

EMERGENT TEMPORAL EFFECTS IN COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

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ABSTRACT: *Based on a qualitative case study of a multiyear, multicity attempt to forge community coalitions against substance abuse, this article analyzes three categories of organizational temporalities: cycles, event streams, and temporal style. Community initiatives based on collaboration, coalitions, and cooperation, projects that “bring everyone to the table,” provide an opportunity for naturalistic observation of the unanticipated, but analyzable, effects that emerge when mismatched organizational temporalities interact. This article lays out a theory of these emergent effects of interorganizational time conflicts in communities of organizations. The aim is not to argue for the primacy of temporal effects over other dimensions but to include them in a multidimensional view of the causes of problems encountered in multi-organization community initiatives.*

Keywords: community; time; organizations; community initiatives

“Time” is a common scapegoat when broad-based community social interventions face implementation challenges or produce disappointing outcomes: “too little, too late”; “there are only so many hours in the day”; or “the timing was wrong.” These clichés suggest, respectively, that the right program arrived at the wrong moment and did not last long enough, that the right people were doing the right things but not enough to make a difference, or that the effort might have succeeded had it occurred under conditions prevailing at some other point in time. Mindful of such observations, both funders and program designers have become “temporally generous,” supporting longer projects, providing resources to ensure that new programs represent net increases in effort, and requiring more planning, timelines, and milestones and documentation of community readiness.

Nevertheless, even programs with generous temporal endowments seem to be plagued by time-related problems. Participants complain that organizers waste their time in meetings, project leaders cannot keep on schedule, deadlines are missed. Familiar phenomena such as Parkinson’s law—the tendency of work to expand to fill the time available (Parkinson 1957)—and the planning fallacy—the

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tendency to underestimate the time required to complete a task (Buehler, Griffin, and Ross 1994)—are illustrated on a regular basis. Residents want immediate action; staff members want more careful planning. Demonstrated results are demanded long before they can be detected. Symbolic battles are fought over when to hold meetings, how much advance notice is necessary, or whose busyness is busiest.

Such problems are sometimes offered as evidence that still more temporal resources are needed. Perhaps more frequently, however, people involved in, or affected by, community programs, as well as those who design, fund, or evaluate them, interpret “time troubles” as evidence of underlying personal, organizational, or community pathology (Ryan 2006). Failure to produce a plan during a planning period, for example, is taken to reveal a project director’s incompetence. The difficulty of coordinating meeting times leads participants to question one another’s commitment (cf., Epstein and Seron 2001). Activists with a long history in a community call newcomers “naïve,” and the latter deprecate veterans as anachronisms. Leaders who miss deadlines are labeled “bad managers,” organizations that fail to coordinate are “incompetent” or “corrupt,” and in general communities that botch program implementations are “disorganized” or “lack political will.”

This article argues that the interpretation of time troubles as indicators of failure in commitment or other pathologies can represent an analytical error. This error is rooted in a flawed view of time as a quantitative resource and of communities as vessels into which more of this resource can always be added. “Time troubles” are, to the contrary, a normal and predictable feature of programs implemented in (urban) communities, rooted in the temporal structure of the organizations and organizational networks that constitute community. Time troubles are, in other words, manifestations of ordinary interactions between normal, but divergent, organizational temporalities.

COALITIONS, COLLABORATION, AND COOPERATION

In recent decades, community coalitions, collaboratives, and interorganizational partnerships have been widely touted by government and philanthropic funders as well as by social scientists as sources of solutions to social problems (Aguirre-Molina and Gorman 1996; Connell et al. 1995; Davis, Lurigio, and Rosenbaum 1993; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Israel et al. 1998; Kubisch et al. 1995; Warren, Rose, and Berggrunder 1974; Winick and Larson 1996). The supporting logics vary: an ecological sensibility that recognizes that problems are multifaceted and require holistic solutions (Bronfenbrenner 1979), the idea that coerced cooperation can overcome political conflict (Laumann, Galaskiewicz, and Marsden 1978), “it takes a village” (Clinton 1996), and the belief that bridging gaps and reducing duplication will lead to a more efficient delivery of services (Lackey, Welnetz, and Balistrieri 2000; Weiss 1978). And so do the forms: interprofessional collaboration, intersectoral coalitions, community involvement, and multi-organizational cooperative ventures.

Typically, extant literature advocates the use of community coalitions and collaboratives, reviews success stories (e.g., Wandersman and Florin 2003), or offers

analyses of “what works and what doesn’t” (e.g., Gray 1985). Very little, however, is written about the challenges faced by programs that employ such approaches (Kadushin et al. 2005). In the substance abuse field, for example, there is a growing literature about how and why coalition interventions should work (Butterfoss et al. 1993; Chavis 1995; Wandersman and Goodman 1991), but hard evidence that such programs do work to reduce drug or alcohol problems is at best limited (Berkowitz 2001: 213–27). A common logic in this literature is to identify a number of success stories, note shared features, and then declare these *sine qua non* for success.

It is rare, though, to read descriptions of what these collaborations and coalitions look and feel like in the everyday life of local communities in which they take place (Lindholm et al. 2004). One characteristic, familiar to anyone who has spent time on the ground, is conspicuous by its absence from the literature on community programs: they are phenomenally “messy” and fraught with difficulties. The lack of acknowledgement of the messiness of collaboration in conventional research offers those who experience problems on the front lines little beyond the diagnosis that something is wrong with their community. Such pathologizing can mask the fact that some of what occurs when organizations try to work together to solve community problems is actually a “normal” manifestation of the kind of thing a “normal” community is as an arena, and what “normal” organizations are like as tools, for such activity.

“Normal” is used here in the sense introduced by Charles Perrow in the 1984 book *Normal Accidents*. Writing about accidents in complex technological systems, Perrow suggested that problems are “normal” when they arise from “the way failures can interact and the way the system is tied together” (p. 4) rather than from extraordinary events alone. “It is possible,” Perrow argues, “to analyze these special characteristics and in doing so gain a much better understanding of why accidents occur in these systems, and why they always will” (p. 4). Such efforts at understanding are hampered, he suggests, by the tendency to explain accidents in terms of “operator error”: the system is vindicated; the humans are blamed. It is alarming, to Perrow, that we fail to think about how ordinary organizational problems can have very extraordinary consequences when the systems involved are, say, dealing with radioactive waste or an unforgiving environment (p. 10).

Though less dramatically compelling than nuclear disasters, a similar pattern can be seen in social technologies such as community coalitions and collaboratives. Failures in multi-agency community interventions—our chosen approach to many social problems—can have profound consequences. And when we account for things going wrong with what is missing in, or wrong with, a particular community and the actors who compose it—a community equivalent to “operator error”—we make the same analytical mistake Perrow describes. Following Perrow, what is needed is insight into the “normal” difficulties associated with the technology of coalitions and collaboration, if we are to understand why these problems emerge and always will in programs like those under consideration here.

One area where things go wrong is, again, time. Scholars of time have introduced two basic insights: time is multidimensional; time is socially constructed.

They have suggested many different conceptual schemes for categorizing temporal properties of social entities (e.g., Hawley 1950; Lauer 1981; Moore 1963; Ryan 2004; Sorokin and Merton 1937; Zerubavel 1981). Pace, speed, and tempo, for example, refer to the rate at which events occur. Cycle and rhythm describe patterns of recurrence. Sequence is the order of events, and duration their temporal "size." A time horizon is how far forward or backward in time an entity's awareness reaches. In addition to societies, situations, and events, these properties have also been extended to organizations (Anaconda and Chong 1996; Bluedorn 2002, McGrath and Rotchford 1983; Schriber and Gutek 1987; Zerubavel 1979). These temporal characteristics may be functionally related to an organization's activity, as when produce is delivered in pre-business hours to wholesalers so that retailers can have it on their shelves during shopping hours (Hawley 1950), or they may be primarily symbolic, expressive of cultural boundaries, as with a religion's choice of a Sabbath (Zerubavel 1982a).

Community initiatives based on collaboration, coalitions, and cooperation, projects that "bring everyone to the table," provide an opportunity for naturalistic observation of the unanticipated, but analyzable, effects that emerge when mismatched organizational temporalities interact. This article lays out a theory of these emergent effects of interorganizational time conflicts in communities of organizations. It does not argue for a one-dimensional view in which temporal effects are primary but rather for their inclusion in a multidimensional view of the causes of problems encountered in multi-organization community initiatives.

THE CASE: COLLABORATION IN NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

This analysis is based on a multiyear study of an effort to build a community-wide coalition against substance abuse in New Haven, Connecticut (Ryan 1999). Supporting materials are drawn from studies of parallel efforts in a number of other sites (Jones and Fisher 1997; Jones and Suazo-Garcia 1998; Kadushin et al. 2005; Lindholm 2001; Lindholm et al. 2004; Ryan 1999). The research involved fieldwork, interviews, and document analysis.

In early 1989, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the largest health philanthropy in the United States, announced a new program called "Fighting Back" (FB), which would "find out whether, by consolidating existing programs, activities, and other resources into a single community-wide system of prevention, early identification, treatment, and after-care services, a community can achieve substantial reductions in the use of illegal drugs and alcohol" (Jellinek and Hearn 1991: 79). Fourteen communities were selected on the basis of their ability to document their drug problem and propose an approach likely to reduce demand. Each received one- or two-year planning grants, with the understanding that they would be awarded \$3 million over five years upon successful completion of a community plan. Several sites, including New Haven, later received additional funds allowing the project to operate for a full decade.

In New Haven, the program consisted of a small staff and several large committees. One, a sort of ongoing "blue-ribbon" panel on substance abuse called "The Citizens Task Force," comprised organizational elites from across the community.

Other committees formed around prevention, treatment, neighborhoods, and youth. Staff worked out of city hall and consisted of an executive director, clerical staff, and several outreach workers and community organizers. The project's annual budget was on the order of \$500,000 (Ryan 1999).

FB AS TEMPORALLY INNOVATIVE

Twenty-five years after the community action programs of the 1960s (Dahl 1961; Lowe 1967; Powledge 1970; Sviridoff 1994), there was, at the end of the 1980s, both in New Haven and nationally, a desire to "get it right this time." New Haven activists responded enthusiastically when the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation self-consciously structured into the program several "temporal" lessons of the past—namely the recognition that (1) timing is important, not all communities had reached the stage of readiness for a given intervention; (2) change would require a net increase in effort; and (3) results would emerge only slowly. These lessons deserve scrutiny.

First, "timing." The original request for proposals had argued that FB's impact would depend on it being the right idea applied at the right time. Each community was on its own trajectory, and selecting those that were at the appropriate stage of readiness would ensure the program's success. The country, the Foundation had asserted, was ready to consider demand reduction as a strategy in the war on drugs, but the challenge would be to identify communities that were ready to implement the "FB approach" (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 1989).

Second, "effort." Programs like FB are recognized to consume time as effort "time consuming" (cf. Lasker, Weiss, and Miller 2001). Many initiatives in communities that had begun to "fight back" were staffed by volunteers (Falco 1992), but success, the Foundation believed, would require more person hours than either volunteers or a mere reshuffling of existing personnel could supply. The program would need a net increase of effort, and so funding would be generous and grantees would be enjoined from using it to pay for existing projects.

Finally, "duration." Interventions like FB also consume time as duration. In addition to requiring raw effort, the development of a "coordinated system of prevention and treatment" would be a slow process. FB's designers recognized that even with extra temporal resources, change would not occur overnight and that too many past programs had disappeared before making a difference. To address this issue, they allocated two years for planning and five years of implementation, both atypically long for such programs at the time.

TEMPORAL PROBLEMS DESPITE TEMPORAL PLENTY

In timing, effort, and duration, then, the temporal inputs to the program were state of the art. But despite the attention given to temporal issues, conflicts and problems related to time were endemic.¹ Disagreements often took on intensely moral tones; every time-related decision seemed to offend somebody. Even meeting times became a hot issue: midday meetings excluded working residents, late afternoons

slighted those with children, evening meetings required professionals to put in extra hours, and the police would only meet at the beginning or end of shifts.

How could so many temporal problems arise in such a “temporally enlightened” program? In the literature and in our fieldwork, all the usual explanations appear: lack of political will, in-fighting and fragmentation, program design flaws, incompetence, and lack of leadership. Both emic and etic diagnoses explained outcomes in terms of pathology: someone or something was deficient, abnormal, or substandard. If the city or project staff or specific decisions had been “normal” or “good,” the reasoning seemed to go, all would have been well. If participant organizations had been able to put aside self-interest, successful cooperation would have been possible. Each explanation assumed that absent pathology, programs like FB would work. Such thinking ignores the possibility that these problems should be expected as a normal feature of such programs, and it undermines the experiment implicit in their implementation: “Does this work?” Despite awareness that “these things happen all the time,” participants tend to look to exceptional characters or circumstances for explanations. And the analytical literature on community programs does the same thing, effectively failing both activists and policy makers by focusing on the positive prerequisites associated with supposed success stories, passively implying the conclusion that unsuccessful communities simply lacked one (or more) of these.

TIME TROUBLES, COMMUNITIES, AND ORGANIZATIONS

What, though, if time troubles, like Perrow’s (1984) accidents and Durkheim’s ([1895/1938] 1964) crime, are “normal”? They were, after all, observed in most FB sites and quite widely within the New Haven site. And although the literature on coalitions and collaborations generally avoids cataloging them, participants, activists, funders, and researchers always nod vigorously in assent when problems like these are acknowledged. The assumption that they are normal and ordinary, rather than pathological and in need of causal explanation, shifts the analytical task away from the search for a smoking gun and toward identifying properties of programs and the arenas in which they take place that give rise to time troubles. What, in Durkheim’s ([1895/1938] 1964) words, makes time troubles “necessarily implied in the nature of the being” (p. 59)? To answer this, we need to look more closely at the arena in which (here, urban communities) and tools with which (here, organizations) programs that employ organizational coalitions and collaboration to solve problems are carried out.

THE ARENA: COMMUNITIES AS COMMUNITIES OF ORGANIZATIONS

There is a long history of debating the definition of *community* in the social sciences (e.g., Hillery 1955; Keller 2003), but implicit in most definitions is “people” (Diaz 2000). In practice, though, when community initiatives such as FB bring participants “to the table,” those participants are, by and large, representatives of organizations (Lackey et al. 2000). The “turf wars” they hope to end and the gaps they hope to fill are organizational. Indeed, the arena in which such community

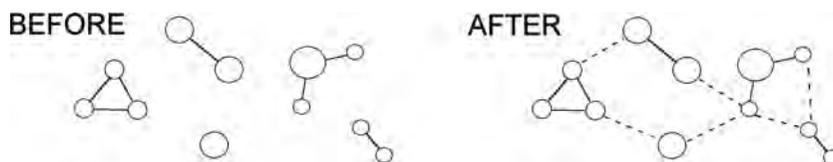


Figure 1

Hypothetical Community as Loosely Connected Network of Organizations

initiatives operate might well be called a “community of organizations” (Ryan 1999). Consider the very premise of the program as expressed by its designers:

Despite the proliferation of local demand-reduction programs and activities, there has been little attempt to tie such endeavors together. . . . There is no common understanding of the problem, no consensus regarding priorities . . . no overall strategy for deploying the community’s multiple resources . . . it is hardly surprising that few communities . . . have turned the corner. (Jellinek and Hearn 1991: 79)

“Common understanding” refers not to the citizenry but to a population of organizations. Jellinek and Hearn (1991) implicitly envisioned “the community” as a disconnected network of organizations. Small clusters of organizations may work together, but overall, the network was fragmented and disconnected, as shown schematically on the left side of Figure 1. One goal of the program was to forge new links in the community, turning this loose network into a more connected system (right side of Figure 1).

THE TOOLS: ORGANIZATIONS ARE TEMPORALLY STRUCTURED

Despite their graphical representation here as hollow circles, organizations are objects with internal structure; of central importance here, they are temporally structured and differ from one another temporally (Bluedorn and Denhardt 1988; Dubinskas 1988; Sorokin and Merton 1937; Zerubavel 1981, 1985). In police and fire departments, for example, time is structured in terms of rotating shifts and response to unanticipated events. Hospitals share the cyclical shift structure but (except for the emergency room) are less subjected to the unexpected (Zerubavel 1979). Neighborhood groups, by contrast, build on family time, with schedules dominated by the comings and goings of children to school and adults to work. Student groups change with semesters (Kenyon 2000). Some organizations have neatly bounded periods of activity (such as 9 to 5), while members of others must always be “on call” (Zerubavel 1979). State agencies often have time horizons compatible with long delays and drawn out processes, whereas local activists operate in a world where windows of opportunity may rarely open for more than a few weeks.

For convenience, I refer to these temporal properties of organizations collectively as an “organizational calendar.” An organizational calendar includes an organization’s internal schedules, its periodic activities, and the streams of events

inside and outside the organization that spur it to action. It also includes temporal style: an organization's typical pace of operations, the way it demarcates days and times as ordinary or special, and the temporal behaviors and attitudes it expects from its members.

COMMUNITIES AS NETWORKS OF "CALENDAR"

If communities are networks of organizations and organizations have "calendar," then Figure 1 can be redrawn: communities of organizations can be seen as loose networks of calendar (Figure 2).

Among clusters of frequently interacting organizations, mutual adjustment, or what students of time call "entrainment" (Bluedorn 2002; Hall 1983; McGrath and Rotchford 1983), gives rise over time to within-cluster temporal similarity or complementarity and between-cluster temporal differences (Moore 1963; Zerubavel 1981). Thus, the gaps in the network effectively divide a community of organizations into "temporal enclaves." The mutually entrained organizations in an enclave share temporal properties such as a sense of "how long is long"; daily, weekly, monthly, and annual rhythms; and standards of temporal precision as well as being "geared into" one another in terms of pace, rhythm, and other temporal properties.

Under ordinary circumstances—that is, without interventions promoting community-wide connections²—organizations with contrasting, and potentially conflicting, calendar remain more or less segregated. The medical drug treatment facilities in a community, for example, can run on "hospital time," while the prevention specialists stick to "school time." Communities of organizations, then, as networks of calendar, are marked by what Nowotny (1992) called "pluritemporalism"—"different modes of social time which may exist side by side" (p. 424).

The temporal gaps between enclaves are seen by the advocates of coalitions and collaboration as generic problems ("fragmentation," "competition instead of cooperation," and "lack of communication") to be solved by new interorganizational linkages in the community. The anticipated beneficial outcomes include increased social capital and enhanced information flow, cooperation, and coordination. But

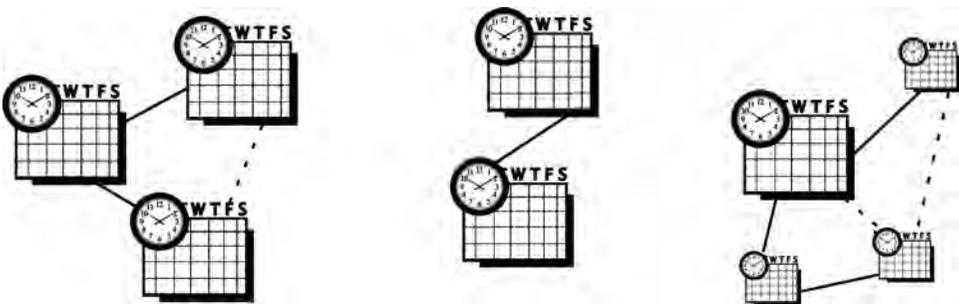


Figure 2

Community as a Loosely Connected Network of "Calendar"

there are unanticipated consequences as well: temporal conflicts emerge when organizational temporality—actual temporal structures of actual organizations (Orlikowski and Yates 2002)—interact across new linkages between temporally dissimilar organizations. Later, I offer a typology and analysis of these interactions and the emergent temporal phenomena they produce.

Emergent Temporal Effects

Over the long term, of course, entities with divergent temporalities do adjust and adapt to one another if they interact frequently (Moore 1963); temporal practices diffuse across social space and the temporal properties of one entity “tug” on those with which it interacts leading to entrainment—the adjustment, matching, or synchronization of one temporality to another (Anaconda and Chong 1996; Strogatz 2003). A “dominant temporality thesis” might be proposed: the dominant temporality in a situation tends to be the temporality of the dominant entity (cf., Doob 1971, as cited by Bluedorn 2002: 146ff; Schriber and Gutek 1987: 642). Common examples are the worldwide use of the Gregorian calendar (Zerubavel 1981) and the seven-day week (Zerubavel 1985) or the adoption of time zones and Universal Coordinated Time (Blaise 2000; Zerubavel 1982b).

In the short term and on the local scale, however, new interorganizational connections among temporally incompatible structures can generate a variety of temporal interaction effects. When, for example, entities with different daily, weekly, or annual rhythms or divergent time horizons are “brought to the table,” temporal incongruities can give rise to a number of distinct, but easily misrecognized, phenomena. Zerubavel describes symbolic contests over calendars (Zerubavel 1977, 1982a) and the beat patterns that emerge when different social rhythms overlap (Zerubavel 1979: 60ff). Levine (1997) has described the temporal disorientation experienced by tourists and immigrants in cultures with temporal styles different from their own. The focus here, though, will be neither explicit contests over temporal structures nor the personal experience of temporal conflict but the organizational-level effects of interactions between organizations with different temporal properties. I will consider three general classes of such properties: temporal cycles, event streams, and temporal styles.

“Cycles” are repetitive patterns of organizational activity such as work schedules, patterns of peak activity and slack times, fiscal years, funding cycles, project life cycles, staff development cycles, and election cycles. Some cycles are internal (e.g., shifts), while the metronome controlling others is located outside the organization in its environment (e.g., funding cycles).

An “event stream” is the ongoing sequence of occurrences that require an organizational response, action, or decision, but that are not a part of predictable cycles. Examples are client arrivals, project deadlines, funding opportunities, resignations, visits by evaluators or funders, political crises, deaths of people, and births of projects. Events can be expected, but their unpredictable or irregular timing distinguishes them from cycles.

“Temporal style” refers to an organization’s general orientation toward time.³ Is it fast or slow paced? Does it set its own rhythm, or is it driven by external clocks

and calendars? To what degree are its operations temporally rationalized? Do appointments, schedules, or coverage concerns govern its activity? Does it tend to have a long- or short-term view of things?

When organizations with divergent temporal properties meet (or are “brought together”), mismatched cycles, event streams, and styles can produce unanticipated temporal interaction effects.

MISMATCHED CYCLES

Cycles are characterized by their period (the time between recurrences) and their phase (when the cycle begins). If, for example, garbage is picked up weekly on Tuesdays and recycling weekly on Thursdays, both have the same period—one week—but they are out of phase with one another by two days. If garden waste is picked up every other week on Thursdays, its period is twice that of regular recycling. Organizational cycles and rhythms can differ in terms of period, phase, or both.

Among the organizations FB brought to the table, some ran multiple daily shifts, others only one; some operated seven days per week, others five. Service providers had a rhythm based on how long cases stayed active or how long treatment typically lasted. Detox facilities cycled people through on a scale of days or at most weeks, while “after care” and transitional housing cycles were typically on the order of months. Some organizations were on multiple year budgets, others had an annual budget and fundraising cycle. Some ran June to June, others September to September. State agencies’ financial rhythms were dominated by legislative funding cycles, while nonprofits set their calendars to those of their philanthropic sponsors. The schedules of youth and education agencies reflected the rhythms of the school day and year, while university affiliates ran slightly out of phase on the rhythm of the academic calendar.

Two kinds of interactions between cycles are possible: patterns that have similar periods but are out of phase with one another and patterns that have distinctly different periods. The former give rise to the familiar coordination problems and perceptions of collective “busy-ness” epitomized by two people trying to make a lunch date. Operating in slightly different milieus, their weekly rhythms of meetings, work, and play may have similar periods—both may teach two times a week, for example—but be out of phase—one teaches Monday and Wednesday, the other Tuesday and Thursday. The latter are illustrated by a social service agency’s high employee turnover (with cycles, perhaps, on the order of months), resulting in clients (with cycles on the order of years) always dealing with unfamiliar caseworkers (cf., Lackey et al. 2000).

Because of divergent weekly cycles, the more “stakeholders” invited “to the table,” the more impossible the simple task of scheduling meetings became. Whatever time leaders chose, someone always felt deliberately excluded. Eventually, the main task force settled for 8 a.m. meetings, the “prevention committee” met at noon on weekdays, and neighborhood committees met around dinnertime. This had the unanticipated effect of sorting participants according to compatibility of their schedules. The task force became dominated by organizational

representatives for whom morning meetings were natural—business, medical professionals, university staff, and the heads of larger social service agencies—effectively excluding parents and smaller organizations that kept less “business-like” hours. Lunch meetings were convenient for nonemployed neighborhood activists and staff of small agencies and organizations, and so the “prevention” committee was increasingly associated with “the grassroots.” Phase differences also had symbolic effects that compromised the goal of “community-wideness” when one set of rhythms was privileged over another, effectively declaring one party’s participation as more valuable than another’s.

Interactions among cycles with different periods can lead to a different problem: mismatched time scales (cf., Bluedorn 2002: 136–38). One organization’s activity can have its beginning, middle, and end before another even notices. At a community meeting in 1996, for example, a veteran of education reform efforts in the 1960s observed, “We had been attacking ten or twenty year problems with two and three year solutions.” The point is not simply that all programs should be longer but that problems, solutions, programs, and organizations have characteristic periods, mismatches among which lead to moving targets, apparent invulnerability, overlooked outcomes, and organizational blindness. The drug problem itself was a moving target: during the time it took to figure out how to “fight back,” the community’s substance abuse problem was evolving. The education problems the activist was referring to appear to be invulnerable to intervention because programs end before results can be detected. Outcomes are missed when evaluations must be started early so as to measure independent (intervention) variables but do not stick around long enough to measure changes in dependent variables (levels of sobriety, for example) that have longer periods and may lag programs by months or years.

Temporal blind spots can emerge when entities with significantly different attention spans are brought together. Foundation representatives, for example, would visit New Haven about every six months to check on the implementation. At the end of an early visit, they asked, “Where is the grassroots involvement?” Project leaders assured the funder that progress would be obvious at their next visit; they would, after all, meet several times in the interim. By contrast, for the neighborhood organizations that were clamoring for recognition as “the grassroots,” this was the “problem of the week.” They were quick reaction machines, and they responded with letters of protest, threats to boycott the program, and demands for action. The task force did eventually meet to consider options, but by the time it offered concessions, the neighborhood groups’ attention was elsewhere, and records show little subsequent participation by their leaders. When the Foundation returned six months later, the episode was history for most local players. The interaction between FB and the neighborhoods was invisible to the Foundation. This strobe-like effect of differences in organizational periodicity makes some organizations appear static and others unstable or erratic.

Cycle mismatches can also have purely symbolic effects. When short cycle entities (e.g., drop-in shelters) interact directly with those used to longer cycles (e.g., policy think tanks), there can be a trivialization of the former’s activity as “not what’s really important” and a valorization of the latter’s as “more serious” or

“sophisticated,” or alternatively, short cycle activities can be seen as “more front line,” “closer to the community,” or “helping real people,” while longer cycle activity is disdained as “distant,” “abstract,” or “bureaucratic.” Temporal mismatches can easily turn into symbolic politics.

This phenomenon could be seen in the variety of reactions to the temporal generosity that marked the FB program. Mindful of the unrealistically brief programs of the past, rushes to implementation, and premature expectations of effects (see, for example, Marris and Rein 1967; Moynihan 1970; Pressman and Wildavsky 1984), the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation gave FB at least seven years. Organizations comfortable with patient evaluation of options, the preparation of reports, and waiting for results hailed this as an opportunity to avoid grant-driven “business as usual.” Smaller nonprofits, however, along with neighborhood organizations and residents, with much shorter attention and action cycles, proclaimed, “We know what we need!” and “We don’t need to sit around for two years planning!” These two temporal perspectives competed for legitimacy, resulting in a lurching pattern of “talk and act,” in which the project never deliberated long enough for some and never acted soon enough for others.

INTERACTING EVENT STREAMS

Cycles and rhythms of regular occurrences constitute the more or less predictable component of organizations’ temporal structure, its “schedule.” They are complemented by an “unschedule”—streams of noncyclical and more or less unpredictable events that occasion organizational activity (cf., March and Olsen 1976). Such events can be internally generated (e.g., a family needs to deal with an alcoholic parent, a firm evaluates whether it is ready to launch a new product) or come from the environment (e.g., the family needs to clean the house because relatives are coming over or the firm needs to hurry the product launch because a competitor just introduced one). Events can be “routine” in size, scope, and subject matter—those that demand only “ordinary” levels of organizational attention and that are expected to occur occasionally, if unpredictably—or “exceptional”—events whose attention demands significantly disrupt organizational routine (e.g., a major fire in a factory or a lawsuit against a social service agency).

Streams of unscheduled events, and the corresponding imperative to “do something,” are a normal part of organizational life. Unanticipated problems emerge, however, when events leak across newly formed interorganizational linkages and one organization’s “unschedule” collides with those of others. The gaps between temporal enclaves minimize such leaks, but endeavors such as FB can effectively merge the event streams of temporally diverse organizations, giving rise to “temporal noise” as organizations “come to the table” or “get on the same page.” The saying “bad planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on mine,” popular on office novelty placards, epitomizes such temporal noise. The message, typically posted behind a harried clerk, exhorts the reader to keep his or her “unschedule” to him or herself, quite the opposite of what happens in coalitions.

Each new organizational link that FB created threatened the calendrical separation between the community’s temporal enclaves. Early in the project, for example,

the State of Connecticut announced funding for the establishment of regional substance abuse councils. Although the funds were small and FB had other things to do, once the "opportunity" came to its attention, the application deadline became an item on the agendas of organizations throughout FB. The same thing occurred when, not long after this, one of FB's member organizations lost its funding. As word spread, "saving X" became a top task for about a dozen agencies. Both situations were later hailed as examples of successful collaboration, but they illustrate a fundamental cost of closer working relationships: new interorganizational connections expose organizations to "the other guy's" deadlines, panics, hecticness, and crises.

If the leakage of ordinary temporal noise can clutter organizational schedules, the occasional "big" event can obliterate them. In midsummer 1991, for example, FB's project director resigned after only a few months on the job. Across the community, schedules in otherwise temporally segregated organizations—the mayor's office, a leading drug treatment provider, the office of a state senator, the university, a local hospital, a utility company, and the community foundation—were momentarily trumped by the latest FB crisis. Emergency meetings displaced business as usual. A replacement was quickly found but not before the problem had become a crisis for many more organizations than were actually involved in solving it.

There are also several symbolic effects of temporal noise. One can be called "the misery of temporal awareness." A typical scene provides an illustration: during a meeting on another topic, the organizational representatives present learned of weekend activities—car washes, tag sales, and pancake breakfasts—being sponsored by one another's organizations and of which their daily rounds would otherwise have left them oblivious.⁴ Once they became publicly aware of such events, though, they risked squandering political capital by not putting in an appearance. A related symbolic effect, which can be called "crisis trumping," occurs when organizations are exposed to one another's ordinary crises *du jour* (or *du mois*) and contests emerge over whose problems might be trivial in the larger context even though quite critical locally. This happens because the intra-organizational context that gives crises their ("in-house") meaning does not diffuse through networks along with the news of such crises. Relations can become strained as organizations try to balance awareness of each other's problems with the maintenance of organizational focus.

CONFLICTING TEMPORAL STYLES

Cycles and event streams cover many, but not all, of the temporal properties of organizations that have been identified by students of time in organizations (cf., Bluedorn and Denhardt 1988). Additional characteristics can be gathered under the term *temporal style*, an organization's general orientation to time. Does it have a long or short time horizon (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967; Ziller 1965)? Is it temporally rigid or flexible? Temporally homogeneous or heterogeneous (cf., Zerubavel 1981)? What sorts of temporal buffers—leads, lags, and delays—are built into its routines (Cyert and March 1963; Moore 1963; Schriber and Gutek 1987: 643;

Zerubavel 1981)? How temporally rationalized is it (e.g., how much temporal accountability do members have [Nippert-Eng 1996])? What kind of deadline pressures does it face (March and Simon 1958)? Is it more "monochronic" or "polychronic" (Hall 1959)? Differences in temporal style that were observed in the field include the importance of punctuality, how "business" arrives, the density of schedules, and the meaning of organizational "history."

The most common effect of temporal style interactions emerged in the course of routine meetings. Participants clashed over whether meetings should start and end on time, how long meetings should take, and how much time should be devoted to small talk. Standards of punctuality can vary widely in a community, as they do between cultures (Lauer 1981; Levine 1997). Professionals with rigid timetables faced difficult symbolic choices when more temporally informal members were so late to a meeting that waiting would mean missing subsequent appointments. Colleagues with shared temporal norms would understand a decision not to wait, but among temporally heterogeneous partners, such a decision could be interpreted as unacceptable impatience. For residents and representatives of neighborhood organizations, the use of meeting time to catch up and interact informally, renewing the very bonds that compose community, was temporally efficient. This was often less the case for "busy" professionals, who reserved "chit chat time" for more professionally relevant situations.

Punctuality and timing were frequently implicated in routine legitimacy contests. Professionals, on the one hand, had to compromise their professional temporal standards to prove their "street credibility," whereas, on the other hand, community representatives often seemed to imitate their more professional counterparts by making a show of carrying sophisticated calendars and fledgling nonprofits would sometimes attempt to distinguish themselves from the organizational "riff-raff" by a hyperrigid commitment to temporal professionalism (cf., Epstein and Seron 2001). People who worked in more punctual realms would routinely schedule themselves tightly, having, for example, meetings at 9, 10, and 11 a.m. Some of those meetings were with people who never had more than a few meetings per week and rarely needed to run off to another one every hour, leading, sometimes, to a palpable resentment by the latter who found the former "self-important" or even temporally haughty.

How "business" arrived was another dimension of temporal style from which conflict emerged. Everyday activity has a different feel in organizations where activity is initiated by appointment (e.g., doctors), by events (e.g., emergency departments), at client initiative (e.g., clinics), on a fixed schedule (e.g., schools), or by detection (e.g., police). This feature of organizational temporal style affects when representatives can meet (see above) and who can be an organizational representative (e.g., without schedule control, only those who do not work on the front lines can meet). A sort of temporal camaraderie exists among those with similar activity initiation styles (e.g., EMTs, police, and ER doctors; social workers and clinic doctors; lawyers, accountants, and medical specialists). Problems emerge when contrasting styles interact. The inability of the police in New Haven to block out time during shifts, for example, meant that they were only willing to

meet at the start of a shift, but this was interpreted by others as the police needing to “get their way” as the price of their participation.

Organizations also vary widely in terms of their time horizons or temporal depth, which is defined by Bluedorn (2002) as “the temporal distance into the past and future that individuals and collectivities typically consider when contemplating events that have happened, may have happened, or may happen” (p. 114). Neighborhood organizations, for example, often have short time horizons relative to, say, policy research groups. Interactions across such divides engendered questions of whether the latter were genuinely committed to action and whether the former were capable of seeing beyond the moment or considering the big picture. The short-term style of local organizations had been influenced by seeing one program idea follow another without effect, while the long-term perspective of the “planners” was an interpretation of the same observation as a history of rushed, thoughtless implementations.

A final manifestation of temporal style interactions is the way organizations carry their history. Old organizations may either enjoy a legacy of legitimacy or bear the burden of past failures. New organizations may suffer a “liability of newness” (Stinchcombe 1965) or have the benefit of a clean slate. In New Haven, organizations and agencies that had been around since the 1960s shared taken-for-granted claims, practices, and recognition of one another’s legitimacy. Likewise, in interactions among newer players, mutual appreciation of one another’s sense of freshness, not being locked in the past, and readiness to make new beginnings seemed to facilitate working together. In mixed interactions, however, the old incessantly reminded the new that “we’ve tried that before” and “that did not work last time,” while the veterans were often scolded for living in the past or refusing to let old grudges die.

MISREADING TIME AND COMMUNITY

The conflicts described earlier are familiar ones, but they are not commonly diagnosed as being time related and are generally not seen as “normal.” Instead, they are seen as aberrations requiring explanations based in exceptional characteristics of particular communities, organizations, or programs. Why does this misreading happen? I suggest it is rooted in the relative invisibility of temporal structure due to an ideological dominance of “quantitative” time and the relative invisibility of community structure due to the overromanticization of *Gemeinschaft* as a model for “community.”

A common logic in discussions of urban communities and community initiatives is “more time equals more program equals more effect.” This quantitative perspective on time resonates with the maxim “time is money” (Franklin 1997; Weber 1958) and with a temporal ideology that predisposes us to think about time in terms of obtaining more of it and using what time we have more efficiently. Franklin’s maxim also suggests why time troubles are often taken as moral failings that signal personal, organizational, or community pathology. The dominance of “time as quantity” and the embeddedness of our experience in temporal structures makes them relatively invisible and distracts us, this article has argued,

from the fact that temporal conflict is a normal phenomenon in normal communities of organizations.

We are also frequently distracted by an overly romanticized view of “community.” Even in sophisticated minds, the term *community* has strong connotations of *Gemeinschaft*: in “healthy” communities, people recognize the common good, set aside differences, and cooperate. While the literature treats “community” variously as setting, target, resource, or agent (cf., McLeroy et al. 2003), its invariable characterization as “good” leads to misinterpretations of problems, disorganization, and lack of success as indicators of the absence of salutary community-ness. When programs falter or fail, we ask, “What is wrong with that community?” And many answers equate to “it’s not community enough.”

In many cases, this leads to simplistic local exceptionalism. Residents, activists, and program staff claim that theirs is a unique community beset with unique problems that make it “not like other cities.” Nothing could succeed there because of turf wars, fragmentation, age-old rivalries, a long history of corruption, the incompetence or dishonesty of specific individuals, or the conflictual style of particular organizations. Each characteristic makes this community an exception to any “law” about what programs such as FB should be able to do for a community. To outside observers, though, two things always stand out: first, the same problems arise in other communities; second, the same explanations do too.

Together, these factors—a nonstructural concept of time, romanticization of “community” accompanied by the tendency toward local exceptionalism—inhibit both participants’ capacity to learn from experience and analysts’ ability to correctly diagnose and advise.

TIME TROUBLES AS PREDICTABLY VARIABLE

If, in fact, problems—here, “time troubles”—in community-wide collaborations are normal, then they may be predictably variable—that is, analyzable in terms of what communities are like generically as settings, targets, and agents of initiatives such as FB. This contrasts with the usual approach of trying to ascertain what is missing in communities where programs run into difficulties. Rather, we expect these problems and ask whether we can describe conditions that predict their distribution. The likelihood of temporal conflict increases, for example, possibly nonlinearly, with the number of entities involved and with their temporal diversity, as shown schematically in Figure 3. Low levels of conflict can be expected only in collaborations among small numbers of entities or among temporally homogeneous entities.

These two relationships are combined in Figure 4. Here, contour lines connect combinations of “collaboration size” and “temporal diversity,” which yield similar levels of temporal conflict. Lower levels occur in small collaborations between temporally similar organizations (lower left)—for example, a drug treatment center and a community health clinic—and in so-called “categorical” collaborations (upper left) that bring together larger numbers of organizations that are all in the same “business” (and are thus assumed to be temporally similar or complementary). With increasing number of collaborators or increasing temporal diversity of

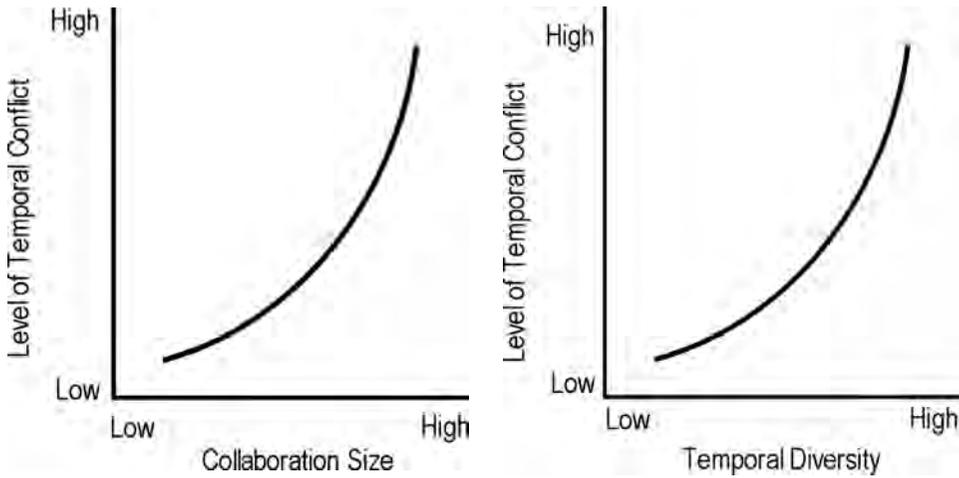


Figure 3

Temporal Conflict as a Function of the Number and Diversity of Collaborators

collaborators, temporal conflict is more likely, and these are precisely the type of programs toward which what I have called “overly romantic views of community” predispose us. The worst-case scenarios are in the upper right: large numbers of organizations from different temporal enclaves. Here, there is the possibility of what might be called “temporal gridlock,” a situation in which the costs of emergent temporal conflicts completely dominate any gains to collaboration.

The key insight here is that costs of collaboration vary with its configuration. The goal of a project—a reformed system or a fully collaborating community of organizations—may be a more optimal equilibrium, but the trajectory from a

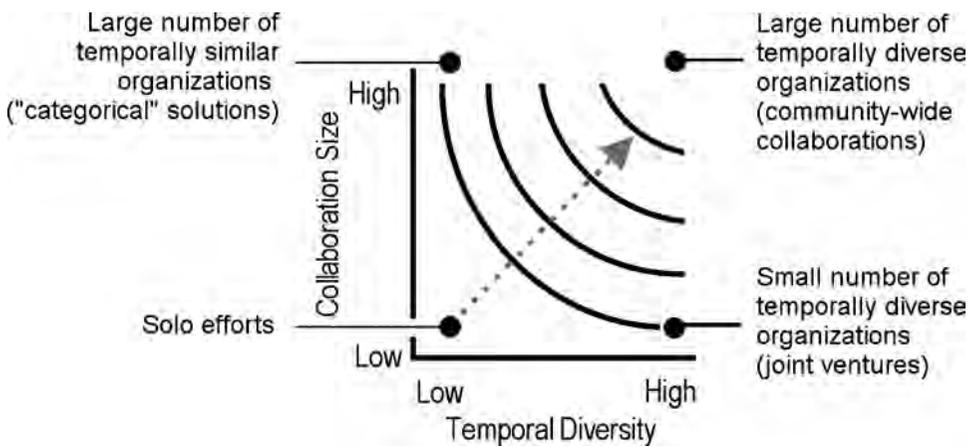


Figure 4

Temporal Conflict as Function of Number and Diversity of Collaborators

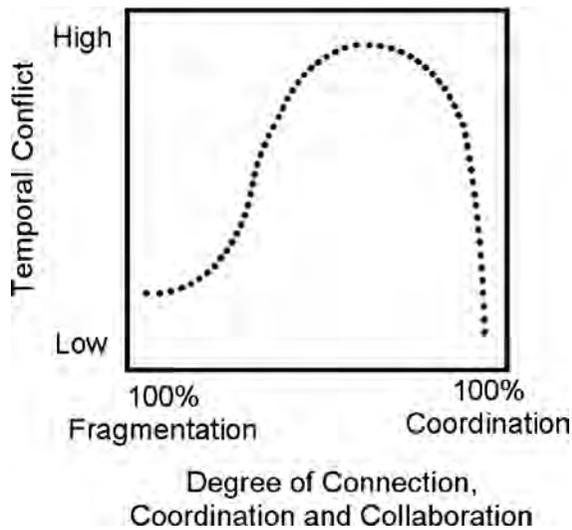


Figure 5

Movement from Low Coordination to High Passes through Zone of High Coordination Cost

more loosely connected to less loosely connected community of organizations will generally involve costly increases in temporal conflict. These may be temporary—over the long term, entrainment may transform a community of organizations into a single temporal enclave where the payoffs to coordination outweigh the costs (see the drop off in conflict to the right in Figure 5)—but few initiatives last long enough or have enough clout to completely dominate the divergent temporalities within a community of organizations.

A DARK SIDE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL?

One of the conceptual underpinnings for programs such as FB is “social capital.” The concept of social capital was first described by Loury as “resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization and that are useful for the organization or social development of a child or young person” (Coleman 1990: 300; Loury 1977). When applied to communities of organizations, social capital refers to those collective resources that are made available through personal and institutional networks in a community (Kadushin 2004; Lin 1999); the more connections, the more social capital. Collaborative solutions—FB’s efforts to “get everyone to the table” and forge “a unified community-wide system”—can be seen as attempts to build new social capital on the hypothesis that it will enhance the community’s capacity to solve its problems.

Although social capital is generally taken to be an unqualifiedly good thing, the phenomena described earlier point us to an interesting concept: a “dark side” of social capital.⁵ If temporal interaction effects increase with the density of connections in a community of organizations, we can expect, somewhat counterintuitively,

that more social capital may yield more temporal conflict. In effect, organizational temporality and organizational “calendar” flow through new network links along with other salutary resources, often wreaking havoc when they arrive at the next node.

We might hope that these are just short-term adjustment problems that will diminish as temporal structures realign, entrain, and mutually adjust, but such optimism may be unwarranted. First, as noted earlier, most community initiatives are often relatively short lived, organizations participate in them opportunistically and then go back to business as usual, and programs end and others follow and do it all over again. Second, diminished temporal diversity may not, in the long run, be a good thing for a community. Temporal standardization can undermine the adaptive advantages provided by temporal diversity.

These emergent costs of social capital result from interactions among organizations with discordant temporal structures. Similar effects can be expected from interactions between other properties of organizations (e.g., size, mission, organizational structure) brought together “for the good of the community” (cf., Ryan 1999, 2006). These “costs” are one reason the “technology” of community coalitions and related strategies based on social capital is so difficult to implement effectively in urban communities (Kadushin et al. 2005). Social capital is neither free nor a silver bullet.

CONCLUSION

This article draws attention to the connection between time, organizations, and urban community initiatives. It began with a simple question: Why were there so many time-related problems in a program that had such a generous endowment of temporal resources? The short answer is that “temporal plenty” represents only one side of time: its unidimensional and quantitative side. Time is also structural: organizations are temporally structured, and communities of organizations are networks of “calendar” in which a number of common temporal problems arise from interactions between temporally different organizations.

Three categories of organizational temporal properties—cycles, event streams, and temporal style—and the interaction effects to which they give rise, were described. Out of phase cycles interact to produce social arrhythmias that inhibit coordination. When new interorganizational links are forged in a community of organizations, “temporal noise” leaks across organizational boundaries, distracting organizations from their own schedules. Differences in temporal style lead to conflicts that frustrate organizational cooperation. Although common, these structure-based emergent temporal problems are frequently misinterpreted as local pathology or resource deficits.

The aim here is neither to argue for a one-sided structural view of communities and community initiatives nor to promote the primacy of temporal effects over other structural dimensions. Rather, the point is to advocate for a multidimensional view of the causes of problems encountered in community initiatives and for the recognition of emergent temporal problems as a normal phenomenon in normal communities of organizations. These insights might facilitate improved

analysis of the tradeoffs between costs and benefits of various solutions to community problems, move us toward assessing solutions rather than pathologizing communities, and, more generally, temper zealous advocacy of ideas that are ideologically attractive but empirically not well understood.

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NOTES

1. While this material is based on analysis of only the New Haven case materials, ethnographic work in other sites contained similar accounts.
2. Interventions are not the only things that do this. The "discovery" of a new problem (e.g., Y2K) or opportunity that calls for a response from multiple organizations can have similar effects. Disasters are perhaps the most common example (e.g., Drabek and McEntire 2002).
3. Sherman (2002) calls a slightly more general concept the "temporal personality" of an organization. I use "style" to avoid anthropomorphizing.
4. Sometimes, it appeared that the local groups enjoyed putting the community elites on the spot in this way. Such calendar invasion can be a form of loyalty testing in a community of organizations.
5. This phrase is used here in a different way than in Robert Putnam's (2000: 350–63) chapter of the same name. He asks whether uniformity and connectedness among individuals might threaten liberty and tolerance, allowing civic society to regress to the parochialism of the village. Here, the point is that because organizations are structured entities and, for the purposes of this article, temporally structured, across-the-board engagement, community-wide systems, and other arrangements calculated to improve community welfare by reducing fragmentation and eliminating duplication may generate increasing costs even as they increase social capital. In the context of communities of organizations, there may be distinct disadvantages to "getting all the stakeholders to the table."

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