

# MULTIPLE INCLUSION AND COMMUNITY NETWORKS

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### Abstract

There are two urgent questions in academic research on Communities of Practice. The first is how to safeguard the sustainability of a Community of Practice (CoP). The second is how to motivate people in order to participate in and to contribute to such a community. In this paper we try to answer these questions by assuming networked individualism. This notion refers to the observation that individuals in modern society are inclined to participate in several communities simultaneously. We discuss the consequences of this notion for membership in a community. The unit of analysis in this paper is not a 'stand-alone' community of practice but the multiple included individual as a node of various networks. Taking this idea into account our analyses reveals the need to redefine the concept of 'legitimacy' in a community. Our underlying assumption is that broadening legitimacies facilitates multiple inclusion of an individual and, in this way, supports the sustainability of a community of practice.

**Keywords:** community of practice, network individualism, partial inclusion.

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## Abstract

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**E**      **Communities of practice, knowledge networks and networking**

## 1 Introduction

One of the most intriguing issues in recent research on communities is the motivation of community-members to contribute to the production of community goods. The issue has become highly relevant as many business and non-business organizations are experimenting with different kinds of community-organizations for different purposes. Communities are conceived as knowledge resource networks for learning through the principle of legitimate peripheral participation. In this way they overcome the constraints of hierarchically structured organizations. According to Wenger e.a. (2002: 21) communities should not just be seen as auxiliary structures, but as foundational structures on which to build future organizations.

The increasing popularity of communities in management practices has attracted many organizational theorists trying to gain empirical and theoretical insights into the dynamics of communities. Especially the rise of the Internet has promulgated many new interesting research questions. However, there is no full organizational theory of community organization yet. There is a growing research focusing on factors that explain the ability of people and the willingness of people to contribute to the knowledge sharing in CoP's (Hansen, 1999). Although this research provides us with valuable insights in different aspects of modern community organizations, these insights refer to different settings and groups and are not straightforward applicable to CoPs as a learning device.

Various experiments in organizational life indicate that although the installation of CoPs is desired, it does not work out successfully. Although people are involved in a common practice knowledge sharing and learning does not take place. It therefore appears necessary to find a larger framework in order to explain under what circumstances Cop's are a viable option and under which conditions they are not. The question is about the underlying dynamics for the sustainability of Cops. In particular, we will emphasize the issue about multiple membership of an individual in various networks. As Engeström et al. (1995) have observed individuals in modern organisations are involved in several tasks simultaneously. We will consider the consequences of this 'polycontextuality' on membership in a CoP.

Weick (1979:18) argues any organization theory has to specify why members of an organization consent to join and remain in organizations. Most organizational theories assume the existence of a 'social contract', a kind of an agreement between the individual and the organization. The concept of contract suggests there exists an exchange relationship between the individual and the organization. Some type of reciprocity is an important issue here. However, reciprocity between what? And how does the notion of polycontextuality change the notion of reciprocity?

In this paper we first examine the consequences for an individual's motivation for participating in a CoP when we take polycontextuality as starting point. We will argue that this view on an individual can make a CoP vulnerable with regard to an individual's participation and contribution. We will then continue showing that, next to this vulnerability, a CoP can also profit from this view as long as certain conditions for the individual are realized. These conditions are primarily concerned with supporting the individual in his multiple network membership. From here, we suggest some consequences and characteristics, which should be fulfilled within a CoP in order to

realize an individual's benefits. We claim that these characteristics support the sustainability of a CoP. Our main assertion is that the sustainability of CoP's can be enhanced when considering the individual as a node of multiple relationships as starting point.

From a methodological point of view we do not perceive a CoP as unit of analyses for explaining its sustainability. Instead, we suggest that sustainability can better be explained by taking the environment of a CoP into consideration. In this case, the individual member should be perceived as a node of various relationships in a network. In order to explain the sustainability of a community, we take the relations an individual has inside and outside a CoP as the unit of analysis. We will first discuss the view of an individual as a node of multiple networks (Wellman, 2002). From here, we suggest the notion of partial inclusion (Allport, 1962) and discuss some of the consequences for the dynamics within a CoP.

## **2 Networked individualism, partial inclusion and participation in a community**

Research on community organization is almost as old as the sociology discipline itself. In the old sociology (Tönnies, 1912, Parsons, 1951) communities are conceived as densely-knit and tightly-bounded groups of people, who share a sense of belonging, common interests and common resources. Global processes of informatization, computerization, bureaucratisation, and urbanization gave rise to a debate about the change in the nature of the community structure. This debate was called the *Community Question* (Wellman, 1979). In contrast to what is often suggested, communal relationships, did not disappear but the type of relationships between members of communities have changed. This most important change in the traditional concept of sociability to modern, partly web-based forms of social relationships has been succinctly characterized by Wellman as a move away from Little Boxes (homogeneous, broadly-embracing groups) to networked individualism (Wellman, 2002, 2003). Individuals build up personal networks to which they contribute proportionally and out of which they mobilize resources variably. "Most people operate in multiple, partial communities as they deal with shifting, amorphous networks of kin, neighbours, friends, workmates and organizational ties." (Wellman 2002: 11). Networked individualism implies that the individual is a node between different networks. The individual is switching between these networks according to his own personal needs and interests. The individual participates within each network according to specialized roles. Consistency in the roles is not necessary. An individual can have

different roles in various networks. Engeström et al. (1995) refer to this observation as polycontextuality: individuals are involved in multiple networks and communities of practice. Some of the networks might change into communities that are bound together by shared interests, rather than in earlier times, by kinship or locality. The individual as the central node in these networks has a choice whether and how (according to which specialized role) to get involved in a network. Furthermore, people contribute and participate concurrently in several communities. The individual is a node in multiple, specialized networks. The individual is located at the intersection between various networks with a choice of its own.

In this view, the benefits within every network are estimated by the individual separately – and probably in terms of cost and benefits. When we assume networked individualism the sustainability of a community depends on the advantages of the exchange relative to other networks. This makes community membership vulnerable. Members change or leave the community at the moment that more benefits are realized in different networks or communities. A community must be highly attractive for their members in order to be sustainable. The attractiveness must be created within the community, i.e. by the other members. There are no other sources. In CoP's the attractiveness is mostly created by the innovative problem-solving of participant's problems in practice. Free-riding is a serious threat to such a community. Nevertheless, von Hippel and von Krogh (2003) observe that Open Source Networks allow for free-riders and, yet, are attractive to the active participants. The authors show that networked individualism, as discussed here, cannot explain why people voluntarily contribute to open source software, whereas their private benefits are possibly low due to free riding and spill-over of knowledge. Specifically related to the problem of free-riding, they think: "Indeed, under some conditions free revealing may actually result in a net gain in private profit for the innovator [or active participant, I.B.]. For example, free revealing can increase innovation diffusion and so increase an innovator's innovation-related profits through network effects." (von Hippel and von Krogh, 2003: 216). In a more generic sense, the reason for contributing, as these authors, claim is the 'double' (or multiple) advantage that such a network offers for an active participant. "It also means that I as a developer can contribute my code as a public good and at the same time use it for my private and perhaps somewhat different purposes."(von Hippel and von Krogh, 2003: 216). Therefore, it is understandable how a common good is developed although not everybody contributes. "Instead, it proposes that contributors to a public good can *inherently* obtain private benefits that are tied to the development of that good." (von Hippel and von Krogh, 2003: 216). Private benefits are gained, in fact,

because a participant is also member of another network or group where benefits from the original non-beneficial group can be used.

The authors draw a picture of an individual that is involved in another group or context, where he can make use of something which he has gained in the first group. However, they only refer to 'private' benefits, meaning an individual advantage. This advantage, however, can only be gained if we refer to the notion of networked individualism, especially when we talk of knowledge benefits. Without explicitly referring to it, the authors apply the notion of networked individualism. However they do not consider the individual as fragmented person that has to realize his benefits solely inside every community separately. They insist that an individual can derive private benefits that lie outside the particular community. Thus, they adopt the notion of networked individualism but they assume a connection between. As long as private benefits can be realized within the overall network, participation in a particular community can be safeguarded without realizing benefits within this group.

Consequences of networked individualism for group membership are analysed by Allport (1962). Different from the analyses of Wellman (2002) but similar to von Hippel and von Krogh (2003), Allport suggests that multiple membership is not just a question of separating diverse memberships – a view of the individual as quite fragmented with separated memberships, which is already questioned by the analyses of open source networks by van Hippel and von Krogh (2003) as explained above. Instead Allport (1962) suggests the notion of partial inclusion. However he does not only refer to Wellman's idea of membership in specialized roles, he also pays attention to the connection between the partial inclusions. The first aspect is also referred to by Weick (1979), when he defined partial inclusion as "a person does not invest all behavior in a single group; commitments and interlockings are dispersed among several groups." (Weick 1972: 97). Partial inclusion indicates that a person does not apply his entire behavioural repertoire in every group. (The notion of legitimacy might be important here, however see the discussion below). A person has indeed specialized and diverse roles in diverse groups. However, far from accepting the separatedness between the specialized roles, Allport (1962) makes a connection between an individual's partial inclusions. This brings us to the second aspect. Allport insists: "What the individual does in one group, or merely his relation to that group, may have an important bearing upon what he does in another group; and the total 'group membership manifold' of one individual who is a member of a particular group may be widely different from the manifolds of the other members."(Allport, 1962: 25). Thus, alternative to networked

individualism, Allport suggests that group membership in one group has behavioural consequences on membership in another group. The manifold of group membership is interconnected in the individual person. It was already argued that this manifold is the explanation for private knowledge benefits. "Instead of saying that a group incorporates (or is composed of) many individuals, we would do almost better to say that an individual incorporates many groups. One group has salience for him (that is, he is present in it or acting in terms of it) at one time, and another has salience at another time." (Allport, 1962: 25).

The implications of an individual as a node in multiple networks, then, is not only partial inclusion but also multiple inclusion: when participating in a community, the individual has as background his alternative group memberships. Benefits do not necessarily have to be realized within a community, it is sufficient when knowledge benefits can be indirectly derived from membership. The dynamics between various memberships creates benefits. This might be the reason why people stay in clubs like the Rotary club. What you learn here, could be used there etc. As von Hippel and von Krogh (2003) state it: there are private benefits for the individual. These are only possible because the individual is a node in a network and not because the individual is a member of only one community. These private benefits are only realizable in the overall network structure of the individual. Benefits of such networks often consist of information as social capital. Related to CoP's benefits have to exist in the domain of knowledge.

Following this line of reasoning a CoP gets less vulnerable the more a membership in a particular network contributes to benefits outside the CoP. E.g. knowledge gained in one community can be used in another. Benefits can be of a broad range: van Hippel and von Krogh (2003) suggest benefits as a user versus a developer or developer versus sales-man. As these authors implicitly use an exchange theory, it is sufficient if an individual can gain any benefit from the membership. These benefits range from financial reward to reputational benefits. There is always, may be in a delayed form, a type of reciprocity involved. However, there is one big difference between the line of reasoning as suggested by von Hippel and von Krogh (2003) and its application to CoP's. Benefits can only lie in the domain of practice-bound, situated knowledge, which is by definition not transferable. As CoP's rely heavily on learning and development of the individual in particular practice, it is not easy to understand what the benefits for the individual could be. In the end, it is practice-bound, non-canonical knowledge that is acquired within a CoP; how should an individual make use of it in other groups, when this knowledge is, by definition, bound to the particular community?

Therefore, it might be concluded that a CoP is still a very vulnerable community in its sustainability as it is not possible to create private benefits other than the acquired knowledge which is not usable elsewhere. Some form of reciprocity outside the CoP is missing or at least not easily acquired.

In the following we will explore the consequences of the view of multiple inclusion to CoP's. There, we have to reconsider the particular characteristics of a CoP.

### **3 Multiple inclusion and consequences for the dynamics within and outside a CoP**

The notion of legitimate peripheral legitimacy (LPP) is one of the most important concepts in order to define how situated knowledge is created within a CoP. It also demonstrates why common practice is such a strong basis. Common practice serves as the basis for legitimating a participant's contributions. Common practice is a frame of reference for understanding and hence legitimating participation. The attribute 'peripheral' indicates that a participant within a CoP occupies a particular position within the social structure of a CoP. This position changes relative to the meaningfulness of a contribution according to other participants. And, again, this is determined by common practice. Meaningfulness is related to practice. The notion of LPP is so interesting because it connects the social position of a participant in the structure of the community with the cognitive (knowledge) contributions of a participant.

The question, we are now concerned with, is how the notion of multiple inclusion is connected to legitimacy. Furthermore, what are the consequences when we connect the notion of peripherality with the insights from multiple and partial inclusion in networked individualism?

We first assume that an individual is only partially included into a CoP and multiple included in his overall network. In a CoP this partial inclusion is heavily related to common practice within a CoP. One might say, that all members are partially included into the common practice. This is still consistent with the notion of LPP. The only difference is, that participating in common practice is described as partial inclusion and that we know that the individual is still included in other groups/communities. The essential question is how an individual's partial inclusion in a CoP is related to other involvements in groups? How does additional group membership influence legitimacy in a CoP and how does legitimacy influence peripherality – the social position of an individual in a CoP? And what are the consequences of these notions for the sustainability of a CoP?



Knowledge about practice is considered the foundation for legitimising a contribution. Thus, one could argue there is no room for multiple inclusion. We have already argued that this view on networked individualism, which does not allow the connectedness between group membership makes a community vulnerable. If there is no room for multiple inclusion the sustainability of a CoP is threatened. A CoP breaks down as soon as the common practice disappears as common ground for legitimacy. One could consider this fact as one of the strengths of a CoP.

However, empirical evidence shows that exclusive reliance on common practice can also be a too weak criteria for building up a CoP at all. For instance, nurses in domiciliary care share the same practice. Nevertheless, they do not want to establish a CoP in order to learn from each other as they are afraid that the colleagues could criticize them as less knowledgeable which again could have implications on their career, their rewards or 'just' loss of reputation within the group or outside etc. These nurses are not only involved in common practice but also have other, multiple inclusions, i.e. as employee or as colleague.

Thus again the question: how can multiple inclusion be taken into account in a CoP? The above example suggests that common practice is not the only valid criterion for legitimating participation in a CoP. As we see it, common practice is a necessary condition for legitimating a contribution but not a sufficient one. Alternative considerations originating from different inclusions should also be taken into account. Thus, we suggest that a CoP must allow for more and different legitimating criteria than only common practice in order to increase sustainability. In this way a CoP takes into account that individuals are multiple included in various networks. Excluding this multiple inclusions makes the sustainability of a CoP vulnerable.

In the classical notion of LPP the degree of peripherality is determined by legitimating participation on the basis of (its contribution to the) common practice. The notion of multiple inclusion suggests that this is a too narrow basis. Various types of legitimating criteria should be allowed in order to enhance sustainability. Thus, a less knowledgeable individual as far as practice is concerned, would be at the periphery of a CoP according to the classical definition of LPP. If we allow more types of legitimacy, such an individual would probably find itself at another social position (at least on changing positions) than at the extreme periphery. This could further its motivation to participate and increase the sustainability of a CoP.

The process how to find the valid criteria for legitimacy except practice, is a process in itself. Of course, one cannot take into account every possible inclusion of an individual elsewhere. Alvesson (2003) develops in this regard an interesting proposal. Although

this is developed with regard to interviews as research method, the proposal demonstrates the way how multiple criteria for understanding meaning (of an interview) can be developed. Alvesson (2003) suggests that the multiple meanings of an interview – or behaviour in general – becomes visible when reflexivity is allowed. Reflexivity is defined as the possibility to get alternative meanings. The same may be applicable to CoP's. If members apply the principle of reflexivity, they can implicitly or explicitly discuss which criteria for participation are considered legitimate. In our example of the nurses above, alternative criteria for legitimacy – next to knowledge - could be management considerations, i.e. time. (In the Netherlands nurses in the domiciliary care are obliged to follow a very strict time schedule for their activities). Through reflexivity, a CoP is able to allow several types of legitimacies. The (peripheral) social position of an individual thus not only depends on knowledge contributions on common practice. Other types of legitimacies are allowed which make that multiple inclusions are taken into account.

It was argued that gaining private benefits in a CoP might be difficult for an individual as the most important benefit of a CoP is situated knowledge. However, private benefits were identified as strong motivator to contribute to a group's knowledge. However, knowledge of a CoP is not suitable for gaining advantages elsewhere. Some translation or boundary crossing is necessary in order to apply the same knowledge in alternative networks (Engeström et al. 1995). Wenger (1999) talks about boundary objects. Different to the view of von Hippel and von Krogh (2003) boundary crossing in a CoP (or from a CoP) implies cognitive work for the individual. Knowledge as acquired within a CoP must be translated into usable knowledge in other groups. The benefits cannot not directly gained – at least if there is some difference in practice between the various groups. This brings us to our second proposal which again is related to legitimacy. Boundary crossing is facilitated for the individual when both (or several) groups recognize and legitimate the double (or multiple) membership of an individual in diverse groups.

An example can demonstrate this: professional consultants from a Dutch consultancy firm often work together for a long time in a project. To a large extent this project team is comparable to a CoP. Moreover they participate in some learning groups. Thus, a consultant is multiple included in two groups. Empirical research shows that consultants can more easily transfer their knowledge from one group to the other under the condition that the transferred knowledge, first, does not threaten membership in one of the groups, and, secondly, when colleagues in both groups consider the

transferred knowledge valuable. Thus, membership in one group is legitimised by the other group (and vice versa) because of the value of the transferred knowledge. The individual still has to do the cognitive work of translating. However, the individual's willingness is enhanced by this 'double' legitimacy. In this case, an individual consultant does not gain private benefits. On the contrary, he has the cognitive burden of translation. However, through this effort the social position of the individual increases in both groups. This mechanism works only as long as the transferred knowledge is considered legitimate in both groups.

Thus, we can conclude that boundary crossing between CoP's does not directly lead to private benefits for the individual. This happens only indirectly: as long as the translated knowledge is considered valuable and thus double membership is legitimized, the individual can gain an advantage in the social structure within both groups.

Both proposals how to improve the sustainability of a CoP are built on the assumption of networked individualism and multiple inclusions. When applying this starting point to the principle mechanism of LPP, it becomes clear that common practice is just a necessary condition for working and learning together – not more. Next to this condition, criteria for legitimacy must be broadened in order to take into account the multiple inclusions of an individual. Criteria of legitimacy for participation cannot solely be based on common practice.

#### **4 Conclusion**

We started with the assumption that an individual nowadays is involved in multiple networks: the principle of networked individualism. We adopted the viewpoint that networked individualism implies that an individual has various relationships that are somehow related to each other. Thus, multiple inclusion indicates that the various involvements of an individual do not exist isolated from each other. They influence each other. From this viewpoint we have discussed the consequences of multiple inclusions on the sustainability of a CoP. We started from the insight that considering multiple inclusion facilitates an individual's motivation to contribute to a CoP. This, in turn, would improve the sustainability of a Cop. We, then, have discussed various ways how a CoP could take multiple inclusion into account. One proposal was to broaden the legitimating criteria within a CoP. In this way, the multiple inclusions of an individual are taken into account within a CoP. Of course, broadening criteria of legitimacy is not unlimited. Therefore, a CoP needs reflexivity in order to determine the various criteria

for legitimacy. Another proposal was to facilitate boundary crossing. Boundary crossing needs some cognitive work of translation. We concluded that boundary crossing is facilitated as long as the individual is legitimized for his 'double' group membership. This legitimacy depends on the recognized value of the transferred and translated knowledge.

In both proposals it is striking that common practice must be considered as necessary condition for cooperation, but, not at all, a sufficient condition. In order to enhance sustainability, a CoP must take into account the multiple inclusions of a networked individual.

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