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Moving Ahead

How Time Is Compressed and Stretched in Strategy Work

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Moving ahead: how time is compressed and stretched in strategy work

Abstract

The process perspective on strategy agrees that time is integral to any understanding of strategy work, recognizing that strategies emerge over time. However, it is also concerned with how past(s), presents(s) and future(s) are unfolded in time and interlinked in timelines that matter to the organization as a collective way of moving ahead. In particular, research in the "practice turn" has investigated how such unfolding and time-links appears within organizations, but has barely touched on the motion of these temporal spaces, which is to say, how they move the organization ahead. This article introduces Luhmann's systems-theoretical concept of time-binding. The concept offers a means of investigating how time, when unfolded and linked, is compressed or stretched, thereby demonstrating the motion of temporal spaces. To illustrate the concept's potential, I take an event-based case approach focused on the goal-mediated communication within a Danish municipality. Three strategic spaces signified by "gotta catch up," "one step ahead" and "no brake" were unexpectedly found to be experienced simultaneously, thus turning a seemingly linear strategy based on goal achievement into a complex of interrelated motions driven by performativity, potentiality and reiteration.

Keywords

Strategy, time, process, temporality, motion, practice turn, systems theory.

Introduction

Time is integral to any understanding of strategy work, an activity that makes the organization aware of its very identity – where it comes from, where it is now, and where it is heading (Langley, 2007; Hernes *et al*., 2013; **Reinecke *et al*., 2021**). With the spotlight on time, in this article I investigate the intimate relationship between time and strategy work, especially as it pertains to "process thinking," which calls specific attention to the dynamics of time.

The process field of research recognizes that strategies emerge *over* time, but also concerns itself with practices within which past(s), present(s) and future(s) are unfolded *in* time and interlinked in timelines that give the organization collective means of moving ahead. The "practice turn," in particular, has investigated how time-links mediate strategic action, for this purpose turning Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) initial argument that the structural context of action is itself temporal into an empirical matter. This research turn has also shown how actors actually link their often-divergent interpretations of the past, present and future into timelines and strategic accounts (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013).

However, the pioneering work on timelinks and the linking of time calls for more research, as it has only barely touched on the motion of these temporal spaces, for instance, in terms of speed and acceleration versus deceleration or of repetition and routines versus disruption. In short, if strategy work is rooted in a temporal activity that defines collective spaces of change and movement - who we are, from where are coming, and to where we are heading - then this deficit within the practice turn is hardly trivial. Seeking to address this deficit, in this article I introduce Luhmann's systems-theoretical concept of time-binding.

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Luhmann's work includes a general theory on social systems and a dynamic view on their reproduction, which covers how organizations use communication to structure and restructure themselves (Luhmann, 1995; 2012). Researchers within the practice turn have already used this processual view of organizations, especially the concept of "event" and "episode" put forward by Seidl *et al.* (Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Seidl, 2005; Blacke *et al*., 2012; Kastberg, 2013; Seidl and Whittington, 2014). However, Luhmann's concept of time-binding remains notably absent, despite its relevance to the practice turn as a way to examine how organizations structure and restructure their own temporalities.

Time-binding is a mean of investigating how time, when linked as cause and effect, is compressed or stretched and, as such, propels the motion of temporal spaces. As such, I apply the time-binding concept to address this research question: How does the linking of time in strategy work engender the motions of temporal spaces?

The proposed concept of time-binding contributes considerable insight into strategy work, as the more aware one becomes of how such work binds past(s), present(s) and future(s) and within these processes creates spaces that are temporally compressed or stretched, the better one can understand how organizations move ahead.

First, I examine the scholarly work already done within the process view of strategy and time-links. Next, I present Luhmann's concept of time-binding. Then, to illustrate the concept's empirical potential, I take an event-based case approach focused on goal-mediated communication within the Danish Municipality of Hørsholm (read: Horsholm). I conclude by discussing the theoretical implications of the findings and suggest avenues for future research.

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Theoretical background

From the standpoint of understanding the relationship between strategy and time, there are two fields of process research. The first includes pioneers such as Chandler (1962), Pettigrew *et al*. (1990, 1992, 2001) and Mintzberg *et al*. (1978, 1982, 1985, 2007), who are broadly related by an awareness that strategy should be conceived of as patterns of activity and effects emerging *over* time.

Researchers in the practice turn have more recently engaged in the second field. This stream encompasses a general interest ranging from embedded agency (Johnson *et al.*, 2003; Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Vaara and Whittington, 2012; **Whittington, R. (2019; Seidl and Whittington, 2021**) to micro episodes and events (Kastberg, 2013; Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Seidl, 2005; Seidl and Whittington, 2014; **Hussenot et al., 2020)** and is concerned with how the past(s), presents(s) and future(s) are unfolded and settled *in* time and in ways that make strategic practices and spaces possible as collective ways of moving ahead (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Gioia *et al.*, 2002; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Kaplan, 2008a; **Bygballe *et al*., 2020**).

The process perspective can thus be conceptualized around this general distinction between "over time" and "in time," the latter of which aligns with this article's contribution.

Practicing strategy "in time"

Researchers within the practice turn have explored how time-links emerge and become settled as structural contexts that matter to the organization or at least part of it. These

explorations divide this turn's temporal concern into time-linking activities (emergence), on the one hand, and the way time-links mediate strategic activities (context), on the other.

Time-linking as an activity (emergence) was introduced by Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013), who studied this topic in their ground-breaking article on temporal work and strategy-making practice. They suggest that temporal work results in the creation of what they term "temporal linking," which establishes an orientation to time. Indeed, their exploration reveals how temporal work consists of multiple, even competing interpretations across the past, present and future and how organizations might settle into strategic accounts that enable strategic choices and collective action to emerge from such work.

Other scholars have previously advocated an interpretative view of time, stressing that actors' interpretations of historical events, present circumstances and the future to come will always mediate their choices about what action to take (e.g., Gioia *et al*., 2002; Tsoukas and Sheperd, 2009; Suddaby *et al*., 2010; Bresman, 2013; **Mattila *et al*., 2019**). Complementing this work on interpretive processes, Langley *et al.* (2013) have also uncovered the role (micro) tensions and contradictions play in driving patterns of change. These contributions have enhanced the understanding of strategic action and spaces within an organization that involve conflicts and congruities that lead to either change and or stability.

Thus, past, present and future are woven into practices as the everyday means by which an organization orients itself to a horizon, thus giving itself a sense that taking a collectively felt, interest-driven direction can and will effect change (Holt, 2018).

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However, already established time-links (context) can also mediate activities, an approach initially inspired by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), as mentioned in the introduction, and that investigates already established temporal links through related terms, including "strategic accounts," "timeframes," "time-lines" and "lines of action." As such, this approach implicitly assumes or explicitly addresses the links made between past, present and future.

This research on temporal contexts has already led to several conceptual and empirical insights, focusing on different forms and structurings of time and how organizations receive and justify them (Barkema *et al.*, 2002; Bluedorn, 2002; Orlikowski and Yates, 2002; Helfat and Raubitschek, 2002). Other scholars have raised awareness of temporal contingency. Monin *et al*. (2013), for instance, show how strategies are entrenched in economic and political matters that are balanced and altered in ways that evoke different links between past and future. Dodd *et al.* (2013) and Vesa and Franck (2013) have shown how the contingency of different temporal forms provides managers with a repertoire of decisions and spaces of action that, in principle, can be opposites. Griesbach and Grand (2013) have even taken these notions of temporal contingency a step further, arguing that strategic work occurs within this temporal multiplicity rather than breaks down because of it. In sum, it would be fair to say that the practice turn has produced an invaluable understanding of time as integral to strategy work, with research in this field covering a spectrum that spans from time-linking activities based on interpretations, tensions, and contingencies to time-links based on embeddedness and context.

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Apart from a few attempts at studying the issue of pace and speed (Perlow *et al.* 2002; Grey, 2009; Czarniawska, 2013; **Simpson et al., 2020**), however, the practice turn has yet to explore the motion of these temporal spaces. Indeed, the pioneering work of this turn has neither offered a temporal concept enabling any scrutiny beyond these issues of pace and speed, nor shown how different ways of moving ahead are built into time-links.

The concept of time-binding

Applying the social theorist Niklas Luhmann's concept of time-binding can help to address the deficit in this work, as it offers a way to investigate how time, when linked within organizations, is compressed or stretched in terms of cause-and-effect relationships.

Before and after

Luhmann stresses that structures, including temporal ones, follow communication as it reflects and (re-)structures its own temporal conditions. Inspired by Spencer Brown's (1969) work on form and distinctions, Luhmann further notes how within organizations these reflections take place according to the way communication distinguishes before from after (Luhmann, 2018, ch. 5; Esposito, 2011; Luhmann, 1995, ch. 8; Luhmann, 1978). In other words, temporal structuring entails processes able to be addressed as empirical matters that follow the lead of befores and afters.

The before/after distinction means that past, present and future can be studied in multiple forms. The past, for instance, can be studied either as it relates to the present

(present/past) or by how it was constructed in the past (past/past). Similarly, the future can also be studied relative to the present (present/future) but also from the standpoint of how it is expected to be constructed at a later point in time (future/future) (Luhmann, 1990; 2017).

The before/after distinction also engenders a counterintuitive reversal of time. Indubitably, most strategies anticipate a past that comes before the future, as this measured sense of time is habitually considered originary (Bakken *et al.*, 2013, p. 19), but strategies concerning innovation may even consider the future as past. Such strategies manifest themselves in catchy slogans like "the future is already here" or "we put the future behind us" – and to great effect on the organizations' enacted practices.

Following the lead of befores and afters undoubtedly widens the vistas for exploring new and sometimes unexpected time-bindings.

Binding and action

Luhmann proceeds with his concept by considering how the temporal form of before/after becomes binded when unfolded – especially in an organization, which depends on not only a sense of direction but also some certainty that it can go in this direction by its own means and often according to a formalized timeline (Luhmann, 2018, ch. 5; Seidl and Becker, 2006; Nassehi, 2005; Luhmann, 1978). He emphasizes that before and after become binded when cause (before) is related to effect (after). This binding takes two basic forms: cause that is expected to lead to anticipated effects (prospective ascriptions) and effect that is expected to be already caused (retrospective ascriptions). Luhmann further notes that whenever before appears as cause and after as

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effect, an organization ascribes the quality of action and of agency to itself: Its action causes a collective effect or a collective effect is caused by its own action. In this regard, cause-and-effect relationships – and their binding – are temporal spaces constitutive of action (Thygesen, 2007; King and Thornhill, 2003; Luhmann, 1989).

Without doubt, organizations are flooded with such befores and afters. For instance, core competency strategies have their own useful history when it comes to how important past events, decisions or personas cause present effect, which in turn offers a historical structuring following the axiom "what we have always done is what we do best." Another example might be the way strategies based on grand visions create a distance to the past, thereby offering a change structure by which multiple activities are expected to bring about a much-desired future.

Compression and extension

In the bindings of causes and effects Luhmann recognizes the qualities of compressing time and therefore also its possible stretching (Luhmann, 1989; 2017, ch. 3). Compression might occur if an imminent future, say, a sense of urgency, is expected, which often leads to tight planning schedules that compress time immensely. Stretching, on the other hand, is often due to future images that continually function in the present but are expected to be realized within an unknown future horizon. Such instances of time-binding often manifest themselves in values and vision statements (Collins and Porras, 2008; 1996) that, besides providing an appealing sense of direction, often seek to unite many interests. Some instances of time-binding might even both compress and stretch time. For example, strategy work combining long-term visions and mission statements

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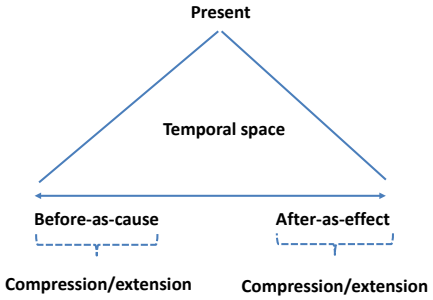
with short term KPI's constitutes presents that are simultaneously stretched and compressed – two motions occurring within one temporal space.

Overview

Figure 1 illustrates the concept of time-binding.



At the top of the pyramid is the *present* within which befores and afters are unfolded by means of ascriptions. These befores and afters carry a specific binding quality when the former is expected to cause the latter or vice versa, thus forming a *temporal space* of action The arrow connecting *before-as-cause* with *after-as-effect* illustrates this binding, and the stipulated brackets indicate that the distance between them is not objectively given but *compressed* or *stretched*. The figure shows what the proposed concept of time-binding offers: an understanding of how bindings create different motions within such temporal spaces depending on how time is compressed and/or stretched, and thus of how organizations move ahead.

To illustrate the empirical potential of the time-binding concept, in the next section I follow the case of a goal-mediated communication within a Danish municipality.

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The case

I chose Hørsholm municipality as an illustrative case for three reasons. First, the municipality has implemented and formalized an overall strategic practice based on goal-steering, which operates both across organizational units and vertically through them (The Organizational Philosophy of the Municipality of Horsholm, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016). Second, the municipality's service areas greatly differ, for which reason it is expected to rely on diverse time-bindings. Third, 12 policy centers integrate the various strategic work done at the top and the bottom of the hierarchy, thus providing a viable object of research. As such, I considered the municipality to be a sound case for presenting the concept's potential.

Generally speaking, the municipality's overall goal process is circular. Top management, which consists of politicians and the board of directors, annually revises the overall strategy, after which it is fleshed out in more detail by middle management, which at the time of the study ran 12 policy centers and now runs six, and by lower management, which operates institutions such as day nurseries, homecare services, schools, kindergartens, cultural institutions, etc. When the time comes for the next year's review, the past year's detailed strategy provides top management with valuable input for the upcoming revision process – and so the "wheel of goals" keeps spinning.

Case approach and methodology

The case approach is generally inspired by Yin (2014) and Robson (2002), specifically aiming to study selected events and episodes within practices (Jarzabkowski and Seidl,

2008; Bromley, 1990). Bromley (1990, p. 302) defines this inquiry as a "systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest."

Data collection

The organizational units selected for this case study are the policy centers, as their strategy work integrates the strategies done at the top and the bottom of the spinning wheel. Within these centers, I have selected communicative events of goal-steering as the objects of analysis, with the data being collected from written material and group dialogues and consisting of observations made in terms of communicative ascriptions (Andersen, 2003; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Fachin and Langley, 2017). For both the written and dialogical sources I used a sampling procedure to select data relevant for approximating shared time-bindings on the basis of expectations about their information content (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230).

I used written material as a means of discerning which events were formally shared by top, middle (policy center) and lower management. In terms of goal-driven policy initiatives, the first sample distinguished collectively shared events from those in the sole domain of the respective management levels and centers. Five events were then selected on the basis of three criteria: They should be profoundly goal-driven; they should explicitly state befores (from where we depart) and afters (to where we are going); and they should have ends (in terms of the goals) associated with different means (i.e., plans) and thus show formations of causality. Table 1 shows the five events selected to

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illustrate the shared time-binding of strategy work. The written material from this sample covered two types of documents produced and reproduced from 2013 to 2016.

Group dialogues were used as another data source because they give insight into how meaning emerges in intersubjective spaces, which, as Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) note, is not something the researcher can merely discover in documents or with non-participatory observation. To explore the shared time-bindings of a given group, I established an intimate setting by seating participants together. This helped them to develop a collective awareness of the subject matter and thus to articulate experiences they might not have pondered individually.

The dialogues were based on a partnership between myself (the researcher) and the municipality, and hence the group, and conducted over a four-year period from 2013 to 2016, during which 11 two-hour meetings were held. I kept four comprehensive logbooks, one for each year, to systematize and extrapolate data from the notes taken on the 11 group dialogues. Each meeting was attended by managers from all three managerial levels and internal consultants, the latter of which were involved in the policy centers' goal-steering processes on a full-time basis. Table 1 provides an overview of written material and participants.

Inspired by Alvesson and Cunliffe's work on dialogical reflexivity and inquiry (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008; Cunliffe, 2003), this dialogical approach engendered an intersubjectivity that included the facilitator. The dialogues were semi-structured according to three themes. The first provided a starting point from which to ask opening questions about dominant and frequently used metaphors, signifiers and common expressions. "One step ahead" proved to be an expression with a substantial impact on

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time-binding. The second theme concerned how befores and afters become unfolded and binded as a before (causes) related to an after (effects), thus serving to address, for instance, different means-ends relationships. The questions covering the third theme delved more deeply into how participants experienced time-bindings in urgent or fast-paced situations (compression of time) or in circumstances of relief or play (stretching of time). Once the participants were familiar with the idea of differently experienced means-ends relationships (causalities), the dialogues moved swiftly between the three themes.

The written and dialogical data were collected over a four-year period (2013–2016) in order to ensure that the observed time-bindings were more than one-off events. One ensures such groundedness, Langley (2009) states, by comparing experiences from the same empirical source at different points in time. The extended collection period further meant that the group dialogues could be held at intervals lengthy enough for me to incorporate and combine, as well as analyze and extrapolate the written and dialogical data. Indeed, these intervals proved an important part of the process, as they allowed me to acquire new inputs on the preliminary patterns of time-binding for the next round of dialogues.

Table 1 shows an overview of the data collected and the events held.

Table 1. Data

	Written material		Dialogue	Follow-up
Year	2013 - 2016	2013 – 2016	2013 - 2016	2018

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Written material	4 x The Organizational Philosophy 4 x Vision 4 x Strategy	4 x strategy letter from top management 4 x 12 policies from centre management 4 x 34 Performance plans from lower management	12 x 2hour dialogues= 24 hours of dialogues with eight managers and consultants 4 x Logbooks	Presentation and confirmation of aggregated patterns of timebindings
Group dialogues	One second level top manager (Head of Center for Politics) also having a seat in the top management group Two lower-level managers (Head of Team Communication and head of Cross-cutting Development, Center for Politics) Four internal consultants full time involved in the goal-steering processes among the six policy centres.			
Events	1. The climate initiative 2. Digitalization and IT improvement 3. LEAN 4. Social capital 5. Training of strategic skills			

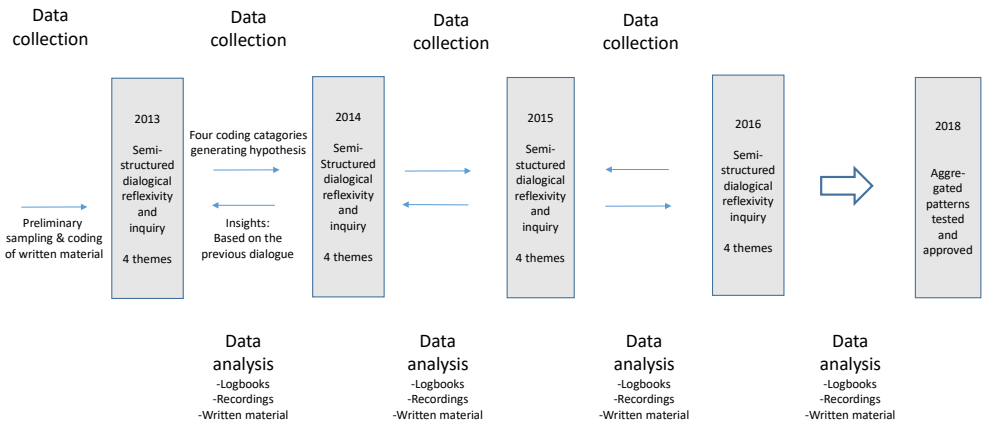
Data analysis

I opted to use a variant of the grounded theory approach, iterative grounded theory, to analyze (code, systematize) and extrapolate the insights gained before and between the group dialogues (Orton, 1997). The preliminary patterns discerned in one round of group dialogues informed the next until, ultimately, the participants in the final meeting in 2018 acknowledged and confirmed a consistent, aggregated pattern of three time-bindings.

I used selective coding to analyze both the written material and the group dialogues (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Flyvbjerg, 2006). As such, I created four coding categories, the first being a temporal semantic category that served as the core. For instance, “one step ahead” was a temporal semantic positioning itself as being ahead of

time. In the second coding category, I took a quantitative step into the written material, seeking to determine the extent to which semantics mediated the formalized communication. “One step ahead” was relatively popular, with about 25% of the authorized goals that impacted staff, means and resources being structured according to it. The third coding category involved a qualitative step into the data material, a process intended to distinguish how the semantics configured a certain distinction of before-as-cause and after-as-effect and thus causal ascriptions guided by this temporal distinction. I then validated this causal set-up by examining the written material but also by using examples raised in the next round of dialogues. The fourth coding category related causal ascriptions to temporal signifiers (Vesa and Frank, 2013), which are a common but unquestioned and often self-explanatory expression referring to this causal construct. For instance, “proactive” became a common signifier for being one step ahead. I extrapolated the four categories into an overview that was drawn up after the dialogues and provided ideas and patterns on the subject of time-bindings in the next round.

Figure 2 sums up the data analysis process.



The figure depicts how the data analysis process began with a preliminary sampling and coding of the written material, which then served as input for the first group dialogue. Dialogical reflexivity and inquiry within the four themes drove each of the subsequent group dialogues, which were also fed by any newly obtained, up-to-date written material. Data were collected and analyzed between each dialogue, and through this iteration process of analysis and pattern extrapolation, I maintained a focus on emerging patterns and the development of new ones. This ongoing process gradually gave shape to the three aggregated and collectively shared time-bindings approved and confirmed in the last group meeting. All three bindings represented a strategic space driven by goals, yet each compressed and stretched time very differently.

Case analysis

I now turn to the analysis part of the study, showing three time-bindings: "gotta catch up," "one step ahead" and "no brake."

"Gotta catch up"

"Gotta catch up" is a semantic operating within a present/future form that evokes a binding whereby the future is caused by the present. This causality appeared with the greatest frequency within the written material, with reference to goals (approx. 75 %), and gained substantial attention in the group dialogues.

One consultant identified what compressed time so immensely within this temporal form, saying, "We can't do without calculating, but it leaves out one thing in the equation: friction, and more than that. We're always behind the plan. Yes, this makes it

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difficult. We're always in a state of gotta catch up." When it came to cause-and-effect relationships, the group gave a clear impression of this relationship directly manifested in strategic calculations and indirectly by optimizing the basis on which the calculations were made, that is, by improving the calculation systems and enhancing management training. Two frequently used signifiers further indicated the compressions: "our own delays" (calculations) and "engine power" (optimizing).

"Our own delays". The participants generally agreed that advanced calculations should be made so service improvements could go hand in hand with savings and efficiency, and that strategies – where present calculated savings already appeared in the next year's budget as future facts – should firmly pressure both managers and employees to maintain a certain pace and reach the defined milestones.

However, from a temporal perspective the participants agreed that such stringent calculations omitted variables like friction and resistance, thus leading, as one consultant noted, us to create "our own delays", which unleashed a frantic state of trying to catch up. In response to this urgency, a failure-is-not-an-option approach developed, as a lower-level manager reported. Within the climate initiative, for instance, a resistance to reducing heating expenses at elderly homes, schools and kindergartens, even by investing in solar cells for all buildings and renovation projects, triggered lengthy delays and even layoffs within the administrative department. Those involved in the initiative and the department responsible for it had therefore suffered the consequences, as the top manager stressed, continuing, "Yes, that's right. We create our own delays, and precisely because of the tight causes and effects in our own calculations."

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"Engine power". An indirect form by which the present was expected to cause the future shifted the participants' focus from calculations to the basis on which they were made. This basis was often signified by "engine power." As one low-level manager remarked, "Management is the engine power that brings the organization from A to B, and that engine should be optimized." A consultant added, "Yes, that's right. And that engine should be constantly optimized."

The participants expressed the notion of management as engine power with vocabulary that was generally mechanical and instrumental in its allusions. For example, the "good management" project covered in-house management training and external talent programs, the use of digital systems and LEAN implementation. Within these topics, causality compressed time in a particular way, as the necessary speed was to be gained by optimized training. In the specific event of the climate initiative, for instance, all managers regarded climate change as a slow process, but kept emphasizing that there was still "no time to waste" when it came to investments in upgrading management and the ways digitalization was expected to enhance calculations.

In sum, the strategy work was driven by a strong belief in calculations, with the present being expected to cause the future to happen, and by the reinforcement of management as the engine power performing these causality calculations. However, once submitted to future goals, the present quickly appeared to be in a state of already belonging to the past and, as such, terribly behind.

Consequently, "gotta catch up" semantically embraced a temporal space that appears in Figure 3:

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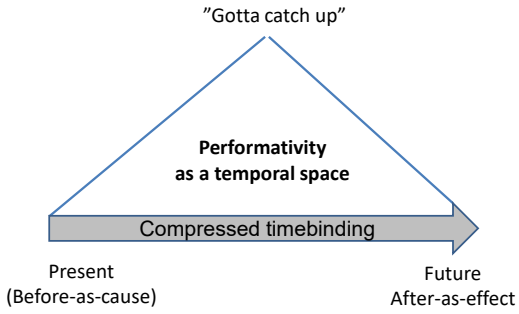

The figure shows how the semantic of "gotta catch up" represents a temporal space of performativity. The temporal form of before and after becomes binded in ways where the present is expected to directly cause the future. What characterizes the motion of processes, their being in this present, is how "gotta catch up" compresses time. It unfolds the present (as a before) and the future (as an after), thus intensely squeezing time into tight sequences, as management work constantly seeks to align the present with the future. If anything, this binding opens up a space in which managers are compelled to operate – a world of performativity driven by the perpetual state of catching up.

"One step ahead"

While "gotta catch up" expressed a compressed binding between present/future, another time-binding appeared: "one step ahead." This binding took the form of a future/present wherein the present is expected to be not only ahead of the future but also caused by it. Although not guiding most goals (approx. 25%), this causal set-up attracted the most attention during the group dialogues. The participants discussed a great deal of matters before this semantic suddenly came up when a consultant claimed that "it all boils down

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to being one step ahead, doesn't it?" The time-binding had now become clear and was further signified by expressions like "proactive" and "first movers" that is, as ahead not only of time but also of others.

"Proactive". In the strategies formulated, especially in the dialogues, "proactive" was associated with enthusiasm, thus lifting strategy out of the calculations into ways of thinking ahead of time. As one center manager said, this means "that we should anticipate mistakes, errors and deviations before they occur," while a consultant added "and that we should be aware of future possibilities as if they exist right now." For example, strategy work presented itself as ahead of the future after a top-level initiative emphasizing that the whole municipality should maintain a sound economy by utilizing a sharing economy and social capital as its means of meeting expected governmental budget cuts before they possibly occurred.

These attempts at being ahead were also found in the operationalization of the digitalization policy, which was putting pressure on schools. As one consultant noted, "I was surprised when I supervised the strategy process among teachers. Many of the young teachers planned courses ahead of time, following principles of blended learning, and some of the digital stuff they include is not yet invented." Another lower manager added that "the young guns [young teachers] are fearless and usually anticipate that 'there will soon be an app'." As a result, future digital software supported the development of pedagogical initiatives that became among the teaching opportunities detailed in several performance plans.

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As such, this general way of being ahead was found both in macro initiatives (strategies for developing new economies) and in micro planning (blended learning strategies).

"First movers". "First movers" was also an expression signifying how to be one step ahead. But this time a step ahead of others. Again the climate initiative was mentioned, but this time "as a way of being among the top three municipalities and thus ahead of the rest," as the top manager remarked. To be ahead of others was considered important, not least for the purpose of anticipating a future. A future might be to attract affluent families, which could increase the area's resources, and to avoid families in need, who would create an expense for the municipality. As the top manager reiterated, "We should be aware of our branding as first movers on climate and other initiatives. It pays off."

In both cases – ahead of time (proactive) and of others (first movers) – time becomes stretched, as the present is now considered ahead of the future ("proactive") and of others' actions ("first movers"). During the group dialogues, this time-binding became a considerable topic of inquiry for the researcher, as one could be ahead of others but surely not ahead of time! However, the participants brushed off this line of questioning, replying with comments like "Why not?" and thus hinting not only at the potentiality that follows from such anticipations but also, as one consultant stressed, at the great advantage gained from "breaking with all that calculating stuff." Being "one step ahead" was not even considered a choice but was rather a prerequisite for "stimulating innovations that go beyond calculations," as another consultant repeatedly stated. This configuration of time appears in Figure 4:

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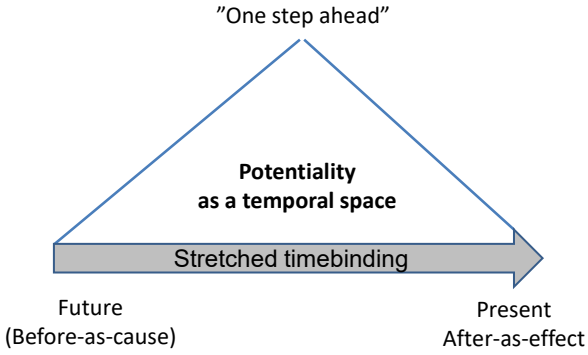

The figure shows how the semantic of "one step ahead" represents a temporal space of potentiality. The temporal forms of before and after become binded in ways where the future (before) causes the present to happen (after). The possibility of playing with multiple futures moves the processes within this temporal space, but then so does the transformation of these futures into present facts – in ways that call for present action. This is because "one step ahead" stretches time in a certain way and to an extent that the present becomes extended beyond the future. Hence, this time-binding opens up a temporal space of potentiality.

"Repetition"

The analysis has thus far touched on two time-bindings, exemplified in "gotta catch up" and "one step ahead," both of which are mediated by goals and share a strong desire for the future. However, the two bindings profoundly differ because they form two distinct spaces – one of performativity and immediate performativity and the other of potentiality and risk-taking. However, I needed to explore another time-binding that operated head-to-head with the others but as a demarcated temporal space highly relevant to refer to as

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irrelevant. The semantic representing this demarcated space proved to be "repetition" and, as one consultant emphatically highlighted, "a way to describe what strategy is not."

This time-binding operates with the semantic of past/future, and the binding itself is a past causing the future, as signified by the expressions "obstruction" and "no brake." The former negatively signified why repetition should be kept out of strategy work, whereas the latter positively signified what was to be gained from repetition in strategy work.

"Obstruction". Many of the demarcations that emerged during the group dialogues signified how repetition was considered inappropriate in strategy work. For instance, the participants framed repetition as a "hindrance," an "obstacle" and, most profoundly, as an "obstruction" to initiatives driven by goals and aimed at the future. As one center manager remarked, "repetition" is not a favorable expression to be confronted with when doing strategy."

All five events were to be developed without repetitions. Digitalization, for instance, now meant new interactive platforms rather than a faster-paced repetition of procedures; LEAN was deliberately meant to break with repetitive existing procedures; and social capital was intended to disrupt ways of generating and conceptualizing public value. As one consultant firmly said, "Nothing should keep strategy work from bringing the organization into the future."

"The source". Having realized this demarcated temporal space as a reflected space within strategy work, I sought to further push reflexivity on the subject by inquiring about this time-binding during the group dialogues. One would have expected participants to invoke a past, a history, certain routines or specific experiences against

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such future-intensified strategy work, but no such brakes were to be found. Instead, this line of inquiry produced concerns about what the other two strategic spaces were to gain from repetitions. The participants recognized the cost efficiency of repetitive routines and procedures, with several remarking, "we appreciate routines," and with one lower manager noting, "it [repetition] not only saves money. It also finances new strategic initiatives." Moreover, to the extent that some routines were strategized they became new objects of change. For instance, nobody disagreed when the center manager stressed, "When we're doing strategy, then we don't cultivate routines. We change them."

"Repetition," then, not only signified a negative demarcation from strategy work but was also, as remarked by the top manager "the source, yes, the source of strategic initiative financing and a potential change object. That is what it is". On several occasions the group dialogues circled around questions of whether this particular time-binding resembled compression or extension. On this reflexivity the answer turned out to be both. On the one hand, repetition meant that time was extended because the past (routines, procedures, etc.) was to be repeated into the future. On the other hand, repetition also signified a compression of time in instances where value was attached to the speed at which routines and procedures were repeated.

This configuration of demarcated time appears in Figure 5:

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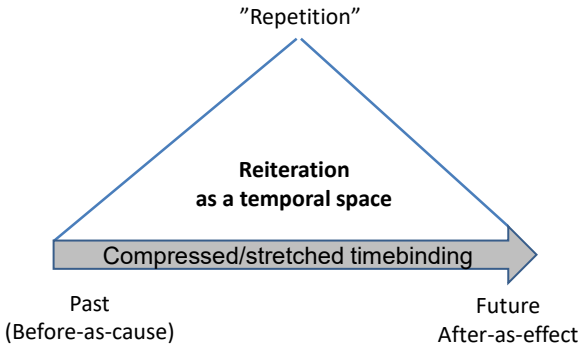

The figure shows how the semantic of "repetition" represents a temporal space of reiteration. This time-binding operates on the semantic of past/future, and within this form is a past expecting to cause the same future effects by means of repeating processes. This binding stretches the past almost infinitely into the future as repetitions are expected to be continual, but also compresses the distance of each repetition in the name of efficiency. However, this demarcated temporal space also signifies a negative and a positive counter-space. On the one hand, strategy work is considered the opposite of repetition. On the other, repetitions are just as important as they finance new strategic initiatives or becomes activities in need of strategic change.

The three time-bindings

Table 2 sums up the three time-bindings and the way they present themselves in goal-mediated strategy work.

Table 2. Three temporal spaces

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Semantic	Form of time	Time-binding	Signifiers
'Gotta catch up'	Present/future	Compression of time: The present causing the future	'Our own delays' 'Engine power'
'One step ahead'	Future/present	Stretching of time: The future causing the present	'Proactive' 'First movers'
'Repetition'	Past/future	Compression of time: The past causing the future in accelerated ways & Stretching of time: The past causing the future endlessly	'Obstruction' 'The source'

The first column shows the temporal semantic at work within each temporal space. The second column shows the form of time. The third shows how the present becomes binded in a compression and/or extension of time. The fourth column shows the signifiers within each temporal space.

The time-bindings are neatly separated in the table, and at first glance this is also what the time-binding concept seems to offer. However, the empirical findings showed more. Although being highly different events, digitalization, the sharing economy and the climate initiative were especially fueled by "gotta catch up", "one step ahead" and the demarcations of "repetition." Figure 6 considers the interrelation of different time-bindings within an event.

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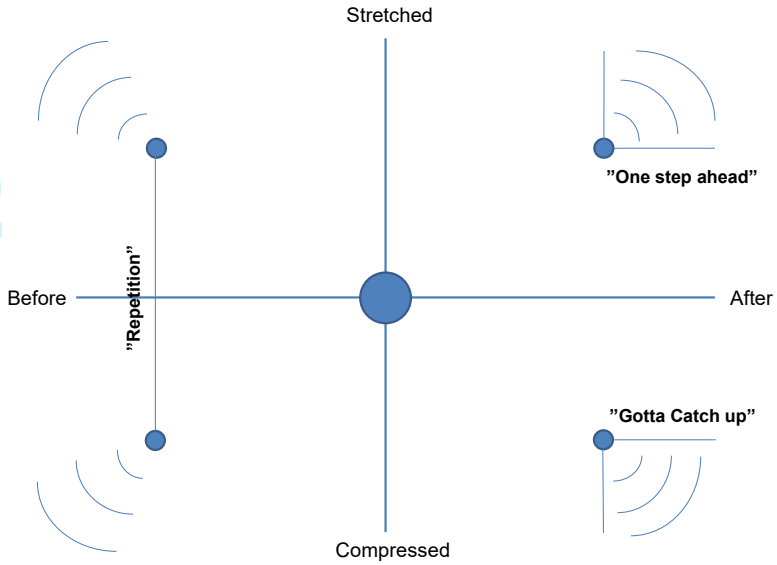

The two axes of the graph generalize the principles of time-binding. The dot in the middle is the event – the climate initiative, for instance. The horizontal axis represents before/after, which is the temporal distinction that gives form to bindings and the temporal spaces. The vertical axis represents time as compressed and stretched. The small dots on the graph position the three time-bindings accordingly. "Gotta catch up" values after (the horizontal axis) in terms of a future orientation, and it represents a compressed present (the vertical axis) as it seeks to catch up with the future. "One step ahead" also values after (the horizontal axis), but this time in terms of a stretched present (the vertical axis) that is ahead of the future. "Repetition" values before (the horizontal axis) and both stretch the past infinitely into the future as well as compress the distance of each repetition (vertical axis).

The whole figure shows how the various time-bindings are all at work within a single event. One would think that a single initiative – whether grand or modest – also represented a single temporal space, at least that is the impression that strategy and plans associated with a hierarchy of goals and sub-goals give. In this case, however, some

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single events consist of several, different temporal spaces, each driven by a particular motion. Indeed, the figure shows how temporal spaces can be experienced together and thus how strategy is an interrelated temporal space consisting of varying stretchings and compressions of time, all of which move the organization ahead in highly different ways.

Discussion and contribution

This article has contributed to the understanding of strategy work by offering the concept of time-binding as a means of investigating the motion of temporal spaces and thus how organizations move ahead. Collaborating with the Danish municipality of Hørsholm, I studied how time was actually binded in three semantic forms: "gotta catch up," "one step ahead" and "repetition." These three bindings did not function as separate temporal spaces but were combined within events, thereby forming an interrelated complex of spaces that moved the organization ahead in different ways.

The three temporal spaces found – motioned by performativity, potentiality and reiteration – complement existing research on time-linking and timelinks within the practice turn in at least three ways. First, the very concept of time-binding enables one to conduct studies far more extensive than those addressing pace and speed, as mentioned. Indeed, time-binding is a temporal concept that offers ways of understanding how the compressing and stretching qualities within time simultaneously move an organization differently in time. Second, researchers conducting such studies could also benefit from understanding how befores and afters are not only variously binded but also likely to be unusual. By recognizing that some futures come before some afters, this pioneering

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research might find new and unexpected answers to questions on acceleration and deceleration and the co-existence of both in the form of multi-celeration.

This specific concern with the compressing and stretching qualities of time and with unusual time-bindings contributes to studies on pace and speed as well as extends what is meant by unfolding, temporal linking and settled forms of time in general within the practice turn. It all boils down to replacing the trivalent logic of past, present and future with the bivalent one of before/after. This may seem pedantic, but one anticipates a certain chronological order within a trivalent logic, for which reason only some, not all, time-linking processes and forms of time can be observed at work. In contrast, a bivalent distinction between before and after expands the possibilities for examining how the past, present and future interrelate. As one time-binding analyzed illustrates, the present might be considered ahead of the future ("one step ahead"), but without leaving out its opposite ("gotta catch up"). In principle, the notion of before and after can occupy many surprising places, or even switch among them. When it comes to strategy work, no chronological order exists, per se, only temporal contingency. Third, the practice turn could benefit from this study's finding concerning temporal demarcations ("repetition"), which present temporal reflexivity in a way as yet unaddressed. Strategy work is strategic in the sense that it deliberately reflects what strategy is not and, by the same token, deliberately leaves out other temporal spaces and hence other ways of moving ahead within organizations.

In acknowledging such qualities of strategy work, researchers in the practice turn should consider how strategy is a temporal exercise that provides organizations with different temporal spaces within single events, and hence different motions – all of which simultaneously move the organization differently ahead in time.

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That said, the concept of time-binding has its limitations, for which reason future research might extend the concept into the technological realm (Thygesen, 2007; Luhmann, 2007, 1990). As Kornberger emphasizes (2013), technologies extend the notion of (subtle) causalities into almost every area of strategic work. Within the context of this article, they bring with them a wide variety of ways to communicate about befores (cause) and afters (effect), tying them together in temporal contexts that call for action and move organizations ahead.

In addition, technologies offer one way for organizations to meet new challenges in times of change. The greater need to deliver cost-effective services is one such challenge. Many cost-effective quality-control technologies have had tremendous sequentializing effects on how organizations move ahead and manage change (Boje and Winsor, 1993). The green transition poses another such challenge. Scientific calculations show that a projected and tragic future is binded not only to past mistakes, but also to a present that needs to create a future present able to avoid looming catastrophes. For sure, management perceptions are important to include in such matters (Harris and Crane, 2002) but so is intensified time within time-binding as "there is no time to waste." A third challenge is the digital transformation. Unlike with the other two challenges, data intelligence technologies work in real time, simultaneously registering and presenting data. As such, time is neither sequentialized nor intensified but aligned, because real-time presentations have no distance between before and after. What moves organizations, then, is highly different, as this motion becomes a matter of synchronizing and adapting actions to real-time changes. Although the field of digitalization and change is huge, recent research on digital transformation has shown that the organization itself remains a major

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blind spot (Jedynak, Czakon, Kuźniarska and Mania, 2021). Applying the temporal dimension, so imperative in strategy work within organizations, is one way of compensating for this blindness and, one should add, the temporal spaces created by digital technologies.

The three challenges discussed here serve to illustrate how technologies give form to time – whether sequentialized, intensified or syncronized – in periods of change, and, as such, tremendously impact how organizations move differently in time.

From a practical perspective, when taking both the existing and future research on strategy into account, one notices that most management literature and the mainstream courses held at business schools tend to draw on one-dimensional causalities and chronological timelines in order to combine accurate forecasts with predicted end-results. Such attempts reflect one unfolding, one binding, one temporal space and one way of moving, but if managers want to improve knowledge on deliberate change, temporal awareness should be part of their strategic change repertoire alongside the ability to match different motions to the skills and capacity of an organization.

In sum, contributing a time-binding view on strategy and strategy work can hopefully encourage a continuing theoretical, empirical and practical exploration of how organizations move ahead and add ways to rethink organizational change.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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4 x Vision (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)/Hørsholm Kommune: Vision (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

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4 x Strategy (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)/Hørsholm Kommunes Strategi (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

4 x Strategy letter from top management (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)/Hørsholms Kommunes strategibrev (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)

4 x 12 Policies from centre management/Politikker i Hørsholm Kommune: Bibliotekspolitik, Boligpolitik, Dagtilbudspolitik 2011-2016, Den sammenhængende børne-, og ungepolitik, Erhvervsstrategi, Folkeoplysningspolitik, Handicappolitik, Idrætspolitik, Indkøbspolitik, Kommunikationspolitik, Kulturpolitik, Kvalitetspolitik for natur og miljø (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

4 x 34 Performance plans from lower management/Virksomhedsplaner i Hørsholm Kommune (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

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Title

Moving ahead: How time is compressed and stretched in strategy work

Table 1. Data

<table>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2">Written material</td><td>Dialogue</td><td>Follow-up</td></tr>
<tr><td>Year</td><td>2013 - 2016</td><td>2013 – 2016</td><td>2013 - 2016</td><td>2018</td></tr>
<tr><td>Written material</td><td>4 x The Organizational Philosophy
4 x Vision
4 x Strategy</td><td>4 x strategy letter from top management
4 x 12 policies from centre management
4 x 34 Performance plans from lower management</td><td>12 x 2hour dialogues= 24 hours of dialogues with eight managers and consultants
4 x Logbooks</td><td rowspan="2">Presentation and confirmation of aggregated patterns of timebindings</td></tr>
<tr><td>Group dialogues</td><td colspan="3">One second level top manager (Head of Center for Politics) also having a seat in the top management group

Two lower-level managers (Head of Team Communication and head of Cross-cutting Development, Center for Politics)

Four internal consultants full time involved in the goal-steering processes among the six policy centres.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Events</td><td colspan="3">1. The climate initiative
2. Digitalization and IT improvement
3. LEAN
4. Social capital
5. Training of strategic skills</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

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Table 2. Three temporal spaces

Semantic	Form of time	Time-binding	Signifiers
'Gotta catch up'	Present/future	Compression of time: The present causing the future	'Our own delays' 'Engine power'
'One step ahead'	Future/present	Stretching of time: The future causing the present	'Proactive' 'First movers'
'Repetition'	Past/future	Compression of time: The past causing the future in accelerated ways & Stretching of time: The past causing the future endlessly	'Obstruction' 'The source'

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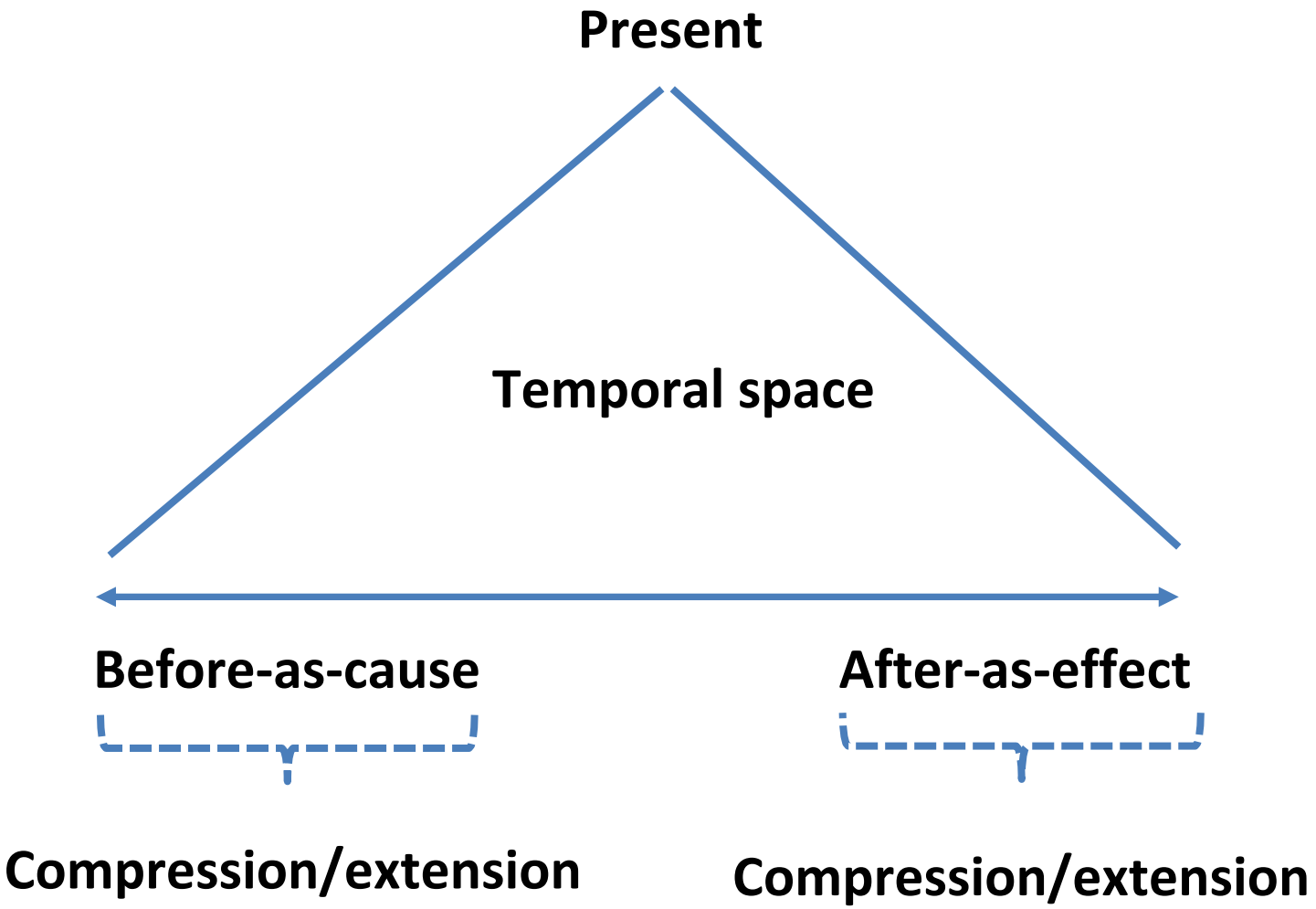
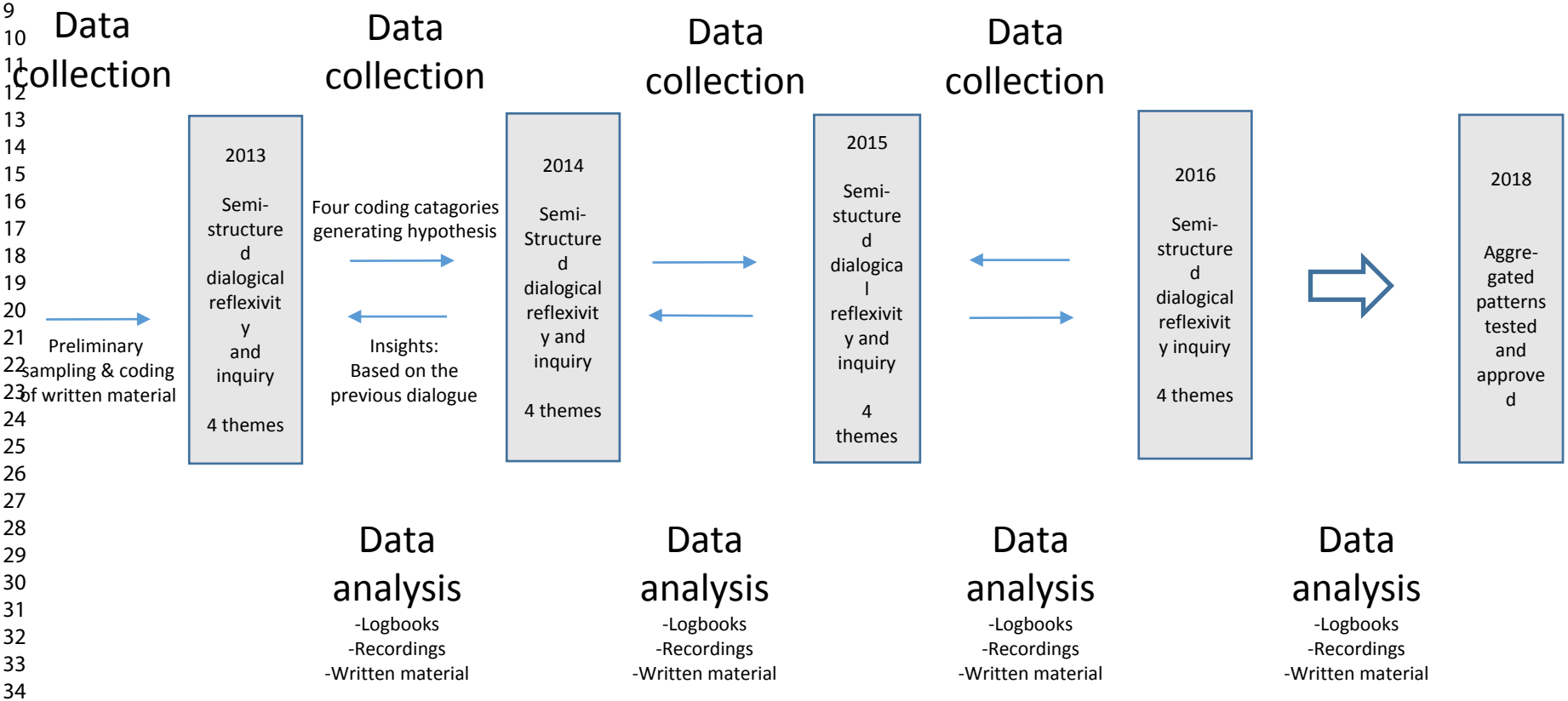
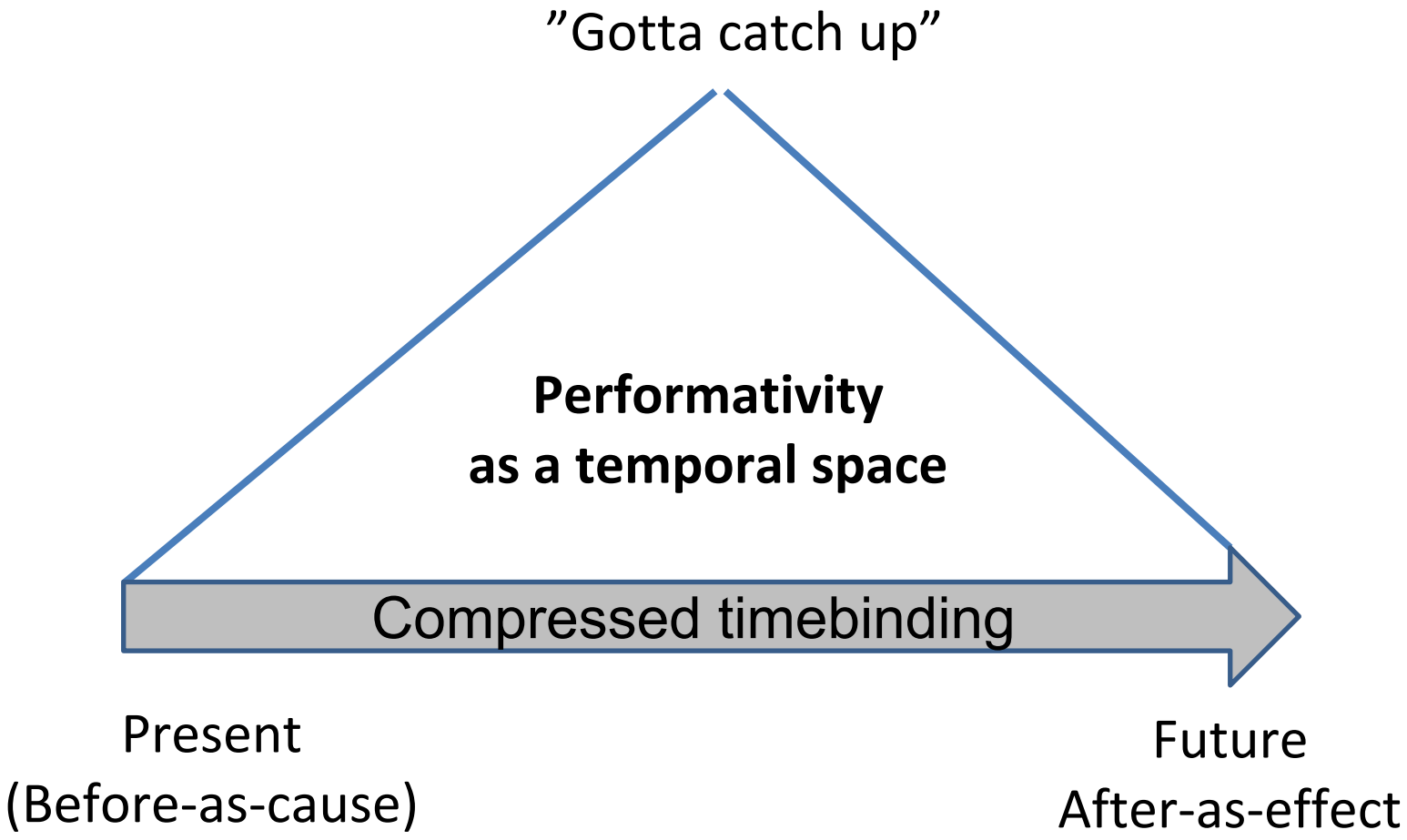
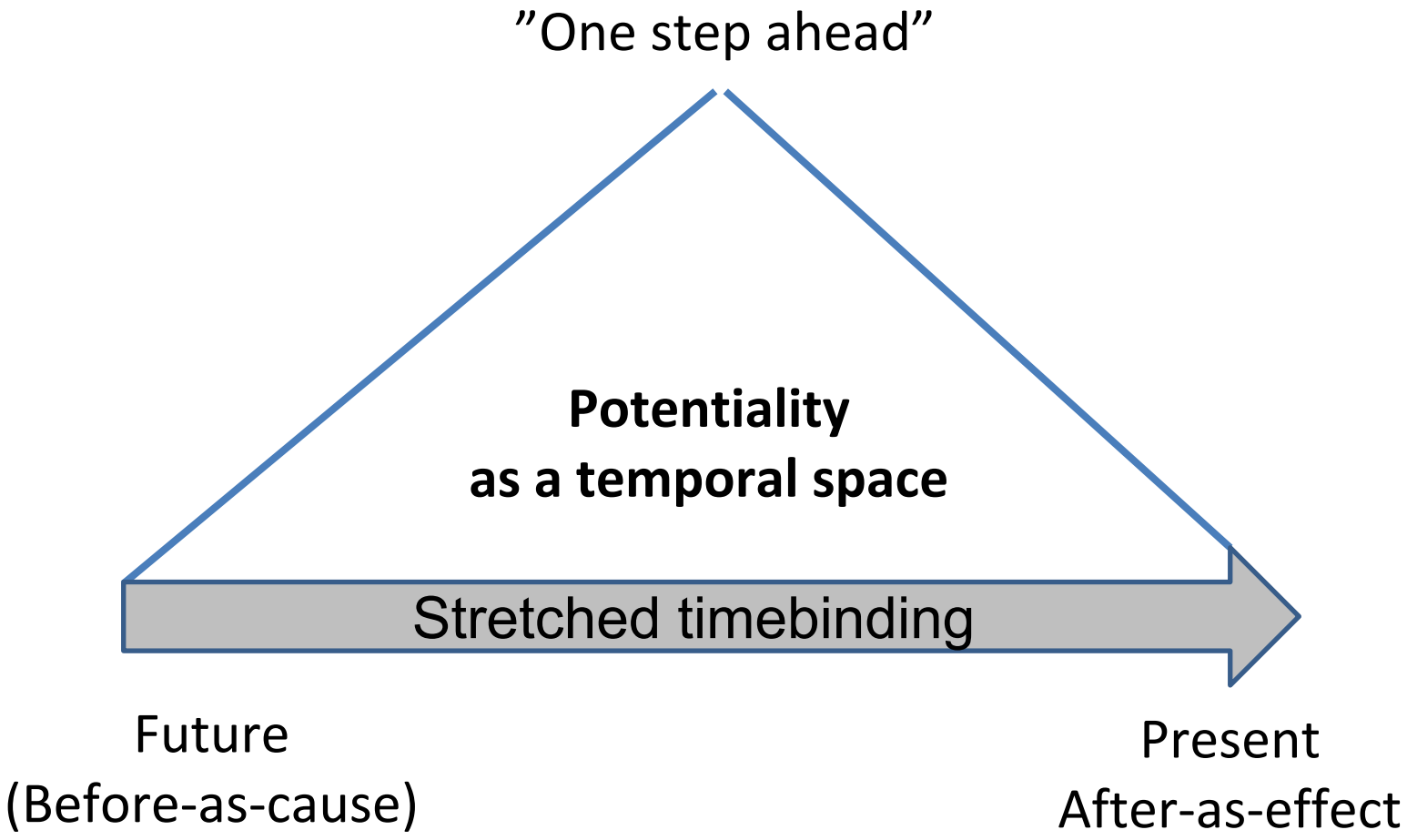
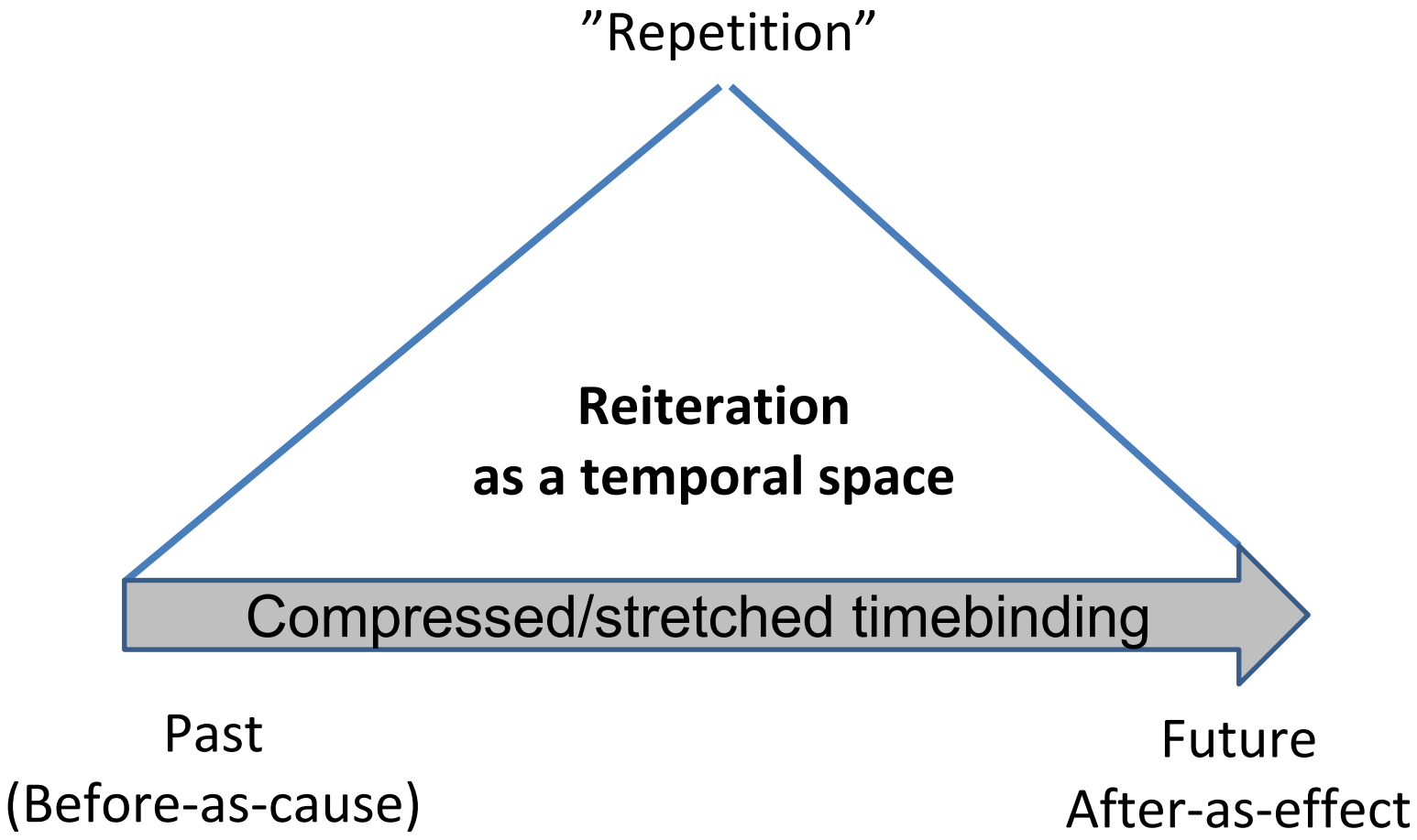
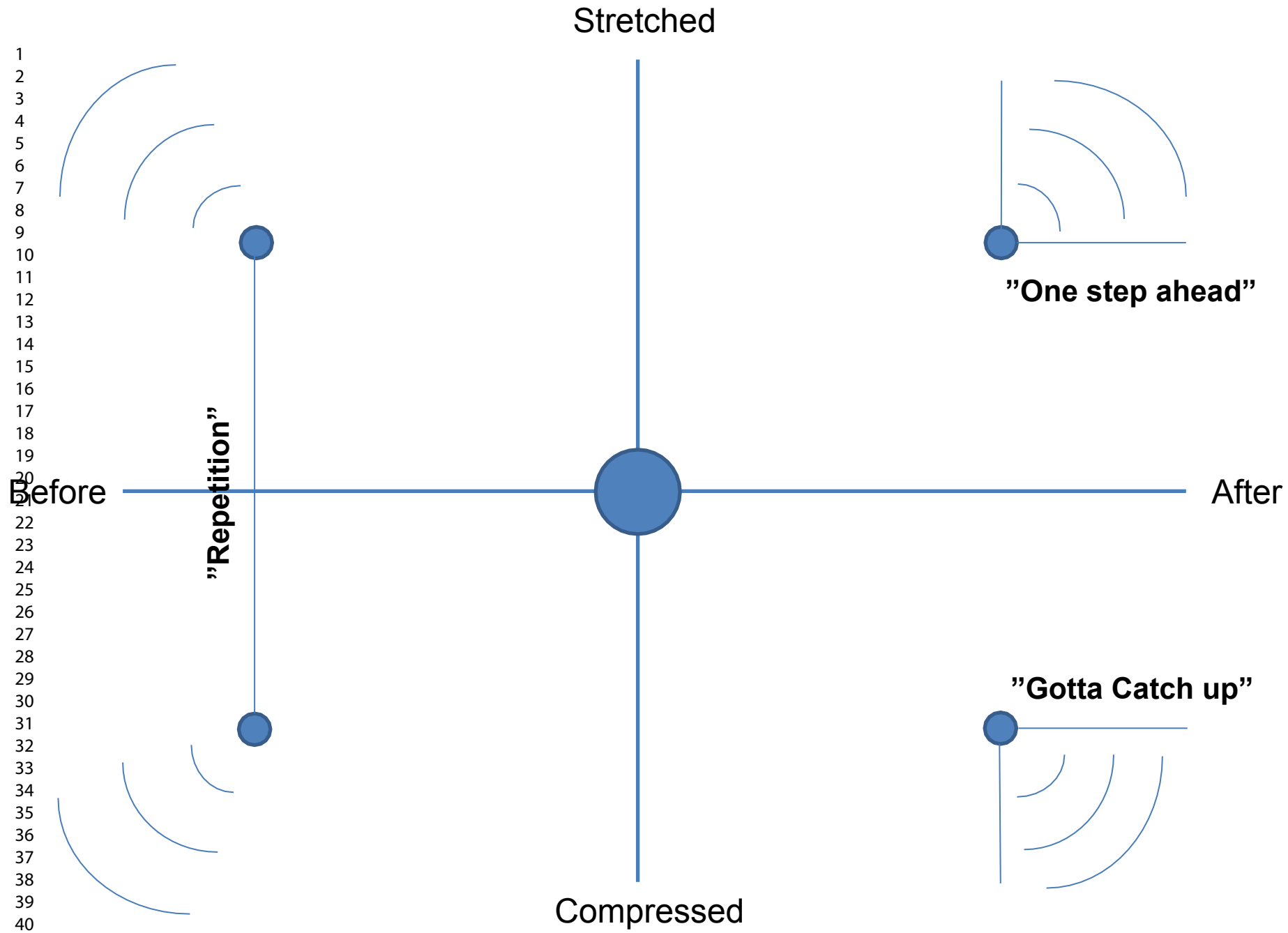

Present
Temporal space
Before-as-cause
After-as-effect
Compression/extension
Compression/extension


Data collection
Preliminary sampling & coding of written material
2013
Semi-structured dialogical reflexivity and inquiry
4 themes
Data collection
Four coding catagories generating hypothesis
Insights: Based on the previous dialogue
2014
Semi-Structured dialogical reflexivity and inquiry
4 themes
Data collection
2015
Semi-stucture d dialogical reflexivit y and inquiry
4 themes
Data collection
2016
Semi-structured dialogical reflexivity inquiry
4 themes
2018
Aggre-gated patterns tested and approved
Data analysis
-Logbooks
-Recordings
-Written material
Data analysis
-Logbooks
-Recordings
-Written material
Data analysis
-Logbooks
-Recordings
-Written material
Data analysis
-Logbooks
-Recordings
-Written material


”Gotta catch up”
Performativity
as a temporal space
Compressed timebinding
Present
(Before-as-cause)
Future
After-as-effect


”One step ahead”
Potentiality
as a temporal space
Stretched timebinding
Future
(Before-as-cause)
Present
After-as-effect


”Repetition”
Reiteration
as a temporal space
Compressed/stretched timebinding
Past
(Before-as-cause)
Future
After-as-effect


Stretched
Before
After
Compressed
”Repetition”
”One step ahead”
”Gotta Catch up”