

ROUTINE REPLICATION AND EMBODYING PROCESS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF THE BODY

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ABSTRACT

We examine how embodiment shapes routine replication through an ethnographic study of the Royal Air Force's replication of a demanding loaded march ('tabbing') from Ground Combat Training into Initial Officer Training. Adopting a novel enactive ethnography over 30 months, we reveal how bodily differences among trainees prompted adaptations while maintaining routine recognisability. Three bodily mechanisms emerged—playing with rhythm, coping with injuries, and dealing with emotions—highlighting the central role of embodiment. Our research contributes to Routine Dynamics by advancing embodied understandings of replication and responding to methodological calls for innovative ethnographic approaches to studying routines.

INTRODUCTION

Organisations use routines to accomplish tasks and retain knowledge, making them central to successful strategizing (Cohen et al., 1996; Feldman & Pentland, 2022; Nelson & Winter, 1982). Replicating effective routines across contexts can thus provide a significant competitive advantage (D'Adderio, 2014; Davies et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2015). Defined as creating a new routine substantially similar to an original (Szulanski & Jensen, 2004), routine replication presents a dilemma: balancing precise replication with necessary adaptations to new environments (Winter & Szulanski, 2001). Although existing literature addresses barriers and the dynamics of adapting routines (Ansari et al., 2014; Danner-Schröder & Geiger, 2016), it largely neglects the role of embodiment—the physical and emotional dimensions influencing routine enactment (Blanche & Cohendet, 2019; De Rond et al., 2019; Michel, 2011, 2023). Consequently, routine participants are often conceptualized as disembodied actors (Wright, 2019), overlooking how specific bodily traits, rhythms, injuries, and emotions impact replication. Hence, in this study, we ask: *how do the specificities of routine participants' bodies impact the enactment of the replicated routine in the new context?*

To explore this research question, we draw on an ethnographic study of an arduous routine in the Royal Air Force (RAF) called Tactical Advance to Battle (TAB). By studying the replication of TAB from Ground Combat Training (GCT) into Initial Officer Training (IOT), we observed significant bodily differences among participants, prompting flexible yet recognisable adaptations of the routine through various bodily mechanisms. Our enactive ethnography—actively participating alongside trainees—provided unique insights, responding to calls for innovative empirical methods (Blanche & Feldman, 2021; Feldman et al., 2021). We thus contribute to routine replication literature by highlighting the embodied mechanisms shaping routine enactment and adaptation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Routines are defined as “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 96). As the building blocks of organisational capabilities and repositories of knowledge (Cohen et al., 1996), routines are crucial for organisational strategy as they constitute the central mode of production in organisations (Feldman & Pentland, 2022), potentially creating competitive advantages (Nelson & Winter, 1982). Organisations frequently identify successful routines and leverage them strategically through replication (Szulanski & Jensen, 2004). This process involves transferring routines across contexts while maintaining recognisability despite inevitable contextual differences (Baden-Fuller & Winter, 2005; Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

The literature on routine replication highlights context as a pivotal factor. Szulanski and Jensen (2004) emphasize the influence of cultural contexts in multinational firms, noting how adaptation can alter the fidelity of replicated routines. Bertels et al. (2016) similarly identify the necessity for 'cultural work' to integrate routines within organisations, emphasizing that participants engage actively to bridge performance gaps rather than discarding poorly matched routines outright. Howard-Grenville (2005) further illustrates that routines embedded deeply within organisational structures necessitate significant individual agency to enact meaningful changes. Collectively, these insights underscore the complexity of maintaining balance between precise replication and necessary adaptation, known as the replication dilemma (D’Adderio, 2014; Winter & Szulanski, 2001).

This replication dilemma is compounded in complex organisational contexts with competing goals. D’Adderio (2014), for instance, observed simultaneous demands for innovation and exact replication in her study of complex server product transfers across geographical boundaries. Her findings challenged traditional sequential assumptions of exploration followed by exploitation (March, 1991; Winter & Szulanski, 2001), highlighting continuous and concurrent tensions. Such studies reinforce the importance of organisational context in shaping replication success, with factors such as organisational identity (Christianson et al., 2009), culture (Bertels et al., 2016), occupational norms

(Bruns, 2009), and macro-cultural values (Essén, 2008) all playing influential roles. Despite these insights, Blanche and Feldman (2021) identify the human body as an overlooked yet critical contextual element in replication processes, meriting further exploration.

Historically, the significance of the body in organisational studies has been acknowledged yet under-theorized (Taylor, 1911; Blanche & Feldman, 2021). Recent scholarship in routine dynamics (RD) increasingly foregrounds embodiment, positing routines as inseparable from bodily practices of those performing them (Blanche & Cohendet, 2019; Wright, 2019). Michel's (2011; 2023) longitudinal study of investment bankers vividly demonstrates how neglecting bodily needs leads to performance deterioration, while renewed bodily awareness enhances creativity, judgment, and ethical behaviour. Bouty and Godé's (2022) study of a French military air display squadron highlights how organisational coordination routines and participants' bodies are interwoven through processes like training and sensitizing, elaborating on how embodiment shapes organisational coordination and sensemaking processes. Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) and De Rond et al. (2019) similarly advocate greater focus on lived bodily experiences, including sensations and emotions, as integral to organisational sensemaking.

Despite these advances, the direct exploration of embodiment within routine replication remains sparse. Blanche and Cohendet's (2019) study of ballet routine transfers notably underscores how bodily differences necessitated routine adaptation, prioritizing choreographic intent over exact replication. Still, the impact of specific bodily traits—such as rhythm, injuries, and emotional responses—in the context of routine replication is largely unexplored. Addressing this gap, our study responds explicitly to calls for innovative empirical investigations into embodied sensemaking and coordination mechanisms (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; De Rond et al., 2019; Gartner, 2013; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), recognizing bodies not merely as tools but as agentic actors shaping organisational practices (Harding et al., 2022).

CASE DESCRIPTION AND METHODS

In this qualitative research, we adopted an exploratory, phenomenon-driven, enactive ethnographic case study approach (Van de Ven & Sminia, 2012; Wacquant, 2015). Following scholars who employed similar insider perspectives (De Rond et al., 2019; Suarez & Montes, 2019), we investigated routine replication within the Royal Air Force (RAF). Our primary methods included participant observation with data collection through enactment, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis (Emerson et al., 1995; Patton, 2005; Van Maanen, 1979). Data was collected from August 2018 to January 2021.

We selected the RAF because it provides a unique context with deeply institutionalised routines. Military organisations are particularly suited to routine

replication studies, given their inherent reliance on replicating peacetime and wartime routines (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). The RAF's emphasis on rigorous procedural compliance makes deviations or adaptations during replication especially noteworthy. Moreover, military settings prominently involve physical routines such as marching, offering ideal conditions for observing embodied actions during routine enactment.

Our study centred specifically on the Tactical Advance to Battle (TAB), or tabbing routine, a fundamental military skill involving loaded marches. We examined its replication from Ground Combat Training (GCT), where tabbing is rigorous and central, into Initial Officer Training (IOT), a more generalised context catering to cadets from various professional backgrounds, including engineers, pilots, administrative officers, medical officers, and intelligence officers, most of whom will engage minimally in physical activities after completing their officer training. Conversely, GCT students, responsible for force protection in the RAF akin to infantry roles, regularly engage in intensive physical activities such as patrols, reconnaissance, and securing hostile areas. Therefore, they undergo frequent and demanding tabbing exercises over challenging terrain with heavier loads. In contrast, IOT cadets perform modified versions of the routine, with reduced weights, shorter distances, and slower paces to accommodate their diverse and less physically demanding future roles.

The second author, acting simultaneously as researcher and RAF cadet, directly participated in both training phases, enhancing insights through embodied experience. Participant observation yielded extensive diary notes, complemented by 16 semi-structured interviews, informal discussions, and document analysis totalling approximately 900 pages. Data analysis followed an iterative, interpretive approach using constant comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Gioia et al., 2012). Our coding identified three central dimensions—'playing with rhythm,' 'coping with injuries,' and 'dealing with emotions'—revealing underlying mechanisms shaping routine enactment and replication in the RAF context.

FINDINGS

Herein, we explain our observation of how bodily differences influenced the replication of the tabbing routine from GCT into IOT within the RAF. Although enacted more flexibly in IOT, tabbing remained recognisable as the same routine observed in GCT. We identified three embodiment mechanisms, each comprising several processes explaining routine differences and similarities.

Playing with Rhythm (assessing, adjusting, intervening, withdrawing). The second author's embodied experience revealed the critical role of rhythm in tabbing, which alternates between walking (march) and jogging (double). In IOT, instructors initially assessed cadet fitness levels through tests and observation, adapting routines flexibly according to individual and collective physical abilities. For instance, instructors frequently adjusted the tabbing pace, accommodating shorter strides and fatigue, thus maintaining group cohesion. On one occasion, instructors reduced the jogging pace upon

noticing cadets lagging behind, allowing stragglers to catch up (obs 1/Oct/18). Such adjustments were less frequent towards the end of training, as cadets better anticipated rhythm changes. However, in GCT, fixed parameters regarding pace and distances were strictly followed, leaving minimal flexibility for such adjustments. Intervening was a process observed in both settings, involving participants actively assisting others to maintain rhythm and avoid hazards, such as alerting peers of obstacles. Yet, GCT displayed greater discipline in maintaining such interventions, even under fatigue or challenging conditions, reflecting the higher operational stakes of their context. Withdrawing—removing participants unable to maintain the routine—occurred in both contexts but differed significantly. In IOT, the safety vehicle allowed greater flexibility (approximately 75–100 meters behind), whereas in GCT, its proximity (20–30 meters) made recovering more difficult. Despite this, cadets in IOT withdrew more frequently, while GCT students often persevered despite exhaustion.

Coping with Injuries (flagging, triaging, intervening, withdrawing). Injuries presented consistent challenges during tabbing, influencing routine enactment. IOT cadets frequently employed 'flagging', proactively informing instructors of discomfort or minor injuries (e.g., blisters). This feedback allowed instructors to anticipate and flexibly manage potential issues by modifying pace or duration. Additionally, 'triaging' allowed instructors to evaluate injury severity mid-session, further adapting routines accordingly (e.g., checking cadets' feet for blisters during water breaks). Conversely, flagging and triaging were absent in GCT due to higher expected physical robustness and less tolerance for flexibility. In both settings, however, 'intervening' occurred, wherein instructors or peers provided immediate assistance, such as adjusting equipment to prevent injuries. 'Withdrawing' due to injury was more common in IOT, reflecting varying physical robustness and greater flexibility in managing injuries compared to GCT, where withdrawals were infrequent and often reluctantly executed due to higher expectations of resilience.

Dealing with Emotions (complaining, motivating, intervening, withdrawing). The physical demands of tabbing significantly affected emotional states, prompting distinct coping processes. 'Complaining' was prevalent among IOT cadets, who expressed frustration regarding perceived irrelevance of tabbing to future roles. Instructors tolerated these expressions, viewing them as necessary emotional outlets helping cadets manage physical and emotional strain. Conversely, in GCT, complaining was explicitly discouraged, reflecting stricter discipline expectations. IOT instructors frequently employed 'motivating' to sustain morale, openly encouraging cadets, particularly during physically demanding moments. This motivational support was notably absent in GCT, where cadets were expected to self-motivate and maintain emotional control independently. 'Intervening' occurred in both contexts, involving instructors and participants actively managing others' emotional states. Examples include instructors curbing excessive complaining in IOT or peers proactively addressing morale dips in

GCT. Finally, 'withdrawing' due to emotional overwhelm was primarily observed in IOT, illustrating flexibility and emotional sensitivity absent in the more rigid GCT context.

In sum, we observed that bodily differences significantly shaped the replication and enactment of tabbing between GCT and IOT. Processes allowing flexibility (assessing, adjusting, flagging, triaging, complaining, and motivating) were prevalent in IOT, accommodating diverse bodily capabilities. Meanwhile, processes ensuring recognisability and standardisation (intervening, withdrawing) occurred consistently in both contexts, maintaining the integrity of the tabbing routine.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our study highlights the critical role of embodiment in routine replication, contributing to existing literature by demonstrating how bodily specificities shape routine enactment in new contexts (Blanche & Cohendet, 2019; De Rond et al., 2019; Michel, 2023). By examining the RAF's replication of the tabbing routine from GCT into IOT, we respond to calls for empirical insights into how individual differences influence routine adaptation (Blanche & Feldman, 2021; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012).

We found that bodily differences significantly influenced how the RAF addressed the replication dilemma—the tension between precisely copying routines and adapting them to new contexts (D'Adderio, 2014; Szulanski & Jensen, 2004). Cadets in IOT, recruited mainly for technical roles and unaccustomed to intense physical routines, experienced greater physical and emotional strain compared to GCT participants, who were more robust and better prepared physically. Consequently, the RAF adapted the routine more flexibly in IOT, employing mechanisms such as adjusting rhythm, proactive injury management, and emotional support, yet maintaining recognisability through standardisation processes like intervening and withdrawing.

These findings extend existing understandings of embodied coordination and sensemaking (Bouty & Godé, 2022; Harding et al., 2022). They illustrate that bodily specificities—such as fitness levels, physical robustness, emotional resilience, and individual perceptions of routine relevance—profoundly impact how routines are enacted and replicated. For instance, IOT cadets frequently relied on emotional coping strategies like complaining and mutual encouragement to handle routine-associated stress, practices which were absent or actively discouraged in the more disciplined GCT context. Moreover, injury management practices, such as early flagging and instructor-led triaging, underscored the importance of bodily feedback in adapting routines, allowing greater flexibility within IOT compared to the rigid injury protocols in GCT. Thus, our research emphasises the necessity of balancing routine flexibility with recognisable standards, reflecting nuanced bodily needs and context-specific challenges.

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