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# Temporal Spans in Talk: Doing Consistency to Construct Fair Organization\*

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## Abstract

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It is generally understood that time, among its other aspects, is a resource in organizational life. In this paper, we take an interpretive perspective to this notion by considering temporality as a verbal resource in the work of organizing. We introduce the concept of 'temporal span' and discuss the ways in which temporal spans in talk serve to establish consistency as an ongoing attribute of organizational reality. Empirical examples drawn from an ethnomethodological study of human resource managers demonstrate interactions during which these managers invoke temporal spans to construct 'fair organization'. We discuss the use of temporality as a verbal resource with respect to the interactional practices of human resource managers and the quality of consistency in organizational life.

**Descriptors:** organizational discourse, human resource management, organizational justice, ethnomethodology, temporal span, time

## Introduction

Towards the end of the 1990s, the Clinton Administration in Washington declared that its policies and actions were creating a 'bridge to the twenty-first century'. This talk of actions in the present that would pass over the temporal divide of Y2K and emerge as results at some future time and place invoked the metaphor of a bridge. In this paper, we take a different approach to time and its bridging effects by focusing on the ways in which 'temporal spans' occur in everyday organizational talk. Such 'temporal span talk' involves ways of speaking that link images of the past or the future with the present for organizational purposes. Specifically, we consider the spanning of time between past and present, or future and present, such that organizational activity in the present maintains the quality of consistency or fairness. Through situated examples of organizational talk involving human resource managers, we demonstrate instances in which utterances concerning organizational actions in past or future time frames are brought to bear on the topic of present action. Such verbal practices, we claim, are one way in which human resource managers enact 'fairness', a quality requisite to sustaining their institutional role.

The paper is organized in four sections. In the first section a conceptual

framework is established for discussing the work of human resource managers and time as a verbal resource. The second section describes our research methodology. In the third section, empirical examples are presented and discussed. Finally, in the fourth section, the implications are discussed.

## Conceptual Framework

### Responsibilities of Human Resource Managers

Much of the literature on organizational justice assumes that managers are responsible for maintaining a fair workplace (see, e.g., Sheppard et al. 1992). Human resource managers, in particular, are charged with the responsibility for maintaining this quality in organizational life. This link between human resource management and issues of fairness or justice draws on an extensive body of theory and research (see Cropanzano and Randall 1993; Sheppard et al. 1992). Traditional organizational justice inquiry invokes a functionalist approach and generally concerns the perceptions of employees about the fairness of organizational policies and procedures. Such theory suggests that there are various components that contribute to an individual's sense of fairness (Adams 1963; Leventhal 1980). In particular, Leventhal (1980) notes, *consistency* is a principal constituent of perceptions of procedural justice. Indeed, human resource managers themselves express the importance of maintaining consistent standards and rules as a central aspect of their role (Forray 1998).

As the organizational point person for all manner of employer and employee-related problems, the everyday work of human resource managers means dealing with 'organizational trouble'. Such 'trouble', or 'social disruption' as discussed in the sociological literature, represents what the layperson might describe as 'a problem' (Mills 1957). While 'trouble' may be any situation with the potential for conflict or ill will, perceptions of unfairness or injustice are clearly one form of trouble. Yet, as organizational actors in formal positions of leadership, all managers have the authority to define and frame situations for others (Smircich and Morgan 1982). Human resource managers, as *managers*, frame situations for others to sustain the perception of fair organization.

Employers and employees alike expect the human resource manager to *smooth* or work out trouble, because trouble impedes the performance of individuals and the organization. An important part of the work of human resource managers can be viewed as an ongoing effort to anticipate and avoid trouble, both for themselves and for the organization. One way in which human resource managers avoid trouble is by *not* allowing perceptions of *unfairness* to occur. Thus, their ongoing orientation is to ensure that *all* actions are perceived as fair and consistent over time. The work of the human resource manager is to maintain the perception that organizational actors are continuously engaged in constructing a fair organization.

This paper describes some of the ways in which the interactive practices of human resource managers avoid trouble by creating and sustaining fair organization for themselves and others.

Viewed from an interpretive perspective (Burrell and Morgan 1979), *fairness* and *consistency* are not simply the outcomes of particular policies, but qualities of organizational life, ongoingly created between organizational actors. This view suggests that 'fair organization' is constructed by organizational actors through interactional practices or talk that establishes consistency as an attribute of the scene. In other words, in this view *talking* is a practice of reality construction (Berger and Luckmann 1967) to which we must attend; or, as Gronn (1983) notes, *talking is the work*. Thus, the taken-for-granted speaking practices that constitute attributes of consistency or fairness are of theoretical interest, and, as human resource managers themselves state, human resources work is relational (Forray 1998). This implies that human resource managers must 'work through talk' to construct and sustain 'fair organization' as an ever-present organizational reality.

As an interactionist framework for organizational study, ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) provides a means of understanding this work by attending to the ongoing practices that are taken-for-granted by the actors themselves. Verbal practices provide one such way of discovering the organizing features and commonsense aspects of everyday life. Such an approach allows us to describe the verbal practices that produce qualities of social reality (Clayman 1988). Drawing on this interpretive framework, we describe how this attribute — consistency as fairness — is an accomplishment achieved by 'talking temporality'. In so doing, we demonstrate that fairness, rather than simply an aspect of organizational life established by particular policies, procedures and structures, is sustained through the construction of 'temporal spans' in everyday talk.

A temporal span describes the connecting of past to present, or future to present, in talk. This concept describes a little-noticed relationship between time and organizing; namely, the ways in which temporality serves as a resource in everyday talk for constructing organizational attributes. Our interest concerns the manner in which temporal spans are verbally constructed as part of the ongoing work of organizing. In particular, we focus on how the flow of time is used in certain interactions to construct consistency as an attribute of fair organization. We present examples of verbal interactions between human resource managers and other employees in a number of different organizational settings. We demonstrate how these actors invoke the future or the past as a means of sustaining a dominant reality. We suggest that such temporal spans, created interactively in talk, are a way in which human resource managers *do consistency* to construct fair organization.

### **Time as a Resource in Organizing**

In previous research, time and organization theory have been integrated in a number of different ways (see, e.g., Bluedorn and Denhart 1988; Clark 1990; Gherardi and Strati 1988; Hassard 1991). Here we focus on time as

a resource, since, as Fine notes, 'Time, like the concept of organization itself, is a resource that can be negotiated or symbolized, and is treated as real, yet simultaneously known through our experience of it' (1990: 96). However, in contrast to streams of research which seek to optimize the use of 'time' to achieve organizational and individual goals (see, e.g., Adam 1995; Fine 1990; Hassard 1991; Perlow 1999; Yoels and Clair 1994), we note the ways in which time is an implicit part of everyday talk. As scholars interested in conversational practices suggest, time-related characteristics are inherent in language-based exchanges, both in constructing an ongoing dialogue and in maintaining continuity (Hewitt and Stokes 1975), and, as such, provide a verbal resource for organizing.

Indeed, language in everyday use depends on many temporal cues for interpretation. Intricacies of pause and sequence enable taken-for-granted ways of engaging in conversation (Sacks et al. 1974), while culturally sensitive differences in the pace of speech provide cues to status (Gumperz 1982). As Boden (1997) explains, everyday talk in organizations establishes temporal frames in daily and recurrent agendas, strategies, and decisions of organizations. Members use talk to establish routine and recurrent features of that organization, and thereby the ongoing maintenance and evolution of the institution across time and space.

Time-related talk is not merely talk 'about time'. Instead, talking itself constitutes both the interaction order (Goffman 1959) and an ordering of the organization as a whole (Boden 1994). Temporal frames provide meaning-making structures that frame both individual and institutional experience, linking past, present and future through the codification of knowledge as a social memory, and the congruence of participants over envisioned futures (Butler 1995). Such temporal frames form 'a wide range of temporally ordered resources which both constrain and facilitate other organizational activities ... . Temporal frames constitute an overarching framework of accountability through which members orient to, and account for, the interlocking timetables of organizational life' (Boden 1997: 9). In this paper, we develop the concept of *temporal span*, the linking of past to present, or future to present, as a discursive practice for establishing consistency between organizational moments.

The managers who participated in this study may consider time to be a scarce resource within the organizational milieu, but this understanding of time was not investigated. Instead, an emergent result in the micro-sociological analysis was the extent to which temporality was an implicit, cognitive resource. This is not surprising for, as Gergen notes, 'Narrative accounts are embedded within social actions: they render events socially visible and typically establish expectations for future events' (1994: 187). Temporality is a tacit resource in the construction of narratives. As Taylor and Wetherall suggest, 'Time is a resource to be drawn on in a speaker's ongoing discursive work, in order, for example, to present an identity, establish a truth or defend an interest' (1999: 39).

Some research describes how stories select and sediment organizational experience as shared past, establish identity as ongoing present, and pro-

ject possible future scenarios (see, e.g., Boje 1991; Martin et al. 1983). As such, individuals may explicitly connect or dissociate themselves from a particular place as they describe it at a specific time (Taylor and Wetherall 1999), or display discontinuities in relationships of self to past, present and future (Leccardi and Rampazi 1993). In contrast, our research demonstrates ways in which discursive practices provide temporal links that bring past and/or future together in the social construction of current reality. In this study, the men and women involved enacted their role as human resource professionals by using temporality in their talk to create consistency as an attribute of 'fair' organization.

### **Research Methodology**

This study was conducted using an ethnomethodological perspective; that is, an orientation to 'an extant, achieved orderliness in everyday activities and a commitment to discovering organizational features of direct interaction' (Maynard and Clayman 1991: 385). Ethnomethodology, along with other forms of interpretive scholarship, focuses on language or 'talk' as the means by which the everyday features of social life are constructed and maintained. Verbal routines, as an aspect of talk, display the underlying speaking practices employed by individuals in conversation that establish particular qualities of the scene (see, e.g., Clayman 1988). These are considered actors' own methods for sustaining an intersubjectively shared reality. Such routines provided the empirical data for an analysis and description of human resource managers' practices for producing and maintaining consistency as a quality of organizational reality.

This approach focuses on the way in which human resource managers themselves are creating what they consider to be 'fair organization'. Human resource managers say that being fair is being consistent, while being inconsistent represents trouble (Forray 1998). In this sense, the verbal practices described in this project are understood to be these human resource managers' practices for sustaining the reality — fair organization.

Five individuals from five different organizations located in New England participated in this research. Each was the most senior member of their HR (Human Resource or Personnel) department, a position that afforded each a generalist approach to the domain of the human resources function and an extensive interface with managers and employees from different departments. The principal form of data gathering was field observation, with data recorded through audiotaping and field notes. Over two hundred hours of observation, along with individual interviews, established that these HR managers defined organizational fairness as 'consistency'. Conversations between HR managers and other organizational members were collected and analyzed, as described below.

The justice occasion, the unit of analysis in this study, describes an interaction that involved the making, applying, or interpreting of organizational policy or procedure. Justice theory (see, e.g., Sheppard et al. 1992) sug-

gests that it is during these types of occasions where the dominant 'fair organization' reality is most likely to be challenged by counter-themes of 'unfair organization'. In other words, it is on these occasions that human resource managers must work to sustain the sense that 'nothing unusual is happening here' (Emerson 1970).

The unit of observation is the verbal routine. Structurally, a verbal routine is similar to a speech act (Searle 1969) in that it indicates a specific occurrence of talk. However, our use diverges from speech-act theory and other taxonomies of message-exchange analysis in that the focus is not on the functional aspects of message production (e.g., assertives, directives, expressives, etc.) but on the content or what is being said. For example, one participant commented, 'As we did with the capital uh uh planning groups and (inaudible) planning groups last year ...' This segment of talk was coded as *recalling the past* to focus on its content as an activity. Analysis then examined how the sense of the flow of time was discursively produced and used within such segments of talk.

Ultimately, 243 instances of verbal routines, displayed across occasions, the five individuals, and their locations, were used in analysis. On examination of these separate instances of talk, interpretation frequently noted the ways in which the verbal routine included temporal spans. That is, these segments of conversation included utterances with emergent meaning concerning organizational actions in past or future time frames while, at the same time, bringing these actions to bear on the topic of present action. Of the 243 instances of verbal routines studied, more than 70 percent involved temporal dimensions. Two broad categories of interaction, described as *Recalling the Past* and *Projecting the Future*, were identified. In each temporally dependent practice, different time frames were brought together, or 'seamlessly accomplished', as an essential element in sustaining consistency as a quality of shared reality. Five examples are presented below to demonstrate the form of temporal spans used in talk to establish consistency or avoid inconsistency for both present and future organizational reality. Pseudonyms are used to characterize the organizations.

## Results

### Recalling the Past

As creations of human consciousness, all organizations have a past. Indeed, organizational stories abound about prior people and events. Within the storytelling process, members often portray knowledge of the organization's history as being fundamental to understanding present circumstances. In such everyday telling of history, organization is created and recreated. As members refer to previous events and circumstances, organization becomes defined and redefined for them.

As the following examples depict, the past is available as precedent and may be offered as a referent for present activity. A temporal span is created

when this precedent is invoked, linking present circumstances to past activities. As such, a temporal span discursively sustains the human resource manager's comments as being consistent with an established pattern. In establishing consistency, the actions of the present are to be regarded as normal and appropriate to the situation.

**Example 1: Establishing Consistency**

In the following example, the HR Director at Education is meeting with a committee of non-academic supervisors and managers from across the organization. These individuals serve as liaison to the non-academic staff, a segment of the organization that has only recently been included in discussions of governance and policy. One of the HR Director's purposes for the meeting is to inform the group of an upcoming review of the compensation system for non-academic staff. As such, it is considered a *making procedure* occasion because the manner in which the review will take place is the subject of discussion.

The HR Director has just informed the group of the upcoming review of the compensation system. He has indicated that a new advisory committee will be formed to evaluate proposals from outside consultants so that one may be hired to facilitate this work. The HR Director then describes the process being used to form the new advisory committee.

*HR Director:* 'So, um, that's the way we see the committee shaping up. Um, what I would hope that in and and ask this committee to think about is two things really as far as membership on that committee goes. Um, as we did with the capital planning groups and ( ) planning groups last year, um, it might be helpful, it would be very helpful if you thought about some nominees for the President to consider, um, of people you think might make good candidates to serve on this committee.'

Initially, the HR Director frames the nature of committee composition by soliciting the involvement of those present in forming this committee ('what I would hope that in and and ask this committee to think about'). He then invokes a temporal span, discursively linking a proposed action ('if you thought about some nominees ...') to a prior event ('as we did with the capital planning groups'). In so doing, past practice becomes 'present' to be used as a benchmark or guideline for current action.

The HR Director's verbal benchmarking defines the reality of the present as fair in that it is consistent with past practice. However, it is not enough simply to invoke the past in order to sustain consistency. To establish fairness as a quality of the scene, the HR Director must invoke a temporal span that is legitimate to the situation. In this instance, committee input in forming the advisory committee conforms to, and reconfirms, legitimate standards of procedure. Fair organization is sustained through the *doing* of consistency in talk.

**Example 2: Establishing Consistency**

In a number of situations, some form of trouble has occurred, such that a human resource manager is called upon to apply organizational policy in a



way that involves interpretation of that policy, and of the facts, circumstances, and people connected with it. 'Applying' occasions, such as these, may require more effort to sustain fairness than others, because they involve multiple interpretive agendas and scenarios of consistency. Actors must work together to develop not only a shared definition of the problem, but also to create a plan of action that is viewed by everyone as an appropriate response to the nature of the trouble. Sustaining consistency under these circumstances requires a more elaborate display of recalling the past.

At Small Production, an organization of less than 200 employees, the HR Manager is the sole human resources employee. This one individual is responsible for a broad array of human resource concerns, including confirming that the legal requirements of employment are maintained. As with many small organizations, informal communication among employees is commonplace and the HR Manager is particularly aware of this. Much of her work involves maintaining the uniformity of employment practices. A lack of such uniformity, particularly given the informal social structure of the organization, represents a problem for the HR Manager.

On the following occasion, the HR Manager and the new Production Floor Supervisor are meeting at the HR Manager's request to discuss problems she has noticed with the Supervisor's completed employee timecards. The HR Manager has noted that an employee's pay was not docked for 20 minutes of lost time. The interaction proceeds as follows:

*HR Manager:* 'It's all right. If you want to bring that to Nancy's attention then we can ... but we just have to make sure we're real consistent 'cause I know, one week, Paul Wong came up to me and he brought probably about a dozen cards and said, "why am I getting docked? You know if people aren't getting docked." So, they really watch it. And ...'

*Floor Supervisor:* 'He grabbed other people's cards?'

*HR Manager:* '... made copies of them and ( ) them out. Yeah, yeah. So ...'

*Floor Supervisor:* 'I thought you weren't supposed to touch other people's timecards.'

*HR Manager:* 'I didn't know where he had gotten copies. He actually came up with copies, not the real cards, and I didn't want to make that an issue. And so what we did was we went through and it was the week that the, um, time changed? Remember when we had ...'

*Floor Supervisor:* 'Yep.'

*HR Manager:* '... fall back? Um, and the clocks were off, so everyone was late by six minutes or something ...'

*Floor Supervisor:* 'Um hm.'

*HR Manager:* '... like eight minutes, um, so he said you know you're not docking all these people, which you should, and I said, "Well, we, the clocks were wrong; we didn't dock anyone ...!'

*Floor Supervisor:* 'Right.'

*HR Manager:* '... on that, um, but they're and and so other people have been have been docked the way he had been, so we, just because we knowing that people watch, we have to make sure that we're real consistent.'

*Floor Supervisor:* 'Yeah.'

The presenting issue for the HR Manager is the time card error, and, in the current interaction, it is necessary both to identify the problem and to develop an appropriate solution to it. As such, both the problem and the solution are subject to interpretation. To sustain 'fair organization', the HR Manager has to work to establish consistency as a quality of both the problem and the solution.

In this case, the consistency of the problem with other such problems is asserted as a coda to the corrective ('bring that to Nancy's attention'). In the first temporal span, the HR Manager presents a story about past trouble ('one week, Paul Wong came up to me and he brought probably about a dozen cards and said, Why am I getting docked? You know if people aren't getting docked.'), which is provided as a guidepost to current concerns ('So, they really watch it'). This temporal span provides the application imperative, 'as history shows us, inaccurate timecards are trouble' (our paraphrase).

As the Floor Supervisor questions the nature of these events, the HR Manager provides additional details of the past that are now salient to the present. This includes a reference to the basis for the consistency of the procedures used in the past ('well, we, the clocks were wrong; we didn't dock anyone'). In so doing, her story provides a correction imperative to the fair organization of the present, that is, *then* we had consistency across people, and we must also have consistency across people *now*. This frames the suggested response as being appropriate to the situation.

### **Example 3: Avoiding Inconsistency**

If a consistent organization is a fair organization, then, alternatively, an inconsistent organization suggests that it is an unfair organization. In avoiding inconsistency, human resource managers must dissuade others from a proposed course of action if that proposed action can be viewed as being inconsistent with past actions. Avoiding inconsistency necessitates both an assertion of the nature of the present, and the elimination of a proposed course of action. As such, temporal spans are invoked to display the constraints on present actions because of prior events or activities. In so doing, human resource managers use temporal spans as a means of sustaining a shared view of the interactional present.

One example of this practice occurred at Production where a union organizing campaign had begun a few weeks earlier, and where avoiding inconsistency was a particularly salient imperative for the HR Director. During this period, the VP Marketing has suggested a reconfiguration of the Customer Service and Warehouse Departments. The HR Director, the VP Marketing, and the Distribution Supervisor meet to discuss restructuring personnel at one of the two company warehouses. The Distribution Supervisor has proposed laying-off one of the two current warehouse employees, both of whom are minorities, in order to create a new supervisory position. Such a course of action represents trouble for the HR Director and, in the following interaction, she works to dissuade the Distribution Supervisor from her suggested course of action:

*HR Director:* 'then what would, for example, if, if the new, if we were eliminating a warehouse person and adding a customer service rep it would be a little easier to justify, assuming we had some documentation for lack of capability of one of these guys coming into the job. But we're talking about a warehouse person to a lead warehouse person, and we don't have really much documentation that says that either of them have been worked with, developed, you know, or failed to develop at the higher level ... That's why I'm asking: "Are there any alternatives to resourcing this thing, that we aren't thinking of? Assuming these two guys are good enough to keep (pause); cause we've kept them until now?''.'

In this example, the HR Director works to dissuade the Supervisor from his proposed course of action (laying off an employee) by constructing a view of things, such that both actors view the proposed layoff as an impossibility. To do so, the HR Director invokes three temporal spans to display that what is possible in the present is restricted by what has, or has not occurred in the past. This talk makes visible the imperative of consistency by linking the circumstances of the past to the present, to constrain how actors may view the circumstances of the present.

The HR Director offers an acceptable future ('if we were eliminating a warehouse person and adding a customer service rep') that is tied to a possible past ('assuming we had some documentation for lack of capability...'). However, this is a past that does not exist, thus removing the proffered alternative from present consideration. This temporal span is then juxtaposed with another that addresses current circumstances ('but we're talking about a warehouse person to a lead warehouse person') and events in the past that constrain their actions ('we don't have really much documentation that says that either of them have been worked with, developed, you know, or failed to develop at the higher level ...'). With this second temporal span, she again provides a past that is a constraint on the present, but one that deals with the proposed action.

Her third temporal span is brought to bear on other possibilities for action. At the end of the sequence, the HR Director asks for other suggestions ('Are there any alternatives to resourcing this thing that we aren't thinking of?'). Once again, she frames what is possible ('Assuming these two guys are good enough ...') with a temporal span of the past as a constraint on the present ('cause we've kept them until now').

Each of the three temporal spans in this dialogue works to place the lay-off outside the correct view of the situation. The omissions of the past, specifically the lack of prior documentation of a problem, and 'we've kept them until now', are temporal spans that link the past with the present and provide a framework for dismissing the Distribution Supervisor's proffered course of action as being inconsistent with present activity. In this talk, fair organization in the current situation is redefined in terms of what is possible, because the suggested course of action is constrained by past actions.

### Projecting the Future

In the previous examples, temporal spans connect the past and the present. In other situations, however, managers' temporal sequencing connects the future to the present. The future, when interactively introduced into the scene, becomes, in this sense, 'empirically present'. In other words, when the future is introduced into the present as an object or apparent fact, it is available as a resource for actors' meaning-making activity. Further, such activity is a means of establishing the consistency of the present with a future yet to occur. Whereas temporal spanning to the past relies on a precedent, no precedent yet exists for projecting the future.

With an implicit (and often explicit) mandate to protect the organization from employee-related problems, it is not surprising that human resource managers exhibit a keen sensitivity to the impact of present actions on future circumstances. Avoiding trouble means anticipating and circumventing that which is problematic, ahead in time. In this sense, projecting the future can be considered as a form of pre-emptory sense making. It is with these discursive practices that human resource managers construct meaning for potential future events.

#### Example 4: Creating a Consistent Future

When problem solving, human resource managers must develop a course of action that is not only consistent with current circumstances (that is, fair) but also one that will solve the problem. However, since any course of action is, itself, a potential problem, and may be viewed as unfair by others, human resource professionals test the dependability of their actions by projecting responses to them. In other words, human resource managers use a temporal span by forecasting the future, linking possible future problems to a considered course of action in the present.

On the following occasion at Education, the Assistant HR Director has received an inquiry from another department where an employee had complained about the inconsistent application of overtime policy between the departments. The HR Director and Assistant HR Director discuss the steps taken to investigate the matter and the appropriate response to the supervisor who received the complaint. The Assistant HR Director relates her conversation with another office regarding the nature of the overtime restrictions and current policy. As she does so, the HR Director invokes a temporal span that brings possible futures into the present.

*Assistant HR Director:* 'I should have known better than to call them but, I mean, they're the people that see this stuff. So, I called her and she said, "Oh well, I'll look and see if I've got anything." First thing I know, I get a call. Well, Paul and Susan and Nancy and Kristy and I just discussed the whole thing, and here it is. I said (laughs), "Well, I've resolved that all right." And, of course, it was. She, they were going to take the leaner [view], you know. So, I'll get back to him and say, "What you're doing is fine, just the way it is".'

*HR Director:* 'So how is this going to not satisfy Paul Goodfriend and the, and the others?'

*Assistant HR Director:* 'We'll just say that is the way we think it [works].'

*HR Director:* 'Will they be able to illustrate examples where it's been done the other way?'

*Assistant HR Director:* 'Hmm, no. I don't know [but] ...'

*HR Director:* '[So] it's just a different thing?'

*Assistant HR Director:* 'Yeah.'

After describing a sequence of activity before proposing her course of action, the Assistant HR Director outlines what she plans to say to the department manager ('what you're doing is fine, just the way it is'). The HR Director then asks questions about potential problems that may occur in the future. In so doing, he engages in temporal spanning, introducing the future and future problems into the present, as an aspect of their interaction. His questions concern a future where their agreed-upon actions and position do not avoid trouble for themselves and the organization ('how is this going to not satisfy ...'). In particular, he forecasts a future where the potential action is inconsistent with organizational circumstances, i.e., where trouble occurs ('Will they be able to illustrate examples where it's been done the other way?'). Although the Assistant HR Director is unable to confirm the nature of this future ('Hmm, no ... I don't know but') her response is sufficient for the HR Director to confirm that their actions are not inconsistent, and thus are appropriate ('it's just a different thing').

#### **Example 5: Avoiding an Inconsistent Future**

Most interactions involving employee problems concern scenarios from which multiple courses of action may result. Some potential outcomes represent future trouble. For example, if a potential action presents a threat to the smooth working of the organization because it involves legal action or the like, it is clearly an undesirable action and represents a problem for the human resource manager. Human resource managers therefore work verbally to convince others that such a possible course of action is undesirable. This work of persuading interactively often includes a temporal span that introduces a possible future into the present. To avoid unfair organization, human resource managers provide a run-through of an undesirable course of action to foreclose the possibility of its coming to pass. In other words, they engage in demonstrating that a particular future is inconsistent with current concerns or circumstances.

At Healthcare, a large organization in the medical care industry, a massive organizational redesign has been in process for the past 10 months. The corporate policy with respect to this restructuring is to lay-off as few people as possible as a result of this process. The HR Department has focused much of its resources and its efforts on finding other positions within the organization for workers who are not selected to continue in the newly redesigned units. In the following interaction, the HR Director meets with an employee, displaced by the organizational redesign, and the employee's Area HR Manager. The employee has threatened to file a grievance in order

to obtain a position in the redesigned unit. The two HR individuals are encouraging him to take a transfer to a different unit. For human resource managers, any grievance represents a disruption of the smooth working of the organization. Thus, a grievance is clearly a problem that should be avoided. Both the Area HR Manager and the HR Director use a temporal span, offering two different scenarios of the future:

*Area HR Manager:* 'Or, you know, if we go the grievance route and you prevail, you'll get the job. My personal view might be that, in that case, you might win the battle, but you'd still have to fight the war. So that's an issue that I would be concerned about. The fact that you know they don't really want you in that job at this point in time, I think is why I've drawn that conclusion. Even if you win the battle, you're still going to have to fight the war in a sense.'

*HR Director:* 'And that's not inconsistent with what we'd talked about. The issue, the crux of the matter for the grievance really is, you know, they're looking at the specifications, the ideal candidate. We're looking at a policy that says if you meet the minimum qualifications you get the job because you're displaced.'

*Employee:* '[Right]'

*HR Director:* 'And that's really the crux of the issue with the grievance. You know, I think if this can be a solution, it's a better solution because you're in a position that they feel you're qualified to do, you're suited to do beyond the minimal qualifications, okay?'

In this example, both human resource managers work to construct a present where the grievance action is eliminated naturally, as a possible course of action. In order to do this, and sustain fair organization, the potential grievance must be viewed as inconsistent with the nature of their discussion. That is, that the three are engaged in a conversation about what is best for the employee.

The HR managers provide two temporal spans, each representing a different future. The Area Manager first provides a future that includes the grievance ('if we go the grievance route and you prevail, you'll get the job') and then characterizes that future ('even if you win the battle, you're still going to have to fight the war'). In this instance, the future is depicted as being inconsistent with present circumstances, i.e., what is best for the employee. The HR manager then provides a temporal span that reframes the grievance, presenting a different future ('if this can be a solution ... you're in a position that they feel you're qualified to do ...') that is consistent with present circumstances.

To avoid unfair organization, human resource managers must maintain a consistent relationship between present activities and possible future actions. To do so, human resource managers may frame a particular view of the future as adverse and their efforts may be seen as an attempt to foreclose the likelihood of that future. In other words, through temporal spans they engage in demonstrating that a particular future is inconsistent with current concerns or circumstances.

**Discussion**

Interactions of human resource managers include verbal practices through which current activity is interpreted. Justice occasions, as a particular type of human resources interaction, focus attention on human resource managers' methods for constructing fair organization. In order to sustain 'fair organization' as an attribute of interaction, actions must be established as being consistent with a previous pattern or examined in the expectation of future circumstances. The range of examples presented in this paper is summarized in Table 1 and discussed below.

When the verbal practice involves recalling the past, human resource managers connect past history to a problem or proposed future. This creates a shared frame for allowable actions, constrained by past events. When the verbal practice involves projecting the future, the human resource manager relates the current action to a future that is consistent with organizational goals or present circumstances, with the expectation that future troubles will be silenced or avoided. Rather than emerging as explicit story telling or the deliberate creation of a shared vision, these practices are seamlessly enacted during talk.

During the verbal practices of recalling the past, temporality is a verbal resource that may be used to draw on a past action as a referent. The human resource manager's discursive work ensures that once a problem is identified, past history is seamlessly introduced into the interaction before the

Table 1  
Summary of  
Examples of  
Temporal Spans

Verbal Practice	Justice Occasion	Temporal Span in Talk	Talk as Doing
Recalling the Past	1. Procedure for choosing committee members at Education	Proposed action <i>links to</i> past action.	Establishing consistency
	2. Time-card policy at Small Production	Past trouble <i>links to</i> present action <i>links to</i> past problem/past action.	Establishing consistency
	3. Reassigning employees when restructuring a department at Production	Future action <i>links to</i> possible past action that did not happen. Present trouble <i>links to</i> past action. Future action <i>links to</i> past action.	Avoiding inconsistency
Projecting the Future	4. Coordinating overtime policy between departments	Future action <i>links to</i> future problems <i>links to</i> past actions.	Creating a consistent future
	5. Avoiding an employee grievance at Healthcare	First future action <i>links to</i> future problem for individual. Second future action <i>links to</i> no problem for individual.	Avoiding an inconsistent future

current action is defined. By creating a span from present to past, then back to the present, temporality acts as a verbal resource for creating a shared frame for allowable actions. Alternatively, by ensuring that present actions do not deviate from past practices, the past may be recalled in order to constrain the present. The temporal span created from future, to past, to present, provides a verbal resource through which the human resource manager constrains actions to conform to past outcomes.

During the verbal practices of projecting the future, temporality is a verbal resource that may enact or rehearse a future action, or forecast trouble ensuing from future actions. In each case, a temporal span is created between present and future actions. In some instances, when a potential future action is proposed, the human resource manager introduces future problems as part of the interaction, often through a sequence of asking questions. In particular, a future is described where the potential action is inconsistent with organizational circumstances; that is, a situation where trouble occurs. Actors then adjust their proposed actions to increase the possibility that such troubles will be avoided. When a human resource manager interactively creates this temporal span from present, to future, and back to present, the outcome is to align potential actions with imperatives of the present.

In other instances, these practices verbally construct the future as the present, then interactively move even further ahead in time. The human resource manager's interactional work includes a temporal span from the present to one or more possible futures, with the expected outcome of silencing a potential action. Alternatively, when forecasting trouble, verbal practices allow a span between the future and two different present actions, with the outcome of avoiding future problems.

Our examples illuminate the taken-for-granted ways in which temporality is a part of everyday talk, since, in the instances of talk examined here, an eavesdropper (as readers become for this (re)presentation of a situated activity) hardly notices the temporal sequence. That these instances are situated within particular organizational contexts — the interactions between human resource managers and other organizational members in situations involving the making or applying of organizational policies and procedures — suggests that such verbal practices are a necessary resource in the ongoing work of human resource managing. A future focus on the talk of human resource managers in other contexts may contribute to a richer understanding of their work.

The human resource managers involved focused on maintaining their construction of fairness in ambiguous situations: any circumstance needed to be framed as consistent (or not inconsistent) so that unfairness could not exist as an aspect of the scene. As discussed previously, without enacting the consistency that defined fairness for them, these people were not human resource managers. Others may have different perceptions of the motivations of these individuals, but our methodology requires that we examine the micro-sociological practices within the situation. The human resource managers were oriented towards fairness, because to do otherwise would run counter to the imperatives of their role. When an action was potentially



'unfair' (i.e., inconsistent), the interactional accomplishment of shared meaning needed to bring to the surface what was fair and leave behind anything unfair.

This research project was initially designed to examine the nature of organizational justice from an interpretive perspective. The construction of fairness as 'being consistent' developed from conversations with human resource managers about their work. However, as a component of justice, the quality of consistency is unlikely to be particular to these circumstances alone. Future research is needed to provide an analysis of the patterns of discourse and activity with respect to the concept of justice and to attend to the nature of these practices in other contexts. In fact, these practices may be part of a larger category of talk that sustains fairness as an attribute of social action.

Within each verbal practice, temporality is discursively enacted as a temporal span and, in so doing, creates and recreates a sense of time in the organizational context. When recalling the past, the span bridges current imperatives with past organizational actions. When projecting the future, the span bridges immediate actions and future scenarios. From the perspective of human resource managers, actions are constituted and socially constructed as consistent by bringing the past into the present, or connecting the present to the future, through talk. In one sense, then, these may be considered examples of 'doing time'. The temporal spans are made possible through a multiplicity of organizational times, flowing between past and present and future. Each enactment of temporality is particular to the organization, but when other external events are plotted onto these internal times, actors are able to understand the structure of events and to plan action (Gherardi and Strati 1988).

Temporal spans occur within the rhythmical nature of social life, where, as Hassard (1991) notes, time is understood as a collective phenomenon, as a product of social consciousness. In organizational settings, daily and recurrent agendas, strategies, and decisions may be collectively understood as temporal frames that create social order (Boden 1997). Here, however, fragments of collective memory of a particular organizational event are directly connected to a present action, or a shared vision of a future action is created and connected to the present without any intervening temporal processes. The past action or possible future may occur at any point 'in time'. In other words, the temporal span links the present to an action alleged to have happened weeks, months, or years ago, or to an action that may happen at any time in the future. In discursively constructing a link between present and past or future and present, end-points of the temporal span become connected, irrespective of how they are separated in objective clock-time. Such temporal spans, discursively produced, create consistency — maintaining and sustaining fair organization over time.

**Note**

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