

Organizationality and Alterity: Looking for signs of organizing in an online community of practice

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Abstract

This paper examines the potential for alterity to inform organizing outside of formal organizations. Alterity is the concept of difference as a fundamental aspect of identity and social relations. I argue that current hegemonic, identity-driven explanations of organizing are limiting, and explore how alterity appears in an online community of practice called AlteritOrg (a pseudonym). Through the analysis, I advocate for extending the scope of “organizationality” (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015) to include attention to alterity claims. I present findings from a netnography (Kozinets, 2015) of AlteritOrg, and demonstrate how the community exhibits four qualitative markers of organizational alterity: emergent structures, role-based activity, localised decision-making, and an experimental culture. The paper contributes to the literature on alternative organizing by drawing attention to Teal organizing (Laloux, 2014), which represents a set of approaches that are often overlooked. I propose that attending to alterity can prompt new questions and offer more possibilities for organizing, as well as encouraging a loosening of our attachment to identity. Overall, this paper offers a valuable perspective on organizing outside of formal organizations and highlights the importance of attending to alterity in understanding new possibilities for organizing.

1. Introduction

The central focus of this research is on organizing outside of formal organizations: specifically, about how alterity might illuminate organizing in a way that helps us embrace difference and possibility. Alterity is recognised as an “oppositional twin term” of identity, signifying “a relationship of difference: from oneself at another time, from something else, or from somebody else” Czarniawska (2008a: 8). It is closely related to, and used interchangeably with other concepts (*e.g.*, difference, otherness, diversity). However, alterity emphasizes the idea of difference as a fundamental aspect of identity and social relations, rather than as a secondary or marginal feature. In that regard, I take issue with identity-driven explanations of organization and explore how alterity appears in an online community of practice that makes claims about its commitment to organizing differently.

In this paper, I extend *organizationality* (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015) to include attention to *alterity claims*. Organizationality already enables the exploration of more fluid and latent forms of organizing, such as collectives and networks (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019). The organizationality literature names identity claims – commonly understood as “speech acts” (Searle, 1969) – as the pathway to organizational identity and actorhood. This resonates with the powerful identity perspective within organizational studies (Brown, 2019; 2021), which frames how researchers theorize formal organizations and advance

alternatives. Knights and Clarke (2017: 338) suggest that unsettling the hegemonic attachment to identity can prompt “uncomfortable questions” that manifest as “a lack of concern to look either backwards or sideways”. I agree with this and suggest we need to unsettle identity further still – by attending to alterity.

This paper presents empirical analysis of an online community of practice and demonstrates how organizationality should be extended by the inclusion of alterity claims. However, a concern for “identity free of alterity” (Czarniawska, 2008a: 8) and a preoccupation with self-construction (Knights and Clarke, 2017) looms over the identity literatures; though, Skovgaard-Smith *et al.* (2020) highlight how identification work (Brown, 2017) mainly takes the self as a starting point, whilst relying on others for its accomplishment. As a result, thinking and theorizing about organizing is drawn to identity as a signifier for being both “the same as others” and “different from everyone else” (Pullen 2007: 1). And, when referring to alterity, such work often affirms “a superior self in contrast to an inferior Other” (Skovgaard-Smith *et al.*, 2020: 1584). Loosening our attachment to identity-driven explanations of organization might offer a radical transformation of organizing differently, with a fuller response to its potential as “heterogeneous and open-ended” (Peltonen *et al.*, 2018: xiv).

The paper addresses the pertinent question of how alterity claims might help us when looking for signs of organizing. To explore this, the article presents findings from a netnography of AlteritOrg (a pseudonym) which was established in 2015 as a prototype *Teal organization* (Laloux, 2014). Members of this online community come from organizational development, consultancy, and coaching backgrounds. I became a member shortly after AlteritOrg launched. Above all, in this community I observed an unrelenting focus on difference and possibility and came to theorize this through the work of Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) whose interest lies in exploring the value of possibility over presence. This led to a clearer understanding of relationships of difference and motivated me to make the case here for alterity claims.

The main contribution of this article is to incorporate alterity claims into an organizationality perspective. I show how my analysis suggests four qualitative markers of organizational alterity: emergent structures, role-based activity, localised decision-making, and an experimental culture. Additionally, I add to the literature on alternative organizing by drawing attention to *Teal organizing* (Laloux, 2014). The article establishes a conceptual frame for the study of organizationality and alterity before providing a detailed introduction to the novel empirical setting and research methodology. The findings and discussion represent my learnings from an 18-month period of fieldwork in which I engaged with a site of alterity wedded to its own embodiment of alterity.

2. A conceptual frame for organizationality and alterity

The common assumption that organizations cannot exist without workable identities (see Schreyögg and Sydow, 2010) has persisted in much of the organizational studies literature. As scholars look for signs of organizing outside formal organizations, this preoccupation with identities risks obscuring what might be found. Instead, organizationality offers us an adjectival focus to turn away from “the binary classification” that forces us to identify groups crudely as “organizations or non-organizations” (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015: 1006). Developed carefully, I argue that this helps us in our search for signs of organizing – through

a fuller consideration of alterity, such that difference can be considered a fundamental aspect of identity and social relations.

In reviewing relevant literature, I explore three things: first, the context of research on organizing outside of formal organizations; second, the intersection of organizationality and alterity; and third, the role of communities of practice in inspiring new perspectives on organizing.

2.1 The context of research on organizing outside of formal organizations

Current research on organizing outside of formal organizations has been criticized for being outdated (Dunbar and Starbuck, 2006) and not adaptable to the diversity of organizational settings (Greenwood and Miller, 2010). Some scholars have called for a new approach that moves away from the normative western values of “economic production” (Walsh *et al.*, 2006: 661) and “competitive individualism” (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009: 242) and better utilizes alterity to learn from “spaces that permit diversity and difference” (Böhm *et al.*, 2005: 100).

Mainstream approaches to organizing differently have largely focused on hybridizing bureaucratic practices. This has presented “new organizational forms” (Lewin *et al.*, 1999: 535) that are not especially new: instead, they are networked (Miles *et al.*, 1997), federal (Handy, 1993), hybrid (Pache and Santos, 2013), mutual (Koenig and Thiétart, 1990); creative (Fairtlough, 1994); flexible (Volberda, 1996); partial (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011); temporary (Karmowska *et al.*, 2017); virtual (Goldman *et al.*, 1995); or, individualised (Ghoshal and Bartlett, 1997). A focus has remained on organizational identification whilst at the same time increasing flexibility and responsiveness (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Volberda, 1996), knowledge creation and learning (Nonaka and Toyama, 2007), and survival (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2008).

A key problem with these approaches is that they tend to overlook difference and instead emphasize design, form (Dunford *et al.*, 2013; Palmer *et al.*, 2007) and the wider environment (Lewin and Volberda, 1999). In part, this is addressed by critical approaches building on work by Burrell (1992: 92), who notes how “anarchism, syndicalism, the ecological movement, the co-operative movement, libertarian communism, self-help groups, or [...] feminism” inspire organizing differently. Here, signs of organizing emerge from “radical social ideas or grass-roots movements” (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009: 244) evoking a prefigurative politics (Maeckelbergh, 2009) where formal hierarchy is reduced, individuals have more influence, communication is more open, and a greater sense of democracy pervades the organization. Still, we might commit to “a more unprejudiced search” (Peltonen *et al.*, 2018: xiv) for signs of organizing and reject an exclusively identity-driven privileging of “unity and sameness over alterity and difference” (Dahl, 2001: 28-29).

The concept of alterity is often used in other fields to explore the nature of identity and the ways in which individuals or groups pursue difference. This disrupts conventional discourse and challenges orthodoxy (Spivak, 1988, 1989), highlighting alternative perspectives or marginalized voices, and reflecting the complexity of social and cultural relations. Crucially, alterity emphasizes difference as a fundamental aspect of identity and social relations, rather than as a secondary or marginal feature. This evokes the kind of thinking that liberates possibility and “encompasses our capacity as humans for the free-floating imagination of how things could be different and better” (Burrell and Dale, 2002: 106).

2.2 The intersection of organizationality and alterity

Set in this context of research on organizing outside of formal organizations, organizationality (Dobusch and Schoenenberg, 2015) emerges from a communicative constitution of organizations perspective. It draws attention to the informal, fluid, and open characteristics of organizations that are emergent and contingent upon language (Wilhoit and Kisselburgh, 2015) and, in its original conception emphasized interconnected decision-making (see Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011), actorhood (King *et al.* 2010), and collective identity (see Bartel and Dutton, 2001). In naming identity claims as how identities are asserted, organizationality risks overlooking how organizational actors embrace alterity. This has the effect of privileging presence over possibility, sameness over difference, identity over alterity.

Organizationality is attentive to different signs of organizing in different organizational settings, such as social collectives (Endrissat and Islam, 2021), co-working spaces (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019), and digital social movements (Laaksonen and Porttikivi, 2021). So, the idea of the idea of difference as fundamental aspects of identity and social relations seems crucial to its longevity. In part, organizationality shifts the focus of what we look for – from elements and practices to qualities, from nouns and verbs to adjectives (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019). It is unconcerned with a binary classification of organized/not organized, and its value lies in recognizing signs of organizing where institutionalized norms and expectations are less apparent. This further supports the significance of alterity claims as ways for individuals or groups to assert identities, express their unique perspectives and experiences, and acknowledging the diversity and complexity of the task they are undertaking.

As the organizationality perspective developed further, challenges to its original form emerged. Smith (2021), for instance, complicated the view on identity by recognizing that organizationality could be achieved through actions, which could serve as the collective's identity claims just as much as speech acts. According to Smith, the organizational exists “in a world of matter, things, stuff, feelings, expectations, desires, and beings of various ontological status” (Smith, 2021: 2). This suggests alterity claims are not inferior to identity claims and demands our attachment to the present should not hold us back from observing that “we live surrounded by possibility” (Bloch, 1968: 281).

Alterity claims are discussed in various fields of study, including anthropology, philosophy, and cultural studies. This reflects how they are relevant to understanding the complexity and diversity of identity and social relations. Surprisingly, then, discussion within organizational studies has been more limited – surprising, because, as noted by Czarniawska (2008b: 49) “[b]eing different is hardly a postmodern invention”. However, perhaps defining alterity is intricate because it involves concepts like difference and otherness that can be problematic. Lévinas (1998) suggests that we encounter alterity as we would encounter a *stranger*, while Cunliffe (2018) contends that alterity is not an abstract concept since we live our lives in relation to *others*, including particular people, generalized others, language systems, narratives of culture and history. An *alterity claim*, then, refers to a speech act (or embodied action) that asserts a degree of otherness. Alterity claims – or claims of difference – align with the goal of developing a more “gradual differentiation” between organized and not organized (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015: 1006) – one that does more than simply extracting crude binaries of sameness and difference. Neglecting alterity leads to a blunting of our tools of differentiation and identification – depriving the world of the possibility of its rebuttal of arrogant, insular

cultural narcissism (Baudrillard and Guillaume, 2008). This is significant, especially if we subscribe to the view that we “live surrounded by *possibility*, not merely by *presence*” (Bloch, 1968: 281 – my emphasis).

The implication is that organizationality need not demand evaluations that are exclusively driven by identity. Instead, *idem* and *ipse* questions of sameness and otherness can coexist. By stepping back from identity-driven evaluations and locating organizationality within the context of alterity, I align with a Blochian ontology of *not-yet being* that recognizes that organizations are *Not-Yet*: a “reality not yet fully ontologically constituted, immanently pointing toward its future” (Thompson and Žižek, 2013: xvi). Moving beyond the understanding of organizations as simply constituted by “five structural elements” (Apelt *et al.*, 2017: 9), alterity opens “spaces of unknowingness and betweenness where new possibilities, new questions, new ways of seeing, being and acting arise” (Cunliffe, 2018: 20). These spaces are the home to new possibilities for organizing – and they come into clearer focus through alterity.

2.3 The role of alternative settings in inspiring new ways of organizing

As scholars challenge traditional assumptions about what constitutes an organization, there has been a growing interest in identifying signs of organizing beyond formal structures. This trend is reflected in academic publications (*e.g.* Martella, 2019), influential business reviews (*e.g.*, Bernstein *et al.*, 2016), and popular media (*e.g.*, Gelles, 2015). Many non-traditional organizations have also gained prominence, such as Wikipedia, which has reinvented the knowledge economy (Jemielniak, 2014), Linux, which has challenged proprietary computing practices (Iannacci, 2005), and Zappos, which has disrupted the e-commerce landscape (Kopelman *et al.*, 2012). Interest has also been renewed in advancing knowledge about forms of organising that predate the birth of organization theory (*e.g.*, anarchist organising – Parker *et al.*, 2020) and about the historiography of organizing (Peltonen *et al.*, 2018). This body of work has shed light on different organizational practices and subjectivities, including the deliberate organization of communities of practice. In these communities, a clear marker of difference is how success appears to be determined by group ownership of activity rather than group identity (Akkerman *et al.*, 2006).

Communities of practice are cultivated – not created – as sites of learning and action where informality and self-organization can thrive (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). They bring together people within an alternative setting to interact regularly to learn from one another about a shared concern, real-life problem, or hot topic (Pyrko *et al.*, 2017); often evolving organically (Hara, 2008), engaging participants, negotiating meanings, and sharing knowledge (Iverson and McPhee, 2002). Communities of practice, at least in part fuelled by a widespread interest in situated learning, have expanded far from the original handicraft apprenticeships (*e.g.*, midwives, tailors, quartermasters, and butchers) presented by Lave and Wenger (1991). Nonetheless, emphasis on social forms of learning have continued and expanded to make use of online technologies.

Specific online communities of practice have developed a wide and varied use, ranging from anaesthesia (Kearsley and McNamara, 2019) to women composers (Hennekam *et al.*, 2020). They are well represented in marketing, for example in exploring online brand community practices (Hakala *et al.*, 2017) and spending social dollars (Park *et al.*, 2018). Likewise, they are in educational settings (*e.g.*, Banks *et al.* 2022), gaming communities (*e.g.*, Giordano, 2022), and

groups often subject to othering (e.g., Alves and Cavallieri, 2021; Guma *et al.* 2022; Lee and Lee, 2021). These settings help expand knowledge and understanding about organizing differently and demonstrate how difference constitutes a fundamental aspect of identity and social relations; so too, about the identity work of individual members (Boven, 2014), the formation and maintenance of collegial relationships (Fletcher, 2014), different processes of knowledge exchange (Reinl *et al.*, 2015), and overcoming geographic isolation (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

AlteritOrg is an online community of practice, where members exchange ideas, experiences, and insights about novel and alternative approaches to organizing. While AlteritOrg is grounded in the principles of *Teal organizing* (Laloux, 2014), its members are also familiar with other alternative approaches such as Holacracy (Robertson, 2015) and Sociocracy (Rau and Gonzalez, 2018). Teal organizing is rooted in an evolutionary worldview that draws on Integral Theory (Wilber, 2000) and Spiral Dynamics (Beck and Cowan, 1996). This meta-theoretical positioning has engendered debate and controversy, perhaps explaining why it has been marginalized in organizational studies to date. Nevertheless, in the spirit of “a more unprejudiced search for alternative beginnings” and an understanding of organizing as “heterogeneous and open-ended” (Peltonen *et al.*, 2018: xiv), this paper examines AlteritOrg’s organizationality as a practice that explores “new organizational practices and subjectivities” (Land and King, 2014: 924). Through the signs of organizing expressed in alterity claims, AlteritOrg offers new possibilities to stimulate our thinking and theorizing afresh.

3. Introduction to the empirical setting

AlteritOrg began in 2015 as a bi-monthly email, which led to the formation of an online community of practice. The impetus for this was the publication of Frederic Laloux’s book, *Reinventing Organizations*, in 2014, which introduced a new framework for organizational approaches called *Teal Organizing*.

Chris, one of six founder members, described: “We had high hopes of what we might achieve [and] felt that Laloux’s book could spark a coming together of many peoples’ work, that as a collective we could have more of an impact.”

AlteritOrg grew quickly, expanding to its current configuration of website, forum, and social media channels, and the community of practice established itself as somewhere people could collaborate around alternative organizing. At the heart of the community were a set of *Teal* practices, derived from Laloux’s work (2014). As the membership grew, AlteritOrg’s work revolved around: (1) publishing journalistic-style articles; (2) facilitating synchronous online conversations; (3) stimulating asynchronous online conversations; and, (4) curating resources of interest to members.

Cheryl, another founder member, recalled: “I don’t think we expected to achieve the reach we have so quickly. But I think this shows what a longing there is for this kind of enterprise, one that is hopeful of a better life.”

I was interested in alternative organizing and had read Laloux’s book when I joined the AlteritOrg community shortly after its establishment. During my initial period of membership, I began to consider AlteritOrg as a potential site for my empirical research. After discussing my plans with the founding members of the community and being accepted into a doctoral programme, I disclosed my identity as a researcher to the other members of the community in

an open forum post. I was warmly welcomed in a series of replies to my post, and I began an 18-month period of fieldwork in November 2016.

3.1 Research methodology

The research design was influenced by netnography (Kozinets, 2015) – a qualitative methodology that adapts ethnographic practices to uncover detailed cultural and community descriptions (Geertz, 1973) specifically within online settings. It was approached holistically, rather than as a series of disconnected choices (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009), which created a more integrated process. This was important because, while netnography is grounded in participant-observation, multiple methods were utilized in the research process to facilitate the journey of discovery. This included collecting archival data, interview data, and reflective data and the details of which are contained in Table 1.

The data (co-)creation, collection, and curation strategy (Table 1) set out to achieve three things: first, to “provide an accurate atmospheric overview” of the researched environment; second, to contribute to knowledge by uncovering inconsistencies or gaps; and, third, to offer a “human filter of immersion and experience” (Kozinets, 2015: 164).

Strategic intent	Co-creation of data	Collection of data (with commitment to open identification of the researcher and nature of the research).	Curation of data (including storage in accordance with AOIR (2012) and University Research Ethics Committee standards).
Provide an accurate atmospheric overview	Survey of archival data (<i>e.g.</i> , articles, blog posts, forum posts and comments, podcasts, text files, photographs, images, AV presentations, other digital artefacts from research site).	Participant-observation work, centring on <i>observation</i> . Reading and identifying material; searching the research site, its associated social media platforms, and individual member profiles; exploring a nascent network.	Downloading text-based data, screen-grabbing visual data, recording and transcribing audio data.
Uncover inconsistencies and/or gaps	Living stories developed through consocial interaction ¹ including a/synchronous text exchanges, technologically-mediated, real-time conversations, face-to-face interviews,	Participant-observation work, centring on <i>participation</i> . Engaging in discussions in comments sections of articles/blog posts, text-based exchanges on forums; connecting with members through online/offline	Specific acts of downloading text-based data, screen-grabbing visual data, recording and transcribing audio data; writing notes of online and offline events; audio recording of face-to-face interviews for later review, transcription, and analysis.

¹ Consociality (see Amit and Rapport, 2002) is a way of thinking about the complex ways in which social relationships are produced and maintained in different social contexts, and the implications of these relationships for social and political action.

	participation in online/offline events.	events; interviewing participants.	
Offer a human filter to frame data (co-) creation, collection, and curation	Ongoing commitment to reflective fieldnotes: written/typed recorded as close as possible to ‘real time’, used reflexively to guide, shape, and inform research practice.	Supplementing participant-observation work with reflective practice to draw on immediate reactions as a prompt for later reflections. Thoughts and reflections captured in paper diaries, computer typewritten entries, memos, scribbled diagrams.	Returning regularly to fieldnotes; consolidating formats; revisiting ideas; seeking emergent and/or recurrent themes; space for potential theorising.

Table 1: Summary of data (co-)creation, collection, and curation strategy

The research spanned six phases, each characterised by different but interconnected activities (Table 2). It began with my initial interactions with AlteritOrg, and becoming a member, alongside which I built a theoretical and methodological framework.

Phase 1 (from November 2016)	Entrée: critical analysis/evaluation of literature to build a theoretical/methodological framework; initial interactions with research setting (e.g., scoping the site, securing ethical agreements, formulating research questions)
Phase 2 (from January 2017)	Develop observational focus: (co-)creation, collection, and curation of archival data; field notes; reflection; (very) tentative theorising
Phase 3 (from March 2017)	Develop participatory focus: (co-)creation, collection, and curation of archival data; consocial data (e.g., interactions with participants); field notes; reflection; preliminary analysis; more (very) tentative theorising
Phase 4 (from August 2017)	Develop interview focus: (co-)creation, collection, and curation of archival data; consocial data (e.g., interviews with AlteritOrg members); field notes; reflection; analysis; extending theorising
Phase 5 (from February 2018)	Develop review period: review of all data; reflection; analysis; extensive theorising
Phase 6 (from April 2018)	Depart and feedback: review of all data; reflection; analysis; extensive theorising; focus on communicating findings and implications

Table 2: A schematic representation of the research design

The collection of archival data (from Phase 2 onwards) involved searching articles, blog posts, forum posts and comments, podcasts, text files, photographs, images, AV presentations, and other digital artefacts emanating from AlteritOrg members and their networks. Alongside participant-observation, which I carried out mostly by watching conversations and ideas develop in the online forum, this helped establish a cultural baseline before fully engaging in participant-observation. From Phase 3 – having sensitised myself to community norms and introduced myself to members – I took a more active part in the community and became more visible: engaging in discussions in comments sections of articles/blog posts, having

conversations on forums, and connecting with members through online/offline events. To expand on this, I carried out 42 semi-structured interviews with AlteritOrg members, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. During these interviews, participants were encouraged to speak openly about their experiences with organizing. A key feature of these interviews was the frequent use of prompts to elicit examples of ideas and practices shared with others and to encourage reflection on specific instances that might help the researcher understand the participants' experiences more fully. (Table 3).

Focus area	Indicative question from interview schedule	Prompts
Participant introductions	<p><i>Could you begin by introducing yourself?</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about who you are and what you do?</i></p>	<p><i>What kind of work do you do? What sectors? What functions do you have experience of (e.g., marketing, operations, strategy)? What activities do you tend to be involved in (e.g., consultancy, coaching, freelance work)?</i></p> <p><i>How long have you been a member of AlteritOrg? What prompted you to join? How would you describe the community to an 'outsider'?</i></p>
Research introductions and baseline understandings	<p><i>What do you understand this research to be about?</i></p> <p><i>We are going to be talking quite a bit about 'organising'. Can you explain to me what you understand by the word 'organising'?</i></p>	<p><i>How familiar are you with Teal organising? Are there other organising approaches you work with?</i></p> <p><i>Do you have a view on using 'different' types of organising for 'different' situations? How does this relate to how you understand 'organising'?</i></p>
Principles and practices of organising	<p><i>How would you describe how organising is approached within AlteritOrg?</i></p> <p><i>Are you an active member of the community?</i></p> <p><i>What are the kinds of activities you get involved in? How do things get accomplished? What characterises the kinds of activities you do? Does this build on your previous experience? Or explore new areas of practice?</i></p> <p><i>How would you describe relationships between members?</i></p>	<p><i>Was this surprising to you when you joined? How might other people find this differs to other settings?</i></p> <p><i>How does AlteritOrg relate to other organizations or groups you are part of?</i></p> <p><i>Can you talk a little more about the relationships within the community?</i></p> <p><i>Who do you feel is responsible for things going well? Or things going badly? What happens when something needs to change, or when something new is needed?</i></p>

	<i>What would you say are the biggest achievements of this community?</i>	<i>Can you tell me more about how decisions are made around these things?</i>
Concluding remarks	<i>Do you have any other stories or examples from AlteritOrg that you would like to share?</i> <i>Finally, how would you describe this place to a stranger?</i>	<i>Is there anything else you would like to share?</i> <i>Do you think there is something I should have asked you?</i>

Table 3: Outline of interview schedule and examples of questions and probes

I built in some flexibility as to whether interviews with participants were face-to-face, online, synchronous, or asynchronous. We aimed for the highest level of interaction possible with the participants and recorded interviews for later transcription and subsequent analysis, curating the data using a simple database to capture text, images, key words, and to which I was able to add emergent ideas relating to themes for coding and analysis, or specific learning points which I thought important. Alongside recording these emergent ideas, I kept the fieldnote data akin to diary studies (Czarniawska, 2007), which charted my journey from Phase 1 to Phase 6 – through learning and discovery – and documented ideas to be considered, reflected upon, and potentially acted upon later.

From Phase 4, I became more attentive to synthesising the data and building a research representation. My first step was to break up, separate, and disassemble the data (Jorgensen, 1989) and, as a humanist-oriented netnographer, I relied on naturalistic and experience-close analytical tools and techniques (Kozinets, 2015: 197). I manually coded the data and created spreadsheets, carefully inputting the data myself. To ensure rigour and transparency, I lent on practices advocated by Gioia *et al.* (2013) to systematically handle multiple emerging concepts whilst grounding my thinking and theorizing in empirical data. I did not adopt a grounded theory approach as I began the study with some theoretical ideas that influenced the research design. Instead, I committed myself to not imposing prior constructs or theories on the participants as an *a priori* explanation for understanding their experiences.

The curation of a dataset amounting to 1,500 articles, 42 interviews, and 2 years-worth of field notes required management of a large body of text. To open up my formal analytical encounter with the raw data, I used Kozinets' (2015) seven interpenetrating intellectual elements, which include *Imagining*, *Re-memorying*, *Abduction*, *Visual Abstraction*, *Artifying*, *Cultural Decoding*, and *Tournament Play*. These elements guided my approach as follows. First, in the *Imagining* stage, I reviewed, annotated, and re-ordered my reflective fieldnotes. Next, in the *Re-memorying* stage, I reconstructed patterns in the data from memory, and in the *Abduction* stage, I combined elements of data to see which elements attracted and repelled each other. In the fourth stage, *Visual Abstraction* prompted me to sketch elements of the data, creating multiple iterations. This led to the fifth stage, *Artifying*, in which I considered the multimedia formats (photos, images, audio, video) that constituted and accompanied the data. In the final two stages, I was focused on *Cultural Decoding*, intentionally saturating myself in the data. This progressed to *Tournament Play*, where I tested ideas about possible connections against the data of reality.

Alongside this sustained engagement with data, I drew out a large set of first order concepts expressed in participants' own language. (These are summarised in Table 4, below.) At this

stage, my focus was solely on identifying concepts, without trying to distil categories or interpret the data. To move towards second order analysis, I used a form of axial coding (based on Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Based on the many first order concepts, I reduced them to a set of themes that captured the data in a more distilled form and highlighting the adjectival quality of the organizational activity. Through continued work and refinement, these themes began to suggest a larger narrative, providing a foundation for understanding the meaning of human organizational experiences. Although the research identified eight second order themes – which I name as qualitative markers of organizational alterity – this article reports on four of these themes: *emergent, role-based, localised, experimental*.

First order – summary of concepts with exemplar interview data	Second order – highlighting adjectival quality
<p>Organizing structures loosened (e.g., <i>I won't lie – starting out with nobody in charge is terrifying. At times, we tried to codify what we were doing and I remember some people [*no names!] were particularly keen to acquire some authority and power – but doing that didn't work and our collective will to achieve this together and without resorting to more conventional ways of organising was stronger than we thought</i>)</p> <p>Networks connecting with other networks (e.g., <i>'as we got deeper into this piece of work, [someone in the group] connected us up with [another organisation] and we worked for a while together until we needed to go in our own separate ways – we got a lot done together though and kept in touch – we did revert back for some advice and [the others] put us in touch with a really cool [collaborator]</i>)</p> <p>Multi-disciplinary, locally accountable teams (e.g., <i>this was a new group that came together – nobody knew each other and worked in very different fields – but that was quite refreshing because we were all enthusiastic and had ultimate responsibility for pulling off [this event] and had to start from scratch to get good working relationships and practices – we didn't have the luxury of time either which turned out not to be the problem we thought it would!</i>)</p> <p>Collective successes and failures increasing responsibility (e.g., <i>the pressure of getting this right didn't help initially and we almost fell apart as a group – but I think then the sense of ownership we had – both to AlteritOrg and to the [project] kicked in – we ended up being so happy because together we pulled things back from failure – that was a big learning for me]</i>)</p>	<p><i>Emergent</i>, networked structures</p>
<p>Work organized according to roles (e.g., <i>who doesn't want to be thought of a wizard in a particular area! I love being able to be really open about the stuff I'm good at – it's great psychologically to spend time doing stuff that matters and that you can do brilliantly – compared to other workplaces, it's so liberating leaving behind the shit you can't do</i>)</p> <p>Encouraging diversity and embracing talent (e.g., <i>the last time I went for a job interview most of the time was spent evidencing what I could do – they only seemed interested in the extent of my demonstrable competence ... what I really wanted to talk about was how I could make a difference to their agency, and how they might get the best out of me and my talents – if I'd had got the job, I'm sure I know how things would have turned out ... boring!)</i>)</p>	<p><i>Role-based</i> activity</p>

<p>Connect tasks with peoples’ passions and enthusiasms (e.g., so the workshop was a brilliant opportunity – working with [other names] I learned so much and we got to put together an event that got great feedback – from walking around the event, I could tell that people were really buzzing – I can’t wait to do it again)</p> <p>Knowing ‘what is needed to get “what needs to be done” done’ (e.g., some organisations fill time with unnecessary stuff that really doesn’t need doing – it’s not that we take short cuts, but our sense of purpose gives us a great steer on the things that really matter ... getting those things done is good for everyone)</p>	
<p>Decisions made locally (e.g., look at it like this, if you see that something needs doing, why do you need to explain this to someone else so that they can make the decision for you or endorse what you see? ... maximum understanding about most issues you encounter is held up close – by you)</p> <p>Distributed decision making for agility (e.g., the whole thing about being able to make decisions is that the right people are deciding, and they are deciding at the right time – it’s efficient – and it shows people they are massively trusted)</p> <p>Organizational purpose needs people who are independently agentic (e.g. as members we are AlteritOrg – so if we say we want our purpose to live and evolve we have to be ready to act on it – AlteritOrg doesn’t act ... we it’s members do and there’s quite a responsibility there)</p> <p>Promoting accountability and responsibility (e.g., I’ve never felt as responsible within a group as I do in AlteritOrg. In other places there’s always someone to defer to or to leave things to – here it’s you answering your own questions and living with others doing the same)</p>	<p><i>Localised</i> decision making</p>
<p>Experimenting at all levels of the organization (e.g., I was kind of challenged in my first week to try something out and see what happened – it felt quite exposing, and I didn’t want to do something wrong – I found that everyone was experimenting with ideas all the time ... and messing up – to be honest, I wish I’d have known that sooner)</p> <p>Experimenting is natural (e.g., the first meeting of the sub-group I attended had decided to experiment without a formal agenda ... it was chaotic but we did share some important learning about having discussions with others that we have incorporated into our practice – we haven’t gone back to formal agendas but we do have a few more things written down to keep us on track)</p> <p>Competence with change (e.g., I have never got the impression that I’ll get bored in this group – or that I’ll find myself worrying about things that are being done – things change all the time, and we get on with it with a smile – it just feels normal)</p> <p>Supporting agility and creativity (e.g., I feel [colleague] really knows how to get the best out of people – I’m always trying to listen in on how they are empowering people to do great things ... it’s always making people feel better about what they are doing and then you can see them doing it with real confidence – if they need to move on to other pieces of work then they are coming from a ‘can do’ culture)</p>	<p><i>Experimental</i> culture</p>

Table 4: Representation of first order concepts and second order themes

These four themes represent the specifically adjectival quality of organizational work. Viewing these through a prism of alterity names them differently to any empirical basis derived from an identity-driven perspective. And, because the themes now emerge from claims of difference and a lack of fixity in the present, this allows for the emergence of new structures in the future rather than remaining tied to conceptions of the past. This, in turn, reiterates the importance of embracing alterity in understanding organizing outside of formal organizations and highlights the potential of organizationality for unlocking ‘new organizational practices and subjectivities’ (Land and King, 2014: 924) – especially now expanded to include alterity claims.

4. Findings and discussion

In this section, I do two central things. First, I discuss the four qualitative markers of organizational alterity that emerged from my empirical analysis: *emergent* structures, *role-based* activity, *localised* decision-making, and an *experimental* culture. I dedicate a subsection to each marker, circling back to literature previously reviewed, and demonstrating how my analysis extends the understanding of organizing. Second, I argue for the importance of alterity claims within an organizationality perspective. I support this argument with examples from my analysis, using participants’ words (pseudonymised and italicised) to showcase the novel language used in this setting and to illustrate the co-created data’s richness. This new organizational vocabulary (see Acquier *et al.*, 2017) is a sign of theorising organizing outside formal organizations.

4.1. Looking for signs of organizing – proposing four qualitative markers of organizational alterity

When I joined AlteritOrg, I had little first-hand experience of alternative organizations, and even less of communities of practice. I was simply curious and a bit restless in my own relationship with organizational theory and practice. I couldn’t claim any expertise in practices common to alternative organizing, nor had I engaged significantly with practitioners in that field. Reflecting on these inauspicious beginnings, I realize that my own initial engagement with AlteritOrg was framed by an awkward mixture of identification and differentiation. Fortunately, over time, my understanding and my practice became more discerning, and I began to relish *my* difference.

As a researcher entering a new community of practice, I lacked confidence that I could make sense of what I encountered. This heightened my anxiety around fitting in with the natives. Moreover, as a netnographer working in an online setting, some of the more obvious visual cues of acceptance that I had developed throughout my career were not available to me – so I looked for validation through different responses to comments I made (*e.g.*, willingness to engage with me in conversation, emojis).

Luckily, when I introduced myself on the forum, the curiosity I expressed for “being different” struck a chord with others.² I felt reassured when I read comments from other members, like this one, from Lucy: “I don’t think you see them [organizations] as things that

² I tended to refer to as *difference* in place of *alterity* within the fieldwork because it seemed to resonate more strongly with the participants.

need putting together in a certain way [...] you know, typical command and control like structures [...] you seem quite imaginative [...] the language you use seems connected to our way of thinking [...]". From the outset, I could see that other newcomers were unsettled by the absence of *command-and-control* structures being reinforced through *managerial language*. Thomas *et al.* (2011:22) argue that "changes in patterns of organizing depend upon new language," and the use of explicitly non-managerial language was an important sign of this community's organizing – a sign of its alterity. Approaching this in terms of differentiation, rather than identification, helped me to see how meaning was being continually negotiated among members which revealed something about a daily practice of alterity – this non-managerial language was more than simply speech acts but associated and embodied actions (see Smith, 2021). For AlteritOrg members, a *renewal of organizing* embodied in their daily practice and co-constructed through language was at the heart of the community's attempts at being different.

4.2. Signs of emergent structures

Conversations about organizational structures provided a vivid sense of *emergence*. Members often referred, imaginatively, to *teams springing up within teams* and *networks emerging within networks*. It initially surprised me how naturalized *emergence* was in this setting, with some describing the organizational structures as being like *Russian dolls*. This *emergent* quality of organizing seems to constitute a distinctive othering of its own, through speech acts and associated actions.

Karen (an organizational development consultant) embraced the othering of formal organizations in a forum post about her work to *dismantle dominating organizational structures*. She detailed an ongoing project developing *multidisciplinary teams* which *form and re-form*, within networks which are *continually created and re-created*.

I could go to an organization, spend a few weeks looking around, and put together a perfectly rational system to structure the different work flows I observe. But the next day everything could change and, even if I've built in some capacity to respond to change, it can't cope – only with the things "programmed" into the system or the capabilities of the people involved [...] mainstream logic and rationality will only get us so far [...] we need to think more about how hearts and souls emerge within organizations.

This othering of formal organizational structures consolidated a common identity amongst members, but I probed Karen's comment about *hearts and souls*. She expanded:

Don't think about networks like machines – think of them like organic systems, diverse, interconnected and interdependent. They transcend the realities of the here and now. They go on and on, they outlive and outthink us. They enable us to become something different – something we don't even know about right now.

The interrelationship between emergence and the individual humanity of members was pervasive. It served as a common point of differentiation between AlteritOrg's *alternative approaches* to organizing and the formal organizations on which many members had turned their back in disillusionment or disgruntlement. Some distanced themselves from the *human-*

made conceit of formal organizations in favour of structures that were expressly locally responsive.

We need to be more accountable for the choices we make [...] this is possible because there is so much potential [...] skills waiting to be unleashed [...] possibilities are limitless [...] if we show people what they can become and allow them real responsibility – for success and failure [...] sharing in the responsibility for what organizations become. [Sandi]

Both Karen and Sandi (a freelance management consultant) signalled their commitment to alterity through their recognition of how emergence enables *future possibility*. But it was Karen's comment about *hearts and souls* which stayed with me for some time. I was reminded of it again when I read about "things, stuff, feelings, expectations, desires" (Smith, 2021: 2) and sensed a distinctively human concern for the future which appeared better served by *emergent* structures. Members seemed more able to engage in the struggle to address their own questions of otherness – not just 'what they are not' and 'who they are not', but 'what they might become'. *Without emergence there is no room for newness – only more of the same [...] or things just expressed in the same old ways.*

4.3. Signs of role-based activities

In AlteritOrg, activities were allocated *according to roles* rather than being tied to a formal job description or set of processes. This practice reflects the *informal* and *volunteer* nature of the community, and it allows for rejection of formal organizational practices more easily. Members found that *role-based* activity allowed them to explore different talents and approach tasks in *clever or surprising* ways, to explore *multiple and diverse* talents, and to value their *individual wizardry*. This practice of organizing through roles, as revealed by members' speech acts and associated actions, demonstrates alterity in the community.

As a marker that signals new thinking about organizing, allocating activities according to roles *encourages diversity, respects talents, and raises motivation*. Such a commitment also offers potential for unlocking "new organizational practices and subjectivities" (Land and King, 2014: 924). Joe (a frequent poster on the forum) explained how this practice of alterity enables difference: "it allows people to be valued for what they can bring to the organization, as living breathing individuals – it doesn't demean their capabilities or their humanity by evaluating them against a set of organizational competencies".

In reply, Karen suggested job descriptions fuel *controlling egos* rather than attending to *what needs to be done* within an organization. Chatting more with her, she argued that dominant voices often prioritise work to embed themselves within formal structures and consolidate bases of power: *structures can't be there simply to accommodate those people who lack the wisdom to work collaboratively*. Roles are flexible, and inherently focused on what needs to be done at that time. They might be *self-selected* though not in a way that *serves individual desires*; rather in a way that *deepens the link between organizational purpose and what an individual does to serve that purpose*.

At times, it was clear why certain members took on specific tasks and activities, while at others it was not. For instance, Edie, who had a background in publishing, took the lead on various written contributions. Some members utilized their existing skills, while others *followed their passions and explored new territories*. Although this arrangement may have seemed

haphazard, the community continued to flourish and expand throughout my time there. This success was attributed to their efforts to *unlock possibilities*.

During the analysis phase, I came to understand how *organizational purpose* – or the overarching organizational address (as described by Dobusch and Schoenenborn, 2015) – played a crucial role in the thriving of the AlteritOrg community. Despite the relatively informal nature of the organization, there was a deliberate focus on how different roles intersected and contributed towards the organizational purpose. This dedication to the organizational purpose served as a guiding force for role-based activities, surpassing what individuals could achieve on their own. This observation aligns with Akkerman *et al.*'s (2006: 369) notion of group ownership being more significant than group identity.

Edie, a founder member, explained: “there is an emergent sense of roles and responsibilities [...] but we organize according to a single shared goal – to nourish the growing ecosystem of Teal organizations [...] all roles need to respond to that purpose”.³

Paul recognized AlteritOrg as a place that embraced diversity and difference (as noted by Böhm *et al.*, 2005), where he felt *held in place* while also *shaping a different future*. According to Lucy, what made AlteritOrg *special* was the confidence members had in each other – that each would *carry out the work that matters to their view of the community*. This sense of safety and trust underpinned their confidence and practice. However, this trust also came with an emphasis on individual responsibility – if something needed to be done, it was up to the individual to take action. When I took on a task, I was encouraged to seek advice if needed, but ultimately, I was reminded that it was my role to *fulfil the organization's purpose* and to *stay true to myself*.

4.4. Signs of localised decision-making

The question of who decides (as explored by Rau, 2021) is a significant challenge for an organization that advocates for non-hierarchical structures and a flexible approach to task allocation. Personally, I found it difficult to fully grasp the move away from *command-and-control* structures and *job-based* task allocation. However, the response to this question represents a distinct feature of organizing, and it exposes the fragility associated with *relinquishing control*. This fragility undermines the hegemonic attachment to identity that holds formal organizations in place. Through this feature of organizing, alterity is marked by a *localized* approach to decision-making that is constituted by both speech acts and actions. This approach reflects a real sense of difference, and it constitutes, as well as is constituted by, this difference.

AlteritOrg demonstrates how, consistent with the move away from traditional conceptions of command and control, decision-making is subject to a localising-turn. Edie explained: “by having everybody responsible for the decisions about what is needed – those who are closest to the action are inevitably going to know best about what must get done [...] not just that, about when, where, and how it must get done”.

³ Later in that conversation, Edie explained in more depth about the types of roles and responsibilities that emerged. Some were practical (*e.g.*, *moderating the forum*, *welcoming new members*, *updating the website*) whilst others were more ephemeral (*e.g.*, *sensing new opportunities*, *exploring*, and *developing synergies*).

New organizational practices, such as localized decision-making, were characterized by fluidity, with small groups making decisions separately but with ongoing coherence to the *collective and emergent* sense of organizational purpose (as noted by Smith, 2021). On one hand, this fluidity destabilizes identities (as explored by Knights and Clarke, 2017), but on the other hand, it fuels the sense of difference that allows for exploration and realization of *hopes and dreams*. This is possible because those *most removed from the impact of a decision* are often the ones absent from the decision-making process. Those *entrusted with the greatest knowledge* about the task at hand are also entrusted with the agency to make relevant decisions.

Looking at this through a prism of alterity reveals how different individuals are trusted with the future of the same organization. Lillian, a founder member, explained: *trust is central to our practice: once a responsibility has been agreed, we trust people to make decisions*. Describing the distinctiveness of this within the community, she continued: “if we say we value individuals, we must allow them to make decisions otherwise we just we never become any different from a regular organization that makes decisions for people (and rarely in their interests)”.

Localizing decision-making not only distributes agency more equitably but also supports organizational agility. Mainstream approaches to organizing rely on chains of command, which are associated with specific processes for decision-making and can be time-consuming. In contrast, the *emergent structures constantly reforming* around work that needs to be done can support decision-making in organizations like AlteritOrg. This commitment to agility is a response to emergent possibilities arising from *greater connectivity* and the *dual spirit of collaboration and autonomy*. In this environment, people are encouraged to *experiment and adapt to changing conditions*, which fosters a culture of experimental agility.

There were continual conversations about how decision making should be carried out – with varying degrees of consensus about efficacy and the potential for learning-from-doing. A group of members, for example, were in the middle of an experiment with “integrative” decision-making. Chris, a founder member, explained: “We’ve been working to implement integrative decision making – you know, from Holacracy [...] Some have used it before, but I haven’t. It has given me a chance to really understand how it works on the inside before talking about it in other settings”.

I explored this in an interview with Adrian (a *Teal* enthusiast) who was part of this “integrative” decision-making experiment. I shared with him my uncertainty, about how responsibility and authority to take decisions locally moved around the organization. How would I ever “know” if I could go ahead and make a decision? Could I make a decision in one context, but not in another? And, what legitimacy would I ever have? He challenged me: “Do you need one person to back your decision, ten people, or everyone?” I waffled in response. Adrian added: “this presents a real opportunity for people to be heard, to make their mark on an organization, to experience the highs and lows of contributing to that emergence we see in next-stage organizations”.

4.5. Signs of an experimental culture

The nature of *experimentation* makes for a characterful sign of organizing that pervades structures, practices, and processes, and exists in all parts of the organization. Common to my interviews, which sought to tease out more about the complex ideas which I was encountering for the first time, were reports of unspoken expectations: *to work together, to ask for advice, and to try things out which seemed very real* and, consistent with *Teal's* non-hierarchical principles, was *regardless of rank or file*. Those new to AlteritOrg often found this disorientating, noting how in mainstream settings experimentation was a largely controlled phenomenon. One memorable comment from Adrian (a *Teal* enthusiast): *where I used to work, we were never encouraged to experiment too much or find too many new things*. It seems like, in many settings that, to get on, you had not to look for too many differences. Through this sign of organizing, alterity is marked by an *experimental* culture which intentionally re/produces otherness through speech acts and through actions.

It was not unusual for conversations on the forum to centre around – if not appear preoccupied with change – identifying it as a *daily reality implicit in the culture of the place*. Out of this, experimentation seemed to become a core competency in all parts of the community. It also stimulated conversations around structures, activities, and decisions, and made me think about the continued development of organizationality. In an asynchronous text conversation with Beki (a freelance administrator in the creative sector) which we settled on after being unable to schedule some time “together”, I unpicked some of the ideas around experimentation. She typed back:

I think it's more important to recognise that we must be prepared to try all things, and we must create a community in which it is possible to try all things. Without being able to experiment we will remain trapped in old practices which no longer serve any purpose.

Whilst I was thinking about this, I had another chance to speak to Chris (a founder member), who always seemed able to help me further with my understanding. “Some of the value of AlteritOrg is its being a safe space for experimentation. Because there is a danger of reading about practices and trying to use them without really understanding their practical implications”.

In fact, this was an interesting conversation which lasted longer than usual, particularly when Chris spoke more about their experiences of experimenting with integrative decision making which forced the rejection of consensus even more strongly and felt counter-cultural. He reported:

There was quite a bit of trepidation about the experiment,⁴ but we felt called by our purpose to give it a go. As it turns out, it has been quite useful and we've used it to give life to some older practices we've been accustomed too. Also, as I said, it has really helped understand the practical implications of a new idea. Experimentation here has been brilliant and already I've taken what I learnt to another group I'm involved with.

⁴ The experiment pertaining to ‘integrative decision-making’, which is an approach to decision making that seeks to incorporate diverse perspectives, information, and interests. It brings together multiple stakeholders and seeks a solution that meets the needs and goals of all involved, rather than just one individual or group.

When I first joined AlteritOrg, I was told that active participation in the community was expected. Jeff asked me directly: “What are you able to contribute to the community?” Contributing to the community was a core expectation, but I wasn't sure how I could contribute to what it might become. James shared similar concerns and commented that *it wasn't entirely clear* how he could contribute, and he was unsure about *the specific language used* within the community. Others expressed similar sentiments, with some feeling that the self-management structure and focus on roles required a level of communication and understanding that they were not used to. However, as we became more involved in the community and its conversations and experiments, we quickly acclimated to the culture and its norms.

Overall, the analysis of the data from AlteritOrg highlighted acts of alterity and difference that construct organizational spaces that enable the other (Böhm *et al.*, 2005), rather than excluding them in pursuit of unity and sameness. The emergent structures, role-based activities, localised decision-making, and experimental culture are shaped by both claims of alterity and identity. This approach of elevating possibility to the same importance as presence can lead to greater chances of innovation and creativity in our thinking and theorizing.

5. Being different – advocating for the inclusion of “alterity claims” within an organizationality perspective

As I reflect on my analysis, I see how difference is inherent in the communicative constitution of organizationality perspective. I make no claims that emergent, role-based, localised, and experimental characteristics are not found in mainstream organisation. Nor, that these characteristics cannot be observed from a more conventional identity-driven perspective. Indeed, identity claims have been identified as a vehicle for expressing sameness and difference. However, my understanding is that focusing solely on identity claims overlooks something important – it limits possibility. Both possibility in what might be discovered, and possibility about how those characteristics might develop over time. This is in line with the ideas of Baudrillard and Guillaume (2008), who argue similarly, that a focus on identity deprives us of possibility. On this basis, I propose expanding the literature on organizationality to include attention to alterity claims – speech acts, or associated embodied actions, that make claims of otherness. These alterity claims would not necessarily be in relation to sameness but seek to communicate possibility – perhaps what could emerge from the current situation.

Within alterity, we discover room for new practices and subjectivities, as well as for unimagined possibilities. This does not exclude strong individual or collective identity claims, as these claims are present in the various acts and actions of AlteritOrg's members. However, they are not exclusive in their analytical or practical value. The claims made by AlteritOrg's members can be conceived of as the pursuit of an alternate identity (Obodaru, 2012) or an aspirational identity (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). But what about claims like Karen's: “they enable us to become something different – something we don't even know about right now”. Claims relating to identities that are not yet formed, but a sense of difference that we pursue in the hope that it can be animated at some point in the future.

If we look to researchers who prioritize unity and sameness over alterity and difference (see Dahl, 2001), we could turn to Eury *et al.* (2018), who emphasize the importance of allowing for

past, present, and future identities to express multiple temporalities (see Escobar-Sierra and Calderon-Valencia, 2021). However, we would still need to find a way to bridge the very human response to organizing described by AlteritOrg's members and attempt to negotiate what we can learn from less tangible "things, stuff, feelings, expectations, desires" (Smith, 2021: 2).

Amongst the data, it was relatively easy to identify statements that reinforce ideal identities (Gecas, 1982) or preferred identities (Brown *et al.*, 2021) and point to how the use of speech acts helps to maintain community boundaries. For example, I often observed Jeff (a founder member) policing boundaries, affirming a sense of self through 'contrast to an inferior Other' (Skovgaard-Smith *et al.*, 2021: 1584). Once, he wrote: "we don't want to be yet another of the 100s of "movements of all movements" [...] our purpose is expressly focused on people working in the field of next-stage organizations, responsive organizations, and the like".

Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) argue that identity claims are important for external audiences, so the largely internal focus of alterity claims observed among AlteritOrg members provides an interesting counterbalance. AlteritOrg is not necessarily seeking an external audience and is constituted along different lines from organizations with an outward-looking focus. Instead, its focus is on supporting *people working in the field of next-stage organizations and nurturing the growing ecosystem of Teal organizations*. Thus, its organizationality is directed towards supporting its members, sharing expertise, and engaging in new opportunities while also promoting *Teal* and other approaches to organizational renewal beyond the community. However, its primary goal is *supporting its members and holding space for their development*.

The ways in which AlteritOrg is animated also capture something of the paradoxical intentionality and non-intentionality of the community. The nature of *Teal* organizing relies on the notion of *evolutionary purpose*, in which members are invited to listen and understand what the organization wants to become (Laloux, 2014: 56). If the underlying nature of *Teal* is ever to be realized, it will have to do so in a way that transcends individual speech acts or associated actions. Reflecting on the analysis, I wonder if another telling of the AlteritOrg story could be framed in terms of a group of individuals attempting everything possible to avoid giving the impression of being organized.

The concept of organizationality goes beyond organizational structures to encompass organizational actorhood and identity. This is context-dependent and within AlteritOrg, it is seen in how members commit to emerging structures that are flexible and adaptable to the changing needs of the organization. These structures are influenced by claims of difference and a lack of fixity in the present, which allows for the emergence of new structures in the future. This approach enables the organization to respond effectively to external challenges and align its design and form with the context of its environment. The embrace of alterity and ontological openness is crucial to achieving this response.

Indeed, the notion of alterity challenges us to rethink how we conceptualize organizational identity and actorhood. Rather than relying on fixed structures or pre-existing identities, AlteritOrg demonstrates how identity can be achieved through a collective commitment to emergent structures and a shared purpose. Within this community, anyone can contribute if their actions are on behalf of the collective, and roles can be flexible and adaptable to changing needs. Similarly, Smith (2021) highlights how anyone can contribute to organizationality – and thereby achieve a degree of organizational actorhood – if what is said or done is on behalf of the collective. The culture of experimentation and learning further reinforces a shared

organizational identity, while the emphasis on autonomy and interdependence captures the paradoxical nature of *Teal* organizing. Ultimately, the aim of AlteritOrg is to nourish the growing ecosystem of *Teal* organizations and support its members in their development, rather than seeking approval from an external audience or conforming to established organizational norms. By embracing alterity, AlteritOrg offers a new perspective on organizationality that challenges us to think about difference, taking us beyond existing frameworks and demanding we embrace new possibilities for organizational practices and subjectivities.

In summary, AlteritOrg provides a novel perspective on organizationality, in that it emphasizes the importance of alterity claims. Through its focus on nourishing the growing ecosystem of *Teal* organizations and supporting its members, AlteritOrg achieves organizational actorhood and identity through emergent structures and self-management. In such a space, and by being attentive to alterity claims, we can better anticipate a state of otherness and imagine human and organizational possibility beyond what characterizes the real. Ultimately, the character of organizing represents our opportunity for development, novelty, invention, and genuinely different outcomes, and our goal should be to reveal possibility and excite about the potential of what will become.

6. Conclusion

This research highlights the importance of embracing alterity in our understanding and theorizing of organizing. Doing so enables us to anticipate new forms of organizing that challenge our assumptions and offer new possibilities for social change. This requires us to be open to difference and embrace the idea that organizing is a dynamic and ever-evolving process. It also calls on us to seek out groups experimenting with novel organizational arrangements and spend time with them to sensitise to their difference.

The article addressed the question of how alterity claims might help us find signs of organizing, specifically outside formal organizations. It introduced a general scepticism of identity-driven explanations of organization, emphasizing that alterity considers difference as a fundamental aspect of identity and social relations rather than a secondary or marginal feature. This approach, driven by the possibility that surrounds us, recognizes and celebrates difference as essential for human flourishing. Taking a Blochian ontology of *not yet*, alterity becomes necessary for meaningful relationships with others and for creating just and equitable social structures. Alterity claims provide a way to communicate what an organization could become, challenging us to move beyond a fixed idea of organizational identity and renew a focus on the “heterogeneous and open-ended” (Peltonen *et al.*, 2018: xiv) nature of organizing.

In conclusion, organizationality and the incorporation of alterity claims offer a new way of understanding organizing outside formal organizations. Organizing is a powerful and emotional work that is expressed through discourses and practices, and the indivisible nature of the means and ends of organizing is central to AlteritOrg’s organizational setting. Alterity is a state of otherness that enables us to imagine human possibility beyond what characterizes the real, and together, organizing and alterity embrace the possibility of difference in how we organize and what outcomes we achieve. Researchers must therefore look for signs of organizing in different places and in different ways to fully understand the potential of organizing as a heterogeneous and open-ended process.

Alterity is a state of otherness that is opposite, distinct, or inassimilable by the self. Its innate otherness captures the quality of the other that escapes the self's comprehension, resists possession by the self, and refuses to be subsumed into pre-existing categories of knowledge or consciousness. Alterity is not merely the complementary opposite of a total system with the self. In looking for signs of organizing outside formal organizations, researchers need to define the Other more expansively and look for discourses and practices that a hegemonic attachment to identity cannot fully comprehend. Such discourses and practices resist, refuse, and sit uncomfortably with current knowledge and understanding of identity.

In conclusion, organizationality and the incorporation of alterity claims offer a new way of understanding organizing outside formal organizations. Organizing is a powerful and emotional work expressed through discourses and practices, and the indivisible nature of the means and ends of organizing is central to AlteritOrg's organizational setting. Alterity is a state of otherness that enables us to imagine human possibility beyond what characterizes the real. Together, organizationality and alterity embrace possibility and difference, both in how organization is accomplished and what it achieves.

Keywords

organizationality, alterity, community of practice, alternative organizing, Teal organizing

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