

Community as ‘Place in this World’: A Second-order Observation*

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ABSTRACT

The limitations of available community theory have roots in treating community as a first-order object of study. Subsequently, much of community theory reveals only surface descriptions. These theories help to describe human settlements, but offer little insight to the meaning of community. A theory of community based on second-order cybernetics offers a new perspective and new insights. In this paper, Niklas Luhmann’s theory of social systems is used as a general theory of social organisation. The author situates community within Luhmann’s framework by arguing that community may be understood as the expressed experience of a close and comprehensible world, i.e., a sense of one’s place in this world.

The ‘Community Problem’

The ambiguity of the meaning of community is widely recognised within the community studies literature (e.g., Hillery 1955; Warren 1963; König 1968; Bell and Newby 1972; Bernard 1973; Willis 1977; Fowler 1991; Wilkinson 1991; Dasgupta 1996; Freie 1998). Much of this literature has tried to resolve the ambiguity by sorting through definitions and types of community, processes of change, types of studies, or a combination thereof. Jessie Bernard (1973) and Kenneth Wilkinson (1970, 1991) share another perspective on the problem with community. They emphasised that the normal sociological science approaches used to study community were as problematic as the concept itself. The same argument is presented here. Namely, normal sociological science approaches constrain the ontological conditions of community research by taking community as a given unit of social analysis. This forestalls debate about the meaning of community.

Normal science is defined as areas of study and theory that grow steadily and cautiously, cultivated within a paradigm of theoretical concepts approved by scientists in the pertinent field, including methods and models (Kuhn 1970). Social theorists have pointed to the limitations of normal science approaches in dealing with complex social issues (Boudon 1984; Price 1997; Turner 1997). Bernard (1973) and Wilkinson (1970; 1991) specifically pointed to the limitations of normal science approaches in dealing with community. Bernard described the normal science approach to the study of community as passé because it was unable to deal adequately with recent social developments (Bernard 1973:190) – and this was before the Internet and ‘globalisation’! To quell this trend, Bernard (1973:179) posed two questions: “(1) Is the very concept of the community necessary for an understanding of how our society operates and, if it is, (2) is normal-science research guided by the classic paradigms adequate for the purpose...?” Wilkinson stated: “A theory of order is hamstrung from the outset by the fact that disorder, not order, is the dominant feature of many, and perhaps most, human events” (Wilkinson 1970:151). Twenty years later, Wilkinson (1991:7) re-stated this as, “What is needed is a conception of community that recognises its complexity.”

Two trends within the community theory literature help to build upon Wilkinson’s thinking. First, the use of ‘system’ as a core concept to define community has increased (Willis 1977). Second,

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there have been recent applications of complexity theories to social systems (Buckley 1998; Eve et al. 1997; Marion 1999). Formulating community using complex systems thinking is not well developed, however (Connell 2000). Moffit (1999) and Barbesino (1997) provide preliminary reflections on community as a complex system. An open question remains: If society is complex and if normal science approaches are unable to deal with this complexity, what happens if one presumes complexity as the foundation for an inquiry into the meaning of community?

Second-order Cybernetics: An Alternative Approach

The 'community problem' may be characterised as a limitation of first-order observations. A first-order cybernetic study *describes* community. Subsequently, community studies reveal only descriptions of the surface structures that characterise human settlements and interactions. Namely, community studies focus upon structures, dynamics, and elements that include such things as typologies, class, power, conflict, patterns, networks, and institutions.

A theory of community based on second-order cybernetics offers a new perspective and new insights. In second-order cybernetics the aim is no longer to construct a theory of observed phenomena but to include the observer in the domain of science (Umpleby 2001:89). The operative mandate is: observe the observer. The operative question is: What is the distinction being made by the observer? To advance along this line of inquiry one must determine what distinctions guide the observations of the observing system. In this case, first-order studies of community amount to surface descriptions of human settlements. Second-order study starts with the distinction that community is a form of social organisation, just as the economy, law, family, and religion are forms of social organisation. The challenge is to find a general theory that both accounts for and gives rise to community as one form among many forms of social organisation – and also overcomes the limitations of normal sociological science. Luhmann's theories will be used as a general theory of social organisation to frame an understanding of community. His second-order cybernetic approach transcends existing normal sociological approaches. Rather than asking, "What is community?" the question asked is, "How is community possible as a form of social organisation?"

For Luhmann, order, simplicity, and predictability are the exception, replaced by disorder, non-linear complexity, and unpredictability (Knodt 1995:xii). It is a theory of social systems drawing from many disciplines, e.g., mathematics, biology, sociology, and philosophy. Accordingly, there are many interpretations and applications of Luhmann's work. The author views Luhmann's general social theory as founded primarily upon cybernetics, phenomenology, and autopoiesis.

The primary distinction that guides the observation of social systems is system-environment and the system's ability to observe this distinction, i.e., social systems are observing systems. The operational mandate may be re-stated as: observe the observing system. Because there is no external observer as required in the subject-object world of normal science, Luhmann's approach stands in contrast to conventional sociological theories of community based on action theory or the knowing subject. As such, the inquiry into the meaning of community is not constrained by a subject-object duality, individual-society duality, nor constrained by a focus upon order. It is a framework that transcends the individual-community-society schema (i.e., community as mediating between individuals and society) and creates new possibilities for understanding the meaning of community.

Luhmann's theory of social systems is premised upon complexity. Complexity means that it is not possible at any moment to connect every element with every other element. People extract meaning from complexity by connecting one element to another element. Over time, relations among elements are embedded in the accumulation of shared meanings. From this, Luhmann builds upon a logic of operations based on communication. Social systems function to process meaning via the simultaneous reduction and preservation of complexity. When people communicate, people are always making a selection among other possibilities. Likewise, meaning is always contingent, one meaningful distinction among a horizon of possibilities. Theoretically, therefore, the organisation and structure of community systems is to be understood as both guiding and constraining people's abilities to make sense of the experiential world.

Methodologically, viewing system organisation and structure as guides and constraints is consistent with second-order cybernetics. To understand organisation and structure of community systems one must understand what meaningful system-environment distinction a community processes. The possible distinctions may be situated within Luhmann's theories of functional differentiation and system types.

Societal differentiation

The evolutionary process of societal differentiation is premised upon the capacity of forms of social organisation to process meaning, i.e., to reduce complexity. Accounting for societal evolution will lead the argument from the general development of media of communication, including codes and programs, to the subsequent rise of function systems. Community will be situated within this context.

Systems are contingent. They are neither necessary nor impossible. Evolution, therefore, must not be seen as guaranteeing "either the selection of the best of all possible worlds nor 'progress' in any sense" (Luhmann 1989:108). Societal evolution does not imply an orderly process. Communicative selection produces emergent order: it transforms an improbable order into a probable (functional) one. The possibility of being 'wrong' can never be negated. "Negation is a reflexive process. This means, of course, that it can be applied to itself. Everything negated in an act of selection is negated only provisionally because this act can be negated and the initially negated possibilities re-actualised" (Bednarz 1988:6). Evolution creates its own conditions as it progresses and comes to a halt when and as long as this does not succeed (Luhmann 1989:42).

The function performed by any communication is to reduce complexity, to select from among a number of different possibilities. A meaningful grasp of the world requires a purely momentary grasp of the world (Luhmann 1989:17). The more complex the world turns out to be, the ability to communicate becomes improbable. What people need is a way to structure expectations to make it possible for selections made by one individual to be relevant to another. The generalisation of symbolic media of communication, including codes and programs, address this problem. The generalisation of symbols provides a medium additional to everyday language. Symbols are "codes of selection" that increase the societal capacity for communication. Truth, love, power, money, are outstanding examples of generalised symbolic media of communication that have evolved 'successfully.'

Symbols may be understood as a functional equivalent of similarity (Luhmann 1979:128). Symbols achieve simplification by anticipating what is possible, by stabilising possibility. This both facilitates communication and acts as a catalyst for communication. Generalisations make it possible to share meaning with different people in different situations, which in turn allows people to come to the same or similar conclusions. Generalised symbolic media of communication, therefore, are primarily semantic devices: "connections between the complexity of the world on one hand and the socially regulated processes for differentiating and connecting multiple selections on the other" (Luhmann 1979:48).

There are different media of communication, such as codes and programs. According to Luhmann (1989:43), codes occur in social evolution and corresponding systems differentiate when codes are operationalised. We can consider the rise of economic systems to illustrate this point in a simplified way. Coins were introduced as symbols of exchange value. The option of paying or not paying developed as the operational code for using coins, and eventually criteria such as price and quality emerged as programs for deciding whether to pay or not. Through time, an economic system has come to dominate society globally, although it did not start out that way. Function systems are premised upon codes that are operationalised, accepted, and programmed.

The capacity of code to facilitate selection resides in its binary schematic (Luhmann 1979:134-5). Successful communication media depend on the societal capacity to pre-structure operations by assigning them one or the other of two values. A binary code is a pre-condition of system reference that permits systems to determine what is information in their environment (Luhmann 1989:116), i.e., systems structure their communication through a binary code (Luhmann 1989:36). For example, the law system is

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structured according to the binary code legal/illegal. The economic system is coded as pay/not pay. In effect, codes create the difference of system and environment through difference.

Codes do not operate in isolation; they are mediated by further conditions. Programs, such as theories, laws, investments or party-political alignments, operationalise and regulate codes. Programs are the criteria that determine what is and is not a code-specific difference (Luhmann 1989). For example, if we take 'true' and 'false' as a binary code, we can see that 'true' cannot be applied to determine what is true. This is tautological. Criteria must be available to process the difference between true and false. Programs are these criteria. In science, for example, theories are employed as programs to process the difference between true and false. In this way, programs co-ordinate system operations with regard to both sides of the binary code "without ever raising the question of the unity of the code itself" (Luhmann 1989:37). Furthermore, coding and programming make possible the simultaneous closure and openness of a system (Luhmann 1989:40). Because a system can only operate according to its code, like 'true' and 'false,' it is closed in this regard. On the other hand, a system's programming is open to external forces and accommodates conditions under which 'true' and 'false' may be determined.

Understanding media of communication provides the basis to consider the societal capacity to deal with complexity. All generalised symbolic media of communication are integral to societal capacity to process meaning. Codes and programs are integral to system formation. But not all generalised symbols lead to system formation. Love, trust, power, and values, are generalised symbols but not systems. Luhmann suggests several factors that enhance capacity. Generally, to understand capacity is also to understand why some function systems dominate society. For instance, Luhmann argued that codes that cover and combine a multiplicity of functions are more likely to attract people's attention (Luhmann 1979:142). Similarly, the more that codes are technical and abstract, "the richer the multiplicity of the (internal) operations with which the system can operate as closed and open at the same time, i.e., to react to internal and external conditions" (Luhmann 1989:40).

Luhmann's overall account for the dominance of some functional systems resides in a progressive resolution and re-organization of the structural redundancies of society (Luhmann 1989:110). Redundancy is about "multiple certification of a function." Strict binary coding has greater capacity for processing meaning than multiple certification. As a result, multifunctional systems, like family households, moralities, and religious cosmologies, have been replaced by functionally specific ones (Luhmann 1989:110). Through this evolutionary process society attains highly organised capacities, but at the cost of displacing other functions.

Luhmann appears almost entirely concerned with the function systems that he variously described as "primary," "dominant," and "major." These systems include law, politics, economy, education, science, etc. Only the dominant function systems operate for the "whole of society." Luhmann does not deny other possibilities, but consideration for non-dominant systems is often overlooked at the expense of discussing the dominant function systems almost exclusively. (Hereafter the dominant function systems will be referred to as the Function systems). Luhmann's pre-occupation with the Function systems may be summarily represented by his assumption that "there is no longer a binding representation of society within society." This presumes that all societies are dominated by the Function systems and that all persons of functionally differentiated societies construct their worlds exclusively using media of communication particular to the Function systems.

It will be argued that Luhmann's view of society over-states the dominance of the Function systems. Although Luhmann stated that "not all communication falls within the context of the primary subsystems" (Luhmann 1989:122) he does not develop this line of inquiry. Consideration of non-dominant systems provides more opportunities for conceptualising community as a social system. That is, to conceive of community as a social system does not mean strictly that it must be a Function system or its equivalent. If insight to the meaning of community may be gained from Luhmann's theory of social systems it will emerge from complexity and the human need to process meaning, i.e., as both a guide and constraint for how people make sense of their experiential world. In this regard, it is important to explore how non-dominant systems remain relevant to society today, in spite of functional differentiation.

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According to Luhmann (1982) society evolved through three forms of differentiation: segmentation (identical sub-systems, e.g., villages); stratification (societal hierarchy, e.g., nobility and peasants); and, functional (particular tasks, e.g., law, politics, economy). As a result of functional differentiation, "society no longer has a center or controlling sub-system, but becomes the indeterminate outcome of the interactions among these independent but interdependent domains" (Mingers 1995:141). "Segmented" societies appear to be most similar to conventional descriptions of community.

In contrast to the placeless functional society Luhmann described, he argued that the system-environment distinction is easier to maintain in "simple segmentary" societies. The following describes the shift from a segmented to a stratified society.

The level of semantic complexity could be kept fairly low since these societies were organised around very small units such as households, tribes, and settlements and since more complex associations had to function only occasionally. ... Semantic complexity does not increase until society is based more on asymmetries and inequalities. The improbability of the social order becomes apparent and requires explication (Luhmann 1988:26).

Luhmann argued that there was a loss of natural representation during the shift to functional differentiation. Natural representation is "elementary knowledge of the surrounding geographical space, of individual persons, and – sometimes – of mythologies demarcating the given order of human life from frightening alternative orders..." (Luhmann 1988:26). In the loss of natural representation the totality of society is never fully present. The totality of society is replaced by coding its identity. Each form of social differentiation has its own way of processing the meaning of the world.

Although a segmented society is the most 'primitive' form of social differentiation (Luhmann 1988), it can be argued that the equivalent function of this type of society persists. The alternative to Functional exclusiveness is that the societal function fulfilled by segmented systems remains relevant – and functional. Is it possible that community (as a self-referential system) maintains the equivalent function of meaning processing that segmentary societies once fulfilled? Based on Luhmann's argument for the human need for a close and comprehensible world, it seems that such a hypothesis is credible. Hence the question, "If community is a social system, what is its function?" arises from this line of thinking.

Community As a Social System: 'My Place in this World'

It will be argued that community is a segmentary subsystem of society. Like other subsystems, community systems re-construct society as a difference between system and world. Every system re-constructs society (Luhmann 1989:107). This occurs via the operationalisation of paradox. Via the difference of system and environment a system is and is not society at the same time. When such a re-construction of society is created, Luhmann states, the result is a new internal difference in society: *the difference of this place from all the others in society* (Luhmann 1989:137). Hence, the unity of the difference of system and environment is *the world* (Luhmann 1989:138). This is the basis for a hypothesis of community as a social system: that community is a specific system-environment distinction between 'my place in the world' and 'not my place in the world.'

Luhmann's theory of intimacy lends insight to how community may be conceived as an intimate relation among people and space. In *Love as Passion* (1986), Luhmann presents a theoretical account of the need for systems that describe a world that is close and comprehensible. As society and the possible worlds it can constitute become more complex, people have a greater need for a world that is "understandable, intimate and close"; a world that one can "learn to make one's own" (Luhmann 1986:16). A close world shields persons from the immense complexity and contingency of society and all the possible worlds it constructs. "The individual person needs the *difference* between only personally valid experiences, assessments and reactions and the anonymous, universally accepted world" (Luhmann 1986:16).

Humans experience the meaning of a close and comprehensible world – their 'place in the world.' This experience is expressed through communication. That is, the meaning of one's 'place in the

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world' is formulated as "this is my place; not elsewhere." One's 'place' is distinct from other places, but humans cannot fully conceive of all other places, we cannot conceive the totality of the world. A sense of place stands in distinction to an unknowable world. By default, place is reduced to either a tautology or paradox: it is what it is or it is what it is not. Humans conceal this self-reference by coding it as a distinction between community and world. "... [T]he concept of a world designates a unity that becomes actual only for meaning systems that can distinguish themselves from their environments and thereby reflect the unity of this difference as a unity that trails off in two endless direction, within and without" (Luhmann 1995:208).

Community, therefore, may be understood as a segmentary sub-system of society, rather than functional. As a self-referential social system, community processes the meaningful system-environment distinction between 'my place in this world' and the world. Further, community is a multi-functional system that lacks a strict binary code. As per Luhmann's argument, this creates a paradox that the system cannot effectively deal with. That is, multi-functional systems cannot easily re-produce the system-environment distinction through strict coding. In the case of community, the system attempts to re-construct all of society within the community system. The re-construction of all of society is not possible, however, in a functionally differentiated society. The lack of strict coding leads to ambiguity.

The argument presented here accounts for why community systems do not dominate society, but does not preclude the possibility of community systems. Community may be conceived as a segmentary sub-system of society, i.e., as a distinct form of social organisation. Community is distinct because it may be conceived as the only intimate relation people have with public space. There are other intimate relations certainly, e.g., family and marriage. And there are intimate relations with private space, e.g., home. Community, on the other hand, is a shared meaningful experience of familiarity not only with people but also with public space (e.g., the immediate landscape). As such, community is imbued with the comfort and expectations of a world that is close and comprehensible – as a shared meaningful distinction between "my place in this world" and elsewhere.

Conclusion

Historically, the limitations of normal science have constrained the ontological possibilities for the conception of community. Community most often has been taken as a given form of social organisation. Situating community within a general theory of social organisation provided a way to explore other possibilities. A shift from first-order to second-order cybernetics was presented as an appropriate and necessary methodological step to addressing the conceptual ambiguity of community. Luhmann's theory provided a critical, radical approach to understand community as a distinct form of social organisation, as the intimate relation people have with public space. Community emerged as the system-environment distinction between 'my place in the world' and the multiple worlds our complex society constructs.

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