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Time as a determinant of the organizational change, a structurationist approach for a case study

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Abstract

In all the theories pertaining to organizations, the concept of time, also termed temporality, is often approached as a simple implicit framework of action. The notion of movement or change can only therefore be appreciated by its variation and rarely as an intrinsic dimension able to influence and provide greater insight into the complexities surrounding the causalities observed. Bearing this in mind, we have primed the theory of structuration, which considers time in addition to space, as a dimension of the structural dynamics. According to Giddens, each structure comprises a homeostatic principle, which tends to maintain its own living conditions over a given period despite the external pressures to which it can be submitted. Our interest here lies in the notion of disturbance resulting from this notion of homeostasis. What happens when a structural feature evolves? Can one see a disturbance? Can time be considered as a structural feature? In order to attempt to address these questions we will present a case study in which four operational offices of a large firm have the particularity of being faced with a spate of large scale organizational changes and a serious rise in psychosocial disorders. Without jeopardizing the possible causality link connecting both phenomena, we hypothesize that temporal dissonance could be considered as a source of explanation for this disturbance.

Keywords

Time; organizational studies; theory of structuration; organizational change; psychosocial risks; well-being

Introduction

The present work describes research performed within an organization experiencing a radical transformation. As these developments affect its very *raison d'être* thus prompting organizational changes and rationalization procedures, various characteristics that can be relevant to our research are displayed, namely because of the recent yet significantly heightened exposure to psychosocial disorders.

Among the different diagnoses advocated in the different organizational theories to decipher, understand and clarify, we have chosen an original conceptual framework that we believe supports our case, namely that of temporalities.

However, in the theories surrounding organizations, the concept of time, also termed temporality, is often approached as a simple implicit framework of action. The notion of motion or change can only therefore be appreciated by its variation and rarely as an intrinsic dimension able to influence and provide greater insight into the complexity of the causalities observed.

With this in mind, in order to underline the paramount role of temporality in the empirical reality under study, we chose the theory of structuration as a diagnosis, since this theoretical approach has the particularity of contemplating time, as well as space, as a dimension of the structural dynamics.

From this perspective, we will show that temporality can be all the more considered as a structural dimension of the organization, because when it evolves it is capable of causing significant disturbances both for individuals and for the organization.

For this purpose, after having recalled tenets of structuration theory that are relevant to our study, we will describe a case study in which four operational offices of a large company present the particularity of being faced with a wave of large scale organizational changes and a serious rise in psychosocial disorders. Following this, we will present our main findings and appraise them by using the theoretical principles introduced and will endeavour to improve our understanding of the significance of the temporal dimension in the disturbance under study.

Time and the theory of organizations

Time is a concept that has been developed by human beings in order to understand change in the world. This reference that stretches from the past to the future enables mankind to act, recall, imagine and to develop outlook. According to Aristotle, time is the number of change with respect to the before and after.

From this perspective, the notion of time is a consequence of the notion of motion as time seemingly becomes meaningless when there is no longer any idea of motion and time assumes the variation to justify its unfolding : “In one or the same time or finally in a time , all things become.” (Alain 1991)

If Man observes that everything around him is tainted by the passage of time he nevertheless recognizes that everything continues in its essence despite the changes observed. This paradox thus assumes that time comprises both change and permanence. Such ambivalence only becomes fully meaningful when one places it in its reference correlate which Descartes had compared to space.

Consequently, it is possible to reference the passage of time by the notion of simultaneity (or synchrony) which makes it possible to explain the idea that at the same moment events of a possibly infinite number can take place together. In addition, the notion of succession (or diachrony) which expresses the idea that innumerable simultaneous events seemingly follow each other on the arrow of time.

Both these considerations engender the idea that time cannot be measured only from the perspective of one's own universal experience : the before, the during and the after : distinct phases of which the classification and not the appreciation of the duration depends on one's memory, itself influenced by a possible repetition of the facts and a source of learning (cycles).

Out of all these philosophical considerations and their impenetrable development, very few are actually considered in this rich and polysemous field of organizational theories today.

Nowadays, despite the aims of the academic inputs into the theories of the organizations being "to mention the processes which structure in time the organized life, to provide a synchronic vision of the organizational activities" (Rouleau 2007), we are compelled to note that, whatever the chosen sociological paradigm, the time of the organizational change is, in the large majority of cases, the time of the Galileo-Newtonian reference frame. Transmitted by successive legacies from the natural sciences to the social sciences, this reference time is namely an implicit framework allowing only the appreciation and possible measurement of the observed changes.

After several decades of research, most organizational theories consider time and space as simple dimensions of the environment of the action, implicit frameworks only enabling the appreciation and possible quantification of the changes observed.

Among the classical theories, only March and Simon's decision theory recognizes time as a qualitative determinant of the decisional rationality of their "administrative man". In the same way, the work of systems analysis, in keeping with its thermodynamic origins, considers the temporal dimension of causality in terms of feedback- a cornerstone of cybernetics.

With modern then post-modern theory, time becomes gradually emancipated in the domain of social construction with the organizations resulting from processes socially located and historically built. The theory of structuration underlines the need for approaching social reality by means of its dynamic principles and by taking account of the way in which it is constituted at a given time and in a specific place (Giddens 1984). From this point of view, time becomes a determining element in organizational life. Thus, the search for the power, temporalities and the structural mediations structural make up the singularity of the organizational processes (Bouchikhi 1990).

As for the critical theories, whereas these suggest that the analysis of the organizations must be put into perspective to analyze their socio-historical conditions; post-modernism proposes an in-depth reflection on production, even a certain knowledge relating to organizational theories. According to Foucault, power lies less in the institutions than in the disciplinary mechanisms which are invariably found throughout them. This "genealogical" and "archaeological" work underlines the use of time as an actor in the pursued goal. Accordingly, time becomes an instrument of power, a variable in the collective action (Foucault 1975).

According to this theory, Sewell & Wilkinson find a logic of panoptic surveillance in the JIT principle. From their perspective, time becomes an instrument of power and a variable of collective action (Sewell & Wilkinson 1992).

Thus, using the example of the evolution noted in other disciplines, the concept of time in organizational theory gradually evolves and progressively casts off the implicit shackles which had hitherto confined the traditional Galiléo-Newtonian reference frame.

With a view to making our contribution to such change, we propose assuming that time is perceived as a particular determinant of organizational life and particularly with regard to its movement. Thus, we retain the theory of structuration (Giddens 1984, Orlikowski & Yates 2002) as a theoretical framework to highlight the central role of temporal dimension in the findings of our case study.

All the same choosing this theoretical field to ascertain the significance of the temporal variable does not mean choosing the specific processing of this variable as a great deal of criticism has been leveled at it due to the scant consideration of its intersubjective dimension (Bergmann 1992, Nowotny 1992).

The theory of structuration

In order to avail ourselves of the theoretical elements required to highlight the role of temporalities as explanatory variables of the organizational events in our case study, let us recall the main elements comprising the theory of structuration related with the subject relevant to our demonstration, i.e., the temporalities.

Within this theoretical framework, time and space play a very particular role i.e., neither an implicit framework for the action as in many social theories, nor even a variable in the action organized in some of the current social science research.

This meta-theory hinges on three principal concepts which are structure, duality of structure and system.

- Structure is considered in accordance with the following proposition: "In structuration theory, structure has always to be conceived of as a property of social systems, 'carried' in reproduced practices embedded in time and space" (Giddens 1984). Structure refers to "structuring properties allowing the 'binding' of time-space in social systems, the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them 'systemic' form" (Giddens 1984). Structure therefore underpins a syntagmatic analysis of social relations viz the development in space-time, of adjusted models of social relations which implicate the reproduction of practices. From this structural perspective, Giddens considers three different notions :
 - Structures considered as isolatable sets of rules and resources,
 - The structural principles such as the most deep rooted structural features and "those which are implicated in the reproduction of societal totalities and which become stabilized in time and space",
 - the institutions such as protocols which have the widest spatial and temporal extension in these societal totalities.
- The duality of structure points to the fact that the structural features of social systems are both the medium and the result of the recursively organized practices.

For Giddens, this does not imply dualism but is more a duality and such duality of structure is pivotal in the idea of structuration.

- As for system, it refers to the paradigmatic dimension of social analysis, i.e., a virtual order of means of structuration recursively implicated in the reproduction of practices

To approach these various concepts, Giddens proposes a complex quotation but which boasts the advantage of mobilizing all of them: "Structure, as recursively organized sets of rules and resources, is out of time and space, save in its instantiations and coordination as memory traces, and is marked by an "absence of the subject". The social systems in which structure is recursively implicated, on the contrary, comprise the situated activities of human agents, reproduced across time and space. Analyzing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities and situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction. Crucial to the idea of structuration is the theorem of the duality of structure, which is logically implied in the arguments portrayed above" (Giddens 1984).

This synthetic presentation of the principal concepts of the structuration enables us to identify the temporal dimension of this theory. To continue with the use of the structurationist terms time, like space, is considered to be "constraining and entitling" (Gregory 1989). With this turn of phrase, Giddens means that "it is not interested in static entities, such as could be the being the individual actor or the company, but well with a dynamic process. The social phenomenon is apprehended as a movement in which the individual actions all at the same time structure the social systems and are structured by them." (Stones 2005).

Naturally, to allow the continual evolution of these contexts of interaction whilst avoiding the recourse to functionalist determinism, Giddens hypothesizes that "repetitive activities, located in one context of time and space, have regularized consequences, unintended by those who engage in those activities, in more or less 'distant' time-space contexts. What happens in this second series of contexts then, directly or indirectly, influences the further conditions of action in the original context." (Giddens 1984).

From this assumption, the concept of homeostatic loops can be conceived as "Homeostatic system reproduction in human society can be regarded as involving the operation of causal loops, in which a range of unintended consequences of action feedback to reconstitute the initiating circumstances." (Giddens 1984).

This principle of the homeostatic loop is so convincing in the theory of structuration that it is considered as immanent with the structure and transcending its possible evolutions: "the moment of the production of action is also one of reproduction in the contexts of the day-to-day enactment of social life. This is so even during the most violent upheavals or most radical forms of social change." (Giddens 1984).

In this theory, any evolution or even radical change always implies a series of intentional and non-intentional actions of which the retroacting effects, finally reconstitute the initial circumstances of the structural principle (Thompson 1989).

What interests us here is not precisely the demonstration or the refutation of this axiom of structural homeostasis, but more particularly the study of the effects and possible feedbacks constitutive of this homeostatic principle.

An explanation is required. If there can be homeostasis (or homeostatic loops), meaning a capacity which a system can have to preserve its living conditions over a given duration despite that external pressures that it can undergo, there is necessarily a specific phenomenon of disturbance so that homeostasis can be considered.

The focus of our present work thus concerns these episodes of disturbance, their effects and their possible effects on organizational properties. More precisely, our interest is in the role of temporal dimension with the appearance of a phenomenon of disturbance and in its effects.

For this purpose, we now describe a case study in which this dimension represents a structuring condition of the relevant social system and will we observe what follows when a change occurs under the conditions allocating this resource.

Ontology, epistemology and methodology

To get a better grasp of the situation, we turn to critical realism, a post positivist current which deals with the classical positivist approach to consider the partial accessibility of an existent reality, meaning that if reality refers to social constraints, an objective analysis could clearly link certain underlying regularities to these constructs (Mingers 2004). We follow the manner of Miles and Huberman who refer to transcendental realism, “we believe that the social phenomena exist not only in the mind but also in the real world and that legitimate and reasonably stable relationships can be discovered” (Miles & Huberman 2003).

Given the strong exploratory nature of our research with the goal of understanding a phenomenon from an existing conceptual framework, our approach is fully consistent with an abductive approach and fully accepts the intention to “gather from observation the conjectures that should be readily tested and discussed” (Charreire & Durieux 1999).

Concerning the goal of our research, it is our wish to understand as precisely as possible a phenomenon in its context. Coupled with the exploratory nature of this approach, a qualitative approach seems particularly suited while presenting the advantages of being able to handle the formulation of possible theoretical contributions (Miles & Huberman 2003).

Our methodological approach is based on case study, which is justified by the fact that we are interested in an empirical phenomenon upon which we have no control in order to respond to a question of the sort how. Given the complexity of the phenomenon, the capacity of qualitative approaches in case studies with the aim of allowing the researcher to find all the subtlety of the studied reality has been confirmed (Rispoli 2002). This methodological choice is compatible with the conceptual elements of structuration theory, even as far as the needs of its development, as has been pointed out (Stones 2005).

Case Study

Context

Our empirical research focuses on the organizational changes in a territorial unit of a postal service, which was not long ago a part of the state administration, and which will soon be the domain of free enterprise on a European scale.

The globalization of the economy has heightened international competitiveness, the pressure exerted upon companies and on their exchanges. In this particularly complex and dynamic environment, the postal services were initially concerned (Crew et al. 2004).

Anticipated in the late eighties, the report paved the way for the European directives at the beginning of the following decade creating an incentive for the national postal services in member countries to commit themselves to in-depth changes.

In France, since 1991, the national operator has continually reformed its structures for this purpose. Evolving from civil service status to a that of a public company (Le Roux 2002), from a national monopoly market to a European oligopoly market (Crew et al. 1997) and from a public service oriented organization to a customer oriented organization, several rationalization policies have been implemented over the last twenty years leading to the full opening of markets on 1st January 2011.

Among these measures is one that influences all the others, this being financial autonomy. Previously placed under the supervision of the state and therefore listed in the supplementary budget of the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications, the public company is now forced to balance its accounts and enjoined, to the extent possible, to improve its performance (Salaün 2008).

This new goal is gradually being adapted to company culture and all hierarchical echelons are now evaluated and rewarded according to their ability of fulfilling the economic objectives to which they are assigned (Berthon 2006). However, despite the good will of participants, improving results implies an increase in business, either through improving productivity or optimizing costs, the most important often being that of the personnel.

Within the context of gradually opening its markets to competition and its notorious stagnation of volumes of mail to process, forecasts for the revenue of the postal operator are foreseeably low. The real issue is more about maintaining what already exists. If in the past, all effort of differentiation was dispensed due to the monopoly enjoyed in the territory of reference, today is very different. The company now needs to be competitive both in price (cost control, economies of scale) and service (meeting commitments on delivery times, quality of service, etc.) in order to retain large sectors of business (banking, insurance, mail order, ...) which were once dependent on it (Zarifian 2005).

Regarding productivity, which is the weakness of the postal operator compared to the expected capacity of its competitors (Larcher et al. 2002), many investment programs have been put into place in the past ten years in order to modernize the industrial equipment and develop the automation of its "sorting lines" (Berthelot 2006). With the aim of 90% automation compared to the current 70%, investments made (acquisition of sophisticated

sorting machines) make it now possible to deliver the day's mail, not in bags like in the past, but in boxes sorted by rounds, by street and even by street number.

In pursuing its optimization, one of the key issues concerns the last few meters of the supply chain (or sorting line), which cannot be automated for the distribution of mail which must be particularly reliable, economical and flexible. The optimal match between the labor force, the volumes to be handled and the space needed is a major objective.

To this end, each distribution area (region, county, city, and district) is continuously measured and studied. Statistics make it possible to prepare for different distribution (ordinary mail, a registered letter, package) over a given period (year, semester, month, week). Combinatorial analysis of variables specific to the different areas considered (demographics, population density, terrain, dividing populated areas, etc...) makes it possible to determine an optimal cartography of a specific number of delivery rounds. With the same theoretical time requirement, each defined round helps to optimize the available labor force according to the territory to be served and the volume of mail to be distributed.

The steps for sorting are now reduced to a bare minimum (sorting mail that cannot be treated mechanically or that contain an anomaly), within a comparable time requirement and the number of kilometers traveled, the volume of mail transported and the amount of mail distributed are higher.

These streamlining efforts concern the entire mail division of the company considered, and in particular one of its territorial headquarters, which was the empirical framework of our research.

Going on site

Our access to these headquarters was made possible within the framework of a study led by the University of Nantes on the determinants of health at work (Detchessahar et al. 2006).

Made aware of this subject by one of the organization's occupational health physicians, the territorial entity volunteered to participate in this study in order to understand the reasons for the recent deterioration of its key health indicators (recorded incapacities, sick leaves, unannounced absences).

In order to identify as precisely as possible the expectations of this research partner with regard to the issues identified, a series of interviews were conducted with key functional managers, occupational health physicians and social workers. All were particularly sensitive to the psychosocial evolution of the different populations of the territorial entity.

At the conclusion of these interviews, feedback was exchanged which helped to define precisely the scope and terms of our operation at the four distribution centers for mail retained due to their intrinsic properties (size, location and population).

Data collection

Once these four distribution centers were identified, it was possible to program our work in order to successively study each. The entirety of the fieldwork took place over nearly 18 months.

For the purpose of the triangulation of data sources needed for the internal validity and reliability of our analysis (Miles & Huberman 2003), the methodology that we used in each center consisted of four phases:

- A qualitative phase consisted of interviews with volunteer candidates. In order to encourage participation, we were present during the hours that all staff were available. Each interview was conducted using a guide including five subjects with the aim to understand the nature and consequences of the changes. During the qualitative phase, we conducted 99 interviews averaging 1 hour and 20 minutes in length, 88 of which were digitally recorded with the authorization of the interviewee. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis software. Our sample consists of individuals whose distribution in rank, status, seniority, age and sex is representative of the parent population (340 people).
- A phase of observations in the life of the organization: a phase of work termed “internal” (sorting of the mail), a phase of work termed “external” (delivery in the letter-boxes), a phase of collective work (meetings, work groups) and a phase of breaks and abstract exchanges.
- A phase of collection and analysis of the documentation, which relates to the logistic data (volumes, rate of processing, rate of anomaly, properties of the delivery systems), the social data (population, status, seniority, turn-over, rate of unionization) and the medical data (unexpected absences, sick leave, medical unfitness).

The results

The results of our literature review show that each center studied experienced a significant increase in unannounced absences, sick leaves and temporary incapacities during the two years prior to our study.

These data suggest this trend is by no means correlated with the number or severity of work related accidents or reported occupational diseases, which were on the decrease for the same period.

Concerning ergonomics and physical working conditions, our literature review reveals that many measures have been made by the company in recent years to improve the operational conditions of work particularly in terms of quality, safety, proper equipment and training of agents and their supervisors. All staff we met unanimously welcomed these measures.

Our literature review also reveals that the flow processed during the same period was characterized by a relative stability both in terms of both volume and cyclicity (seasonality).

Our *in situ* observation periods revealed the particular intensity that exists in distribution centers during a working day, especially in the 6:30 – 9:00 am shift which corresponds to the collective sorting and individual sorting phases.

This period of coexistence, the only of the day, is characterized by a particular tension because of the desire of each to avoid as far as possible any unnecessary interaction with the obvious aim of completing so-called "internal" work as fast as possible to begin the phase of work called "external," or the actual mail delivery as such.

This period is also characterized for the supervisors by a particularly excessive level of solicitation. In addition to their role of coordination and support, they must handle the irregularities that have become reoccurring (if not daily) of unannounced absences and sick leaves that disrupt the workflow and the correct assignment of each round. For this population, this phase appeared to be particularly difficult as the conditions for the balance between instructions, constraints and available resources (staff, time) seem precarious and under question daily.

Qualitatively, the organizational changes within the company are worrying to the agents and managers. If the majority of them readily acknowledge the need to adapt their practices to new economic demands, they are nevertheless concerned about the future of the distribution job in light of developments seen in recent years (rationalization, continuous change, intensity).

However, no personnel we met really discussed the difficulty of their task, the level of involvement required or the mental or physical aspects required. They were more concerned about the time requirements for performing the diverse day-to-day activities they were responsible for and their position within the restructuring plans, the conditions of synchronization between continuity and change.

In detail, the operational staff appreciates the evolution of the distribution of their activities which allow them to abandon a portion of the sorting phase in favor of the distribution phase.

However, their patterns of service (cordial exchanges with the recipients, adjusting the order of the delivery round as needed, the possibility of rendering small services to others, etc ...) are now thwarted by a level of time requirements that have become mandatory. Most workers perceive these production constraints as a hindrance to the relational dimension of their activity, which has been reduced down to a strict labor dimension.

All the operational staff resent this erosion of their margins of autonomy, as one expressed,

"Before, we had confidence, we knew what we had to do. Sure, some days we had to work hard, that's normal, but we knew it'd be easier the next day or later [...] Now all that is over, they've compressed everything, you have to work at full pace all of the time... You're not allowed to ask any questions, you distribute, volume, volume, volume... that's it."

A distribution agent, male, 42 yrs old.

In this normalized scheme, if a distribution agent wishes to pursue the relational interactions among recipients on his round, it would delay the theoretical performance of the round, and push back the time his or her service ends, and thus encroach on his or her rest period.

Therefore, to maintain their working practices, most now start early, limit interactions with colleagues, go without breaks and increase their pace to the retain the needed time for operational autonomy and the relational aspect which is so appreciated.

The consequence of these opposing goals are that the days don't seem long enough to sufficiently fulfill the various tasks of the day, the pace picks up, people become exhausted and incomprehension appears. As one manager expressed, "By running faster and faster, the carriers contribute to their own misfortune."

Faced with tired, skeptical or disappointed distribution agents, the local managers must assume on a daily basis "the hierarchical responsibility for their movement" (Zarifian 2005). As such, they are now the guarantors of the balance between the continuity of action, deployment developments and the necessary adapting of practices, three keys principles which are particularly difficult to balance in the daily flow while maintaining the mandatory pace.

Asked about these points, the vast majority of managers appreciate the new responsibilities entrusted to them, including management activities that offer them the possibility of expanding the diversity of their tasks, complement their skills and exercise more autonomy.

However, at the same time, they denounced the many paradoxical instructions and time constraints associated with them (mandatory objectives, time frames and deadlines) as one of them expressed,

"This is what we are suffering from: we are constantly in action, in project management, dealing with information that comes up to us... after dealing with the day-to-day business, time is all that matters... yet the work day takes priority, because we are constantly faced with it, we can't get out of it."

An operational manager, male, 48 yrs. old.

Managers are given responsibility, evaluated, promoted and compensated based on their ability to meet quantitative targets (stream flow, operating margin) and qualitative targets (personnel management, customer satisfaction, deployment of reorganization programs) and the tasks that now fall on the managers put them at risk of fatigue and breakdown.

Thus our results show a significant increase in unannounced absences and sick leaves without specific factual explanation. The day-to-day organization of the activities is burdened by an atmosphere of palpable tension and a constant risk of malfunction forcing those in charge of the coordination and its accomplishment to adapt on a daily basis.

When asked about these points, people explained their incomprehension not about the need to change as such, but the practicalities of the change. Their main principle is to bring into question or disavow the practices of each individual without providing any particular compensation other than the necessity to evolve. The contradictions arising

(paradoxical instructions, perceived lack of recognition, progressive dilution of collective understanding) repeated throughout the day and not properly defused through an adequate outlet, and the grip of a perpetual quest for time, ends up creating situations of tension and unease, which progressively worsen the very reasons for their appearance.

Discussion

The structural principle

The situation of our case study presents a number of issues that would be particularly interesting to develop; however, as we must clearly define our subject for the purpose of this article, we will focus here specifically on the development of one that seems pertinent to illustrate this concept of disturbance related to the evolution of the temporal dimension. This is namely the thwarted autonomy of the distribution agents.

To consider the performance of a delivery round under only an industrial angle would limit the reality of a trade where for many distribution agents the relational aspect is an important dimension and is recognized as such by their supervisors (Join-Lambert 2001).

The round is a place for socializing, friendliness and social interchange built over time through repeated daily interactions even if fleeting (a simple wave of the hand), between recipient and carrier. These gestures of civility and attention are part of a reciprocal mode of recognition of others and the identification of individuals which contribute day after day to a cordial relationship from which each distribution agent, if eager to get involved personally, is able to reap symbolic recognition and gratification (Cartier 2003).

It's the regular contact that anchors the distribution agent in the day-to-day life of the recipients on his or her round and creates a sense of mutual ownership. All the agents we interviewed spoke of "their" customers like most of us speak of "our" mail carrier.

"I like my customers, I know most of them, I say hello, we talk a little, exchange news, it's important, it's important to be aware of that"

A distribution agent, male, 34 yrs. old.

"The mail carriers are viscerally attached to their customers, most of them, they are their real superiors in the hierarchy"

A functional manager, female, 48 yrs. old.

This social anchoring is a part of the distribution business. The experienced agents who enjoy certain popularity are proud of this recognition, which represents for them the "vox populi" (voice of the people) proclaiming their knowledge of various facets of the profession. It is also a source of pride, which legitimizes and compensates for the day-to-day physical difficulty of their profession:

"Listen, my round, I've been doing it for 15 years, I know everybody and everybody knows me, I've just about seen all of them arrive, I saw their kids grow up, can you imagine if they take that away from me tomorrow, what would I do?"

A distribution agent, male, 54 yrs. old.

When analyzing our qualitative results, it seemed that many people, both operational officers and local managers, expressed incomprehension, disappointment, regret or anger about the gradual erosion of these practices.

When we specifically asked about this, it seemed that our interlocutors perceived these practices as a set of prerogatives and customs shaped over the years and inherited from their predecessors, a true collective know-how.

It is of course appropriate to adapt these to modern requirements but their abolition represented, beyond the repudiation of a real number of postal workers, an undeniable loss for both the company in terms of image, and society which loses one of the day-to-day elements of its social cohesion (Renoy 1999, Cartier 2003).

Without necessarily being conscious of it, each distribution agent is a part of day-to-day activities time by doing his or her round every day and institutional time by perpetuating at his or her humble level a service of distribution and practices that are associated with it (concept of circuit of reproduction in of structuration theory).

In doing so, he or she is a part of time and space of everyday life over many years (notion of life path) shaping over time the conditions of repetition of specific contexts of interaction with an ensemble of social actors who become acquaintances throughout the encounters (notion of co presence). In this sense, all these practices can be likened to the notion of routine developed by structuration theory (Giddens 1984), which is the framework of our analysis.

Routinization, which is seen as rooted in the practical consciousness, is a fundamental concept in structuration theory:

"The concept of routinization, as grounded in practical consciousness, is vital to the theory of structuration. Routine is integral both to the continuity of the personality of the agent, as he or she moves along the paths of daily activities, and to the institutions of society, which are such only through their continued reproduction" (Giddens 1979).

The repetitiveness of this practice and the cyclicity associated with it, express the temporality of everyday life and the contingent nature of routinization: "The 'fading away' inherent in the syntagmatic ordering of social interaction is consist with a very marked fixity of form in social reproduction" (Giddens 1984).

The interactions of a round that may seem trivial when we consider them in terms of an evanescent moment, take on a lot more importance when we consider them to be inherent to the iterative nature of social life.

Routinization plays a crucial role to linking ephemeral meetings to social reproduction, and thus the apparent sustainability of institutions.

"On my round, there is a little old lady who waits for me every morning, I'm the only person she sees all day, that's not insignificant. I know that if I want it, there's a coffee waiting for me, we talk a bit, we spend a moment together."

A distribution agent, male, 35 yrs. old.

In this spirit, Levi-Strauss foresaw the tradition as a medium of reversible time that binds the duration of daily life and long-term aspect of institutions (Lévi-Strauss 1990).

Thus, in the framework of what is called "outside" work, a set of practices and social interactions are repeated and legitimized daily, within a time set aside and a limited space. This includes the distribution agent in the perpetuation of the institutional dimension and is a source of confidence and recognition which is both enabling and structuring.

However, what happens to these practices if any of the parameters of their conditions of existence and daily repetition changes?

The disturbance

As our research focuses on the evolution of the temporal dimension as a disturbance of the homeostatic balance of a structure, let us now look in detail at the effects observed in our case study.

Where as before, each distribution agent enjoyed a relative freedom as to the performance of his or her round through use of a voluntary kairos time, today productivity standards require compliance within prescribed time limits. This, according to our respondents, leaves little space for initiative or autonomy (Huy 2001).

As we presented in the context of our case study, a time limit is now precisely defined in order to optimize the available labor force according to the territory to be served and volume of mail to be distributed. If the allocated distribution time seems to the majority of our respondents to be correctly calibrated, they all complain that all these calculations have completely omitted the relational dimension of the job as described above.

"Well, conversation, you don't really have the time, a handshake is about all, and that's it!"

A distribution agent, male, 53 yrs. old.

And yet, this dimension is recognized, which is confirmed by the results of our research, as the main source of satisfaction, recognition and motivation for most distribution agents, (Abdollahzadeh 1999, Cartier 2003).

According to structuration theory,

"the disruption and the deliberately sustained attack upon the ordinary routines of life produce a high degree of anxiety, a 'stripping away' of the socialized responses associated with the security of the management of the body and a predictable framework of social life"(Giddens 1984).

As stressed by (Garfinkel 1963) following his experiences that enabled him to reproduce the conflicting feelings of anxiety felt by individuals when their routines are disturbed or endangered, routinization seems essential to psychological mechanisms that maintain a sense of trust, an ontological security in the daily activities of social life.

Also, to avoid such a disturbance and its effects, a number of distribution agents refuse to compromise the symbolic dimension of their social role. In order not to lose the vector of their main source of recognition and be left with only the labor dimension of their activity,

they exercise reflexive control to maintain the conditions of their job (Mosakowski & Earley 2000).

Ignoring the recommendations and instructions of their superiors, most agents we met try to preserve this space for autonomy which allows them time to perform this much appreciated social role and keep these very conditions of routinization.

These forms of resistance are well known to industrial sociology where a number of studies describe workers use of a framework of interaction to maintain relative autonomy in relationships of power.

However, where some of them working in an integrated disciplinary space have some form of control to disrupt or stop a production process, these forms of control do not exist for those who are dispersed in time and space as are the distribution agents in our case study. Since they can neither divest mail to deliver nor slow down their activity without reducing their rest periods, the only way to preserve the autonomy sought is paradoxically to accelerate the performance of their tasks.

Throughout his discussions on the origins of disciplinary power, Foucault is unceasingly concerned with distribution of space and time. For him, "Discipline can proceed only through the manipulation of time and space" (Foucault 1975).

Although in our case, this phenomenon of resistance with time can also be seen as an unintended consequence of rationalization:

"Social life is in many respects not an intentional product of its constituent actors, in spite of the fact that day-to-day conduct is chronically carried on in a purposive fashion. It is in the study of the unintended consequences of action, as I have often emphasized, that some of the most distinctive tasks of the social sciences are to be found" (Giddens 1979).

Thus, according to our understanding of the reality observed, one of the unintended consequences of the rationalization effort made in the centers studied materializes through a perceived intensification of activities of each person, not as a direct result of the implementation of new time standards but as the result of indirect resistance to change by those wishing maintain their previous time prerogatives.

Contradiction and conflict

In the structurationist lexicon, a contradiction means an opposition of structural principles such that each principle depends on and denies each other at the same time.

As we mentioned earlier, the scheme is standardized and normative for productive purposes. If a distribution agent wishes to pursue the relationship interactions among recipients of his round, he must delay the theoretical performance of the latter, and postpone his or her finishing time and thus reduce his or her rest period.

From this perspective, the time allotted for a round now seems insufficient for a number of distribution agents. According to them, with the present allotted time, the service can only be unsatisfactory for all parties involved: for the postal company through the deterioration of its local service, and for the recipients reduced to anonymity by being

disconnected from their mailbox and for the distribution agent now alienated from his or her role of exclusive manual distributor.

It is interesting to note that this temporal “contradiction” and the prospects for the services associated with it share a disturbing resonance, as the cause or perhaps the effect, within the company itself in the polysemy of the term “customer”¹. For many distribution agents, the recipient being called “the customer” is an evolution of “user” to whom they performed the public service of mail delivery. Whereas, for the postal company, the customer was never the recipient, but rather the mail sender who paid for shipping².

When executives of the company now refer to the need to satisfy customer expectations, distribution agents understand that they are referring to those who place orders for a service. However, in their day-to-day reality, these economic actors appear very distant, impalpable, and almost ethereal. On their day-to-day life path, the stage of their routines, the customer remains for them that other to whom the mail is intended, that they meet and with whom they interact in a situation of co presence and who he or she wants to satisfy, since they are the only witness and beneficiary of their efforts.

Where the postal company continues a logical rationalization of the task force of distribution by optimizing the maximum flow of mail delivered in units of time, the distribution agent tries to handle the same time frame regardless of the volume to distribute.

However, over the course of rationalization projects, deviations from the norm become increasingly difficult to manage and the promotion of their endless search favors the intensity of inside and outside work. This largely explains the early starting times, voluntary waivers of morning breaks and the incomprehension of operational officers who suffer from no longer having the time needed to maintain the “relational” developed with “their” customers, except to delay the time they finish their service as some admit to doing:

“To be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of day-to-day life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to ‘make a difference’, that is, to exercise some sort of power” (Giddens 1984).

By changing the time data of the day-to-day routines of its staff in order to increase their productivity, the company generated not only an ‘unintended consequence’ of behavior of preserving the conditions of the interaction but also a ‘perverse consequence’ understood as “a contingent outcome that may be brought about in circumstances of structural contradiction” (Giddens 1984). This ‘perverse consequence’ is manifested by the tension felt by some agents concerning their usual temporalities inciting them to pick up the pace

¹ No doubt our fellow psychologists, semioticians or linguists, will find a pragmatic interest in studying the origins and effects of this polysemy.

² Today 85% of postal company customers consist of major clients such as mail order companies, press, banks and insurance companies, to whom they are under contract to distribute an amount of mail within given time constraints with significant financial penalties for non-compliance with agreed deadlines.

beyond that which is now expected in order to, at all costs, keep the conditions of autonomy so appreciated.

Most agents who strive to maintain a semblance of control over their time suffer this 'perverse consequence' daily. This resistance leads to fatigue, wear and tear and tension particularly noticeable during the phase of interior work ('internal' work) where everyone focuses only on their task in order to reduce interaction and get as quickly as possible to their round.

As we described in our results, the local supervisors in charge of their coordination, are particularly solicited daily by the various tasks presently assigned to them, and find neither the time nor the means to explain and defuse the situation.

Like the agents, the evolution of their own time equilibrium has created contradictions that today alienate them while they try to best handle the deployment of the plans for restructuring and the daily management of individuals and rounds. These objectives are concurrent objectives and more incentive than their promotion and compensation is now partly conditioned.

So as time goes by, people hurry past each other, alienate themselves and ignore each other. These behaviors eventually annoy the distribution agents who inevitably come into confrontation with the orders of the local managers. The latter want to apply the new operational policies and abandon past practices, which if irrationally preserved, threaten the organizational equilibrium on a whole. If some agents comply with them willingly, out of conviction or resignation, others refuse and the division is perceptible, views are in opposition, dissent appears, individuals confront each other and all suffer.

"Whereas contradiction is a structural concept, conflict is not. Conflict and contradiction tend to coincide because contradiction expresses the main 'fault lines' in the structural constitution of societal systems. The reason for this coincidence is that contradictions tend to involve divisions of interest between different groupings or categories of people (including classes but not limited to them), Contradictions express divergent modes of life and distributions of life chances in relation to possible worlds which the actual world discloses as immanent" (Giddens 1984).

Repeated throughout the day, these situations of tension, opposition, confrontation and demands eventually wear down the individuals, as we noted during our interviews. This can explain, at least partially, the degradation of the indicators noted by the territorial directorate.

In the framework of our structurationist analytical grid, and considering each distribution area of the centres studied as a spatio-temporal structure of its own, it is possible to foresee the change in the degree of autonomy of agents as a clash of balance in the routine in which they willingly anchor themselves, both to give meaning to their day-to-day lives and to take part in the sustainability of the institution, in their own way.

This challenging of the temporalities of socialization and recognition, questions the sense of action, involvement and life choices of a number of agents. Through a series of 'unintended consequences', this leads to a progressive degradation of the social climate of the centres studied and exposes the actors to the harmful effects of conflict.

Interest and generalization

As we have just detailed, the organizational changes made in the case we studied have gradually transformed the status of the time. In the past, a resource mobilized for the fulfilment of a public service has become, through the developments of organization and its environment, a discriminating and determining factor of industrial and economic performance.

This evolution now incites that operational or managerial actions be executed as a principle of maximum efficiency. This Taylorist approach is directed not only towards the organizational dynamics it creates but also towards maximizing the return on time paid.

If any organization can be considered to be a temporal metronome, in the sense that it requires its members to adjust their individual temporality to its communal temporality (or meso temporality), a quest for measurement and performance continued today, then it tends to encourage communal temporality to use its lineage to induce temporalities constitutive to a constant quest for improvement. From normalizing, it becomes ordaining.

Caught in this vise, each hierarchical level limits itself to its own logic of objective time, in spite of the effects produced on adjacent levels. Hence, interaction diminishes, coordination crumbles, communication becomes mono logic, the sense of community disappears, temporalities clash and the essence of the organization itself wanes.

In this exhausting and harmful context where the sense of collective action becomes uncertain, some actors do not hesitate to divest from the collective temporality to recover from accumulated fatigue (sick leave) or to focus on their individual temporality (unannounced absence). To avoid reaching this level of aporetic desynchronization, the organization must be able to recognize and appreciate the different temporalities that constitute its common temporality (or meso temporality).

This reality, imperceptible in the phase of organizational homeostasis, reveals its complexity during periods of changes in the initial conditions of the original balance. Organizational change, even local, causes imbalance and provokes, by successive causalities, a period of systematic instability. The effects of this can be particularly harmful for both the organization and for those who have a stake in it, if the conditions of the change were planned erratically.

To ensure optimal conditions for the transition, the organization must be able, at every organizational change, to assess in $t-1$ the possible impacts on the conditions of the synchronization of the temporalities that constitute it, to ensure in t the conditions for maintaining their homeostatic balance and sustainability and in $t+1$, their complementarity.

If time is now the universal reference for performance, it should not be reduced to a strict management objective at the risk of the temporal organization, hurting its own cause and promoting radicalization and confrontation between the individual temporalities that constitute it.

Conclusion

The situation we have studied represents a moment in the organizational life of our case study. From its context, its current developments and the data we collected over a

period of 18 months, we have developed within the framework of structuration theory a demonstration showing changes in operational temporality to be a cause of disruption of 'structural principles', governing the areas studied and sources of 'unintended consequences' and 'perverse consequences', able to weaken both the organization and the individuals in charge of its day-to-day activity.

Naturally, the methodology used is insufficient to assess the structural dynamics as a whole. The structurationist principles developed by Giddens are based on the homeostatic character of the structural and our methodology allows us to address an episode of this dynamic: a temporary situation in the life of this organization that can be understood as an epiphenomenon of disruption of homeostatic balance as seen as a whole.

If the principles of structuration theory are relevant, the disturbance that we presented in turn will likely lead to a set of 'unintended consequences' or even 'perverse consequences', and in order to regulate this imbalance and enable the structure to eventually recover its homeostatic principle around new values of its structural principles:

"Homeostatic system reproduction in human society can be regarded as involving the operation of causal loops in which a range of unintended consequences of action feedback to reconstitute the initiating circumstances"
(Giddens 1984).

However, beyond this methodological consideration, the prospects that we see specifically concern the opportunities that time offers, and its concept of temporality as a subject of particular study to enrich and develop our understanding of their influence on organizational dynamics and more specifically with regard to episodes of organizational change (Staudenmayer et al. 2002).

In accordance with the use of organizational theory that differentiates levels of the individual, the group, the organization and possibly the company, it would be particularly instructive to study the temporalities of each level to better understand the different interactions that connect them and that allow them to equilibrate with varying degrees of success on a common punctual rhythm.

If this reality can be approached in a disciplinary perspective as it infers that each individual adjusts his or her temporality to a common temporality (Foucault 1975), it is also possible to understand it in an anthropological sense for which a community exists only around a common relationship to the measurement of time (Mauss & Beuchat 1904), the temporal reference without which there would be chaos (Evans-Pritchard & Panoff 1969).

While presently time has become in many organizations a strategic resource to such a significance that it has become convenient to over exploit those who hold it, yet with the risk of exposing the organization to the harmful effects of this excess, the time may have come to reconsider the position that this concept deserves to occupy in social theories.

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