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For Maya and Tania

At the closing session of the First Organization Studies Summer Workshop in Santorini, Greece in 2005, which was dedicated to process thinking and organization studies, one of the panellists suggested that after having debated process for several days, the time had now come to develop a theory of processes. The proposal drew acclaim from some participants, but created consternation in others. The difference in people's reactions, in fact, reflected a divide between world views that could be sensed throughout the conference. The researchers who felt dismayed thought that if a theory of process could be developed, it would signify a view of process as something that can be observed or measured at a distance. It would, they argued, imply the submission of processes to an interpretation framework hovering somewhere above the processes to be studied. They would rather see process as constitutive *of* the world—including theories about the world. Somewhat in line with Whitehead (1920: 53) they would reject that process can be subject to explanation, and instead see process as an invitation to use speculative language for demonstrating the processual nature of things.

This book is an attempt at theorizing organization on the assumption that process is constitutive of the world. It suggests a vocabulary derived from process philosophy not commonly applied in organization studies. The vocabulary may therefore seem unfamiliar, and perhaps even awkward, to readers schooled primarily by the organizational literature. One reason for proposing a different vocabulary is nevertheless to try to address the ongoing work of organizing as the connecting of heterogeneous actors. I regard any attempt at stabilizing the connecting between actors to be acts of organizing, which is why it is important to understand how various kinds of actors in the making interact in time and space to form an organization, however provisional it may be. For this reason the reader will find, alongside examples from 'normal' organizational life, many examples that would normally not be associated with the organizational literature, such as shepherding, the sinking of a passenger ship, the experience of a sex change, a conversation in a laboratory, and several others.

The book is the result of a journey of puzzling questions that I have asked myself about what happens in time and space in organizational life as the trajectories represented by actors' histories and projections become entangled. Just such a moment of perplexity occurred when I was hospitalized in a large public hospital in Geneva some years ago and was struck by the combined vastness, complexity, and fluidity of its organizational life. To keep boredom at bay I spent some time ruminating about how various theories of organization

could be applied to make sense of what was going on around me. Obviously, most theories can be used for explaining parts of what is going on in organizations, and it would be equally trite to say that no theory will ever be able to explain everything that goes on. Still, I was left with a feeling of theoretical inadequacy as I attempted to apply various theories to separate segments and levels of the organizational life that I was witnessing. In particular, I discerned that there was little in the way of theory that could access the situated nature of what I observed while not losing sight of the more general picture. That gnawing feeling of inadequacy, combined with extensive reading of relevant philosophical and sociological literature in subsequent years, has resulted in this book, which makes an attempt to connect the fluidity of day-to-day organizational life with the structures it articulates.

When I use the expression 'organizational life' I do not mean 'life in organizations'. What I mean by organizational life is the ongoing process of making, remaking, unmaking, and relating of organizational actors of all sorts: humans, technologies, concepts, groups, and the like, into meaningful wholes. These meaningful wholes can be a Twitter community, an emerging interest group, an entrepreneur with an idea, a think tank, a fashion show, sporadic interactions among scattered actors around a concept, or the spread of a technology, as well as any form of formalized organization or institution. Meaningful wholes are not entities as such, but may be temporarily experienced as entities.

A bit like Friedman's (2010) description of the lean start-up company EndoStim,[1] the view is of a flat world, where connectedness prevails over size, flow prevails over stability, and temporality prevails over spatiality. A 'flat world' is not meant as a description of a world of endless possibilities, but as a convenient analytical assumption for the appreciation of the emergence of various types of actors, including bureaucracies, entrepreneurs, designers, firms, institutions, brands, concepts, and technologies, and their interconnectedness. Organizational life needs more and better models for explaining the temporal dynamics that arise in the meeting between actors, where they bring different histories with them while shaping futures in which they share. In a previous book (Hernes 2008), using the idea of tangledness to reflect a process-based view of organization, I tentatively regarded process as the becoming of entangled actors. This book, on the other hand, explicitly focuses on the role of time and temporality in the making of actors, which raises a number of issues, such as what we mean by present, past, and future, and how we deal with the notions of continuity and change.

If there is one main message conveyed by this book, it is that 'time matters', and this in a dual sense. Time matters because it is important, and perhaps more important than ever, as the world is apparently continually being sucked into a whirl of crises and events, while uncertainty grows about how to project past experience on future possibilities, and even about whether the past should weigh in at all. Time is also of significance because it gives meaning to *matter*.

The passing of time and the way actors deal with being in time shape and reshape how individuals, groups, organizations, markets, and technologies are understood, and consequently how interaction between dispersed entities of different kinds is undertaken and how the interaction is given meaning and, hence, agency with the passing of time. Of interest is the meaning of being as defined by temporality, which refers to the carving out of temporal existence (present, past, and future) from the passing of time. It invites the study of the impact on things by the passing of time.

The book has theoretical precedents from within organization theory, particularly represented by works by March and colleagues, for whom the connecting of streams of actions, actors, feelings, beliefs, and problems constitutes organizations. While March and colleagues have contributed considerably to better process understanding of organizations, there is a need to extend from their work, notably by focusing more explicitly on time and temporality, which remain distinctly underexamined in organization studies (Langley et al. 2013).[2] Process philosophers hold a key to furthering the field of organization studies precisely by enabling better understanding of the workings of time and temporality. While the book is by no means the first to bring process philosophy to organization studies, its emphasis on time and temporality is distinctly novel.

Until now organization studies has been somewhat complacent about the effects of time on the experience of organizing. Writers have been inclined to seek refuge in spatial representations of reality, while tending to relegate time and temporality to static representations against which space has been understood. Process philosophers, however, invite us to afford time and temporality an active role in organizational life. Bluntly speaking, they invite us to explore the 'work' performed by time and temporality on spatial representations of organizational life. What tends to be forgotten in organizational theorizing is that actors act upon a future state of affairs based on their histories, even if those same histories may be faked, forgotten, or rejected by those actors.

Giving an active role to time and temporality seems particularly important given the present evolution of organizational life. Some years ago a manufacturing company, for example, might employ thousands of people and carry out virtually all related functions, whereas today that same company might consist of a brand and core technology managed by only a handful of people, with the related functions being carried out in various parts of the world. Moreover, those various functions come into being and are upheld through their relations with other entities, each of which brings their own histories to the interactions. In other words, we are looking at a distributed system of actors mutually constituted by temporally ordered acts, rather than a hierarchically ordered monolithic system. Therefore time and temporality typically play a different role in a distributed view than in a hierarchical one. In a hierarchical system time is seen as a scarce resource endowed from the apex, whereas in a

distributed system of actors' time becomes the resource from which reality is carved out. The traditional view of an organizational apex that wields authority over a range of in-house functions is badly in need of revision, not least because a distributed rather than a hierarchical view of organizations forces consideration of how the temporal construction of the reality of respective actors influences how they co-create organizations.

The flattening of organizational life takes place at the same time as interactive technologies become increasingly more prominent. One aspect is that of speed, but an equally important aspect is the temporal effects of coordination between actors with different historicities and ambitions at different locations and sometimes in different time zones. The connecting dynamics of organizational life and the formation of organizations need to be better understood, notably by better understanding how events—encounters between actors in the making—connect to each other and reproduce patterns or structures of events. For example, while the connecting power of social media has been demonstrated by recent political events, their importance in the definition of organizational life remains to be understood, especially because new forms of collaboration and exchange are emerging such as, for example, crowdsourcing, conceptualized as clouds or the foam of creative encounters. The very notion of crowds as arenas of organizational activity demands that novel analytical frameworks be developed.

At a more theoretical level the book may be seen as an appeal to an 'atomistic'[3] theory of organization, where ideas of organizational boundaries and structure are abandoned, and where the focus of analysis is on the connecting power of events, seen as encounters between heterogeneous organizational actors, rather than the connecting power of structures, systems, cultures, or the like. Consistently with process philosophy, order is seen as arising from flow and not vice versa, that is, there is not a unitary organizational actor that acts, but the making of organizational actors through acting. The flow of time gives rise to ordering attempts, which in turn give rise to organizations. This, I believe, is a feature of the world in which we find ourselves, where an idea in one part of the world, a piece of regulation in another, technology in the third, production in the fourth, and finance in the fifth may come together momentarily and set in motion an assembly of events and elements, which precariously yet vigorously reproduces itself from a growing past while continually changing for a different future. It is this sense of movement that traditional organization theory has withheld from organizational life. It is time to put it back where it belongs.

■ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1 **Introduction**

> But why would one be interested in adopting and promoting a process perspective? The simplest answer is that, as mentioned above, since time is an inescapable reality, process conceptualizations that take time into account offer an essential contribution to our understanding of the world that is unavailable from more traditional research-based conceptual models that tend to either ignore time completely, compress it into variables (describing decision making as fast or slow, or environments as dynamic or stable).
>
> (Langley and Tsoukas 2010: 10)

> In any attempts to bridge the domains of experience belonging to the spiritual and physical sides of our nature, time occupies the key position.
>
> (Eddington 1928: 91)

Process is more a disposition than a model or theory, as Chia has reminded me. As a disposition it can help to focus critically on things that otherwise are liable to be taken for granted in organization studies and which impede our understanding of organizing in a 'world on the move', a phrase meant to be consistent with Whitehead's 'the passage of nature'. 'A world on the move' invites the suspension of things as finite units and instead directs attention towards a world in a continuous state of flow. The flow we are talking about, however, is not the flow of money, people, or goods. It is about the flow of time. But time is not confined to the regular ticking of the clock or the appointments marked in an electronic calendar. Instead we find ourselves on the slippery slope of the relentless passage of time, time as eternally perishing, as Whitehead pointed out. The slope of time is slippery in the sense that keeping on one's feet depends on the ongoing drawing of appropriate temporal distinctions between present, past, and future. Nowhere is this more important than in organizational life, where heightened uncertainty combined with increased speed and accelerated rates of change sometimes provides decisions and choices with a heightened sense of acuteness.[1]

As human actors we find ourselves 'thrown' (Heidegger 1927) into the flow of time, as it were, and in the flow of time we carve out the temporal existence

of things past, present, and future. In Heidegger's terms, we temporalize from time; and in Garfinkel's (1967: 166), we operate in the 'inner time' of recollection, remembrance, anticipation, expectancy'. Time, then, becomes the very resource from which temporality is created. Temporalization is proper to the entities in question as they project their past upon aspirations in an ongoing present. The past, while being re-enacted, is open to re-interpretation, and the future is an open canvas onto which selected interpretations of past experience are projected, while at the same time this canvas provides a basis for the evoking of past experience. The past–future articulation takes place in an ongoing present characterized by indeterminacy and improvisation. It is not before that present becomes past that it becomes possible to make sense of what the actions and gestures of the present that has passed pointed towards, even though the connecting of the various gestures and utterances were meaningful to the actors during the present. This is when the lived present becomes an 'event', an entity endowed with meaning in such a way that it blends into the spatial, yet fluid construct that is seen as the organization. Therefore the idea of the present plays a key role in the understanding of organization as process. The present—turned—event exhibits agency by reaching out towards other present-turned events, but it is a volatile sort of agency, perpetually in need of reproduction.

Thinking about process[2] is about coming to grips with the phenomenon of being in the flow of time. It is not about the flow of things, but about the things of flow. The things of flow include the actors who find themselves having to organize the world around them in the flow of time. They cannot simply step out of the flow, decide how to organize others, and then step back into the flow, because such an ideal scenario would presume that one could stop time, even reverse it, and start it again. The point is that even by freezing time, by going on leave, taking vacation, or, very unlikely, by *ordering* everyone to do nothing and turn off all machines, does not stop the flow of time. Attempting to substitute that which is with emptiness does not put an end to what is happening. Instead the actors have to organize while on the go, while in the flow of time, staying entangled with everything else that makes up the flow.

This may sound like the usual way to introduce process thinking and it may invite the usual sceptical reactions. If everything is changing all the time, then anything is possible, which runs counter to what we experience in real life, where some things are experienced as stable, thus providing a sense of how and when they change. People in organizations operate within structures, technologies, and legal systems that cannot be changed at will. They are burdened with histories, including heroic stories from the past that are not of their own making. Corporate strategies, visions, and goals are imposed on them, which, incidentally, may or may not work. And they have to follow temporal logics imposed by budget cycles and deadlines. Taking all these experiences into account is important, because they are experienced as real. A process view

accepts this as the actuality of organizing, while simultaneously investigating how experience creates, enacts, and defines the phenomenon under study. As an actual state of affairs the organization is seen as a synthesized and coalesced set of ways in which things are perceived as functioning that is neither wrong nor misplaced. Process thinking also invites, however, a view of potentiality, which in turn prompts the question of how things become the way they are in view of the multiple possibilities of becoming. Process thinking invites reflection on the relationships between the given state of affairs and the multiple possibilities for things to turn out otherwise. The adage that there is always more than meets the eye is basic to process studies, which demands that phenomena are studied in their openness and indeterminacy, while accepting that they may provisionally appear closed and determinate.

Studying things as process is obviously not about comparing states of being in time or in space, but about how something persists and changes in view of becoming 'otherwise possible', to paraphrase Luhmann (1995: 133). More than anything, the task is to explain how things persist, and how some configurations achieve stabilization whereas others do not. Our task then becomes to investigate what produces these stabilizing and channelling effects that are typical of organizational life (Latour 1996). Ordering in such a world is not a result of inertia, but more like what Whitehead calls creative order. Chia (1999: 224) nicely states, 'Acts of organizing, much like the ceaseless building of sand-dykes to keep the sea at bay, reflect the on-going struggle to tame the intrinsically nomadic forces of reality.'

I believe that such thinking is far from alien to people who struggle to organize collective activity. If anything, it is more of an issue for people who theorize about organization than for those who actually do the organizing. If we assume that organizational actors are caught in the flow of time, maintaining a coherent past requires effort. For example, it requires no work to convince people in a quickly growing company that keeping things on track and retaining coherent practices over time entails hard work. Organizations are part human systems, and past memories need to be brought to life on an ongoing basis if they are to persist as a basis for a different future. Archives and artefacts, for example, need to be acted into existence: if not, their content perishes from sight as meaningful sources of coherent organized actions. What is more, efforts to keep things alive need to be organized for a coherent past to be maintained. Maintaining a sense of coherent identity, for instance, may require persistent reminders about where it all started and concern, for example, influential founders, their ideas, visions, commitment, and self-sacrifice. The use of narratives is but one of several ways of keeping the past coherent. Some organizations, for example, use corporate museums to keep the past alive. Naturally, keeping the past alive is not just about the past, but also about having a way to look forward. Caught in the flow of time, actors bring the past to bear on a desired future state, although they are aware that they will probably not attain

this future state. Many leaders and practitioners are aware of this fact. They also know that if nothing is done to keep things on course, things could get off track, engendering consequences they might find difficult to tackle. So when we work hard to keep things on track, we work hard because we know that if we do not, things will turn out differently than we expected. Anyone who has tried to write a book, train for a championship, apply for a job, prepare a special meal, or pass an exam knows this. Maintaining continuity is hard because there will always be events that threaten to throw things off course.

Working to keep the past alive is not a purely retrospective exercise confined to the bringing forward of memories. As the theorists drawn upon in this book remind us, we are always inescapably in the present, which includes both the past and the future. To be sure, there are pasts that went before the present (present) just as there are futures that come after it. Still, the point is that the pasts and the futures are experienced in the present. What differentiates one present from another is how and how far back into the past and into the future the projection occurs. This is why this book works from the premise that actors operate in an ongoing present. Actors have the ability to evoke the past selectively and make choices about future aspirations informed by the selected past, aided by what Schultz and Hernes (2013), inspired by Mead, refer to as the materials of the present.[3] When the past is evoked in a social setting, we are talking about a living present (Deleuze 2004). The same applies to the future. Even if we consider the future as a goal to be achieved in ten years' time, it is an imagined state that is perceived within the confines of the present. We may say, along with Deleuze (2004), that the past and future are *dimensions* of the living present. But the present more than just includes the past and future, it *shapes* the past and future. An important implication therefore emerges from this, which is the need to examine the 'agency of the present', and in particular how it connects to other organizational presents, past and future, to maintain or alter organizational arrangements.

As process thinking begins to take hold in organization studies, there is a tendency to fall for the temptation of liquefying the notion of process to the extent that the view becomes of little use. Weick (1979) may have inadvertently planted some seeds to this effect when he pitted the verb 'organizing' against the noun 'organizations'. In the eagerness to make process the antithesis of the noun, a sort of Parmenidean world view where nothing moves, it becomes tempting to romanticize a view according to which everything flows, and to then embellish flow with notions such as change, disorder, freedom, innovation, multiplicity, chaos, and creativity.[4] However, to say that everything flows is first and foremost an ontological stance that actually challenges us to look for how flows are stabilized, bent, or deflected. It is precisely such a stance that invites study of how different forms of stabilization come about, including seemingly robust forms such as bureaucracies. The beauty of process thinking lies in leaving open what actually emerges from processes. For example, how

institutions evolve depends on the processes, likewise the persistence of institutions depends on the processes that make and sustain them.

All these concerns are oriented towards the future along the arrow of time, while forcing attention towards what has been up until the present. Every organization involves routines, equipment, people, technologies, etc. that exist in the present, while stretching through events back into time. Like a tail of history, they all weigh in on how the organization sees itself in the mirror of its possibilities. It should be obvious that engaging in this process requires not just work, but even some degree of creativity.[5] Quite some time ago now, it was established that organizations should not be considered cultural dupes. A process view such as the one presented in this book challenges us to go much further than that and to consider them capable of assessing alternative courses of action even as they stick to their current course of action (Hernes and Irgens 2013). Assessing alternative courses of action requires imagination about how they might otherwise become even if they are not pursued. Therefore, purposely not changing things is not necessarily a sign of indifference, ignorance, or incompetence. On the contrary it may well be a sign of creativity, imagination, and persistence. For example, it may demand considerable imagination and persistence to organize collaboration with an outside firm in order to keep producing the same product, just as it may involve imagination to consider why it should not be changed. The reason why this requires creativity is that the world is assumed to be on the move, and the time in which to bring about a sense of ordering is evanescent. Things (markets, people, relations, products, beliefs, etc.) change as time moves on, and they sometimes change in surprising ways. Potentiality involves imagination about how things might become in the light of the possibilities that lie ahead, but also about how things of the past might be perceived differently. This is why potentiality is germane to a process view.

To come to grips with some salient features of process, I rely on a collection of thinkers in philosophy for whom temporality was central, notably Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Alfred Schütz, George Herbert Mead, Gilles Deleuze and Alfred North Whitehead in particular. This seems like a broad choice of thinkers for one book and indeed it is. I could have undoubtedly written about organization and process by leaning on just one or two of them. Schooled philosophers might well criticize me for selectively drawing isolated ideas from thinkers who deserve a considerably more thorough understanding and treatment. It may be considered a work of bricolage, as it attempts to build a picture from diverse, although not irreconcilable, sources. There is, however, no standard in the social sciences for how deeply one should engage with a philosopher's thoughts and ideas in order for social theorizing to be seen as validly building upon the ideas of the philosopher. There is, I suppose, a point in social-science theorizing at which the philosophical validity is compromised, philosophical depth is left behind, and social-science criteria for

theorizing begin to take over. This is a point at which the philosophical moorings are cut. Whether or not it is the right point will be known neither from an exclusively philosophical viewpoint, nor from an exclusively social-science standpoint. It matters what the aim of the writing is, and the aim of this book is to contribute a novel view of organizing and organizations rooted in process philosophy, to which temporality is essential.

Viewing the world as process, the thinkers from whom I draw ideas in this book developed insights into the temporality of process, notably on the notion of past, present, and future. A common assumption is the primacy of the present and the present as locus for the immediacy of past and future experience.[6] To be sure, there are significant differences between the thinkers concerning, for example, the role of the human and the social in temporal processes. Whitehead's event-based process philosophy is perhaps the one most devoid of actors, using what he called 'actual entities' as its most basic unit of analysis, where entities are constituted by events composed of tempo-spatial experiences rather than things of substance, such as material or human actors. Heidegger, while also working from a non-substance viewpoint, applied the notion of *Dasein*, which refers to the spatio-temporal entity that emerges from engaging with the world. Heidegger's *Dasein* differs from Whitehead's, whose metaphysical scheme aimed at reconciling natural process with that of experience. Still, from a process perspective, Whitehead and Heidegger held parallel views about the relationship between process and entities, whereby they viewed entities and their structured relationships as emerging from processes, and not vice versa.

With Bergson, who applied a human-centred, introspective view of duration and memory, individual human beings get to play a more concrete role in process thinking. For this reason, he could probably penetrate deeper into questions of the passing of time, memory, continuity, and change than many had done before him. Most notably his understanding of the indivisibility of change in time is of importance to process thinking and organization, and the difference between the understanding of time and space. His urge to try and think in terms of movement rather than a series of immobilities, and of duration as the continuous progression of the past, rather than a discrete series of 'nows', encourages a rethink of how time (and hence process) is viewed in organization studies.[7] Mead, a fourth example of a process thinker, drew upon the role of the social far more than the other three philosophers, as did Schütz. Although the different theorists operate with differing notions of the role of the human and the social in temporal processes, the main common ground between their ideas, which to my mind legitimizes the use of them in the same book, is their view of temporality, and particularly their view of the role of what this book refers to as an ongoing present.

The book is to be read as an attempt to develop a temporal process theory of organization, where actors find themselves continually 'thrown' into time.

The importance of time is that it cannot be stopped; it represents the relentless passage of nature, as Whitehead formulated it. Organizers are well aware of this. Whereas they appear to be organizing what is there today, they are in effect also organizing for what might not be there tomorrow. The first represents actuality, the second potentiality. The first is well documented in organizational research; the second remains to be developed further. When we better understand how the two work together, we are in a better position to unravel some of the mysteries of organization, such as what happens when a small idea, a passionate person, an available technology, and an accommodating institution connect to make something novel for the future while activating something that belongs to the past.

The book ends with a plea for mystery in organization studies. There are fascinating stories out there waiting to be told. Alas, many, if not most of them suffer from being sentenced to rejection because they are not set within legitimate theoretical frameworks. As per today there still seems to be a schism between, on the one hand, studies leaning towards natural science logics and, on the other, studies leaning towards constructivist logics. There is no reason, however, why organizations should be treated as either predictable objects anaesthetized by variance theorizing or as amorphous organisms doped by excessive *in situ* theorizing. Neither of them holds much promise of mystery. The one is devoid of life, and hence, force. The other suffers from a lack of form, and hence, a rationale for life and force. Form and life, however, are not antitheses of one another, but forces that play out in time. It is the passing of time that enables us to treat some things as open and indeterminate, as in-the-making so to speak, and others as provisionally closed. This is how we can be in a meeting and experience its outcomes as indeterminate, yet potentially consequential, while at the same time experience that which happens outside the meeting as provisionally stable and given. Closure, in this view, is not about leaving things behind unchanged, but about taking them with us and letting them be changed on a journey of new encounters. The whole point lies in being experimental in life about that which is provisionally given to us with form.

Part I

Some Problems of Organization Theory and the Potential of Process Organization Theory

■ **SUMMARY**

The overall aim of this part is to contrast the basis of traditional organization theory with the demands for a theory that explains organizing in a world on the move. Organization theory was developed to explain the functioning of large formal systems. Although multiple developments have been made in the field to make it more applicable to a contingent, fluid world, some of the basic assumptions of traditional organization theory remain in place. The part contains two main chapters. The first chapter explains why certain assumptions hamper the ability of traditional organization theory to explain organizing in a world on the move. The second chapter discusses elements from process theory that necessitate theorizing organization differently.

2 Why Assumptions in Organization Theory Do Not Work for Explaining Organizing in a World on the Move

■ SUMMARY

This chapter proposes six assumptions that underlie traditional organization theory that have been directed towards the view of organizations as stable, delineated entities circumscribed by boundaries that separate them from their external environments. However, a number of changes have been taking place over the past couple of decades that invite a view of organizations as emergent processes of interaction between heterogeneous entities of widely different sizes, operating from different times and from different places. This makes it necessary to study the extent to which dominant assumptions underlying traditional organization theory respond to the emergent economic and social realities. The chapter begins with arguments about why it is important to assume a world on the move and then examines each of the six assumptions in turn.

2.1 Why it is Important to Assume a World on the Move

> Organization studies and theories are based on time-free statements.
>
> (Gherardi and Strati 1988: 149)

> No concept of motion is possible without the category of time.
>
> (Sorokin and Merton 1937: 615)

Almost forty years have now passed since Weick (1974), in a relatively little-cited paper in the *Academy of Management Journal*, urged scholars to pay attention to five types of settings, which he called 'someplace else' than large, established organizations. The five 'someplace else' that he suggested were: (a) everyday events, (b) everyday places, (c) everyday questions, (d) micro-organizations,