The Phenomenology of Time: Reflections from the *Lebenswelt*

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According to Merleau-Ponty (2002) the central theme of Husserl's later phenomenology was the notion of the *Lebenswelt* normally translated as "life-world". Husserl, in his work *Experience and Judgment (1938)* emphasized the importance of returning to the life-world, the world of our ordinary experience (Moran, 2000) (p. 12). Furthermore in the *Crisis of European Sciences,* Husserl understood the *lebenswelt* as encompassing the totality of human endeavour including the realm of scientific endeavour.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the workshop by reflecting on how time was perceived by different actors during a longitudinal study of innovation in the *lebenswelt* –in this case a multi-national subsidiary (Costello, 2010). It aims to address the call by Markus (2000) that information systems (IS) research must incorporate the concepts of both history and time in their management and organization studies.

The study of time is as old as philosophy itself with Parmenides and Zeno holding what is regarded as a "static" view- they considered the appearance of temporal change to be an illusion. However Heraclitus and Aristotle argued for a "dynamic" view of time where reality was being constantly added to as time passes (Lowe, 2005). In particular Aristotle 's concept of time was closely linked with his account of motion concluding that we perceive time and motion together (Kenny, 2010). An influential discussion of the problem of time is contained in Book XI of Saint Augustine's Confessions (1961) where he opens by stating that there is "no quick and easy answer" to the question of what is time (p. 263). He goes on to say that there are three *times*: "a present of past things, a present of present things, and a present of future things". He explains (p. 269):

> The present of past things is memory; the present of present things is direct perception; and the present of future things is expectation.

Moran and Cohen (2012) propose that the question of temporality was a "foundational element of Husserl's entire phenomenological project" and subject to "profound and constant revisions, precisions and clarifications" (p. 320). A conundrum that he struggled with was how to relate "objective time" with the "subjective" consciousness of time and he regarded time as the "most difficult of all phenomenological problems" (p. 321). From the beginning of the twentieth century Husserl began to have a great interest in the "temporal character of acts and their objects, and in the temporal 'streaming' of the ego itself" (p. 139) (Moran, 2005). He began to study the way in which consciousness is framed by temporal experience (p. 34). Similarly Brough (1977) points out that an examination of relatively recent editions of the *Husserliana* indicates the development of Husserl's idea of time-consciousness.

> In the new position which then appeared, around 1909, the absolute flow of time-constituting consciousness, and its distinction from temporal objects both immanent and transcendent was unequivocally affirmed (p. 83).
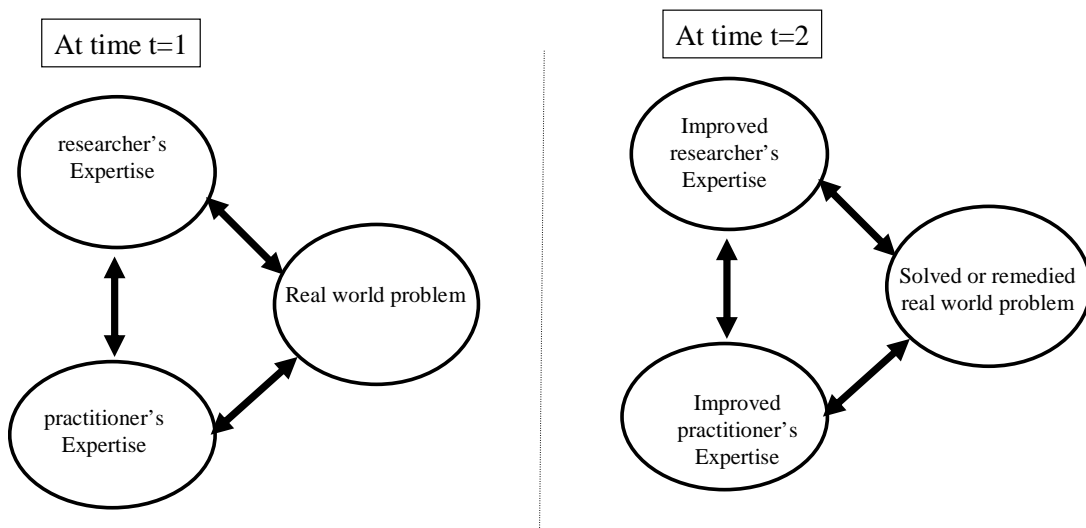
The *Lebenswelt* of this research was a subsidiary of APC, a division of the Schneider Electric multinational corporation (MNC), located in the West of Ireland. It was carried out during a *time* of significant change within both the MNC and the Irish economy. The investigation involved a two year *longitudinal* study of innovation in the multinational corporation where the researcher had the status of a temporary employee. In *year one*, a total of 29 unstructured or open interviews were undertaken that involved approximately 60 hours of *interview time* and 24 *days* spent in the company sites. The interviews were conducted across a wide area of the organization that included: Senior Managers with global, EMEA (Europe, Middle East and Africa) and site responsibilities, Middle-Managers, Team Leaders, Engineers and a

number of people in general planning roles. Furthermore the researcher had the status of a temporary employee with his own email address and intranet access. In *the second year* the approach involved dialogical action research (DAR) proposed to the information systems (IS) community by Mårtensson & Lee (2004). In total the transcripts for this DAR period ran to over 60,000 words resulting from the dialogue between the researcher and the practitioner.

Now we will examine empirical research from the *Lebenswelt*, through the lens of *objective time* and *subjective consciousness of time*.

At the project macro level (in this case a two year period), in order to evaluate dialogical AR Mårtensson & Lee suggest three criteria (p. 519). These criteria were used when evaluating the research as it progressed from time t=1 to t=2.
- The practitioner considers the real world problem to be solved or remedied satisfactorily
- There had been an improvement in the practitioner's expertise
- There has been an improvement in the researcher's expertise

However a number of other conceptualisation of time flowed through the two-year project. Initially there was an assignment within the APC organisation that was scheduled to last three months. This involved doing a number of on-line training modules. However one of the machine operatives had a problem *finding time* to concentrate on completing the modules when doing a "hands-on job". Typically workers at this level would have output measured on an *hourly* basis. Another technical manager interviewed had the issue of managing project over different *time-zones* in Europe, North America and Asia.

Here are some time-related quotes from the plant manager who was a very important actor in the research:

> Managing uncertainty is the immediate problem. A big challenge is to free up creativity in a *time of uncertainty* as this type of environment can make creativity difficult.
>
> I see a great value in this research by forcing me to take *time out* for reflection

> There is real benefit by bringing the literature to me… people from the academic world read lots – that's what they do. However, being able to filter it down to the likes of me who might want to read but does not have all that *time* is important.
>
> In some ways, it is a bit more *time-consuming* for me but it's a false economy, because once I've spent that *half an hour* with everybody at the start of the week, I have less to deal with during the week. However, the other way around means that you are *fire fighting* the whole *week*".

Also, from the perspective of the researcher, the two-year study was part of a five-year PhD research journey with even longer publication cycles –from concept through research through writing to publishing papers.

This outline provide a brief summary of some reflections by the researcher , using empirical data, on the objective and subjective concepts of time as lived-out in a real-world context. The aim would be to develop a full paper based on this initial impetus.

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