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Considering the temporary leader in temporary work arrangements: Sensemaking processes of internal interim leaders

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Abstract

Though temporary work arrangements have garnered increased attention among scholars and practitioners, there has been little research into internal interim leaders (i.e. interims hired from within the organization) as a distinct case of temporary worker and leader. Internal interims are a fixture in organizational leadership and often serve during critical periods of change. As such, it is important to examine these leaders' actions and the social, organizational, and individual dynamics that inform them. Toward this end, the present study examines the sensemaking processes of 24 internal interims using a qualitative approach. We describe five distinct sensemaking processes (*dutiful, traditional, aspiring, reluctant*, and *self-conscious*) shared by the 24 participants and discuss how several social dynamics (message valence and consistency) and individual factors (prior leadership and future aspirations) influenced these divergent processes. Further, we contend that internal interims adopt more passive (*caretaking*) or proactive (*trailblazing*) styles of leadership based on these socially and individually informed sensemaking processes. Finally, we highlight directions for future research (motivating factors for serving as an internal interim, experiences with stigma and alienation, and processes of identity formation and identification) that may concomitantly enhance our understandings of internal interims as well as temporary workers and leaders at large.

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Introduction

As highly visible chief executive officers of major corporations, Steve Jobs and Ed Whitacre Jr were familiar players on the corporate landscape, but beyond visibility, the former Apple and General Motors leaders shared another element in their professional pedigrees: each held the title of interim CEO prior to his permanent position at the organizational helm. Jobs and Whitacre are just two examples of a growing number of temporary leaders who serve in corporate settings (Ballinger and Marcel, 2010; Inkson et al., 2001) and nonprofit sectors including healthcare (see Ellis et al., 2005) and higher education (see McWilliam et al., 2008; Mundt, 2004; Stapleton et al., 2005). These temporary leaders often serve during tension-filled, volatile periods of transition, and thus their adjustment to, and performance in, the interim role likely has critical implications for their organizations at large. For example, Ballinger and Marcel (2010) found that the performance of publicly traded firms in the USA often declines during the period of an interim CEO owing to dissention among the interim and top management team. Likewise, Langevin and Koenig (2004) posited that organizations may suffer owing to interims bringing personal biases and agendas into their positions.

These and other accounts suggest that temporary leaders' behaviors may have lasting consequences for entire organizations. As such, it is important to examine the ways in which temporary leaders enact their roles and the impetus for these enactments. Anecdotal accounts in the media suggest that temporary leaders vary widely in how they perform their roles as some act assertively or even aggressively while others remain passive, acting as reserved caretakers (Associated Press, 2011; Mugits, 2011). Nonetheless, these accounts do not specify how such divergent actions arise nor does scholarly research provide substantive insight into this matter.

The present study attempts to shed light on how and why a particular brand of temporary leader we refer to as an internal interim enacts the leadership role. Internal interims are hired internally from within the organization, a practice that is prevalent, for example, in publicly-traded US firms such as Yahoo, which recently appointed CFO Tim Morse to the interim CEO position. Nonetheless, internal interims are still largely neglected in scholarly and trade publications, and hence we know little about their potentially unique experiences and approaches to temporary leader positions. Toward this end, we employ a qualitative case study of 24 internal interim leaders and apply sensemaking theory as a useful theoretical frame to help us understand what informs their role-related actions (Weick, 1969). We position the study of internal interims in the gap between temporary work research that has focused largely on agency temps (e.g. Aletraris, 2010; Galais and Moser, 2009; Gossett, 2006), contractors/freelancers (e.g. Storey et al., 2005), and seasonal workers (e.g. Booth et al., 2002) and the leadership succession literature that has centered mainly on successions between two permanent leaders (Ballinger and Marcel, 2010; Preston, 2005).

Attuning to internal interims and the gap between leadership and temp studies has both practical and theoretical import. Practically speaking, this study furthers our understanding of how members with newfound but temporary power perceive their unique circumstances, and perhaps more importantly, how personal attributes and organizational dynamics shape their perceptions and subsequent actions. Such knowledge may help practitioners to select internal interims more strategically to fit their organizations' leadership needs. Beyond this pragmatic purpose, the attention to positional power and insider status that comes with internal interim leadership introduces two previously unrecognized elements in temporary work roles, and these elements call for us to re-examine some of our overarching theoretical conceptions of the antecedents, processes, and outcomes associated with temporary work. Likewise, the notion of restricted time in leadership has not been widely considered in scholarly research and may complicate some of our theoretical understandings of how leaders envision and execute their roles. The following section synthesizes the temp literature and highlights the scant attention to interims in leadership studies.

Literature on temps and temporary leaders

Several assumptions in the literature on temporary work arrangements warrant further inquiry as we consider temporary leaders. First, temps are largely characterized as externally hired, limited autonomy workers who are not previous members of the organizations that employ them (e.g. Aletraris, 2010; Bidwell and Briscoe, 2009; Brophy, 2006; Broschak et al., 2008; Galais and Moser, 2009; Gossett, 2001; Jenkins et al., 1997; Kalleberg, 2000, 2009; Morris and Vekker, 2001; Von Hippel et al., 1997). Ballard and Gossett (2007), for example, characterize temps as 'guests' who reside in a set physical and/or temporal space but are afforded only temporary membership status. The extant leadership literature also fails to consider temporary leaders who came into their positions as existing members of the hiring organization (i.e. internal interim leaders). For instance, Inkson et al. (2001) place interim leaders in the temps/contractors category of their four employment types and define them as 'short-term *outsiders*' who only after a period of time may subsequently move toward core employee status (p. 261, emphasis added). This neglect of internal interims is further evidenced by Langevin and Koenig (2004) who only briefly refer to internal interims as acting leaders and alternatively encourage practitioners to hire externally for temporary leader positions.

Because scholars have focused on externally hired temps, a second assumption by extension is that temps often feel caught between their hiring agencies and client organizations, are uncertain who rightly bears authority over them, and do not necessarily desire to be highly identified with the organizations they serve (Aletraris, 2010; Connelly and Gallagher, 2004; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2006; Gossett, 2006; Kalleberg, 2000). However, as internal interim leaders more closely resemble what Ballard and Gossett (2007) refer to as 'real members' (i.e. individuals afforded with a permanent membership contract) hired from within the organization, the same dynamics may not persist. That is, influence and identification issues may differ for internal interims who are presumably part of the authoritative group and are somewhat identified through a previous relationship with the organization.

The leadership literature does not offer a clear answer on these issues of influence and identification though. Some studies cite temporary leaders as caretakers who perceive their role as maintaining stability rather than wielding power (see Farquhar, 1991); this is additionally evidenced in case studies that document interim CEOs and academic administrators acting as harmonizers, relationship-builders, and listeners (Denis et al., 2009; Ford, 2006; Grigsby et al., 2009). These actions suggest the leaders may be identified with the organization but (either despite or because of that) do not feel compelled to exert power. Alternatively, other studies document these individuals perceiving themselves and acting as authoritative, aggressive decision-makers that may signify either identification or non-identification (e.g. Ashcraft, 1999). Scholars are largely uniform, however, in noting that when leaders do exercise authority they largely act toward short-term rather than long-range issues such as strategic planning (Ballinger and Marcel, 2010); one exception noted by Ballinger and Marcel (2010) is in cases when an organization's previous CEO or board chairman takes the interim helm at the request of others in the organization and hence may feel empowered to act decisively toward long-term issues. In general, though this suggests temporary leaders may see their authority as having temporal limitations.

A third major assumption in the temp literature is that individuals temp willingly or unwillingly either because they (a) cannot obtain full-time employment, (b) hope to segue the temp role into a permanent position, or (c) enjoy the work-life flexibility afforded by temporary work arrangements (see Brophy, 2006; Broschak et al., 2008; De Cuyper et al., 2008; Gossett, 2001; Morris and Vekker, 2001; Rogers, 1995; Von Hippel et al., 1997). The leadership literature mainly acknowledges the second explanation with respect to temporary leaders (e.g. Alley, 2005; Farquhar, 1991). However, much of the research in this vein also explicitly warns organizations against allowing interim leaders to seek the permanent role, citing reasons, for example, that 'the goal of interim service is to prepare for new leadership' (Langevin and Koenig, 2004: 161; see also Chapman and Vogelsang, 2005); thus, we have little empirical evidence of what ensues when individuals pursue the long-term leader role. Beyond this desire to transition into the permanent position, internal interim leaders may also be motivated to temp owing to the perception of limited choice or volition in the matter.[1] Because of their pre-existing relationship with the organization, that is, these individuals may feel obligated by colleagues or superiors to forego their permanent status and serve as temporary leaders for the good of the organization and/or their own professional legacy (Ballinger and Marcel, 2010). Because perceptions of one's decision to temp may influence the individual's organizational and role-related experiences (Boyce et al., 2007; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2006), this is an important factor to consider when examining the process and products of temporary leadership.

Finally, numerous scholars cite the tendency for temporary workers to feel or experience isolation from and/or alienation by other organizational members (e.g. Bidwell and Briscoe, 2009; Clark et al., 2010; Jenkins et al., 1997; Rogers, 1995). For example, Jenkins and colleagues (1997) discovered temporary employees were asked for, and gave, information less frequently than their permanent counterparts, and Bidwell and Briscoe (2009) found contractors failed to develop relationships or engage in off-the-clock interactions with coworkers. This relational dynamic is often attributed to the

independent role design of most temporary work arrangements (i.e. individually working on discrete tasks). However, temporary leaders may be required to work collaboratively and engage in long-term planning efforts that involve multiple members and stakeholders (see Galup et al., 1997), and therefore the antecedents to, and nature of, alienation would presumably differ for them. Nonetheless, the leadership literature provides no insight into this or similar negative relational experiences during the interim leadership tenure.

In sum, though the prevailing literature on temps depicts them as external hires who often are isolated, caught between authority lines, lacking organizational identification, and temping as a means of obtaining needed income, personal flexibility, or a bridge to the permanent position, the internal interim leader perceivably violates many of these assumptions. The extant leadership literature confirms the distinct nature of temporary leaders, but its neglect of internal interims also raises questions regarding the leaders' perceptions of, approaches to, and experiences in the role, as well as their ultimate impact on the organization. To more fully understand the consequences of internal interim leadership for leaders and organizations, the present study focuses on the processes that inform these outcomes. Toward this end, we employ sensemaking theory (Weick, 1969) as a useful central construct for examining these processes.

A sensemaking perspective on internal interims

Whereas scholars have previously employed uncertainty reduction, social exchange, social comparison, social identity, social capital, and/or expectancy theories to predict the occurrence of temp behaviors (Connelly and Gallagher, 2004), we adopt a sensemaking framework in order to uncover the social and organizational processes that inform these behaviors for internal interim leaders (e.g. Chaudhry et al., 2009; De Vos et al., 2003). A sensemaking framework focuses on how internal interim leaders perceive and enact their roles based on their perceptions. Rather than viewing leaders' actions as proceeding from rational planning, a sensemaking perspective contends leaders tend to retrospectively construct meaning from actions after engaging in them (Weick, 1995, 2001). This perspective also views the enactment of an organizational environment in the manner of a self-fulfilling prophesy that is shaped by a leader's established mental models and ongoing social interactions (Weick, 1969; Weick et al., 2005). Put differently, a sensemaking approach calls us to focus on how leaders ultimately take part in continually recreating their organizational environments owing to the way that they process or make sense of their current circumstances and encounters.

In sum, we focus our inductive, interpretive examination on internal interim leaders' perceptions of themselves and their environments as a key element in understanding their manifest behaviors and actions. Rather than simply documenting their actions, a sensemaking perspective helps us to understand *why* internal interims potentially adopt different role-related actions that may ultimately have sweeping implications for their organizations. Toward this end, two research questions guided this inquiry:

RQ1: How do internal interim leaders make sense of their role(s)?
RQ2: How does this sensemaking process influence internal interims' actions?

Methods

This study employed a single case study approach using what Lindlof and Taylor (2002) refer to as critical case sampling, an approach that examines a case demonstrating a theoretical or practical problem. Namely, we examined the sensemaking accounts of multiple internal interim leaders employed in an institution of higher learning hereafter referred to as Interim U. Though scholars have criticized case studies for failing to offer generalizable conclusions and carry theoretical import (see Eisenhardt, 1989), case studies have been productively employed to generate theoretical insight into a variety of understudied organizational communication phenomena (e.g. Barker, 1993; Tompkins, 2007).

The research questions were chiefly examined using in-depth interview data. In line with Fairhurst's (2007: 9) argument that interview discourse may serve as a text in which 'individuals' sensemaking accounts and meaning assignments are revealed in their language use,' we conducted in-depth interviews to understand how the internal interims made sense of their roles. Additionally, as longstanding members of the organization under study, the first two authors incorporated cultural knowledge of the organization and ethnographic observations to craft interview questions and confirm ongoing analyses. The remainder of this section elaborates on the research setting and methodological choices that shaped this study.

The critical case of Interim U

Several events beginning with the president's launch of a new university vision in 2001 prompted the promotion of multiple employees to temporary leader roles at Interim U. After the vision met with resistance by various stakeholder groups, the visionary president eventually submitted his resignation. However, the university's board of regents moved forth with the controversial vision, and in the years that followed, multiple leaders served in the president's position including: an interim president who left the university after one year, a permanent president whose three-year tenure resulted in firing, an acting president who held the post for several months, and a second interim president who completed two years in the position before the recently appointed permanent president was named. During this period, the university relied heavily on interim leaders at all levels within the institution.

From this group of former and ongoing interim leaders, 24 individuals agreed to take part in the study. Table 1 details each participant's pertinent professional characteristics including: The type of interim leadership role held, categorized into higher level executive (president, provost, dean, or other staff administrator) or lower-level operational roles (departmental chair); organizational tenure, broken down by those who began their service with Interim U prior to (11 or more years) or after (10 years of less) the establishment of the controversial university vision; overall career stage, divided into early (1–10 years), mid (11–24 years), or late (25 or more years); whether the permanent position was desired and successfully obtained; and sources of predominant workplace interactions (superiors, subordinates, external stakeholders).

In line with previous interpretive studies of leaders and leadership, the in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion in order to enable sensemaking

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Interim	Position	Org. tenure	Career stage	Desired/obtained permanent role	Source of interactions[a]
Walt	Operational	Pre-vision	Late	No/No	Sub
Carol	Operational	Pre-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sub
Lucy	Operational	Pre-vision	Late	No/Yes	Sub
Rick	Operational	Pre-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sub
Bob	Operational	Pre-vision	Late	Yes/Yes	Sub
Louis	Executive	Pre-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sup, sub
Theo	Executive	Post-vision	Late	Yes/No	Sup, sub
Travis	Operational	Post-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sub
Tyler	Operational	Post-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sub
Steve	Executive	Pre-vision	Late	Yes/No	Sup, sub, ES
Mason	Executive	Post-vision	Mid	Yes/No	Sup, sub, ES
Sally	Executive	Post-vision	Early	Yes/No	Sup, ES
Matt	Operational	Pre-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sub
Roy	Operational	Pre-vision	Late	Yes/Yes	Sub
Austin	Operational	Post-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sub
Thomas	Operational	Pre-vision	Late	Yes/No	Sub
Trevor	Operational	Pre-vision	Mid	Yes/No	Sub
Gary	Executive	Pre-vision	Mid	Yes/No	Sub
Julie	Executive	Pre-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sup, sub
Greg	Executive	Post-vision	Late	No/No	Sup, sub, ES
Samuel	Executive	Pre-vision	Late	Yes/Yes	Sup, sub
Nick	Operational	Post-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sub
George	Operational	Pre-vision	Mid	Yes/Yes	Sub
Marshall	Executive	Post-vision	Late	Yes/Yes	Sup, sub

[a]'Sub' indicates subordinates, 'Sup' indicates superiors, 'ES' indicates external stakeholders.

narratives to unfold (e.g. Brown et al., 2008). Critical incident questions (i.e. questions about specific events and occurrences) were also utilized to center on the temporary leader's experiences (see Flanagan, 1954). Example interview questions include 'What challenges did you face when you began your temporary leader role?' and '(How) would you do your job differently if your position were permanent?' Interviews were conducted by the first author and ranged from 25–90 minutes in length with the average interview lasting 45 minutes. These conversations were audio-taped and then transcribed by the first author and two research assistants, resulting in 202 single-spaced pages of interview data.

Analytical process

The overall method of interpretive inquiry exemplified a process of analytic induction (Bulmer, 1979). Specifically, this process entailed four phases of analysis including (a) an

initial assessment of which phenomenon are most relevant to the analysis, (b) identifying prominent patterns in the data, (c) accounting for exceptions and contradictions in the data, and finally (d) crafting a clear and reasoned presentation of the findings. To accomplish the first phase, the first author (employed at Interim U) and research assistant (unaffiliated with Interim U) independently familiarized themselves with the transcripts and formed initial impressions pertaining to each research question. Next, the researchers shared portions of the transcripts that stood out to them and collaboratively identified areas of commonality and difference in their respective reviews of the data. This two-step process helped fulfill the second inductive task of exhaustively identifying prominent patterns in the data. For example, both researchers independently noted the tendency for participants to engage one of two divergent actions. However, during collaboration they discovered only one of the researchers had independently recognized how perceptions of stigma potentially influenced these actions.

In the third analytical phase the second author, also an employee at Interim U, reviewed the data set and conducted a negative case analysis to identify any potential exceptions or contradictions to the emergent findings presented by the first author and research assistant. Subsequently, the authors met to discuss and account for any alternative views of the data. For example, during this process the research assistant analyzed whether (lack of) desire to obtain the permanent position additionally informed leaders' actions. This process of what Johnson (1999) refers to as investigator triangulation helped strengthen the findings by having multiple researchers critique and refine their understanding of the phenomenon and processes in question. The following section details this interpretation of the data.

Results

The results address research question one, which asked how internal interims make sense of their role. In our analysis, we detected five distinct sensemaking processes we describe as *dutiful, traditional, aspiring, self-conscious*, and *restrained*. Before detailing each process, we describe briefly four central dimensions comprising the participants' overall sensemaking processes and parenthetically reference the labels used to describe each dimension in Table 2. These dimensions were derived from the temporary work and leadership literatures and represent potentially paramount issues tied to temporary leaders' sensemaking processes.

The first sensemaking dimension pertains to the degree of choice participants felt they had in initially taking on the position, a noted concern among temporary leaders and temporary workers as a whole (e.g. Aletraris, 2010; Ballinger and Marcel, 2010). In the present study, some individuals perceived an obligation to serve as the interim leader (obligation) while others sought the position of their own volition or did not feel compelled by obligation (choice). The second major element participants made sense of was whether the internal interim role was stigmatized, a central matter in the extant temp literature (e.g. Boyce et al., 2007; Rogers, 1995) but one that has been largely overlooked in leadership research. In our analysis, we found participants either perceived some role-related stigma (somewhat) or they sensed no stigma at all (none).

Table 2 Types of sensemaking processes

Type	Dimensions comprising the sensemaking process			
	Perceived obligation/ choice in taking role	Perceived role stigma	Perceived (dis) similarity with permanent role	Perceived (dis) empowerment
Dutiful (n = 10)	Obligation	None	Similar	Empowered
Traditional (n = 6)	Choice	None	Similar	Empowered
Aspiring (n = 5)	Choice	Somewhat	Dissimilar	Empowered
Self-conscious (n = 1)	Obligation	Somewhat	Dissimilar	Empowered
Restrained (n = 2)	Choice	None	Similar	Disempowered

In a similar vein, the third major sensemaking aspect deals with one's perceived similarity or contrast to permanent leadership positions (similar and dissimilar respectively), an issue that is implicitly underscored in previous research on temp identification (e.g. Gossett, 2006) and leadership succession (Inkson et al., 2001). Finally, the fourth central aspect of participants' sensemaking processes pertains to the sense of empowerment, or lack thereof, they felt as organizational decision-makers (empowered and disempowered respectively), a question that is previously cited in studies of interim leaders and agency temps (e.g. Farquhar, 1991; Kalleberg, 2009). Now that we've described the four dimensions comprising the sensemaking process, we discuss the five distinct ways (dutiful, traditional, aspiring, self-conscious, restrained) in which participants made sense of these collective dimensions.

Dutiful

The most prominent way in which participants made sense of their interim leader role was in the manner of a dutiful steward who was initially obligated to take on the role but did so willingly and did not feel stigmatized or dissimilar from other permanent leaders (n = 10). This brand of sensemaking characterized, for example, departmental chair Matt who acknowledged, 'I was the natural choice as interim. The chairmanship was nothing I was looking toward. From my perspective it was simply my time to serve.' Leaders who made sense of their role in this way clung to its similarity with permanent leadership and many insisted on viewing themselves, not as interims or temps, but as leaders during what Matt referred to as the 'interim time.'

In addition to this sense of duty or obligation in accepting the role and a perceived similarity to a permanent position, the dutiful sensemaking process included a sense of empowerment regarding organizational decision-making and did not view the interim role as inherently stigmatized. The interim president provides an exemplar of these

sensemaking dimensions with the statement: 'you see the [former] presidents' pictures on the wall and you realize that we are all interims in the long-run so . . . I do not approach this as a temp. It's the office that makes the difference, and I have the authority to make all the decisions.' Sam, another senior level interim, echoed this sensemaking process, contending, 'I think as you move up the organization there is less of that [concern with the interim title]. In my job, it doesn't matter if I have interim on my tag or not.'

Traditional

The second sensemaking process was similar to the dutiful process in all respects except for the obligation dimension. That is, participants who made sense of their role in this manner did not feel obligated to serve as the interim leader and some even proactively sought the position. For example, Thomas recalled saying to himself, 'to heck with it, I am just going to do it' and Sally offered, 'I pressed for it.' This sensemaking process was also prominently shared among participants ($n = 6$) and labeled traditional in the sense that it is largely indistinguishable from that of a conventional permanent leader. By that, we mean that the role was perceived to be accepted or sought of one's own volition, did not appear to be inherently stigmatized, and lent itself to empowered decision-making. Carol's comparison of permanent versus interim executives demonstrates this brand of sensemaking:

> In some senses every executive position is an interim since you don't have tenure at an administration position in academia. So you serve at the pleasure of the President . . . so technically, everybody is an interim. So what does it mean not to be an interim? It means you just don't know the date that you will be fired.

Sally's recollection of her experience summarizes this general sensemaking process, as well. She claimed, '[t]hey [her supervisors] told me to treat it as my job regardless of what changes were following that and do as I saw fit . . . I felt free and comfortable to do what was necessary.'

Aspiring

Not everyone embraced the interim role as a typical leadership position, though. The third most prominent sensemaking process departs from the former two in that the interim role was perceived to be somewhat stigmatized and dissimilar from permanent positions ($n = 5$). For example, Tyler balked at the notion of similarity, sarcastically questioning that if there was no distinction for interims, 'then why do we even need permanent chairs?' He also illustrates the stigma dimension in this sensemaking process, saying, 'It's like you weren't good enough to become permanent . . . It isn't like a normal job where you have an annual review. You get a call from the dean's office, you're up for review . . . you walk by in the student union and you are up for review.'

Nonetheless, this process is labeled aspiring because the sensemakers willingly sought the interim position and felt empowered to make decisions despite the seemingly conspicuous nature of their role. For example, departmental chair Travis noted waiting for a

permanent role, 'would've felt like treading water . . . I would rather be making some movement and have to adjust rather than just not have done anything.' These aspiring sensemakers felt empowered to move Interim U forward, but likely owing to the perceived stigma and difference, were reluctant to exercise their authority fully. This sensemaking process is exemplified by Mason's recollection of how others 'kept pushing me to have a long-term vision and I would balk and I would go, "No, I don't want to put the energy or the time in" . . . I didn't want to restructure things when I didn't know if I was going to be the guy . . . [but] he kept telling me, "We have to put this in place even if someone else comes in and takes all of our positions."'

Self-conscious

Though only one participant processed his role in this manner, departmental chair George's self-conscious sensemaking was patently distinct. Nonetheless, his sensemaking matches the aforementioned aspiring process in that it is characterized by a sense of stigma and difference but also empowerment in the interim position. Empowerment was evident in comments by George such as, 'When I started enforcing [deadlines] . . . the ground nearly shook and cracked open because no one had ever sort of been held accountable in that way.' In tandem, though, perceptions of stigma and difference were interwoven with the sensemaking and evident, for example, in George's negative remembrance of awkward conversations with stakeholders: 'It's always, "Are you the chair?", and I would reply, "I'm the interim chair." And they would say, "oh [with a dissatisfied tone]".' Thus, George made sense of his role in largely similar ways to his aspiring colleagues. However, unlike the aspiring sensemakers, George perceived that he was obligated to accept the interim role and recalled saying, 'Uh, I guess if that's what you guys feel' in response to the dean's initial request. He also confessed to feeling obligated to serve again after a failed search for the permanent chair. As such, we labeled George's sensemaking process self-conscious owing to his ongoing perception of being unnaturally imposed into the role and 'castrated a bit', as he said, from the outset.

Restrained

Two participants shared the fifth sensemaking process that was comparable to traditional role sensemaking in all respects except for the empowerment dimension. That is, the participants who engaged in a restrained sensemaking process did not feel obligated to serve, stigmatized, or distinct from other permanent leaders yet they felt as though they either could not or should not make many organizational decisions. Theo made sense of his ongoing interim executive role in this manner, in one respect claiming he does not feel different as an interim but in another admitting, 'If I am fortunate enough to be named permanent, there may be some things I would do differently.' This statement conveys the administrator's reservation about making decisions despite his credentials and confidence in a leader position. Now that we have described the dutiful, traditional, aspiring, self-conscious, and restrained ways in which Interim U leaders made sense of their varying interim roles, we discuss how and why these divergent sensemaking processes developed and how they ultimately inform the interims' actions.

Mapping internal interim sensemaking and actions

In exploring the first research question we discovered not one unitary sensemaking process shared among the 24 internal interim leaders but rather five distinct yet interrelated processes at play. Such divergent sensemaking within a single organization has been previously recognized by scholars as fragmented sensemaking, a process that according to Maitlis (2005) occurs when organizational members are exposed to an intense flow of information that is not unified or coherent (see also Brown et al., 2008). Beyond this, we argue that other aspects of the communication as well as personal dimensions additionally account for this fragmented or divergent sensemaking. We identify and discuss these factors in the next section as we attempt to defend why each sensemaking pattern developed as it did. Following that section, we address how these varying sensemaking processes informed the interim leaders' actions (RQ2).

Accounting for sensemaking divergence

In our analysis, we found that the following social and communicative dynamics accounted for some of the discrepancies in participants' sensemaking processes: the perceived valence (positive/encouraging or negative/discouraging) and relative consistency of messages received regarding their interim role. Previous theoretical and empirical works on temporary workers (e.g. Boyce et al., 2007) and leaders (e.g. Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Zagenczyk et al., 2010) lend support for this interpretation and will be discussed in this section. Additionally, we discovered two individual factors that partially accounted for participants' discrepant sensemaking processes: prior leadership experience and the desire to seek greater leadership positions. In this section, we incorporate organizational theories and findings from previous studies to substantiate how and why each of these factors impelled the sensemaking divergence.

Social dynamics influencing discrepancy Several unique combinations of message valence and (in)consistency across senders contributed to the different ways that participants made sense of their roles. First, we contend that participants who reported receiving consistently positive messages from both superiors and subordinates thus made sense of their roles positively as stigma-free, inconspicuous, and empowering. While there have been no studies to exclusively examine the effects of coworker messages on interim leaders' perceptions of role stigma, difference, or empowerment, it follows that encouraging messages from superiors and subordinates alike would foster a sensemaking process that is more positive in its orientation toward the interim role. This argument aligns with the tenets of leader-member exchange theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) that posits that high-quality exchanges (i.e. positive interactions within the dyadic relationship of leaders and followers) are conducive to positive individual outcomes such as energy (Atwater and Carmeli, 2009) and self-esteem (Hill and Ritchie, 1971). This link between social interactions and sensemaking is demonstrated, for example, by those who made sense of their role in the dutiful manner. These participants were asked by superiors to consider the position and encouraged by colleagues that they would be doing the organization a service by agreeing to take on the role. This social-sensemaking link is also characteristic

of traditional sensemakers such as Louis (1980) who recalled having more 'people who were for me' as interim than when he later served in the permanent position. In sum, the early sensemaking activity of noticing and bracketing these leader-member exchanges into meaningful concepts was likely interpreted by these interims in a positive manner and fostered a sense of empowerment and overall wellbeing (see Chia, 2000).

However, not all messages received by participants were perceived or reported as consistently positive. Among these interims, the aspiring and self-conscious sensemakers were beset by conflicting messages from superiors and subordinates. That is, these interims were consistently encouraged by superiors to 'treat it as any normal leadership position' (Mason) but often discounted by subordinates, as illustrated in Austin's encounter with a subordinate who complained, 'We had just worked out a system with him [the former departmental chair], and now we've got you, and soon we'll probably have another new person.' We contend that this second combination of social interactions promoted perceived role stigma and difference because discouraging messages received regularly from subordinates ultimately bore more influence than occasional encouragements by superiors. Put differently, we content that because interims spent more time with subordinates, their discouraging messages carried more weight in the sensemaking process. This logic is supported according to the proximity and centrality concepts in social network theory that posit that actors who consistently and closely interact with individuals may significantly influence them (see Ibarra and Andrews, 1993). Thus, internal interims who had more frequent interactions with discouraging subordinates were vulnerable to the aforementioned sensemaking pattern despite the fact that they intermittently received encouraging messages by superiors.

In a slightly different vein, restrained sensemakers reported receiving no role-related messages prior to becoming the interim and then inconsistent messages by individuals throughout the organization regardless of positionality (i.e. superior versus subordinate). Consequently, we contend that this combination of messages ultimately made these leaders feel disempowered in their roles. This follows, in part, because they did not have the initial relevant social interactions to draw from that Weick et al. (2005) suggest are essential to the process of sensemaking. Further, because in their view they were continually caught between two random 'camps [who are] waiting and counting on you to really exert some leadership . . . or just discounting you' (Trevor), they likely felt as though they were in a state of limbo wherein they could not take authoritative actions as leaders. This line of reasoning is corroborated by previous research on multisource feedback that suggests that leaders' perceptions of feedback usefulness affect their abilities and confidence to lead (see Brett and Atwater, 2001). In the present study, leaders likely did not rate the feedback as useful, owing to its random and inconsistent nature; consequently the feedback likely stifled leader empowerment. In sum, we argue the following regarding participants who received inconsistent messages: those who received consistent negative messages from subordinates and peers (which dispelled the occasional encouraging message from a superior) were vulnerable to perceived role stigma and difference and those who received inconsistent messages across the board ultimately felt castrated as leaders.

Individual dynamics influencing discrepancy In addition to social and communicative dynamics, the individuals' degree of prior leadership experience and desire (or lack

thereof) to continually seek greater leadership positions also accounted for their sensemaking divergence. In their work on social cognitive theory and mastery modeling behavior, Wood and Bandura (1989) argue that patterns of success increase confidence in the leader's abilities and their overall self-efficacy. Their work illustrates that leaders with successful, mastery experiences strengthened their beliefs in their capabilities, while those who could not transfer mastery modeling would weakly enact leadership and quickly run into difficulties. In a similar vein, we contend that internal interims with prior leadership experience subsequently felt empowered, stigma-free, and inconspicuous with respect to their roles, while those without this frame of reference underwent a counter sensemaking process. Further, we contend that prior leadership experience helped to combat perceptions of being obligated to take on the role. This position is consistent with Bidwell and Briscoe (2009) who argue that individuals with a pre-established professional pedigree (i.e. experience) often willingly choose temporary work roles rather than undertake them because of some sense of obligation.

In our interpretation, however, prior leadership experience was not the only individual factor that accounted for participants' sensemaking nuances. Rather, we posit that one's desire (or lack thereof) to seek subsequent leadership positions concomitantly worked with prior experience to more accurately explain why participants made sense of their roles in varying ways. Specifically, we argue: (a) those with prior experience but no future desires felt obligated but otherwise positive toward their roles, (b) those with prior experience and future desires had positive sensemaking experiences and did not feel obligated to serve, and (c) those without prior experience but desires to seek higher leadership positions perceived their roles to be stigmatized and different from permanent leader positions. Regarding the first group, we rely on the nature of altruism as highlighted in Avolio and Locke (2002) who noted that this concept is the sacrifice of oneself to others. This connection to sensemaking is exemplified by the dutiful set of interims who were personally satisfied with their overall professional status and had no plans to pursue higher positions in their career; to illustrate, one-third of the dutiful sensemakers did not even desire the permanent position and the rest were content to return to their previous role in the organization.

The second link between experience/desires and perceivably positive, obligation-free sensemaking was illustrated in the present study by the traditional interims who desired to seek or maintain higher level positions in academia (e.g. provost). As mentioned previously, mental models from their previous leadership experiences potentially normalized the interim leader role, filtered out significant insecurities about their abilities to lead competently, and ultimately made them feel empowered (see Weick et al., 2005; Wood and Bandura, 1989). This group stands in stark contrast to the aspiring and self-conscious sensemakers who represent the third link between individual factors and sensemaking: minimal prior leadership but desires to continue leading that fosters perceived role stigma and difference. These interims could not rely on mental models from previous leadership experiences. Rather, these mid-career professionals or 'young guys trying to build our careers', as Tyler described them, at times questioned why they weren't 'good enough' to have been previously promoted to a permanent leader position. Thus, they labeled this first opportunity at leadership as inferior owing to the interim label and often felt uncomfortable in the role because they lacked leadership

credentials. Again, this is in line with Wood and Bandura (1989) who stated that leaders who have not had success in mastery modeling may not convince themselves of the effectiveness they could have as a leader and difficulties will emerge. Now that we've outlined why the interims may have made sense of their roles in divergent ways, we turn to a discussion of the relationship between their sensemaking processes and actions.

Connecting sensemaking to action

The second research question guiding this study asked how sensemaking processes influenced internal interim leaders' actions. Consistent with the tenets of sensemaking theory, we indeed discovered that participants' sensemaking processes meaningfully shaped their actions and by extension their enacted environment (Weick, 2001; Weick et al., 2005). However, we acknowledge that sensemaking is not working alone to impel the leaders' actions. Rather, interim leaders' sensemaking shapes the subsequent actions they take, but such actions are also informed by prior experiences and personal choices. For example, the internal interims still held formal decision-making authority and discretion and in part chose their actions accordingly. Though the leaders were temporary, they still possessed title authority that imbued them with some power to act as they saw fit. As such, we contend that the leaders' choices and sensemaking, shaped by the previously discussed individual and social factors, spurred the internal interims to enact their roles generally in one of two divergent ways. Departmental chair Nick provided a concise view of this contrast:

> I think of kind of two extremes of how you can be an interim . . . We had an interim president who fires the provost in the first five minutes of his job. And so, you've got that extreme and then you have the interims of whatever level that kind of turn off and on the lights, and they don't want to do anything [and] truly see this as 'I'm maintaining.'

We describe the former enactment as *trailblazing* and the latter as *caretaking* and discuss how they correspond to the five sensemaking processes in turn.

Trailblazing The trailblazing actions of some participants challenge Ballinger and Marcel's (2010) assumption that temporary leaders largely act toward short-term rather than long-term concerns. In contrast to interims who enacted their roles as caretakers, trailblazers focused more on issues effecting Interim U over time. Thus, while organizational relationships were still valued by many trailblazers, they were willing to temporarily dissatisfy members/stakeholders in pursuit of what some referred to as 'massive change.' Internal interims who made sense of their roles in the traditional, self-conscious, and aspiring manner largely engaged in these types of trailblazing actions. The sensemaking-enactment connection between traditional processes and trailblazing actions follows chiefly because these individuals perceived themselves to be imbued with the same status and authority as any permanent leader and, therefore, had no reservations about acting toward the future. In a slightly different vein, the self-conscious sensemaking process lends itself to trailblazing role enactment because, as George said, there was a

'knife in my back' pushing him to do so. Because this interim perceived his interim service as obligatory and stigmatized yet also felt empowered by the urgings of superiors to enact change, he accordingly acted as more of a trailblazer.

Finally, the aspiring sensemaking process brings about trailblazing actions because, like George, this group of individuals was empowered by superiors to make consequential, future-oriented decisions for the organization. Additionally, several of these aspiring individuals attempted to overcome their perceived stigma and difference by 'proving ourselves' (through trailblazing actions) to be worthy of the long-term position (Tyler). With that said, two of the five aspiring interims engaged in more caretaking rather than trailblazing actions in their role. Upon further examination, we identified a common thread among Mason and Gary that may account for this aberration in the sensemaking-enactment pattern. Beyond the fact that both interims wanted but were ultimately denied the permanent role, they also appeared to be consciously or subconsciously convinced that this outcome would arise. To illustrate, despite the encouragement of his superior, Mason continually refused to engage in strategic planning 'if I'm not going to be the guy [who is permanently hired]'; likewise, Gary insisted, 'I knew in essence I wouldn't be long term . . . the reality was . . . it was highly likely that I wouldn't be long term.' Thus, this persistent expectation of ultimate denial likely led these aspiring interims to act more as caretakers than trailblazers. These individuals join several other caretaking interims who we discuss in turn.

Caretaking Interims who enacted their roles as caretakers focused more on short term issues that immediately affected the organization and its members. Likewise, preserving relationships with long-standing constituents was privileged over strategic visioning and planning for the future. Internal interims who made sense of their roles in a dutiful or restrained manner typically engaged in these types of caretaking actions. The former sensemaking process lends itself to such enactment because most of these individuals did not see themselves as being engaged in high-level leadership for the organization in the distant future; as such, they were not concerned with long-term planning and/or did not feel it was their place to engage such issues.

In essence, they 'chose not to think about visions for strategic planning for the future' (Bob). Similarly, because these individuals did not aspire to climb the corporate ladder further, they focused on maintaining status quo in their role rather than positioning themselves as innovative or visionary leaders. As one leader said, they tended to 'just kind of say grace over things.'

Regarding the restrained sensemaking process, one of these individuals was explicitly instructed 'just to steer the ship, not to make any significant changes, just to make sure that procedures were followed and paperwork was shuffled . . . just to steer the ship.' Further, both participants' sense of disempowerment likely inhibited them from engaging in substantial actions toward the organization's long-term growth. Interestingly, neither of these interim leaders was promoted to the permanent position, supporting Weick and colleagues' (2005: 419) view that 'constraints are partly of one's own making and not simply objects to which one reacts'. That is, perhaps the restrained sensemakers' perceived disempowerment and related caretaking actions damaged their run for the permanent position. Nonetheless, they refrained from the trailblazing actions of other

internal interims in the organization. Now that we've discussed how the internal interims made sense of their roles (RQ1) and how these sensemaking processes informed their actions (RQ2), we conclude the study by identifying directions for the future study of internal interims and how they fit into the extant research on leadership and temporary workers.

Continued study of internal interims as distinct temps/leaders

In addition to exploring how and why internal interims enact their roles in various ways, the present study also sought to highlight internal interims as a distinct case of temporary worker and leader. Toward this end, we revisit three issues from the extant temp and leadership literatures and identify opportunities for the continued study of internal interims in light of the study's findings. Before doing so, we first acknowledge two limitations of the present study stemming from the research setting. First, the presence of multiple interim leaders serving over time at Interim U may have affected how participants made sense of their roles. Particularly, the sensemaking processes of more recent interims may have been shaped by the emerging organizational norm of interim leadership. For example, a recently named departmental chair said of his interim status, '[It] isn't that big of a deal because we've had so many interims.' Thus, our interpretation of the internal interim leader sensemaking process may only translate to settings that employ multiple internal interims.

A second limitation of the research setting was the unique conventions of the university employment environment. That is, the tenure system in these environments potentially fosters a more static than dynamic view of the temporal nature of employment contracts that may uniquely shape participants' perceptions of interim roles. Thus, we encourage scholars to examine internal interims in contexts with varying employment contract norms (e.g. corporate for-profit settings, non-profits, faith-based organizations) and fewer internal interim leaders. In addition to these general directions for future research we highlight the following three focal points for the continued study of internal interim leaders.

Motivation for taking on the role

As cited previously, the extant research on temporary work arrangements highlights several motivating factors that lead individuals to temp including financial necessity (i.e. the individual cannot obtain full-time employment), personal preference (e.g. the individual enjoys the flexibility of temping), and hopes to segue the role into a permanent position (see Brophy, 2006; Broschak et al., 2008; De Cuyper et al., 2008; Gossett, 2001; Morris and Vekker, 2001; Rogers, 1995; Von Hippel et al., 1997). However, in the present study only the latter motivating factor was present. Before discussing this further, we first identify an additional motivating factor from the present study that has not been directly addressed in the literature to date.

That is, many of the internal interim leaders were motivated to take on the role because they felt an obligation to the organization and/or some of its members. Specifically, 11 of the 24 participants in this study cited social pressure from colleagues or a personal

feeling of duty to Interim U in explaining why they initially accepted the role. Aletraris (2010) peripherally addresses the issue of obligation or forced choice to temp, but she ties it to individual financial constraints (i.e. obligated to temp owing to financial necessity) rather than the organization or its members; and unlike Aletraris, who cited the negative implications of this forced choice, we found this aspect of sensemaking did not necessarily spur negative perceptions of the role.

This obligation stemming from prior relationships with the organization is a unique element of internal interim leadership and warrants further inquiry in scholarly research.

Additionally, aspirations of obtaining the permanent position is cited in both temp and leadership research and also proved to be a significant motivating factor in the present study. Twenty-one of the 24 participants interviewed hoped to eventually secure their respective permanent positions, and only the interim president was explicitly prohibited from doing so. Seven of these individuals, nearly one-third of the study's participants, were ultimately denied in this pursuit; consequently, several of these individuals left Interim U while the remaining individuals attempted to adjust back into their previous roles. Considering that the prevailing leadership literature simply warns against allowing interims to seek the permanent position and thus fails to explore what happens when this pursuit ensues (Chapman and Vogelsang, 2005; Langevin and Koenig, 2004; see Farquhar, 1991), this matter necessitates inquiry in future research. In addition to this, the present study also highlights two prominent foci in extant temp research, alienation and stigma, worthy of further consideration.

Alienation and stigma

At Interim U, we did not find substantial evidence of the alienation cited in previous studies of temporary workers, likely because the nature of a leader's position and responsibilities decrease the probability of alienation (see Clark et al., 2010; Rogers, 1995). That is, leader roles typically require ongoing interaction and coordination with multiple organizational members and stakeholders, therefore, making alienation unfeasible. Additionally, internal interims have the uncharacteristic advantage of preexisting relationships in the organization to combat alienation, a benefit not typically afforded to externally hired temps. Thus, while alienation is thought to be a key antecedent to temporary worker stigma (Rogers, 1995), this did not account for the stigma perceived by six participants in our study. Rather, we offered the alternative explanation that lack of previous leadership experience (in their organization or field) combined with a desire to advance their career made these individuals feel as though they weren't good enough to initially be named full, permanent leaders. This explanation for perceived stigma as well as others needs to be further examined in future studies.

Additionally, further inquiry is needed to explain how interim leaders' perceptions of stigma may be reduced. Previous studies claim a temp's vulnerability to stigma may be lessened by concealing their temporal status (i.e. hiding the fact that they are a temp; see Boyce et al., 2007); however, this strategy is not viable for leaders whose interim designation is often more conspicuous. In the present study, we found that previous leadership experience helped dilute any potential negative perceptions of the interim leader role, but further inquiry is needed into this and other factors in order to better

understand how perceptions of stigma may be effectively combated. Our final recommendation for the continued study of internal interims stems from issues of organizational membership and is addressed in turn.

The internal factor

The extant literature depict temps and temporary leaders as outsiders without prior membership in the organizations to which they are hired (e.g. Ballard and Gossett, 2007; Inkson et al., 2001). However, the present study points to a prevalence of interim leaders who are previous members of their employing organizations; and while this study focused more on how these types of interim leaders made sense of their roles, future studies should examine the role that organizational and vocational identification plays as members move into, engage, and transition out of these positions. Likewise, scholars should examine the relationship between identification and internal interims' actions. For example, future studies could explore whether highly identified internal interims are more likely to act as caretakers or trailblazers in their role. Finally, we encourage scholars to further inspect the implications of interim leader sensemaking for identity formation. Identity is intimately tied to sensemaking (Weick, 2001), and how interims make sense of role-related interactions (e.g. stakeholders saying, 'I want to speak to the real dean') presumably shapes not just their perceptions of their interim role but also their enduring personal and professional identities.

Conclusion

The present study offers insight into how and why internal interim leaders enact their roles in various ways and underscores the theoretical and practical import of considering internal interims as a distinct case of temporary worker and leader. As evidenced by the divergent ways that participants made sense of their roles, it is clear that internal interims' actions are shaped by a combination of individual characteristics and choices (e.g. previous leadership experience; aspirations to garner future leadership responsibilities) as well as organizational encounters prior to and during their leadership tenure (e.g. encouragement and criticism by superiors and subordinates). Considering that internal interims are a staple in many industries (Ballinger and Marcel, 2010; Mundt, 2004), the insight into internal interims offered in this study has wide-ranging implications for leadership studies and organizational practice.

First, our findings suggest that personal perceptions and interactions with colleagues and stakeholders critically influence whether internal interims will act as caretakers or trailblazers during their tenure. Not only does this matter for the leaders' experiences but also for those of their colleagues and stakeholders. Our study demonstrates why interim leaders make sense of their role in different ways and that this informs distinct and separate actions. Such qualitative insight enhances scholarly understanding of how and why leader sensemaking proceeds in various ways, and this newfound understanding may aid practitioners in selecting interims that more precisely fit the needs of their organizations. For example, if organizational practitioners determine that a caretaker would be the best fit during an interim period, they might target a late career professional with prior

leadership experience and little aspirations to further advance his or her career (i.e. the pedigree of a dutiful sensemaker); or they could also potentially strive to refrain from being overly optimistic/encouraging or skeptical/discouraging of a newly appointed interim (i.e. the experiences of a restrained sensemaker). In sum, both caretakers and trailblazers can be harmful when their actions are contrary to the firm's expectations. This study provides preliminary insight into how these role enactments arise owing in part to interactional dynamics in the organization and the leader's professional history and future aspirations. Such insight garners practical significance in that it may guide members charged with appointing the interim.

This study also offers systematic explanations of interims' behaviors that may be applied to future studies of the tie between interim actions and broader organizational processes (e.g. conflict management; group creativity) and member outcomes (e.g. subordinate satisfaction and trust). Considering the consequentiality of interim leaders as suggested by practical and anecdotal accounts, we encourage more precise empirical examinations of the links between interim leadership processes and various group and organizational outcomes. In light of current and previous study findings, we particularly encourage scholars to examine potential ties to subordinate actions, shareholder attitudes, and group climate and creativity. In doing so, we may gradually address our presently deficient understandings of these fixtures in organizational leadership. This study marks a step in that direction, but there is still much to be learned. And though some scholars have begun to examine interim leaders, few if any have specifically attuned to the unique experience of internal interims. These individuals are distinct in that they must reconcile their ongoing membership with their newfound yet temporary power, and this study hopefully provides a foundation for more leadership research in this area.

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Note

1 Aletraris (2010) is one of the few scholars to cite this notion of forced choice, but she discusses it as a product of financial circumstances (i.e. cannot obtain full-time employment and/or need additional income).

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