

SOCIAL THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION
TO THE STUDY OF COMMUNITY ANALYSIS
AND THE PROBLEMS OF THE RURAL LIBRARY

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The purpose of the paper which I am presenting is to examine the contribution which social theory can make to an understanding of the problems and dynamics of community development and rural librarianship. As a preliminary to this examination I wish to address several anticipated criticisms and questions which will, no doubt, arise concerning the topic of this presentation.

I shall begin by presenting a definition of social theory. The purpose of social theory is to present either an explanation or description of why a particular set of social happenings or phenomenon occurred. It should be emphasized that social theory, as I use it in this paper, is essentially explanatory or descriptive in nature, as opposed to being normative. This does not mean that descriptive and explanatory theory does not possess normative implications or connotations. However, the principal thrust of the theoretical constructs that I shall examine are descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature, and I shall deal with their heuristic or practical utility as opposed to their normative content.

There are those who might argue that such a paper has no place in a consideration of rural librarianship, that such consideration should be devoted to practical solutions to immediate problems, and that this is not the place for the type of speculation in which I shall indulge in this paper. On this matter I take a more long range view, seeing my contribution as one of making a positive first step toward the construction of a general theory of community development which would emphasize the role potential of various approaches or orientations in social theory.

The importance of building a theoretical structure which the

student of rural librarianship can utilize may be questioned by the hard pressed practitioner in the field who is beset with the myriad of problems confronting the practicing rural librarian. In response to such inquiry I can only argue that efforts toward building a library science subdiscipline should proceed in the same manner as building a discipline in any of the social sciences. To enhance one's understanding and to aid in the development of the discipline one must proceed in two directions: immediate problem solving and the development of a theoretical foundation for further inquiry.

To understand the importance of the latter, let us examine the structure and conditions of "knowledge" in the area of rural librarianship and macrolevel social analysis. "Knowledge" as used in this context refers to what the practitioner in a specific field of inquiry ascertains to be true or real about the subject matter of his particular discipline.

In examining the two fields of inquiry of rural librarianship and macrolevel social analysis, one finds two polar extremes or conditions of the state of knowledge. In the case of macrolevel social analysis, or social theory, practically all knowledge is theoretical, as opposed to being empirical, in nature. In this area of inquiry knowledge consists of the formulation and understanding of relatively elaborate theoretical structures whose philosophic origins are, for the most part, derivative from other areas of inquiry. The relationship between these elaborate theoretical constructs which make up the body of social theory and the discrete "facts" of social life are tenuous and partial at best.

At the other extreme is the body of knowledge which constitutes the present state of rural librarianship. Knowledge is almost totally empirical in nature with little or no theoretical connectors. In other words, knowledge of rural librarianship is comprised of pockets or islands of information, for the most part in the hands of practitioners in the field. In addition to being nontheoretical or atheoretical in nature, the knowledge of the practices and behaviors of rural librarianship has, frequently, not even been explicated by those who hold it.

By this I mean that the "knowledge" which comprises the subject of rural librarianship is anecdotal and even intuitive in nature.

Between these two extremes lies a broad, middle ground for innovative and experimental thought. At the one extreme is a wealth of information or knowledge concerning the behavior and practice of rural librarianship without any theoretical framework describing or explaining the occurrence of phenomenon. At the other extreme there is an abundance of theory with little application to unique social problems or issues and with a limited effort to relate the overarching theoretical structures to discreet social phenomenon.

This paper will explore the possibility of the fusion of the theoretical insights derived from this large corpus of social behaviors with the heuristic insights of the practitioner or student of rural librarianship. It is hoped that this fusion will be the first step toward an eventual synthesis in which insights from the theoretical literature of macrolevel social analysis can be applied to specific issues of rural librarianship.

At this point I wish to insert a caveat that the list of theories and theoretical approaches which I discuss in this paper is selective and not exhaustive. To make an exhaustive listing of all potential social science theorists and their potential contributions would be beyond the scope of this paper. Nor would it be particularly useful, in that the approaches of many theorists either overlap or possess marginal relevance to the issues at hand. An examination of a large number would produce diminishing returns in respect to their utility for studying the issues of community development and rural librarianship. In place of an exhaustive listing I will attempt to examine a select few of the theorists who are regarded as the most relevant.

The several approaches which I shall examine are recognized as standard theoretical works representing classical approaches in social theory. Their status as important contributions in the area of sociological theory are universally recognized by sociologists and political theorists. What has never been done is to utilize these theoretical approaches to look at phenomenon associated with rural librarianship.

Consequently, although what I shall be doing here may seem novel, or even radical to many, I believe that it is an interesting and necessary exercise in the development of the study of rural librarianship.

The first theorist whom I shall consider is David Easton. In his tripartite seminal work, consisting of The Political System (1953), A Framework for Political Analysis (1965), and A Systems Analysis of Political Life (1965), Easton elucidates an elegant model of the "political system" that is broad enough in scope to be used to describe any type of political structure from the present global system to the political structure of a small tribal village. Easton describes his work:

... I have been exploring the utility of the system as the major unit, focusing on political life as a system of behavior operating within and responding to its social environment as it makes a binding allocation of values. [1,p.21]

As this quotation illustrates, Easton views the political system as a structured means for processing the "wants" of its constituent members into "outputs." In another quote Easton states that the political system is "that system of interactions in any society through which binding or authoritative allocations are made and implemented." [1,p.50] Easton posits a complex model of systemic behavior wherein "wants" are "conveyed" into "demands" by the proper agencies or "gatekeepers." These demands are then processed as outputs of the political system. These outputs or results of the system are classed as "feedback" mechanisms which signify the support of those who made the original demands for the original system. The element of the political system is characterized by Easton as "institutions."

Persistence of a system, its capacity to continue the production of authoritative outputs, will depend, therefore, upon how well its constituent parts are operating. [1,p.132]

As a further elucidation of this very simple input-output model Easton constructs a rather complicated model of the political system in Systems Analysis of Political Life. In terms of the study of rural libraries what should concern us is the contribution that Easton's theories make to a better understanding of the role that rural libraries do and can play in the social and political system of which they are a part. In

this respect I think that the concept of "gatekeeper" introduced by Easton is a particularly useful one to explore. "Gatekeepers," as Easton defines the term, are the regulators of demand stress in the political system. Easton discusses this particular structural mechanism:

Because of their general social status, some individuals or groups are more inclined to feel efficacious enough to articulate a political position. If this is so, persons occupying these roles in the social and political structure will have an important measure of control over the number of demands put into the system. For this reason we may call them structural regulators of the volume of demands; they are gatekeepers who stand athwart the admission channels to a system. In modern societies we may identify them as interest groups, parties, opinion leaders, or the mass media. In traditional societies they may take the form of notables, an aristocracy, or a military cadre. Whatever the particular form that these structural regulators take, it is clear that the volume or variety of demands that initially get into the system and begin to move along toward the point of output . . . will depend upon the characteristics of the gatekeepers. [1,p.122]

I believe that Easton's concept of gatekeeper is a particularly useful one when examining the position of rural libraries in their respective community structures. Many rural communities when examined in terms of Easton's model show either a relatively undifferentiated or poorly developed structure for processing the wants of the residents into demands. For those individuals in rural communities who have been excluded from the system the library could be looked at as an alternative to existing underdeveloped and underutilized "want conversion" mechanisms. In place of the informal channels of conversion, for example, local influentials, which dominate the process in a less complex social or political system, the library can present itself and develop its potential as an integral element in the development of political and social community in rural areas by serving the information needs of the respective communities. In so doing the library will assist in the formulation and articulation of community needs.

Before the information needs of the individual rural community can be processed they must first be determined. Here again, social science theory can be of assistance to the rural librarian for ident-

ifying community analysis studies which delineate the political and social structure characterizing individual communities. Using Easton's methodology a community study could delineate who the important gatekeepers are in a given community and determine the methods which the library can develop to supplement this need.

Another fruitful analytical approach to the study of community development is that utilized by Karl Deutsch in The Nerves of Government (1966). In this work Deutsch posits a model of the political and social system drawn from a lengthy examination of other theoretical and philosophical systems and a recognition of their historical limitations.

Mechanic, organismic, and historical models were based, substantially, on experiences and operations known before 1850, even though many of their implications were worked out more fully only later. A major change in this situation began in the 1940's. Its basis was in the new development in communications engineering with its extensive use of self-monitoring, self-controlling, and self-steering, automatic processes. [2,p.75]

The model which Deutsch develops is described by the author as a "self-modifying communications network" or "learning net." [2,p.80]

It is also described as a cybernetic model. Deutsch states that the most important concept for understanding the cybernetic model is "information:"

. . . communications engineering transfers information.
It does not transfer events. [2,p.82]

The author presents an interesting discussion of the metaphysical and theoretical assumptions underlying his conception of information transfer which, because of its essentially philosophical nature, need not concern us here. What need concern us, however, are the concepts of "feedback" and "equilibrium," an understanding of which are vital to an appreciation of Deutsch's theoretical constructs. Feedback is the process by which the input of new information into a system can cause that system to "correct" or modify its behavior.

A simple feedback network contains arrangements to react to an outside event . . . in a specific manner . . . until a specified state of affairs has been brought about. [2,p.88]

If the system's feedback mechanism is well designed it will result in a diminished degree of error. If it is inadequate or improperly functioning the degree of error will increase. According to Deutsch "these failures of feedback networks have specific parallels in the pathology of the human nervous system. . . and perhaps even . . . in the behavior of animals, men, and whole communities." [2,p.89]

The concepts of "information" and "feedback" are the most important elements of Deutsch's theoretical model. Deutsch argues, very persuasively, concerning the implications for future research of his model. The first major point to be considered in applying this model to the study of political structure, and, for our purposes, the problems of community development and community analysis, is the processing of information. Community structures, in order to survive, must possess the capability of adjusting to and assimilating forces and factors from the environment with which it interacts. [2,p.163] Here creativity and the learning capacity of an organization are called into question. Deutsch discriminates between infant learning and adult learning. Infant learning involves the recombination of large amounts of unrelated material structured, in part, from forces outside the learning environment. Adult learning involves a much lesser amount of recombination of new material. Infant learning is slower, but richer, in possibilities for recombination. Adult learning is more restricted by the limitations of the combinations of material as it is given.

Three problems suggested by this view are finding some optimum range between infant-type and adult-type learning; or alternating between infant-type and adult-type learning at various stages within the same organization; and finally, of establishing a strategic criteria of interest for the selection of promising configurations from the large ensemble of infant-type learning for the purpose of developing the selected configurations more nearly adult type learning methods. [2,p.166]

The possibilities presented by the implications of Deutsch's statements are fascinating for the study of community development and rural sociology. From Deutsch's theoretical framework one can construct a model of community development that would utilize "learning capacity" of the

community for assembling new information in the form of external pressures as a prescribed goal, i.e., by setting the objective of improving the community's learning capability. In achieving this end, I foresee a more active role for the rural library. It can provide reference material which will assist community leaders and community activists in making decisions concerning problems related to the community. On the face of it this may seem like a rather mundane exercise and something which all libraries perform as a part of their normal lending or reference service. This is true. However, the importance of the role that the rural library may play as a de facto agent of community development and community change can not be underestimated and should be considered from a theoretical perspective. Deutsch's theoretical insight on the nature of information flow helps in clarifying this important role.

Deutsch postulates that it is possible to measure the ability of a particular organization or social and political structure to learn. Referred to as "deutero learning," this is a measure of the rate of improvement in an organization's performance when confronted with a succession of learning situations.

Has the learning of the organization been creative, that is to say, has it increased its range of possible intake of information from the outside world and its ranges of possible inner recombinations? Or has the learning of the organization been merely viable, that is, neither adding nor detracting from the subsequent capacities of the organization for learning and self-steering? Or, finally, has the learning performance of the organization been pathological, that is, has the organization learned something that has reduced its subsequent capacity to learn, or its subsequent capacity to control its own behavior? [2, p. 169]

Again, the ramifications of Deutsch's theoretical insights for the process of community development and analysis, as well as the implications for rural libraries are interesting. The impact of events on rural communities and social structures in the form of information, for example, technological or economic transformation, can be examined in terms of the community's or social structure's ability to respond successfully to or assimilate this information. A role can be foreseen for the rural library as a mediating and educating agent in the lessening of

the shock potential of radical social, political, and economic transformations in rural communities through the development of information resources that can be utilized by the communities in evaluating the problems and opportunities emanating from such transformations.

Another potentially fruitful theoretical approach for the study of community development and analysis is the functionalist approach. An example of this approach is the work of Talcott Parsons. Parsons' work spans a period of close to thirty years. [3] A central theme of Parsons' work has been his analysis of the forces and factors which affect social integration. Principally these are seen as deriving from the institutionalization of the society's normative values of the social system. The principal assumptions and tenets of functionalism are relatively simple to grasp, namely, those elements of a social or communal structure which survive are those which make a positive contribution to the well-being of the community. [4]

For our purposes functional analysis can provide an interesting and potentially fruitful enterprise. The analysis of rural communities can go forward through an examination of their component substructures in terms of their contribution to the community's ability to cope with the problems confronting it. However, as Merton warns in his provocative and interesting exposition on functional theory, there are a number of intellectual or theoretical pitfalls which must be avoided when using the functional approach to community analysis. Specifically, a practice which might be functionally beneficial to a subunit of the community might be actually detrimental to the whole of the system. Such would be the case where the phenomenon of "increased family pride" would be seen as bringing about "increased solidarity of the community." As Merton indicates, however, this is not always the case. An increase in pride among individuals may often bring about disruptions in a small community. [4,p.27] One thinks of the classic Hatfield-McCoy feud or the Montague-Capulet feud in Romeo and Juliet.

The point of this example is to demonstrate that functional analysis, while it is a useful means for performing community analysis, is also a tricky business. It is difficult, sometimes, to be able to

determine the functional role of any subunit of a given community with any real certainty.

In respect to the prescriptive aspects of functional analysis as it pertains to the role of libraries in rural communities, much can be learned from a functional study of a community which would examine its information needs. A study of this sort would attempt to describe the manner in which the information needs of the community were processed, what agencies or channels performed this function, and the manner in which the library could function as an alternative or supplemental information source.

This paper has, by its nature, been selective rather than exhaustive. I have chosen three approaches in social theory represented by the works of several individual authors and examined them in light of their relative contribution to community analysis and development and the role that the rural library can play in this process. This examination has by no means been exhaustive. Rather, it is suggestive of possible directions for future research. Future studies should examine in a greater degree of depth each of these approaches, using case studies of individual rural library situations to examine the potential contributions discussed here. In this way one can begin to develop a theoretical and scientific approach to the study of the rural library and community development.

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