

Call for Papers

for a Special Issue of Systems Research and Behavioral Science:

Organization and Membership

Guest Editors:

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Membership is one of the most important concepts in organization theory. For decades, the majority of organization studies has built explicitly or implicitly on the assumption that organizations are based on membership. Scholars for example highlight that it is important for an organization to distinguish between members and non-members (Aldrich, 2008), to control who its members are (King et al., 2010), and to recruit members and convince them to stay (Mayntz, 1965).

That membership plays an important role when it comes to define and understand organizations is also true for modern sociological systems theory as devised by Niklas Luhmann. In the 1960s Luhmann outlined an action-based theory of organizations building crucially on the assumption that membership is the ultimate basis for an organization (Luhmann, 1964; Seidl and Mormann, 2014). In this understanding, organizations only exist through their ability to formalize behavioral expectations and couple them strictly to the question of membership. Moreover, while he revised the main pillars of his systems theory in the 1980s moving to a communication-based understanding of social reality (Luhmann, 1995), membership remained crucial for understanding organizations. Therefore, it comes not as a surprise that even in his last lifetime published work Luhmann formulated: “Membership is the premise for deciding on the premises for making decisions” (Luhmann, 2013, p. 143; similar passages can be found in Luhmann, 2000, pp. 68-69, 110-112; see also Luhmann, 1996).

Luhmann moreover argued that organizational membership has an important function for modern society. While modern society can be seen as primarily differentiated into factually distinctive realms of social reality like politics, economics or sciences (the so-called “functional systems”) organizations are crucial to regulate inclusion and exclusion into/from these functional systems by decisions on memberships (Luhmann, 2000, p. 392). Other researchers have further investigated this relationship between societal differentiation and organizational membership. Andersen (2003) argues that the functionally differentiated society has paved the way for the development of polyphonic organizations, which are not subscribing to a rigid definition of membership but instead communicate membership through different functional systems. Following the same line of argument la Cour and Hoejlund (2017) show how functional differentiation makes it possible to draw various stakeholders into different forms of membership of new governable terrain, while Roth et al. (2017) argue that functional differentiation multiplies the horizons for organizational decision making within Human Resource Management.

However, the existing ideas of organizations and membership in most organization theories as well as in systems theory have become more and more problematic in recent years. Scholars note the increasing emergence of new forms of organization like social movements, hacker collectives or terrorist networks for which it is difficult to identify members distinctively (la Cour, 2014; King, 2017; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). In general, membership is nowadays found as radically changing (Andersen and Pors, 2014). In some instances, the relationship between organizations and their members seems to become increasingly intimate (Andersen, 2015). In other cases, membership is described as becoming fluid or unclear (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). In some cases, membership even takes the form of a non-membership (la Cour, 2014; Lauritzen et al., 2013; Lauritzen, 2017). And in yet other cases, scholars identify whole organizations that renounce membership at all (Grothe-Hammer, forthcoming).

Correspondingly, several scholars have come up with proposals to rethink the established assumptions of membership and its role for organizations. For instance, Schoeneborn and Scherer (2012) point out that some organizations attribute membership retrospectively – sometimes even after death. McPhee and colleagues (McPhee and Zaug, 2000; McPhee and Iverson, 2009) argue that membership should not be seen as one fix decision that comes first, but as an ongoing stream of negotiation. Bencherki and Snack (2016) have revived the notion of contributorship (see Barnard, 1938) for arguing that individuals can be partially included into organizational processes without being or becoming members. Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) point our attention to fluid collectives that decide on membership asymmetrically – meaning that there is no decision on inclusion but on exclusion if necessary. Andersen and Born (2008) highlight how membership can become a question of passion. La Cour (2014) points at organizations that deconstruct their own premises for membership, so only behavior that is disloyal to the rules of membership is observed as true membership. Other scholars go even one step further and propose to drop membership as a defining criterion of organizations (Ahrne et al., 2016; Apelt et al., 2017; Grothe-Hammer, forthcoming).

An interesting aspect of this development is that all of the mentioned works build on a communication-based understanding of organization. Moreover, many of the scholars mentioned above at least draw partly on modern systems theory. Therefore, the current debate in organization studies on how to rethink the concept of membership is one that is crucially inspired by Niklas Luhmann's oeuvre. However, so far only a few works reflect systematically on this issue or even try to develop systems theory itself instead of just taking inspiration from it.

The special issue for Systems Research and Behavioral Science wants to address this development. We want to carry back the discussion to its muse. While we acknowledge the manifold empirical developments regarding organizational membership, we are convinced that the current debate could significantly benefit from contributions that develop specifically modern systems theory instead of just taking inspiration from it. By doing so, our aim is not only to develop systems theory solely but also to provide new inspirational impulses for the whole field of organization studies in this respect.

The guest editors of the special issue welcome contributions dealing with the aspect of membership in organizations based on a systems-theoretical understanding. Papers submitted can be solely conceptual in nature and/or based on empirical insights, but must, in any case,

make a significant contribution to the development of modern systems theory. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- What distinguishes organizations that primarily build on classical forms of membership from those that apply other forms of individual inclusion?
- Scholars argue that membership allows for building a certain kind of expectations. What are the advantages and disadvantages of membership?
- How can we think of organizational boundaries without relying on membership as an indicator?
- What are the developments of organizational membership? Do organizations generally renounce increasingly to membership or is this an old phenomenon that is not as new as we might think?
- How can we conceptualize new forms of membership and/or other forms of individual inclusion?
- How can we rethink of what membership is in terms of systems theory?
- How does the relation between organizations and society change in the light of changing or absent memberships? How is the inclusion/exclusion of individuals into different functional systems of modern society affected?

The guest editors welcome the submissions of Research Papers (5000-8000 words, including references). Submission deadline is January 15th, 2019, with anticipated publication in March/April 2020. Please submit your papers to the guest editors Anders la Cour (al.mpp@cbs.dk) and Michael Grothe-Hammer (michael.grothe-hammer@hsu-hh.de), NOT directly to the journal.

For questions and to discuss manuscript ideas, please do not hesitate to contact one of the guest editors Anders La Cour (al.mpp@cbs.dk) or Michael Grothe-Hammer (michael.grothe-hammer@hsu-hh.de).

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