Temporal conditioning and the dynamics of inter-institutional projects

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Abstract

This paper presents an in-depth and processual case study of a major infrastructural innovation project involving diverse private and public-sector organizations. The case study shows how organizing developed recursively in response to diverging temporal requirements, induced by the *temporal institutional complexity* facing the project. We introduce the idea of *temporal conditioning* to demonstrate how large-scale temporary organizations dynamically cope with conflicting temporal institutional requirements by making use of three strategies: (1) *temporal avoidance*, (2) *temporal splitting*, and (3) *temporal matching*. With its focus on the emergence of the project, this paper adds to our understanding of the dynamics of organizing in temporary and institutionally pluralistic settings – settings that put greater pressures on our ability to deal with conflicting institutional requirements pertaining to time and timing. Accordingly, we offer a new perspective on the dynamics of large-scale projects and how they respond to a particular kind of institutional complexity.
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1. Introduction

Large-scale projects are an important vehicle used for developing infrastructure, achieving economic growth, targeting welfare, and managing health and safety concerns (Altshuler and Luberoff, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2014; Orr and Scott, 2008). Given the inherent challenges of organizing across institutional field boundaries and norm systems, these projects resemble "inter-institutional projects" (Dille and Söderlund, 2011) operating under conditions of "institutional complexity," i.e. "the presence of multiple logics with conflicting, or at least diverging, prescriptions for behavior" (Martin et al., 2017, p. 104). In contemporary large-

scale projects and "megaprojects" (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Söderlund, Sankaran, and Biesenthal, 2017), institutional requirements and norms, due to increasing time pressure and task interdependencies, often raise a number of temporal challenges and issues (Anderson-Gough, Grey, and Robson, 2001; Judge and Spitzfaden, 1995; Mosakowski and Earley, 2000). Accordingly, one might argue that managing and organizing such projects is a matter of "temporal institutional work" (Granqvist and Gustafsson, 2016) in which key project actors identify, adjust and capitalize on "institutionalized timing norms" (Dille and Söderlund, 2011) in their attempts to respond to and change institutional requirements (Holm, 1995).

Typically, large-scale projects are characterized by explicitly formulated deadlines (Lindkvist, Söderlund, and Tell, 1998) that require actors to align with an overall sequence of nested and interdependent activities (Thompson, 1967). These actors are

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expected to enact intense and collective agency to realize evermore challenging system-wide goals with regards to time pressure, limited budgets and stakeholder benefits (Merrow, 2011; Shenhar and Holzmann, 2017). While all projects are alike in their temporary duration (Scranton, 2014), each large-scale project is unique in its highly integrated orientation and demands for intense collaboration and synchronization among the actors involved (Davies and Hobday, 2005; Manning, 2017). For successful projects spanning institutional fields (Dille and Söderlund, 2011), if sub-optimal goal prioritization is to be avoided, legitimacy transcending individual member organizations needs to be established (Human and Provan, 2000).

However, given the uniqueness and uncertainty of their task (Whitley, 2006), large-scale projects are often characterized by emergent forms of organizing and governance (Beck and Plowman, 2014; Van Marrewijk, 2017) rather than slotting into established models. The grounds for legitimacy have to be secured without obliterating sector-specific institutional advantages and idiosyncrasies (Furnari, 2016). In that respect, one needs to approach these projects as continuously creating and recreating institutional requirements from the diverse fields that the temporary organization transverses as it strives continuously towards settlement and truce among diverging institutional requirements (Schildt and Perkmann, 2017). Nevertheless, the unique, temporary and dynamic nature of these organizations, partly in the wake of task complexities and uncertainties, make attempts towards ensuring settlement profoundly difficult and sometimes even misdirected.

Informed by recent literature on 'temporal institutional work', we develop an analysis that portrays these temporary institutionally complex projects as 'dynamic temporal zones' designed to facilitate collective action among sovereign actors and organizations (Granqvist and Gustafsson, 2016; Tukiainen and Granqvist, 2016). Responding to calls for dynamic theorizations of projects (Söderlund, 2011, 2013), we develop a processual understanding of the nature and dynamics of large-scale projects which demonstrates how such organizations grapple with diverging temporalities in temporary collaborations spanning institutional fields. Such a framing may foster a rebalancing of institutional theory to grasp processes occurring at the limits of institutional field boundaries and in the everyday organizational activities (Greenwood et al. 2014: 1210).

In particular, we respond to suggestions that studies should promote a "fine-grained understanding of temporal dynamics" (Lawrence et al. 2001: 625) in large-scale and complex temporary organizations as a particularly interesting organizational context for studies of institutional complexity (Greenwood, Maynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, and Lounsbury, 2011. We align ourselves with scholars who have pointed out the centrality of exploring how organizations respond to conflicting institutional requirements and continuously evolve in response to and as responses to institutionally conflicting requirements (Bechky, 2003; Engwall, 2003; Kristensen and Lotz, 2011). This dynamic framing addressing responses to what we refer to as 'temporal institutional complexity' is particularly relevant in the context addressed here.

In our case study presented below, we identity three primary strategies that management relied upon to deal with diverging "time-reckoning systems" (Clark, 1978, 1985, 1995; Clark and Maielli, 2009). This framing conceptualizes a notion of pluralistic time-reckoning systems to analyze the effects that they have on "temporal conditioning", defined as the process of responding to and coping with institutionally prescribed and conflicting temporal demands. Thus, we attend to the unfolding of different time-reckoning systems embedded in distinct institutional fields. Moreover, we address the entanglement of time-reckoning systems and institutional fields and focus on three key strategies that management relied upon to cope with disparate temporalities and how the application of these strategies, in turn, influenced the emergence of the project.

2. Projects in time

Past research indicates the importance of "isochronism" for ongoing collaboration across organizations (Perez-Nordtvedt, Payne, Short, and Kedia, 2008; Khavul, Pérez-Nordtvedt, and Wood, 2010). In many industries and sectors, actors drawn from diverse organizations need to adhere to a unifying "project time" to handle technological and organizational interdependencies (Shih, 2004). Over time, actors who regularly collaborate with each other develop common ideas about when activities should be done, in what order things should be done, and the duration of their interdependent activities (Zerubavel, 1981). However, despite temporal issues being implicit in much work on institutions and institutionalization they have received surprisingly little attention in the scholarly literature (Roe, Waller, and Clegg, 2009), echoing earlier remarks on the general socio-temporal structuring of human organization (Zerubavel, 1979) as well as the institutional requirements of time and timing (Butler, 1995).

Prior research has assumed that organizations adapt to isochronic processes and timing norms as "shared patterns of paced activity" (Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence, and Tushman, 2001). In that respect, timing norms are conceived as an outcome of and a target for actors' construction (Barley, 1988) and that organizations engage simultaneously with different and diverging timing norms (Dille and Söderlund, 2011), which tend to produce a variety of contradictory temporal expectations and diverging agency (Dille and Söderlund, 2013). As pointed out by Granqvist and Gustafsson (2016), however, research has failed to address how actors enact and manipulate understandings about temporality in organizations: most notably, managing and organizing needs to be looked at from a perspective acknowledging the temporality of institutional work.

In this paper, we argue that there is a need to build an institutional theory that is more "organizational" (Greenwood et al., 2014; Kraatz and Block, 2008) and "time-centric". Accordingly, we need to address how various institutional requirements are manifest at the organizational level and how these manifestations change and evolve over time during the life of a temporary organization. The context of megaprojects and other large-scale projects, as cases of inter-institutional temporary organizations, involving multiple and institutionally diverse actors seems to be highly relevant for exploring such processes. Following Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), we underscore the centrality of focusing on different kinds of institutional work aimed at creating, maintaining