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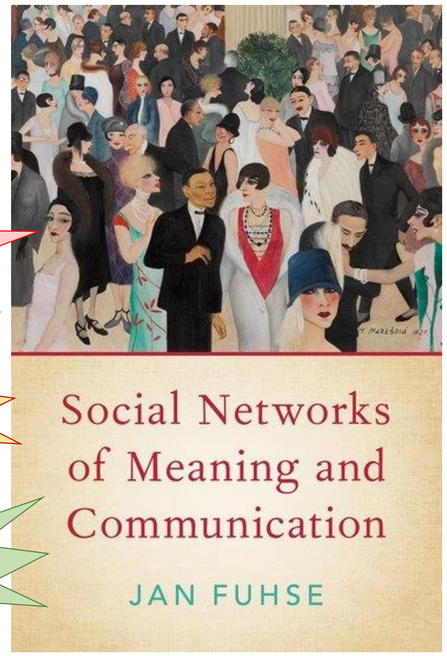

Chapters:

1. Networks with Theory
2. Networks, Relationships, and Meaning
3. Groups and Social Boundaries
4. Ethnic Categories and Cultural Differences
5. Roles and Institutions
6. Love and Gender
7. Events in Networks
8. Networks from Communication
9. Summary and Discussion

New Book in the theory of social networks!

Wanna know what networks really are?

Do you like abstract arguments and long hard reads?

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1. Networks with Theory

Just a general introduction. Key point for network research:

We need theory!

to reflect on network research, and to integrate and make sense of empirical findings. If we rely only on empirical work, we adhere to unreflected proto-theoretical ideas.

I offer a **theory of social networks** in the tradition of **relational sociology** of H. White, C. Tilly, A. Mische, and many others.

I combine this tradition with various **other approaches** (N. Luhmann's systems theory, symbolic interactionism, N. Elias etc.) and confront it with **empirical research**.

3. Groups and Social Boundaries

Groups feature high **internal connectivity** and few ties to the outside. They stabilize around **foci-of-activity**: meeting places, neighborhoods etc.

The dense interaction in groups breeds particular **group cultures**: symbols, practices, attitudes, and worldviews. These mark the group as different, and sometimes make for a strong **social boundary**, with symbols of **group identity** and with **expectations** concerning the interaction within the group and to others.

→ **interplay of network patterns and meaning** (culture) in groups.

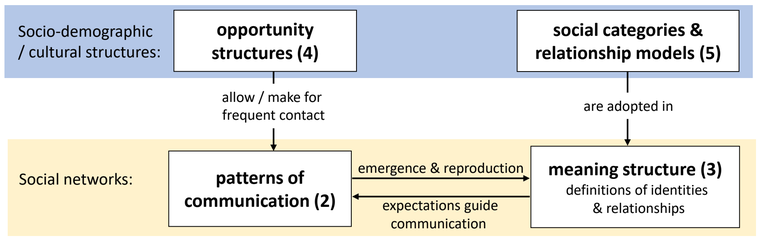
Groups feature a core and a periphery:
- The **core**: strong commitment, strong group identity and culture, dense mesh of ties.
- The **periphery**: many ties to the outside, mix of cultural patterns, subject to conflicting expectations.

Current social structure shows **few bounded homogeneous groups**. Most people are embedded in multiple groups.

Groups exist by degree, not either / or.

Empirical examples of groups include street gangs, communes, sects, social movement groups etc. They often draw on cultural models for group formation.

Figure 1: Interplay of meaning structure and communication in social networks



4. Ethnic Categories and Cultural Differences

(building on paper from Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 2012)*

Ethnic categories and cultural differences are rooted in social networks. Ethnic categories are more salient if:

- they harbor **cultural differences**;

- **networks of personal relationships** are divided by them;

- **public and political discourse** constructs them as meaningful.

They come with **expectations** about the **interaction** between ethnic groups:

- Intra-ethnic relationships tend to be close and personal.

- Inter-ethnic contacts remain superficial.

This makes for patterns of **structural equivalence** by ethnic categories.

Ethnic categories are broader than group boundaries (chapter 3), and more **institutionalized** (chapter 5).

They also depend on the ethnic segregation of **opportunity structures** (neighborhoods, workplaces, schools).

Again, interethnic relations are subject to the **interplay** of **networks** of personal relationships and patterns of **meaning**, influenced by wider **culture** and **opportunities for contact** (figure 1).

6. Love and Gender

Gender and (traditional) romantic love are tightly linked in interpersonal relationships.

The social category of **gender** prescribes particular kinds of social relationships:

- **Friends** are supposed to be of the same gender, and they connect transitively to form cliques.

- **Romantic love** is traditionally heterosexual and exclusively dyadic.

Romantic love and gender, but also friendship and **family** are cultural models ("**relational institutions**", chapter 5) that bring order into personal relationships. They make for patterns of **structural equivalence**, with different patterns by type of relationship.

Statistical analyses of **confiding relations** in the **2004 U.S. General Social Survey** shows them to be remarkably gendered (figure 3).

7. Events in Networks

Social networks and meaning are not stable and unchanging. I consider networks as **dynamic structures of expectations** that arise and continuously change over **social events**.

The chapter discusses seven concepts for these events:

- The notions of **behavior**, **action**, and **social practices** attribute events to individuals.

- **Exchange**, **interaction**, **communication**, **transactions**, and **switchings** take place between actors.

- **Meaning** is processed in action, social practices, interaction, transactions, and communication (fig. 4)

I argue for focusing on observable processes **between actors** and for incorporating **meaning**. This leads to the concept of communication (chapter 8).

Figure 4: Concepts for social events

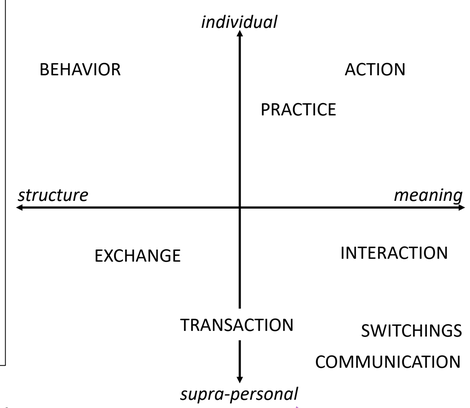
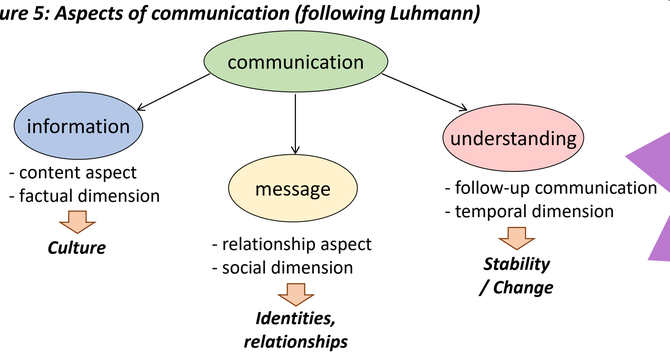


Figure 5: Aspects of communication (following Luhmann)



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5. Roles and Institutions

Networks of social relationships interplay with wider culture through roles and institutions (Fig. 2). **Roles** are local patterns of meaning that mark **structural equivalence** across types of ties. They mediate between the structure of social networks and institutionalized cultural patterns:

1. They can **emerge in local networks** to map positions in patterns of ties (e.g. leader, follower).

2. Communication draws on **institutionalized role frames** to reduce complexity and uncertainty.

Relational institutions imprint social networks by role categories. This includes (a) cultural models for **actorhood** (individuals, collective & corporate actors) and (b) for social relationships ("**relationship frames**") and their **patterns**, but also (c) **social categories** like ethnicity and gender.

2. Networks, Relationships and Meaning

(building on paper from Sociological Theory*, 2009)*

Social networks feature two interrelated sides:

- **patterns of communication**: who interacts how with whom?

- the **meaning structure** of the networks: "**relational expectations**" of how actors will interact. These expectations develop, stabilize and change over the course of **communication**, and they make for their observable **patterns** (figure 1).

Patterns of communication also follow **structures of opportunity** of contact around foci of activity.

The meaning structure builds on **wider culture**, adopting **models for relationships** and **social categories** like ethnicity and gender.

Models for relationships (**relationship frames**; e.g. friend-ship, kinship and family, romantic love, patronage, alliance, conflict) are institutionalized patterns of expectations. They define "**types of tie**" against each other, prescribing kinds of **interaction** and specific **network patterns** appropriate for the relationship: transitivity for friendships, exclusive romantic love ties, mesh of different relationships in kinship, patronage triangles etc.

Figure 2: Roles and relational institutions in social networks

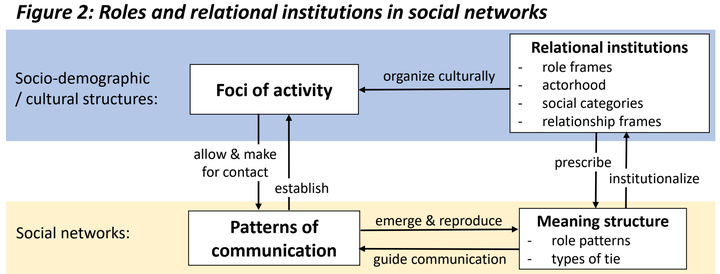
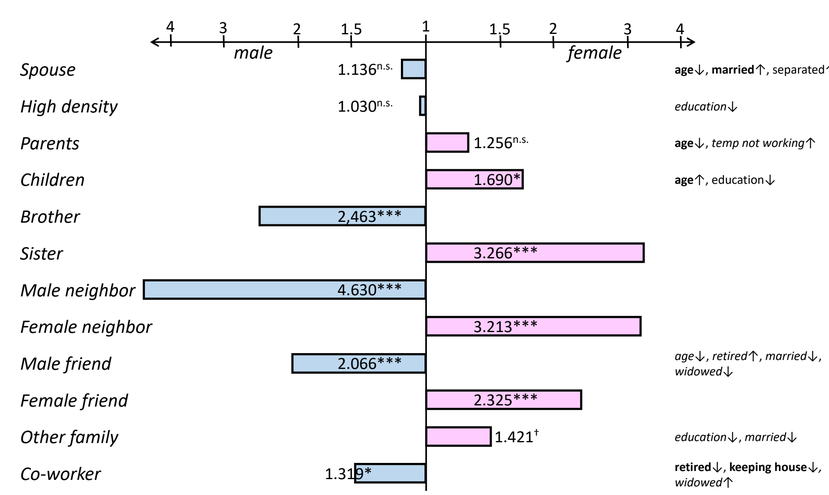


Figure 3: Confidants in the General Social Survey (2004) by gender of ego



Binary logistic regressions of ego-centric network data in 2004 US General Social Survey, N = 1070
Odds ratios of respondents naming at least one confidant from particular category (e.g. "male neighbor") by the gender of ego.
Controlled for level of education, age, place of residence, work-status, marital status, number of alters.
Significant control effects (apart from number of alters) are listed in last column.

8. Networks from Communication *(building on paper from* European Journal of Social Theory*, 2015)*

Building on chapter 7, I start from **communicative events** as the basic processes in networks.

Social relationships and networks are conceptualized as "**relational definitions of the situation**", **patterns of expectations** in the process of communication.

Communication features three aspects (Figure 5):
(1) **Information** consists of the factual content offered. This leads to knowledge and **culture**.
(2) Events are attributed to actors as a **message**. Expectations result concerning their **identities** and **relationships**.
(3) The meaning of an event is established (**understanding**) in follow-up communication. This leads to **stability** or **change**.

I discuss three areas of application and extension:

- **Intercultural communication** bridges network contexts and their cultures.

- Communication is attributed to **individuals**, **collectives**, and **organizations**. Expectations can attach to all three.

- We need **methods** to discern the **relational meaning** of communication and to study networks as **patterns of communicative events**.