



Studying organizations as temporary

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Abstract

This article reflects upon the methodological pessimism that sometimes plagues students of organizations. In particular pessimism seems to strike us when we try to get to grips with the incessant transformations of organizations—transformations that seem to occur at such great speed. Our immediate reaction to Heraclitus' statement that: "You cannot step twice into the same river" is that it has considerable methodological relevance. However, we contend that his metaphor in its orthodox version leads to too narrow a view. An elaboration of the metaphor could perhaps reduce the pessimism regarding organizational studies by promoting a focus on contextual aspects. Moreover, changes and transformations in themselves do not necessarily represent a stumbling block for the researcher. Rather studying crucial projects provides a means for studying the mechanisms at work in the host organization. The resulting approach—contextualization in a broad sense—relieves researchers of some of their pessimism, maybe even inspires optimism, by raising new questions: not only "what can be said?" (about the organization), but also "in what contexts?" and "about what manifestations in those contexts?" The article concludes with some remarks on the scarcity of the contextualization approach for studying organizations as temporary phenomena.

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1. The rationale

Since the beginning of time consultants, reformers and researchers have all claimed that the world is changing and that organizations have to adapt to the change or go under. This scenario of change (this social construction of change) as

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the only stable aspect characterizing organizational life comes as a reminder of the ever-present urgency to understand organizations and organizational action. The entire organizational field appears to be on the move, when it comes to the organizations themselves and to the environments in which they live and act. For any student of organization this outlook represents a challenge. The focus of the present article is to reflect upon this challenge, to address the apparent methodological pessimism and to share with the reader our views and ideas for further discussion about how to handle the situation.

For organizations the constant changing or even the accelerating movement of the field, has had implications for the ways business or “activity”, and related structural configurations, have been defined. Practitioners suggest that new rules are emerging, sometimes talking of environmental forces ten times as powerful as those that have obtained before, and concluding that these challenges call for an understanding of the “strategic inflection points” that organizations have to cope with (Grove, 1996). Strategic inflection points can be said to represent paradigm portals and a shift in the rules or in the interpretations of how organizations should be organized and managed.

Organizations appear to be dealing increasingly with this development and with the related challenges by way of a special form of structural configuration, namely projects. In an empirical study of 22 organizations Bryde (2000) states that “the need to survive and prosper in ever-changing external environments” is the most important driver behind the growth in project management (Bryde, 2000, p. 232). This trend could be referred to as projectivization, a process that has paved the way for study and discussion of projects. We thus contend that the way forward in studying organizations calls for a stronger focus on the manifestations of the actual activities concerned, the time-limited projects, and what they have to tell us. With reference to present developments in the business world we suggest that almost all organizations today can or should be regarded as “temporary” or at least as being subject to profound and incessant changes.

As Morgan (1997) has pointed out, it is difficult if not impossible to study organizations that are in a state of flux and transformation, at least if we accept his introduction of the river metaphor (Morgan, 1997, p. 251). However, elaborating upon the river metaphor (originally ascribed to Heraclitus around 500 BC) it is argued here that remedies do exist for the deep pessimism that otherwise occurs. The remedies may be found by highlighting the ontological stance or assumptions of the study and by applying a micmac approach, studying the main organization and its contexts simultaneously. This leaves the student with more work to do but this procedure has the desirable effect that macro-level ontological stance and micro-level approach and results come together. In this respect, the approach appears to be well in tune with contemporary notions of reflexive modernity (Beck, 1992).

The article is designed as follows. Reasons for the methodological pessimism and the optimism claimed as a result of regarding organization, as temporary phenomena will be discussed in the next section. The underlying theme here is that temporality is attributed to virtually all organizations, at least as regards business organizations. For illustrative purposes this discussion is then related to a physical metaphor—the

river metaphor that according to Morgan (1997) leads to a very pessimistic view of the prospects for making any kind of plausible statements about organizations. A basis is then provided for an extended version of the river metaphor whereby a broader view including sources of rivers, riverbanks, surroundings, etc. is adopted rather than an exclusive focus on the flowing water. This refinement and extension of the metaphor helps to open up another set of avenues for studying organizations. The metaphor allows for a broad contextual approach that demonstrates the relevance of studying organizations as temporary phenomena, and indicates the essence of the methodological aspects that bear the seeds of potential optimism about the study of organizations.

2. Understanding contemporary organizations

Organizations are man-made, as are most manifestations of organizations in the world in which we live. And since they are man-made they are also remade by man, and are focused in many change endeavours. Thus, according to the popular ways of describing present developments, it seems to be changes rather than stability that characterizes the business world as a whole. Not everybody—researchers for one—may agree with such a contention. However, most important on a generic level is that people tend to think that the business world is changing at an unprecedented pace. This is how business people in general tend to talk about their field. One might speculate both about the background to the ongoing social construction with its central tenet that the world of business is moving faster and faster, and about its results. However, people tend to act in accordance with the way they talk, and thus contribute to making their statements come true.

This is all the easier because there is so much current evidence of the claims about speed. Rather than attempting to go into details on this question, we prefer to present a few examples of the way in which ideas about companies and company activities appear to have changed recently.

- (a) “Disposable organizations” is a concept that arose from the empirical observation that in recent years young entrepreneurs in computing and IT have often formed new companies with a view to promoting some invention of their own, with the explicit intention of selling them off again very soon (March, 1995). This observation appears to be at odds with the traditional view of entrepreneurs cherishing their companies almost like their own offspring. The observation of “disposable organization” can thus be seen as an indication that companies are no longer expected to last forever.
- (b) For many of us, internet companies embody our ideas about business moving faster. Few of us have even the faintest idea about how they are expected to make money, at least not in the long run. Nevertheless the prices of shares in internet companies tend to soar to unbelievable heights, and to drop to virtually nothing like yoyos (to the despair of financial researchers) thus contributing to the impression we have of relentless pace. Managing internet companies appears

to be less about managing tangible assets for profit-seeking activities, than about managing virtual assets of a less conspicuous kind. Managerial roles in this sector are not the same as those we are used to in traditional industry. The typical guru in this section of the economy is <30 years old, which seems to indicate that for some reason traditional managerial recipes do not work.

- (c) “Outsourcing” could be seen as a manifestation of speed. The tendency for companies to “outsource” activities that are not regarded as core to their operation has certainly been very strong in recent years. As demonstrated by Pettigrew and Fenton (2000) changing organizational boundaries was the most evident and most profound structural change in industry in the US, Japan and Western Europe in the 1990s. Most of the boundary changes concerned outsourcing, and the process seems to be continuing. Even tradition-bound companies in heavy industry appear to be changing into something they have never been before. It should be noted that outsourcing (or something like it) was not even among the managerial options proposed by the classical writers in the field of organization studies. Thus, in a chapter on “organizational design” Thompson (1967) only offers instances of company growth. His recommendations refer exclusively to growth, not outsourcing.
- (d) Projectivization, i.e. an increasing tendency to create projects (or temporary organizational entities) in order to focus the work on issues important to the organization concerned is another confirmation of the speed contention. Projects appear to be far more prevalent today than a decade ago. One particularly interesting point about projects is that taken together they can be regarded as a sign of speed, while they can also be regarded as organizational responses.

All in all, perceptions of the trend towards temporality and speedy change are relevant to the organizational scene today. The often-repeated cry “Business is moving faster and faster!” has been nursed in so many minds and acted upon in a way that makes it difficult to ignore the idea of temporality altogether in almost any current organizational study design. At least it would seem unwise for a researcher not to include the “fast change” worldview as one option in a study. In practice, setting up projects is a common way for organizations to participate in change and to be in on shaping it. The corollary of this statement in research terms is simple: projects should be included in a study of the organization.

As pointed out above projectivization is a distinctive phenomenon, and it has important side effects. For one thing, it entails change in the business ventures that are subject to it. However, creating and emerging projects involves temporality for the project itself as well as for the parent or host organization. This theme will reappear below.

The methodological implications of the above are quite straightforward: studying projects and temporary organizations is a way of capturing temporal aspects of the organization, an approach that owes something to the old adage, “Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are!” However, the organization is more than its projects. What else is there, and how can that “something else” be studied?

Studying the projects could in fact be very useful in answering that question too. Since projects are decoupled from the regular activities of the organization, defining the project implicitly also defines the “regular” activities of its host (cf. Johansson, Löfström, & Ohlsson, 2000, p. 126). In other words, the actor describing the project has to make a contrast to what is not the project. To sum up: projects are the key to the inner workings of an organization. Next, we look briefly into the nature of what could be called the original pessimism as regards the study of organizations, with a view to indicating a further way of averting it.

3. A physical metaphor on organizational phenomena

Metaphor has been proposed as a useful tool in studying organizations (Morgan, 1986; Tsoukas, 1991), although its status is controversial. The generative quality of metaphor is not questioned, but its fruitfulness is. Those in favour of using metaphors are often the promoters of a constructivist approach, while those for whom science is about exactitude are more critical (Grant & Oswick, 1996). We believe that physical and non-physical metaphors can both be useful in studying organizations, particularly because they both invite researchers to see organizational phenomena in a new light.

Metaphors are images that can help us to see some aspects, while leading us to ignore others. Metaphors are thus mind-stretchers on the one hand and mind-closers on the other. As Morgan (1997, p. 4) points out metaphors imply “a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally”.

The metaphor that Morgan calls “flux and transformation” appears promising for the study of organizations as temporary phenomena. The value claimed for this metaphor lies in that it can cast light on the logic of change and the functioning of organizations and organizational activities. Morgan (p. 251) opens his discussion of the “flux and transformation” metaphor with the following quotation from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus:

You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing on.

To researchers concerned with the temporality of organizations, this seems an apt observation, since their research concept implies just this sort of continual organizational movement. So one wonders what meaning can be assigned to this particular observation in the study of organizations in general? Can the various organizational attributes and activities be envisaged as floating along in a stream of water on a seemingly endless journey, as different episodes, events, attributes and developments appear and vanish again?

To quote Heraclitus again:

Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed... Cool things become warm, the warm grows cool; the moist dries, the parched becomes moist... It is in the changing that things find repose (quoted from Morgan, 1997, p. 251).

This statement (that everything flows and nothing remains) supports the adoption of a flowing river as a metaphor for organizations and organizational activities in times of constant change. So, is the study of organizations like stepping into a river? If so, what then are the chances for the researcher to understand the forces, structures and functioning of a particular organization?

Heraclitus' metaphor powerfully invokes the possibility that all organizational activity is dynamic and constantly in motion. It affirms that time is short and change is fast, which seems relevant. As Pettigrew (1997, p. 338) has put it, "social reality is not a steady state... it occurs rather than merely exists". Every action, configuration and constellation is changing and changing fast, and—still according to Pettigrew—the aim of the researcher should therefore be to catch this reality in flight, as it flows. But that is not easy, since every time the researcher steps into the river of organizational action he is in a sense too late. The particular activity has vanished and the moment has passed. And if the researcher nonetheless finds part of a story, it is already history. The manifestation that the researcher can reveal and discuss is not around any more—its embodiment is no longer within his reach and is not likely to reappear.

The researcher can of course adapt the research design and try to capture aspects and elements like collecting water in a bucket, or he can follow the river and step into it in more than one place, or he can take a boat to increase the prospects for gathering interesting empirical data. Whatever design is used, the chances of getting a useful picture do not seem promising, because the relevant field of action vanishes. Steps into the water seem at best like static snapshots that fail to reveal the whole picture, while a full bucket of water simply represents a product, the storing of activities already undertaken, but does not in itself indicate anything about the process. It is an output revealing part of the content only. The opportunity to follow the river in a boat might seem the most promising, but it may be very difficult to complete the research due to the intensity of the change inherent in Heraclitus' river metaphor.

The statement "You cannot step twice into the same river" can be read in several ways. Up to now we have been stressing (and so, we are convinced have our readers) the word "twice", indicating the difficulty inherent in repeating organizational observations and experiences. But there is an alternative. If instead the first word, "you", is stressed, the sentence then reads, "*You* cannot step twice into the same river", which gives a completely different meaning to the statement. We are being reminded that, as researchers, we also change as a result of our experiences. As we see it, this works to the advantage of the researcher. It reinforces the abduction aspects of research endeavours (Alvesson & Sköldbeg, 1994). If we subscribe to the common assumption that wisdom is additive, the experience effect makes us more capable as researchers, even though we still cannot step twice into the same river. But we may be able to evaluate our own experiences as researchers in an appropriate way in order to compensate for some of the loss of "twiceness".

If "water flowing in a river" can be justified as a reasonable metaphor for organizations as a field of study, then it also exposes a kind of pessimism within the practice of studying organizations. This goes beyond the critical attitude to

metaphor as a tool of organizational science adopted by the adherents of the non-constructivist approach (Ortony, 1993). Rather, the pessimism pervading the study of organizations is related not to the use of the metaphor as such but to what can be attained by studying organizations at all; a metaphor that emphasizes the state of constant or accelerating change in the study of organizations is simultaneously emphasizing just how difficult such a study must be.

But, like all metaphors, this one too highlights some aspects and hides others—in this case, it is the time dimension of organizational activities that is emphasized, reminding researchers that the pace of organizational activities, may well be very fast indeed. This insight certainly seems important, but for the researcher it is not enough simply to be made aware of the apparent speed of change. This metaphor fails to provide sufficient guidance for the study of organizations, nor does it help us to understand the sequence of activities that occurs. It omits—or closes our minds to—the embeddedness or context of the organization concerned and of the change it is undergoing.

What is promising as well as a source of optimism, is that this focus on the river's flow actually implies rather a limited interpretation of the physical metaphor in question. Looking at the flow of a river isolated from its environment and from one position only does not provide an adequate description of a river. The physical metaphor becomes richer and more useful once a broader view is adopted. Thus we call for an extension of the metaphor to include both a river and its context.

Essentially a river is a copious stream of water flowing through the landscape and ultimately into the sea. The actual time span for the flow of a river is surprisingly short, calculated in terms of the speed of the flow and the length of the river. "The answer turns out to be hours, or even minutes at least, and a matter of days at the most" (Dury, 1981, p. 65). As a result of that fast and forceful movement, rivers actively shape the landscape. They also differ in size, in terms of the quantity of the water in the flow. In some rivers, such as all Russian rivers running from south to north, there is a danger of spring floods; in others the flow is more or less stable.

There are several types of river depending on various characteristics of the water that reflect its source for instance, or the geographical context. This point can be illustrated by the current classification of Icelandic rivers: one type is a river whose main source is a melt from a glacier (a *jökulá*, in Icelandic); another is a river originating from water that collects under lava fields (a *lindá*); a third type is a river resulting from the confluence of many small streams (a *dragá*). These three types of river all have different characteristics (Rist, 1974).

The river itself assumes a different appearance, depending on the roughness and stability of the riverbed. Does this consist of rocks, gravel or soil? Huge waterfalls are more eye-catching than the steady flow of a quiet river. Some rivers offer a variety of whirlpools or other features of a strong current, while others are very quiet, and so on. The behaviour of the water is also connected with the seasons. Man-made disturbances are also common, as when rivers are used for hydroelectric power. The flow of a river can also be intensified or disturbed by many means, natural or human.

All of this goes to show that the flow of a river, already highly unstable and temporary in its character, can be made more unpredictable under severe weather conditions, or can be manipulated by human activities resulting in anything from slight cumulative changes to measures so drastic as to destroy the source of the river and render its channels dry.

A description of a river can of course include a lot of other details. However, the brief survey given above should be sufficient for our purposes. Rather than focusing further on the “content” of the river—the flow of water—we will now extend the metaphor to include the context of the river as well.

4. Contextualization invited by the extended metaphor

Four different (but related) types of contextual scheme have been inspired by the metaphor. We have noted that the Heraclitus metaphor highlights the time context, but an extension of the metaphor suggests three further contexts, which we present below—albeit, as examples only.

- (1) The time context,
- (2) the geographical context,
- (3) the man-made context, and
- (4) the conceptual context.

The *time context* could stand for several things, since time is a somewhat problematic concept (see e.g. Lundin, Söderholm, & Wilson, 1998). In its least complicated version it can be envisaged as linear or cyclical. In the early times, i.e., the days of subsistence farming and fishing, we could say that society was based on a cyclical concept of time. Farming and fishing are both dependent upon the seasonal changes. So too is the river, which means that information provided about the seasons can give us a good deal of information. Water levels, flows and erosion tend to be cyclical and to be shaped by seasonal changes, over the year since the levels of precipitation usually vary with the seasons. Similarly, vegetation changes over the years, with implications for water absorption, and so do temperatures in the water. A river located in a mountainous region is particularly sensitive to changes in temperature that cause snow to melt, and so on.

There are several fairly trivial but very important examples of the way in which this discussion can be applied to organizations. We know that activities in business organizations are “seasonal” for a variety of reasons. Sales are seasonal for most companies or production has to be seasonal due to the particular raw materials required. Added to which, there are seasonal variations based on institutional conditions. The fiscal year is extremely important in connection with certain activities; so too is the structure of the periodical release of short-term income statements. Budgets and follow-ups obviously impose seasonal variations in what is going on, while investment behaviour towards the end of the budget year can often be attributed to plans for handling funds for the next year. “Buy now or the money

will be gone” is the kind of planning that appears to apply, particularly in some parts of the public sector. Very stable investment priorities in organizations are hardly to be expected under these circumstances.

As regards the linear time concept, it is perhaps enough to remind the reader that in some respects action in time is far from cyclical. Thus, if there is an eruption of lava affecting a river in the lava field, that river will certainly change its “behaviour” for all time. It will still be affected by seasonal variations, but due to the eruption that changes the conditions for the seasonal variations, knowledge about the extent of the seasonal variations is bound to be much reduced, especially in the years immediately following the eruption. The lava outburst (which cannot be reversed—a perfect example in relation to linear time) tells us that what we know about seasonal variations is no longer very reliable as regards that particular river. It is well known that linear time “exists” for organizations. To put it briefly, they may be disturbed for good by irreversible events such as mergers and acquisitions, crucial investments, government actions and so on.

The *geographical context* is even more obvious characteristic to the river metaphor than the time context. The geographical refers to differentiation in the surface of the earth, which for rivers can be exemplified by their sources, the nature of their basins and their riverbeds. Knowledge of such things tells us something about what to expect when we study a river in the long as well as the short term. Some rivers flood extremely rarely if ever, whereas others do so every now and then. Riverbeds and riverbanks (geography at the micro level) cannot in general be regarded as constants. However, the present configuration of both macro- and micro-level geography provides a clear point of departure for grasping what is happening in a river at any point in time. Not only the context of the present but also that of the past is important in relation to the future, although when changes occur they may be regarded as discontinuous (as a lava eruption would be).

It could be said that the three names for rivers in Icelandic mentioned above, *jökulá*, *dragá* and *lindá*, all include their entire geographical composition as the main ingredient in their very names. Any Icelander who hears one of these names has a very good sense of what it means and what to expect. In different parts of the world with other types of geography, the differentiation between rivers is bound to be different. Certainly in the Scandinavian countries the names are different. The more crucial the differentiation of the various types of river has been in the past, the more likely it is that the terminology is similarly differentiated. Even differences in very subtle details are probably taken care of in the language. We are often told, for instance, that in Greenland the language has 30 names or more for different types of snow.

The geographical context has several parallels in the organizational world, for instance the mapping of organizations by ownership, industry, type, and size. The concepts of “closeness” and “distance” have also been used as grounds for describing relations between and within organizations and how these relations develop over time. The use of IT is obviously changing such things today, but physical distances are still relevant when it comes to differentiating between organizations. Theories concerning industrial development—for instance, ideas about the second industrial divide (Lorentzoni, 1981; Piore & Sabel, 1984)—in which

“closeness” is used as an important variable, exemplified this trend as far back as the early 1980s. The extended river metaphor allows for the fact that it is difficult to define boundaries between the outside and inside of an organization, and encourages the researcher to consider organizational activities across traditional levels and boundaries.

The *man-made context* refers to the once—for-all changes that can also affect rivers. These include constructions of a more or less tangible kind such as dams built for the purposes of hydroelectric power that alter the behaviour of river for the foreseeable future by altering the natural flow of water and rendering it less variable. Attempts to avoid future flooding by strengthening riverbanks or constructing walls also have long-range effects. Occasionally even more drastic human action may be taken, as when towards the end of the 19th century a Swede known as “the wild Huss” changed almost the entire bed of a Swedish river with a single blast of dynamite. In such cases the character of a river can be almost completely changed. Much of what was previously known about the river concerned is instantly rendered virtually invalid.

Needless to say, man-made contexts are very important to organizations as well. Here there are general contexts existing for, and valid for, all organizations, and special(ized) contexts existing exclusively for one specific organization. Laws and edicts are usually valid for the entire range of organizations and their mere existence has implications for each one. Professional activities have similar effects on a whole set of organizations. It could also be claimed that rules of conduct associated with particular cultures also have an obvious impact on organizations—although here the “man-made” label is a little problematic, since such rules are of a very special kind. This kind of man-made context is commonly referred to as being “institutional”. A strike aimed at one particular company (for refusal to sign a labour union agreement), is an example of an organization-specific context. Such special contexts that are exclusive to a particular organization may be involuntary and enforced in various ways, or they may represent some kind of restriction that the organization imposes upon itself.

Finally, the *conceptual context* represents what we believe we already know about rivers in general, and includes the concepts that have been constructed over the years to guide us in classifying rivers. The knowledge that a river is a glacial river, is very useful since we know immediately that the water will be muddy from loose sand, which means in turn that it looks “milky”, that fish will generally avoid it and that sedimentation in the river will be not only heavy but also of a special sort. The conceptual context also encompasses verbalized experience of what erosion and meandering evolve over time and this provides us with a basis for forecasting what will happen to the river in the future. And we can be guided in our attempts to research the river. The conceptual context also includes normative knowledge, i.e. rules as to how we should behave in relation to a river. Conceptual context is overwhelmingly important for organizations as well. In fact it embraces all research in the area as well as all its theory-in-use.

The implications for student of organizations of this rather detailed description of the extended river metaphor should be evident to the reader. The study of a

particular organization, rather than being restricted to the organization in isolation, can be enriched by looking at its various contexts as these seem, relevant to the research question or questions driving the research endeavour as a whole. Since most organizations participate in a larger number of contexts, this approach should help us to see how activities in relevant contexts are mirrored in the organization and vice versa.

As to the contexts that may be relevant, there are no ready-made answers. The contextual examples described above might provide some inspiration for dealing with the relevance of environmental issues, naturally with due consideration paid to the research question(s). Another complementary possibility is to let the actors in a host organization be involved in the definition of the relevant contexts. This approach is related to the idea of letting empirical work “go naked” or to the notion of the *tabula rasa*, which in turn bears some resemblance to the setting up hypotheses based on previous research or the explicit revelation of all the assumptions on which studies are based. The first of these alternatives should perhaps be further discussed. The implicit suggestion regarding the use of a predefined set of context definitions might be regarded as a call for hypothesis testing as a prototype for doing research. However, that is not our intention. The “abduction” alternative suggested by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (1994) seems to be what researchers choose anyway, so we have no hesitation about mentioning such procedures here.

The essence of our suggestion as it emerges from an analysis of the river metaphor, namely to study organizations in terms of their contexts, implies the consideration of different societal levels. Further, it should appeal to theorists of a realist bent as well as those who adhere to social constructionism. Overall, the contextualization idea seems to support the fruitfulness of a “micmac” approach in seeking to capture the different dimensions and levels that are inherent in the study of organizations.

Before concluding our discussion on contextualization through the medium of metaphor, we would like to make one further point concerning the use of metaphors in organization research. Their use has been much debated, among others by Tsoukas (1993). For instance, it can be questioned whether the metaphor inspires the work or the other way round. The point we want to make in connection with this debate is related to our discussion of the river metaphor above. As pointed out, a river means something completely different to a present day Icelander compared with what it meant to Heraclitus. In other words, metaphors are culture-dependent. Which means that understandings of metaphors are not very consistent. This in turn may lead to diverging perceptions and understandings among researchers, often resulting in problem of communication. On the other hand, that same cultural dependency may enrich the realms of the metaphor as a source of inspiration, as we feel it did for us when we were working on the present article.

5. Projects and contextualization

For the purpose of our analysis of the study of organizations via their projects, it seems appropriate to distinguish between projects (or “temporary organizations”)

on one hand and “ordinary” organizations on the other. As noted above, we believe that the study of projects helps us to understand contemporary organizations. Projects are manifestations of organizational action and they provide interesting insights into the inner workings of a studied organization and into the way the organization relates to its environment. Projects and “ordinary” organizations do thus have many traits in common and are usually related to each other, but we should also be aware of what may differentiate the one from the other. Projects generally have two very characteristic features: they have been designed for a purpose so their existence is delimited in time from the moment of their creation, and they are focused on one primary task. Projects are therefore very interesting as special cases. To most people their man-made quality appears obvious and direct—in a way they are more man-made than ordinary organizations—and there are several reasons for paying special attention to them:

- (1) The prevalence of projects in society appears to be on the increase. (There are very few direct or explicit statistics to substantiate this claim, since there are very few, statistics—if any—on projects as a whole. But there is indirect evidence to support it, for instance the fact that PMI—the professional organization for project managers—has increased its total membership from around 17,000 in 1995 to somewhere in the vicinity of 60,000 in 2000. In other words, interest in projects is growing, since membership of PMI increased by almost a factor of four over a period of 5 years.)
- (2) The field is currently attracting research interest from new cadres of researchers. (Themes associated with projects and temporary organizations are appearing more frequently in research journals. Special conferences and workshops on various aspects of project organizing are arranged, often in cooperation with business people who have a stake in project-oriented activities. One reason for all this growing activity in recent years is that many researchers find the notion of a “temporary organization”—differing from any “ordinary” organization since it has a definite end-point—intriguing in itself. There also appears to be an urge to find ways to merge thinking about projects and temporary organizations with the general field of organization theory.)
- (3) It appears that the overall, global economy is undergoing some fundamental changes, and that projects play an increasingly important part in this development. (Projectivization, in the sense of the increasing use of the project form, is escalating in society as people talk increasingly of the rapidity of change and emphasize time as an important variable to be considered (cf. Ekstedt, Lundin, Söderholm, & Wirdenius, 1999).

As already mentioned, projects differ from the general category of “organizations” in that they are defined as limited in time from the outset. In most cases, the time horizon is specified at the time when the project is explicitly formed.

In projects time is generally regarded as linear, since by definition a project has a beginning and an end, and has none of the aspired continuity of the ordinary organization. Since a project tends to pass through a series of phases during its

lifetime (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995), project duration time is a good indicator of what may be going on. The whole notion of a project as a plan is in fact based on the concept of linear time. And even when a project or a temporary organization has an imprecise or unclear task, which renders the entire venture rather vague, the results reported in Gersick (1988) about the “half-way” problem suggest that knowledge about the linear project time is useful if you want to grasp what is going on. At the same time the Gersick results also suggest that the order of the phases in a project may be switched round or some phases may be repeated, so there may even be instances of circular time in projects as well.

Other differences also exist (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995). It could be claimed that in the minds of the general public temporary organizations or projects are envisaged as having a very strict design, as compared to the generic organization. The project idea is thus accompanied by a clearly specified set of characteristics, a kind of geographical structure. The following summary of some of the differences between projects and “ordinary” organizations (or their stereotype version) can serve to illustrate this contention (Fig. 1).

Although this dichotomy may be overstating the case, it is fair to say that a project can be conceived as a special case of organizations in general. Some researchers also specifically differentiate between projects and temporary organizations. Packendorff (1993) finds it useful to describe the project as being characterized by a plan, while the temporary organization is more of a perspective on what is going on in the world in terms of time-focused organizations. This last distinction could be carried further by suggesting that “ordinary” organizations are assuming some of the traits of the “temporary”. We will leave that argument here, however, and return briefly to the discussion of time.

As noted above, projects and “ordinary” organizations are often related to each other. The latter are often “parents” or “hosts” to the former. Projects are generally constructed or created from parts of an “ordinary” organization. In that case, according to the normative prototype a project should be isolated from its environment. It should be possible to decouple the project from the rest of the world (including its host), so as to make it independent and amenable to control as an entity. In practice this is very difficult to achieve. In some instances it would even be less than wise to follow the normative advice. Project managers and, even more, the

	Projects	"Ordinary" organizations
goal structure	only one main task	a broad set of goals
time dimension	delimited time	unlimited, eternal
boundaries	given by the task	legal boundaries
actors	team members chosen	members with different
control	especially for task	but permanent functions
	by way of a plan and	by annual statements
	subsequent revisions	and/or evaluation

Fig. 1. Comparing conceptions of projects and “ordinary” organizations.

bosses of the project managers have long since recognized the need to coordinate projects from an extended view, especially those using the same kind of resources (cf. Eskerod, 1997). If manpower is a scarce resource, then this will affect the total set of projects (or the project portfolio, to use the traditional terminology).

The concepts (or conceptual context) in the project field are nearly always normative. This applies not only to the theory-in-use but also to virtually all-conceptual material. This fact may give added weight to the field, since the terminology seems well adapted to the needs of those working with practical problems in projects. At the same time the preoccupation with the normative entails a weakness, especially if the approach is explanatory.

In our search for remedies for the methodological pessimism that can plague the empirical study of organizations we thus focus on the project level. In other words we scrutinize the context of the projects or temporary organizations that are connected with a studied organization. (This last is the most relevant part of the project's environment.) Thus, focusing on projects or temporary organizations is a way of studying more directly what is going on in the main organization. The contexts of the projects and temporary organizations tell us something about the host or the parents organization, since projects almost by definition have a birthplace and a home. Investigating the projects associated with an organization thus involves answering questions about where the projects come from (their origin) and what will happen to them when their task is completed, as well as the more obvious question that attaches to projects, namely how they are handled over time.

Specifically, the following points are, what make projects especially interesting to the study of a particular organization:

- (1) They represent foci of attention not only for people working within them but also for others, such as ordinary members of the host organization, and even for people outside the constellation altogether. In other words, it is comparatively easy to pick them out for study. In line with the reasoning of actor network theory (Callon & Latour, 1981), we could say that the projects become actors once they have been established on the stage.
- (2) They can function as communicative devices in relation to actions in the main organization and as a way of involving the actors more deeply in the ongoing research processes.
- (3) They represent aspects of the main organization since they have been created to fulfill a task associated with that organization. The answer to the question about where a project comes from—which is important for the people working in it, since this belongs to its context—may be a key to essential processes in the main organization and in the project itself.
- (4) The events preceding a project's birth and the birth process itself may tell us something very important about the main organization and its actors. The same thing holds for the allocation of resources to the project, which is also one of its important contextual aspects.
- (5) The mix of projects—bread-and-butter projects in the construction industry, for instance, as compared to development projects whose ultimate purpose is

change as such—also tells stories of interest to those working in the projects as well as interesting stories about the main organization.

- (6) Thus studying projects related to a parent or host organization and examining their different contexts, is also a way of grasping some of the vital processes, actors and related priorities of the main organization.

6. Contextualization and organizations as temporary phenomena

Before summarizing the above and attempting to carry the argument a little further, it is important to note that there is more to organizations and their contexts than meets the eye. The data collected may not be relevant, nor may it provide any very valuable understanding of the organization in question. A deliberate effort has to be made to collect data, useful to the case under study. For those anxious to get a grasp of organizations that may be on the move, i.e. to understand contextualization in a broad sense as described in above, our proposed procedure offers one way to organize the study of organizations today. We will see that, the aspects of contextualization which are closely related could, be regarded as two sides of the same coin.

The extended metaphor highlights not only the “becoming” but also the “being” of organizations. It calls attention to their embeddedness and contextual aspects, and the different levels at which organizational activity occurs. It invokes complex underlying forces and invisible assets as well as the more tangible manifestations of organizations. This means that in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the organizational activity in question, the researcher needs to study the organization longitudinally and across the different levels in which the activity is embedded. This in turn suggests a need to adopt a contextual and processual research approach, referred to here as a processually related “micmac” approach.

This conclusion is in line with recent calls for contextual awareness and processual research (see Ropo et al., 1997), but it is also necessary to draw special attention to this research approach when it comes to studying organizations as temporary phenomena. Viewing organizations as temporary implies a certain ontological stance, which has implications for the research as well as for the researcher. A change in the ontological stance regarding the nature of organizations raises the question as to whether present theories and models are really promoting useful understandings of the activities in question. The researcher should never forget that in the field of organizational studies and in the common understanding of the practices of organizational research, language and traditions may be misleading from the start.

By focussing on the temporary aspect of organizations, we are forced to consider them as “becoming” rather than as merely “being”. They cannot be regarded as stable and predictable systems or as self-controlled organisms that always achieve a balance in their activities. There is a chaotic element in organizational activities, which can indeed be seen as multi-contextual and heavily dependent on the will and wishes of the stakeholders in question. The student concerned with the temporary

nature of organizations must take heed of Pettigrew's warning that "language can be an analytical prison" (1997, p. 338) and remember that the development of new language must be grounded on the particular action to be studied. The student's preconceptions and understandings of this action frame the study.

In studying organizations as temporary phenomena the researcher's attention is drawn to different contexts and processes in the organizational actions, as well as to the changing nature of the contexts themselves. Different aspects such as the context of time, the context of space, the context of man-made creation and the context of conceptions and enactments among the participants in the temporary activities are all in the focus of attention. Projects, as the most fully considered manifestations of organizations as temporary phenomena, illustrate the complex contextual dependencies and paradoxical aspects that have to be taken into account in seeking to understand what is actually taking place. Projects are the surface expression of the organized activities, they are intentional "man-made" creations—social and technical constructions—designed on purpose to grasp some of the activities or developments that occur.

In discussing the methodological aspects of studying organizations as temporary phenomena we have emphasized the importance of extending the research focus beyond the projects in isolation and to study them in their context as well. Also, the organizational field does not offer the vocabulary that is really needed for studying on organizations in this temporal perspective. To support this contention we need only point out that understandings of the concept of "project" today vary not only in different parts of the world but also within one and the same country. There are even languages totally lacking appropriate words for describing the project concept. And when it comes to trying to describe what "organizations as temporary phenomena" actually means, the situation is worse still.

There is of course, nothing really new about applying different contexts to the study of organizations. In one form or another researchers have used all four of the context types inspired by our metaphor. Thus Hägerstrand (1991) is famous for his time-space geography, which brings together two of our contexts. Giddens has long been promoting ideas regarding "structuration" which are also relevant (see e.g. Giddens, 1984). Further, the focus on projects has some features in common with the emphasis on "critical incidents" as a useful way to find out about organizational processes. Studies of a "critical incidents" type have in fact been around for a long time (cf. Flanagan, 1954), although projects and temporary organizations themselves have only become popular in empirical studies quite recently.

What is perhaps new is the suggestion that a focus on organizations as temporary phenomena promotes the combination of the various contexts and approaches into one. An analytical approach that combines something along the lines of the four contextual aspects with a study of the projects of a host organization might open up some new avenues for the researcher, since the resulting match (or mismatch) could be a further source of valuable information and a trigger for new questions. The idea behind this contention is very simple. Projects can be seen as instruments whereby a host organization can adapt to, or shape, the contexts within which it is operating. In this light the contextual approaches can be said to represent the two sides of a coin.

Rather than choosing one or other of the approaches (or perspectives), the aim should be to combine them, since such a combination is useful in itself.

If this is so obvious, however, why have more researchers not adopted the approach? There are not many examples of projects being studied as a means of reaching interesting conclusions about their host organization. The same can be said about contextualization via the metaphor. Examples of the suggested combination are even more scarce, if not lacking altogether. The question as to why the combination has not been used is of course an empirical one. We suspect, however, that there are some fairly straightforward answers:

- (1) Perspectives other than that of contextualization have been favoured by researchers over the last 20 years or so. The relative success of studies on cultural and similar issues has fostered certain favourite ways of doing research among those active in the empirical field.
- (2) Studying projects has not been particularly popular until recently. The project field has a history of normative endeavours on the part of engineers, rather than efforts towards understanding on the part of organization theorists.
- (3) Most researchers interested in the temporary organization/project phenomenon have tended to focus on the project in itself, rather than on projects in context. Not until recently have research efforts been directed towards project-oriented firms or projectivized companies, i.e. towards a multi-project environment.

We claim that the temporality of organizations today should not be regarded as anything exceptional. We believe that the entire field of organized activity is constantly moving and changing, due to forces and relations that demand responses and counteractions. We emphasize the challenge that this poses for the researcher. In this article, we have sought to provide some bases for reflecting upon the study of organizations by way of a focus on projects and through lenses representing different contexts.

In conclusion, it is our view that researchers should seek to concentrate their efforts on the study of organizations as temporary phenomena. The risk otherwise is that organization research might lose its relevance for practitioners in the field. And we cannot be too sure that the practitioners have got the whole thing wrong, can we?

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