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Introduction: Special Topic Forum on Time

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INTRODUCTION

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The goal of this issue is to advance our theoretical understanding of time in organizations—with a focus on spanning individual, group, organizational, and interorganizational units of analysis. We wish to explore the meanings of time and conceptual frameworks addressing temporal issues in organizations. In doing so, we identify both areas of learning and intellectual gaps. In essence, we seek to create a temporal lens for organization and management studies.

The rationales for exploring temporal issues are found throughout this issue. Time, as a subject of inquiry, is pervasive and generalizable. It is a central issue in all disciplines of inquiry, from planetary physics to cell biology. In all art forms such as dance or music, time forms the underlying structure. Our personal lives are full of time questions: when should I make this appointment, when should I have a child, why do my activities seem to accelerate and time become shorter, when should I retire, when is my time to die, and so forth? In our domain of organizational research, the vocabulary of flex-time, time to market, customer responsiveness, scheduling, part time, career planning, and organizational evolution represents a small list of time words for organizational life.

Given the different manifestations of time in organizational life, there is surprisingly little research on time in this setting. If you do a content analysis of the references in this issue, you will see relatively small numbers of empirical papers” is based on a comparison with other special issues in AMR on such topics as trust (July 1998) and change (October 2000).

This special issue focuses attention on both the language of time and framing how to think about and integrate time in our research. Hopefully, readers will be prompted to use a temporal lens to sharpen their own research.

This introduction provides a map for the reader. The nature of the review process generated a diversity of papers. The special issue editors reviewed for quality and intellectual contributions, not in terms of any predetermined framework. We did not know what the collection of articles would be until we began to review them. The issue, thus, includes both metaperspectives and a variety of temporal topics at different levels of analysis.

The first two articles present metaperspectives, which provide a broad discussion of general theoretical and empirical concerns. The first, "Taking Time to Integrate Temporal Research," contributes a theoretical organization of temporal research. Ancona, Okhuysen, and Perlow divide time research into three categories: (1) our conceptions of time (e.g., clock time, cyclical time), (2) relating activities to time (e.g., single activity mapping), and (3) the role of organizational actors relative to time. The authors then illustrate how the framework can be used to synthesize the literature and generate new research.

The second paper, "Building Better Theory: Time and the Specification of When Things Happen," concentrates on empirical issues. The au-
thors focus on incorporating temporal issues in research rather than on explaining temporal variables, such as pacing or meeting deadlines. Mitchell and James use a temporal perspective to critique current organization literature that attempts to explain the relationship between X and Y. Their basic thesis is that time lags between X and Y and the duration of X and Y are critical theoretical issues. However, these issues are rarely specified or developed in most research. Approaches to thinking about lags and durations are developed.

The next set of articles examines specific temporal topics. We arrange them in terms of level of analysis. In “When the Muse Takes It All: A Model for the Experience of Timelessness in Organizations,” Mainemelis explores timelessness as a complex individual state of consciousness. The author explores the meaning of timelessness, as well as its antecedents and consequences for organizational functioning.

In “When Plans Change: Examining How People Evaluate Timing Changes in Work Organizations,” Blount and Janicik examine how people value time with reference to their social context. The authors suggest that the stimulus for valuing time is a change in schedules that represents a deviation from a socially shared temporal status quo. Blount and Janicik explore the processes by which people evaluate delays and hastenings (outcomes that come earlier than expected). The role of individual differences, context, and organizational factors are developed as explanatory factors in how people value time.

“The Effect of Individual Perceptions of Deadlines on Team Performance” focuses on differences in perceptions of deadlines among group members and the implications of these perceptions for group performance. Two individual-difference variables—time urgency and time perspective—are developed as key drivers of perceptions of the meaning and importance of deadlines and the probability of meeting deadlines. Waller, Conte, Gibson, and Carpenter link these individual-difference variables to group perceptions of deadlines that then influence group performance.

In the next two papers the authors explore temporal issues at the organizational level of analysis. In “Time, Temporal Capability, and Planned Change” Huy develops four ideal types of organizational change interventions: commanding, engineering, teaching, and socializing. He then explains temporal assumptions concerning conceptions of time, entrainment, time perspective, and pacing that underlie these interventions. Next, Huy develops propositions to explore the timing, sequence, and pacing of these different change interventions in different organizational contexts. An argument about more effective sequences and combinations of change strategies is delineated.

In “The Temporal Dynamics of Institutionalization,” Lawrence, Winn, and Jennings examine the sequence of events assumed to underlie traditional notions of institutionalization. Two temporal dimensions are examined: the pace at which an institution is diffused and entrenched and the stability of the institution over time. The authors suggest that four mechanisms—fluence, force, discipline, and domination—shape the pace and stability of institutionalization. They then discuss how different combinations of these mechanisms create more complex patterns of pacing and stability.

As the reader explores and works through the articles in this issue, a number of themes should surface. First, there are commonalities and connections among the papers. All acknowledge the multiple meanings of time. This is done in most detail by Ancona et al., but there is a basic recognition that research must develop a rich dictionary of time concepts. As we do our research, we need to address “what we mean by time.” Is it clock time or event time? Is it a linear or nonlinear notion of time or some combination that fits our research problem? How do we reflect both the objective and socially constructed features of time? Are we defining time as a predictor or as the phenomenon under study?

The articles exhibit a selection of similar time variables. First, the concepts of pacing (or rate of change), timing, and sequencing appear frequently as variables to be explained. For example, the factors that explain the rate of institutionalization are an essential part of Lawrence et al.’s paper. The stability of concepts and related measurements is another commonality. What is the likely stability or duration of an X or Y variable over time, and why? This issue is best articulated by Mitchell and James, but it is a current throughout the papers.

If we look at time variables as predictors or independent variables, individual differences in time perspectives appear throughout many of
the papers. In Waller et al. and in Blount and Janicik, time perspective—a stable individual-difference variable—is an important explanatory variable. Timeliness as an individual-difference state is the central concept in Mainemelis's article.

Some of the authors look at time structures in organizations, such as schedules (Blount & Janicik) and deadlines (Waller et al.). Although these structures have objective properties, such as the length of time for project completion, the authors focus on understanding the social meaning of these time markers in organizational life. What are the factors and processes that contribute to how people perceive and/or value time structures, and what are some of the consequences of their social constructions?

Another striking and understandable commonality across most papers is the nominal level of theorizing. While the content of the ideal types differs as a function of the problem—groups meeting deadlines (Waller et al.) versus planned organizational change (Huy)—the reader will notice the frequent use of ideal types framed in simple matrix notation. This should not be a surprise. As stated earlier, despite the pervasiveness of time in all aspects of our lives, it has not been a central theme in organizational research. There is no well-developed set of theories or empirical studies. Moreover, at this point in the development of time as a central concept in organizational studies, typologies and ideal types are a suitable way to organize our thinking. The challenge will be to shape the state of this literature five or ten years from now. Hopefully, the level of theorizing will advance.

A second observation readers will note is the diversity among papers. The articles vary in terms of level of analysis—some with a strong individual-level orientation (Mainemelis) and others at the organizational level (e.g., Huy and Lawrence et al.). The selection of dependent variables differs. Waller et al.'s ultimate criterion is group performance. Mainemelis focuses on creativity, whereas Lawrence et al. examine both the rates and stability of institutionalization processes.

The Mitchell and James paper differs from the others in one important respect. The authors' basic argument is to make time explicit in all organizational research, whether or not the focus is on time. In non-time-focused research the independent and dependent variables are not about time. They could be about the relationships between leadership patterns and workers' satisfaction, group composition and team performance, or the determinants of trust in interorganizational relationships. Mitchell and James' argument is that time is a critical issue both in terms of lags between variables and the stability of variables, and it must be made explicit in all studies. Any theory of trust, for example, should address the lags between changes in interorganizational trust and changes in the stability of the relationships.

The other papers in this issue call for an explicit selection of time-based variables, either as independent or dependent variables. Although time is inherent in any change study, Huy suggests that the sequencing of change strategies is an important research topic. Similarly, while there has been considerable research on institutionalization, Lawrence et al. call for particular attention to the pacing of institutionalization. In all the articles the authors ask the reader to rethink his or her research in a temporal lens and to make temporal issues explicit.

The third observation readers likely will make concerns intellectual gaps. This is not surprising, given the early state of temporal research in organizational studies. However, the gaps should be seen as an intellectual opportunity, not as a detractor.

Many questions remain unanswered. How does context change the meaning or role of time? Many of the authors are silent on this issue. The meaning of deadlines in a call center or in a team designing a car for 2005 can be very different. We need a more fine-grained way to think about contextual interactions. How do we think about time in relation to unit of analysis? Is the unit of analysis one day or time units within a day? If we study group performance, do we select time periods (e.g., meeting annual performance goals) or focus on events? What is the process by which context shapes the meaning of time in organizational settings?

How do we think about time in a multilevel context? In his paper Huy presents propositions about the effect of sequence of interventions on organizational change. But the effectiveness of these changes has temporal components across individual, group, and/or organizational levels. How do we trace these temporal changes in order to understand changes across levels of anal-
ysis so as to understand whether and why the changes will improve organizational effectiveness? We also need to understand in more detail the interaction process by which individual differences in time perceptions become group or organizational phenomena.

These are just some of the many theoretical gaps. To push our understanding ahead, we have written a concluding article. Our goal is to highlight the temporal lens as a new way of exploring opportunities in organizational research. The temporal lens is developed as a new intellectual perspective. At the same time, there is an exploration as to why temporal perspectives are not explicit and are not generating cumulative bodies of research in our field. We then use the lens to illustrate three other theoretical gaps. First, there is a discussion of timing norms, which regulate our behavior in organizations in terms of their types, where they come from, and their consequences. The second gap focuses on time lags in organizational research: given X, where and why do we expect Y to occur? If we are committed to using this temporal lens, we need to theoretically develop and investigate, empirically, when Y will occur. The third position uses the lens to reframe how we think about top management teams, their role in managing multiple time perspectives and organizational architectures in their exploration and exploitation of organizational environments.

These topics represent specific interests of the special issue editors and are meant to be illustrative, not integrative. Our decision was to join the other authors in this issue to create a temporal lens in organizational research. Carving out a new territory seemed a better task than trying to integrate past studies and the articles in this issue.

Throughout this issue there is a whole set of exciting questions—questions that are both very important and not well addressed in the organizational literature. These range from fairly basic questions, such as how we conceptualize time, to identifying lags between X and Y, to better understanding temporal variables such as timing, pacing, and sequencing. How do we specify time in a multilevel system? The challenge is to begin developing these temporal issues in our theoretical work and then to move to the empirical domain. Hopefully, the contributors to this issue have produced some maps so you can include the temporal lens in your work.

An Editorial Note:

The making of this issue was deluged with time challenges. Two conflicting deadlines were listed in Academy of Management publications about submissions for this issue, which led to yet another new deadline! Late submissions and pleas for ignoring the deadline followed from the confusion regarding the original announcements. Then, with all the other responsibilities of the special issue editors, there were delays in processing manuscripts. Later, there was some confusion about the due date to return revise-resubmits. Since our process involved multiple editors reviewing revise-resubmits, the time for selecting papers for the issue was determined by when the last revise-resubmit was returned. All of the papers conditionally accepted in this issue then had to go through another round of revisions, which led to different return times for these manuscripts. There followed a mad rush to both write the introduction and final article in a way that these would be collaborative efforts. Given people's schedules, the time coordination occurred both sequentially and then in parallel. In this relatively straightforward task of putting an issue together on time, time permeated all our activities. There were different deadlines, shifting deadlines, different interpretations of deadlines, time coordination and entrainment issues, parallel and sequential processing to manage time, unknown exogenous temporal events, strange circuitous e-mail details from the East to West Coast, and so on. When we started this activity, we wanted to extol time in organizational research. We did not anticipate how integral and pervasive time was to be in our work!

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