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### Recommended Citation

Zacharakis, Jeffrey (2017). "The Democratic Ideal vs. Luhmann's Autopoietic Systems in Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2017/papers/21>

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# **The Democratic Ideal vs. Luhmann's Autopoietic Systems in Adult Education: Theorizing from the Literature**

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the democratic ideal and its historical importance to adult education, and then analyzes how adult education today fits Niklas Luhmann's (2006) autopoietic systems at the expense of the democratic ideal.

In the 1950s most professionals were members of the Adult Education Association, which evolved into the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. Up through the early 1980s these organizations were home to most adult education professionals. Today the field of adult education has many professional associations, some of which splintered off AAACE such as the Commission on Adult Basic Education (COLLO, 2017; Flemming 2000). The paper uses Luhmann's (1977; 2006) theories of autopoietic systems and systems of differentiation to explain how the rationalization of adult education into disparate parts, which have little communication with each other, evolved out of the Progressive movement and pursuit of the democratic ideal. Luhmann offers adult educators an opportunity to understand how systems affect learning and information transformation. He takes the simple notion of open and closed systems (those dependent on their environment vs. those which operate independent of their environment) to a more complex understanding of autopoietic systems, which allows them to self-produce through their operations and structures within their environment. The paper applies Luhmann's systems theory to understand why the field of adult education has been fractured into many parts and they why these parts have created separate systems that support their goals yet minimize the interaction between each part, even when they have common goals. According to Luhmann, schooling exasperates social and psychic differentiation as a system, and in essence is a means to socially construct the student (or clients) and therefore is a vehicle of social differentiation. Based on Luhmann's systems theory, education is less about transferring knowledge and more about self-production of the educational system and the social structure's status quo. This paper will highlight how adult education, adult educators and their students, are shaped by systems.

## **Disciplinary Perspectives**

This paper uses both a historical and sociological framework. Luhmann was a sociologist whose social theories are widely used in Europe in many different areas including education, law, religion, economics, ecology, and politics. Yet his theory of social differentiation is seldom used to analyze the educational system in the United States, and to my knowledge is rarely used in adult education. In particular the framework of autopoietic systems is particularly relevant to adult education in the United States and helps explain why adult education is seldom seen as an interdisciplinary field that is applicable to many disciplines. This paper is also historical in that my thesis is dependent upon understanding adult education's historical roots in the United States during the Progressive Era.

## Historical Analysis of the Democratic Ideal

The historical importance of adult education was to build civil society and strengthen the democratic ideal during the Progressive Era. Important educators within this adult education tradition include Walter Rauschenbusch (1908), John Dewey (1916), Jane Addams (1902; 1915), and Edward Lindeman (1926). An entire generation of adult educators were influenced by these early pioneers including Myles Horton, Francis Brown, Wilbur Hallenbeck, Robert Blakely, Paul Sheats, and Alexander (Sandy) Liveright, to mention a few. Carl Minich (1955) arguably stated the essence of Progressive movement in adult education best: “Adult education should be available to *all* the people and not limited to economically or intellectually favored minorities. This is simply another way of saying that if adult education is to become an accepted part of our democratic way of life it must be democratically conceived and developed” (p. 140).

Within this progressive movement tradition, Milton Reed (1906) wrote that the democratic ideal is based on three principles: “liberty, equality of rights and opportunities, and justice” (p.146). Liberty is not freedom to do what you want it is something that must be regulated by the state to avoid anarchy and tyranny. Liberty is created by the state, and with these freedoms the state must also institute rules and order, all of which according to Reed are based on each citizen's obligation to all other citizens. This “obligation to others” is based on reciprocity and mutual help (p. 146). It is the state's responsible to preserve freedom by preventing mob rule and the rise of despots, and “possession of enormous wealth, thereby generating sharp distinctions between classes, is inimical to the democratic ideal” (p. 150). Lewis Lorwin (1935) argued that the democratic ideal has shifted over time being defined by each civilization reflecting their conditions. In his construct of the democratic ideal there is a common set of freedoms including the freedom to move, freedom of speech and thought, freedom to associate with others, and freedom to pursue one's individual potentials (p. 114). These freedoms are preserved by allowing people to determine government policies; being able to replace peaceably any administration; forming public policy and opinion without fear of persecution; and inclusion of minority group opinions and their needs in the decisions of the majority. All these freedoms are preserved through the political process, voting, and most importantly and engaged citizenry. He pointed out that in liberal states that adhered to the democratic ideal was a balance and check to various economic orders, or what might be viewed as regulating economic capitalism. The purpose of the liberal state “is to put into political form the scattered economic powers of individuals and to make these powers serve a distinct collective purpose, namely, making the whole nation work together for a common good” (p. 116).

The democratic ideal is captured in almost all early adult education literature. It may be best captured by Waller (1956) in *A Design for Democracy* where he argued that adult education had two missions: one to enhance and nurture personal aspirations and the other to set standards for citizenship and social order. This notion of cultivating personal growth while building a strong democracy with a strong collective purpose may be considered to be naïve in today's hyper-polarized society where liberal views of the common good clash with conservative neoliberal views which idealize marketization and commodification and promote the unfettered free markets.

### **Niklas Luhmann and Autopoietic Systems**

Systems theory in contrast to humanist theories in adult education sees society not as a

collection of human beings but as a collection of systems that interact with each other but are distinct and differentiated. It breaks from the Plato's notion that society can be defined as groups of people, the social contract of Hobbes and Rousseau, and today's consensus theories of Habermas (communicative action) and Rawls (fairness and justice), all of which are based on groups of people and communication between people (Moeller, 2011). Niklas Luhmann argues in the phenomenological tradition that we don't know what people feel or believe, only what they communicate, and what they communicate may not be what they feel or believe but only what they have been taught or conditioned to communicate. Systems theory constructs society as a system of communications that is independent of individuals. Thus individuality exists in the body, but consciousness is reflective of the system in which the individual operates and functions. Hence, "social systems theory holds the if 'we' want to understand how society functions and operates we cannot reduce it to such an extremely broad and 'metasocial' notion of that the 'human being'" (Moeller, 2011, p.11)

The concept of autopoiesis, which means self-production, was originally developed by two Chilean scientists, Maturana and Varela (1980). It was used to describe how organisms are self referential in their development, whether it is a living cell, an Aspen grove in the mountains, or a rhizome, and designed to reproduce themselves. Luhmann (1977) adopted this biological construct of autopoiesis into organizational systems theory in which organizations are closed, autonomous systems of interaction that reference only to themselves through communications. Though these systems interact with their environment, they thrive and reproduce themselves by developing boundaries that differentiate themselves from their environment. Luhmann begins with the assumption that "system differentiation as the *reduplication of the difference between the system and environment with systems*. Differentiation, then, is the reflexive form of system building. It repeats the same mechanism, using it for amplifying its own results" (p. 31, italics in original). When systems impact society as a whole, they do not necessarily affect how other systems affect society. Luhmann uses political systems to illustrate how they impact society, but do so in ways that are not the same as religion or education. These are separate systems or subsystems even though they too operate within the same environment and interact with each other.

System differentiation is a selective process, whose main function is to "reduce the complexity of external and internal environments" (Luhmann, 1977, p. 32). Hence as society becomes more complex and evolves, system differentiation increases, which strengthen boundaries between subsystems. This leads to "stratification" with "unequal wealth and power" (p. 33). Power for Luhmann is associated with access to communication within the hierarchy of systems or subsystems, and not with individuals or communication between individuals. Luhmann argues that within society subsystems form a hierarchy by identifying their boundaries through differentiation with other subsystems, and lower subsystems conform to this hierarchy because they have no alternative. "On the whole, lower strata have the problem of getting the attention and becoming a topic of influential communication, and there only means seems to be conflict: social movement, peasant revolts, uproars" (p. 34). Rarely do structural changes occur because of these conflicts. Systems have functional purpose, such as political, educational, religious and legal, and even though they may claim equal access in reality functional systems are unequal. And by increasing functional differential systems can also increase openness to their environment and still be stable or self-producing. Therefore, changes within a system's environment are analogous to changes in the system itself because the environment is organized as an extension of the system. Understanding the nature of an autopoietic system implies

unraveling an infinite network of wholes within wholes because the system is fundamentally a closed network of communications with no clear beginning or end. In essence, living systems, although self-referential and autonomous, are not isolated; they can only be understood as systems within the broader networks of interaction in which they function as system.

System theory and autopoieses posit that reality is constructed reflecting many complexities and not created. As each system produces itself it also produces its reality, and hence there is not one universal reality but multiple realities based on constructed differences in autopoietic systems that are self-referential. And each system has operational closure (Moeller, 2011).

### **The Democratic Ideal contrasted with Autopoietic Systems**

The democratic ideal as promoted in adult education and described by Rauschenbusch, Dewey, Addams and Lindeman within the Progressive tradition is challenged if not debunked within systems theory. Reed's (1908) three principles of the democratic ideal (liberty, equal rights and opportunity, and justice) are based on individual rights, and though they may exist in one system they are not universal. Whereas the democratic ideal is based on individual rights and has a subjective bias that reflects Western culture, it does not operationally define systems that evolve by differentiating themselves and constructing boundaries. Though it can be said that the democratic ideal of equality and justice might at best be naïve in systems, which evolve into hierarchies and negate individualism as well as individuality. Yet what systems theory does provide is a tool to evaluate and analysis society, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its injustices. To assume that we all have equal opportunity and there are laws of fairness and justice does not fit with Luhmann's more objective analysis of systems hierarchy and access of to power or communication. Luhmann is not anti-humanist, but falls more within the tradition of social constructivist in that persons as individuals are shaped and controlled by systems in which they operate.

### **Implications for Adult Education and Practice**

Adult education theory is far to embedded in individualism, teacher-student communications, and formal education (Brookfield, 2015; Knowles, 1970; and Mezirow, 1991), which we frame as adult learning. As the field of adult education has evolved and become more complex and diverse it has redefined itself into many subsystems, some of which no longer subscribe to the democratic ideal. Using Luhmann's theories, we are stuck in a closed system, and we through our research and practice are constructing a system separate from other educational fields, which allows us to construct and produce boundaries so we can define adult education as a unique field or discipline. We in essence are a self-referential or self-producing organization.

Though Luhmann would argue that all systems evolve and that we cannot reverse this trend, there are potential pathways to develop adult education that take into consideration systems theory. To solve the problem of professional isolation within autopoietic systems, this research suggests that we as a profession reexamine our purpose and practice of adult education during the Progression Era, and understand how the democratic ideal fits into this Progressive experience. From here this research recommends we as adult educators seek collaborations with other disciplines, use research and theories from other disciplines, and build new bridges that

allow us to overcome both professional and political polarization in search of a commonweal. The field of adult education in the United States was weakened when it broke into many parts, creating subsystems with a system by forming distinct groups such as AAACE, COABE, CAEL, and ICAE.

Adult education is by its very nature interdisciplinary (Stanage, 1987). Learning is not confined to classrooms, or teacher-student communications, or to individuals. It occurs in organizations at the individual and unit level as well as the structural level. As is true with any system, we are continually redefining and reinventing ourselves. We have opportunities to work cross discipline in many different settings and with many different partners through new and innovative collaborations. Though these new collaborations we will be introduced to new theories and new practices. The challenge that Luhmann presents is for us to observe our field as it was developed during the Progressive Era when many promoted the democratic ideal, to observe where this system of adult education has evolved today, and to proactively plan how we want to shape our future.

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