Organizing and the construction of alterities

Irene Skovgaard-Smith

University of East Anglia (UEA)

Norwich Business School

irene.smith@uea.ac.uk

Preferred stream: Organizing and social relationships in non-traditional contexts

Organizing and the construction of alterities

Alterity is part of the structure of being-in-the-world – an elementary structure of existence.
(Csordas, 2004: 164)

This paper focuses on the anthropological concept of alterity – a relationship of difference – and how it is constructed in organizations. Organizing can be seen as 'constructing and maintaining identities to facilitate collective action' as Kärreman and Alvesson (2001: 80) proposed and organizational scholars have focused extensively on exploring how 'self-constructions become powerful players in organizing processes and outcomes' (Alvesson et al., 2008: 7). However, identity is relational with respect to various dimensions of alterity (Gingrich, 2004; Hastings and Manning, 2004). There is no 'identity free of alterity' and organizing involves the constant co-presence of alterity (Czarniaswska, 2008: 8). Yet, the construction of alterities as part of organizing has received less attention. The aim of the present paper, therefore, is to advance our understanding of how acts of alterity are intrinsic to organizing, and with what implications.

The human condition of existence is *to be* in relation to others (Csordas, 2004). As De Beauvoir (1949/1997: 17) argued, 'otherness is a fundamental category of human thought'. In the words of Bourdieu (1998: 31), 'individuals and groups exist and subsist in and through *difference*; that is they occupy *relative positions* in a space of relations'. These relative positions are not fixed or given, but socially constituted through processes of differentiation. 'Alterity is every inch a relationship, not a thing in itself' as Taussig (1993: 130) reminds us. Relational alterity construction defines social categories, identities, status positions and roles to accomplish collective activity. At the level of everyday interaction, social actors are reciprocally 'othering' and 'being othered' within the constraints of specific structural contexts, which are simultaneously being constituted through these processes (Skovgaard-Smith et al., 2020). Resources for such 'acts of alterity' include prevailing classification systems and hierarchies along with established discursive repertoires and 'social heteroglossia' of stereotyped, essentialised 'exemplary others' or figures of alterity (Hastings and Manning, 2004: 300-301).

The relational production of difference, division, and separation between categories of persons and groups, and the staging of differences necessary to sustain the drama of alterity, represent a significant social achievement (Goffman, 1961) central to the accomplishment of social order. As differences are maintained over time, they attain an objective quality as social boundaries that separate actors and define 'who's who' to enable interaction and collective activity. Social boundaries form the basis for inequalities, structural disadvantages, barriers and conflicts, but they can also be rich in affordances and opportunities for all manner of social and cultural production, work and enterprise (Barth, 2000). Crossing imagined lines, breaching boundaries, performing attributed difference, encountering the

Other, and 'slipping into Otherness, trying it out for size' (Taussig, 1993: 33) represent a constant field of emerging opportunities. The perceived character and power of an Other, whether feared or revered, can be subsumed and otherness encompassed, imitated, played with and appropriated for all manner of purposes (Taussig, 1993).

The production and maintenance of difference intrinsic to organizing, constitute certain categories of persons as superior or extraordinary. Figures of alterity such as heroic, charismatic leaders (Jones, 2001) or deified consultants (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003) are attributed with extraordinary abilities, special powers or other symbolic significance by virtue of separateness; created as beings 'set apart' endowed with magical powers (Mauss (2001 [1950]: 29). As Bourdieu (1987: 203) argued building on Marcel Mauss, differentiation constitutes the authority of the leader or the expert and make the artist an artist, 'not a craftsman or a Sunday painter'.

At the same time, the production of difference and separation intrinsic to organizing also constitute certain categories of persons and groups as inferior, invisible, delegitimised, degraded, or dehumanised. Spivak (1985) who coined the concept of othering, focused on the processes through which European colonizers created and sustained the colonialized as an inferior Other. Similar processes are demonstrated in studies of societal discrimination, racialization and inequality (Hall and Du Gay, 1996; Schwalbe et al., 2000) and in studies of othering based on gender, age, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation in organizational contexts (e.g. Ainsworth and Hardy, 2007, 2008; Mik- Meyer, 2016; Pullen and Simpson, 2009; Riach, 2007).

Large-scale organizing however produces a much broader range of invisible and dehumanised alterities, from exploited workers in complex supply chains to faceless users and other groups impacted or harmed by organisational activities, products and services. Bureaucratisation and digitisation depersonalise social relations and organising increasingly involves the production of many different categories of persons as faceless numbers divested of humanness and thus unworthy of consideration, such as the victims of damaging financial products ruthlessly exploited for profit (Bandura, 2016).

Organizing involves the continuous construction and maintenance of alterities, ranging from superhuman Others, such as star CEOs and other organisational elites, to inferior, invisible or dehumanised Others, such as people exploited, harmed or otherwise negatively impacted by organisations and their activities. Focusing on organising as alterity construction contributes to illuminating the implications and consequences of organised activity, including rising inequality and other societal harm. It re-emphasizes calls for an ethics of and for the other understood in the Levinasian sense (Rhodes, 2012) as responsibility, care and concern for other people as fellow human beings.

REFERENCES

Ainsworth, S. and Hardy, C. (2007) The construction of the older worker: privilege, paradox and policy. *Discourse & Communication* 1(3): 267-285.

Alvesson, M., Lee Ashcraft, K. and Thomas, R. (2008) Identity Matters: Reflections on the Construction of Identity Scholarship in Organization Studies, *Organization*, 15(1), pp. 5–28.

Bandura, A. (2016). *Moral disengagement: How people do harm and live with themselves*. Worth Publishers.

Barth, F. (2000) Boundaries and connections. In: Cohen A (ed.) *Signifying Identities. Anthropological Perspectives on Boundaries and Contested Values*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1987). The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46, 201–210.

Csordas, T.J. (2004) Asymptote of the Ineffable. Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion. *Current Anthropology*, 45 (2): 163-185.

Czarniawska, B. (2008) Organizing: how to study it and how to write about it. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* 3(1): 4-20.

Czarniawska, B. & Mazza, C. (2003). Consulting as a liminal space. *Human Relations*, 56 (3): 267-290.

De Beauvoir, S. (1949/1997) *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Classics.

Gingrich, A. (2004) Conceptualising Identities: Anthropological Alternatives to Essentialising Difference and Moralizing about Othering, in: Baumann, G. & Gingrich, A. (eds.), *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*. Oxford-New York: Berghahn, 3-17

Hall, S. and Du Gay, P. (1996) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage

Hastings, A. and Manning, P (2004) Introduction: acts of alterity. *Language & Communication*, Vol. 24 (4), 291-311,

Kärreman, D. & Alvesson, M. (2001). Making Newsmakers: Conversational Identity at Work. *Organization Studies*, 22(1), 59-89.

Mauss, M. (2001 [1950]). *A General Theory of Magic*. London: Routledge.

Mik-Meyer, N. (2016) Othering, ableism and disability: A discursive analysis of co-workers' construction of colleagues with visible impairments. *Human Relations* 69(6): 1341-1363.

Pullen, A. and Simpson, R. (2009) Managing difference in feminized work: Men, otherness and social practice. *Human Relations* 62(4): 561-587.

Riach, K (2007) 'Othering' older worker identity in recruitment. *Human Relations* 60(11): 1701-1726.

Rhodes, C. (2012) 'Ethics, alterity and the rationality of leadership justice', *Human Relations*, 65(10), pp. 1311–1331. doi: 10.1177/0018726712448488.

Said, E.W. (1978) *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon.

Schwalbe, M., Holden, D., Schrock, D., Godwin, S., Thompson, S. and Wolkomir, M. (2000) Generic processes in the reproduction of inequality: An interactionist analysis. *Social Forces* 79(2): 419-452.

Skovgaard-Smith, I., Soekijad, M., & Down, S. (2020). The Other side of 'us': Alterity construction and identification work in the context of planned change. *Human Relations* 73(11):1583-1606.

Spivak, G.C. (1985) The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives. *History and Theory* 24(3): 247-272.

Taussig, M. (1993) *Mimesis and Alterity*. New York: Routledge.

Jones, H.B. (2001). Magic, meaning and leadership: Weber's model and the empirical literature. *Human Relations*, 54(6): 753-771.