

# ‘Making a Difference’: The performative role of values in the constitution of organizations

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**Abstract.** This study provides an overview of the current literature of organizational values and offers a research agenda for the future investigation of values from a performative perspective. The article encourages methodological pluralism by indicating ways of studying how organizational values exhibit both ordering and disordering agency, and how the same value can have different modes of manifestation (espoused, attributed, shared, and/or aspirational, negotiated, and/or embodied/ embodying). By drawing on ethnographic methods and a study of a cooperative organization, the paper makes a twofold contribution to management and organization studies. Namely, the findings show that: a) values have *ordering* properties, since they foster identification and collective action when invoked by managers in day-to-day work; and b) values have *disordering* properties (generating tensions, resistance and discursive struggles) when these position people to speak on their behalf.

**Keywords:** organizational values, agency, communication constitutes organization (CCO)

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## INTRODUCTION

In predominant management research the agency of values is theorized from a multitude of approaches, although these conceptualizations are not clearly spelled out. What it is that makes values ‘powerful’, so to speak, has not yet been elucidated. On the one hand, prevailing management research indicates that values shape behavior and action by creating intrinsically shared loyalties among organizational members (Haack, Schoeneborn & Wickert, 2012) and by drawing human resources toward countless acts of cooperation with each other (Kotrba, Gillespie, Schmidt, Smerek, Ritchie & Denison, 2012). The assumption follows that it is the universally good and timeless character of values that has obvious and easily identifiable positive ordering implications if an organization uses a set of moral and ethical values such as meanings attached to human needs (i.e., democracy, equality, sustainability) and pragmatic organizational concerns (regulation, economic freedom, etc., King & Ehrhard, 1999). On the other hand, a stream of critical research notes that values can not only generate everyday positive experiences but can at the same time lead to tensions, alienation, mis- dis- identification and cynicism in organizations (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Studies indicate, for instance, that managers position themselves (and are positioned) as being moved and constrained by values (Chaput, Brummans & Cooren, 2011). These values express themselves in their actions and conversations, but frequently contradict or clash with each

other, thus creating the perception or experience of tensions (Cooren, et al., 2013). Nevertheless, studies examining the potential of values to simultaneously produce order and disorder as a result of their performative nature are scarce.

An established stream of research has indeed shown that manifold agencies are at play in any instance of organizing, in which both order and disorder occur simultaneously (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). This dialectic recognizes that order comes in various degrees, which means that disorder and messiness are inherent to organizational processes while being concurrent with order (Langley & Tsoukas, 2016). As a result, this paper does not assume a dichotomy between order and disorder, but treats them as a continuum. In every situation where organization emerges from efforts to order action around particular meanings, rules and values, disorder occurs in the form of confusion, struggles, negotiations and misunderstandings (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Recent studies indicate that the (dis)order dialectic is specific to instances when values are inscribed in texts. This is because these texts exceed their authors' full control since they leave the initial context of their creation, and authors point out that more research that addresses these dynamics is needed (Vásquez, Schoeneborn & Sergi, 2016). The aim of this article is to provide further insight into the relationship between organizational values and communication, specifically about how values are socially shaped and socially shaping of organizations in both ordering and disordering ways. Addressing this question is important as it will create more knowledge of the performative aspects of organizational values: i.e. of the capacity of values to define and express socio-material realities. For this reason, this paper draws on a stream of research that sees communication as constitutive of organization (labeled 'CCO') in order to expand management research by offering an innovative conceptual approach for analyzing how organizational values exhibit agency in day-to-day organizational interactions.

CCO is a relevant lens because it helps to show the performative nature of language since organizational realities are constituted through language interactions (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Talk, in this study, is not conceptualized as utterances employed to simply reflect and describe reality but to actively constitute reality. The CCO perspective is important as it reverses the 'common-sense' image of a manager who communicates values and then needs to do what he or she has said. Instead, language through its polyphonic characteristics is seen as having agency and as "speaking through" or ventriloquizing individuals (Cooren & Sandler, 2014: 226). This means that when individuals communicate it is not only a manager, say, who is speaking or writing to another manager, but also the specific values to which these interlocutors are attached and which are mobilized through their turns of talk (Cooren, et al., 2013). Values then have performative implications because these stimulate action and incant a wished-for future (Christensen, Morsing & Thyssen, 2013). Values, in other words, have a constitutive role, since through them organizations talk themselves into a new reality (Haack, Schoeneborn & Wickert, 2012). While the performative qualities of aspirational talk are the subject of an emerging stream of research across disciplines such as communication and organization studies (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), not much attention has been paid to the manifold ways in which values contribute to the constitution of organization in management research. Calls are therefore made for the study of how values exhibit agency and are made to speak ('ventriloquated') or express themselves

(‘ventriloquizing’ others) in a given organizational interaction, thereby constituting organization (Cooren & Sandler, 2014).

Because organizational values encompass a broad range of phenomena (e.g., values are usually investigated from multiple perspectives as elements of organizational identity and culture processes, AMR, 2000; Taylor, Irvin & Wieland, 2006), the scope of this paper narrows down to a study of the performative qualities of values for two reasons. Firstly, by focusing solely on exploring different theorizations of organizational values, this paper develops a conceptualization of values that problematizes (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) a dominant dichotomy between words and actions and the cause-effect rationale for the purpose of providing novel avenues for future management research. Secondly, by paying detailed attention to how values express themselves and are expressed in everyday interactions, the paper develops a novel conceptual framework that further expands the study of organizational values as iterative and ongoing textual elements that have ordering and disordering roles in the constitution of an organization (Chaput, et al., 2011).

The article proceeds as follows: it starts by discussing how current research on organizational values can be enriched by acknowledging the performativity of values, which contextualizes both their ordering and disordering agency. It then provides an overview of different conceptualizations of values in order to identify underexplored areas in existing organizational values research. The article next introduces the methods and case (Delta<sup>1</sup>, an international cooperative organization) and moves on to present the empirical findings that illustrate the ordering and disordering agency of values. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of a shift in perspective from a functionalist to a performative focus in management research in regards to the future study of organizational values.

## **THE PERFORMATIVITY OF ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES**

Values are emphasized in predominant management research as having positive managerial implications for organizations, such as fostering corporate social responsible behavior and employee commitment (Hansen, 2013). Studies often examine values as mere talk (that is, words without substance, often commonly understood as empty rhetoric, spin or greenwashing, Munshi & Kurian, 2005) and thus distinct from action (Brunsson, 1989). Organizations are expected to fulfill values and managers are frequently encouraged to ‘walk their talk’ (Maak & Pless, 2006). Talk is thus considered worthless and leaders are urged to act accordingly and prove that their actions are in alignment with their values (George & Sims, 2007). The ‘walk the talk’ mantra has migrated into practice, with solutions put forward for solving the presumed dichotomy between talk and action. For example, even when values conflict, managerial literature recommends that leaders should engage in acts of moral imagination that will enable them to align their actions with their talk without relying on simple tradeoffs: one can walk the talk by “discover[ing] possibilities within a particular set of circumstances [and] by expanding one’s operative mental framework” (Werhane & Moriarty, 2009: 4). While these conceptualizations provide many useful insights, there is less knowledge about the performative aspect of organizational values, i.e. the capacity values exhibit to make an organization present when invoked in interactions, which has both ordering and disordering properties.

1. Pseudonym used to protect the identities of the informants and organization.

Performativity is theorized based on established streams of literature across multiple fields such as sociology, accounting, and organization and management studies (for a special issue on critical performativity see Huault, et al., 2017). Originating from Austin's (1962) argument that to say something is always to do something, these discussions have expanded the philosophy of language across social sciences and economics (Butler, 1993; Loxley, 2007; Wickert & Schäfer, 2014). In linguistics, the ability of a spoken word to perform a change in a subject is defined as a perlocutionary act (Austin, 1962). The focus on speech acts has been taken on across a wide range of disciplines, including management, where studies show that non-humans can engage in illocutionary acts (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Performativity has been explored conceptually (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2015), philosophically (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1993), economically (MacKenzie, 2006), and as a normative, critical project (Fournier & Grey, 2000; Huault et al., 2017; Wickert & Schäfer, 2014). This paper does not aim to contribute to these discussions (Gond, et al., 2015) despite their evident importance. Given the present focus on organizational values, the main argument of this study is that 'talking values' does not simply label or reflect but also *constitutes* organizational realities. This provides a way of conceptualizing that values do not simply describe an external reality which remains unaffected and should ideally mirror organizational members' behavior (Kotrba, et al., 2012). Certainly, some emerging fields of research in organizational communication are more attuned to the idea that values, principles and ideals are not simply a matter of corporate greenwashing but are continuously inviting and expressing themselves in human interactions. In line with the broader literature on performativity, these approaches include a focus on how various elements such as values, ideals and principles (Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2016), with their related material artifacts (Ashcraft, et al., 2009), figures of speech (Cooren, et al., 2013) and spatiality (Vásquez & Cooren, 2013), play a central role in the constitution of organizations. Such a focus on the performativity of values emphasizes both their ordering and disordering agency, underscoring the perpetual movement between order and disorder (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). This study considers the agency of values to reside neither in humans nor in values themselves but in an oscillating process where individuals are positioned (or position themselves) as speaking in the name of values as if it were the values themselves that were speaking in the interactions (Cooren, 2015). This means that the locus of (dis)order is not in the individuals who (mis)understand some element of organizing. Nor is this an operation taking place within individual minds. Instead, (dis)order comes from larger sets of actions where humans, among other elements, often act in contradictory ways on behalf of a set of values, mandates, or a mission etc. to make an organization present in interactions (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009).

It is important to clarify that performativity in this study is not used in the sense of efficiency (such as, how effective values are when it comes to shaping managerial practice); rather, the term is used to highlight the ordering and disordering agency of values. A performative standpoint is therefore relevant as it paves novel research avenues by allowing the analyst to jettison the dualism between values and actions and the framing of individuals in psychological terms as vessels carrying values into ontologically separate organizations. Performativity-based understandings of values challenge the basic tenet of functionalist approaches that values are distinct from action. This is because such functionalist approaches, when promoting ideas such as "walk the talk" (Maak & Pless, 2006), tend

to overemphasize the dichotomy between “the walk” and “the talk”. What they miss is the importance of acknowledging the “plenum of agency” (Cooren, 2006, p. 81), i.e. the many voices (not only human ones) that express themselves in interactions. This is not to say that values alone are responsible for producing interactional possibilities, since order emerges from systems with many elements that are fully but not densely connected with one other (Anderson & Meyer, 2016). Values are only one of these elements but many others are at play and possess agency, e.g., objects, machines, as well as thoughts, rules, and so on, that make organization happen (Cooren, 2015). Of course, not every instance of communication implicates values. As research shows, values only surface in certain organizational interactions often in implicit (e.g. when specific choices are made or lines of action are adopted in accordance with a value) or explicit ways (when individuals position themselves as speaking in the name of a value). When this happens, the performative character of values (Cooren, et al., 2013) resides in their *positioning* capacity that causes individuals to get *attached* to (and be driven by) them in interactions. Speaking in the name of transparency, for instance, as is shown later, suggests that a manager is attached to this value, which creates the impression that she or he is driven by it. The notion of attachment or clinging is useful because it denotes both constraint, by being tied to something, and also captures the fact that we do not always consciously choose the values to which we are attached or that identify us in a certain way (Cooren, et al., 2013). For this reason, values should not be reduced to simple functional instruments or resources that are employed by people for ordering purposes and to achieve specific goals in interactions (Kotrba, et al., 2012). Values (which can be contradictory) manage to inhabit and drive interactions, since they are capable of extending or transcending what their interlocutors say and do, also causing disorder (tensions, confusion, etc.). In this respect, human beings are driven by the values they invoke, yet values are also driven by them. Attachments to values then constitute who and what individuals are, what they want, feel or must do, and what they believe or stand by, etc. (Cooren, 2015).

In sum, values are often considered to be “abstract and difficult to pinpoint” (Aust, 2004: 516) even though an emerging stream of research provides methodological and conceptual ways of approaching these phenomena (Chaput, et al., 2011). To avoid such ambiguity, values are defined in this paper as the common beliefs and priorities of a group of people, which are expressed and express themselves in interactions, thus directing and telling organizational members what is more important, what to pay attention to, and how to interpret meanings (Driskill & Brenton, 2011). By drawing on the CCO lens, the paper provides a shift in perspective from a functionalist to a performative role of values, which is important as it enriches the current analytical repertoire of organizational values in management research. In doing so, the next section provides a brief review of the literature on organizational values, focusing on the way values and their agency are conceptualized, while stressing that these conceptions can be present in the same value.

## **CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES**

The following review was carried out through using the Web of Science and Scopus databases from the period 1980 to 2016. Due to the interest in providing an overview of extant research on values, articles were selected with the highest citation index based on the Journal Citation

Reports' impact factor (Reuters, 2012). Subsequently, 1,252 articles were obtained through a search of the Boolean terms "organizational values" across domains such as social sciences, science and technology and humanities. The results were narrowed down to 263 by analyzing the abstracts of articles that were situated in research areas such as business, economics, sociology and psychology and which analyzed theoretically or empirically values in organizations. To ensure the reliability of the selected articles, a research assistant conducted a separate parallel search of the articles based on the Boolean terms "organizational values" across the same databases and then compared the results with the author, resulting in a reliability coefficient of 0.96 (Holsti, 1969). For the purpose of this analysis, only those articles that had both an empirical and a theoretical focus on organizational values were selected (thus those articles that focused on personal values in organizations were not included), which led to a final sample of 64 articles and book chapters. To avoid the risk of missing the most cited papers in journals not present in the respective databases searched, we compared the results with a search on the Google Scholar database, and only three articles would have been added. Thus it can be said that the review is based on extant state-of-the-art research on organizational values.

The review was based on a manual content analysis which resulted in six partial but related categories of values derived directly from the texts reviewed, namely: values espoused (by top management); values attributed (to the organization); values shared (by organizational members); aspirational values (for organizational members); negotiated values (by organizational members); and embodied/embodying values (in organizational interactions). The categories emerged based on meaningful clusters (e.g., sharedness, negotiation, etc.) that were indicative of how values and their agency are conceptualized in current research. The neat distinction between different conceptualizations is inevitably somewhat artificial, since some of the research reviewed concepts cut across the types and dimensions. Nevertheless, these demarcations help demonstrate existing developments in current research and set up connections for paving a future research agenda in underexplored areas.

Indicating the different conceptualizations of organizational values is relevant because it highlights traditional and novel ways of examining values: how values are manifested or manifest themselves, and how values are performative in terms of their agency. This is important methodologically, since it allows the analyst to investigate the agency of values when these are unequivocally present in conversations or texts and to map their ordering and disordering implications. In addition, it allows the analyst to examine the agency of values and how they shape organizational behavior in fundamental ways even though they can appear in inconspicuous, indirect or invisible ways to most organizational subjects. Nevertheless, this is not to say that the indicated conceptions are opposed, exhaustive and mutual exclusive. The same value can be conceptualized in different ways as having both ordering and disordering agency. For purposes of clarity, however, and in an attempt to systematically demarcate underlying assumptions for developing new ways of inquiry, the next section lays out the different conceptualizations of values separately according to their agency and modes of manifestation.

In research that theorizes the ordering agency of values, three overall types can be identified that demarcate how values manifest themselves or are manifested in interactions: by being espoused by top management, by being attributed to the organization, and by being shared by organizational members. Typically understood through qualities such as

“core” and “enduring” (Kessler, 2013: 531), espoused values are analyzed as invoked by top management in order to intentionally drive the way employees make decisions and act in organizations. Studies show that the agency or ‘power’ of values resides in their continuous invocation and articulation by managers, which provides them with an enduring, unitary or stable quality (van der Wal, de Graaf & Lasthuizen, 2008). The emphasis is placed on their ordering agency because when values are present “explicitly in corporate documents” (Bansal, 2003: 518) they have the ability to create order by prompting the implementation and coordination of collective action (Barley & Kunda, 1992). When inscribed in texts (e.g. in human resource management policies, corporate philosophy statements, memos and annual letters to stakeholders and shareholders), values are performative because they come to “create and represent value consensus across an organization’s senior members” (Driskill & Brenton, 2011: 31). Studies show, for example, the capacity of espoused values to direct action and generate order by examining how “leaders and managers follow the core values that they set for the rest of the organization” (Fey & Denison, 2003: 703).

Attribution is the second mode of manifestation that can be identified in the research specific to literature on the ordering agency of values. Attributed values are those values that come to be acted upon, since these are the indicators for assessing whether or not the organization’s actions are representative of its values (Ostroff, Shin & Kinicki, 2005). Attributed values create order and underlie decision-making since they are values acted upon while espoused values are something which is claimed. Thus the difference between attributed values and espoused values lies in their enactment, since attributed values are singled out “from those that may be espoused but not enacted” (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013: 500). Studies explore attributed values by examining the way top managers are driven to engage (or not) in behaviors aligned with the values they invoke in order to recognize patterns of past decisions and therefore attribute the values to the firm (Balazs, 1990). A certain dualism between action and talk is promoted here retrospectively, since the methodological steps employed mandate one to:

- 1) compare what it [the organization] says to what it does and find out if there are differences between espoused values and values in use; 2) study the values over time to see if the values are merely rhetorical or whether they are actually used as premises for decisions; and 3) examine whether the values have an impact or whether they always lose out in conflicts between money, power and values. (Thyssen, 2009: 112)

The performativity of attributed values is usually examined by looking into the way values that are positioned by managers in annual reports act by driving the history and future of the organization (Sagiv, Schwartz & Arieli, 2011).

Sharedness is a third mode of manifestation that can be identified in studies exploring the ordering agency of values. Research examines the way shared values have performative properties through their virtue of embodying the “essence of organizations” (Aust, 2004: 516, Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton & Corley, 2013). Studies indicate that when shared values are invoked in interactions they instill order by driving employee identification (van Rekom, Soenen, Ravasi & Lerpold, 2007) and eliminating the risk of hypocrisy and legitimacy gaps (Ostroff, et al., 2005; Kotrba, et al., 2012). Methodologically, this entails the examination of how managers who position themselves as speaking in the name of shared

values act in consistency with them since they “have no other choice” (Fey & Denison, 2003: 698) than to submit to the values that uphold them.

In sum, three modes of manifestation can be arguably mapped in current research that looks at the ordering agency of values: e.g., espoused, attributed and shared. The underlying assumption of such research rests on consensus among organizational members, since organizational values are typically defined as “socially shared cognitive representations of institutional goals and demands” (Rokeach, 1979: 50). The default explanation of such theorizing of values is based on intra-organizational homogeneity and is specific to a functionalist view of organizations (Parsons, 1956). Values are typically conceptualized based on a dichotomy between words and actions, that is, as communicative acts that are the product of organizational structures (generated by shifting and conflicting institutional fields (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In this case, consistency is the *raison d'être*, since congruence between the values the organization communicates, on the one hand, and its actions and structures on the other, is considered to help maintain a positive reputation, legitimacy and access to resources (Parsons, 1956). Studies contributing to this stream of literature tend to assume rationally bounded organizational members who internalize managerial values and act (usually with a lesser degree of dissent or resistance) according to their management's instructions. Values are, to this extent, examined as having ordering agency, i.e., a positive relationship with productivity (Dawn, Brent & Wilf, 2000), employee commitment (Ostroff, et al., 2005) and stakeholder relations (Voss, Cable & Voss, 2000). The underlying rationale inspiring such research, while undoubtedly valuable, raises important questions concerning the orderly and disorderly nature of organization, since disorder tends to simultaneously accompany efforts to create order when organizing (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). However, the literature remains at a relatively abstract or theoretical level of analysis, and the exploration of the disordering character of values is limited, despite the fact that disorder is interwoven in the very fabric of organizing (Vásquez, et al., 2016). Thus, the second part of the review that follows next enriches the understanding of organizational values by focusing on their disordering agency.

Aspirational values are the first type of values that can be identified in emerging research that conceptualizes their disordering agency. The performative implications of aspirational values are typically examined by mapping their progressive evolution and manifestation in daily interactions. For instance, the value of efficiency was found to act as a driving force often with long-term negative consequences (e.g., burnout) in the organizational members' incessant efforts to become better at given tasks (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Similarly, the value of sustainable development has been found to exhibit disordering properties, since it leads organizational members to question formal designations of unity as it exists in contradiction with other values such as efficiency (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). At the same time, aspirational values have also been found to generate micro-level twists and turns that ultimately perform/institute conflicting realities. Studies of corporate social responsibility strategies have shown, for instance, that rather than being empty talk and different from action, “[c]orporate eco-talk participates in (re)creating the firm and (re)constructing its relationship to nature, while opening up novel possibilities of understanding and action at the societal level” (Livesey & Graham, 2007: 336; see also Christensen, et al., 2013). Similarly, research has shown that aspirational values can lead to an inevitable gradual or “creeping commitment” (Haack, et al., 2012: 835) to specific agendas that

may be in opposition to initial strategic decisions due to fears of public scrutiny and reputational damage.

Negotiated values are a second mode of manifestation that is identified as having disordering properties. When invoked in interactions, values become the basis of discursive struggle since they come to represent numerous conflicting interests in organizational lives (Putnam, 2004). Studies conceptualizing values from this standpoint focus on their paradoxes and unintended consequences: instead of being conducive to positive employee relations as a result of their presumed unifying and enduring features, values can lead to disorder in the form of resistance to organizational procedures. That is, values are inconsistent when they translate into everyday interactions, clashing with one another and bringing to light key conflicts in the organizational lives of staff members (Meyer, 1995). Values exhibit disordering agency by generating conflict since they are continuously renegotiated, debated and sustained in the "interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals" (Putnam & Poole, 1987: 552). Studies of transnational organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund have shown, for instance, that the positioning of values such as sustainability, instead of creating consensus, have led to disorder and a failure to meet the expectations of conflicting interest groups and have generated at least as much conflict as they promised to resolve (Peterson & Franks, 2006).

Finally, embodied/embodying values are a third form of manifestation specific to emerging studies focusing on the disordering agency of values. On the one hand, values are theorized as embodied in texts, artifacts, etc. in a way that they come to speak on behalf of an organizational collective "we" (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). In this respect, studies explore how values can be mobilized in various ways, and show that values, depending on the situations in which they are positioned and the people who invoke them, have multiple modes of existence and therefore often contradict each other (Cooren, et al., 2013). In other words, because values express themselves in different ways in ongoing interactions, they frequently lead to contradictions in the enactment of actual situations, which produces the experience of disorder and struggles among organizational members. On the other hand, organizational values are conceptualized not only as being *embodied* in texts and making the organization present, but also simultaneously *embodying* the organization. Studies examine how values enable, re-shape, and re-produce the organization, since they are continuously debated, fixed and changed ties that bind members together as an organization (Chaput, et al., 2011). Such recursive interplay between embodied and embodying values permits investigation into how organizational members end up defining values that progressively transform themselves into norms and rules, which eventually become official policies that enable collective organizing (Cooren, 2015). The focus of such research aims to understand how various elements (values, principles, managers, documents, etc.) become bound together and co-produce a collective organizational actor that acts and speaks on their behalf. Studies drawing on this standpoint explore the way in which organizational values create disorder and a site of struggle for control, since these values are active elements with the power to both re-present and rearrange the organization (Rennstam, 2012).

In short, this review has provided an overview of the different conceptions of values in management and organizational communication studies. In doing so, the review has enhanced the conceptual clarity of organizational values by identifying a variety of uses and theoretical definitions across

management and organization fields of research. The review emphasizes the importance of expanding research that theorizes the disordering agency of values, since this is an underdeveloped approach despite the fact that values have the capacity to influence organizational behavior and all forms of human agency. It is indeed highly relevant to gain insight into how to locate values in communication, especially when the same value can be conceptualized in the same way. Thus, this study proceeds to an empirical analysis that indicates ways of examining the ordering and disordering properties of values. The paper investigates the following research questions:

*How are organizational values expressed and how do they express themselves in day-to-day interactions?*  
*What ordering and disordering implications do these have for organizational activities?*

These questions were investigated by analyzing the communicative interactions in Delta. Prior to introducing the analysis, the following section describes the methods, and data collection process.

## METHODS

### DATA COLLECTION

Drawing on a multi-sited ethnographic study of Delta, this article examines a strategy of developing and communicating organizational values. Cooperatives are organizations in which cooperative values inform the democratic governance structure (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Thus, Delta was chosen as a site for inquiry because it provided a diverse range of parameters (Baxter & Jack, 2008) in mapping the ways in which organizational values fundamentally shape interactions and behavior in organizations. The data were collected during nine months of multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1998) in Delta, an organization where I worked as a seconded communication manager from 2014 to 2015. Delta is an international advocacy cooperative organization, i.e. it works to influence international policy in favor of cooperatives. Delta's daily activities are defined as advocacy, that is, "the preparation, analysis, decision-making and communication related to the consultation process vis-à-vis governmental institutions" (Delta Annual Report, 2011: 2). As cooperative, Delta is owned not by shareholders but by all of its 139 member organizations from 28 countries (each with an equal right to vote for its strategies). Thus Delta's governance structure is based on democratic decision-making and collective management. Its members meet annually to elect two co-presidents, the board of directors and the executive council. Delta's headquarters is run by a small staff of seven individuals: two executive directors, two line managers, two interns and one secretary. Delta was selected for investigation because in organizations such as cooperatives with decentralized, democratic power structures, egalitarian values such as community, participation or democracy will tend to predominate and direct action (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). As a result, Delta constituted a rich case that provided a wide number of parameters for investigating the agency of values.

This ethnographic design was selected in order to provide a richer context for the analysis of values, since I gained access to observe and participate in a strategy designed to develop and communicate values to all Delta members, which amounted to producing corporate texts that

incorporated values (a press release, flip chart and manifesto). I followed the trajectories of the texts, investigating the relations of which these were part and their ordering and disordering properties (Chaput, et al. 2011). This design allowed me to understand how values are established, which relationships and actions are defined by values, and how managers make values present in given interactions. The data set comprises: a) two three-hour staff meetings in which executives developed the values contained in the texts; b) one four-hour board meeting where the texts were discussed and approved by executives; c) 17 semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 50 minutes, with managers involved in the creation of the texts; and d) 82 single-spaced pages of field notes of observations taken when recording was not possible during day-to-day work situations and of Delta communication material (emails, documents, photos).

#### MULTI-SITED FIELDWORK AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The focus of this study is to expand research on organizational values and show how a performative perspective can highlight the intricate and complex dialectics that values introduce in organizational settings. While video/voice recordings were the primary methods used, detailed notes were taken when recording was not possible. This happened because a video camera is always potentially intrusive, especially since people tend to regard it as surveillance technology (Lindof & Taylor, 2010). In this respect, despite their obvious limitations of not being able to capture fully the richness of audio and visual settings, the field notes taken are treated as instances of discourse (Chaput, et al., 2011). This ethnographic approach allowed the identification of both verbal and non-verbal markers of communication that indicated the key elements (i.e., values, texts or digital artifacts) that appeared to dictate how people talked and acted. This was either because these elements appeared to matter to them (e.g., the value of "transparency" surfaced again and again in Delta members' discourse and they often spoke in the name of the members' rights) or because elements expressed themselves in managers' speech and action without suggesting that these managers were overtly or necessarily attached to values of democracy in an explicit manner (e.g., sometimes Delta members' positions could be deduced from the directness with which they expressed themselves). The ethnographic design allowed me to show how values 'made a difference' in the way Delta's presence was coproduced and dealt with through interactions in this context. For example, Delta stopped being simply an abstraction when I observed managers acting (voting) on Delta's behalf in board meetings or when I saw Delta's president negotiating its presence with local authorities. Therefore, an important aspect of the ethnographic analysis involved identifying the markers based on how these expressed themselves on a recurrent, iterative basis in the recorded interactions. These markers were relatively explicit in specific turns of talk (e.g. when Delta representatives kept positioning themselves as speaking in the name of the value of democracy, which can qualify as an espoused value) or relatively implicit (e.g. when specific choices were made or lines of action were adopted, which can be an embodied/embodying value, Cooren, et al., 2013). The multi-sited fieldwork approach provided therefore a measure of triangulation, as most of the data were evaluated in relation to at least one other data source. The collected data were analyzed based on grounded theory using an online database via the NVivo software. The unit of analysis was one sentence or one image. Each unit was itemized based on lower-level actions (an utterance or a gesture), whose selection was

influenced by the analyst's experience during data collection with field notes and repeated watching of the video data. A collection of lower-level actions constituted a higher-level action, i.e., a conversation about values in a staff meeting (Norris & Maier, 2014), which was then subjected to coding.

Furthermore, in order to examine how organizational values manifest and are manifested in both explicit and implicit ways in the observed instances of discourse, the data were analyzed through discourse analysis (DA). This method was selected because it facilitates the study of unobtrusive or indirect meanings in texts which "are related to underlying beliefs, but are not openly, directly, completely or precisely asserted" (Van Dijk, 2001: 104). Since organizational values are the kinds of meanings that are often alluded to without being explicitly expressed, DA allowed me to spotlight this information which is "part of the mental model of a text, but not of the texts itself" (Van Dijk, 2001: 104). Subsequently, through the study of communicative interactions I was able to reveal the presence of organizational values in texts. To analyze the images through which organizational members communicated values, I used multimodal discourse analysis (mDA) (Manchin, 2013). In this respect mDA was used in conjunction with DA analysis to facilitate the analysis of interactions that were subject to computer mediation (images posted on social media, email exchanges, live streams of board meetings online). Through mDA, both lower-level mediated actions were analyzed (smile, gaze, technological object handling) as well as high level ones (those actions that social actors usually intend to perform and/or are aware of and/or pay attention to, such as several utterances chained together by speakers, gaze shifts, postural shifts and so on) were analyzed. By combining these methods, I was able to identify the presence of mediated discourses which appeared in ways that might not be obvious and that are much more difficult to express through language, since images tend not to have such fixed meaning, or at least the producer can claim that it was more suggestive and open to various interpretations. This methodological approach permitted the identification of how values unfold upstream and downstream (Cooren & Sandler, 2014), i.e.: a) how values are made present by managers in similar and dissimilar situations, and b) which values represent the managers and make them speak.

Finally, the findings from both the ethnographic and discourse analyses were coded by highlighting potential markers of value identification, such as the use of pronouns, repeated keywords, or giving explicit accounts about Delta's activities and history (Chaput, et al., 2011). Recurring substantive codes were clustered into themes (Lindof & Taylor, 2010). First-level coding involved repeated comparison and contrast of recurring threads in the data, which allowed me to identify open and focused codes that illustrated the way values were present in inconspicuous or obvious ways in the communicative acts that guided individuals' actions ("increasing our visibility; showing who we are; exposing our values" (interview, manager)). Second-level or axial coding permitted me to label four key themes that demonstrate the agency of values diachronically: the first illustrates how values are informally discussed between managers when setting up a press conference; the second presents how values materialize in the interactions of managers working in the cooperative house; the third indicates how values are handwritten on a flip chart during a staff meeting; and the fourth shows how values are inscribed in a cooperative manifesto. The analysis is next presented based on these four incidents (the press release, the "mad house", the flip chart and the manifesto), and shows that when values are

invoked by organizational members, identification and order are only partial implications. Values at the same time introduce disorder in the form of contradictions, tensions and authority struggles.

## **THE (DIS)ORDERING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES IN DELTA**

### THE PRESS RELEASE

The values of solidarity, subsidiarity and transparency are inscribed on the first page of Delta's annual report in bold letters: "We are united with due respect to our differences making alive the principles of solidarity, transparency and subsidiarity. Together we are stronger to assert our identity, to defend and promote our specificities" (Delta Annual Report, 2011: 1). These values, as Delta managers indicated in many similar instances, were relied upon in annual reports, on the website and official documents because they were considered to instill collective and accountable decision-making and strategic cooperation: "[...] one member, one vote. Everyone has a voice here, not like in multinationals where only shareholders get to call the shots" (manager, interview). The inscription of values in Delta's annual reports and other official texts indicates that these can be conceptualized as espoused. Delta's top management expected these values to ultimately become shared and introduce ordering properties such as fostering identification within the employee-organization relationship (Maak & Pless, 2006; Hansen, 2013). While nevertheless important, conceptualizing the values only as belonging to the espoused and shared categories, would present a one-sided understanding of values since it implies a tendency to focus only on their ordering agency while overlooking the disorderly aspects of values. At first glance, it indeed seemed that Delta's cooperative values exhibited ordering agency through their capacity to "enable creative and productive action" (Barley & Kunda, 1992: 364). Over a period of twelve months, Delta's values, the "cooperative ethos", surfaced on a day-to-day basis during the interactions I witnessed at lunch breaks, team meetings, board meetings, coffee breaks, and in emails, etc. Needless to say, the values not only manifested themselves in "the way the board [of directors] desired" (manager, interview), that is, by having ordering properties and being espoused, shared and attributed. At the same time, the values were positioned and positioned managers in contradictory manners, leading sometimes to dis-identification and resistance among individuals, which is evidence of their negotiated aspect. Nevertheless, in spite of occasional resistance, the values generated the impetus of unity and collective identification "we" because organizational members were positioned by the values to work around common goals, which led the values to become ultimately "shared", at least temporarily, among Delta's employees. This vacillation shows that the same value can be conceptualized as being both shared and negotiated.

Furthermore, values could be conceptualized as both shared and attributed when they produce order and exhibit the capacity to define the actions, roles and authority positions of organizational members (Seeger & Ulmer, 2003). As indicated by the following field note excerpt from a board meeting:

I check my wristwatch and it's 9.56 am. Twelve managers sit around the U-shaped table of the meeting room. All wear headsets on their ears listening to the live translation from two booths in the back where two translators were whispering each word the president was uttering from Italian into English. I am in charge of taking the minutes of the meeting and I type as fast as I can. The first item on the agenda is about a press release which Delta is supposed to organize the following week. The president says "the *cooperative values are our DNA*. They help us become visible to our member organizations. *We have agreed to do this* [he holds up the press release which was signed by all managers in the room] *to help all of our members perceive the importance of our policies*". Everyone else around the table nods, seemingly in agreement. The president then adds, while pointing with his finger to the document on the table: "Basically, at the press conference we will discuss our values as the strategic guideline for next year. It [the press release] is the result of different consultation processes, different priorities over how *we want to appear to our members*. We received quite a number of recommendations from our members, not always converging towards a single aim." (field note excerpt from a board meeting, 2015, emphasis added)

In the above interaction, values manifest themselves as shared and attributed ("values are our DNA") since they guide managers' decision-making by acting as a "strategic guideline" which is a form of subversive control (Barley & Kunda, 1992). This is evidence that values can be theorized as belonging simultaneously to the shared and attributed categories since they are a way of controlling how Delta's existence is perceived and experienced by its members. The managers appeal to values not only to make Delta present ("appear to our members") but also to ensure that Delta is presentified in a certain way by explaining to their members ("we have to help our members understand") what this presence implies, that is, what this presence should mean to them or how they should make sense of it (Cooren, Brummans & Charrieras, 2008). However, conceptualizing values as having the ability to shape managerial action solely in a rational and orderly manner may offer only a one-sided understanding of their role in organizations. This is because, as the following analysis indicates, when invoked or when "*folded within*" (Cooren & Sandler, 2014: 234, italics in original) organizational interactions, values can generate as much disorder as order. In Delta's case, the cooperative values (i.e., solidarity, subsidiarity, transparency, community and democracy) initially exhibited ordering qualities, specific to the espoused values category, since these prompted collective action across multiple sites and organizational levels: discussed informally between managers in the park, handwritten on a flip chart, inscribed in a press release and cooperative manifesto, stated in staff and board meetings, coffee breaks and in email exchanges, etc. At the same time, Delta's set of values, the ethos which was inscribed in a corporate text ("the press release"), while being promoted to Delta's member organizations and the public, also had the capacity to "embody", i.e. make Delta present as an organization present (see Cooren, 2015). These findings show that the same values can be theorized as pertaining to both espoused and embodying categories due to their performative properties. This is also indicated by the following excerpt from a team meeting where managers from Delta and its member organizations manipulated and were being manipulated by Delta's values:

David (manager, Delta): If we issue the press release with the [values'] paragraphs and your [the member organizations'] logos on the same level with ours, it [the press release] will be emphasizing the equal relations with Delta, *it [the press release] will weaken our leading position.*

James (manager, X cooperative): So, I mean, in the document we foresee a very broad message, taken from each organization. I mean, it [the press release] should put everybody together in agreement since it [the press release] shows what *we've done in the past and in what way we should become more visible to our members from now on*, and that's all.

Ellen (manager, Y cooperative): Yeah. I think it would be good that in the press release about Delta you would still have a paragraph from each [organization]... But (.) I mean *the values for us are more technical and we would like to write that paragraph.*

Tim (manager, Delta): Well, that's the problem. You don't seem to be on the same page with us.

Diana (manager, L cooperative): Of course you have to keep in mind the differences across organizations (.) but I mean..(.)... I think our values concerns all of us when setting it [press release] up. We need to recognize the diversity, but still to keep it [press release] broad to connect to all. (fieldnote fragment from a team meeting, 2014, emphasis added).

The negotiation over the press release shows the ability of values to presentify Delta, since speaking and acting in an organization's name can always become a source of concern because it affects how its mode of being is co-constructed (Cooren, et al., 2013). Each manager was positioned by the values in a certain way ("for us it's more technical") and framed the others as opponents ("you don't seem to be on the same page with us"), which defined their roles and authority ("will weaken our leading position"). During the meeting, the managers were repeatedly embodied by, and embodying the values, in contrasting ways, and pressed for the inclusion of their own position in the press release despite the presumed sharedness ("we need to recognize diversity, but"). The discursive struggle took place and continued throughout the following weeks because Delta is made present by its values and can therefore be questioned, obstructed, altered, etc., at all times. While the values had been temporarily shared by managers during the board meeting a week before, in this instance the values created disorder since these manifested differently and continuously shifted between shared, aspirational, attributed qualities in interactions, creating the experience of tensions and contradictions ("well that's the problem"). After the meeting ended, in a brief email exchange between myself and two Delta managers in charge of the press release coordination, the managers hinted at the feeling of disorder introduced by the values they were experiencing, which deemed collective action "impossible":

Me: How do you think it [the meeting] went? Can we go forward with it [the press release]? [It] [s]eems we share the values, but [we're] still not in agreement.

David (manager, Delta): We share, yes. But sharedness is something that does not mirror the complexity of the situation.

Tim (manager, Delta): Cooperating in cooperatives? Impossible.

## THE MAD HOUSE

At times, Delta's values exhibited ordering properties in the form of providing managers with the basis for identification and a way to assert their collective identity, which is evidence of the shared qualities of values. Concurrently, Delta's values continued to induce disorder and to generate struggles, proof of values' negotiated and embodied/embodying properties. Managers reported experiencing an atmosphere which was described through the "madhouse" metaphor—a wordplay on the name of Delta's headquarters, the cooperative house. This common feeling occurred because values often temporarily disrupted authority positions among managers given their capacity to "transpire" differently, as the following field note fragment illustrates:

I enter a wide-ceilinged meeting room where two Delta senior managers await to provide me with an introductory overview of Delta's lobbying activities. On the table there are three copies of Delta's annual report. One manager turns to me, smiles and says loudly "So, welcome to the madhouse!" After a one second hiatus, everyone, including myself, laughed in a rather artificial manner, as we tried to appear relaxed—we were all a bit anxious. We then started going through the reports. During the lunch break, I was sitting together with one of the managers on one of the benches of the small garden situated in front of our building. While opening my lunchbox, I asked the manager what the "madhouse" was about. He answered while pointing at the "madhouse" with his plastic white fork: "Well, you know, Delta is a young organization. We have been leading for seven years only. *We all share the cooperative ethos, but also because of it* everyone else does not want to renounce their leading [advocacy] role here with the government, especially the top managers. *Everybody is defending their turf* and they all want to be out there". The second manager, who had joined us on the bench meanwhile, added: "I mean, we do have a challenge in terms of communication, trust and transparency. There is a strong discrepancy between how our values transpire to the local [cooperatives], national [associations], and macro level [member organizations] and you [Delta] (field note fragment, 2014, emphasis added)

While Delta's values were repeatedly invoked as shared "our values", when manifesting in interactions the value of cooperation clashed with the value of transparency as these materialized in "discrepant" ways and caused "everyone to defend their turf". The values oscillated between the shared category (providing the basis for collective identification, "we all share the cooperative ethos"), and the negotiated one (spurring discursive struggles that impeded decision-making among Delta managers in everyday organizing). One instance indicative of the negotiated nature of values occurred the following week in a "closed-door" meeting about finalizing the details of the press release, despite the aim of creating sharedness and increase identification between employees and the organization, "*our cooperative identity*" (staff meeting, manager). One manager described such closed-door meetings, in which only top managers participated, as involving "only politics, not exactly mutual cooperation in there" (staff meeting, manager), therefore implicitly positioning Delta's top management in opposition with their espoused value of cooperation. During the meeting the manager continued to invoke the values of cooperation and community

in an implicit manner in order to (rhetorically) question the present lack of unity and strategic consensus. Delta's values shifted from the shared to the negotiated category since they contrasted with Delta's management intentions and thus became contested across its complex international structure, creating tensions that threatened Delta's collective identification processes and "unity":

Tim: Do we represent Delta or not? We say so everywhere but there is much ambiguity and no straightforward answer can be provided about who we are. *In moments like these when we can't really decide on our agenda I don't feel our unity.*

Allen: I echo that. Our member organizations *do not understand* what we do (.) *our values* (.) they are too far from the political scene. *We need to provide them* with more information and make our activities clearer since we are facing difficulties (fieldnote fragment from staff meeting, 2014, emphasis added).

As evidence of their negotiated manifestations, Delta's values also introduced disorder since they led managers to question the top management's "unity" and authority ("do we represent Delta or not?") and decision-making ("we can't really decide", "we are facing difficulties"). Delta's values had the capacity of presentifying Delta in conflicting ways across different sites, which happened when managers set up the invitation letters for the press conference. The letters became an object of discursive struggle, which is also proof of their negotiated properties.

Despite the fact that during the board meeting the managers had agreed beforehand to coordinate the press conference as a shared event driven by common values, each sent their own letter to Delta's stakeholders in order to gain authority, which fueled the discursive struggle over their "unity":

I wonder if we really give the impression of unity. I don't know. If a politician receives three different letters from our managers that are part of the same organization [Delta] I don't believe it gives a good sense of who we are. So I think that maybe we should *cooperate* more and be more consistent with our values (Board Member, Board Meeting)

By manifesting themselves in interaction and being included in the letters, the values made Delta present as an organization (Chaput, et al., 2011). In doing so, the letters did not simply and passively disclose something (e.g., letters announcing the press conference and stating Delta's cooperative values). Instead, by espousing cooperative values the letters had the capacity to *represent* Delta as a collectivity and *make it present* in different contradictory ways to others and to its own organizational members (Brummans, et al., 2016). As indicated in the manager's response during the board meeting, the letters by containing Delta's values were constitutive of Delta's collective identity in a disorderly and fragmented way, which is evidence of the values' espoused and negotiated manifestations:

Delta makes a proposal [of the press release], tables it to the board, we agree, meet and now we hear that this idea might be dropped because of the disagreements over who [managers] is to be in it [press release]. There is a consistency problem. And you cannot send a letter to a politician that we are going to stage a press conference and then we change our mind. It's not consistent with who we are. If we don't stage a press conference it will be detrimental to our image (Manager, board meeting)

Furthermore, while Delta's values of solidarity, subsidiarity and transparency imply and dictate that people help each other because they are part of an organization, these materialized in conflicting manners. The letters acted as embodiments of their values which came to speak by, to, and for themselves (Cooren & Sandler, 2014: 226), evidence of their embodied and embodying manifestations. The following field note fragment illustrates the ways in which the value of democracy exhibited embodying properties as it prompted managers to act in both meaningful and "meaningless" ways:

The voting cards are scattered in boxes all over the office. I am sorting them into three piles, yes, no and abstentions. We are preparing for the board meeting where the press release proposal is to be announced. While the piles increase in size, I find myself thinking that it would be very difficult to count the votes in a room full of people. There are eighty-four persons and some will hold up more voting cards than others, since those who pay higher membership fees and have larger cooperatives have more votes. While still sorting, I ask Tim, the manager sitting on the other side of the room: 'How do you count the votes?' After a second of silence, he leans on his chair back from the computer and utters, in a cynical tone while waving his hand in dismissal, 'Don't worry, they will never vote for it [the press release proposal]'. He then suddenly gets up and says grinning 'Oh, I need to tell this to Allen and leaves the room. I hear them both laughing on their way back to our office. Allen comes and puts a hand on my shoulder, smiles and says 'Come on, do you think anyone ever voted for a change in the history of Delta?'. I feel puzzled but manage to smile and prepare myself to ask 'the why' question but the sound of the coffee machine in the hallway coming through the opened door stops me. As I turn around, I see Tim looking at us. While dismissively throwing a sugar cube in his cup, he adds with a vehement tone, 'It is the problem of today's democracy. They come and take these voting cards and it's meaningless'. But, to my surprise, something that contradicts this happened the next day at the board meeting: during the voting session one board member lifted up a no vote sign while adding "[w]e oppose it [the press release] because it is not in line with how we co-operate" (fieldnote fragment, 2014, emphasis added).

In this situation, the board member invoked the value and was thus positioned by the value to act (vote) in its name. The value led the board member to hold up the no voting sign, and explicitly mention the value of cooperation ("how we co-operate"). As a result, instead of creating consensus, the cooperation value exhibited disordering agency since it materialized in opposition ("not in line") and interfered with what the value meant for him.

#### THE FLIP CHART

In the light of the "no vote" that occurred at the board meeting, Delta's top management organized a workshop in which managers were supposed to design a strategy that would help communicate Delta's values in a consistent way. Delta's managers were well aware of the performative implications that values can have and thus they attempted to control the way values were making individuals act. This happened because the values exhibited the capacity to motivate what organizational members say, evidence of their shared properties. Delta's top management then

hoped the values would also direct managers' collective identities to converge in one direction, that is, achieving an identical character between what they say, do and are (Cooren, 2015). The following excerpt from a workshop with Delta's managers is indicative of the many instances where the cooperative values exhibited embodied and embodying properties, because in being made present through communication they simultaneously make managers speak and define their actions:

- 1 Jack: So, the first issue on our list is that we need better (.)  
(writes on a flip chart the  
2 words cooperation and community) <cooperation and  
community>.
- 3 Tim: Yes. Our members want to *understand who we are and*  
4 *what we do*, and again,  
this shows again that *our cooperation and community*  
5 *are not very strong*.
- 6 Allen: Yes, yeah. It is really interesting. (.) Although, really,  
7 *what we're doing is*  
8 *stating our values here*. It is quite elementary. This is us  
(hits the flip chart with  
9 his marker pen)). So, since at the top there is a strong  
need for better cooperation  
10 and community (.) these *values are our compasses* at  
the next board meeting.
- 11 Tim: Uh-uhm ((shakes his head affirmatively))
- 12 Allen: Is there anything we want to add?
- 13 Jack: Well, we have education and community. But most  
14 importantly (.) uhm (.) is  
democracy (.) in the governance
- 15 Allen: Can you give me an example?
- 16 Jack: Uhm (.) so (.) that the governance mechanism is clear  
(.) in the sense that if I have  
17 a problem, I know who's responsible.
- 18 Tim: What does this have to do with values? (.) But, in fact  
(.) it could also be linked  
19 here ((gets up and points to the word cooperation on  
the chart)) –cause, I mean,  
20 it's who we are and what we do. Who we are is not just  
our board of directors. We  
21 are not shareholder-owned, 'just give me your profits'. It  
is Delta. This is us ((lifts  
22 the paper sheet from the chart and waves it through the  
air)), our *values guide us*,  
23 and this includes the governance and the members, it's  
everyone. We are  
24 a cooperative, what we do we do together. So then all  
goes back eventually to the  
cooperation and participation values, of course. –Cause  
(waving the paper sheet))  
this *pushes us forward*. (fieldnote fragment, 2014  
workshop, emphasis added)

As illustrated in lines 1-3, the values of cooperation and community were made present by Jack and Tim, given their intention of improving identification between organizational members. Simultaneously, in the conversation (lines 5-8), during Allen's account of aspirational talk

(Christensen, et al., 2013), the values generate order as they demarcate the actions and roles of managers as these are seen to act as strategic “compasses” (line 8) and have the capacity to “push” the managers “forward” (line 22). By being inscribed on the sheet of paper the values manipulated the managers and directed their actions. The values exhibited ordering agency by being constitutive of Delta and an embodiment of the formal organization, as Tim and Allen point to the sheet of paper on which the values were written and exclaim “this is us” (lines 6 and 19) while waving it in the air. In this respect, the values were talking to the managers and it was the voice of the group that contributed to the shaping and reaffirmation of Delta’s identity (Cooren, 2015). Nonetheless, the values were continuously exhibiting negotiated properties and motivated the managers to edit the texts containing the values, attempts which in most cases were driven by situational or organizational interests. These instances were always met with resistance given the untouchable character of the value of democracy. Cynicism was widespread, given the feeling that cooperatives were becoming less democratic at a political level, being repeatedly described as ‘one member, one vote is only theoretical’ (manager, interview). However, not all of the individuals experienced the tensions induced by the way the democracy value was manifesting itself. One manager indicated that while the disordering agency of values was experienced as a “massive” and “major” challenge, the resistance created was productive since it fostered a multiplicity of viewpoints and enhanced dialogue:

We want tensions within the democratic control in order to be a healthy cooperative. To give an example, I went to the board meeting of one of our organizations, a very good one which we hold in high esteem. And in this meeting there was a huge debate, a genuine debate, between those who said we need to keep expanding our range of products we offer and reach out to new people and others saying, we already worry that we’ve actually forgot why we started giving cheap food to those who couldn’t afford it. And there were really *backwards and forwards debates among that democracy value*. And I say don’t you ever loosen that tension, that’s what being cooperative is about. Yet, I think there is a difference between the good functioning of democratic control and also keeping it alive, [being] always together. But it is a *massive challenge* when you have high level international structures. It is very very hard to make it real and share it with everyone on the ground. This is our major challenge (manager, interview, emphasis added).

## THE MANIFESTO

The manifesto is the text that embodied Delta’s values discussed at the workshop, which aimed to control the way values were manifesting themselves. It was created during four months of strenuous negotiations and communicated to Delta’s constituents, thus making Delta present across multiple hybrid, collective yet dislocated spaces (Vàsquez, et al., 2016). On its cover there was a picture of with the Delta employees holding cardboard signs on which the values were written (see Figure 1; faces are blurred to maintain the anonymity of the informants).



Figure 1 - Cooperative Values in Delta

The dress code is strikingly informal despite the fact that two people in the image are executives, two are line managers, two are interns and one is a secretary, which implicitly signifies the value of community and collective decision-making designed to mirror the horizontal hierarchies, casualness and informality. The poses are open and relaxed, thus not connoting deliberate control and regimentation despite the fact that they clearly required dedication and organization. The values inscribed on the cardboard could be conceptualized as empty corporate business language that has come to dominate public institutions and backgrounds about facilities, staffing and treatment (Manchin, 2013). However, a closer look at the way values surface in interactions indicates that in spite of being “just” talk they are performative and trigger both ordering and disordering implications. On the one hand, the manifesto brought the formal organization into being again and again, and became an active participant in (re)defining managers’ actions and authority positions. That is, the values inscribed in the manifesto had both shared and embodied/ embodying properties and enabled managers to act together, to become identified as a ‘family’ and achieve ‘sameness’ (Chaput, et al., 2011): “[t]he values inform our daily actions, really. And, with the manifesto I can rally everyone in the *cooperative family*” (manager, interview, emphasis added). As the manager indicates further, the values included in the manifesto act by giving him the capacity to generate order and mobilize collective action (“we all look the same, behave the same”): “when *we communicate our values* and principles then *we all look the same, behave the same*, have the same standards, then people would say ‘oh, I know them’ [...] that’s uniformity” (manager, interview, emphasis added).

On the other hand, the values introduced disorder by (de)centering the authority of the speaker and silencing the voices, lives, and experiences of those involved (Chapman-Sanger, 2003). For instance, at the first board meeting where the manifesto was discussed, the democracy value exhibited negotiated properties and generated continuous struggles since it made managers interact in opposing manners, rendering them unable to reach consensus: one manager changed the democracy value in the draft of the manifesto by adding to it “in principle” because for him

democracy had an inherently negotiated character given that in Delta not all strategic processes are democratic: “Cooperatives are, *in principle*, democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions” (cooperative manifesto, version 4, italics added). Another manager edited the value of cooperation arguing that it would be hypocritical not to acknowledge that solidarity is often sacrificed since values of economic efficiency are necessary for cooperatives to survive in the global economy (manager, board meeting). Yet another proposed the introduction of breach warnings based on the rationale that such a tactic would eliminate any discrepancies between what the organization says and does: “complying with and furthering these values is the job of every employee of Delta. Any employee who becomes aware of, or suspects, a breach of these values is urged to inform his or her supervisor” (cooperative manifesto, version 6). All of the negotiations led one manager to signal the paradoxical disordering agency of values after the board meeting that “we have a problem with the philosophy of togetherness” (manager, staff meeting). The ongoing negotiations show the polyphony of values and is evidence of their negotiated and embodied/embodying character: the more the managers negotiated and attempted to change or eliminate the values in the manifesto, the more the values motivated the other managers to speak and mobilized them to vote for keeping the manifesto intact in order to objectify and bring their collective identities and organization into existence “*for another next first time*” (Garfinkel, 2002: 216, emphasis in original).

In sum, values were initially seen in Delta as ordering devices that help members identify as an organization and a form of normative control (Barley & Kunda, 1992). However, the values acted in both orderly and disorderly ways in interactions across different organizational sites: creating and undermining authority positions in the case of the press release; generating unity while fueling discursive struggles and creating a “mad” rather than a “cooperative” atmosphere in the headquarters; and fostering “togetherness” and directing strategic action in team meetings, while resisting certain treatments, i.e., being edited in corporate texts. Values thus actively participate in the process of co-constituting the common identity or “substance” (Chaput, et al., 2011: 254) of the organization. The findings show that values are performative not only in the sense of being used by leaders to impose the alignment of behaviors. Equally, values which represent and are represented by managers constitute a *Hydra*<sup>2</sup> organization: the more some managers try to fix, clarify or eliminate values in the name of hypocrisy, the faster the values emerge, motivating other managers to act (often in contradictory manners) and bring the organization into existence. The study shows that values can affect organizational realities in both ordering and disordering ways: values have the potential to mark individual and collective identities, generate discursive struggles and re(define) organizational strategies and authority positions.

2. Greek Mythology. A serpent-like monster with reptilian traits. It possessed many heads and for each head cut off it grew two more.

## DISCUSSION

This study suggests the need to challenge default assumptions concerning the existing theorizing of organizational values for developing novel research paths. Based on a brief literature review, the study provides a tentative overview of the different conceptualizations of organizational values that allows for the investigation of values from a performative focus. The study therefore encourages methodological pluralism by indicating ways of studying how organizational values exhibit both ordering and disordering agency and how the same value can have different modes of manifestation (espoused, attributed, shared and/or aspirational, negotiated, embodied/embodying). The usefulness of the proposed conceptualizations has been shown through a case study of a cooperative organization that employed different strategies and tactics designed to communicate values and increase organizational identification. The findings of the study provide a framework which enables future research to investigate the agency of values when these are unequivocally present in conversations or texts and to map their ordering and disordering implications. In addition, the framework encourages prospective studies to examine the agency of values and how values shape organizational behavior in fundamental ways even though they can appear in inconspicuous, indirect or invisible ways to most organizational subjects.

The findings of this paper provide an outlook on and extend the knowledge of organizational values by underlining the relationship between values and communication. The case analysis shows that when values are invoked in conversations, managers' interactions are a *discursive practice* whereby managers appeal to discourses of cooperation, transparency and democracy for legitimizing their individual and collective identities. When values express themselves in conversations they make a difference to organizational action. That is, managers' interactions are a *social practice* with an ideological dimension, since values both order and disorder organizational power structures and managers' authority. Consequently, the paper illustrates that values are performative as they motivate managers' actions and mark their identities, and make their organization present across multiple sites. The study's contributions are twofold: firstly, this paper contributes to the extant literature by providing insight into the performative nature of values and aspirational talk in organizations (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013; Christensen, et al., 2013). Secondly, the paper contributes to management research by indicating that values not only function as tools employed by humans who speak on their behalf (Chaput, et al., 2011) and that there are both ordering and disordering agencies present in organizations when one explores how values affect the people who speak on their behalf.

This study has inevitable limitations since it is bound to one case study and provides a limited view of the types of agency that organizational values have and their modes of manifestation in a specific type of organization (i.e., an international cooperative). Certainly, cooperatives face specific tensions in terms of maintaining a transnational collective identity due to their multiple identification targets such as business and democratic participation (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Nonetheless, the findings of this study may also be informative for other organizational forms, since workplace democracy and community and cooperation values are goals that many contemporary multinational organizations pursue. At the expense of breadth for depth, single case studies offer valuable insights for guiding future research (Tracy, 2013). Based on the tentative typology provided by this study, prospective research may investigate new modes of

manifestation of organizational values, or validate and/or invalidate the ones this article provides by investigating multiple organizational and institutional settings. This is important as more insight is needed into the historico-political circumstances and the formative forces that define an organization: the constitutive (and not simply expressive) “deflections” (Burke, 1969) and the various elements and agencies omnipresent in the collective discourse of “who we are”.

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