelings (Noonan, 2011). In the short term, as everyone collectively applies the same routine to cope with sensitive issues, this can form a collective perception of the social context – organizations sacrifice effective decision making for playing safe and avoiding conflict. Collective perceptions of the social context positively affect job satisfaction (Meneghel et al., 2016). We can therefore deduce that ODRs may create a harmonious working environment and temporarily increase job satisfaction.

However, in the long run, underlying issues resulting in organizational problems are swept under the carpet and become an obstacle that hinders job performance. In the example described by Argyris (1990, p. 5), employees know how to further reduce costs, but decide not to share their insights with managers in order to avoid conflict with managers. Gradually, such behaviour can erode one's trust in the organization, as voicing one's opinions is considered risky. Abstaining from voicing one's opinion is negatively correlated with job satisfaction (Knoll & van Dick, 2013). Therefore, the relation between ODRs and job satisfaction may be inversely U-shaped.

Employee engagement. Engaged employees are able to "employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role

performances" (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Internal communication usually plays a crucial role in employee engagement. Specifically, senior managers' responsiveness to employees' opinions can either encourage or discourage employee engagement (Ruck, Welch, & Menara, 2016). Employees working in organizations with ODRs tend to experience defensive communication, which is applied to hide the inference of the senders of the message (Argyris 1990). Crafting defensive communication is often self-referenced: "that is the way it is", "it has been always like this," and " trust me, I know it." Challenging this kind of communication could create an impression of being distrustful and incompetent. Questioning the inference of ambiguous communication could put senders and recipients of such messages in an embarrassing situation or under threat. Consequently, people involved with ODRs have to suppress their genuine feelings about issues in the workplace. This can demotivate employees from engaging in their tasks and performing to their full potential.

According to social cognition theories, people learn what is an appropriate way of responding to issues by observing other people (Bandura, 2012; Kunda, 1999). Defensive routines make individuals physically move from identifying root causes of problems. They learn to self-protect themselves emotionally – they do it for their own interest and to the detriment of organization's goals. Hence, ODRs can reduce engagement.

Another consideration that supports the above arguments relates to the characteristics of the employee or the manager under analysis. A highly neurotic employee with low self-efficacy levels and an external locus of control may also show low engagement and low job satisfaction (e.g., Judge & Bono, 2001; Kim, Shin, & Swanger, 2009). The role of ODRs may be considered, in this case, a vehicle that brings these individual characteristics to the surface. In other words, it is likely that ODRs work as mediators for all three individual level factors discussed. We maintain that there may be a direct effect of these three on job engagement and satisfaction, but ODRs is one of the vehicles through which these characteristics materialize into more organization-focused outcome variables.

4.2. Influence of ODRs on Organizations

There are various aspects of organizational life that may be affected by routines in general and by ODRs in particular, such as organizational performance, innovation and competitiveness. However, due to space limitation and focus, we concentrate on these two variables that, according to literature, are among most relevant for ODRs. Learning is very much in line with the studies and is an obvious choice because of the way defensive mechanisms hinder cognitive processes (see below). In contrast, the link between ODRs and ambidexterity is our original proposal. Ambidexterity has been increasingly attracting the attention of management theory researchers, as it has proven to be key to dynamism, adaptability, and sound

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performance in a turbulent environment (Meglio, King, & Risberg, 2015). In this respect, mechanisms that block innovation and adaptability, such as defensive routines, may be particularly harmful to this important element of successful organizations. We shall explain this connection below.

Organizational ambidexterity. Ambidexterity is key to organizational success and job performance (Gibson, Birkinshaw, Gibson, & Birkinshaw, 2004). Ambidextrous organizations have the ability to promote organizational growth by simultaneously exploiting existing competencies and using innovations to meet challenges related to current and future market requirements (Patel, Messersmith, & Lepar, 2013). In order to be ambidextrous, organizations need to develop a context that embraces open, candid, and rapid feedback. This encourages employees to have more ambiguous objectives, it maintains stable managerial support, and establishes trust (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). However, such conditions stand in stark contrast to ODRs. The nature of ODRs is to use mixed messages to protect themselves from potential negative consequences; it requires, therefore, a mode of communication that people adopt, and that is mainly opaque and inconsistent (Argyris, 1990). Without genuine feedback and clear guidance, employees are unlikely to have a focused vision and/or ambitious objectives for their job. This may jeopardize the chances of the organization to develop ambidexterity. On the one hand, mixed messages and covert communication contribute to setting ambiguous objectives, which is, at least partially, in line with ambidexterity. On the other hand, however, ambiguity created via ODRs does not contribute to transparency or openness, and it does not work as a trust enabler. For this reason, ambiguity through ODRs is not perceived as opening further opportunities, but rather as a blocking mechanism.

Additionally, employees working in organizations with ODRs tend to assume some issues are simply not open to debate. This impedes employees from self-reflection on their own contribution to generating ODRs and prevents organizations from learning about the causes of problems. For example, Sales, Vogt, Singer and Cooper's (2013) research on ODRs in a hospital evidenced that healthcare practitioners regard errors in their work practice as inacceptable, and therefore they tend to conceal any errors committed and avoid responsibility. Consequently, the hospital lost its chances to explore new methods of improving patients' safety. Furthermore, ODRs are known to prevent individuals from engaging in a deep reflection and from analysing organizational issues. Instead, they only make incremental and superficial changes through exploiting current resources. The lack of collective and reflective discussion could impede the emergence of new routines (Dittrich et al., 2016) and prevent organizations from developing their adaptability in the face of future challenges. The examination of these aspects allows us to conclude that ODRs could be negatively related to organizational ambidexterity. Specifically, ODRs could induce individuals

to play safe through aligning their performance with established formal processes rather than taking risks and exploring new practices.

Organizational learning. As mentioned above, the negative impact of ODRs on organizational learning is not new and it has been extensively investigated (e.g., Argyris, 2001). Surprisingly, this well-established understanding of ODRs and organizational learning has been challenged by recent studies (Yang et al., 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to further clarify this relation and provide a solid ground for future research intended to replicate the study empirically.

Argyris (1990) explicitly defined organizational learning as the process of identifying and correcting errors. Building on this definition, he made a clearly distinction between single-loop and double-loop organizational learning. In the major part of his work Argyris (1990, 1993, 2002) endeavoured to explain the relation between ODRs and double-loop learning. This is reflected in the assertion that people's tendency to avoid embarrassment and threat only results in implementing no more than cosmetic changes that are to solve organizational issues and, consequently, in single-loop learning. Hence, the claim at 'ODRs are anti-learning' needs to be narrowed down to double-loop learning. Continuously changing markets require double-loop learning as, given fierce competition on the market, radical changes are necessary for organizations to survive and prosper (Lipshitz, 2000). However, it is of vital importance to make sure that available resources and skills create financial sustainability and reduce costs. Based on this reasoning, the relation between ODRs and organizational learning is inversely U-shaped. Empirical studies testing this relation need to clearly measure both types of organizational learning to distinguish between the effects of variables.

Figure 1 summarizes the system of triggers and consequences as explained above. On the left-hand side of the diagram, individual and organizational triggers are distinguished. Some of these are intertwined and linked with a double-arrowed line to indicate that, for example, *organizational politics* and *red tape* may be enforced in particular by *neurotic* individuals with low *general self-efficacy* and external *locus of control*. At the same time, an environment characterized by politics and red tape may work as a disabler of self-efficacy and exploit more externally-driven individuals. These constructs affect ODRs and have been considered as triggers in our reasoning discussed above. On the right-hand side of the diagram, consequences are represented. ODRs have a direct impact on them but, at the same time, there are direct links between certain triggers and consequences. This is due to the fact that, for example, *red tape* and a *centralized formal structure* may hinder *ambidexterity* and make more dynamic aspects of *learning* difficult. At the same time, as noted above, individual characteristics indicated in this theoretical framework may affect *satisfaction* and *engagement* directly as well as via defensive routines.

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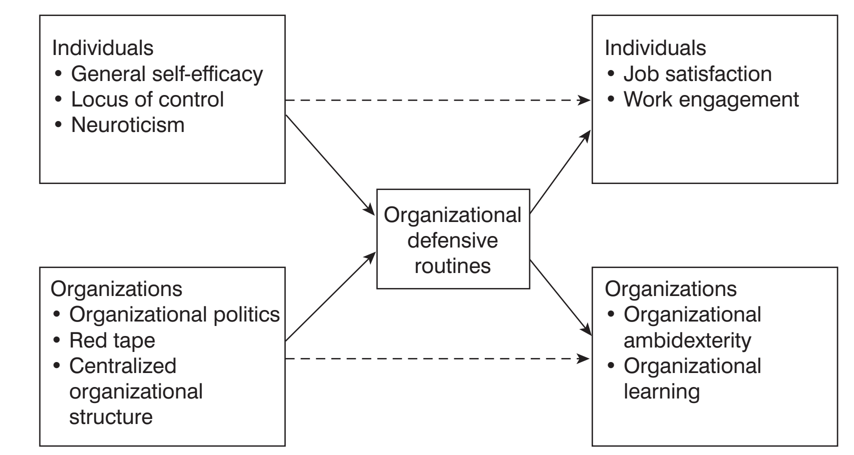

Note: The solid lines signify direct relations that are the main focus of this chapter. Dotted lines indicate a possible relation that usually appears in the literature. The double-arrowed line indicates a possible multi-level influence.

Fig. 1. Theoretical framework

One aspect of Figure 1 that remains ambiguous is the fact that individual and organizational triggers ODRs and these, in turn, affect the consequences. However, when looking at Figure 1, it remains unclear whether individual triggers may affect organizational consequences through ODRs. We have not argued one way or another, but we have noted the existence of broad interconnections between individual and organizational elements as far as defensive routines (and routines in general) are concerned. This leads to the claim that individual triggers may affect organizational consequences only indirectly, that is via ODRs. The other cross-path – i.e. from organizational triggers to individual consequences – is also possible, although relevant studies are more limited in this respect.

5. Conclusions

The pervasiveness of ODRs in organizations has been generally acknowledged by academics and practitioners. The emerging research on routine dynamics strives to decode the evolution of new routines. Considering the omnipresence of ODRs and their position within the wider context of the theory of routines, it is important for researchers to systematically explore ODRs and expand their knowledge and understanding. It is also necessary to build on the literature of routine dynamics and understand why certain new routines take a long time to become established. Seen through the lens of ODRs, defensive routines seem interdependent with multiple other routines in an organization and, consequently, one routine can become an

obstacle to the change, implementation, and development of other routines. The conceptual model presented in this chapter is to be considered a stepping stone for future empirical studies.

The model focuses on the collective defensive behaviour in organizations characterized as mostly inert and resistant to change. These routines operate in many different forms, such as fancy footwork, protective support, self-censoring and mixed messages (Argyris, 1990; Wilson, 2001), but they share the same pattern of bypassing and covering up embarrassment and threats. In this chapter we have analysed individual and organizational factors that act as triggers of ODRs (see Figure 1). In addition, we have pointed to some of the potential consequences of defensive routines. The discussion of ODRs' influence on individuals and organizations shows that, to a certain extent, ODRs might generate short-term gains, but may prove harmful to individuals' attitude toward their job and organizations' adaptability.

Arguments presented in this chapter provide some guidance for future studies. First, in order to systematically understand the mechanisms of ODRs, researchers need to empirically test and retest the newly developed scale developed by Yang, Secchi and Homberg (2017). It may also contribute to advancing our understanding of ODRs through testing relations presented in this paper.

Future studies may also widen nomological networks of ODRs. The chapter provides a brief review of triggers and consequences. ODRs could also be triggered by certain other variables, such as organizational culture, motivation systems and technologies. ODRs may also impact organizational performance, competitiveness or staff retention at the organizational level. More theoretical and empirical research is needed in order to attest the actual effect of ODRs on other organizational factors.

Finally, research should integrate ODRs with the theory of organizational routines, especially with the latest perspective of routine being dynamic. For example, one may want to ask what roles ODRs play in the emergence of new routines, or what cognitive perspective may be embraced to better understand the hidden nature of defensive routines.

Given the volatility of the economic environment Western companies are facing and the extent of changes many organizations need implement in order to respond to unexpected international developments, it is important for researchers to understand ODRs systematically and provide managers with practical suggestions on methods of eliminating ODRs at early stages of their development.

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