

# ORGANIZATIONS AS PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES IN THE POST-MODERN ERA

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**Abstract:** *What is the meaning of social context for the connection between Psychologists and Social Workers with the organization they work for? Many professionals are searching for both professional space, and a fitting connectedness to the organization. This connection seems to be greatly influenced by social developments. This article will show that organizations are important communities of the future that will partially adopt the function of family and township connections. By conscious deployment of organization-communities, as a manager it is possible to bind professionals to an organization that offers them freedom and challenge.*

**Key words:** *organization communities, professional space, people and organization, management, post modernism.*

When asked about the organization they work for, several Dutch psychologists or social workers will provide different answers, such as “Working with patients is tough but also very challenging”, “the caseload is too high”, “the team can more or less get along with each other and the senior management understands little”.

Annoyance usually forms a gap between managers and the social workers. The different perspectives they have on the organization barely seem reconcilable. In a time, when care is becoming more business-like, when social work is needed but at the same time too expensive, this isn't very surprising.

It is not unique that reality is full of contradictions like these; it is perhaps a social given which is partly determined by the politics. This contemplative article is not about these contradictions, but wants to give an answer to the question of what the meaning of the Dutch social context is for

the connection between individual social workers and their organizations. It also offers a possible answer to the changing social context in which these organizations operate. The article does not go in on the trend of accountability, on becoming more business-like and scaling, but zooms in on what is going on inside the walls of the organization and what is happening with the employees. It ends with a plea for new types of organization communities, which continually know how to find an appropriate connection with the changing reality.

## 1. The Dutch Postmodern Society as a Context

The Dutch society characterizes itself by the growing diversity. Postmodernism determines the current social view on diversity in Holland. Robbin (in Geuijen [7]) focuses on this and argues that pluralism is inherent to postmodernism. With concepts

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such as truth, predictability, continuity and know-ability, which both social workers and clients often strongly need, postmodernism gives a lot of tension.

Time, however, seems to dim these contradictions because more recent relativities and synthesis are taking place. In my opinion, the growing interest for Wisdom Literature is a sign for that. The time of paradigm is disappearing. 'And-and' is now more important instead of 'or-or' (Quinn)[16]. With this last movement, the tension named above becomes milder, but does not diminish.

## 2. Individualization and Pluralism

Schnabel [18] describes individualization as a historical, social and cultural process, which has been active and perceptible in the western society for several centuries. He defines individualization as *'the process in which the dependency of the individual, economically and normatively, is shifted from its direct social environment to farther anonymous links through partial relationships, making the power ratio between the individual and his direct social environment equal. It then doesn't necessarily lessen the influence of the social environment but lessens the guiding ability.'*

In Holland, the process of individualization started long ago. The reformation can be seen as a metaphysical individualization whereby man is responsible to His Creator as an individual. Here he can't delegate his responsibility towards the religious community that he is part of or towards their leaders.

Afterwards, the equal mind of The Enlightenment did its job and individualization continued because of industrialization and increasing prosperity. In the last century, the process of individualization manifests itself through the growing number of one-person households; married women that use their maiden name; partners who, in decreasingly degree, have control of each other's finances and who have different friends. Children have their own room and can isolate themselves from

the rest of the family there because of the arrival of central heating.

Thus, individualization becomes visible as a social process in the independence of people compared to others. People are able to make choices which are relatively separated from those surrounding them. What characterizes the modern and emancipated individual is that the uniqueness of the individual finds its expression in a strictly personal and held together whole of roles and functions, which is not standard in that combination. The question is whether or not this process will further develop towards an atomistic society. Where the company can be freely chosen, there is talk of re-collectivities, which is shown in the small growth of living areas and carpooling. By considerations, values such as freedom are disposed of against security, privacy against availability of a listening ear, career opportunities against the desire to have children and divorce against the continuation of the relationship. The freedom of choice and autonomy are values that are considered of great importance.

## 3. Philosophical Examination of Pluralism: Levinas

By thinking more about pluralism, I first consulted Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas wrote about pluralism, (in)dependency, and justice as needed conditions for dealing responsibly and ethically. 'Which conditions need to be fulfilled to make goodness possible?' Levinas' philosophy looks for answers to this question. Pluralism is one condition that Levinas names. After all, the possibility of well-being as a responsibility assumes a relationship with someone, whom you can direct your care on. That is why Levinas calls well-being a relationship term. By being responsible, I acknowledge the existence of someone apart from myself. Real pluralism is only possible when there is freedom and independence. There is talk of own identities. Only an identity with a demonstrable autonomy, someone with freedom of choice, with an ability to decide, with an own will, is sane. It is, however,

impossible for someone to be in a relationship when he is entirely independent and stands on his own. Every relationship means that there is a connection, which indicates 'bondage'. Thus, apart from independence, another condition for dealing ethically is dependency.

Interdependency and dependency (in terms of Levinas: autonomy and heteronomy) are both crucial. These are exactly the terms that characterize the tension of the whole organization and the individuality of the workers. This ambivalence connects to Levinas' ambivalent image of humans, the ones who are both free and not free. Levinas puts the human in light of well-being. Both dependency and interdependency are needed for well-being.

Dependency is also needed for well-being. Dependency causes suffering. From my suffering, I can come to compassion. Change ego-centrism to alter-centrism. Levinas does not seem to come out of this dilemma and is left between peace and turmoil, needs and desires, selfishness and responsibility. Self-realization dominates the postmodern society.

#### **4. The Relationship between an Individual and the Organization**

A certain tension is expected in the relationship between an individual and the organization as the process of individualization progresses because of the fact that an organization is a collective relationship. This affects the way that the connection between an individual and an organization is formed. In his book "Geluksfabriek" (Lucky Factory), Bruel [3] describes two types of 'psychological contracts' that employees enter into with their employers. The first group, the linked employees, connects itself to the identity and mission of the organization and is also prepared to bind its destiny to the organization. This relationship is relatively stable. The second category is gripped by the organization through the fun work, the possibilities to develop, colleagues, and the terms of employment. As long as this deal is

attractive enough for them, their fate is bound to the organization. The employee relationship is not really stable. As a consumer, which he is to a certain degree, the employee is whimsical. Basically, gripped and bounded employees differ in their attitude towards the organization.

Bruel [3] indicates that both groups bring in qualities which are needed to operate successfully as an organization. He indicates that it is of importance that the organization doesn't enforce a specific psychological contract on its workers, but leaves room for a free choice. That both groups of employers respect each other and work together, and that the talents are used where they will be most efficient.

#### **5. Ties to the Primary Counseling Process**

With organizations which offer care, service or counseling, there is often talk of a strong involvement on the primary process because the normally already strong tie between the professional and his department is strengthened by the fact that in the primary process it's about people with a question for counseling. Next to the big appeal a question has, a personal component arises in the help- or service relationship. A high degree of professionalism is required to enter into a helping relationship, to handle issues adequately, to deal with the counseling process and to gradually end again. This (psychological) tie makes it impossible to keep the relationship with your client separate from you as counselor. This appeal done on the counselor can bring him in a loyalty conflict between the client's requests, the organization's interests and his personal needs. With psychologists who are just recently working, this conflict may get decided in the advantage of the client or the organization. If this lasts for a longer period of time, the risk of having a 'burn-out' at a young age will be very likely. In many organizations, the short term importance of schedules must be filled in to win the longtime investment in supervision and coaching of beginning professionals and all the following consequences.

## 6. Mutual Relationships in the Organization

Ten Bos [2] dedicates a paragraph in his book "Remarkable moral, good and evil in the theory of management and practice" to friendship, as being an important factor in working together as a team. He quotes the Scottish philosopher Hume: "*The truth comes forth as a consequence of differing viewpoints between friends*". Verweel [23] indicates that up to date ideological and kindred ties were first in the analysis of a social context, but that in the future the ties in and with the organization just may become more important. For many people the workplace is more exciting and the friendships there are more intimate than those in their private lives. The anthropologist Darah [4] discovered in "Silicon Valley" that people sooner experience their private lives as a burden rather than perceiving work as such. Sometimes, work even atones for a destabilizing family. In the view of the publicist Hans Wansink [24], the office is an alternative home, where colleagues replace friends and relatives.

Personal development at work and making work more fun are movements that make it possible to satisfy your existential needs at work. Issues of inspiration (Ofman)[15], trust (Whitney) [25], inspiring leadership (Grint)[11], diversity (Martin)[14], learning organization and mastery (Senge)[20], offer the possibility to re-theme the social relationships in the organization. These relationships play an important role in the ties with colleagues and, hence, the organization.

## 7. Implications for the Management

More attention has come for the management of pluralism and the additional value of pluralism in an organization because of the influence of pluralization in the Dutch society. It is not surprising for this postmodern time period, in which the mind

is strongly determined by values such as individualism and autonomy.

Successful managing is usually described as utilizing the diversity of talents that are available in an organization to its fullest (Schermerhorn)[17]. Diversification is approached as separately as possible from moral values and in a pure, business way. It encourages the turn of moral to business and popular management philosophies, where individual development and achieving the goals of the organization, are mixed.

Glastra [10], however, gives several objections about Thomas' opinion [21]. First, it's too superficial to only give people what they want: respect and recognition as unique individuals. There is also talk of finding shelter in all kinds of institutional and group ties. The need for individual distinction is opposite to (and inextricably tied with) the social cultural tie that people look for in an organization.

It is not about the monochrome situation of collective adjustment versus one's development. It is about subordination and negotiation. The underlying human vision is an important motive in handling with diversity in an organization. Up to what degree is a human a rational being and how do you define that in your organization? Up to what degree do organizations serve as modern communities?

## 8. The Organization as a New Community

Bekman [1] indicates that for a lot of people in today's society life in the context of an organization plays a bigger role than life in traditional communities, such as family and religious communities. Where up to now family, nation and religion formed the binding communities where people could experience their existence, the organized institutions now take this role upon themselves. Just like Senge [20], De Geus [8] approaches the organization from a human measurement and mastery in his edition "The Fifth Discipline", and sees an organization as a community of people.

Not only management experts like De Geus [8] and Drucker [5] have the viewpoint that an organization is a modern community. Postmodern scientists also lay emphasis on the role of organizations in our society. De Wit [26] and Manschot [13] discuss the term “solidarity” as an important, present day, philosophical theme in their book “Solidarity, philosophical critique, ethics, and politics”.

Now that our society is undergoing the doom of the ideological solidarity and the big truth stories remain strong, a need arises for reconsideration of those strong social concepts: freedom and solidarity.

Community characteristics like trust, loyalty, identity and spontaneity are needed organizational principles, even in the digital world of E-commerce. The analysis of work and life in the organization comes down on the fact that the rationality of the production needs to be tuned in with the rationality of the social.

## 9. Communities: History and Qualities

Schuijt [19] describes a community as a living, organic whole. It is not something you can make, like a computer system. We can't command a community. The origination of a community answers to its own laws, where the whole is more than the individuals. “There is no depth of life without the depth of the common life” is a quote which Schuijt [19] uses to open up her view on the organization as a community.

Vanier [22] describes the change of communities in the last century. In the past, different forms of society, city or town were a lot more homogeneous. People spoke the same language, lived in the same way and obeyed the same authority. People lived in great dependence of each other. Vanier continues with the presumption that people can't live without each other and in the present time they search for new forms of communities. This creates new groups, no longer based on family or residence, but on other agreements. In the past, undertaking the commitment that asks for faith,

dedication and surrender formed the core of community building. Terms which are not so central for the postmodern, autonomous Dutchman.

Bekman [1] indicates that natural, traditional communities, like families, also emancipate from their natural context. They get organized and barely distinguish themselves from the organized contexts in which we are.

Elias [6] signaled long ago that, as societies become more differentiated, social institutions in which one type of bond pushes the other into the background are formed. More groups and institutions which are specialized in the productive function arise, whereas it is the protective function which satisfies the affective needs or transfer of knowledge. One can speak of a process of breaking ties. In our society, relationships (in a broad sense) have become more functional as different types of dependencies spread out over specialized branches of their networks. In strongly differentiated societies, the possibility arose to be dependent on the multitude of free anonymous institutions and at the same time to be less dependent on appointable people. The situation can give people the illusion that they are independent; they divide their dependencies strategically so that they don't feel like they are bound to anyone in particular. On the other hand, people experience getting caught in a tangle of ties. They feel themselves becoming more and more dependent on anonymous, impersonal institutions. These contradictory sensations are indicated as a ‘homo-clauses’-feeling, the idea of being independent and at the same time being threatened by society.

A community exists when there is, indeed, tension, but no contradiction between an individual and a group. As characteristics of communities, Schuijt [19] indicates that ‘being human’ connects people in communities which differ from each other. There is willingness to join in the bigger whole. Although there is room for individuality, members let themselves be led by what binds them and not by what distinguishes them. There is room for

everyone in the group, which, despite the occurrence of conflicts, gives security. There is commitment, willingness, and the effort to work or live together. There is certain normality; both the sunny and the shady sides are shared.

It is important that the individual members of the community don't get absorbed by the community. Daring to stand alone, to make moral choices, to acknowledge your own true colors are necessary to not extinguish as a community. Being part of a community is only possible when someone's individuality is seen and recognized. From that perspective, living communities are by definition pluriform. Pluralism is then found in the personality of the staff and not primarily in the pursuit of personal interests. Egocentrism, materialism and narcissism are threats for the community. If discontent is the unifying factor, then the lifespan of a community may just be short.

This means that the challenge lies in the forming of a community where there is room for the individuality and autonomy of an individual.

To achieve this in a postmodern society, it is necessary to join conflicting concepts. Within organizations, we cannot solely rely on the principles of traditional communities. In organizations, we still find deeply rooted community values such as design principles and stories that fit the traditional community cultures. But we also see that these values are broken in organizations where individuality is precisely controlled (Bekman [1]). In organizations, we see two worlds merge together: the world of operations, in which everything is put in service of the desired result and the other world of the organizational development where unconscious forces are addressed. Individual people come to fundamental change and renewal of contributions through their own responsibility and freedom, which ensure that the organization as a community becomes connected and remains on its resources. These resources are constellations of people involved in various roles.

## 10. How an Organization Becomes a Community

As was mentioned previously, it is not possible to organize an organic community. The development of an organization as a community, however, requires new principles of organizing. In order to grasp the principles that underlie the formation of the organization as a community, Bekman [1] distinguishes principles of communities that are identifiable within organizations:

- The natural connection/relationship, for example, family ties. Within organizations, you mainly see this in family organized companies.
- The religious ideology, whereby people with common beliefs unite. This is especially visible in political and religious organizations.
- The hierarchy that grants authority and power to the one higher up. Within organizations, this is recognizable in the hierarchical structure.
- Solidarity in the group by establishing a connection with others, with the associated emotional experience of loyalty and the group bond. Within organizations, this is recognizable as binding with the name of the company and marketing against the competitor.
- Community rituals, festivals, customs and sayings which secure the social cohesion. We find this within the organizational culture of the organization.
- Personal dedication through which the individual members discipline themselves and tailor their personal lives. Individual community members go through different phases and crises, which bring them to individual- and community awareness. Within organizations, you see this reflected in personal choices. The organizing principles listed above ensure consistency within the organization. These principles are under great stress because three levels of organizational existence are strongly manifesting themselves:
- The spheres in which we find ourselves are changed into a system. In the Netherlands,

we have fallen from the collective context of the traditional community cases and find ourselves in an organized world system. In a large degree of autonomy, through numerous control mechanisms, we are able to regulate processes and forces.

- The networks that are created are largely determined by interests and business relations, with no common ground needed, as would take place in natural communities. Language, location, culture, ethnicity, religion and occupation are not necessarily common in our networks.
- In our private lives, we are able to connect to completely different dimensions of reality. We are no longer part of a consistent community. There, the individuality is challenged to implement self-control, which is associated with disharmony, confrontation and life conflict.

From these principles, Bekman [1] comes to three recommendations regarding the organizational architecture. In the first place, the employee is central as a creative individual. He or she gives meaning to their own independent work process and is responsible for changes, resulting from external stimuli and internal initiatives. Individual staff members live in a double reality. On the operational side, each is tied to the global system and herein must show adapted behavior, at the same time being challenged to change it in motion by using their own personality, views and approach. The changing process forms the challenge.

The second recommendation is creating small, self-contained units that function as communities, called 'comunits', as a combination of 'unit' and 'community'. The employee links himself to the comunit and its goals.

A third recommendation is the control. There are only two actual control points: the leader of the "management comunit" and the managers of the comunit of performers. Each comunit focuses by the control on the client, achieving the agreed outcome and the personal development of the employee.

## 11. The Psychologist and Social Worker as an Ideal Manager?

This article described the contemplations about organizations and their context ends with recommendations for designing organizations. From this viewpoint, an important role is set apart for psychologists and social workers as specialists in the field of social (group) processes. The working on and the conscious deployment of solidarity within the organization fits the social worker like a glove. The tension between individual and collective is also something that received a lot of attention within the course. Does that make the psychologist or the social worker the ideal manager? I believe that with some training in strategic- and result-oriented thinking, they will come very far in the Netherlands.

This question brings me to a downside of the presented arguments: the outlined bond between individual and organization could give a commitment that any change can retain. Decisiveness is then completely gone from the organization and thus has created a nightmare for all managers who tend to be dealing with a changing environment. Is there thus a new gap between management and executive assistants created?

In order to prevent this, it is important to give the communities in which psychologists and social workers can perform a leading role in their organizations, an open connection to the environment. This requires knowledge and understanding of what is playing in similar organizations, skills to persuade, sense for political relationships, arrangements and available resources and courage to translate this into new initiatives. Or: creative psychologists and social workers who have the initiative to do business!

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