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Similarity: outline of a systems theory of community

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Abstract

Community studies face a persistent dilemma: weak definitions of community avoid groupism but sacrifice analytical precision, while strong definitions maintain precision through problematic assumptions of social closure, value cohesion and collective agency (i.e., groupism). This article resolves this tension with a theory of communities as social systems, which reproduce as they create and organize a communication mode that establishes a principle of social identity based on a shared similarity. The formation of communities is then explained by the co-occurrence of three processes: distinction, generalization, and structuration. By shifting the focus from questions of belonging (“who is in or out?”) to questions of symbolic boundary-making (“what distinguishes a community?”), the approach rehabilitates the concept without presupposing high solidarity, or social closure. The theory then positions communities in the meso level of society, above interactions, besides social movements and organizations, and below institutional/functional systems. It also demonstrates the analytical difference and empirical usefulness of “community” if compared to the concepts of network, group, and category. The discussion provides, in sum, a framework to observe how communities maintain symbolic distinctiveness while accommodating graduated participation, varying solidarity, and fluid social boundaries within a complex society.

Keywords Community · Systems theory · Social theory · Similarity · Communication

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Introduction

Since the time of our classics, sociology has offered unsatisfactory answers to the problem of conceptualizing communities. The present article addresses this challenge by developing an account of *communities* as social systems. From the nineteenth century, sociological theories of society have either conflated communities with the societal dimension (e.g., Durkheim, 2014; Alexander, 2006), positioned them in opposition to modern society (e.g., Tönnies, 2011; Latour, 2013), dismissed them as structural epiphenomena (e.g., Marx, 2004; Luhmann, 2012a, b), or recognized but undertheorized their distinctiveness in relation to the societal system (e.g., Simmel, 1992; Weber, 2019; Delanty, 2018). Meanwhile, most empirical and theoretical sociologies have fallen into one of these four boxes, often also succumbing to what has been termed “groupism”—treating informal collective phenomena as (i) the building blocks of social life and (ii) bounded, homogeneous entities with deterministic socialization (Brubaker, 2004: 8–9).

Community studies thus face a persistent theoretical dilemma: weak definitions that avoid groupism lose analytical precision, while strong definitions that maintain precision become empirically implausible in complex modern societies. Traditional approaches either assume clear membership boundaries, social closure, and value cohesion (rendering them vulnerable to the (2004) groupism critique), or dissolve into network mappings or structural arguments that sacrifice the qualitative distinctiveness of communal phenomena they could otherwise explain.

This article resolves this problem by shifting analytical focus from questions of belonging (“who is in/out?”) to questions of symbolic boundary-making (“what distinguishes this form of communication?”) (see Lamont & Molnar, 2002). By conceptualizing communities as communicative systems reproducing themselves through similarity rather than as bounded aggregations of people, this approach rehabilitates the community concept without presupposing the strong social closure or high values that render traditional conceptualizations analytically problematic. This theoretical innovation allows us to explain community persistence and distinctiveness while accommodating the possibility of graduated participation, inconsistent solidarity, fluid social boundaries, and personnel turnover that characterize most empirical cases.

In addition, by reconceptualizing communities as systems of communication, this outline offers three significant contributions.

First, the discussion overcomes the limitations of macrosociological determinism and microsociological reductionism in theories of society by positioning communities as an autonomous level of social reality to be observed alongside other social levels. Second, the article provides a non-essentialist understanding of informal collective phenomena that avoids reifying presuppositions of clear boundaries between people and deterministic socialization while still explaining how communities maintain their clear symbolic distinctiveness. Third, the conceptual proposal offers a framework for analyzing how communities can be coupled with social systems of different levels while maintaining their operational autonomy, an idea that can bear fruitful empirical implications for multi-level analyses. So, the article illuminates how communities operate alongside other types of social systems in modern society, neither subsiding in the face of macrostructures nor simply subordinated to interactive logics.

Even if Luhmann has not engaged directly with the problem and Parsons's (1971) *societal community* was clearly “groupist,” I chose to work with social systems theory for good reasons. In fact, it offers a particularly promising toolbox for the present conceptualization. As a multi-level social theory that distinguishes between interaction, organization, social movements, and functional systems without deterministic reduction (Luhmann, 1995: 2–11), modern social systems theory provides the conceptual architecture needed to position communities as distinctive social systems while acknowledging their complex interrelationships with other social forms, including society as a whole.

The later systems-theoretical emphasis on communication rather than human aggregation or subjective action also allows us to avoid the essentializing pitfalls of presupposing strong social closure and high values from traditional group and community concepts (compare with Luhmann, 2013: 53–67). As a result, communities are conceptualized neither as aggregations or coalitions of individuals nor as semantic or discursive units, but as social systems that reproduce themselves through recursive communications around a form of *social similarity*.

Contemporary social systems theory provides, in sum, an appropriate conceptual trioka to face the task ahead: the processual concept of communication, the idea of social levels (i.e., social emergence), and functional differentiation. With these tools, we can therefore untangle the following “epistemological obstacles” (Bachelard, 2002 [1938]): (i) interactionally or structurally reducing the communal into another social level, (ii) dismissing the communal, and (iii) groupism.

The discussion will unfold in six sections.

Following this introduction, the *first* section engages with previous theoretical work, assessing their relative contributions and limitations. The *second* section constructs the problem (Problemstellung), while the *third* reviews and critiques prior systems theoretical attempts to conceptualize informal collective phenomena. The *fourth* part presents the article's central thesis—that communities form as social systems—elaborating the concept of similarity as a distinctive communicative mode with a few examples. The *fifth* section deals with the formation of “cognitive and normative expectations” (Galtung, 1959) within communities to demonstrate how they are able to self-organize. Finally, the *sixth* and last part directly distinguishes communities from other system types (interactions, organizations, social movements, and functional/institutional systems).

A brief literature review

This initial section examines the concept of community in sociological theories of society, focusing particularly on the problem of societal integration (see Stichweh, 2000: 220–235).¹ A good place to start would be to review four generalist positions within social theory that have shaped most of our understanding of the conceptual

¹ The long tradition of community studies is set aside for two primary reasons: first, it proved increasingly unproductive by the 1970s; second, it restricted the concept of community to geographical understanding, impeding abstract theory-building (Brint, 2001: 5–7).

pair “community-society:” society against community; society as community; society without community; and society and community (for more extensive review of theories of community, see Brint, 2001; Delanty, 2018; Opielka, 2006; Rosa et al., 2018).

In the early days of sociology, Tönnies’ (2011[1887]) work represented a landmark contribution to discussions about modernity’s alleged social disintegration. His approach associated modernization with the deterioration of traditional social relations, diagnosing modern society and traditional communities as fundamentally at odds. This perspective can be characterized as “society against community” (see also Latour, 2013).

By contrast, proponents of communitarian conceptions of society differ fundamentally from Tönnies and his successors. They propose that modern society’s integration is successfully performed by value communities responsible for socializing individuals. This position is exemplified, albeit in different ways, in the theories of Durkheim (2014), Parsons (1971), Habermas (1990), and Alexander (2006). I would also locate new institutionalists in this category. These approaches can be summarized by the formula “society as community,” wherein (moral, societal, life-world etc.) communities constitute society’s core.

A third position, more skeptical of communal bonds’ significance, dispenses with the community concept entirely and addresses societal integration through alternative mechanisms. This approach locates integration in impersonal societal structures, treating communities as marginal or insignificant phenomena in the analysis of modern society (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Luhmann, 1997; Marx, 2004). This stance could be described as “society without community.”

Finally, a fourth position understands the relationship between these concepts as disconnected from the integration problem. According to this perspective, society and community are distinct yet interconnected phenomena characterized by simultaneous and dynamic forms of sociality (see Simmel, 1992; Weber, 2019; Elias & Scotson, 1994; Bosk, 2003; Delanty, 2018). This view could be described as “society and community.”

Each perspective offers valuable insights while demonstrating particular limitations. Tönnies—and his heirs, such as Latour—correctly identifies tensions between societal and communal processes but overreaches in diagnosing social disintegration, a conclusion stemming more from moral critique than empirical observation. The communitarian position rightly emphasizes communities’ socialization role but also overstates the point in conceiving communal capacity to steer modern society. The third perspective elegantly explains the formation of far-reaching social expectations without requiring moral cohesion yet reduces communities to structural epiphenomena. The fourth and final standpoint, viewing society and community as interrelated phenomena, most closely aligns with my own but lacks theoretical precision about how these systems interrelate and tends to overestimate the operative centrality of “belonging.”

Along these theoretical positions, most concepts of community—together with those of groups—have also been scientifically inadequate due to their vagueness and “groupism:” (Brubaker, 2004: 8). This critique has inspired calls to abandon these

concepts in favor of more flexible alternatives such as Brubaker's own "categories" or the almost omnipresent "networks" (Fuhse, 2006: 253).

My approach recognizes and incorporates this point by conceptualizing communities not as homogenous collections of people but as systems of communication that reproduce and organize themselves through reference to forms of social similarity. As we will see, the article will place the *how* before the *who*, unlike most groupist concepts of community. This approach is then consonant to Brubaker's understanding of ethnicity as a symbolic category rather than an essential entity. But it is also more robust as the systems theoretical infrastructure of the argument enables the comparison of ethnicities with other communicative systems within modern society. With communication as a starting point, communities cannot be assumed to have "agency" or to function as cohesive units with high solidarity and clear-cut membership criteria. Rather, they represent processual modes of communication that enable symbolic reference to collectives in a relatively stable and recursive way.

Last but not least, it is also important to distinguish this article's argument from symbolic interactionism's treatment of informal social systems, particularly as developed by the eminent Gary Alan Fine in the last decades.

Fine's theory of groups differs significantly from the present argument, as he tends to focus on small, face-to-face collectives, effectively treating them as specialized forms of interaction. His notion of "idioculture" describes knowledge repertoires, beliefs, and customs available to group members but fails to clearly differentiate between individual and social dimensions and neglects the societal level altogether (Fine, 1979: 734). The distinction between groups and interactions appears fluid at best, with psychological and social meaning conflated without a precise understanding of the difference between thought, language and communication. In addition, there is no account of higher-order social levels. By contrast, the present approach conceptualizes communities as distinctive social systems alongside others, particularly emphasizing their relationship to society as the most general (i.e., all-encompassing) social level.

Having mapped these theoretical positions, we can now summarize our core challenge: how to conceptualize communities without falling into either groupism or analytical dissolution. In addition, these limitations in existing approaches point to the need for a different theoretical foundation—one that can handle both emergence and communication.

Communicative levels

To resolve this challenge, we must first understand how contemporary social systems theory approaches the problem of social coordination.

The fundamental problem of social theory is double contingency—the mutual uncertainty arising when individuals encounter each other, each with their own consciousness, intentions, and potential responses (Luhmann, 1995: 103–136; Parsons & Shils, 1951: 16). Any adequate social theory must explain how stable patterns of coordination emerge despite the social world's inherent unpredictability at its most basic level. From human nature to transcendental reason, from social facts to social

action, there have been several answers to this problem, some more convincing than others.

Modern social systems theory approaches this predicament by understanding communication as the “solution,” a self-referential phenomenon creating its own operative logic as it emerges from participants’ selections as an external source of meaning and social coordination (Luhmann, 1992: 251–259).² In other words, social systems emerge while distinguishing themselves as autonomous producers of social meaning apart from psychological systems. Both types of systems observe and irritate one another. But the former cannot completely control the latter, and vice-versa. So, they are *different* but not *indifferent* to one another.

The existence of communication then implies the emergence of a social system. But *communication* here is not understood as information transmission from Ego to Alter. Rather, it emerges from the synthesis of three selections by at least two participants: *utterance* (Mitteilung), *information*, and *understanding* (Luhmann, 1995: 139–147). An utterance is made that carries potential information. Their meaning is then understood (or misunderstood) in a particular way by another participant. As a result, *communication* can be reduced to two further forms of social meaning: *social action*, when the emphasis of meaning falls upon an utterance, and *social experience*, when it falls upon the moment of understanding. We will return to this point later.

For now, it suffices to say that this three-part process creates a single communicative event, the element of social life. Communication becomes a system as these events link to one another in a recursive chain, with each communication creating socially meaningful conditions for further communications (Luhmann, 2002: 160–168). The reproduction of communication then reduces (i.e., organises) the complexity of the world in the system because it stabilizes probabilistic expectations that orient future communicative events that, in turn, reproduce the system.³

Every surviving social system must find ways to make further communication probable despite the world’s inherent unpredictability (i.e., complexity). Different types of social systems solve this problem in different ways, developing specialized structures that increase the probability of future communication. They each are able to reduce complexity in particular ways.

Four social system types have been classically theorized, each level creates its own elements and increasingly complex structures to deal with double contingency:

1. Interactions, the most simple social system, solve double contingency through turn-taking and co-presence, creating ephemeral systems that dissolve when participants disperse (Luhmann, 1995: 405–412; Kieserling, 1999: 15–78).

² In several interpretations of Luhmann’s (1995) systems theory, communication creates double contingency as much as it solves it. This is due to the belief in a general theory’s self-implication (i.e., the attempt to explain its own emergence). But it is also possible to claim that human capacity for participating in communication is not created by communicative processes but instead socially perceived as preformatted in the biological and psychological constitution of the homo sapiens. I cannot develop this point further here but I have written about it elsewhere (Barros, 2023: 134–156).

³ For a longer introduction into contemporary social systems theory, see Arnoldi (2001); Barros (2025); Luhmann, 2012a); Moeller (2011); Stichweh (2011).

2. Organizations manage double contingency through formal decision-making, thus creating structures that persist beyond personnel changes (Luhmann, 2018: 30–47).
3. Social movements address double contingency through protest communication that creates a self-referential system distinguishing between the movement and society (Luhmann, 1991: 135–154; Neidhardt & Rucht, 1993: 305–326).
4. Functional/institutional systems (or society) address double contingency through binary codes and programs that create specialized communication oriented toward abstract functions (Luhmann, 2013: 78–108).⁴

While detailed, this typology appears to be incomplete; numerous important collective phenomena in modern society seem to fall between these four boxes. These include scientific communities, ethnicities, digital communities, and various subcultures—all of which demonstrate persistence beyond interactions, lack formal organizational decision-making, do not self-organize exclusively around protest, and are not reducible to functional rationales.

More communicative levels?

Having revisited the classical typology, we must now face the question of how to expand it. For decades, various scholars have attempted to address this gap and extend the typology of social systems with the help of two main concepts: groups and networks. We will now revise these attempts briefly. However, before going any further, I should mention that this section might feel a bit technical for those unfamiliar with contemporary systems theory. If that is your case, you can jump over it without significant loss. Anyhow, I will do my best to make this section comprehensible to all.

Of the two concepts, *groups* have a longer career in social systems theory and sociology in general. In the usual conceptualization of systems theorists like Neidhardt (1979), Tyrell (1983), and Kühl (2021), groups are presented as small social systems with clear membership boundaries based on personal acquaintance and direct communication. The prototypical example is a group of friends. Kühl's recent concept of *personal orientation* as the defining characteristic of groups is enough to distinguish them as a mode of communication. At the same time, Kühl reproduces the traditional focus on small-scale phenomena of Neidhardt and Tyrell (Kühl, 2021: 32–35). This differs from my approach that focuses on larger informal collectives transcending direct acquaintance networks. While interesting, these group concepts cannot explain how social similarity can generate, organise and maintain system boundaries across larger social formations that persist despite personnel turnover and geographical dispersion. As a result, the concepts of group and community deal with different levels of generalisation and can be said to be complementary.

Social networks, in my understanding, constitute structures of social addressability rather than social systems in a strict sense, as they lack operative closure (i.e., a

⁴ This equation of functional systems with society is, of course, only valid in modernity. But as my argumentation is located firmly within modernity, it will have to make do as a heuristic choice for now.

self-made symbolic boundary) (Tacke, 2010: 88; Stichweh, 2000: 220–235). Networks only describe relationship patterns as ties between nodes without specifying qualitative differences between relationships (see also Baecker, 2025: 8–9). When something such as a symbolic boundary is introduced in social network analysis, it is typically taken as something external to the structure of ties, as in the classical “cat” (White, 2008 [1965]). From this starting point, one can then distinguish between the social or the relational (i.e., tie-making) and the cultural (i.e., category-making). The relation between them is then conceptualized in two ways: either neglecting the latter in favor of the former (structuralist network analysis) or treating them as somewhat autonomous and interdependent dimensions (White, Fuhse).⁵

The most developed attempt to take on the task of integrating systems theory and network analysis is Fuhse’s (2022) book on social networks of meaning and communication. Drawing on over a decade of empirical and theoretical research, the book represents a conceptual contribution to network analysis drawing on Luhmann’s concept of communication. While Fuhse productively engages with both traditions, similarly to his mentor, Harisson White, the emphasis remains on relationship patterns and associated interpretative frames (“culture”) rather than on communication’s self-referential making. The approach is very sophisticated methodologically and reviews an extensive amount of literature. But it does not—and perhaps cannot—take seriously the qualitative differences between interactions, organizations, and functional systems. The idea of emergent social levels is largely neglected, with selective engagement with Luhmann’s *concept* (and not *theory*) of communication while leaving his systems theory and theory of society aside.

While sophisticated and useful for other purposes, these two approaches fall short of conceptualizing modern communities. Communities express characteristics extending beyond both small groups’ microsociology and the “relational” tie-mapping of network analysis, even one that is sensitive to cultural “relationships” but oblivious to the structure of society (functional differentiation) and the self-organisation of social meaning.

Similarity

With this theoretical foundation established, I can now present my central argument about how communities emerge through similarity. However, communities emerge when a form of similarity serves as more than a mere social distinction in communication; in this case, it initiates an autonomous mode of communication that produces a principle of social identity. This is to say that a community is formed when the communication of a similarity prompts the emergence of more communication

⁵ Such a distinction makes little sense within contemporary systems theory. The basal difference between system and environment implies that the structurality of ties in society’s human environment (the population) is only a material condition of possibility or, perhaps, an observational artefact of communication. It can then serve to describe the external effects on humans as psychological and biological systems caused by society during its production and reproduction of categorical or “cultural” distinctions, the elemental units of sociality (Barros, 2025; Luhmann, 2012a, b). For communication, the “structure” or the “relationships” of cats matters much less than the way they coordinate people to catch a rat.

(i.e., social meaning) and stable expectations (i.e., structures) between members in a recursively causal way that only makes sense thanks to the importance given to this common symbolic principle (i.e., the basal form of similarity).⁶

Similarities are not ethereal or ontological beings; they are performed, talked and written about and become relevant for community formation only if appearing as bounding, informative and generalized in communication. This means that they become communal only if successful in producing further related communication and expectations between community members—otherwise, one deals instead with ephemeral and inconsequential coincidences.

The present article does not seek to identify causal determinants for why communities emerge. Therefore, for practical reasons, I set aside here the relevance of things such as “ontological needs,” previous generalized preferences, resource struggles, or an institutional prehistory for community formation, except when they can indirectly fit under the processes of distinction, generalization and structuration that will be analyzed in the following pages. At the moment, *I am only concerned with how communities emerge and operate once formed—i.e., how they reproduce themselves*. This follows Luhmann’s functional-structuralist method of theory building asking not about elementary structures (as in Parsons’ AGIL) but how specific problems are solved through system formation (Luhmann, 1995: 52–58). The question becomes not “why do communities form?” but “how do communities operate?”

As a result, I propose three analytical steps that serve to verify if community formation has taken place:

1. *distinguishing* a form of social similarity that also went through.
2. *generalization* and.
3. *structuration*.

The last step is also key for theorizing the internal organization of communities, a topic that will receive close attention later on.

Distinction, generalisation, structuration

A form of similarity, as I conceptualize it, is a social *distinction* that serves to *group people based on something in common between them*.⁷ In this sense, the mere distinction of social similarity *alone* does not form a community; it is a necessary but

⁶ This is a technical note for system theorists. On this basis, a community produces an inside from an outside world (*autopoiesis*). As a result, in order to identify social similarity, no access to people’s minds is needed, since similarity appears in communication. That forms of social similarity are observed in consciousness and acquire particular meanings there is practically certain. Social and psychic systems can observe one another with the help of language and cognitive scripts (structural coupling). Yet this translation is always an approximation incapable of controlling or entirely grasping external processes (Luhmann, 1995: 272–275). The psychology of the matter can then be set aside for sociology to emerge.

⁷ The meaning of such a distinction does not need to be uncontested but only recognizable in the sense of being tied to a semantic network of adjacent concepts. The latter restrict which and how new redescriptions can make sense. John can only argue that Mary is kind coherently if his arguments make reference to the semantic web of kindness.

not sufficient step. Speaking the same language is arguably a form of similarity but it does not imply community membership in any meaningful way—at least not without a favorable context, as when it communicates a general, informative, and unifying element in regional struggles for recognition, such as the Quebecois plight in Canada. Instead, community formation happens only when a form of similarity is taken as a general principle that guides the production and transformation of *social expectations* (i.e., structures) between members, which stabilises these expectations by associating them to the alleged basal similarity in communicative performances. Still, a form of similarity is much more than a common theme. Themes do not have to refer to a basal similarity between members and, as such, can be changed within the same communicative system much more easily.

Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth-century, the institution of Transatlantic slavery imposed on various ethnicities the condition of enslavement and the supposed unity of their color (eventually seen as *race*) that should allegedly justify their common predicament (external, categorical distinction), thus creating conditions for the emergence of a counterrepertoire of social meaning between recipients (Eyerman, 2001). These individuals and their descendants, still being marked by this (ancient) condition and their color, could then communicate on this basis and stabilise social expectations concerning the meaning of their predicament over time (internal, communal distinction).⁸

Something also important to notice is that the attribution of similarity does not necessarily imply affinity or appreciation. Colleagues might have a lot in common and yet show a terrible relationship, possibly because of their high degree of similarity. Freud (1991: 131) was alluding to something akin when conceptualizing what he called “narcissism of small differences.” In addition, there are communities that, as such, are founded on a form of similarity, share a strong sense of mutual obligation, yet are predicated on self-hatred (for an interesting case study of incel communities, see Kallio & Törnberg, 2025).

Distinction alone, however, is insufficient. The second crucial process is *generalization*, which alludes to the fact that the meaning of a *social distinction* was *abstracted from concrete recipients and is considered applicable to strangers based on a set of formal characteristics*. Those who do and do not relate to a social distinction can then understand it.

The level of generalization, though, is contextual and depends on the empirical universe that is being studied. With the help of transformer-based methods, ethnography or discourse analysis, this process can be measured. In some cases, generalization remains within the geographic constraints of a village as in Elias and Scottson’s (1994) seminal monograph on Winston Parva. In others, the reach extends globally, often due to work of international organisations (Meyer, 2010).

The third element of community formation, *structuration*, means that a generalised *social distinction* has become a *principle of social identity, being attached to an internal set of expectations that relate explicitly to such basal similarity in*

⁸ Of course, community members communicate with one another about much more than matters related to their community, but when they do so, they reproduce a different type of social system (say, a love relationship).

communication. In other words, the *structuration* of a community starts (i) when people use a generalized social distinction to refer to themselves and (ii) this distinction is used as an *explicit* basis for the reproduction of expectations that are considered reliably stable between (most) recipients (i.e., social structures). This process is contingent on repeated interaction for stabilization and socialization but is not reducible to the sum of such individual interactions. Think again of Blackness in countries such as Brazil or the United States. Amongst other things, it indicates (sadly) to Blacks that they should behave in a different way than Whites in several situations in order to try minimizing the risk of discrimination (for instance, in encounters with the police). This continuous process (re)creates a *symbolic boundary* between inside and outside (whose meaning can be renegotiated over time; it evolves).

The beginning of structuration over a generalized social distinction marks the birth of a community. The process also establishes a loop between operation and structure within a social system (Giddens, 1984).⁹ We will come back to this point later.

Let me now draw on these three processes to highlight how communities differ from *categories* and *groups*.

All three steps—distinction, generalization and structuration—are necessary for the formation of a community. Well, the first is always present whenever someone observes real or imagined collectives. If one sees only the first and the second, it is better to talk of a *social category*, a tool that serves to observe how people in general, regardless of positionality, conceptualize a social difference; however, categories obscure the difference between self- and other-descriptions. For the meaning of a category, every curse counts.

No one can deny that categories are valid lenses for observing the social world, especially classification disputes. But this does not mean that the communication of categorized and non-categorized individuals bears the same relevance for both clusters—for instance, the meaning of *queerness* is not defined by self-identifying LGBTQIA+ people in terms of *sin* as in the case of several churches.

If only distinction and structuration are found, this social system constitutes a (small) group, a special type of interaction, whose logic and structural complexity depend on the co-presence of specific people and, in this sense, is not general. In this context, every individual arrival and departure changes the game.

If that is true, communities should not be called generalised social groups. Here a terminological change is warranted because communities are much more complex than simple social systems such as interactions. For one thing, they can bear immense and constant internal variation and disagreement on several issues—including on membership lines—without collapsing. This is due to their higher degree of generality, a point that becomes clearer if we think about the diffusion of customs and marks.

⁹ While this is much more unlikely than structural change, such a loop also implies that the same community might change basal forms of similarity over time. This is a claim that should be better developed in an article about the sociocultural evolution of communities and, as a result, will have to be brushed aside for now.

Customs and marks

There are two main types of similarity, customs and marks, which are directly related to the phenomenological infrastructure of social systems.

Every communicative process can be reduced to either a social action or a social experience, depending on the perspective. Who hits *acts*, who gets hit *experiences* the blow. Both are social. Both are communication. In more rigorous terms, social action and social experience indicate, respectively, the reduction of a communicative process (social meaning) to something a social system or participants could control (action) or a circumstance imposed on them (experience) (see Luhmann, 1995: 83–84). For instance, a hobby exemplifies the former, while a common physical condition exemplifies the latter.

When a form of similarity refers to social action, it will be called a social *custom*. When it refers to social experience, it will be called a social *mark*. Homans famously defined customs as “recurrences in social behavior... [that are] recognized as recurrences” (Homans, 1951: 26). I reform this concept to include recognizable bounding patterns of social action (and not “behavior”) that appear in communication. Similarly, I understand *marks* as durable qualities or conditions *socially described* as beyond the direct control of their recipients, therefore indicating a form of social experience (for a similar—albeit more universalistic—concept of mark, see Bourdieu, 1984).

Difference to conceptual alternatives

The present framework can then clarify the analytical distinctions between communities and related social forms.

Unlike *categories*, which merely describe how social differences are conceptualized regardless of positionality, communities require structuration—the transformation of generalized distinctions into recursive principles of social identity with associated expectations. Unlike *groups*, which constitute special types of interaction dependent on co-presence and specific individuals, communities achieve generalization beyond particular persons and contexts. And unlike *networks*, which map relationship patterns without operative closure or self-referential boundaries, communities constitute self-referential systems that actively reproduce themselves through the reference to a basal form of similarity. Thus, while categories lack structuration, groups lack generalization, and networks lack systemic self-organization, communities uniquely combine all three processes—distinction, generalization, and structuration—to create persistent yet flexible forms of social coordination.

After these initial remarks, it now makes sense to demonstrate how similarity differs from older sociological concepts such as *conventions*, *morals*, *folkways*, *communalization* (Vergemeinschaftung), and *traditions*.

Unlike *conventions*, which function as explicit social rules followed openly for coordination purposes (like driving on the right side of the road), forms of similarity do not require reference to a rationale or agreement (compare Lewis, 1969). Similarity forms differ from *morals* as the former don’t necessarily claim universal validity or explicit normative force; while morals directly evaluate right and wrong, customs

or marks simply indicate usual and generalized patterns of social action and social experience considered bounding and informative for recipients (see Luhmann, 1995: 234–244). *Folkways*, in Sumner's conception, represent habitual practices with mild social pressure behind them, but this concept treats them primarily as behavioral patterns rather than communicative phenomena generating their own reproduction (Sumner, 1906: 2–3).

Similarity most closely resemble Weber's concept of *Vergemeinschaftung* (communalization), but with a crucial distinction: while Weber emphasizes subjective feelings of belonging as the basis of community formation, the present approach treats customs and marks as objectively observable in communication, operating externally to psychological states (see Weber, 2019: 40–43). In this framework, similarity functions as a social fact that allows a recursive form of communication (a social system) to emerge.

Tradition might serve as a reflexive structure that naturalizes similarity forms, providing what appears to be a solid foundation for communal practices if it deflects questions that lead to communication short-circuits (e.g., "why do we do what we do?" or "why are we what we are?"). When forms of similarity reference "tradition," they can obscure their contingency, presenting current ways as natural continuations of the past rather than social constructions. An image of the past is taken as a stable guide, all in all, a matter of normative preferences.

This reflexive mechanism can stabilize the community by suggesting its customs or marks are not merely contingent products but necessary expressions of shared heritage. Sanctions then come to be when normative expectations are frustrated. In "traditional" communities, invocation of ancestral practices, myths, or historical narratives have served this function by anchoring customs or marks in something beyond immediate choice, but this recourse can still be used in modern communities as well (see Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983: 1–14).

The appeal to tradition is itself a communication artefact that can be embraced or rejected—even in traditional communities, such as Amerindian tribes, which often have to reinvent their heritage under new conditions over which they have close to no control. As the contributions to Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) demonstrated competently, traditions are "invented" rather than organically evolved, pointing to the communicative construction of historical continuity. What matters for community transformation here is not factual historicity but whether they frame an image of the past as a normative principle, as well as which role this plays in their projections of the future. Indeed, as Maffesoli (1996: 76) argued, several contemporary or "post-modern" communities explicitly reject tradition appeals, instead embracing their marks' or customs' contingency as expressions of freedom, authenticity, or resistance. But I do not believe reflexivity is a monopoly of them.

Trust and sociability

Beyond these formal characteristics of similarity, we must also consider how communities produce interpersonal dynamics different from other social systems'. Communities exhibit a distinctive way of dealing with people. One key mechanism that couples social and individual experiences is *belongingness*, the perception of being in

one's place that brings about a degree of security. This means that belongingness can contribute both for individual and communal well-being, even if there are differences between its social (i.e., communicated) and psychological experiences (compare with Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister, & Leary, 1995).

This coupling provides a psychological and physiological infrastructure for the emergence of social trust. However, when it comes to sociocultural evolution, the importance of belongingness for communities in modernity has drifted from the central motivational role it played in traditional societies for most of human existence.

Belongingness does still couple people and social systems to the point of motivating social participation. But, in modern society, weak bondings seem to be the rule for *most* participants in *most* communities but obviously not for *all* participants in *all* communities, not in the least because people are included in hundreds (if not thousands) of social systems (e.g., interactions: families, friendships; organisations: companies, schools; institutional systems: politics, the economy, mass media etc.). We know this, at least, since Simmel's (1955) argument for a modern web of group affiliations (Kreuzung sozialer Kreise). But conditions for the production of communal trust seem to have diminished even further in the meantime. Otherwise, a phenomenon such as the "global health concern" caused by the current epidemic of loneliness would not exist (see World Health Organisation, 2025).

While I do not deny that there are still communities with a high level of trust and a strong sense of mutual obligations along the lines of Tönnies' *Gemeinschaften* and the folk meaning of "community" in English, these parameters cannot serve as the threshold for a sociological concept of community because they presuppose a theory of society as simple as that of Tönnies. Instead of overextending the dualism between (aloof) society and (trustful) community beyond its original validity of marking the emergence of modernity, it seems more interesting to inquire *how* and *how much* trust and solidarity communities produce in a complex society that imposes so many impersonal commitments on people. These are empirical questions that, I believe, should not be taken for granted and can lead to a better typological understanding of the matter.

One could argue that this movement makes the concept abstract because it displaces solidarity from a given element to a factor to be investigated. That is a trade-off. But it seems to be more empirically plausible and fruitful than the alternative of soaking in nostalgia while lamenting the downfall of community.

The key difference in sociability of modern communities lies in the fact that individuals are expected to *activate* and *deactivate* the relevance of social boundaries depending on the context—an interesting hypothesis would then be if there has been a progressive institutional limitation of contexts where communal social boundaries can be meaningfully activated in the last decades. Of course, people might disobey expectations. Ultimately, corruption can be everywhere. But there are structural mechanisms in place to maintain these expectations, codified as laws and other norms.

To paraphrase Bourdieu freely (1984), the existence of rules for practice does not presuppose the perfect practice of rules.

Another important point concerning sociability is the relative personal openness of communities that allows greater informality of meaningful themes between members. A scientific community, for instance, may discuss not only research methods and

findings but also personal struggles with work-life balance or emotional responses to professional setbacks. The communal role of mentorship exemplifies this point very well. Therefore, while it does make sense to place the theoretical accent in *what* distinguishes (symbolic boundary) a community as opposed to *who* belongs (social boundary), it must be also considered that this “*what*” has an openly “warm” connectivity for social bonding communicated among the *who* that the “cold” sociality of institutional or organisational systems lack.¹⁰

Rather than through clear-cut divisions between people as members or non-members, communities maintain systemic boundaries while the symbolic distinction expressed in its basal form of similarity is reproduced in communication. Dissimilar to organizations and their formal membership rosters, communities operate effectively even with significant ambiguity regarding who “belongs” and who doesn’t, especially when they are large. What matters most for a community’s reproduction is not the precise delineation of human membership but the ongoing reproduction of similar communication patterns.

This operational reality allows communities to accommodate various participation degrees—from core members who embody marks and perform multiple customs to peripheral participants who engage with only selected aspects of communal communication and complete outsiders. In electronic music communities, for instance, some individuals participate intensively in multiple aspects (production, DJing, dancing, organizing events), while others engage primarily as occasional attendees who recognize key customs and marks without fully mastering them.

The graduated participation patterns predicted by this framework align with extensive empirical research documenting *power law distributions* (see Barabási & Albert, 1999). Studies consistently find that participation in online communities follows a highly skewed distribution, with Nielsen’s 90/9/1 rule suggesting approximately 90% of community members are “lurkers” who observe but rarely contribute, 9% contribute occasionally, and only 1% account for most communicative activity (see Van Mierlo, 2014; Ortega et al., 2008). This pattern has been documented across diverse platforms. The peripheral 90% are not failed members but necessary participants for communicative reproduction. They observe and internalize customs and marks without actively performing them, yet their presence or their attention as an *audi-*

¹⁰ This is a technical note for those familiar with systems theory. Another way of formulating this warm connectivity would be to say that communities include persons more informally, allowing more “personal” *themes* to irritate their communication in comparison to the more aloof nature of functional and organisational systems. In other words, this higher thematic flexibility makes these systems relatively more irritable (i.e., exposed) to their social interpenetration with people’s minds and the latter’s mercurial ways of reducing complexity. Also because of that, in communities, it makes sense to talk about a large and concrete “we” or “they” whose self-organisation can be perceived as independent of the observer (i.e., as socially real). This inclusivity is expressed in semantic structures of unity and common identity—said references to “we,” “us,” and “our ways” appearing throughout communal self-observations. Importantly, these semantics function as (self-)descriptions rather than strong operative prescriptions, even if they do express the relative higher irritability of communities vis-à-vis their human environment; that is to say that these concepts are communicative constructs that communities and other social systems use for (self-)observing rather than the foundations of said “collectivities” (see Luhmann, 2013: 176–177). This point alone suffices to demarcate the present conceptual proposal vis-à-vis most of the existing concepts of community that, dissimilarly, put questions of strong membership (the *who*) before questions of symbolic boundary-making (the *what*).

ence creates conditions to the production of communicative performances that indeed maintain community boundaries (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kollock, 1999).

Similar participation gradients appear in non-digital communities, though less precisely quantifiable. Classic ethnographic studies reveal comparable patterns: in religious congregations, a small core maintains institutional functions while the majority participates peripherally through attendance to communal events and rituals without active involvement (Ammerman, 1997). Even in seemingly egalitarian communities, ethnographic evidence reveals differentiated participation and engagement (Putnam, 2000). The difference in participation might lie not in the distribution pattern but in how it is maintained—online communities through algorithmic visibility of contributions, offline communities through indifference, social recognition and informal leadership roles. This suggests the power law pattern reflects something fundamental about how communities communicate about their similarity rather than a technological artifact.

These ideas challenge the concept of community as used in institutionalism and parts of social network analysis. They highlight the limitations of the network tradition, which is always looking for clear social boundaries that may not exist. It also questions the institutionalist fixation on high values, solidarity, and strong socialisation (e.g., Polanyi, 2024 [1944]), enabling a better understanding of informal collective phenomena without presupposing a degree of trust and mutual obligation that should instead be investigated.

If we are not to essentialize the concept, the boundary of a community appears processually in communication itself—in the distinction between what it is and is not about—rather than in any definitive and final categorization of people. Levels of trust and mutual obligations must be established and reestablished through this process. This flexibility regarding human membership, values, and trust levels while maintaining communicative boundaries of the present framework can help to explain communities' survival in contexts of rapid personnel changes and weak solidarity.

The structuration of similarity: norms and knowledge

Communities produce and organize social meaning through a dynamic interplay of operations (re-enactments of customs and marks) and structures (norms and knowledge). This verifiable loop reflects the fundamental relationship between self-production and self-organisation, just as that of operation and observation, in social systems. While the constant re-enactment of customs and marks represents the system's ongoing processual operations, norms and knowledge in turn constitute relatively stabilized expectations (structures) that organize and inform said processes. These expectations emerge from past events and configure the range of possibilities of a system, thus enabling a “looping effect” between operation and organisation in social systems (for the concept, see Hacking, 1999).

The existence, intermediate steps, and the speed of this loop can be tested empirically. This section details what to look for.

Customs and marks are fundamental elements of a community. As defined earlier, they are generalized meaningful similarities in social action and social experience

communicated as bounding and informative for members. Norms and knowledge, by contrast, represent structural outcomes that crystallize from recurring internal communications about and based on customs and marks. In Luhmann's terms, they function as "condensed expectations" that make certain associations more likely than others (Luhmann, 1995: 292–296). These structures don't determine customs or marks mechanistically but inform what they imply internally (for members) and how they and associated practices should be performed.

A community's cognitive expectations—its knowledge structures—can be organized into three categories: facts, narratives, and myths. Facts are considered concrete truths expressing reality with clarity and precision (see Durkheim, 1912: 215–216). Narratives organize facts into temporal sequences with cause-effect relationships (compare Danto, 1985: 233–256). Myths function paralogically, addressing matters resisting conventional logical inquiry (see Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 206–231). In electronic music communities, knowledge structures emerge through descriptions. Initial marks of shared aesthetic appreciation generate communication about factual knowledge of production techniques, narratives about genre evolution, and myths about legendary parties or performances. All these knowledge structures then serve as resources for future communal communication as interpretative frames and practical guides.

Similarly, a community's normative expectations regulate communication through emotion demands, values, themes, taboos, roles, rituals, temporal categories, and spatial orientations. Emotion demands establish expectations about appropriate emotional *expression* (see Collins, 2004: 106–133). Values serve as strong preferences that should be made present in the world. Themes and taboos organize the semantic landscape by defining what should and shouldn't be discussed. Roles assign performative sets to community members. Rituals create extraordinary events reinforcing cohesion (see Goffman, 1967: 47–95). Temporal and spatial categories organize the community's relationship to time and space. In electronic music communities, normative structures evolve from initial dance customs. The basic custom of participating in communal dancing generates normative expectations about proper action in different contexts—emotion demands controlling enthusiasm displays, values of mutual respect and originality, themes appropriate for discussion, taboos against favoring "selling out," roles for mentors and novices, rituals of circle formation, and spatial orientations around the dance floor.

What makes this arrangement distinctively autopoietic is the recursive relationship between customs and marks (operation) and structures (observation). This reflects Luhmann's understanding of autopoiesis as "the production of elements by the elements of a system" (Luhmann, 1990: 3). Structures are not opposed to processes but are their necessary complement. The community's norms and knowledge function as internal conditions enabling communal communication to continue from one moment to the next without reinventing its premises.

Serving as a way to manage contingency exemplifies the structure's primary task in social systems: "to limit the range of possible connections, to preselect the possibilities of communication" (Luhmann, 1995: 283). *So, structures must enable and limit different events at the same time.* Community structures (norms and knowledge) do exactly this when restricting possible communal communications to a manageable

scope without rigidly determining them. In communities, communicative processes produce norms and knowledge structures that enable and orient future communications, which might continue to enact or alter said structures (and so on). This then creates an autopoietic loop between basal operations and observations.

This loop is not voluntaristic of course. Initial customs and marks function as basal elements that, through recursive communication, generate observations in the form of norms and knowledge whose configuration cannot be controlled by singular individuals at will. These observations then create conditions for new customs and marks to emerge, which in turn produce further refined observations. *Past selections and events strongly limit the possibility range of future ones.* Again, in drum and bass communities, the basal mark of appreciating particular musical forms (operation) generated observations about movement vocabularies (knowledge) and proper dance floor conduct (norms). These observations then informed new dance customs (operation), which produced further refined observations about authenticity and innovation.

The structures of norms and knowledge therefore serve a crucial function in managing the inherent contingency of communal communication. The development of structural patterns provides relative stability without eliminating contingency entirely. In electronic music communities, knowledge structures about genre development and normative structures about innovation manage the contingency of aesthetic social experience, structurally coupling them to the art system. These structures don't eliminate aesthetic uncertainty but help to transform it into productive tension between tradition and innovation. The security provided by shared expectations actually enables greater experimentation within recognized parameters. The dynamic interplay between customs and marks as process and norms/knowledge as structure provides a powerful explanation for how communities maintain identity while being able to change along circumstances.

Communities thus persist neither as rigid structures nor as formless processes but as social systems that continuously reproduce themselves (while re-enacting customs and marks) and self-organize (through cognitive and normative structures that further orient future communicative performance). This recursive relationship between operation and structure better explains both their resilience and their capacity for evolution, as each cycle of the autopoietic loop introduces variations that can bring about immense changes over time.

Community and other social levels: a rough sketch

Having established how communities operate internally through similarity, we must now clarify how they differ from other types of social systems. Communities exist alongside other social system forms—interactions, organizations, social movements, and functional systems—while maintaining their distinctive operative unity. Here I will highlight what distinguishes communities from these other system types.

In contrast to interactions, communities transcend co-presence limitations. While interactions dissolve when participants disperse, communities persist across multiple interactions through the ongoing reproduction of basal customs and marks. Unlike interactions that depend on turn-taking communication among simultaneous par-

ticipants, communities maintain continuity through social similarity forms bridging temporal and spatial gaps. A scientific community continues to exist even when its members are not interacting, sustained by things such as shared expectations concerning canon, methodology, terminology, and conceptual frameworks informing future communication.

Unlike organizations, communities do not depend on formal decision-making or explicit membership criteria. Organizations operate through formalized decisions which become premises for future decisions. This calls for, as a consequence, the creation of clear boundaries between members and non-members (Luhmann, 2018: 62–64). Communities, by contrast, include people through the distinction between similar and dissimilar individuals, allowing also for ambiguous and graduated participation rather than binary membership. While organizations must decide who belongs and who doesn't, communities can operate with a continuum of core participants, peripheral contributors, and interested observers, all engaged with their ways to varying degrees.

In distinction from social movements, communities do not organize themselves primarily around protest communication directed at changing society. Social movements mobilize around protest themes, creating a self-referential system distinguished by a form of protest demanding change from external addresses (typically, "the System," i.e., society as a whole) (Luhmann, 1991: 135; Japp, 1986: 175–191). Communities, however, orient themselves around customs and marks rather than outward-directed demands. While movements derive their identity from what they oppose, communities derive their identity from shared similarity that may or may not involve agonistic opposition to other systems.

Compared to functional systems, communities do not operate through binary codes processing communications according to highly specialized functions that work as their identity principle. Functional systems like science (true/false), economy (payment/non-payment), or law (legal/illegal) operate through complex performative programs in order to fulfill their self-attributed function (respectively, knowledge production, scarcity management, and maintenance of counterfactual expectations), so excluding criteria outside their binary frame and function as irrelevant (Luhmann, 2012a, b: 42–43). Communities, however, process communications through the similar/dissimilar distinction allowing for multivalent evaluation and greater thematic flexibility. Rather than self-imposed specialized functions, communities achieve symbolic boundaries through the recognition of generalized bounding similarities in social action and social experience, which exposes them to greater thematic freedom but makes them less universalistic.

These distinctive features—persistence beyond interaction, marginality of decision-making, orientation toward internal customs and marks rather than external protest, and communicative performance based on the similar/dissimilar distinction rather than functional binary codes—firmly position communities as a social system form distinct from the others.

Conclusion

This article has developed a conceptualization of communities as social systems defined by the recursive reproduction of a generalized form of social similarity. By positioning communities as autopoietic systems distinct from interactions, organizations, social movements, and functional systems, we have addressed a significant gap in both systems theory and the broader sociological understanding of informal collective phenomena.

The theory presented here provides *a framework for understanding communities that avoids “groupism” pitfalls without sacrificing analytical precision*. Due to the focus on communication rather than human aggregation or subjective action, we can analyze how communities maintain communicative boundaries without reifying them as socially bounded entities with clear membership lines and deterministic properties à la institutionalism (such as strong values, inescapable commitments, and ontological needs). Communities emerge not as people collections but as communication systems reproducing themselves through recursive reference to generalized forms of social similarity.

By reconceptualizing communities through communicative rather than membership boundaries, this framework resolves the long-standing tension between analytical precision and empirical plausibility in community studies. Where previous approaches required choosing between groupist assumptions and theoretical dissolution, the similarity communication framework demonstrates how communities can maintain symbolic distinctiveness without strong social closure or presupposing existential needs. They can persist across personnel changes without bounded membership, and exhibit real social effects without reified group properties.

This theoretical rehabilitation enables more nuanced empirical analysis of how communities operate in complex modern societies—neither as anachronistic relics requiring artificial preservation nor as romantic alternatives to functional differentiation, but as distinctive solutions to the double contingency problem that complement rather than contradict other social forms. The shift from “who belongs” to “what distinguishes” thus provides not merely conceptual refinement, but analytical liberation from the false choices that have constrained community studies, opening new possibilities for understanding how symbolic boundaries generate real social coordination without the theoretical baggage of groupism.

The present framework opens several promising empirical research avenues. It suggests researchers should focus less on identifying clearly who “belongs” to communities and more on analyzing how the communication of similarity forms reproduces itself across diverse contexts. Rather than seeking clear membership boundaries, empirical studies might examine how customs and marks generate system (i.e., symbolic) boundaries through the processes of distinction, generalization and structuration, which can then be translated into possibly more fluid and fuzzy social boundaries between members and non-members. The theory also invites investigation into how communities evolve, and how they relate to other social systems through structural couplings and irritations.

Understanding communities as communication systems provides a theoretically precise yet empirically promising approach to one of sociology’s most enduring

concerns: how distinctive social forms coexist within modern society's complex landscape. By overcoming nostalgic communitarianism, interactionist reductionism, institutionalist determinism, and structuralist dismissal, the article hopefully indicates a path toward more nuanced analyses of informal collective phenomena that neither essentializes nor reduces them to byproducts.

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