

Tending to the Particular: Navigating Tensions Around Principles of Alternativity Through an Ethics of Care

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ABSTRACT Alternative organizations must continuously address conflicts that emerge regarding diverging prioritizations and interpretations of autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility. We explore how tensions around alternative moral principles can be navigated through relational processes that attune to others' needs, emotions, and concerns. Building on an organizational ethnography of a cooperative campaign agency, we mobilize ethics of care as a research lens to trace and analyse how relational activities that are infused by an ethical attention to particular others assist the organization in dealing with these tensions. Our findings show that three relational activities – inquiring, deliberating, and responding – constitute a “relational tension-navigation circuit” that enables the alternative organization to evoke, map, and situatively settle tensions around alternative principles by embracing the vulnerability, plurality, and flourishing of others. We contribute to relational, ethical, and processual research in alternative organizing by showing how the particular and the general can be productively enfolded in alternative organizations. Furthermore, we conceptualize a broad, ethically and relationally grounded understanding of revisability that supports alternative organizations in finding targeted adaptations and provisional solutions to address conflicts and tensions.

Keywords: alternative organizing, collectivist-democratic organizations, conflict, ethics of care, process, relationality

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INTRODUCTION

*What do you celebrate?
 What gives you a headache?
 What do you want to let go?
 (ethnographic note)*

Alternative organizations disillusioned by the failures of global neoliberalism strive for a more solidary mode of organizing that moves from ‘I’ to ‘we’ (Huber and Knights, 2022, p. 1137) and fosters self-reliant work that creates ‘pockets of freedom’ (Dahlman et al., 2022, p. 1981) while taking responsibility in the face of striking inequalities, humanitarian catastrophes, and the ongoing climate crisis (Fraser, 2016; Friedrich and Steyaert, 2024; Zanoni et al., 2017). At the same time, the commitment to solidarity, autonomy, and responsibility as guiding moral principles gives rise to frequent tensions and emotionally loaded conflicts within alternative organizations over how to enact and prioritize these principles in everyday organizational life due to diverging perspectives on, for example, how radically these principles should be pursued or how different principles can be reconciled (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Parker et al., 2014; Schiller-Merkens, 2022; Siedlok et al., 2023). Although alternative organizations often draw upon horizontal decision-making procedures, such as democratic consensus (Kokkinidis, 2015; Reedy et al., 2016), open meetings (Bryer, 2020; Daskalaki et al., 2019), or digital forms of collective authoring (Pietinalho and Martela, 2024; Shanahan, 2023), these practices are not always sufficient to address deeply rooted tensions around alternative principles, and they themselves become a point of disagreement over how these principles should be adopted and prioritized (Reedy et al., 2016; Schiller-Merkens, 2022).

Embracing a form of liminality that oscillates between ‘structure and anti-structure’ (Meira, 2014, p. 713), alternative organizations not only rely on more abstract moral principles and democratic procedures but often foster intimate affective bonds (Lüthy, 2024; Resch and Steyaert, 2020) based on friendship (Farias, 2017) and mutuality (Reedy et al., 2016) that pay attention to, honour, and support what Pohler (2024) calls ‘particularity’ – that is, members’ specific, contextual, and personal interests, feelings, struggles, desires, and relations. Some researchers have suggested that maintaining relationships that orient and connect members with others’ particular needs, emotions, aspirations, and concerns is central to coping with the ‘deep tensions’ (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Bryer, 2020, p. 655) that emerge due to different views on how to pursue, interpret, and balance the principles of solidarity, autonomy, and responsibility in alternative organizations and help them to ‘be different together’ (Husted and Just, 2022, p. 1). Nevertheless, we know relatively little about how cultivating such relationships imbued with attention to others’ particularity allows alternative organizations to handle more abstract alternative principles and address their inherently conflictual nature. We therefore ask the following: *How do relational processes that direct attention to the particularity of others enable alternative organizations to handle alternative principles and the tensions around them?*

To answer this puzzle, we mobilize the rich conceptual vocabulary of the ethics of care scholarship as a research lens that enables us to analyse how attending to the particular enables alternative organizations to address tensions around alternative principles. Not only does an ethics of care forcefully critique contemporary capitalism, providing a ‘powerful conceptual vocabulary [...] to theorize alternatives’ (Zanoni, 2021, p. 579), it also problematizes that ‘masculinist’, principle-based moral theories often lose sight of actual relationships and ‘nested dependencies’ (Fotaki et al., 2019; Held, 2007; Kittay, 2011, p. 56). It emphasizes a situated morality that emerges from responsibility to particular others and their concrete and particular needs and vulnerability, enabling them to flourish (Kittay, 1999; Noddings, 2015; Tronto, 1993). An ethics of care invites us to trace how such a situated morality enables alternative organizations to handle the tensions that arise around more abstract alternative principles and underlines that tending to the particularity of others entails both a relational practice and an ethical orientation. Moreover, it directs attention to how communities engage with plurality and power while attending to and negotiating diverse needs, emotions, and concerns that show up in the context of their alternative organizing (Antoni et al., 2020; Held, 2007; Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012; Tronto, 2010).

For our analysis, we draw on an organizational ethnography of a cooperative campaign agency and consultancy dedicated to promoting sustainability transformations and social change through democratic and self-managed work. Deep immersion in the everyday organizing of 30 coworkers allowed us to trace how a commitment to solidarity, autonomy, and responsibility, as alternative principles, surfaced and, at the same time, produced tensions in the alternative organization (Van Maanen, 2011). The fieldwork also alerted us and allowed us to trace the role that ethical attention to the particular needs, concerns, and emotions of others plays in the organization. Enriching our inductive and iterative data analysis and problematization of field notes, interviews, and group discussions with the conceptual sensibilities provided by an ethics of care (Gioia et al., 2013; Grodal et al., 2021), we found that three relational activities – inquiring, deliberating, and responding – allowed the cooperative to embed alternative principles in caring relations and reevaluate and eventually situationally settle tensions around these principles by continuously fostering a collective ethical attentiveness to the vulnerability, plurality, and flourishing of particular others in their everyday organizing.

Building on our findings, we develop a process model that shows how inquiring, deliberating, and responding interconnect, constituting what we call a ‘relational tension-navigation circuit’. In discussing our contributions, we first highlight how the model strengthens and expands our understanding of the importance of close and caring relationships by showing how they are continuously and collectively constituted. Furthermore, we conceptualize how this ‘practical work’ (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Bryer, 2020, p. 657) allows alternative organizations to cope with tensions by enfolding and connecting rather than separating the particular (i.e., personal and affective) and the general (i.e., principles and procedures) (Daskalaki et al., 2019; Pohler, 2024). Second, we discuss how we contribute to an emerging stream of research that emphasizes the role that ethical orientations play in governing alternative

organizations (Huber and Knights, 2022; Jaumier and Daudigeos, 2021) and argue that they enable organizations to make sense of tensions around principles by establishing fragile but collectively embraced ad hoc arrangements and provisional settlements. Third, our findings and model contribute to a more processual view of alternative organizing (Husted et al., 2025) by theorizing how ‘revisability’ (Pietinalho and Martela, 2024; Shanahan, 2023) emerges relationally and through ethical attention to particular others, ensuring that alternative practices and principles do not ‘osify’ (Shanahan, 2023, p. 1662). Eventually, we reflect on the limitations of our study by emphasizing the challenge of scaling the relational tension-navigation circuit to larger alternative organizations (André and Pache, 2016; Noddings, 2015).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Alternative Principles as a Site of Tension: Turning to the Particular

Scholarship has highlighted that alternative organizations come in many forms and sizes. What qualifies them as alternative is that they attempt to organize against the dark consequences of ‘advanced capitalism’ – that is, the tendency to commodify, atomize, and exploit individuals and environments, create inequality, and externalize negative consequences (Parker et al., 2014, p. 3). Parker et al. (2014, p. 18) suggested that alternative organizations are guided by three broad alternative moral principles: ‘autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility’. Autonomy highlights a commitment to ‘liberty, diversity, dignity, and difference’, protecting individuals from doing things they do not agree with. Solidarity, on the other hand, emphasizes cooperation, community, and equality as a duty to others. Eventually, responsibility encompasses embracing sustainability, accountability, and progress to foster livable futures. These principles are usually embodied and materialized in governance structures, such as shared ownership models and cooperative practices, which include assembly-based and consensus-driven decision-making (Kokkinidis, 2015; Pek, 2021; Schiller-Merkens, 2022). However, research has highlighted that alternative organizations are precarious and prone to degeneration because embracing and embodying these alternative moral principles give rise to complex organizational struggles (Shanahan, 2024; Siedlok et al., 2023; Storey et al., 2014).

For one, alternative organizations continuously struggle against being coopted by neoliberal values and hegemonic norms circulating in the economic system in which they are embedded (Bendl et al., 2025; Dahlman et al., 2022; Schiller-Merkens, 2022). Committing to alternative principles plays a vital role in defying hegemonic pressures to succumb to capitalistic values (Soetens and Huybrechts, 2023). At the same time, all alternatives, to some degree, must function within and draw upon resources from market environments (Böhm et al., 2010) and, therefore, need to operate as ‘hybrids’ that balance different goals and institutional logics (Huybrechts et al., 2024; Mair and Rathert, 2021). Competing interpretations of how principles of alternativity should be adopted within alternative organizations can lead to intergroup dynamics and tensions between more idealistic members, who, as a ‘priestly cast’, are committed to realizing cooperative principles, and more pragmatic members, who are less critical and more

focused on securing the resources necessary to pursue the ‘cooperative dream’ (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014, p. 508). Although we know that committing to alternative principles is critical for sustaining alternative organizations, a rigid adoption of these principles and their embodiment in cooperative practices has been shown to threaten to ‘ossify’ alternative organizations, making them less meaningful and effective by crowding out heterogeneity and internal differences (Shanahan, 2023, p. 1662; Soetens and Huybrechts, 2023; Storey et al., 2014).

Struggles and conflicts also surface because there exists an inherent tension between the three moral principles and their prioritization. As Parker et al. (2014, p. 39) pointed out, ‘Too much concern for ourselves ends up as possessive individualism and selfishness; too much direction from others and bending to the collective will is a form of coercion; and too many promises about the ideal future neglect the mucky problems of the present’. In their study of a food retail cooperative, Huber and Knights (2022, p. 1149) argued that a general sense of ethical responsibility allowed members to continuously regulate the tension between being ‘self-determining individuals’ with a sense of choice and free will and their responsibility towards the community, mutually reinforcing both. However, studies have also underpinned that, in reality, this harmonious coproduction of different alternative principles is far from easy to achieve and can fuel organizational conflicts (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014). For example, Pohler’s (2024) study of two collectivist-democratic firms showed that such a conflict arose after a coworker who was supported in working remotely for private reasons started becoming less available, which was seen as a misprioritization of autonomy over equality and solidarity. Reedy et al.’s (2016) study of an alternative group finds that cooperative practices such as consensus-oriented meeting formats can also cause frustrations and tensions around principles. Not only did members have different views of how efficient or egalitarian these formats were, they also problematized how meeting procedures tended to prioritize either their autonomy or their solidarity with a joint goal. The need to meaningfully coproduce and, at the same time, balance tensions between different interpretations and prioritizations of alternativity principles presents a core challenge for alternative organizations (Kokkinidis, 2015; Parker et al., 2014).

Research has indicated that relational processes that attune members to the ‘particularity’ of others (i.e., their specific, situative, and often differing interests, needs, and concerns) (Pohler, 2024) can play an essential role in addressing this challenge. Scholars exploring alternative organizing on the ground have long observed that close and reciprocal relationships (Farias, 2017; Parker et al., 2007; Pohler, 2024; Reedy et al., 2016) and processes that maintain these relationships are central features of day-to-day practices in alternative organizations (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Bryer, 2020; Resch and Steyaert, 2020). Such relationships not only help members to informally trade knowledge, skills, favours, and resources outside of the confines of the capitalistic system (Reedy et al., 2016) but also allow them to appreciate particular interests, modes of expression, struggles, and concerns that are regularly excluded from organizational action and resource allocation (Bryer, 2020; Farias, 2017).

However, relational attention and care for the particularity of others are often framed as a realm that is separate from, and sometimes even opposed to, alternative organizations’ commitment to solidarity, autonomy, and responsibility as broader

principles and common goods (Daskalaki et al., 2019; Pohler, 2024). Nevertheless, several scholars have observed that fostering and maintaining close connections that engage with others' particularity seem to play an essential role in coping with and diffusing tensions over how to interpret and adopt alternative principles (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Kokkinidis, 2015; Parker et al., 2014), enabling organizations to be 'different together' by remaining open to a heterogeneity of perspectives, and interests (Husted and Just, 2022, p. 1). For example, Ashforth and Reingen (2014, p. 497) showed that recurring 'soothing rituals', in which strained relationships are repaired, help absorb conflicts over how to interpret and adopt alternative principles. Similarly, members of the Greek grassroots exchange networks studied by Daskalaki et al. (2019, p. 1754) noted that building informal and affective relational ties in which people knew each other helped 'bridge' conflicts and 'recontextualize individual differences' over which alternative values should be mobilized. Bryer (2020, p. 655), studying how belonging was fostered in the budgeting process of a cooperative bookshop, surmises that by creating an active orientation towards including and validating particular concerns, needs, and interests in the organization, ongoing 'empathetic', 'sensitive', and 'critical' work can support alternative organizations in dealing with 'deep tensions' around principles. This suggests that a concern for the particularity of others does not necessarily complicate but rather enables dealing with conflicting interpretations over the right way to adopt broader moral principles. However, it is not well understood how relational processes that direct attention to the particularity of others enable alternative organizations to handle tensions around different principles of alternativity.

Tending to the Particular Through an Ethics of Care

To explore how attentiveness to the particularity of others can help handle tensions around different alternative principles, we mobilize the conceptual sensibilities of the ethics of care as a research lens. In recent years, there has been growing interest in the ethics of care in management and organization studies (André and Pache, 2016; Fotaki, 2023; Gittell and Douglass, 2012; Johansson and Wickström, 2022; Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012). This is partly due to the fact that an ethics of care carries an explicit critique of capitalist forms of organizing and their systematic suppression and exclusion of meaningful ways of being and relating, to the detriment of our individual and collective flourishing (Ashcraft, 2001; Benschop, 2021). For example, care scholars problematize the tendency of traditional organizations to foster transactional rather than reciprocal relationships and to externalize or decouple themselves from the effects they have on the (future) well-being of others (Gittell and Douglass, 2012; Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012). While care scholarship has been pursued in the field of feminist economics to criticize the 'invisibilization' and non-payment of care work (Folbre, 1994; Nelson, 1995) and care is vigorously discussed by political and cultural theorists as a pressing public and political concern and 'highest social goal' (de la Bellacasa, 2017; Engster and Hamington, 2015; Tronto, 1993, p. 175, 2013), we build here on the interrelated ethical strand of care scholarship.

The core ideas of an ethics of care were first articulated in the early 1980s. Researching mother-child relationships, scholars such as Gilligan (1982) and Ruddick (1980)

questioned dominant ‘male’ moral theories that construct morality around abstract, universal principles, such as freedom or justice, by highlighting a different female morality that emerges from the immediate and situative responsibility for others. Scholars have since degendered the ethics of care, arguing that it is a feminist rather than a female morality (Löffler and Greitemeyer, 2023; Walker, 1984). Building on a relational ontology, this feminist morality emphasizes that caring for the needs, interests, and concerns of particular others to whom we are connected is necessary not only because others depend on this support but also because we depend on them (Fotaki, 2023), as we are all (often accidentally) embedded in networks of relations that sustain and protect us (Kittay, 2011). Scholars have emphasized that this morality exceeds the familial sphere and includes ‘caring about’ and being in responsible and responsive relationships with more ‘distant others’ (Noddings, 2015, p. 78). Looking at ‘care-ful’ work in the creative sector through the lens of an ethics of care, Alacovska and Bissonette (2021), building on the work of Lynch (2007), showed that creative workers orient care towards the three circles of relationality, attentiveness, and responsibility for the well-being of others: towards relations of intimacy, which typically include family members; towards relations of mutuality, which include friends, neighbours, or colleagues; and towards the relations of solidarity that involve a commitment to care for public goods, national cultures, or the natural environment.

In the ethics of care, relational activity and ethical attentiveness towards particular others are always intertwined (Tronto, 1993). In practice, this entails becoming attentive to and tending to others’ particular needs, feelings, and concerns with a caring and compassionate attitude. Care theorists highlight that particular needs should not be assumed but relationships fostered, in which needs, interests, and vulnerabilities can be openly ‘expressed’, allowing for recognition and flourishing (Noddings, 2015, p. 74). Moreover, the activity of tending to others’ needs should be evaluated with respect to its effects on the complex web of relations of care in which both the carer and the cared-for are embedded. Instead of assuming that there are generally superior moral judgments based on moral principles such as autonomy, solidarity, or responsibility that transcend different viewpoints, an ethics of care stresses ‘sensitivity to the multiple relevant considerations in particular contexts’ and values narrative appreciation, emotions, and feelings to cultivate moral understandings and actions in concrete situations and relationships (Held, 2009, p. 552).

Care theorists have highlighted that ethical attentiveness and responsibility for the needs and concerns of particular others entail organizational and institutionalized arrangements that acknowledge vulnerability, plurality, conflict, and power (Antoni et al., 2020; Tronto, 2010). For example, Tronto (2010, p. 169) called for organizational ‘conflict resolution mechanisms’ that are sensitive to power asymmetries that, for instance, allow all ‘parties [to] suggest revisions in the mutual understanding of needs’ (Noddings, 2015, p. 77). Unsurprisingly, participative and democratic arrangements that create flatter hierarchies and strive for egalitarian dialogue are seen as especially conducive to collaboratively tending to particular others (Tronto, 2010). Despite remaining sceptical of universal rules or abstract principles that impartially act on behalf of ‘all others or humanity in general’ (Held, 2007, p. 12), ethics of care theorists do not naively reject considerations of fairness and justice. However, procedures of justice should, if

necessary, ‘arise from within the practice of care itself’ (Bubeck, 1995, p. 206) and be restricted to specific ‘domains’ (Held, 2007, p. 87).

Introducing an ethics of care as a lens to research alternative organizing allows us to deconstruct the common idea and ‘illusion’ that morality exists primarily as a universal good and institutionalized principle that can transcend conflicts between independent and ultimately self-interested individuals. An ethics of care emphasizes and understands relationality, vulnerability, and interdependence as foundational to developing moral claims in organizations. Cultivating ethical attention to people’s particular emotions, interests, needs, and private circumstances, rather than impeding efficient functioning and moral reasoning in alternative organizations, is understood as an important resource for developing context-sensitive moral arrangements that recognize power and plurality. An ethics of care thus sensitizes us to the often ‘overlooked’ personal and relational space in alternative organizations that embeds conflicts around broader moral principles and facilitates their situative embodiment and prioritization. Moreover, it attunes us to the potential of surfacing and negotiating these conflicts in and through caring relationships between particular others (Held, 2007, p. 12).

Research has shown that an ethical concern for the vulnerability, well-being, and flourishing of particular others weaves through alternative organizations (Pohler, 2024) that seek to create more space to care for close others but also extend care and compassion towards stakeholders, collaborators, and beneficiaries (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2021; André and Pache, 2016). Building on research indicating the importance of close and caring relationships (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Bryer, 2020; Daskalaki et al., 2019), we argue that an ethics of care allows us to trace in greater depth how alternative organizations address tensions over how to embody and prioritize principles of alterity through relational processes that bring ethical attention to the particularity of others.

METHODS AND DATA

Research Context

To study how ethical attentiveness to the particular allows alternative organizations to address and deal with tensions around alternative principles, we drew on an organizational ethnography of a small workers’ cooperative based in a major European city. The research context was particularly fitting for our study since this cooperative has a strong commitment to ‘solidarity, autonomy, and responsibility’ (Parker et al., 2014) as alternative principles, and our fieldwork highlighted that everyday organizing in the cooperative is imbued with a deep interest in including the particular needs, concerns, and emotions of coworkers and partners and supporting their well-being.

The cooperative, referred to as CREACOOOP, sees itself as a ‘campaign agency, design studio, and organizational consultancy for the common good’ and a ‘laboratory’ for just, equitable, and democratic work within the organization. The 30-member consultancy was founded as a limited company by two entrepreneurs in 2009. In 2016, the employees and founders decided to adopt a cooperative ownership structure with annual elections of

management and supervisory boards and a high degree of democratic governance, flat hierarchies, and self-management. Embracing the alternative principle of responsibility, CREACOOOP works with customers to serve the socioecological transformation of society by designing complex communication campaigns and facilitating organizational development and change through, for instance, open strategy processes for green, humanitarian, and social and public organizations, such as the WWF, political parties, ministries, NGOs, and social enterprises. At the same time, the members see the cooperative as an organizational space that demonstrates that alternative ways of working and doing business, with an emphasis on autonomy and solidarity, are possible and viable. Most members work part-time and freely decide on which projects they work. Hybrid meetings and work formats are the norm, enabling people to work partly from the central office and from other locations. Every four months, the entire co-op meets offline for four days to discuss issues of strategic importance and to foster personal bonds. Egalitarian decision-making, needs-oriented salaries, and collective support and flexibility for health issues or personal care duties are integral to the cooperative's collaborative organizing.

Ethnography for Theorizing the Particular in Alternative Organizing

Two years of ethnographic fieldwork encompassing 26 work weeks of ethnographic involvement enabled the first author to 'be there' and observe how tensions surrounding different alternative principles surfaced and were addressed by engaging in 'the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others' (Van Maanen, 2011, p. xiii). Participating in an embodied way in the organizational processes also allowed the first author to experience and observe the relational processes, emotions, interdependencies, and responsibilities for particular others that are at the heart of an ethics of care (Ortiz Casillas, 2021). Building on the rich dataset from this fieldwork, we engaged in an inductive, emergent process of theory building (Gioia et al., 2013) through a reflexive and transparent mode of theorizing driven by an ongoing process of problematization (Ciuk et al., 2017). We purposefully integrated different types of ethnographic data, including observation, interviews, and group discussions (see Table I) (Van Maanen, 2011), in our ongoing 'categorization processes' throughout the analysis (Grodal et al., 2021). Below, we describe the different types of data we collected. In the subsequent section, we elaborate on the 'multiple [analytical] moves' (Gioia et al., 2013; Grodal et al., 2021, p. 591) that we engaged in our inductive process of theorizing.

Ethnographic observation. The first author negotiated entering CREACOOOP as an intern for the first 3 months. During three subsequent shorter ethnographic stays, his position shifted more towards observation (see Figure 1). As an intern, the first author supported one comprehensive campaign for a national ministry that aimed to inform and support survivors of child abuse and their relatives. Small desk research tasks, proofreading documents, and presentations were delegated to him, and he participated in brainstorming and ideation sessions for ongoing projects. In addition to hands-on project work, as an intern and later as an observer, he participated in different meeting formats and informal social events that characterized and structured the organizational processes in the cooperative, such as daily and monthly assemblies, project work, meetings of the self-organized subgroups

Table I. Overview of the data sources

<i>Data source</i>	<i>Data structure</i>	<i>Data content</i>
Ethnographic observations (eth)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twenty-six weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in the main office stretched over a period of 24 months. • A total of 480 pages of field notes in an ethnographic diary taken during the internship and observation periods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine-grained understanding of the processes, tools, and practices that constitute everyday work in the organization. • Embodied experience of the tensions, conflicts, and relational dynamics that surface in alternative organizing.
Interviews (int)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thirty-four narrative interviews with coworkers from all self-managed subgroups as well as the management board, the supervisory board, and two former coworkers. • A total of 2409 minutes (each interview lasting between 24 and 97 minute). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contrasting experiences and opinions on the challenges and rewards of alternative organizing. • Reflections on everyday processes and incidents in the cooperative.
Group discussions (gd)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seven group discussions with 3–7 members from different self-managed subgroups of the organization, including strategy, design, and HR. • A total of 270 minutes of recordings (each recording lasting between 12 and 54 minute). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse perspectives revealed in concrete discussions on different organizational topics as they unfold in everyday organizing. • Collective reflections on complex organizational issues.

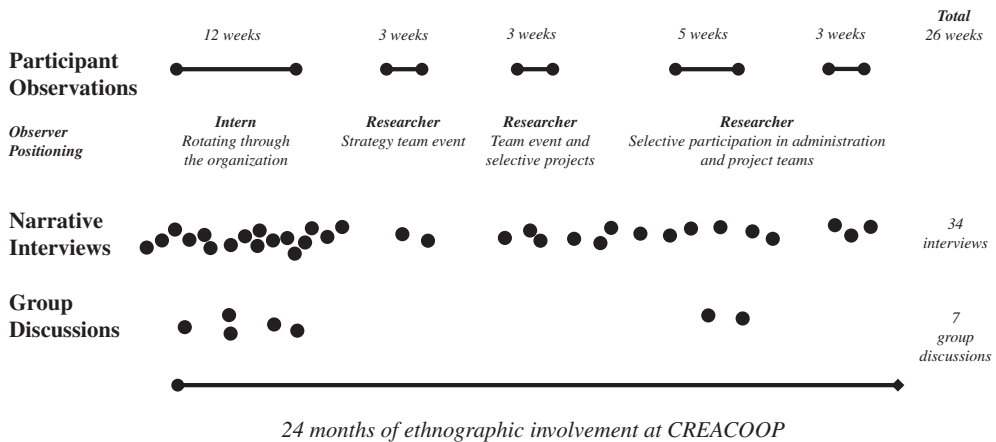


Figure 1. Overview of the data collection

concerning finance, communication, and organizational development, and the supervisory and management board, as well as informal gatherings and cultural events.

Upon entering CREACOOP, it became apparent that relational processes were critical to understanding and participating in the cooperative's organizational processes. One

coworker was worried that the presence of a researcher would interrupt the intimate and personal mode of communication that characterized work at CREACOOOP. Through a slow process of trust building, the first author succeeded in gaining deep access to the organization, allowing him to conduct several rounds of fieldwork and observe the tensions, conflicts, and intimate relationality that are part of the alternative organizing at CREACOOOP. This embodied participation also attuned him to how ethical relationality weaved through everyday organizing, such as when he was sent home after expressing being tired and feeling off ('If you don't feel well, take a break and go home') or when he offered support to a person who had experienced a breakdown (Ortiz Casillas, 2021). Although his presence as a researcher initially created a sense of being observed among the coworkers, this effect was mitigated over time as he became an integral, cared-for part of the community. The lived experience of participating in everyday organizational activities proved central to understanding how relational and ethical attention to the particular manifests in and affects organizational processes (Ortiz Casillas, 2021).

Observations and experiences in the field were recorded by capturing the unfolding everyday organizing in an ethnographic field diary (Czarniawska, 2014), which the first author had with him at all times. As an intern, he took field notes by taking quick breaks from his tasks or when his participation was more passive, such as when he was listening to others in meetings. During subsequent visits as a researcher, he was able to take ongoing notes on the organizational processes and interactions taking place around him. In both cases, he established time regularly after work to reconstruct observations of the day and to make more general reflections (Corlett and Mavin, 2018). In his field notes, he focused on how people interacted; the bodily and emotional relations that unfolded between them and oriented their actions; the kinds of processes, formats, and tools with which they organized; and the kinds of tensions, debates, and conflicts that surfaced. While the ethnography was conducted by the first author, returning back into the academic environment allowed for joint reflections with 'critical friends', such as the second author, to develop the necessary analytic distance from the field experience through a 'collective reflexive' approach to ethnography (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015).

Interviews. To gain additional insights into how members experience the cooperative, 34 open-ended narrative interviews were conducted (Czarniawska, 2002). In these interviews, members of CREACOOOP were invited to reflect narratively on the motivations and aspirations that drew them to work in this cooperative and the struggles and tensions they experienced and associated with alternative organizing. Moreover, the interviews were used to trigger more profound reflections and access different experiences and opinions regarding the ongoing organizational activities and events he observed in the fieldwork. The 34 interviews included a large number of current and some former members of CREACOOOP who worked in different areas of the organization, such as organizational development, strategy, design, texting, and HR. Penelope and Olivia, as important contact persons, were interviewed three and two times, respectively. All interviews were arranged upon request and took place during work hours. One-third of the interviews took place on the organization's premises, and two-thirds were conducted via Zoom.

Group discussions. During the fieldwork, the first author facilitated and recorded a series of seven focus group-like discussions around lunchtime in CREACOOOP's central office, where a rotating group of 8–10 people worked (Hennink, 2013). The group discussions provided a dialogic and dynamic setting to explore key processes and contested aspects characterizing CREACOOOP as an alternative organization. For example, to surface different narratives, conflicting points of view, and experiences, members of the organization were asked how they perceived the discussions and decision-making processes regarding different customers, how they thought that remote work affected the organization, and whether they saw their work as a form of activism. The group discussions were conducted over lunch in the well-frequented kitchen amenities of the cooperative and consisted of groups of 3–7 people from different areas of the organization, including strategy, design, and HR. After obtaining consent to record the conversation, the first author started each group discussion with an initial question, from which the conversation evolved organically between the different participants.

Data Analysis

Following an inductive 'logic of discovery rather than only a logic of validation' (Van Maanen et al., 2007, p. 1146), we developed our research through an iterative process of interpreting and categorizing the data along three analytical phases (Grodal et al., 2021). In the final two phases, iterating between emergent data categories and theory, we relied on ethics of care as a conceptual lens that informed the creation of second-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013).

The first author started the research with a 'pre-understanding' (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2022) that alternative organizations are 'real utopias' (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2022) that contribute to the socioecological transformation of society, with the aim of understanding what challenges they face. After 3 months of fieldwork, the first author discussed his initial impressions with the second author by mapping the recurrent organizational dynamics on a poster. This preliminary mapping of the data drew our attention to two especially salient categories of CREACOOOP's organizing. On the one hand, it was notable that the cooperative continuously handled tensions around and between different alternative principles. For example, we noted that the organization had to integrate and, at the same time, tried to stay open to conflicting understandings of how to conduct responsible business. We also observed that it had to navigate tensions between emphasizing members' autonomy in choosing what projects they worked on and how much they earned and promoting solidarity by ensuring that members filled in and offered support 'when others [were] ill' or needed help. On the other hand, we noticed that the organization cultivated relational interactions that gave space and highlighted the particularity of others and their struggles, concerns, emotions, and needs. For instance, this happened in daily 'check-ins', in which members shared how they felt and how others could support them, or when they discussed controversial clients, set their wages, or expressed different hopes for the future of the cooperative in 'joint strategy days'. This sharing of feelings, concerns, and struggles appeared to continuously feed into alternative organizing, shaping decisions, and triggering ad hoc support and longer-term adaptations in the organization.

Intrigued, we decided to explore these relational interactions and how they affected the organization in more depth. In a second analytical step, the first author wrote five extensive vignettes that condensed ethnographic observations and excerpts from the interviews and group discussions into descriptions of organizational processes and situations in which this relational engagement with the particularity of others was salient. These included descriptions of processes such as ‘negotiating the cooperative’s mission’, the ‘wish income’, and the ‘need-oriented coordination of work’. Jointly reading and interpreting the vignettes, we found that these relational interactions were infused with an ethical consideration of others’ needs, concerns, and vulnerabilities. Additionally, we saw a willingness to carefully negotiate and respond to these particularities to support each other and keep the cooperative’s organizing vibrant and meaningful. To strengthen our understanding and interpretation of these relational interactions, we started to read ethics of care theorists, such as Tronto (1993, 2010), Held (2007, 2009), and Fotaki et al. (2019). Ethics of care, as a research lens, helped us analyse the relationship between commitment to alternative principles and attention to particular needs, emotions, and concerns in the everyday organizing of CREACOOOP. The conceptual sensitivities of the lens encouraged us to focus our analysis on different *relational activities* that surface, negotiate, and respond to particular needs, emotions, and concerns while addressing tensions around and between alternative principles. Moreover, the lens emphasized the importance of *ethical attention* to fragility and dependence, heterogeneity as well as well-being, and growth in these relational activities, such as when members encouraged and cherished different points of view or were willing to accommodate struggling coworkers, even if this inconvenienced them and disrupted work routines (Ruddick, 1980; Tronto, 2010). In the subsequent fieldwork, close regard was given to these relational activities and how they were experienced by the cooperative members.

After finishing the ethnographic fieldwork, we systematically coded all of our ethnographic data. Mobilizing our ethics of care lens, we identified three interconnected relational activities that engaged with the particularity of others and showed up across various organizational processes in the cooperative: (1) ‘inquiring’, which invited others to sense and reveal particular needs, concerns, and emotions; (2) ‘deliberating’, whereby these needs were collectively discussed and negotiated; and (3) responding, which entailed answering and providing support for these particular needs, emotions, and concerns. Moreover, we found that each relational activity was underpinned and assisted in collectively actualizing ethical attention towards particular others. For example, inquiring helped in surfacing and, at the same time, welcoming and feeling connected to others’ vulnerability when members shared that they had health issues, were struggling economically, or were distraught at working on certain projects. In a second, more targeted analytic step, we returned to our data and specifically inquired about how the three relational activities enabled the cooperative to deal with tensions around different alternative principles. We found that the three relational activities enabled the cooperative to (a) evoke and embed these principles, (b) map and reevaluate tensions, and, eventually, (c) situatively and contextually settle them (see Figure 2). In the findings, we first analyse these three relational activities separately focusing on incidences that are particularly illustrative

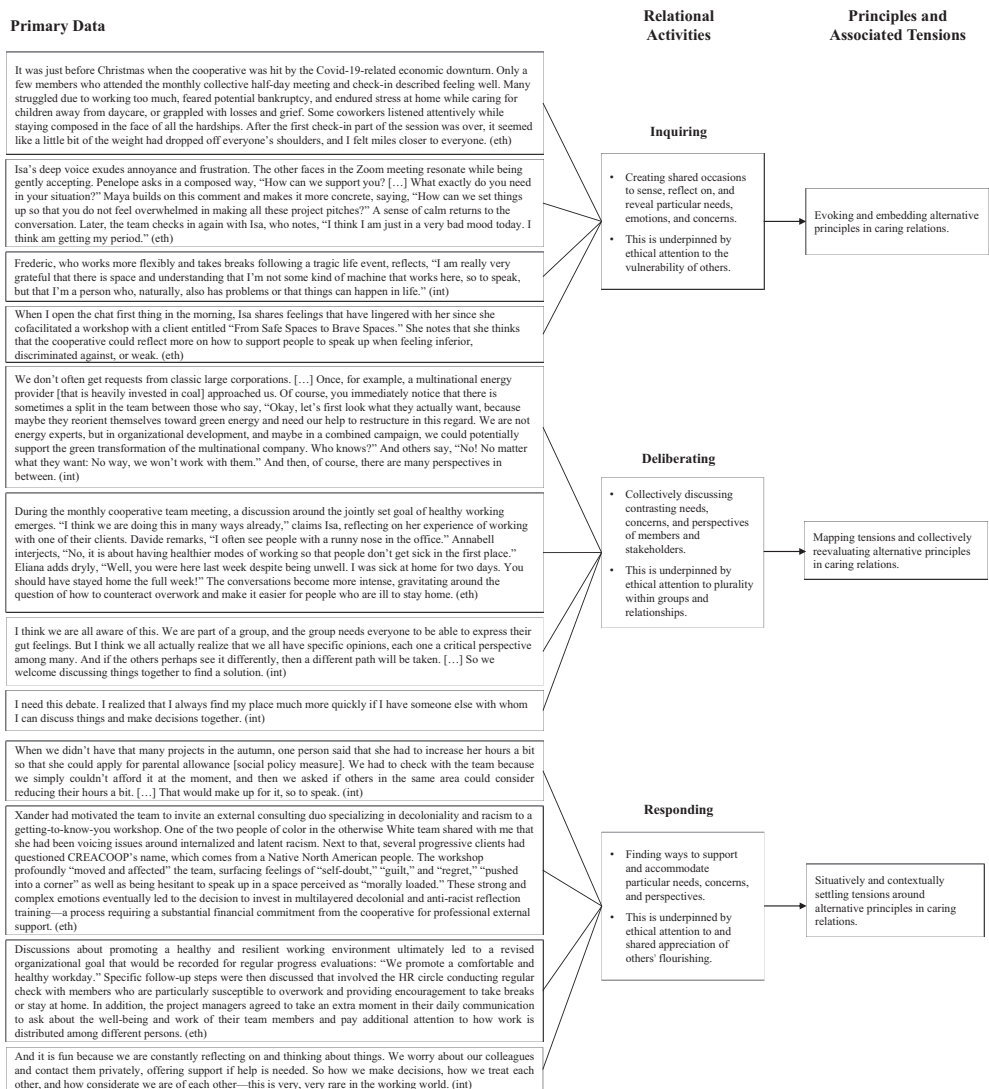


Figure 2. Data structure: handling principles through a focus on the particular

of the cooperative's organizing. We then abstract from the findings with the help of care scholarship and develop a process model that highlights the interconnection between the three relational activities.

FINDINGS

The key findings revolve around three relational activities and how they enable an alternative organization to deal with tensions surrounding alternative principles by fostering ethical attention to particular needs, concerns, and emotions. While the analysis traces these relational activities first separately and in distinct situations, they are often closely

linked in everyday organizing, which we conceptualize in the last section by proposing a ‘relational tension-navigation-circuit’ as a process model.

Inquiring: Embedding Principles by Welcoming Vulnerability

In Tuesday’s project meeting, a first big brainstorming session is being held with strategists, designers, and the project manager to develop a nationwide communication campaign against child abuse. While Xander and Maria are already discussing the first strategic ideas, Isaak, the project manager, interjects, ‘Let’s still start this meeting with a check-in’. He reminds everyone that work teams are not fixed and not everybody needs to participate due to the sensitive topic. The mood shifts as Diane shares that she couldn’t sleep last night until 2:30 a.m. Others join in and share painful reflections about the documentary on child abuse that most watched the previous evening together, feeling both overwhelmed and a sense of urgency. For Xander, these emotions create motivation to craft a well-working campaign: ‘I was not aware that most child abuse happens in the immediate family context. Our campaign should respond to that’. Sterre speaks, tears rolling, her voice breaking: ‘I cannot even say something about the topic right now. [...] I feel paralyzed’. Isaak asks intently whether the group should take a 15-minute break, while other members inquire whether Sterre needs a hug. (eth)

In this vignette, we see a check-in ritual typical of CREACOOOP’s organizing in which members are given space to talk about their feelings and reflect on organizational, professional, and personal issues. Such check-in rituals could be observed in different variations, such as the daily online check-in that invites all members to share how they have started the day, project meetings that include smaller teams, workshops with external clients, and weekly management meetings. Moderated spaces with open questions and attention to specific concerns and experiences were also essential elements of the strategy retreats that take place three times a year for all coworkers, including those who often work remotely (eth). In our interpretation, these check-ins organized *inquiring* as a relational activity that gives space and draws attention to the particularity of others in cooperative organizing by staging sometimes shorter, sometimes more extensive moments of asking, sharing, and listening to how others are and what concerns they have. In the vignette above, inquiring was initiated through an open question by Isaak asking, ‘How are you arriving at the meeting today?’ The organization used and experimented with different and sometimes more structured formats to facilitate inquiring, such as members meeting for a ‘stand-up’ before lunch and being asked to share professional or personal ‘highlights and lowlights of the week’ or reflecting on ‘how they feel on a scale from 0 to 10’ (eth).

We found that the relational activity of *inquiring* fostered occasions to sense, reflect on, and reveal particular needs, emotions, and concerns in everyday organizational life. In the project check-in in the vignette, members of CREACOOOP revealed feelings and thoughts that the campaign work on child abuse stirred up by sharing feelings of being overwhelmed and having a sense of urgency to work on the topic. Inquiring surfaced emotions, needs, and concerns related to specific project work, such as Beatrice voicing that she needed support with her tasks because she was unwell or Eliana reflecting on her concerns about taking on a project related to traumatized female soldiers. It also invited members to reveal aspects of

their private lives that currently affected them, such as struggling with caring duties at home or feeling shaken by personal events during a hybrid pre-lunch check-in (eth). Moreover, the process of inquiring revealed needs and concerns related to rules and procedures in the cooperative, such as Diane, a young strategist, voicing in a check-in at the team event that she struggled with her workload because she catered to fathers who were absorbed by care activities while caring for an ill sibling and wanted clearer rules regarding this (eth). Inquiring created what Penelope, an experienced member, called a sense of ‘what individual differences we have and what different needs we have’ and encouraged colleagues to attune to their needs, feelings, and struggles in the first place (int). Maya, a longstanding project manager, stressed that these check-ins helped to ‘really reconnect with the team, listen to each other, and somehow understand where people are in their lives [and] how they are’ (int). This interest in connecting with others’ particular feelings, needs, and concerns was also extended to CREACOOOP’s customers, such as during an organizational development seminar with a large facility for people with disabilities when Olivia facilitated moments of attentive inquiring and listening to unpack their clients’ needs, concerns, and emotions in the process (eth).

Inquiring, as a relational activity that gives space to complex and at times unsettling or inconvenient emotions, concerns, and perspectives, was underpinned by ethical attention to the vulnerability of particular others (i.e., their fragility and dependence on being seen and supported), be they cooperative members or more distant others. Frederic, a social media manager, reflected in an interview that ‘in the last agency I worked at, it was kind of like that you need to function. So, if you can’t work, you just have to call in sick. But you can’t say, ‘I’m on my period; I’m only doing 50 per cent today.’ [...] I like the understanding that we are humans at work who sometimes do better and sometimes do worse. Here, we take this into account’. Ethical attention to vulnerability in CREACOOOP was also observed, when in check-ins people shared that they felt the ground had been pulled out from under their feet after a close friend was diagnosed with cancer, they disclosed pain and rage regarding the invasion of Ukraine, or when Isaak asked Anton for help because he was ‘a gem’ at campaign slogans (eth). In the vignette, through inquiring, attention was drawn to the vulnerability of the members who had become fragile and affected by the emotionally challenging topic (eth). At the same time, the emotions that surfaced through inquiring also emphasized the vulnerability of those afflicted by child abuse and triggered members to feel responsible for how their campaign affected victims: ‘It could be that this poster ends up with some person and in the end a case is reported because of it. [...] I don’t just see, okay, we’ve put a campaign on the street, and it’s great, and it looks good’ (int, Diane, strategist).

Through *inquiring*, alternative principles, such as autonomy, responsibility, or solidarity, were evoked and embedded in everyday cooperative life, appearing not as abstract or universal claims but in relation to caring for particular and vulnerable others. For example, in the vignette, Isaak’s check-in facilitation emphasized and gave space to particular needs and emotions that might affect how members want to participate in the child abuse campaign. Therefore, inquiring evoked and embedded the importance of protecting others’ ‘autonomy’ – that is, members’ ability to engage in work according to their own values, needs, and capacities in a way that supports their dignity and individuality. This was exemplified in other check-ins, in which members

shared how care duties at home affected their energy to work or reflected on how their side-engagement in political activism provided them with hope (eth). At the same time, inquiring evoked the principle of ‘solidarity’ by showing collective support and a shared duty to respect and engage with the needs, emotions, and concerns present within the community. This is exemplified in the check-in in the vignette, when Isaak inquired whether an unplanned 15-minute break should be taken to accommodate Sterre’s overwhelming feelings or when others wanted to know whether she needs additional support. Similarly, inquiring evoked solidarity when Isa, a young project manager, was asked, ‘Isn’t what you do very challenging and simply too much?’ This motivated her to ‘learn saying no’ while letting others fill in (int). Eventually, inquiring evoked and embedded the principle of responsibility by giving space and importance to members’ moral emotions and concerns. In the vignette, this becomes palpable in moments where Xander and others shared a sense of motivation and urgency to address child abuse as a pressing societal issue. It was also tangible when members expressed joy and relief that the Green Party had won elections in one of the states and shared their excitement and moral emotion in realizing that ‘we really did a good job’ after seeing their campaign against poverty on a billboard on the way to work that day (eth).

We see that inquiring embedded all three principles in cooperative organizing and made them matter through a shared attention to particular needs, concerns, and emotions underpinned by a care for oneself, others, and the world at large. However, members noted that inquiring could sometimes feel intrusive and overwhelming (eth). Sophia, a former supervisory board member, reflected, ‘After all, we all like each other, and everyone wants to know how you’re doing and everything. And it’s incredibly exhausting. It’s such a love–hate thing’. As a consequence, CREACOOB started to emphasize that nobody was obligated to come to the daily check-ins or even team trips and that they could ‘withdraw from a session’ or ‘just listen’ on any occasion (eth). Moreover, if a member suffered from a severe crisis, the cooperative pointed them to a cofinanced coaching program or helped them find adequate medical or psychotherapeutic support so as not to overburden the collective with the intensity of these needs, feelings, or concerns: ‘If it is a personal trauma, we can’t handle it at work’ (gd). Eventually, members found that inquiring was necessary, enabling them to ‘develop a better feeling for each other’ and ‘feel closer and more connected somehow’ (int, Maya, project manager) in the organization’s everyday life, even if they admitted that it could take time to find the right balance between participating and maintaining personal boundaries.

Deliberating: Mapping and Reevaluating Principles while Appreciating Plurality

Opening CREACOOB’s online platform, a job request regarding a social media strategy for a big foreign embassy has triggered a lively discussion. Texter Jan and strategist Xander, who spoke with the client, find the job promising. Chiara communicates strong doubts because the history of the [country’s] foreign policy, in her eyes, involved illegitimate warfare. Taking on a new customer is an intricate process in the

cooperative that entails negotiating whether the client fits the cooperative's mission, the liberty of members to decide what projects they work on, and their tight schedules, which are tracked by an online tool to ensure that no one is overworked. Later that day, the prelunch get-together returns to the topic, and the conversation becomes increasingly heated. Eventually, it is decided that an open meeting will be held to facilitate a more extensive discussion. In the open meeting, Jan and Xander point to the ambassador's previous projects on democracy and antisemitism, while Chiara shares a personal story about a relative who died in the war and is concerned about offending other, progressive clients. Penelope argues that the project, in her view, just does not have enough socioecological impact. (eth)

In this process of conferring about a client, we see a second relational activity central to the organizing of the cooperative that we identified as *deliberating*. Deliberating entails collectively discussing and carefully negotiating members' and other stakeholders' contrasting needs, concerns, and perspectives. The vignette shows how the relational activity spanned across organizational spaces and over time. Deliberation emerged organically on the online platform, which all members could access and used regularly to check in with each other and discuss their thoughts, feelings, and concerns. It could also carry on or be triggered at the organization-wide daily prelunch get-together, at which concerns, challenges, and organizational issues explored through *inquiring* developed into lively and controversial discussions. Eventually, space and time for deliberating were intentionally created in meetings that further explored issues with those who were particularly invested or in regular management board and subgroup meetings as well as at joint retreats. Here, all members took time to not only *inquire* about but also *deliberate* regarding worries, needs, and difficulties related to their daily design, campaign, and copyright work as well as broader organizational processes, such as how personal development and training, political engagements, or parental leave were organized, as well as strategic questions regarding the future orientation of CREACOOOP (eth).

We see that *deliberating*, as a relational activity, allowed the organization to bring diverse concerns, emotions, and needs into a shared conversation, exploring and negotiating them in dialogue. In the job request situation described in the vignette, Chiara was initially the only person who objected to working for the client. In an interview, she reflected, 'I really had the impression that if we take the customer, we are changing something fundamental in the cooperative, [...] something I really, really appreciate'. The process of deliberating over time transformed the collective assessment of the client within the organization (eth). Xander, for example, changed his stance after hearing different perspectives and concerns and started aligning himself with Chiara and Penelope. Jan stayed ambivalent. Although he would have liked to have worked with the client, he eventually did not veto the decision to decline the request (eth). Members collectively embraced that their firm's purpose was 'fuzzy' and remained 'open to interpretation' (int, Annabelle, project manager). Leon, one of the longstanding coworkers, noted that the cooperative had considered setting up a checklist or 'catalog of principles' for such decisions but rejected the idea. He highlighted what was observable time and again in CREACOOOP: that concrete reality around organizational and societal problems was perceived as too complex for such approaches, requiring 'case-to-case decisions'

whereby different feelings, perspectives, and concerns were taken into consideration (int). Deliberations were not only triggered regarding what clients to accept but also regarding strategic questions, such as whether the cooperative should move more towards democratic leadership consulting or focus on communication agency work, or regarding operational questions, such as how to redistribute work to support a struggling coworker, how to make the wage-setting process fairer, or whether to approach potential clients through personal 'love letters' (eth). Consequently, deliberating 'again and again negotiates the concrete nuances' of how CREACOOOP organized and allowed cooperative members to contribute their 'individual sensitivities, which are heard and flow into processes', as the strategist and advisory board member Penelope noted.

Deliberating was underpinned by ethical attention to and a shared appreciation of plurality and heterogeneity and, thus, by the idea that differences are respected, necessary, and productive for the organization. The introduction of a digital time budgeting tool, which asks all members to note down, for example, their time allocation for projects and work for the months to come, also elicited very different feelings, points of view, and concerns among members. While some felt observed or were 'annoyed' by the administrative work, others suggested that it helped to balance work in the organization and protected those who 'tend to always put too much on their plate' (eth). Diane, a young campaign strategist, highlighted, 'Points of friction or disputes or sometimes completely contrary points of view are highly valuable [...] because they encourage us to continue to question ourselves. If we were all totally the same now and had totally... I think we have similar values and that's what holds us together, but we have different opinions, and the different opinions are important because they make us change our minds' (int). Deliberating supported the cooperative members in reevaluating their stances and converging towards a shared understanding in light of different perspectives, needs, and concerns. However, rather than striving for universal agreement, the relational activity aimed to foster a collective understanding that overcame strong disagreement or resistance among individual members and maintained and respected diverse perspectives and experiences. For example, in the vignette, Jan's uneasiness remained valid even if the client was eventually rejected. Or, in another deliberation, Adriana, a longstanding member in her 60s, found the cooperative's activist work on tending to the needs of menstruating bodies absurd and 'not a topic for work', but she accepted that others advocated for and embedded it in daily organizing (int).

Deliberating enabled the organization to collectively map and reevaluate struggles and tensions surrounding different alternative principles by discussing how they were experienced, understood, and prioritized by particular others whom the cooperative cared for and by appreciating and staying open to different views. In the vignette, we see how, through deliberating, members became aware of tensions between different interpretations of what is considered a 'right' client according to a broader commitment to contribute to socioecological change through their work (eth). While Xander focused on the ambassador's significant previous accomplishments, Chiara was affected by and concerned about the organization's implications in war. Penelope, on the other hand, struggled to see any positive impact of their work for this client (eth). Not only did deliberating help in identifying and reevaluating different interpretations of the principle of responsibility but it also mapped tensions and evaluated

prioritizations between different alternative principles. A commitment to responsible business was mapped and reevaluated against the autonomy of members to choose which projects they wanted to work on and the importance of solidarity to protect livelihoods and distribute the workload appropriately. For example, Eliane, a designer ideologically opposed to working for the Green Party, eventually reconsidered when one of her colleagues became sick (eth), and Annabelle, a senior project manager, noted, ‘We don’t compromise our core ideas, but if the budget is tight, we are more inclined to discuss a not-well-fitting customer a second time’ (int). In a similar vein, deliberations around the transparent time budgeting tool or more precise rules for parental leave mapped and reevaluated tensions between members’ desire for autonomy over their time without feeling controlled by the organization and a commitment to solidarity to ensure that people were sufficiently protected from overwork and that tasks were well coordinated. Discussions about the broader strategic orientation of the organization negotiated tensions between different understandings of how a long-term responsible impact was fostered and the autonomy to pursue work aligned with members’ interests and skills.

Deliberating was usually successful in helping CREACOOOP contain tensions between alternative principles because members had sufficient opportunities to participate, feel seen and considered with their particular feelings, needs, and concerns in such negotiations. Agile digital sharing of activities in projects and the representative boards and subgroups fostered a high degree of transparency and uncomplicated access to deliberations that allowed members to join in when they had substantial concerns, feelings, or needs related to the issue. At the same time, members had some flexibility in how they wanted to participate in this relational activity, and it was usually those with specific representative or professional roles and those who felt particularly affected who became very involved (eth). This protected the members’ and cooperative’s time and resources and maintained ‘sufficient billable hours to finance ourselves’, as Anabelle, an advisory board member, stressed (int). However, it was repeatedly observed that there were lingering power imbalances, which resulted in not all voices and concerns being heard equally in deliberating (i.e., experienced members are listened to more). Moreover, informal conversations indicated that gendered and racial biases lingered in the organization, and it was more difficult for shyer members and those who felt they lacked the rhetorical and verbal skills to speak up and be heard (eth). In an attempt to address this, the cooperative started experimenting with what Isa and Olivia called ‘feminist leadership’, such as using anonymous online discussions and quotas for teams, and began a year-long training on decoloniality to develop a stronger sensitivity towards marginal voices, particularly of non-White members (eth).

Responding: Situatively and Contextually Settling Tensions by Supporting Flourishing

Every June, all coworkers are asked to fill in their ‘wish income’ on an openly accessible Excel sheet. This alternative wage-setting procedure results in everyone receiving the same percentage of what they wished for according to the democratically

approved total wage budget – this year, 94%. Since its inception, the procedure has been adapted several times. For example, conversation circles were added to the process because members felt it was quite ‘isolating’, sitting alone in front of an Excel sheet. They also help in explaining and understanding salary jumps, encourage new and reserved members not to be too moderate, and help in adjusting salary wishes in light of others. The calculation was also enhanced so that it does not disadvantage individuals who retain the same wish income. The core idea is that salaries should reflect income needs rather than professional accomplishments. Isa, who lives with her partner, notes that ‘a single mom, of course, should earn more than I do’. Maya shares that when she struggled to pay for her apartment after a sudden breakup, the cooperative allowed her to earn more as an ad hoc solution. Bernd, the facility manager and a nonmember, notes that he is regularly asked, ‘How much more would you like to earn per month?’ His salary is now 38% above market wages. ‘I’ve never experienced anything like this anywhere’. (eth)

The above vignette on wage-setting procedures shows a third relational activity that was central to organizing in the cooperative, which we labelled *responding*. Responding entails answering to and finding ways to support and accommodate particular needs, concerns, and emotions that are brought forward through *inquiring* and are discussed through *deliberating*. In the vignette, we see different forms of responding that cut across CREACOOOP’s organizing. On the one hand, members responded by adapting their personal salary wishes in consideration of their own and others’ salary-related needs and emotions, collectively agreeing to grant a member an extraordinary salary increase, and answering the salary wishes and needs of contractors. In a similar vein, responding entailed members deciding on clients in light of different views and concerns and the absence of strong personal resistance (eth). On the other hand, it took place at an institutional level, with the cooperative deciding to adapt the wage-setting procedure itself in response to members who felt that a lack of contact and exchange ‘torpedoed the whole thing’ (int, Anton, copywriter) or introducing and tinkering with a transparent time budgeting tool to respond to concerns about overwork and uneasy feelings of control. Eventually, responding took place in spontaneous and direct interpersonal contact, as we saw earlier in the support that members offered when Sterre broke down during the child abuse check-in or when a project manager and team members swiftly reshuffled the workload in response to a member sharing on the online platform that they or someone they cared for were ill (eth).

We see *responding* as a relational activity through which the cooperative and its members not only *inquired* about and *deliberated* on particular needs, emotions, and concerns but also found sensitive and targeted ways to situatively answer them – often as an unfinished temporal solution. The whole salary-setting process can be read as a process of responding to a constellation of particular financial needs, the life circumstances of members, and the economic situation of the organization while making ‘every type of work count’ (eth). Members emphasized that throughout the organization, there was a strong willingness to react to and address needs, emotions, and concerns by either directly responding to them or institutionalizing procedures that were in themselves questioned and adapted ‘to support each other and have

each other's back' (int, Penelope, strategist). Abella, a newer cooperative member, shared that 'how well we respond to the needs of the individual, that is something I would have never expected'. This was also exemplified by the constant adaptations of the wage-setting process and the flexible way in which the cooperative responded to personal circumstances, concerns, and values when distributing work or selecting customers. After intense deliberations about 'healthy work' and how to counter overwork, the cooperative decided to introduce 'double leads' in project management to support managers who, when they were solely responsible, often experienced significant stress and struggled to call in sick (eth). Thus, responding, as a relational activity, created and maintained a dynamic organizational fabric that kept moulding itself to particular needs, emotions, and concerns. Although members repeatedly adapted the workings of the salary instrument and were quite satisfied with how it was organized at the time, they freely admitted in the group interviews that it was still imperfect: '[It] is not an optimal system, but it is the best we have come up with so far' (gd).

The relational activity of responding was underpinned by the ethical attention towards and a shared appreciation of others flourishing – that is, those the cooperative cared for felt validated, celebrated, and supported in their well-being and were encouraged to express and develop themselves. Marilyn, a designer and single mother, shared that although she was quite happy with the salary she had noted down, she felt 'shattered' and 'uncomfortable' on seeing that she was second to last on the salary list and was relieved when a colleague nudged her to increase her salary so that she felt validated (int). Similarly, ethical attention to flourishing was at play when, by responding, members decided to exempt someone from a salary cut because the resulting financial precarity would significantly impede their well-being and that of those close to them (int, Maya, project manager). The desire to see others flourish also underpinned responding in other areas. This was the case when reluctant members embraced specific clients or projects because they saw how this sparked motivation in others and enabled these members to grow even if the projects did not fully align with their own understanding of the cooperative's purpose; when members honoured coworkers professional achievements in 'weekly appreciation rounds'; or when they recognized and celebrated life events, engagements, and accomplishments outside of work, such as when members welcomed new family members, took part in demonstrations for humanitarian causes, or worked part-time in night clubs, and displayed a willingness to accommodate them so others could flourish and feel supported (eth).

Rather than resolving the tensions around alternative principles, we found that responding situatively and contextually settled conflicts between different prioritizations and interpretations of principles by focusing on finding ways to address particular needs, emotions, perspectives, and concerns ad hoc and by establishing and adapting procedures to support the flourishing of particular others. We could see in the vignette that the wage-setting process was an attempt to settle tensions between prioritizing members' autonomy in choosing their wages and the aim of solidarity in tempering salary wishes and enabling salaries that were perceived as fair because if someone had a high salary wish, 'all would have proportionally less' (int, Maya, project manager). Responding settled this tension both within the wage-setting process and in adapting the procedure by adding conversation circles, which introduced a stronger

prioritization of solidarity alongside a focus on autonomy. For example, tensions between responsibility and solidarity were settled in the wage-setting process when members decided how much of the annual budget would go on wages compared to, for example, sharing their knowledge pro bono with NGOs or investing in workshops to ‘decolonize’ CREACOOOP (eth). Tensions between different interpretations of responsibility or between solidarity and autonomy were also situatively settled when accepting clients and allocating work within project teams or when CREACOOOP decided to introduce the digital time budgeting tool – in this case, prioritizing solidarity over autonomy while staying open to further tinkering with the tool if it elicited too much discomfort.

Responding enabled CREACOOOP to deal with tensions around alternative principles by instigating the organization to find temporary answers in light of particular concerns, feelings, and needs that surfaced in *inquiring* and were mapped in *deliberating*. Furthermore, by responding, the organization embraced an openness to keep experimenting, adapting, and innovating by focusing on possibilities rather than on intractable challenges. Frieda, a new member, reflected on this by highlighting that the cooperative had existed for many years: ‘I still have the feeling that we are not at the end, yet. There is, somehow, still stuff to do, things to try out, things to change’. This was echoed by Maddalena, who emphasized that there was ‘space to create change. And yes, you will be heard. Not everything is perfect, but the intention to improve is always there. [...] And then it surprises me how it just flows and changes so naturally, somehow’. However, not all tensions could be temporarily settled or reconfigured through this relational activity. There were, for example, perpetual quarrels about whether keeping the balance between autonomy and solidarity, especially when it related to enabling members to take time off for vacations, childcare, or activist work, should be institutionalized and delegated to the HR team or solved through more ad hoc forms of responding (eth). Regarding salaries, there was a shared understanding that there were limits to how much could be wished for, with solidarity and responsibility eventually being the more constraining principles. Although retention was generally high, the cooperative had recently lost two senior members who decided to leave and work in organizations and fields in which monetary compensation was significantly higher (eth). Still, one of the founders, Paolo, who had since started a new venture but remained close to CREACOOOP, noted with awe that the cooperative ‘has found an answer to almost all impossibilities’ and emphasized ‘what happens between the people, that is the decisive factor’ (int).

Tending to the Particular as a Process: The ‘Relational Tension-Navigation Circuit’

Our findings highlight how *inquiring*, *deliberating*, and *responding* are used to handle tensions around alternative principles through ethical attention to the particular. These three activities are interconnected and constitute what we call a ‘relational tension-navigation circuit’ in alternative organizations.

Inquiring, as the initial step in the relational tension-navigation circuit, allows members of an alternative organization and the stakeholders they interact with to sense,

reveal, and listen to their particular needs, emotions, and concerns, such as needing more time to care for their children, feeling overwhelmed by a project while being anxious about the lack of political action, or having concerns regarding working for certain clients. This relational activity fosters ‘a personal, affective, and embodied connection to others’ situations’ (André and Pache, 2016, p. 662), creating moments of relationality that are structured through a form of shared ‘engrossment’ in each other’s lives rather than through roles or hierarchy (Liedtka, 1996; Noddings, 1984). Inquiring helps to collectively ‘express’ needs, interests, or concerns instead of ‘assuming’ them – the latter being frequently problematized by care scholars (Noddings, 2015, p. 74). By actively creating space to understand and feel how people are doing, it encourages members and partners to attune to such needs, emotions, and perspectives, which may not always be evident to them. The ethical attention to vulnerability (i.e., embracing messy emotions, fragility, and the need for support) that underpins inquiring emphasizes that ‘people’s humanity should be displayed rather than concealed’ (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012, p. 649). At the same time, inquiring evokes alternative principles in an organization through careful attention to particular others. For example, the moral emotions and future-oriented concerns that inquiring surfaces embed the principle of responsibility in the organization as a concrete struggle rather than a universal commitment. By emphasizing respect for individual needs and desires (e.g., the need for a higher salary or flexible hours to conduct activism on the side) while also framing them as collective responsibility (i.e., balancing support and protecting shared resources), inquiring evokes and embeds autonomy and solidarity as alternative principles within this joint careful attention to particular others. Rather than grappling with tensions around principles from the start, inquiring, as a first step in the relational tension-navigation circuit, makes these principles matter collectively through shared attention to and expression of concrete feelings, needs, concerns, and experiences.

Building on this first step, *deliberating*, as a relational activity, enables members to explore and negotiate different needs, concerns, and perspectives in this tension-negotiation circuit by bringing them into a dialogue. By integrating, as well as transforming, peoples’ understanding of varying needs, concerns, and perspectives around diverse issues that surface through inquiring, such as the controversial assessment of clients or struggles around how to coordinate work so that it aligns with people’s interests and considers their limitations, it addresses the inherent conflict between them that care scholars such as Tronto (2010) have been keen to emphasize. The ethical attention to plurality that underpins deliberating (i.e., ensuring that different perspectives and voices are respected, conflict is valued, and biases do not remain unchecked) resonates with scholars who have argued that caring attention to particular others should build on ‘communicative ethics’ that are attentive to power and marginalization in such deliberations (Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 2010). The strength of deliberating stems from fostering a ‘polyphonic narrative’ that ‘welcomes rather suppresses contradiction and tension’ (e.g., regarding the embassy as a customer), rejecting ‘universal standards’ by celebrating uncertainty, and the necessity to keep questioning

the organization (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012, p. 650). Concomitantly, deliberating enables an organization to map and reevaluate tensions between and around different alternative principles by producing overlaying, interwoven, and shifting personal narratives that are infused by and navigate different interpretations and prioritizations of these principles (e.g., when deliberating if the organization pours substantial resources into decoloniality training instead of increasing salaries). It allows the organization to explore and form nuanced and, at times, fragmented collective evaluations of these tensions not as abstract moral problems but as diverging situative needs, concerns, and emotions of how to enact, foster, and balance responsibility, autonomy, and solidarity within caring relations while considering the broader social systems and external forces in which they are embedded.

Responding, as a relational activity, eventually entails finding sensitive and targeted ways to answer and accommodate these renegotiated needs, concerns, and perspectives by fostering ad hoc responses through situative support and decisions (e.g., helping and covering for members that need time off), procedurally organized responses (e.g., setting wages or accepting clients and projects), and the adaptation of such organizational procedures at an institutional level (e.g., adjusting the calculation and deliberation process around the wish income or initiating double leads and mentoring programs). Responding protects alternative organizations from becoming overly rigid by calling them to ongoingly and dynamically reshuffle their organizational efforts and practices in light of particular needs, concerns, and perspectives; as in caring relations, ‘innovation takes precedence over permanence’ (Ruddick, 1980, p. 352). The relational activity is underpinned by ethical attention to “flourishing” by seeking, promoting, and celebrating solutions and decisions that support the well-being and growth of particular others, both professionally and in their private lives, and by regarding their flourishing as integral and connected to the flourishing of the organization and society (Held, 2007). As a last step in the relational tension-navigation circuit, responding enables organizations to situatively and contextually settle tensions surrounding different alternative principles without necessarily resolving them; that is, the tensions between autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility constantly resurface around core organizational issues (i.e., how financial resources are allocated, what projects the organization works on, and how to coordinate work around different organizational and private time demands). By emphasizing that answers can be found even if they are temporary and contextual rather than timeless, responding grounds alternative organizations in what Lawrence and Maitlis (2012), following Bloch’s (1995) utopian philosophy, called an ‘ontology of possibilities’. This ontology opens alternative organizations to novel actions and frames struggles as an invitation for continuous innovation, reinforcing a collective sense of hope rather than cynicism, considering the intractable conflicts and challenges that alternative organizations face. Acknowledging the imperfection and contextuality of these responses and their settling of tensions entails that this last step of the circuit loops back to the next opening of inquiring – to keep processually navigating the tensions between alternative principles that are never fully resolved (see Figure 3).

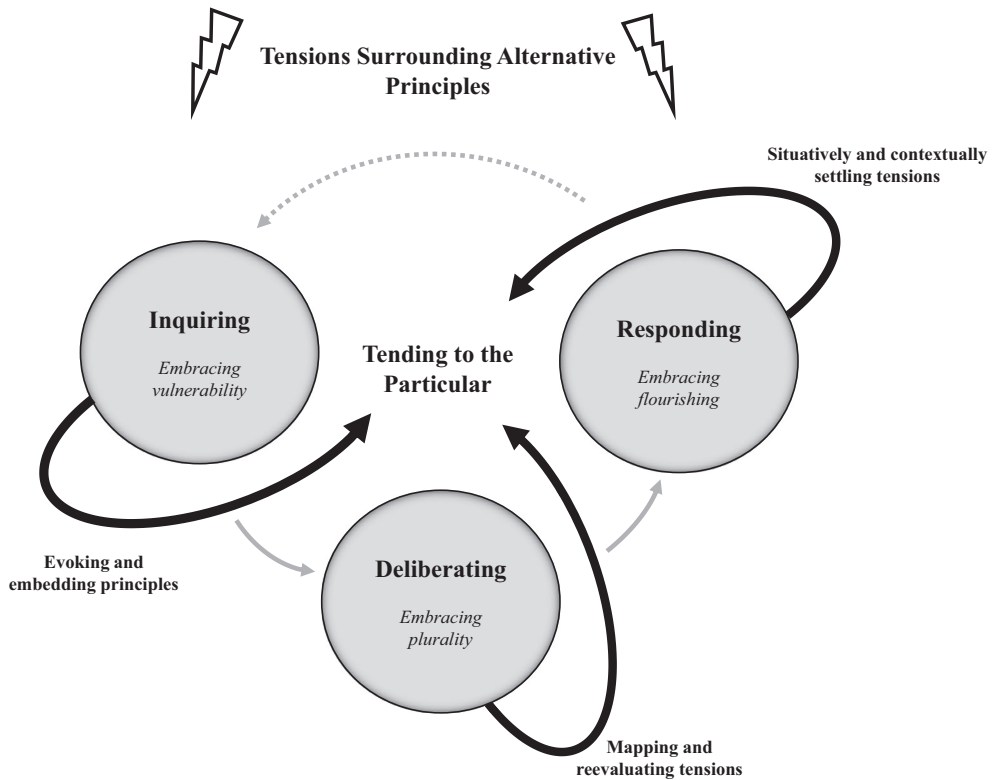


Figure 3. Relational tension-navigation circuit: handling principles through a focus on the particular

DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

We began this paper by highlighting that alternative organizations must continuously address tensions and conflicts around diverging interpretations or prioritizations of autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility as alternative principles (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Husted, 2021; Parker et al., 2014; Schiller-Merkens, 2022). Our analysis illustrated how CREACCOOP, by tending to particular needs, concerns, and emotions, continuously handled such tensions in recursive relational activities that constitute what we called a ‘relational tension-navigation-circuit’. In the following discussion we highlight our contributions to relational, ethical, and processual research on alternative organizing.

Relationality for Enfolding the General and the Particular

By focusing on relational activities that enable alternative organizations to address and work through tensions around the principles of alterity, our research contributes to an emerging stream of literature that highlights the vital role of close relationships built on mutuality, friendship, and attention to particularity (Farias, 2017; Pohler, 2024; Reedy et al., 2016). We expand this literature by revealing how such close and, as we argue, caring relationships are continuously constituted by *inquiring*, *deliberating*, and *responding*. More importantly, by showing how the interplay of these relational activities forms a relational tension-navigation circuit,

we strengthen research suggesting that ‘practical work’, which relationally orients people to connect with the concerns, needs, and emotions of others, may be critical for navigating principles of alternativity (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Bryer, 2020; Daskalaki et al., 2019).

Our findings emphasize that relational activities are not primarily used to repair relationships after disagreements over principles, as Ashforth and Reingen (2014) suggested, but instead enable an organization to make these principles matter and find ways to enact and prioritize autonomy, solidarity, and responsibility by continuously attuning, negotiating, and collectively responding to ongoing concrete needs, emotions, and concerns in the organization. Moreover, our findings show that these relational activities continuously interweave and connect the general (broader organizational principles and procedures) and the particular (personal, affective, and intimate relations). Therefore, our research goes beyond scholarship that highlights the general and the particular as separate, albeit complementary, spheres in alternative organizations (Daskalaki et al., 2019; Pohler, 2024) by emphasizing how they become enfolded. Arguably, this enfolding is critical for maintaining the meaningfulness of both spheres in alternative organizations; that is, paying attention to particularity remains meaningful if it supports organizations in enacting and balancing principles of alternativity and, vice versa, collective decision-making processes, and broader principles remain meaningful if they are able to take into account and serve particularity and support caring relations. Our findings highlight the need for more research exploring how principles of alternativity are addressed through relational processes and, more generally, how relationality enables alternative organizations to thrive in a hostile neoliberal environment and cope with internal conflicts (Friedrich and Steyaert, 2024; Schiller-Merkens, 2022). Future research could also inquire into what other approaches allow alternative organizations to integrate the general and the particular in everyday organizing.

Ethics as Extended Normativity in Alternative Organizations

By paying attention to how relational activities are infused with ethical attention to the particularity of others, we also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role and expression of normativity in alternative organizations (Huber and Knights, 2022; Jaumier and Daudigeos, 2021). While research has continuously highlighted that alternative organizations try to bring about ‘a normatively preferable society, defined in opposition to the injustices of social configurations reproduced by mainstream organizations’ (Shanahan, 2023, p. 1663), it has usually conceptualized this normative orientation of alternative organizations through principles of solidarity, autonomy, and responsibility (Parker et al., 2014; Wright, 2013) and focused on how these principles are inscribed in governance structures, rules, and decision-making processes (Kokkinidis, 2015; Pek, 2021). Our findings show that normative commitments are present and enacted not only at the level of these broader principles and formal governance structures and decision-making procedures but also through ethical attention to the vulnerability, plurality, and flourishing of particular others in concrete caring relations (Fotaki et al., 2019; Held, 2007). Therefore, we also add to an emerging stream of literature that highlights the vital role that ethics can play in governing alternative organizations, enabling them to foster a sense of responsibility

for others that, as Huber and Knights (2022, p. 1142) suggested, following Husted (2021), can lead to ‘positive’ rather than ‘punitive’ forms of (neo)normative control.

Our findings emphasize that this ethical attention supports *inquiring*, *deliberating*, and *responding* as relational activities in finding situative, context-sensitive, and, at the same time, collectively endorsed reactions to tensions between principles. Therefore, our research strengthens the arguments made by Jaumier and Daudigeos (2021), who challenged the idea that focusing on formal deliberation practices and democratic governance alone is sufficient to understand how alternative principles become and remain meaningful in everyday organizing. Studying an industrial worker’s cooperative, they showed how ‘craft ethics’ guided workers in maintaining an emancipatory orientation in their work and organization despite tensions between different goals and values. Our study shows that ethical attention to the particular, similar to ‘craft ethics’, enables alternative organizations to make sense of tensions and establish ad hoc arrangements and provisional settlements that are fragile yet productive. At the same time, in contrast to Huber and Knights (2022) and Jaumier and Daudigeos (2021), who focused on ethics as organizationally shared but individually held and lived normative orientations, our findings indicate that ethical orientations are inscribed into and maintained collectively in relational activities, pointing at least partially to the institutionalization of an ethics of care in organizational processes. Future research could pay more attention to how different forms of normativity are anchored and interact in alternative organizations and also look towards other, non-Western perspectives (Alacovska et al., 2024; Hossein et al., 2023). Moreover, our findings beg for more research that theorizes how alternative organizations maintain the presence of such ethics.

Towards Alternativity as Processuality

Eventually, the relational tension-navigation circuit that we have developed contributes to a more processual view of alternative organizing (Dahlman et al., 2022; Pietinalho and Martela, 2024; Shanahan, 2023). Process views highlight the open-ended nature of organizing, which, while gravitating towards a pattern, is never finished (Hernes, 2007; Nayak and Chia, 2011). Adopting such a processual view, Dahlmann, Mygind du Plessis, Husted, and Just (2022, p. 1981) conceptualized alternative organizations as striving towards ‘freedom’ from the dominant structures and highlighted that this freedom can only be actualized because alternative organizations are ‘always deferred, in a perpetual process of becoming’. Our findings concur with such a ‘becoming’ perspective but locate it, similar to Pietinalho and Martela (2024), not in relation to the status quo but in the situative handling of alternative principles.

Shanahan (2023, p. 1661) conceptualized the processual dynamic that ensures that ‘no decision is permanent’ as ‘revisability’. Going beyond technologically mediated processes of ‘collective authoring’ (Pietinalho and Martela, 2024) and the ‘revisability of coordinating rules’ (Shanahan, 2024), our study shows a relationally and ethically grounded revisability that responds to and adapts organizing with close attention to members’ particular needs, concerns, and emotions. Indeed, our findings suggest that alternative organizations may need to rely on different forms of revisability – one of formal rules and procedures related to how an alternative organization coordinates, makes decisions, ensures participation, and distributes power, and another that is informal, enabling the organization and its members

to appraise and reevaluate decisions on ad hoc and case bases. This double revisability ensures that alternative organizations maintain multiplicity so that alternative practices and principles do not ‘ossify’ (Shanahan, 2023) or become ‘reified’ (Shanahan et al., 2024).

Moreover, our findings show that revisability emerges and is fueled by ethical attention to the vulnerability, plurality, and flourishing of particular others. We contend that such an ethically informed revisability is more inclined to take note of and address complex power dynamics that frequently haunt alternative organizations and affect which voices and needs are heard. In our case, ethical attention to the particular contributed, for example, to tackling gendered and racialized power structures that frequently weave through alternative organizations (Daskalaki et al., 2019; Friedrich and Steyaert, 2024; Sobering, 2016) and helped counter processes of ‘oligarchization’ (Jaumier, 2017). Future research could investigate how revisability can also be driven by affective forces that engender alternative futures (Endrissat and Lüthy, 2025). Moreover, more research is needed to explore how different modes and forms of processuality enable alternative organizations to remain ‘unfinished’ (Husted et al., 2025) and how their institutional enactment shapes and is affected by power dynamics.

LIMITATIONS

The core finding of our study is that relational processes that are underpinned by caring attention to particular others are critical for navigating tensions around alternative principles. The service sector cooperative, with its mix of democratic governance and self-management structures, is a typical example of alternative organizing, thus offering ample generative entrance points for alternative organizing scholars to draw on our work. However, as with all ethnographic studies, the specificity of our research context brings some limitations. Arguably, the relational tensions-navigation circuit that we identified seems particularly suitable for and feasible in relatively small organizations, such as CREACOOOP. Although attempts have been made to theorize how an ethics of care can be ‘scaled’ (André and Pache, 2016), scholars have emphasized that caring attention to the particularity of others thrives in immediate relationships that are not easily organized and maintained in larger organizations and social systems (Noddings, 2015; Tronto, 2010). Mirroring many other alternative organizations that are smaller in size and sceptical towards scaling, members of CREACOOOP noted that ‘we do not want to grow as this chokes our social relations’ (int). Therefore, it seems critical to better understand whether and how larger alternative organizations can draw on this relational tension-navigation circuit by researching more decentralized and delegated organizational designs that allow maintaining social proximity as they scale (Lee, 2024; Pek, 2021) or by further exploring the potential of ‘feminist bureaucracy’ (Ashcraft, 2001).

CONCLUSION

Tending to the particularity of others supports alternative organizations in continuously dealing with tensions around alternative principles through a ‘relational tension-navigation circuit’. It encourages alternative organizations to form ad hoc settlements and

continuously adapt their organizational processes, fostering an ongoing commitment to responsibility, solidarity, and autonomy. We contend that adopting ethical relational activities that embrace and support the vulnerability, plurality, and flourishing of particular others may also help more traditional organizations become more attentive, caring, and alternative.

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