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Groups, organizations, families and movements: The sociology of social systems between interaction and society

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Abstract

In enhancing a proposal by Luhmann, this contribution shows that it is possible to locate different types of systems between 'face-to-face-interaction' and 'society': groups, organizations, families and protest movements. The common ground of these is that they use membership to attribute persons to the system or not. However, they differ fundamentally in regard to how they understand membership. In contrast to Luhmann's differentiation between interaction, organization and society, it is not only possible to imagine different types of interlocking systems but also coequal combinations of and transitions between the different types of social systems.

KEYWORDS

families, groups, organizations, social movements, systems

1 | INTRODUCTION—BEYOND THE SCHEME OF INTERACTION, ORGANIZATION AND SOCIETY

In Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, few schemas have attained such prominence as the differentiation between the three system levels of interaction, organization and society. In his article 'Interaction, Organization, Society', published in the mid-1970s in German and translated to English in 1982, Luhmann asserted that this differentiation allowed the emergence or development of an already 'highly complex conception of social reality' (Luhmann, 1982, p. 88; for the first treatment of this differentiation, see Luhmann, 1972a: 144ff.). In his book *Social Systems*, which appeared in the mid-1980s in German (Luhmann, 1984; for the English translation, Luhmann, 1995b), he retained the differentiation between interaction, organization and society, despite revisions undertaken with the theory, and even 'ennobled' it in one of the few visual graphics that he ever produced (Luhmann, 1995b, p. 2). Luhmann deployed this tripartite differentiation in the mid-1990s in *Theory of Society*,[1] even if the casual introduction of 'protest movement' suggests that he could very well have been considering a modification of this threefold schema (see also Luhmann, 2013, pp. 132, 154).[2]

But even if this threefold distinction between interaction, organization and society is repeated as a matter of course in works that convey introductions or overviews of systems theory (see, e.g., Nassehi, 2005; Seidl, 2005), many have pointed out—including systems theoreticians as well—that many social phenomena cannot be fit neatly into the trinity of interaction, organization and society. How can we, following an early query inspired by the sociology of groups, integrate cliques of friends, or

[1]See Luhmann, 1997 for the German original, and Luhmann, 2012b, 2013 for the English translation.

[2]In his theory of society, Luhmann treats interaction and organization as 'types' 'of freely formed social systems', in order to later address protest movements in discussions of similar length to those for interaction and organization. He postulated, however, that the 'present status of research does not allow them [protest movements] be considered a separate mode of dealing with double contingency on a level with interactions and organizations' (Luhmann, 2013, p. 132).

groups of acquaintances, into this scheme (see also Neidhardt, 1979, 1983; Tyrell, 1983a; Willke, 1978)? How can families be categorized meaningfully in the scheme if we consider that they rely powerfully upon interaction yet do not presuppose the permanent presence of all family members in the interaction (see also Tyrell, 1979; Tyrell, 1983b)? What should we do with movements that, as is well known, differ from organizations in that they cannot make decisions regarding membership, which means that the behaviour of movement adherents cannot be conditioned by means of formulated membership conditions (see also Neidhardt, 1985)? From the perspective of systems theory, should we avoid conceiving of networks as a substitute for the concept of a system, preferring instead to view it as a special type of social system (see also Teubner, 1993)? To name a few more possible social systems, could we not also understand nation-states, professions or religious communities as social systems?

It is striking that these proposed expansions of the list of social systems have either (in the case of the group) not caught on in systems theory or (in the case of protest movements) have not led to a modification of the threefold distinction of interaction, organization and society. This seems all the more surprising, given that Niklas Luhmann—at least in his early works—was prepared to 'fork out' the concept of a system for a broad number of social phenomena. If we always observe the formation of social systems whenever the actions of multiple people are meaningfully related to one another, then we can understand why Luhmann felt that procedures (see also Luhmann, 1969, p. 39), discussions (Luhmann, 1971: 326ff.), conflicts (see also Luhmann, 1975b: 68ff.) or contact systems (see also Luhmann, 2005a: 360) fulfil the criteria of a social system.

Yet the question at hand remains, why has the diverse array of expansive proposals not generated fundamental irritations in the tripartite distinction between interaction, organization and society?

1.1 | Argumentation strategies to save the threefold model

There are three strategies of argumentation that are being used to preserve the 'purity' of the interaction, organization and society scheme. The *first* strategy is to take proposals to expand the notion of social systems to include groups, families, movements, nation-states or professions and to dissolve them into one of the three types of social systems. A clique of friends is then presented either as a number of repeated interactions or as a sort of mini-organization that can impose formal membership demands (on the idea of groups as 'interaction accumulations', see Luhmann, 2008a: 21/3d27fC5). Movements are attributed to the political system and thereby situated at the level of society (see also Japp, 1986). The family is considered a societal subsystem—such as politics, economics or science—followed by a succinct statement that this societal family system is the only societal subsystem that consists of millions of small systems (see also Luhmann, 2005c).[3]

The *second* strategy of rescue consists of admitting that there are phenomena such as groups, movements and networks that escape the tripartite model but that they cannot be granted the status of a social system. In this case, there is an assumption that every social phenomenon need not be understood as communication that entails the formation of a system in which interrelated selections differentiate themselves. Although it is difficult to deny that 'actions of several persons are meaningfully interrelated and are thus, in their very interconnectedness, marked off from an environment' (Luhmann, 1982, p. 70), it can be argued that it is not possible (yet) to show how they reproduce themselves as autonomous social systems.

The *third* strategy of rescue refers to the fact that of course the tripartite model cannot be used to claim that all social systems between interaction and society can be understood yet that the *analytical* distinction between interaction, organization and society is superior to all other proposals. The 'theory of social systems' can, following this argument, 'explain social reality with recourse to the three types, their autonomy and their interdependencies' (Baraldi, 1997, p. 178, my translation). According to this suggestion, it would only be possible to define a compact theory of society by limiting it to interaction, organization and society.[4] The threefold list, according to this contention, is superior, 'in terms of theoretical aesthetics', to a fourfold list comprised of interaction, group, organization and society, and even more so when it comes to hierarchically nonsorted lists with several systems that must be located between interaction

[3]An interesting question here is whether both love and the family are independent systems and how they behave in relation to one another as functional systems. Leupold (1983, p. 299) highlights, for example, that love 'cannot escape the logic of functional differentiation. Like all media-shaped manipulations of communicative problems, [this logic] constitutes, in the process of media formation, its own social system which appears as a functional system alongside those in which love is no longer possible now' (my translation).

[4]This line of argument may admit that Luhmann conceived of the three types of interaction, organization and society as rather pragmatic for research purposes and did not issue a 'claim of completeness' (Tyrell, 1983a: p. 77; my translation), yet theoretically convincing observations can only be made with a hierarchically organized list of three types.

and society. But of course, the question remains as to whether (and if yes, how much) consideration should be paid to 'aesthetic theorizing' in the development of a theory of society (Luhmann, 2013, p. 154).

These arguments for retaining the tripartite model were therefore successful because proposals for groups, movements and families, or professions and networks were usually presented as individual recommendations for a social system. In his programmatic essay, 'Interaction, Organization, and Society', Luhmann offered an integration into the discussion of sociological theory, yet he also presented a theory of society based upon the distinction between levels, described the process of intertwining the different levels and pointed out the richness of this approach using the social model of 'conflict'. However, later proposals for social systems remained largely limited to discussing whether or not single cases of networks, groups, movements or friendships were social systems.[5] To put it briefly, however plausible the proposals for new social systems may have been, each new article seemed to announce, 'Here, I've got another one'.[6]

1.2 | The objective of this article

This article intends to point out how the differentiation among the levels of interaction, organization and society could be expanded in such a way that social phenomena such as group, movement and family can find a place within it, thereby allowing the development of a more complex, historically comparative theory of society.[7] To this end, I have chosen an approach that is unusual, at least for a scholarly article. This article closely follows Luhmann's article 'Interaction, Organization, and Society', and attempts—often with references to Luhmann's arguments elsewhere—to show which additional insights are gained not only by locating organizations between the levels of interaction and society but also by allowing other social systems such as groups, movements or families.

This article of course cannot provide detailed descriptions of groups, movements, families and organizations as social systems. However, Section 2 presents a brief characterization of the respective system types. To define the stated social phenomena, the argument is developed that membership is suitable as a characteristic not only for the determination of organizations but also for the determination of groups, movements and families. Although the definition of persons as members or non-members is what these social systems have in common, the different types of social systems (groups, movements, organizations and families) can be distinguished from each other by the different disposition options with regard to membership.

Section 3 briefly alludes to how the notion of membership can be used to explain how groups, organizations, movements and families historically differentiated themselves. I argue there, in an admittedly greatly simplified manner, that not only organizations but also groups, movements and (nuclear) families have developed as independent social systems only with the transition from a stratified to a functionally differentiated society. I argue that this social differentiation into different social systems between interaction and society generates certain follow-up problems. Groups, movements, families and organizations—as social systems—differentiate themselves not only from interaction on the one hand and society on the other but also from each other. Using the example of family businesses, social movement organizations or groups of friends composed of different families, we can then observe what happens when different system logics collide.

One existing strength of Luhmann's level-based differentiation of interaction, organization and society is that it facilitates an analysis of the nesting of systems of different sizes into each other, for example, interactions in organizations, or organizations in functionally differentiated societies. Section 4 will show that groups, movements, organizations and families can also nest within each other. We need to consider not only groups in organizations, organizations in movements or groups in movements but also organizations formed by groups of friends or organizations that try to initiate movements in order to influence public opinion. In contrast to the level-

[5]This is all the more surprising because, at least in the German-speaking world, many relevant authors have generally dealt with several social systems between interaction and society (e.g., Neidhardt, 1979, 1982, 1983, 1985; Tyrell, 1979, 1983a, 1983b). However, it is striking that the respective propositions are always introduced in separate articles that typically do not refer to one another.

[6]This reminds us slightly of the discussion about societal subsystems, in which titles such as 'Diakonie [a Protestant social welfare organization in Germany] as a Social System' (see Starnietzke, 1996), 'Journalism as a Social System' (see Blöbaum, 1994) and 'The Military as a Social System' (see Schubert, 2001) proffer additions to the list of functional systems.

[7]We can also refer to Luhmann, who expresses the notion that 'a moment of functional differentiation lies on a transverse (vertical) axis' is inherent in the 'pulling apart of society/organization/simple systems.' Because this note can be found under the keyword 'group', one can assume that this means not only differentiation on the transverse axis of society (functional systems) but that this differentiation can also be assumed at the level between interaction and society. Luhmann explicitly mentions that differentiation on the transverse axis should not be confused with 'the simple system/subsystem distinction' (e.g., groups in organizations or organizations in movements) (Luhmann, 2008a: 21/3d27fl; my translation).

based differentiation of interaction, organization and society, groups, movements, organizations and families can be imagined not only to be *nested* within each other but also to be *combinations* and *transitions* between the different social systems of largely equal rank.

In Section 5, I examine the advantages of this model compared with the aforementioned 'rescue strategies'. I argue that a differentiation between different social systems is more likely to lead to an understanding of the group, organization, movement, and family than to an understanding of the phenomena either as an accumulation of interactions, as different varieties of organizations, or as subsystems of larger societal subsystems such as politics or economics.

This article—and this must be emphasized explicitly—neither provides a theory of social systems between interaction and society nor can it offer a detailed description of the largely parallel differentiation of groups, organizations, movements and families as social systems in the transition from a stratified to a functionally differentiated society. Instead, this article examines how we can open up an entire series of research perspectives on the interrelationship of group, organization, movement and family. But in response to the question of whether this approach will be successful, we could paraphrase Luhmann: This 'can only prove itself by means of research' (Luhmann, 1975a, p. 20; my translation).

2 | TYPES OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS BETWEEN INTERACTION AND SOCIETY—A DIFFERENTIATED CONCEPT OF MEMBERSHIP

Theoretically and aesthetically, the simplest way to construct a model of different levels is to locate only one system on each level. In this case, the level can be determined via the corresponding system type, and the respective system type can be related to the other system types via level differentiation. But Luhmann's differentiation of interaction, organization and society—and this is often overlooked—already conceives of the idea that different system types are plausible on one level; after all, at the level of society, different macrolevel subsystems with very different logics exist: law, politics, economics, religion or science.[8] My argument now is that at the level between interaction and society, different types of systems have also developed. Unlike the subsystems located at the societal macrolevel, each of which is based on the principle of inclusion—in principle, anyone can sue and be sued (law system), and anyone can buy and sell (economic system)—the system types between interaction and society are based on the possibility of distinguishing between members and nonmembers.

If in the following discussion the possibility of attributing persons to a social system (or not) through their memberships and communications is determined as a commonality of social systems between interaction and society, then Luhmann's narrow understanding of membership must be modified (see the first treatments of this in Martens, 1997, p. 282). Luhmann introduces membership only as a central criterion for defining organizations. However, it is striking that everyday language speaks of members not only of organizations but also of groups, movements, families, professions and networks. It is said that members of a group of young people who have set a car on fire are probably members of a politically motivated movement and that parents must ensure that younger family members do not hang out on the streets at night. They are members of professions who look after the young people and turn the members of groups, movements and families into respected members of society (or more precisely of the 'community').

Of course, the everyday use of a term alone does not suggest that it should also be used for the sociological definition of social systems. But the use of the membership concept for a multitude of social phenomena can be interpreted as an indication that, as Bettina Mahlert (2015) puts it, there are a multitude of membership-based social systems. It is a characteristic not only of organizations but of other social systems as well that the attribution of a communication as belonging to a system is dependent on whether or not a *person* is regarded as a member. People can be 'identification points of communication', 'addresses for communication' and 'units of attribution' not only in organizations but also in families, movements, organizations and, to a greater extent, in professions or classes (see Luhmann, 2005c, p. 194).

But even if we open our eyes to the fact that not just organizations, but also groups, movements and families, identify persons as members and thus make communications attributable to them, we still need an explanation as to why these are different social systems with different logics. In the following, I will show that although all groups, movements, organizations and families identify persons who belong (or do not belong) as members, the memberships of these people to the respective social systems are handled differently. This results not only in

[8]In this respect, the gatekeepers would have to justify the distinction between interaction—organization—society, which is why different system types do indeed exist at the level of society, but only one system type is supposed to have developed at any one time at the 'lower' or 'middle' level.

different forms of demarcation for the respective system types, which is obvious, but also in different forms of communication through which the different social systems reproduce themselves.

2.1 | Organizations

Most organizational researchers of various theoretical orientations regard membership—the decision about a group of people whose decisions are perceived as the organization's decisions—as a characteristic of organizations (see, e.g., Caplow, 1964: 1f.). In systems theory, however, membership is *the* central determinant of organizations, not just one among many. According to Luhmann, organizations are always formed 'if it can be presumed that a decision can be made about joining and leaving the system' (Luhmann, 2017, p. 205; see also Luhmann, 1982, p. 75).

The organization can therefore decide who belongs to a company, an administration, a political party or a sports club and who does not.[9] And more seriously, it can decide who should no longer belong to it because he or she no longer follows the rules of the organization. The organization creates limits within which the members (and only the members) have to submit to the rules of the organization, and there is a permanent threat that the member has to leave the organization if s/he does not follow the rules. In organizations, decisions about the entry and exit of individuals—the determination of memberships—are a central instrument for establishing compliant behaviour on the part of their members.

Through the possibility of conditioning membership—that is, making behaviour an expectation for everyone, with the threat of terminating membership should someone step out of line—organizations can develop decision communication as a system-specific form of communication (see Luhmann, 2002, p. 160).[10] This does not mean that all communication within organizations takes the form of decision communication. Organizations often wildly debate, criticize, and imagine. But the peculiarity is that the conditioning of the membership can turn any communication into a decision communication. Thus, communication in organizations differs from communication in movements, families and groups, in which decisions are made, but in which decision communication cannot be recursively linked in the same form.

2.2 | Movement

Systems theory has found it difficult to define movements as a social system and has therefore—independently of other sociological movement research—narrowed down movements to protest movements (Luhmann, 2008b, pp. 125–129; Luhmann, 2013, p. 157; see also Japp, 1993: 230ff. or Hellmann, 1998: 500ff. following Luhmann).[11] This narrow-mindedness certainly has the advantage that it manages to determine the systemic character of movements by means of protest communication—that is, communications that are addressed 'to others' and remind them of 'their' responsibility—and thus provides a clear criterion of demarcation from, for example, fashions, trends or scholarly schools of thought. Of course, protest communication also occurs in groups, in families or in organizations, but only in movements does protest serve as a 'catalyst in the formation of a system of its own' (Luhmann, 2008b, p. 126). Protest, as a central element of the system-building process, can then also explain why politics in particular offers itself as an addressee for protest communication. In contrast to business, science or religion, we can assume that politics is particularly well suited as an addressee for protests, even about undesirable developments in science, business or religion.

Luhmann remarked that with a 'more narrow concept of the protest movement', he was able to capture 'broad areas of the phenomenon of the social movement', yet only 'broad areas' (Luhmann, 2008b, p. 125). But that leaves the question of how social phenomena can be described, which, although they have a high structural similarity to protest movements, cannot be primarily defined by protest communication.[12] Thus, religious

[9]This of course presupposes the willingness of the people to also want to become members of this organization. On the special problems of organizations that forcibly recruit their members, see recently Kühl, 2016.

[10]Luhmann stated early on (1973, p. 44) that the formal organization is an 'evolutionary achievement' that enabled decision-making processes to become reflexive in nature.

[11]The term 'social' can be omitted when defining a movement. The extensive use of the term 'social movement' in comparison, for example, to the 'social group', 'social organization' or 'social family' stems from the connotation that the term 'social' not only describes social patterns but more precisely also suggests something 'good' or 'beautiful'. However, this use is not supported by sociology. The use of the word 'social' in the terms 'social movement', 'social organization' or 'social group' is therefore not wrong, but it is superfluous.

[12]It is not my intention to negate the notion that protest movements are particularly prominent forms of movements. Rather than narrowing down movements by definition through the concept of protest from the outset, however, it seems more sensible to me to work with a broader concept of movements and to understand Luhmann's contributions to movements as contributions to the most prominent form of movements, namely, the protest movement.

movements have surprising similarities with political movements, even if they rarely resort to the mode of protest (see Barker, 1993). Movements can also be identified in the field of education if we recall the reform pedagogical movement of the 20th century. Even if these movements see themselves as a counter-concept to the dominant form of school education, movements cannot be reduced to a protest movement. But even for such fields such as sports, we could discuss whether the soccer fan scene has similarities with political or religious movements (see Guilianotti, 2002).

In contrast to organizations, it is difficult in movements to define the circle of members with precision (see early discussions in the Germanophone world for example Rammstedt, 1978, p. 134; Neidhardt, 1985: 194ff.). Although in companies, administrations or schools, it is easy to recognize who is a member and who is not, identifying members is more difficult in the antinuclear movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, the evangelical movement or the reform educational movement. In research, the problem of classifying people is often solved by distinguishing the persons associated with a movement into activists, participants and sympathizers, whereby the activists and participants are assigned to the movement, whereas the sympathizers are assigned to the environment of the movement (for a popular science discussion, see Rucht & Neidhardt, 2001, p. 541).[13] But instead of taking these difficulties of clear classifications of people as an opportunity to speak of 'relatively indefinite entities' (Rucht & Neidhardt, 2001, p. 540), it seems more productive to determine what effects these difficulties have on the form of communication in movements.

If we abandon the concept of movement, which was narrowed from the outset to the type of protest movement, we cannot define movements solely through protest communication (see Luhmann, 2013, p. 157). Although there are also communications in religious movements, in reform educational movements, in the life reform movements or in movements of the economic system that 'are addressed to others calling on their sense of responsibility' (Luhmann, 2008b, p. 125), describing this form of communication as the dominant one would not correctly capture the character of these movements. More generally, *value communication* can be described as the dominant mode of communication. Friedhelm Neidhardt rightly pointed out that 'operationalizable purposes' and 'action-structuring programmatics' are not the strength of social movements; this is why their purposes are kept rather vague (Neidhardt, 1985, p. 195). Movements, on the other hand, tend to communicate with values.[14] But even if values such as peace, environmental protection, equality or charity play a central role as reference points for communication in movements, a reference to values is not sufficient. After all, it is the characteristic of values that they can generate broad approval in their general form. Today, peace, environmental protection and equality (almost) all enjoy universal favour, at least in abstract terms. Values are therefore formulated in movements in such a way that they can also be mobilized. This can be done—as is often the case in religious movements—by dramatizing a value as particularly important or, as movements in the business world show, by 'discovering' new, previously underestimated values such as participation or self-realization. A particularly suitable form—and this explains the narrowing of the form of communication in systems theory—is protest communication, because it can specify a general value shared by most people, such as peace or environmental protection, by setting it apart from others. This is only one (albeit particularly plausible) opportunity for specifying value communications in such a way that they can be mobilized; however, it is not the only one.

2.3 | Group

In sociology, when we talk about a group as a social system, we mean a system in which people are in regular, personal contact with each other. They are therefore also referred to in the literature as 'intimate groups', 'face-to-face groups' or 'primary groups'. One can think of these groups as rather 'fluid', 'loosely connected' groups, such as a regularly touring travel company, a circle of friends, cliques of adolescent youths, street gangs loitering on street corners or neighbours who regularly meet in pubs (Luhmann, 2020). But there are also 'more stable forms' such as 'autonomous' left-wing political groups with their far-reaching demands on their members, small terrorist groups such as the 'Baader Meinhof Group', or religious groups that have developed beyond the initiative of

[13]See Guilianotti, 2002, where soccer fans are classified as 'supporters, followers, fans and flaneurs', much like in research on movements.

[14]This thought is taken up in various theories of research on movements. Consider the collective identity paradigm in movement research, where it is assumed that community building must take place in movements related to defined values in order for mobilization to take place at all (see Melucci, 1995). However, I believe it is wrong to understand values as a 'control medium' of movements. We might ask, who is supposed to control whom here? The concept of communication is better suited to describe the reproduction of social systems here; this has become clear especially in the discussion of control theory.

church administrators and in which personal topics can also be discussed.[15]

Groups—unlike organizations—consist of a certain, unmistakable circle of members who know each other, which is why all of the group members notice when another member is absent. A group does not automatically disintegrate when people leave or join the group. But groups have a very limited ability to compensate for loss of people and to incorporate new people. New entrants are observed from the point of view that their arrival does not disrupt group cohesion, the personal reference of the group members.

This limited ability to substitute people, in combination with often implicit norms, means that the behaviour of members in groups can be much more difficult to condition than that of members in organizations. It is true that norms for 'right behaviour' develop in groups, just as they do in movements, organizations and families. However, as a rule, these emerge rather incidentally. In groups, unlike in organizations, there are no procedures available to change or extend norms (see Tyrell, 1983a, p. 80).[16]

In the communication of this system type—unlike in organizations or movements—there is primarily a 'personal orientation' between the members (Luhmann, 2008a: 21/3d27fc). 'Personal orientation' in groups means that '*personal communication*' is not only 'permissible' but can also be 'expected' and even 'demanded'. This means that, in communication, good 'personnel knowledge is required' so that one can 'assess what the other can understand' and what they cannot understand (Luhmann, 2008a: 21/3d27fc2).[17] Even if personal communication is the dominant style of communication, groups of course also have decision communications or protest communications, for example. But this communication must ultimately always be justifiable with a reference to a 'personal orientation'.[18]

2.4 | Families

Because a personal orientation of communication also prevails in families, families are often treated as a special form of group (see, for example, Tyrell, 1983b). But membership in families plays a different role than in groups. There are obviously two ways to become a member of a family, and both ways must be used to create a family at all: the formation of a relationship between usually opposite-sex partners and the incorporation of children either by birth or adoption. With the birth or adoption of a child within the framework of a relationship, a new family is 'completely on the way'. 'All necessary positions—father, mother and child—are occupied, even if this family may increase by more children (but no longer by more parents)' (Hartmann Tyrell, 1983b, p. 364 in an early definition, partly shaped by a normative picture of the family; my own translation).

The definition of families that Tyrell (2008) later propagated via a frequently risky coupling of partnership and parenthood seems to be a further development of the exaggeratedly harmonious representation of the father–mother–child trinity. According to Alois Herlth and Hartmann Tyrell, the logic of partnership is often quite different from that of parenthood. In the family, these two logics are coupled (Tyrell & Herlth, 1994: 1ff.; see also Tyrell, 2008, p. 317).[19] This division of the definition of families into partnership on the one hand and

[15]Luhmann (Luhmann, 1964, p. 34) himself still seems to fluctuate in this early enumeration. He introduces the examples in general—as a 'law' that living together depends on 'the formation of relatively fixed mutual expectations of behavior' but then takes his examples from small group research in the narrower sense.

[16]Unlike organizations, groups therefore find it difficult to develop membership into a clearly defined 'special role' to which the fulfilment of a number of decisive expectations can be linked (Tyrell, 2008, p. 303). This makes it much more difficult to demand certain behavioural expectations from a member of a group of friends, a street gang or a prayer group by threatening imminent expulsion from the group than from an employee in a company, a hospital or an administration.

[17]I collected the information on the keyword 'group' in Luhmann's personal box of file-cards (*Zettelkasten*) in the course of an initial review that was intended to enable me to assess the extent to which the notes offer insights into topics that Luhmann had not taken up in publications. The central references on the subject of groups under the number 21/3d27fC are contradictory in that Luhmann develops the basic features of a concept of a group as a social system over several notes (quote: groups are 'to be treated as a typology of system formation that cannot be traced back to interaction, organization and society'), and then, on the last note, in response to the proposals of Neidhardt and Tyrell, he states succinctly that 'groups should not be recognized as a special type of social system' but should only be understood as a 'mode of interaction and accumulation of interaction' (Luhmann, 2008a: 21/3d27fC5).

[18]Sociology has so far found it difficult to separate the concepts of friendship dyads and groups of friends (see Tyrell, 1983a, whose concept suggests that friendship between two persons also constitutes a group of friends). My preliminary proposal is based on separating friendship dyads from friendship groups. If you are a friend of a person (friendship dyad), this does not mean that you are also a friend of their friend(s). However, if you are friends with a friend (or friends) of a friend, there is a high probability that a group will form in which the behaviour of the members is influenced by a personal orientation.

[19]With its emphasis on the often opposing logics of partnership and parenthood, this model distances itself from the concept of the nuclear family with its 'strong suggestion of unity'. With this interesting thought, Tyrell opposes the widespread idea in the sociology of families as a triad of mother, father and child (Tyrell, 2008, p. 317, in which the corresponding references can also be found).

parenthood on the other also makes it possible to view families through the aspect of membership. In the case of parenthood, memberships cannot blithely be terminated. Children cannot simply be excluded from the family if they do not behave according to their parents' needs. It is also difficult for the children themselves to terminate their family membership. Children are aware of this impossibility of exclusion and take advantage of it with spectacular resistance actions against their parents, especially at big family celebrations or in line at supermarket checkouts. It is as if they think, what is going to happen—it is not like they are going to leave me. In partnerships, the dissolution of a membership is not just conceivable; in modern society, at least, it is the rule. Even if at first glance it seems that a relationship—similar to membership in an organization—can be 'terminated' (see Tyrell, 2008, p. 317), we must keep the special character of partnerships in mind. In a relationship, it is difficult to exert influence over the partner's behaviour by threatening him or her with separation. If one partner makes the continuation of the partnership contingent on the condition that the household is cleaned regularly, that in the future the other partner will drive more carefully, or that further amorous adventures with other sex partners must cease, then there are already clear signs of crisis at hand.

Despite (or perhaps better: precisely because of) this fragile quality of membership, *intimate communication* in families today is not just allowed to a surprisingly high degree in comparison to premodern society but is almost demanded (for a comprehensive and revealing discussion, see Gilgenmann, 1994, p. 66; see also Luhmann, 2005b, p. 213).[20] Intimate communication does not mean that communication in families is characterized by the permanent flush of love. There would be little empirical plausibility for this. Rather, intimate communication means that 'everything that concerns a person' is, in principle, 'accessible for communication'. According to Luhmann, secrecy can be practiced by parents and children alike, 'but it has no legitimate status'. In the family, one cannot 'reject communication about oneself with the remark: that is none of your business!' (Luhmann, 2005c, p. 193; my translation). Intimate communication differs from personal communication—the idea has not yet been worked out in systems theory—in that intimate communication claims the ability to thematize *all* other roles, whereas personal communication can only claim to thematize *some* other roles. In an interaction among friends, a question about bizarre religious practices can be rejected, whereas in a relationship between two people, not answering the question would necessitate an explanation.[21]

2.5 | Similarities and differences between organizations, groups, families and movements

The *common feature* shared by organizations, groups, families and movements is that they are constantly monitored for whether a person making a contribution to communication is treated as a member of the social system or not. In contrast to the social system of society, which is based on the principle of communicative accessibility, membership refers to the distinction between belonging and not belonging to a system. The lamentations of a dissatisfied person, the crying of a baby or the throwing of a stone by a masked person—depending on whether the person is regarded as a member or not—therefore have a fundamentally different meaning for a system. The distinction between members and nonmembers thus functions as an 'identification signal' not only of organizations but also of groups, movements and families (on identification signals in organizations, see Luhmann, 2008b, p. 188).[22]

Instead of understanding membership as a 'universal feature' of all social systems, membership is introduced here merely as a feature of a series of precisely specified systems between interaction and society. Membership alone is not suitable as a criterion for all social systems because, in most societal subsystems, layman roles are formed through which the 'total population' is included

[20]The idea that parenthood and partnership are assigned the same form of communication may come as a surprise. After all, the term intimate communication was originally used only for partnerships shaped by the romantic ideal of love (Luhmann, 2012a) and then later extended to families as a whole, including parenthood (Luhmann, 2005c). Even if the semantics of partnership and parenthood are surprisingly comparable at first glance (for example, the statement 'I love you', which is used towards both children and partners), similarities and differences in intimate communication in partnership and parenthood need to be examined more closely (see Tyrell & Herlth, 1994: 6ff. on the 'bourgeois semantics of unity' (my translation), which is certainly responsible for the similarity in the form of communication).

[21]The distinction between intimate communication and personal communication has not yet been systematically elaborated. In this respect, this is a provisional definition. The exclusivity claims conveyed in communication would be of particular interest.

[22]So much for the idea that families, protest movements, professions or even classes should be placed at the level of society. To do this, we would have to prove the social function for each of these systems. This may still be plausible with families or groups, but it becomes more difficult with protest movements or professions. Or we would have to explain why other systems besides the functional systems have to be located on the level of society.

in the respective social system located at the societal macro level (Stichweh, 1988: 261ff.; see also Luhmann, 1981, p. 157; Schirmer & Michailakis, 2018). Social systems such as groups, families, movements or organizations, on the other hand, include only a small subset of the total population and can therefore distinguish between members and nonmembers (for organizations, see Luhmann, 1994, p. 193 or Luhmann, 2018, p. 323; on the fundamental distinction between inclusion and exclusion, see Luhmann, 1995a; Göbel & Schmidt, 1998; Schirmer & Michailakis, 2018).[23]

However, as we have seen, the *differences* between organizations, groups, families and movements are now based on the fact that membership (and thus also non-membership) is determined differently. In simple terms, we can say that people in organizations become members through decisions about entry and exit, in groups through more and more regular participation (or even through increasing abstinence) in interactions, in families by means of birth and death, or in movements through repeated identification with a value or through the renunciation of an idea. Although in organizations membership is achieved through a combination of self-selection (of the member) and external selection (of the organization), movements do not—and groups only to a limited extent—have the option of externally selecting their members. In the case of families, on the other hand, there is no option of self-selection or external selection, at least for children and parents, but new members are 'assigned' at birth to a family.

There are certainly borderline cases again and again—organizations in which, for example, one becomes a 'gradual' member through freelance work, groups that receive their members through initiation rites, families in which the children 'divorce' from their parents, or movements that try to condition the behaviour of their members—but these grey zones do not speak against the distinction of organizations, movements, groups and families. Just as the existence of twilight does not preclude the existence of day and night, borderline cases do not disprove the existence of groups, organizations, families and movements that can be distinguished from each other in principle.[24]

Because of the different ways of handling membership, groups, movements, families and organizations tend to produce different forms of communication: In organizations, decision-making communication; in groups, personal communication; in families, intimate communication; and in movements, value communication. The emergence of type-specific forms of communication does not mean that communication in a social system is exclusively in the respective specific form nor that this form of communication is to be found exclusively in the respective social system. Decisions are sometimes made in families and groups, and there can be moments of personal communication in movements and organizations. But, following one of Luhmann's old ideas, only in the respective social system does the respective form of communication serve to reproduce the respective social system.

3 | THE DIFFERENTIATION OF GROUPS, ORGANIZATIONS, MOVEMENTS AND FAMILIES

A central idea of Luhmann's theory of society is that the change from a segmented society to a stratified one to a functionally differentiated society has led to an 'increasing ... differentiation' of the levels of interaction, organization and society. In segmentally differentiated archaic social formations, according to Luhmann, interaction, organization and society were 'virtually identical'. An archaic tribal society consists of 'all those interactions that are visible and accessible to individual members of the tribe'. It ejects—like 'an organization'—people 'who are not sufficiently accommodating' and 'recruits' people 'chiefly through marriage'. (Luhmann, 1982, p. 77) In the stratified society of advanced civilizations, the 'the narrow boundaries of interaction accessible to on-the-scene individuals' is surpassed. In the urban centres, organizations were formed in particular 'for religious, political, military, and commercial functions and for specialized productive tasks'. Because, however, 'the influence of organizations on daily life was still relatively slight and, conversely, society itself was still conceived as "a political organization", as a cooperation capable of action', it is not yet possible to speak of a complete differentiation of the levels of interaction, organization and society (Luhmann, 1982, p. 78). This only formed with the emergence of a functionally differentiated society. Society

[23]Even in interactions it does not make sense to distinguish between members and nonmembers. Surely it is true that one 'belongs' to an interaction by taking part in a fight, a verbal argument or a discussion. ~~But this affiliation is more (intentional or unintentional) participation and is therefore viewed differently than membership in groups, organizations, families and movements (comments on undifferentiated inclusions in interactions).~~ It seems more plausible to me that interactions are often observed in a differentiated way as to the extent to which participants in the interaction belong to a group, organization, family or movement. In any case, we perceive the screaming of our own baby differently than the cries of someone else's child.

[24]It is interesting to see how the respective systems deal with the fact that they are approached by other forms of membership management.

could then neither be understood 'as the aggregate sum of daily personal encounters' nor as a 'uniformed organization' (Luhmann, 1982, pp. 77–78).

How must this part of Luhmann's social theory, described here in close reference to his own formulations, be modified if different systems such as movements, groups, organizations and families are located between interaction and society?

3.1 | Profiling groups, movements, organizations and families as social systems against each other

Looking back from the vantage point of typical modern social systems to segmented or stratified societies is problematic. We can certainly point out that segmented societies and stratified societies (similar to modern organizations) reject people who do not want to submit, but this exhausts the analytical possibilities for comparison. In this respect, we must be careful to use social systems that are typical for modern society, such as protest movements, organizations, groups of friends or families consisting of only one parent and children, for the analysis of segmented or stratified societies. It is rather interesting to see how organizations, movements, groups and families have developed as separate types of social systems in the transition to a functionally differentiated society. It was only with the separation from a social formation characterized by tribal and class affiliation that it became possible for individuals to differentiate more strongly between memberships in different and mutually independent social systems. In the following, I will briefly show that the differentiation of movements, organizations, groups and families as separate system types has taken place largely in parallel and has at least partly mutually conditioned these types.[25]

An important foundation of the emergence of organizations already existed at a time in which religious communities developed into religious associations that recruited their members on the basis of their own decisions and—in contrast to what came before—independently of ascriptive criteria such as family affiliation, class affiliation or ethnic roots (see Parsons, 1964: 347ff.). However, we can only begin to identify a differentiation of organizations across different social fields as a separate system type from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards. Only when politics, law and economy separated from religion did organizations develop in these fields that could make decisions about their memberships in an increasingly autonomous manner. With industrialization in particular, wage labour increasingly differentiated itself as a specific role freed from all other expectations. An increasingly dominant model emerged in which membership in an organization was based on a conscious decision by both the member and the organization itself and, at the same time, members—with the exception of total organizations—were no longer integrated into an organization with all of their role references (see Lieckweg & Wehrsig, 2001: 39ff.).

Sometime after the emergence of organizations as distinctive systems, movements developed into a distinctive system type in their own right. Despite some prominent precursors in the form of religious collective movements in the Middle Ages, it was not until the second half of the 18th century—the French Revolution, for example—that movements established themselves as 'a normal phenomenon in the self-observation of the societal system' (Luhmann, 1995b, p. 398).[26] Although the term 'movement' also existed before the French Revolution, it was generally used to describe the rebellions, revolts and protests that peasants and smallholders instigated, with reference to a morality embedded in class society, to secure their standard of living, which was often just above the subsistence level (Luhmann, 2008b, pp. 129–132). It was not until the French Revolution that the concept of a movement was given the connotation of something 'goal-oriented,' 'permanent' or 'socially anchored' (Raschke, 1988, p. 23; my translation).

The distinction of families as a system in their own right also falls into this period of transition from a stratified society to a functionally differentiated one. In the tradition of Ernest W. Burgess and Harvey J. Locke, the differentiation of families can be described as a transition of the family from a multifunctional to a unifunctional system. According to Burgess and Locke (1945 vii; my translation), educational, economic, religious and medical functions in modern society are increasingly transferred to specialized institutions, whereas the family is

[25]The differentiation of groups, movements, organizations and families in the transition from a stratified to a functionally differentiated society is presented in this article primarily with reference to system-theoretical considerations. The argument of the distinction of these social systems has, however, been well elaborated in sociology in general more (families or organizations) or less (groups), so that it is easy to offer a description even without reference to system theory. The exact description of the largely parallel differentiation of group, organization, movement and family will be provided in a separate article.

[26]In stratified societies there were revolts, riots and protests that often unfolded in violation of normative expectations determined by tradition (Luhmann, 2008b, pp. 129–132).

[27]According to Luhmann, 'the original families were connected symbolically only by the married couple's children, only for this tie to become ever so thin once the children in turn married.' (Luhmann, 2012a, p. 145).

primarily based on 'mutual affection', 'compassionate understanding' and the 'communal feeling of its members'. Because political, religious and economic functions are increasingly fulfilled outside the family, there is no need—and this is a central idea—to take into account the family connections of the respective partner when marrying (Luhmann, 2012a, pp. 145–154.).[27] So whereas in the stratified society, the 'family was still seen as a unity that survived the change of generations', to which servants and employees were often seen as belonging as well, every marriage in the functionally differentiated society—indeed, every choice of partnership—holds the potential for the new foundation of a family (see Luhmann, 2012a, p. 129).[28]

The differentiation of groups 'as a special kind of system formation' also takes place in the phase of transition from a stratified to a functionally differentiated society (Luhmann, 2008a: 21/3d27fC2; my translation). Indeed, already in societies distinguished along segmental and strata lines, we see relationships between two or more persons that remind us of the modern phenomenon of friendship. Just think of the blood brotherhoods and sworn friendships that can be found in some early cultures. However, the idea of groups (of friends) did not develop in the Western world until the 18th century (see the informative analysis in Schmidt, 2007; for an early semantic analysis of German literature, see Rasch, 1936). We can understand the function of groups that place high demands on personal relationships as a compensation mechanism for the increasing absence of 'identification groups in society as a whole' as functional differentiation continues (Tenbruck, 1964: 446ff.).[29] The perceived intensity in groups of friends is then understood as a reaction to the impersonal role-based relationships that dominate society (Kern, 2008, p. 17).[30]

A proposition that deserves further inquiry is that, in the process of differentiation, the different system types of groups, movements, families and organizations 'set themselves off from one another more sharply' as distinct system types (see the formulation in Luhmann, 1982, p. 78 for interaction, organization and society). Luhmann's argument—that in the context of interaction systems 'concrete capacity for human empathy and thoughtful awareness of others' (in the form, for example, of intimate relations) can be 'enhanced in an extraordinary and unprecedented way' when the interaction 'is no longer freighted with society-integrating expectations of "normality"' (Luhmann, 1982, p. 79)—must primarily be traced back to the differentiation between family-specific and group-specific interaction (and not the interaction per se).[31] And the 'organizational specification of behaviour' can also be enormously increased, if organizations no longer generally refrain from religious activities, political attitudes, athletic preferences or friendship loyalties of the organizational member, but also do not have to take into consideration the loyalties of the members in groups, movements or families.

3.2 | Subsequent problems of differentiating movements, groups, organizations and families

Whenever we speak of the differentiation of families, groups, organizations and movements, we can of course understand it as the differentiation of these systems vis-á-

[27]According to Luhmann, 'the original families were connected symbolically only by the married couple's children, only for this tie to become ever so thin once the children in turn married.' (Luhmann, 2012a, p. 145).

[28]I consider the differentiation of the family in modern society to be a model case for demonstrating the strength of this approach. In systems-theory orthodoxy, the family is located only at the societal–theoretical level. The problem of the 'alienation of the individual' arises in modern society 'across the board' and could only be solved by differentiating a functional system by the name of 'family'. Instead, I propose, in coordination with the general sociology of families, that in the transition from a stratified to a functionally differentiated society, we should establish a distinction of families as separate social systems. Of course, the individual families fulfil an important social function in reducing the 'alienation of the individual', but, similar to organizations or groups, they are to be understood in a multireferential way, because, for example, they also have connections to functional systems of upbringing (in the upbringing of children and—with some exceptions—also of life partners) or the economy (as a consumer or sometimes even production community). This multireferentiality of families as social systems cannot be recognized by locating families as functional systems.

[29]Tenbruck points out that it is interesting, from the point of view of gender sociology, that friendship was regarded as a 'matter for men'. His explanation is that the social position of women was limited to house and family.

[30]Few studies have addressed the role that the tension in the personal relationship between two persons (dyad) and in the personal relationship between three or more persons (group) plays in the differentiation process. Although we know from the work of Georg Simmel that 'the third party'—and then of course also the fourth, fifth or sixth—gives a social system its own dynamic (Simmel, 1992: 63ff.), the role played by the alternative between dyad and group formation in the differentiation of personal relationships has so far not received much attention. Even if the transitions from a (friend) dyad to a (friend) group are fluid, there is much to be said for focusing on the differences. Unlike a dyad, a group does not disintegrate automatically when people drop out or join.

[31]Likewise, person-centred interaction in groups has only become possible because the group has also emancipated itself from demands made on group members by organizations, families and movements. The statement, 'I am now going to watch sports shows with my buddies as usual' may meet with protest from families and also from employers, but it shows the formation of the group's own logic.

vis society, completely in the sense of Luhmann's original intention.[32] Unlike in stratified societies, it is generally not possible to use a social position to derive any claims for a position in organizations, families, movements or groups. Even the daughter of an influential industrial manufacturer has to live with the fact that she does not occupy an exceptional position in her circle of friends, in the family she has founded, in a political movement or in the organization employing her.[33]

For our purposes, however, we are primarily interested in the fact that groups, movements, organizations and families in modern society also differentiate themselves more strongly from one another. Often without explicitly communicating this, we learn that groups, movements, organizations and families follow very different logics. Socrates still assumed quite naturally for the stratified society that the demands on the leadership of a family and an army were similar; he claimed this was because it was important to make subordinates obedient and to obey, to punish the bad, to honour the good and to arouse in subordinates a good ethos (Xenophon, 1789: 111f.). However, if a father or a mother in modern society assumed such a position, it would cause irritation to say the least.[34] The young person who wants to be treated in an organization as in a family will presumably be regarded with the same scepticism as the manager who wants to lead his family like an organization (see Dreeben, 1968 for the first case).

Although the self-descriptions of families, groups, movements and organizations often emphasize the compatibility of membership in one's own system with membership in other systems—as in 'we are a family-friendly company'—sociology tends to emphasize the tensions arising from the fact that people are exposed to the demands of different social systems. Although the collisions between movements, groups, organizations and families are empirically of different relevance and have therefore been researched to different extents in sociological research, they should at least be briefly mentioned to point out all possible combinations of group, movement, organization and family.

The self-descriptions of movements often contain statements that, on the one hand, indicate the movement is dependent on organization(s), and, on the other hand, they are postulates of organizations that, in their own understanding, suggest they are ultimately only instruments of the movement (see Etzioni, 1975: 121ff.). However, sociological research on movement organizations has shown that tensions develop between movements and 'their' organizations (see Raschke, 1988: 206f.). Friedhelm Neidhardt even views the tension between the system logics of movements and organizations as the central dilemma of movements. If movements become organizations—or if they rely primarily on organizations—then they lose their 'attractive character'; they do not become organizations, but run the risk of being 'fragmented or rolled over' (see Neidhardt, 1985, p. 202).

Whereas tensions between movements and organizations are relatively well studied, the relationship between movement and family plays a subordinate role in sociological research. This is certainly due to the fact that movements that make demands on the organization of family life—such as the kibbutz movement in Israel—are rather rare. The cases in which the demands of families compete with the demands of movements—for example, over time resources—are certainly more empirically relevant. However, because involvement in movements is often only temporary, such collisions are rarely found.

Also, the relationships between movements and groups focused on personal communication have so far received comparatively little attention. This is surprising in that one can assume that not only are circles of friends formed within the framework of movements but that membership in a circle of friends is also an important motive for involvement in a movement. If your own friends get involved in the peace movement or the women's movement, it is likely that you will do so as well. Conflicts always seem to arise when a group—often clustered around couples or circles of friends—becomes politically more radical than the movement (see Neidhardt's insightful case study, 1982: 320ff.).

[32]The position of a person in his/her layman role, for example, in a legal, educational, economic, political or religious system, is not determined by these affiliations to groups, families, organizations or movements. Contact with a prominent clique of friends, a well-connected family, a protest movement or an influential organization may help, but it does not spare you a traffic ticket from a policeman, bad grades from a teacher or warnings from your doctor. And if it is possible to negotiate a bonus with police officers, teachers or doctors with reference to belonging to families, movements, organizations or groups, this is generally judged critically when it becomes known.

[33]I cannot deal here with the consequence that interaction, as a social system with its own logic, also differentiates itself from groups, families, organizations and movements. The sociological research on interactions in groups, interactions in families, interactions in movements and interactions in organizations, which is both empirically guided and theoretically classified, is rather underdeveloped (but see, for example, on interaction in families, Keppler, 1994: 23ff. or for interaction in organizations, Kieserling, 1994: 168ff.). What seems to be largely missing are comparative studies on interactions in movements, groups, families and organizations.

[34]In his dialogue with Socrates, Nicomachides expressed doubts even then. Of course, Socrates' position is based on a fundamentally different understanding of family. Accordingly, in the German translation of the Xenophon of 1789, the word 'household', not 'family', is used for 'Oikos' (see Xenophon, 1789, p. 112).

In the research literature, the area of tension between 'families and organizations' has been worked out most extensively. Although in the course of the differentiation of organizations such as armies, companies and schools in the military, educational and economic texts it has repeatedly been pointed out that membership in these organizations was of course compatible with membership in a family, the field of tension between organization and family is depicted precisely in sociological descriptions. The tensions between schools and families over the educational sovereignty of pupils (see Dreeben, 1968), the disputes between armies and families over access to young adults (see Shils & Janowitz, 1948) and the debates in companies about 'work-life balance', which usually revolve around the question of balancing the demands of organizations and families, are only particularly prominent examples in which the tensions that have arisen as a result of the differentiation of organization and family are addressed.

In the relationship between group and organization, too, it was initially assumed that the relationship would be more productive for both the group and the organization. In the early experiments on Taylorist work organization, inspired by social psychology, the group was conceived, in contrast to the organization, as a stronghold of humanity. Very quickly, however, this contrast was supplanted by the hypothesis that organizations should promote, not just passively humour, the principle of the formation of groups, because this would simultaneously promote job satisfaction and productivity. Only slowly did sociological research come to the conclusion that—if groups and organizations are understood as systems with their own logics—a harmonious interaction of groups and organizations is rather unlikely (see Moldaschl & Weber, 1998).[35]

The system types of family and group came into contact with each other in the form of claims based on 'romantic love' in the partnership and in the form of groups based on claims for 'sensitive friendship'.[36] Certainly, as Johannes Schmidt (2007, p. 120) has pointed out, one can assume a 'diachronic complementary relationship' in the training of friendship and love semantics, but in the case of contact between groups and families, role conflicts of individual persons can also frequently occur. We need not only think of the split loyalties of a parental couple to the family on the one hand and to a group of friends on the other hand, but we can also see the conflict in the example of children and the competing demands of socialization by the clique of friends and of upbringing by the family, which are inculcated in children.

3.3 | The system perspective

Because groups, families, movements and organizations are systems based on the determination of membership (or nonmembership) of individuals, the interplay of system types can be viewed in the light of the tried and tested presentation of role conflicts in sociology. The basic idea is always that modern society differentiates between different social systems, each with its own requirements. In exceptional cases, a single role may dominate a person—for example, if a person is exclusively a father, movement activist, organizational member or good buddy—but the rule is that role requirements are brought to a person by different systems.

However, a systems theoretical perspective need not be limited to the formulation of role conflicts. Instead, it can systematically examine how the different social systems relate to each other. The possibilities for such analyses will be explained in the following.

4 | NESTING, COMBINATIONS AND TRANSITIONS

It is one of the well-known pathologies of systems theory that considerable energy is devoted to bringing new social systems into conversation without, however, showing how the definition of a new system with its limits, its operations and its codes changes the sociological description that ennobles the social phenomenon as a system. In a discussion of different social systems between interaction and society, the challenge is therefore not simply to proclaim the existence of such social systems but to show what additional cognitive possibilities can be gained by distinguishing between families, organizations, movements and groups.

In the following, we will use a theoretical tool that Luhmann used in his article on interaction, organization and society. The point of Luhmann's (1982, p. 85) differentiation between interaction, organization and society was not (only) that, on the basis of the mechanisms of 'self-selection and boundary-formation', different 'types

[35]Interestingly, the literature focuses primarily on the relationship between groups and organizations in the form of groups 'in' organizations. This is obvious because groups, unlike organizations, are limited in their size. But it would be interesting to look at those organizational phenomena that occur when the group and the organization are largely the same size.

[36]See also the informative discussion in Schmidt, 2007 (p. 120). Also interesting are—as far as I can judge, better investigated—relationships between the often very far-reaching claims of the parent–child relationship (the subsystem of parenthood in the family) and the claims from the peer groups of friends to which the children belong.

of social system' are distinguished and their differentiation is presented in the course of 'sociocultural evolution', but that we can assess how social systems are related to each other.[37] The background for this perspective is that social systems do not have to be mutually exclusive, because communications can always be attributed to several systems at the same time. According to one of Luhmann's seminal quotes, 'social systems ... are not necessarily mutually exclusive—as are things in space.' (Luhmann, 1982, p. 86) On the one hand, a 'faculty meeting, for example, is an interaction system in its own right, with a short history and its own unique horizon of possibilities and series of choices'. But it is at the same time 'a system in an organization that, in turn, is a suborganization in a larger organization that, in turn, belongs to the educational sub-system of society'. (Luhmann, 1982, p. 86).

Because of the differentiation of interaction, organization and society on three levels, Luhmann almost inevitably had to think of the principle of nesting in the relationships between these three systems. According to Luhmann, 'every interaction and every organization also belongs to society, and an interaction can (although it need not) belong to an organization' (Luhmann, 1982, p. 86). We can now, completely in this context, also imagine nesting between groups, movements, organizations and families. We need only consider groups with strongly personal communication, which are parasitically formed in organizations, or of political movements in which protest organizations differentiate themselves. Because communications can belong to several systems at the same time, it is also conceivable that groups, organizations, movements and families are not nested together but are interwoven without one of these being necessarily primary. But it is also conceivable—in contrast to the levels of distinction between interaction, organization and society—that a system changes its system type, for example, if a protest movement 'degenerates' at some point into a publicly sponsored protest organization, or if a group of friends becomes a profit-oriented organization in which hardly anyone remembers that the founders of the organization were once friends. Without claiming to elaborate on forms of nesting, combination and transitions here in greater detail, the following will illustrate the possible insights that such a research programme could yield.

[37]In this respect, the multilevel approach, which is in vogue under the buzzword of 'governance', especially in political science and also in educational science, is 'cold coffee' for systems theoreticians. Especially the postulate of a development from 'systems theory to a multilevel theory' can only be explained with rudimentary knowledge of systems theory, because Luhmann's system theory has always been a multilevel theory.

4.1 | Nesting

Although groups, movements, organizations and families are analytically equal in rank between interaction and organization, they can also be nested within each other. In organizations that impose formal membership conditions, groups can form that not only focus on enforcing informal expectations but also address personal issues far beyond the organization.[38] Within the framework of a movement, a large number of organizations can be formed that define themselves as part of the movement in their self-descriptions.

Although in distinguishing between interactions, organizations and societies we can only imagine one direction of nesting—for example, only interactions in organizations, but not organizations in interactions—the systems of group, organization, movement and family can theoretically be nested in both directions. We can imagine organizations that employ families, but also families that run an organization, for example, in the form of a restaurant. It is possible to imagine groups that are formed within the framework of organizations, but also groups from which an organization—for example, a political organization or an enterprise—emerges. But because of the different possibilities of the different types of systems to expand their membership numbers, some nestings are of course more likely than others (see Geser, 1980 on the sociology of small systems).[39]

The core idea of level differentiation is that the 'superordinate' system does not determine the 'subordinate' system. In organizations, (informal) groups are formed, which are naturally influenced by the organizations, but which can also have their own logic (in the framework of which we can identify interactions that are also subject to their own logic). Within the framework of protest movements, both groups of friends and protest organizations

[38]Groups must not be confused with teams, departments or working groups (the latter are formal subsystems of organizations). In individual cases, teams and groups may coincide, for example, when a semi-autonomous work team in the automotive industry is identical to a group of friends. However, sociological studies on power processes in semi-autonomous work teams make this seem rather unlikely (see Kühl, 2020).

[39]Such proposals for the insertion of further levels gain their plausibility by taking the different size possibilities of the system types as an opportunity to suspect nesting. Because it is difficult for groups to have more than 30 or 40 members because of the need to know each other's personalities, it makes sense to place them at a 'lower' level than organizations whose membership size is in principle not limited (of course, the number of people alone cannot provide information about the complexity of a social system). Although these different sizes make some nesting (e.g., groups 'in' organizations or organizations 'in' movements) more likely than others or even completely unlikely (e.g., movements 'in' families), it is not necessary to imagine just one type of nesting.

are formed, which are not simply subsystems of the protest movement but are also shaped by the specific mechanisms of groups and organizations. According to Luhmann, system formations on different levels are mutually presupposed that 'cannot be traced back to one another, but are independent and irreplaceable through their respective style of reduction' (Luhmann, 1972b; my translation; see also Tyrell, 2008, p. 306).

4.2 | Combinations

The classic attempt to expand the schema of interaction, organization and society arises from the effort to insinuate new 'candidates' as an additional level. Thus, as described above, a prominent suggestion by Hartmann Tyrell is to weave in groups as the fourth level between interaction and organization and then treat groups of friends and families as two different types of groups (especially Tyrell, 1983a, 1983b). This is linked to the view held in group sociology that groups occupy a mediating position between individuals and organizations but also, for example, between strata (Willke, 1978, p. 343; for the sociology of group, see the particularly relevant discussion in Dunphy, 1972: 32ff.).

Because communications can belong to several systems at the same time, it is also conceivable that groups, organizations, movements and families are not nested in each other but are interwoven without the primacy of a social system. Just think of a family starting a business. As long as the family does not hire any additional employees, neither familial nor organizational logic will dominate. Even face-to-face organizations, which are now comparatively well researched, are often characterized by the fact that the members of a group of friends are quite similar to the members of a small business. If we look at the experiments with residential groups in which children live, eat and are even raised together, it is difficult to say whether group logic or family logic dominates. The examples of the socialist movement or the anti-globalization movement show that there are such strong overlaps with organizations that the movement is almost identical to an—more or less strongly formalized—organization. Whether it is then more the principle of the movement or more the principle of the organization that takes the lead can only be tested empirically.

4.3 | Transitions

One effect of the limitation to a few system types below the societal level has been that the change from one system type to another has so far neither been particularly strongly empirically investigated nor meaningfully conceived in theoretical terms. For example, it is not yet clear how it can be conceived theoretically if, for example, a group becomes an organization or a movement only continues to exist in the form of an organization financed by taxes or donations.[40] Such a theory cannot and should not be provided here, but at least it should be shown which theoretical challenges exist.

One can imagine different forms of transitions from one system type to another. Just think of a circle of friends who originally met to tinker with computers and then became the core of a fast-growing business; a neighbourhood group that got politically involved and increasingly became a political lobby organization with its own statutes, membership lists and membership regulations; or a clique of soccer hooligans, who originally regularly arranged an honest 'fifteen against fifteen' meeting with opposing fans, who—as was customary in Great Britain in the 1980s—then developed into a group in which members received a membership card and paid monthly dues, which were used to pay the fines imposed by the courts on individual members (see Allan, 1989).[41] Movements can also become organizations by first yielding parties, trade unions, churches or lobby organizations (see Rammstedt, 1978: 167ff.), which then remain as remnants, even if the movements themselves are no longer perceptible as movements.[42] A movement can dissolve because its theme can no longer mobilize enough people, but the organizations that were founded within the framework of the movement can continue to exist because, for example, they are able to pay the members of the organization working there through donations or subsidies (see Hellmann, 2002: 30ff.).

These transitions from one type of system to another are particularly noticeable when another type of system becomes an organization. Groups, movements or families are increasingly developing criteria for membership,

[40]Thus, it is an interesting empirical research perspective on how a group is formed from the concatenation of face-to-face interactions, which shapes future interactions through its system history and, for example, also notices and tolerates the temporary absence of individual interaction partners.

[41]But of course, the organization can also degenerate into a clique again if, for example, the members became uncontrollable, landed constantly in detention and tore deep holes in the club's coffers with their tendency to run amok.

[42]These organizations are often spun out of a movement to increase their power. Neidhardt (1985: 194) states that movements with 'this development jump into a new type of system', 'which behaves differently outwardly and inwardly' (my translation).

[43]From my point of view there is the option of looking at the prolific research about associations with a new focus.

raising awareness of these criteria among members and aligning their behaviour with increasingly clearly formulated membership conditions.[43] In principle, a reverse process is also conceivable, for example, if a formerly tightly organized political organization only continues to exist as the core of a movement or if a formerly economically successful small enterprise continues as a group of friends after its bankruptcy. But there is much to suggest that such scenarios are the exception rather than the rule.

5 | CONCLUSION

In addition to the organizations, groups, families or movements mentioned here, one could imagine other social systems located between interaction and society. One only has to think of professions, communities, strata or even networks in which the membership of persons is also attributed to a system. Even though the proposal to modify the Luhmann model is illustrated here using only organizations, groups, families or movements, there is no reason why this list should not be extended. The system types between interaction and society—just like societal subsystems—are not a closed list, but it is very conceivable that in the course of social evolution, further systems have developed, which are based on the determination of membership or nonmembership of people.

The proposal presented here must prove itself against the rescue strategies of the threefold scheme of interaction, organization and society mentioned in Section 1. In principle, as shown above, it would be possible to trace all social systems—including groups, movements, families, professions or strata—back to the three basic types of interaction, organization or society if they were only sufficiently broad. In this first rescue strategy of the interaction–organization–society scheme, however, the dominance of the respective system logic would have to be proven. For example, it would have to be shown that groups, much like weekly encounters with a specific supermarket vendor, are merely a series of face-to-face interactions and can be sufficiently explained by the logic of the social system interaction, and that the processes between the interactions—for example, e-mails between group members, meetings of only individual group members—merely represent framework conditions of the interactions. If, to give another example, we want to locate families as an independent system at the macrolevel of society, one must not only point out one (!) specific social function of families but also prove that the individual family is also its own social system, which cannot be explained solely by its social function.[44]

The second rescue strategy described above seems more plausible, consisting of defining a multitude of phenomena as social but without calling them a 'social system'. It is credible, for example, that competition or imitation are not a 'special type of social system', because the competitors or the imitators do not have to communicate with each other, but of course it is a relevant 'social experience' that has to be grasped and analysed by sociology (Luhmann, 1995b, p. 382 connecting to Simmel, 1992, p. 324); this argument has to my knowledge not yet been elaborated for imitation. But this argumentation, which makes sense for a number of social phenomena, does not seem particularly plausible to me for groups, movements or organizations, because for communication consisting of information, utterance and understanding can be proven without a problem, and clear boundaries can be identified with which communication can be clearly attributed to the respective social system.

The third rescue strategy seems least plausible, namely, to justify the limitation to the tripartite scheme of interaction, organization and society, with its 'theoretically aesthetic' advantages. Certainly, Luhmann has impressively shown how a complex theory of evolution of society can be formulated on just a few pages with the tripartite schema alone. But there is nothing to be said against taking advantage of the analytical opportunities that can be tapped by extending the schema. Thus, it is especially important for a theory of the evolution of society to work out to what extent the differentiations of groups, movements, families and organizations ran parallel in the transition from a stratified to a functionally differentiated society and to what extent the differentiations were mutually conditioned.

Certainly, a deep level of analysis could also be achieved by assuming a very broad concept of organization. Groups, families, movements, but also, for example, associations, administrations or companies, would then

[43]From my point of view there is the option of looking at the prolific research about associations with a new focus.

[44]I believe that the view that, in contrast to the proposal presented here, the theory of society ensures that the 'admission' and 'non-admission' of very different systems are controlled is only correct to a limited extent. Certainly, the distinction between tribal societies, stratification societies and functionally differentiated societies leads to the fact that a number of systems can be assigned via three forms of differentiation: 'segmentary', 'stratified' and 'functional'. But it is precisely the candidates of movement, family, organization and group discussed here, as well as other candidates such as profession, that have not yet been just as systematically integrated into the social-theoretical scheme as, for example, tribes in a segmentally differentiated society, an upper class in a stratified society, or the political system in a functionally differentiated society.

all be regarded as organizations, which, however, can be differentiated by a different degree of formalization. On the basis of these merely gradual distinctions, the nestings, transitions and combinations described above would not be understood as nestings, transitions and combinations between different kinds of social systems but between different organizations. This approach would be obvious in so far as, as we have shown, transitions between groups, families and organizations are fluid (and not imposed by a decision) and attributions are not always simple.

At first glance, it may seem arbitrary whether one works with a very broad concept of types of social systems and then allows for a multitude of subtypes of interaction and organization or whether one distinguishes a multitude of different social systems between interaction and society. After all, one can either aim for similarities (all social systems are similar in that they are based on system boundaries) or differences (even unsociable interactions as a special form of communication among those present can still be divided into different types). The argument is, however, that in groups, movements, families and organizations, we are dealing not only with different manifestations of the same social system type but with different system types, each of which has its own communication styles, demarcation mechanisms and forms of structure formation.

Overall, however, it is possible to perform more complex analyses when working with *several* types of social systems between interaction and society because the interaction of social systems can be observed more closely. For example, the weakness of group sociology in the 1960s was that it did not systematically distinguish between interaction and group because it declared virtually all interaction phenomena to be group phenomena (see Kruse, 1972). The system-theoretical sociology of interaction has repeated this approach with reversed signs by interpreting all group phenomena only as repeated interactions (see Kieserling, 1999). But only if one starts from different system logics of interactions and groups and considers the different nestings, one comes to adequate descriptions.[45] Also for the analysis of organizations, it is a workaround to replace the identification of informality primarily by group phenomena (see Luhmann, 1964: 314ff.; and his critical comments in the fourth edition of 1999, p. 399) simply by an identification through interaction (see Luhmann, 2018, p. 9).[46] Furthermore, to give a last example, it makes sense not to let the description of movements and organizations collapse into one system type, because only in this way the tensions between movements, to which everyone can declare himself to be a member, and the organizations with their clear membership conditions become clear.

The fertility of the approach presented here lies in the fact that it opens up a whole series of new questions for the theory of society. How was the parallel differentiation in modern society between organizations with membership, groups oriented towards personal communication, movements oriented towards protest communication and families with severely restricted functions? What are the transitions, combinations and nesting between the different social systems and how have they changed in the course of modern society? Research on such questions remains in its infancy.

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[45]Such a research programme cannot be carried out here, but the research questions are obvious. For example, when does the regular interaction of mothers taking their children to sports and waiting for them in the café become a group? When they stop talking about children? When they meet, even without children, outside of sports activities? When the absence of individual mothers is noticed? The moment they meet, even if the children are not around?

[46]In an epilogue on the fourth edition of his book *Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisation*, Luhmann rightly points out that in the American sociology of organization in the first half of the twentieth century the informal side of the organization was 'understood mainly in terms of group psychology, i.e. as the spontaneous personal contribution of groups' (Luhmann, 1999, p. 399; my translation). But the question is whether this must automatically lead to the complete abandonment of the concept of the group, as suggested by Luhmann (2018, p. 9), and to the replacement of the 'concept of informal organization' and with it the group concept 'via a theory of interaction systems'. The most promising Luhmann candidate for a complementary concept to informality does not seem to me to be the concept of interaction, but that of unresolved decision premises (see Kühl, 2013: 115ff.). The expectations linked to the undecided decision premises can, among other things, be transported via regular interactions between colleagues as well as via groups formed within the framework of the organization.

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