Perceptions And Experience Of Time-Space Compression And Acceleration: The Shaping Of Leaders' Identities

Stream 1: Identity: Constructed, Consumed and Politicised

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"To have personal and collective pasts and to posit individual and collective futures are aspects of what it means to be human" (Jenkins, 2002).

Abstract

This research builds on Jenkins' (2002) theory of time, identification and human nature through an empirical study of leaders' experiences in a large UK public sector organisation. By applying Lewis and Weigart's (1981) typology of social time to the accounts of the leaders studied within this research, the study finds that the leaders' self-identities are constituted through the discourses of self-time, interaction-time and organisational-time which are embedded, stratified and synchronised through social and organisational practices. In the leaders' narratives of career, work, life and family the research identifies dominant discourses of time compression and acceleration, as well as both cyclic and linear discourses of time. Each of these temporal constructs is found to be embedded in and manifested through the continuous construction and shaping of identity. The implications of these findings for our understanding of the contemporary working life of leaders and their identities are discussed.

Keywords: social time, identity, self, leaders, discourse

Introduction

In a post-millenial world which is increasingly driven by discourses of time "acceleration" and in which time is treated as one of our most scarce commodities, it is perhaps surprising that so little research has been undertaken within the field of organisation studies into how time and identity are mutually constituting and reinforcing through discourse.

Time can be found shaping self-identity at many levels. The biological and social phases of our life: youth, adolescence, maturity, middle age, old age, are each socially marked out by symbolic transition points. These periods, for many, shape career and life projections and the linear march toward the next "prize". This upward mobility, however, is often followed in later life by the focussed quest for survival and retention of the identity of one's earlier productive years in a western economy which perceives age as "burnt out" and seeks to dispose of many long before their statutory expectation of retirement. This is a world divided into annual, monthly and daily cycles, each containing markers to indicate the passing of time, and each bringing its own perceived pressures. Not only are we apparently all caught up by the social tyranny of linear time, we also find ourselves oscillating between nostalgia for the past or imaginings about the future as our memories and imagination transport us from the present, back to past and forward to future, representing an equally powerful narrative of cyclical time.

This research builds on Jenkins' (2002) premise that discourses of social time are crucial in shaping self-identity. Since organisations tend to magnify our perceptions of time, and exaggerate challenges to our self-identities, the research has taken as its
focus the discourses of time, leadership and identity found amongst a group of senior leaders in the UK Health Service nearing the end of their careers. I ask how their experience of time at the individual, group and organisational level is embedded in their accounts of their work, careers and personal lives, and in turn how their identities as leaders shape their narratives of time and the temporal discourses dominant in their accounts.

The UK Health Service which has been selected as the site for this research has undergone significant changes over the last few years, coming under growing pressures for results and increasingly tight timescales for their delivery. A government preoccupied with managing targets for public consumption has meant that many senior leaders in the NHS have already lost their jobs after very long service as a result of failing to achieve the required results, as determined by waiting lists, and other largely temporal measures. The group of Chief Executives selected to participate in the study had all been in posts at this level for eight years or more, and many were consequently approaching the age where retirement from the service was a very real prospect. Since some had already been moved out of their prestigious operational jobs into less intensive project roles, it was considered likely that the temporal assumptions of these senior managers had been challenged by the extreme changes they had faced. The research investigated the implications of these challenges for the shaping of the leaders' self identity. The paper also asks more broadly how studies of the social construction of time can assist us in the study of identity in organisations.

The Sociology of Time

Hassard (1990) has suggested that, "Time is the missing variable in sociological analysis". Previously the domain of physicists, philosophers or psychologists, only recently has interest been growing in time as a social and socially constructed experience. Bash (2000) bears this out, arguing that "the study of the social is still relatively ahistorical, and insensitive to how temporality is embedded in social life" (p. 187).

Anconna et al's (2001b) study seeks to address this question through an analysis of the field. They find that sociological research into time lacks coherence, and displays little dialogue across disciplines. They do find, however, a consensual view of time as socially constructed, and a dominant focus on the western linear construct of clock time. This view, they suggest, depicts time as a resource that can be measured, used and traded; a view which, they suggest, has contributed significantly to the commodification of labour.

Two of the earliest studies of social time were those by Sorokin (1943/1964) and Gurvitch (1964). Sorokin's research (1946/1964) found the prime functions of socio-cultural time as being synchronisation and coordination. By this he means the sequential timing of one socio-cultural phenomenon with others; and the organization of the time system for continuity, orientation, and to reflect the rhythms of socio-cultural systems. Gurvitch (1964) offers a complex model depicting a range of eight "social times", each of which occurs more frequently than others at specific levels of the social, ranging from the macro- to the micro-social.
Recent interest in the sociology of time has also led to a number of articles which spotlight writing on social time embedded in the work of a number of scholars known for their broader sociological writing such as Durkheim (Miller, 2000); Mead (Flaherty and Fine, 2001); Weber (Segre, 2000); and Elias (Tabboni, 2001; Newton, 2001). Durkheim’s (1912/1995) concern with the rhythms and dynamics of sacred-profane and collective-individual life; Mead’s (1932) attention to the dynamics of social interaction and the shaping by the present of interpretations of the past; and Weber's interest in the subjective experience of time and how this is constrained by social and institutional experience have all recently become important to scholars of social time.

Elias (1992) addresses the development of the social norms of clock time, and time as a means of both social regulation and self-constraint. He suggests that the puzzle of time cannot be resolved while a division is perpetuated between physical time and social time. He goes on to suggest that visualising time as a sequential flow is challenged by the interconnectedness of past, present and future, but resolves this temporal puzzle to his own satisfaction by recognising these concepts as representations or symbols that assist people to categorise. Thus, the concepts of past, present and future include in their meaning the relationship of the person experiencing them to a sequence of changes.

Elias's work, like that of Gurvitch (1964), seeks to connect macro-societal developments and processes with micro-level changes in manners, morals, mentalities and emotional expression (Van Iterson et al, 2001). Unlike Gurvitch, however, Elias is very clear of the symbolic and constructed nature of the labels we use to interpret time, including those of past, present and future.

Luke (1996) has pointed to the growth of "fast capitalism" and of "informationalization" symbolised by "mass telecommunications, electronic computerization, cybernetic automation, and rapid transportation".(p.126) Informationalization, he suggests, gives voice to previously unheard local groups and renders "a unilinear view of the world and history impossible". With the electronic society, he suggests, the organisation has become disembodied, and re-imagined as shifting networks or flows. Bauman (2000) has also addressed the issue of the apparent compression of time and space, and suggests that the software era has led to an era of instantaneity. This has meant that with no time-space distance separating the end from the beginning, the two notions have lost their meaning.

**Time and organisations**

Despite the growing interest in time in sociological studies, there has, until recently, been little research applying the concept of time to organisations. The exceptions are a special issue of the Academy of Management Review (Oct, 2001) on Time and Organisation (Conlon, 2001), in which Anconna et. al (2001a) argued that the temporal lens used in conducting organisation research needs "sharpening", and an edited collection by Whipp, Adam, and Sabelis (2002) the following year.

These volumes address different facets of time in organisations, but raise many further questions. Lawrence et. al (2001), for example, set out to uncover the temporal dynamics of institutionalisation, arguing for studying time in its social context, as it is
tied to events, the meaning of events, and the relationships among them. Goodman (2001) adds to this the perspective of critical timing issues, asking what kind of time lags may occur in terms of responses to interventions in organisations. Lawrence (2001) draws attention to timing norms as a field of research. She differentiates between norms created solely by the workers as illustrated in Banana Time (Roy, 1959) and those imposed by an external authority.

Other research into temporal practices in organisations has included a focus on the importance of time in community life, as manifested, for example, in "a variety of activities, norms, memories, timetables, expectations and experiences" (Kenyon, 2000, p. 39); the negotiation of temporal boundaries in a project group indicating the importance of time in work planning (Zuchermaglio and Talamo, 2000) and a study of time culture in relation to payment systems (Bell, 2001).

Lee and Liebenau's (2002) research on time in organisation studies found a distinction between clock time and social time. Studies of clock time focused on deciding time, time orientation, time as resource, working time and time pressure. Studies of social time focused on the multiplicity of time, and changing patterns of time where time is seen to be affected by various organisational factors e.g. the influence of new technology. They found that while there are many studies of clock time there are few on social time, many studies tending to think of time as a constant rather than as a variable that can be changed by social and organisation elements. One exception to this is Huy (2001) who concludes that the socio-temporal context of an organisation undergoing a change process will reflect the interactions of clock time, inner time, and the social time of the workforce at any moment in the process.

The hegemony of linear time and its claim to neutrality has been challenged by a number of feminist scholars who have demonstrated the circularity and repetitiveness of women's time embedded in the social relations of daily life, contrasting with masculinity's future orientation, and the constant focus on the future associated with linear time (Odih, 1999). Collinson and Collinson (1997) note the historically embedded gendered assumptions found in practices of "work presence", a theme also raised by Hochschild (1997) in "The Time Bind", her empirical study of the workplace as surrogate home.

**Time and leadership**

The leadership dimension of time has rarely been the focus of study, but is discussed by Anconna and Tushman (2001), who suggest that leaders enact temporal leadership when they manage across multiple time frames, decide how fast to act, and match the pace of change to the competitive environment. They argue that adopting the temporal lens introduces a new language into organisation studies, and enables us to ask different questions and adopt different methodologies.

Collinson and Collinson (1997) have noted that few studies address time in relation to managers, except to focus narrowly on speed and schedules (e.g. Mintzberg, 1973). They draw attention to the impact of what they call "time-space surveillance" in organisations and note that managers are increasingly being evaluated on their time-management and their workplace presence. Rutherford's (2001) study in an airline and a merchant bank reached similar conclusions, finding that the women managers were
less able to compete for senior positions, since they did not have equal access to time as a result of the gendered division of domestic labour.

Sabelis’ (2002) work on how top managers survive amid the increasing complexity of modern times included a parallel goal of studying time in these organisations. Her research found that the leaders proposed compression as a coping strategy for the acceleration in organisation life. In other words, leaving things out and getting to the essence of things was seen as a mechanism for dealing with shorter time frames. At the same time, however, Sabelis recognised that this mindset itself might actually promote acceleration by "implying that rational reduction of information, emotions, and alternatives is necessary to reach organizational and individual goals" (2002, p. 102) and leading in turn to a reduced attention to creativity, invention, empathy and open-mindedness.

**Time and identity**

Since time pervades our lives and shapes our perceptions in such a fundamental way, and since following the social conventions of time is rarely challenged in modern bureaucratic society, it is only a small step further to suggest that time plays a major part in the shaping of identity. Little research has explicitly linked time with identity. An exception, however, is the anthropologist Richard Jenkins (2002) whose argument is that time and identification are best conceptualised together:

"Our past is who we have been, and the future is fundamental to imagining who we will become. However, in order to have either past or future we need a stable present, the space of our everyday lives".

Within a broader discussion of the present he builds on the work of Bergson, Husserl and Mead to suggest that:

"Each individual has a variously defined and overlapping array of presents. There are other people's presents; or to put this another way, each individual's sense of present will vary according to purpose, context and so on. Each of these different 'presents', in and out of which we move all of the time, has its own tempo, its own register, measurement and prioritisation of time, its own boundaries" (p. 272).

He goes on to suggest that "the present is the only possible source of the past and the future: neither makes any sense without the present, from which to be perceived and within which to be produced and reproduced" (p. 273)

On identity he says:

"That we do have personal and collective pasts, and can imagine individual and collective futures, is central to whatever it means, as humans, to be who or what we are…Most human beings experience themselves in a taken for granted present tense as relatively unitary and stable entities…If we are to conceptualise identity as something other than reification, a fixed thing, some kind of stable present is required, as the context within which negotiation and change can take place." (p. 275)
For Purser (2002), however, this sense of self promoted by an individual who is situated in the present, with an eye on both the past and the future is under threat by the real time instantaneity of the digital age. He points to the temporal alienation experienced in chronoscopic temporal environments where there is discordance between clock time and lived time:

"In other words, the more one tends to embody and obey the mechanical / digital rhythms of clock time, the greater the feeling of loss of situated presence in time" (p163)

This malaise, he suggests, often leads to what Rappaport terms as telepression- a form of hyperactivity which is fixated on the present, with the future only narrowly defined and usually not very distant, and which, Purser suggests, points to a much neglected relationship between time and meaning. As Purser illustrates, this problem is also illustrated in Sennet's work in which temporal alienation is shown to have led to the loss of long term commitment and the inability to delay gratification.

Lewis and Weigart's typology of social time

Like Gurvitch who suggested that different forms of social time predominate at different social levels, Lewis and Weigart's (1981) study also focuses on levels of social time. The first is cyclic-time, which occurs at the societal-cultural or organisational levels. This represents the daily, weekly and yearly cycles that influence social interaction. These repetitions, they suggest provide the basis of stability, and also indicate to us when it is time in our biographies and "careers" for certain events to occur. The second is interaction time, which assumes that all social acts are embedded within larger social acts and occurs at the level of the group. The third level is self-time, which is experienced at the level of the individual.

In self-time, they found that events quite distant in physical time, may be held in consciousness as clearly as what happened five minutes ago, and engrossing activities may produce the sense that self-time has ceased. This experience of timeless has been developed by Mainemelis (2001) who found that this state was frequently described by individuals who had become engrossed in attractive work activities. Mainemelis is also one of the few scholars of social time to make a connection between emotion and time (see also Keenoy et al, 2002), suggesting that emotional states presuppose the existence of time and specifically linear time (eg. anxiety, desire) since they assume a line of events running from past to future.

Lewis and Weigart argue that the three levels of time that they have identified are stratified, with cyclic (or organisational) time taking precedence over interaction time, and interaction time demanding precedence over personal time. As the complexity of industrial societies grows, they suggest, the temporal embeddedness of events in organisational, interactional, and personal time structures becomes more complex, the synchronisation of acts and actors within timetables and biographies becomes more problematic, and the stratification of social times more pronounced. This, they argue, can lead to a conflict of social time that profoundly affects the quality of life of members of a society. It is this theory that the research specifically addresses.

Lewis and Weigart stress the embeddedness, stratification, and syncronicity of these three forms of social time:
Temporal embeddedness works as a mechanism making the experience of self continuity, a permanent identity across differing situations plausible. Temporal embeddedness is a plausibility structure for the experience of the unity and continuity of an increasingly complex modern self. " (Lewis and Weigert, p. 93)

Lewis and Weigart suggest that each of these levels of time is interrelated, and that society organises and coordinates across these structures of social time: "The stratification of social times works as a mechanism making the experience of self- control and social control plausible as a single reality" (p. 93) The self oscillates from apparently acting as a free individual to following the timetables of the state or the schedules of the institution.

If one fails to time one's life according to temporal norms this can lead to accusations of deviance. Time wasting in our society is considered "a sin". To be rational is to plan one's life in order to achieve future goals and to synchronise one's life with that of the collective makes social order possible: "Synchronising one's life is a public achievement which merges the unbridgeable individuality of personal existence constituted out of embedded time with the irreducible collectiveness of social order constituted by stratified social times. " (p.94) Organisational time is often resented as it can encroach on self time. The over-commitment to organisational goals can be seen to encroach on interaction time e.g. family or friendship time and also on self-time. However, Lewis and Weigart also suggest that the formal organisations of modern society are "marvels of synchronicity".

This research asks to what extent the leaders in the Health Service experience their roles as conflictual in term of social time or "marvels in synchronicity".

Methodology

This research has drawn on Lewis and Weigart's typology as a framework for conceptualising the leaders' experiences of time and the shaping of their identities inside their organisations and in their lives beyond the organisation.

The research was conducted at the end of a leadership development programme run at Lancaster University during which the leaders enrolled on the programme were invited to consider their careers, leadership styles and the future of the Health Service. Interviews were conducted with 16 NHS chief executives and three of their Chairs, following their participation in this programme. The interviews focussed on their reactions and responses to the development programme as well as on their relationship with their work, their organisation, the nature of their leadership and their views of their personal development and their careers. Questions were asked about the programme itself, their leadership and careers, but no specific questions were asked about temporal issues.

The transcripts were analysed and coded, focussing specifically on discourses of social time found in the leaders' narratives. These discourses were then examined through the lens of Lewis and Weigart's (1981) typology of self-time, interaction
Discourses of social time in the narratives of the leaders

Discourses of social time in the narratives of the leaders were extremely common and deeply embedded in the narratives of the leaders of both organisations. The discourses of self time, interaction time, and cyclic time were all found to run concurrently through the narratives of these leaders, and these were indeed found to be embedded within one another, and stratified in terms of their interconnections. Synchronicity was seen as very important for the leaders. They were constantly attempting to balance personal and life trajectories and careers with the needs of their immediate groups, the demands and expectations of colleagues, friends, and families, and the organisational and societal expectations upon them to achieve certain goals at certain times. This was manifested in their perceptions of career, which was often described as linear.

Linear time

Many of the Chief Executives felt themselves to be in the mature phase of their career, and adopting a linear view, could perceive very little career time ahead of them. A strikingly linear view of life, career and identity was held, for example, by James\(^1\), a mature chief executive:

"I say to my children ‘for most of your life … … life is challenging and obvious in relation to career, looking for a partner, having your children, your job, better house, better job’ and when you have done all those things, which is where senior chief executives are, life’s challenges are more self selective.”

The recognition that their career trajectories were no longer clearly mapped out ahead of them, and that it was no longer simply a question of complying with social or peer group norms had occurred to a number of the chief executives and was considered by some as a worrying prospect. Sally, for example, confirmed:

"I have become more and more aware that I can make my own decisions on life. And in a funny sort of way that's – it has not been as liberating as it sounds – it actually worries me in fact.”

This was reinforced by Maria, who, at a similar age, was exhibiting similar preoccupations:

"In terms of shaping what I want to do, how I was going to manage my work life balance, how I am going to plan the rest of my career given that I am approaching 50. You know there is a limit of time and prospect”.

Brian, another mature chief executive appeared to feel the pressures of linear time to continue along a clear career path despite his age. Nevertheless he rejected these

\(^1\) All names are pseudonyms
pressures, appearing to be unable to envisage a new career path that would not encroach on his desire for more interaction time, choosing instead the status quo:

"Well this life-long learning concept – I mean for us at our age and seniority the future pathways are not obvious but the obverse of that is the scope for the future should be limitless really. And particularly in terms of the way one balances your life in terms of things other than work … so they are the main things… I mean I was in a position where because of my experience I could have applied to a range of opportunities going on around the country. But in my position I would get from it an extra £10,000 a year – I have to leave my family and my home for another part of the country, set up a new infrastructure of friends and personal interests and why would I want to do that?"

The linear discourse of career was also evident in Dean's words, the youngest chief executive on the programme:

"I did think what my next 10-15-20 years might look like because I think linear progressions don’t happen in the same way. I did think that when I became their age what sort of job would I be doing? Where do people go? I mean I am 41, let’s say I do another 7 years here like I did in my previous trust making me 48 – what happens next? … or I don’t have a plan. I am not particularly good at thinking through my career in that way. I have a sense of what it looks like for the following year but beyond that I don’t know."

Despite his desire not to plan, Dean's language suggests that he was nevertheless conscious that the hegemony of career would generate certain synchronistic social assumptions about progression and success in relation to age, irrespective of whether or not he wishes to subscribe to them, and whether or not he wished to actively manage or plan his career.

**Time as resource in short supply**

Time as a limited resource was a discourse that was common in the narratives of the managers. Many of the leaders interviewed appeared to thrive on that shortage, packing every moment of their day with intense activity, as indicated by Edward:

"I mean I had a meeting with the strategic health authority chief executive and the deputy director of HR from the NHS at 2 p.m. in (name of town), so I mean the programme finished at 10 to 1 and I was straight into the car to drive back to (name of town) because this meeting was in my diary for 2 o’clock.

For others, such as Maria, this manifested itself in her claim that time pressures were driving out all possibilities for reflection:

"I took away the papers and I thought ‘I’ll do it’ and of course you don’t and I think I didn’t have as much time for reflection because the job drives that out and there is always this challenge”.

The balance between self-, interaction- and cyclic time represented a continuous tension for the chief executives, with organisation (cyclic) time invariably taking precedence. The leadership programme which they had recently attended had triggered a greater awareness of the tensions of synchronicity and led some, such as Peter, to take steps to address these through consciously redesigning his identity:

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2 Most of the other chief executives on the programme were fifty or over.
"Well it is interesting you see because I came away from the programme determined to change the balance of my life a bit and put a bit less time into work. But then walked almost straight away into a huge operational crisis. So I have had to re-evaluate that over a longer period of time than I would have wanted to. But I think having come through those things now and with a little bit more time I am changing that, quite noticeably. Quite noticeably – while it is quiet, and while the weather is good I am going home and doing my garden, and learning to play golf. Which doesn’t mean that I am not thinking. I think I am clearing my mind a bit, I think I am thinking a little bit better by being able to do that. However can I sustain that when all the pressure…? Well you can’t when it is really getting difficult you have to get stuck in and do some sorting out. I recognise that for quite some time I have spent too much time at work and not working as … … as I might be. One of the harder things to do is to create some space to be able to think better.”

"Was there something specific that triggered you to think about the events in your life?"

"Just a general build up. … …

Pause here… Recognition – well – just recognition that I was spending far too much time and there are other things I should be doing either for myself or for the family."

A number of the chief executives were finding it difficult to synchronise the demands of organisational time, and still retain interaction time. In such cases self-time seemed to be almost entirely suppressed. Dean illustrated these problems

"So I feel that there is an awful lot to do. I sometimes think/feel that I might not be able to do it all. There seems to be so much to do in such short period of time and that I find daunting. So sometimes I leave work feeling low and I have already done everything that I thought I could do about an issue or regret that I couldn’t spend more time on something, or perhaps more importantly I have not spent as much time with people/individuals that I would otherwise have liked. And that I find difficult….It is not coming without its cost of time and family and everything else that ‘how long is this balance sustainable’

The problem of achieving synchronicity was even more marked in Nigel's case. In the interview, he seemed to be suggesting that as long as he was alive, the imposition on his self-time could be tolerated:

"I suppose really in terms of I can hardly say work/life balance… I knew it was bad and I have managed to make it worse but we have a strong family unit – that is tolerated but it is part of the strength really – or it wouldn’t be possible. And … … at the end of the day – if you are living and breathing and everything else it puts things into perspective.

So to some extent I am carrying that with me because I am getting quite a bruising from above which is not being as constructive as it could be and I am thinking ‘I can only do my best’. I wouldn’t say ‘I know I am right’, that may sound wrong – I know that what we do is moving in the right direction. Whether we have the time, support and help to make that work remains to be seen, but I can’t control that. . What makes it hard is thinking about family life and my own career and everything else – it all seems fairly short”.

In both Nigel and Dean's cases they had recently made personal choices to take promotion to bigger jobs, thereby deliberately putting themselves into the situations which they describe. In each case, however, it was clear that the imbalance they had created was barely tolerable.

For some, however, strategies had been found within the weekly or daily routine of cyclic time to make space for self-time. This meant finding a daily routine, such as going for a walk at a particular time of day or making space for a quiet time at the beginning of each day. For others it involved a weekly routine designed to combat the relentless time pressures of the weekly cycle.
Daniel, for example explained his strategy:

"I now work at home on a Tuesday. So I have to gear myself up for taking work home. Every Tuesday I know that I am not going to be here… things to read. It just means that I gain two hours…Well I suppose it reaffirmed that there was a lot – that there was a lot of life out there that it would be good to live and experience and getting the work/life – constantly working at the work/life balance is terribly important. And that we get … … and we forget what is really our priority. So just the physical separation I think was helpful and that has helped and also my wife has an occasional job that she is involved with …so we see each other on a Tuesday”

Fitness and health as a brake on the passing of time

The discourse of time as a resource in short supply appears to have its roots in the certitude that life is inevitably finite. It was striking that the linear discourse that dominated the identities of the chief executives, and equated career progression with the pursuit for bigger jobs was often substituted, particularly by the male chief executives facing the end of their careers, with a focus on physical fitness. The view that sport might rejuvenate the body and arrest the course of time appeared to offer the foundations of alternative new identities for these leaders. In response to the question: "Did you feel under some pressure to be making a move?” Brian replied:

“Well it is just the normal peer pressure – when you are having coffee at a conference with chief execs 'where are you now – why didn't you apply for that job?’ and size – the size of your organisation is perceived to be important …… which of course I relate to and it would be great to have a bigger job but the price for that is – you need to weight that. I mean I had some conversations with colleagues in the run up to the course about life's challenges and career challenges. It struck me because somebody said to me it would be good for me if I had some physical challenges as well as well as intellectual challenges in the job, because you know the intellectual challenges of the job are stimulating but also stressful at times. So I did things I have never done before. I mean I took up running and in my 50s I ran my first London marathon.”

For Brian, self-time had started to become disembedded from interaction and cyclic time in his recent pursuit of physical fitness. This new aspiration in turn seemed to enable him to challenge his belief that it would be "great to have a bigger job", a view strongly rooted in the discourse of a "successful" career.

The relationship between career and body is a recurring discourse in the Chief Executive's narratives, reflecting Elias's insistence that physical and social time cannot be detached. This attention to health may partly be the result of being in the profession, but it is also a reminder that time has both physical and social indicators, and that the social cycles, conventions and norms to which we subscribe throughout a lifetime are integrally related to the physical maturing, fertility, and then decline of the human body. Whilst space does not allow a deeper exploration of the relationship between physical and social time, this relationship was evident in some of the leaders' thoughts as exemplified by Harold:

"What I have done is sat down and had a talk with myself really about how I organise myself because I think starting every morning at 7.45 and working 60 hours a week and taking work home and everything else, now I’m 49 is probably not the most sensible way to organise myself in the next few years. And I need to give some careful thought to organising my working day and being a bit more flexible, making sure I take my annual leave – rather than
not take it, and it is a good opportunity just to rethink the way I work and to try and work in a slightly more flexible way.

Bruce too had considered this relationship in making the decision to give up his high profile job:

“Well I think … … you can thrive on the adrenalin and the buzz you get from other people. But ultimately I think … … I was getting to the age where I was in a quite high risk category – blood pressure was just about acceptable – things like that and it is potential threat … …that wasn’t the reason to do it, but I can see there were risk factors”.

Re-synchronising social times and reconstructing identities

Whilst many of the Chief Executives held a strong view of career as a linear activity, others were now questioning the trajectory that presupposes a correlation between experience, length of service and status (or big job). Those who were reaching their fifties were starting to feel destabilised, detecting that the organisation considered them to be past their prime. Sally, for example, whose anticipated career trajectory to the next operational chief executive job had come to an abrupt end, had found herself in a project role, and suddenly away from the "sharp end" where her leadership identity had been constructed over many years. She mused:

“I applied to become a strategic health authority chief exec and didn’t get appointed as one of the 28. And so I knew by November/December that I would definitely have to change direction and I had already thought that I would change – radically change direction. I had been chief executive for many years in different organisations and I thought I wanted to do something quite different for a while. I got more pain than I thought about whether I wanted to do something for a year - to do something useful but not be forced to make a very important decision too quickly. And I chose, I decided I wanted to do it.”

Sally's ambivalence at losing her "sharp end" role prematurely as she saw it was evidenced throughout the interview. On the one hand she admitted to feeling physically healthier, and to having re-established her relationships with her daughter and husband, as well as joining a choir. She acknowledged the difficulties she had been experiencing in her previous role, and recognised the conflict between self-, interaction- and organisational time:

“As a very pressurised chief exec you are very conscious of having no time most of the time to do anything”

On the other hand, in response to the question:

"Do you miss the sharp end?" She replied:

"Yes I do”.

She went on to demonstrate the contradiction she was experiencing between rationalising the need for more self- time, and a desire to revert to her previous leadership identity. Shifting constantly between nostalgia for her past career, and a recognition that a future identity with more self- and family interaction time might be equally attractive she oscillated between the two identities she had constructed for herself:
"It is making me think quite hard about what I should do next year and how I should focus my effort. I am still very keen on contributing to the sharp end and I feel – I think it has helped me to realise that in the choices that we have in our lives I would prefer to be working in a capacity that kept me at the sharp end".

Here, Sally's past leadership identity was continuing to shape her feelings about the present and her ambitions for the future. As she considered her future she appeared to be seeking synchronicity with her peers, many of whom were still holding sharp end jobs, and despite the improvement to her health and well-being since leaving her Chief Executive role, her dominant construct of self in the present appeared to remain that of sharp-end leader.

Many of the other Chief Executives were exhibiting similar preoccupations in relation to the synchronising of self-, interaction-, and organisation- time, and the stratified, embedded nature of these social times. As they re-balanced their engagement with each level of social time, they were either re-constructing their identities, or taking steps to preserve the identities with which they were familiar. Sally was not alone in fearing the loss of cyclic time which reinforced so much of her identity. Peter, who was closer to retirement, was also concerned, indicating that his sense of self was heavily shaped by organisational (or cyclical) and interaction time, and appearing uncomfortable with the prospect of additional self- time:

"What am I going to do when I wake up one morning and I haven’t got a diary which is full every day? Although I am not doing it at the moment, at different times I have been a school governor, a chair of school governors, been a governor of an FE college, the magistrates have an organisational – the governing body of that and they want me to go on to that – and I have just said I can’t do that. So I have got a whole range of things that I could well pick up again. So I, and I want to go at 60, so I have already got that bit fairly well planned out."

**Conclusions**

This research has reinforced Jenkins' view that "time and identification are intimately bound together" (p. 268) and that "consciousness, memory, knowing who we are and becoming are important aspects of identification" (ibid). Discourses of time were predominantly linear in the narratives of the leaders, however, the presence of cyclic time was evident as they slipped from present to past, remembering their past roles, and evoking these in the present. Their identities, though always in the process of becoming, appeared to have become comparatively stabilised until recent events had raised their awareness of the physical passing of time. However, they were now finding it much less easy to imagine the future.

Lewis and Weigart have pointed out that career is fundamental to one's social biography. They define career as:

"The passage of the person through a number of statuses which are meaningfully related to each other in a recognised sequence" (p. 89).

Career was conceptualised by most of these leaders as a trajectory, but as their career prospects were diminishing, they had started to develop an ambiguous relationship with this future. At a time when their lives were becoming destabilised and their future careers in question, they were articulating to themselves and others significant shifts in their identities. Reprioritising and re-synchronising social time, and bringing
self-time and interaction time into focus were clearly challenges for them all, both as individuals and as a group of peers.

The study has raised a number of important implications for further work on identity and time in organisations. The focus on discourse has highlighted the constructed nature of both time and identity. It has also enabled the illustration of how time and identification are interwoven in the lived experience. There is still much to be done, however: the emotion dimension of this study, for example, has been omitted since it constitutes a major study in itself; the gendered nature of time and identification, too, was evident throughout this work, but space did not allow this to be developed. Further empirical work on time and identity would significantly enrich the study of organisations. There is as yet little work that has applied conceptual frameworks from the sociology of time to the field of organisation studies.

This study has focussed on a group of leaders in transition. It has identified both the strongly-held identities from their pasts, and ambiguous identities of their futures, with their presents playing an important intermediary role. It has demonstrated that these identities are embedded in both the physical and social experience of time, and reproduced through language. The conceptual frameworks introduced by Jenkins and Lewis and Weigart have added richness to the interpretation of the narratives of the leaders.

References


