Individuals, Conglomerates, Persons, and Communities

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Abstract

Literature seems to regard a community as a grouping of individuals united for a common purpose. In this paper, I augment the discrete constituents – the social units 'individual' and 'group or community' – to form a matrix with four categories in an attempt to better explain pluralistic realities witnessed in Africa. I show how individuals (which I define as human beings seen separately from their social connections) group together to form 'conglomerates' (grouping of individuals to achieve a common goal), while 'communities' consist of 'persons' (human beings in constant reflexivity to their social connections), not individuals. In building the argument, I categorise the social units, elaborate on categories and affiliated concepts from two main perspectives (non-Western and Western), and provide multi-focal nuances. The paper contributes a conceptual framing with the hope to move the discourse on how humans group as social beings, and how these groups can be called and recognised in practice.

Key words: *Community, Conglomerates, Individualism, Normative epistemology, African customs*

Résumé

La littérature semble considérer une communauté comme un regroupement d'individus unis dans un but commun. Dans cet article, j'augmente les constituants distincts – les unités sociales « individuel » et « groupe ou communauté » – pour former une matrice avec quatre catégories dans le but de mieux expliquer les réalités pluralistes observées en Afrique. Je montre comment les individus (que je définis comme des êtres humains vus séparément de leurs liens sociaux) se regroupent pour former des « conglomérats » (regroupement d'individus pour atteindre un objectif commun), tandis que les « communautés » consistent en des « personnes » (des êtres humains en constante réflexivité à leurs liens sociaux), et non des individus. En construisant l'argument, je catégorise les unités sociales, élabore des catégories et des concepts affiliés à partir de deux perspectives principales (non-occidentales et occidentales) et fournit des nuances multifocales. L'article apporte un cadrage conceptuel dans l'espoir de déplacer le discours sur la façon dont les humains se regroupent en tant qu'êtres sociaux, et comment ces groupes peuvent être appelés et reconnus dans la pratique.

Mots clés : *Communauté, Conglomérats, Individualisme, Épistémologie normative, coutumes africaines*

Introduction

Libraries are full of studies and musings categorising human beings and their behaviour. The categorisation of social units – the discrete constituents that make up a society or larger group – is a contentious and complex issue and the subject of much study in sociology and anthropology. The latter augments the conversation by proposing categories gleaned from the examination of patterns of behaviour, near and far.

Categories frame arguments as they normalise the world. They provide the bedrock for scientific discourse. A Eurocentric science has used these categories as a lens through which to focus its universalising gaze on the planet. It does so by delivering word formulations that articulate a Eurocentric view of the world, which are adopted and repeated by seats of power. These categories facilitate the politics that keep Eurocentric validation in place (Mawere, van Reisen, & van Stam, 2019). Unfortunately, these categories are set with little, if any, contribution from the non-West, reducing their ability to describe reality and, therefore, utility.

The complexity of the categorisation of social units is exacerbated in today's globalising and urbanising world. Identities are culturally positioned, complex, and contradictory (Appiah, 2018). Kwasi Wiredu (1996, p. 1) points out:

> *We live in times marked by a certain […] anomaly […] in a cultural flux characterised by a confused interplay between an indigenous cultural heritage and foreign cultural legacy of a colonial origin. Implicated at the deepest reaches of this cultural amalgam is the superimposition of Western conceptions of the good upon African thought and conduct.*

In many writings, I recognise two social units – two main categories – being positioned: the 'individual' and the 'community', one being the singular human being and the other those human beings together. An example of this can be found in the following passage by Dismas Masolo (2002, p. 22):

> *Individual and community were related in a constant mutual dependency: the specific behaviour of individuals in various contexts gave the community its cultural boundaries and identity just as much as the normative standards of the community regulated the practices of individuals and groups within it.*

Anthropologic assessments of cultures show the West as individualistic and so-called traditional societies, such as sub-Saharan Africa, as collectivistic (Metz, 2015). Notwithstanding the complications arising from the Eurocentricity of the concepts

used (e.g., the words 'Western', 'modern', and 'traditional' all come with a geopolitical history), it is clear that the narrative distinguishes two distinct social entities: the single human being, or the 'individual', and a collective of human beings, the 'community'. The content and meaning of the words *group* and *community* seem to overlap, for example, like in group-of-experts and community-of-practice.

Ryszard Kapuściński, together with many others, considers *modernity* to map onto Western thought and urban life globally. At the same time, 'traditionality' – coined here as the pursuit of so-called 'traditional' lifestyles – is said to be the focus of those in rural areas, who uphold and transmit traditional customs and cultural beliefs. Kapuściński (2008) posits that these distinctions should be dissolved, because, among other things, the movement of rural populations weakens cultural ties and fuels hybridity, making interactions changeable and dynamic.

The distinction and interaction between the units *individual* and *community* (the crowd/the masses) is a dominant framing – and research outputs are framed in both categories. For instance, the headline of Jolanda Jetten *et al.*'s study on the power of group norms in Asia states in its title that "We're all individuals" (Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002). Reading such literature, and these kinds of reports, while embedded in African communities, is somewhat unsettling – something seems to be amiss.

The dichotomous notion of 'individualism' and 'communitarianism' is also confusing. Communitarians and communities appear to be related, but to what do individuals relate to? If communities are built through the bringing together of individuals, where are communitarians in this narrative? Are communitarians to be understood as individuals who strive to be together? From my lived experience in culturally different societies in the South and the North, and in these societies, in the rural and urban geographical and social spaces, this makes no sense (van Stam, 2011, 2017a, 2021). In my experience, proto-individuals seem to have difficulty recognising the value of – and values in – communities. In hindsight, the efforts of individuals to work together in or with communities resemble a boulevard of broken dreams. Along the way are trouble, bad moods, despair and even depression, and individuals have been seen to draw back, sometimes with contempt and arrogance (Malinowski, 1935). However, the notion that a community is the aggregation of individuals appears current in both considerate academic writings and stereotyping pulp, both from the South and the North.

Although what an individual is may be clear to a Western-trained person, what a *community is* remains shrouded in mystery. Some argue that the so-called modern, Western society has forgotten what community life means, as modernity has shredded communal values. But if a group of individuals together form a community, then does it follows that the individuals experience communal life? Apparently not.

In this paper, I attempt to solve the problem by reviewing the categories in two contexts: the private/secluded and the public/social. This review yields the existence of two additional categories: the *person* (positioned in the private) and the *conglomerate*

(positioned in the public). The addition of these two categories, I propose, explains more clearly what a community entails. It sheds light on how to view the lamented 'lost knowledge' on what a community is and revisits and discontinues the direct link between individuals and communities. But first, before this is done, in the next section I explain the method used.

Method

With the pregnant question 'what *is* a community?', I set my enquiry along a dynamic and integrative epistemological route (Bigirimana, 2017), and scrutiny of the literature from non-Western and Western philosophers, sages, academics and practitioners. This text emerged from the integration of my long-term and differentiated experiences, embodied understandings, value judgements, and actions while residing in rural and urban areas in sub-Saharan Africa, augmented by observations during a multitude of professional and personal visits to Europe and North America. Based on 20 years of uninterrupted focus on such a life, I tried to harmonise my observations, experiences and learnings using the method of living research (van Stam, 2019) developed from Michael Burawoy's extended case method (Burawoy, 2009).

For years, while studying and in intellectual discussions, I have wrestled with the hegemonic view of a community as being the grouping of individuals. Often, after reading and conversations, I would default to the hegemonic understanding and be frustrated by the discordance between such an understanding and what I experienced every day. Unlearning established theory and categories is very difficult. To do so, I relied on reflective science (Burawoy, 2009; van Stam, 2019), critical thinking and exploration to uncover a fresh understanding of the what a community is and how it is constituted. This paper is the outcome of that struggle.

Wrestling local theory out from under the Eurocentric categorisations that permeate it is an act of decolonisation (Hlabangane, 2018) and a move towards epistemic sovereignty (Buskens & van Reisen, 2016). Decolonisation is an intellectual and moral imperative in a globalising world (van Stam, 2017c). In other words, aiding inclusive, multifaceted understandings and the emancipation of polyvocality (the consideration of many voices), diversity and multiple perspectives is an intellectual and moral duty. In the dynamic and integral epistemology current in the South, understanding provides fuel for judgement and action (Bigirimana, 2017).

Defining community and other social units

Here I come to the main subject of this paper: what is community? To answer this question, first we need to examine some of its generally stated constituent parts. In this

section, I look at what is understood as an 'individual', as well as introducing two new categories – 'conglomerate' and 'person' – in the hope that this new framework will give rise to a fuller, more nuanced, understanding of community.

The individual

The Dutch theologian Gert-Jan Roest paints a picture of a Western society entering an 'Age of Authenticity' (Roest, 2016). Western practice, Roest argues, self-consciously regards the individual as the primary agent of change and control. In this realm, people interact with and bounce off each other like billiard balls. The pursuits of the individual, he writes, are: striving for human power and agency, freedom and fulfilment in self-sufficiency, self-reliance, autonomy through self-cultivation, and immanent prosperity and security.

Although the understanding of what it means to be human is different in both imagined epistemic realms (West and non-West), both agree on the possible existence of individuals. A common denominator is the focus on individuals as being separate and unique. The individual is a single entity, significant to him/herself, striving to be recognised as such. This brings me to the following definition of individual: *An individual is a human being independent of social groups or relationships.*

Of course, being an individual is a theoretical concept, as each person is intrinsically connected, having emerged into the realm of the living through a woman's womb. In this definition, the proto-individual is a human being that views him/herself (and others view him/her) independently from his/her relationships – a specific (and solitary)-self in a world consisting of many other distinct (and solitary)-selves. This understanding of individualism aligns with assessments of how Western culture and so-called modernity "calls for the limiting of oneself in one's private, egotistical 'me', with a tightly isolated circle where one can satisfy one's own urges and consumer whims" (Kapuściński, 2008, p. 72).

This individualism was pivotal in the work of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. From ethical reasoning, he highlighted the individual's docility and indifference to 'the other' (Levinas, 1961). Many herald individualism as one of the benefits of modernism and among the values of Western culture. Much has been written about its features, both in philosophy, e.g., Kant, Foucault, and others, as well as in popular literature.

The conglomerate

In the search to depict the grouping of individuals, I stumbled on the word 'conglomerate'. And that sounded just right! A conglomerate, the dictionary tells me, is a thing consisting of several different and distinct parts or items that are grouped together. In the social field, the grouping together of individuals seems to be mostly (measurable) outcome related. Thus, the definition: *A conglomerate is a grouping of individuals to achieve a common goal.*

This definition even fits with the common understanding of conglomerates, being a group of business entities. Conglomerates are mostly formed by individuals who cooperate to participate in economic activities. Conglomerates establish themselves in the political context of power, aligning with, or pushing the boundaries of, established legal frameworks. Conglomerates are guided strategically to bring about 'a purpose'. This positioning involves negotiation and possible struggle against 'significant others' to guard or extend shared *interests.* Conglomerates exist to bring about change or safeguard the interests of their members, to accumulate resource with which to undertake *actions* or to withstand external pressures.

It is here where institutes are formed. Institutes are social units that exist whether or not the persons that perform in them are present. They are the representation of conglomerates. Conglomerates, one could say, are primarily focused on bringing individuals together to *do*, to achieving goals. In contemporary jargon, this involves the articulation of, and agreement with, the conglomerate's written vision, mission, and objectives, and strategic reasoning (an action plan) on how to reach that goal, taking into account competing interests and regulations.

The person

There is little denial of the fact that human beings are embroiled socially. They emerged from a mother, relate to, and often grow up in, diverse social settings from which they derive language. One of the concepts related to this is family. The science of the embedding of human beings in the social context is complicated and vast. Some think that the context imposes identity, others argue that identity is self-made. Molefi Asante (2017) argues that children start as individuals, unaware of their environment, unattached to social bonds, and through interactions in the community become whole persons.

Western settings regard people as mature when they can make their own individual decisions and stand up for their own choices. In contrast, non-Western contexts often declare adulthood after initiation. Initiation indicates that the human being understands what it means to be 'in union' with society and the more extensive social system – what one's part and position is within it. After initiation, depending on those understandings, one's rights can be exercised and duties performed, all set in moral behaviour according to the espoused group values. The person continually evaluates and adjusts his or her conduct to the known or assumed expectations of those he or she relates with. In this way, the person shifts the focus of their conduct from self to the network, contributing to the development and upkeep of shared values. These considerations bring me to the following definition: *A person is a human being that belongs as part of a social network (of relationships).*

The community

Communities exist in many forms and manners. As pointed out above, in the West a community is understood as a collection of human beings existing in a structural aggregation of the individuals that are part of it (cf. Giddens, 1986). Examples are a community-of-practice, like a football club, based on the need to work together to achieve a common goal: winning a game. With the introduction of the conglomerate, this view of the community is disempowered.

Community, in *ubuntu* (communal love) (Mawere & van Stam, 2016) is the condition in which one finds people both identifying with and exhibiting solidarity towards one another (Metz, 2011, p. 236), where one encounters close and sympathetic social relations within a group (Mokgoro, 1998, p. 3). Ubuntu is like the Latin American concept of *buen vivir* (the good life) (Gudynas, 2011). In both, consciousness and society merge. Community members develop shared beliefs and norms of behaviour. Often, a conversation is carefully scripted and handled, with all searching for consensus, an equilibrium, in a rhythm. As such, communities harbour persons: those who inhabit the enduring entity 'community', engaged in and with the unity of beliefs and behaviours the community embodies, persons who belong. In this manner, communities are both permanent social entities and flexible ever-changing contexts.

In short, communities involve belonging and the embodiment of values and beliefs, are ethically grounded, and exist in a confined area in which justice can be sought. From this, I deduce the definition of a community to be: *A community is a gathering of persons who subscribe to shared set of values.*

Of course, critics abound. Communities, some say, are stifling self-employment and can allow despotic control. Others criticise the absence of communities as the pinnacle of vanity. An overarching view, however, is the understanding that communities have to do with commonalities, which, I suggest, can be understood in moral terms. Communities are groupings of those who belong, orient around 'being', with 'doing' being framed and monitored by the values and moral precepts current in the community. Communities are a dialogically constituted gathering – a constantly morphing product of conversations and interactions between people.

Mapping the proposed categories

Perspectives matter; perspectives depend on context, experiences, nature and nurture. As categorisation can help to designate appearances, it is essential to acknowledge that categories are not prescriptive, nor do they exist in a 'pure form'. Although one can recognise shared characteristics, as explored in the previous section, people are interdependent. At the same time, identities are nurtured and constructed in response to

existence and (potential) interactions with other human beings and non-human beings.

This section sets out the results of a transdisciplinary exercise to map the concepts associated with the four distinct categories defined above. Through such a mapping, I try to show the utility of the categories in practice. Its content is harvested from my personal interactions with people and repeated observations of communities and conglomerates over long periods of time, living in sub-Saharan Africa and traveling the world.

Matrix of categories

In Table 1, I map the categories of single human beings and groupings of human beings according to the dichotomy of private and public life.

Table 1. Overview of categories of single and groups of human beings

Orientation	One	Many
Private (independent)	Individual	Conglomerate
Public (civic)	Person	Community

Apart from the four categories presented in Table 1, there is a wide variety in how human beings view themselves, whether alone or in various forms of social groupings. When so framed by the researcher, studies seem to recognise the various categorisations provided. Consecutive literature shows how people identify with some of them, but not with others.

Undoubtedly, there are many 'in-between' stages and crossovers between the four categories presented. For instance, conglomerates can be ethically guided (e.g., environmental rights movements) and communities can be a political force (e.g., when logging takes place in so-called tribal lands). When regarding 'measurable outputs', individuals and persons can appear to be alike. The difference, however, lies in the embedding and nature of the interaction in context. There are distinct differences in the focus on power/control of conglomerates and the authority/legitimacy of communities. The same is valid when assessing aspects influencing the social cohesion of the groupings, and both conglomerates and communities can enable or inhibit cultural issues, explicit value statements, and ideologies or rituals that influence the behaviour of their members. Their existence gives rise to both 'in groups' and 'out groups'. A multitude of leadership structures exist in both categories. And, of course, one can be a member of various entities, including conglomerates (e.g., economic production units) and communities (e.g., geographical, spiritual, ethnic, and national).

Notwithstanding the above, given the original research question – 'what is a community?' – and because of the incompatibility of the dominant thinking: that individuals are seen to aggregate in communities, I posit that the four categories have a

rational appeal. The consecutiveness of individuals grouping in the form of communities is ill-informed. The frequent use of the word 'communal' in the setting of individualism is current but does not fit with the word community. Here, I argue that the word conglomerate more accurately covers that subject matter.

Concepts associated with categories

Although the categories do not exist in their uniform, singular and essential form, I expand on concepts embedded in the four types and, thus, how the categories are recognised in practice. These notions are identified by looking at the categories from two generic perspectives: a Western one and a non-Western one. Both of these positions exist theoretically, with a variety of nuanced forms of self-awareness and stereotyped otherings (contained in ideological framed orientalism and Occidentalism). In this sub-section, I align with Thaddeus Metz, who argues that the term 'African' is an example of a geographical label that refers to (Metz, 2015, p. 1176):

> *…features that are salient in a locale, at least over a substantial amount of time. [Geographical labels] pick out properties that have for a long while been recurrent in a place in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere. They denote fairly long-standing characteristics in a region that differentiate it from many other regions.*

Although 'the West' and 'the South' are imaginary labels depicting unclear geographies, I adhere to Metz's view on the use of geographically linked names. When I use the label 'Western', I seek to refer to the realities that many Europeans, Americans and others, those who regard themselves as part of 'the West', might recognise as features that are salient in their locales over a substantial amount of time.

In diffusionist anthropology, Eurocentric perspectives are widely recognised as being a dominant intellectual approach to the world. However, this is a coercive reality underpinning global matrices of power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). For over five centuries, Europeans strove to rule and dominate the world. In contemporary times, coloniality only recognises the validation and valorisation of what is considered 'knowledge' when done by a Western-trained, preferably European-based, universalistic academy (Grosfoguel, 2012; Nyamnjoh, 2016). Super-colonial tendencies continue to demand description in Western terminology, to be understood from a Western position, using Western language and wordings (van Stam, 2017b). Normative epistemology harbours ideologies and metaphors and reifies borders when discussing particular differences in dichotomous narratives. In this thinking, the mind and heart are separated, as is 'being' from 'doing'.

In Table 2, I provide an overview of the categories and affiliated concepts, aligned

with designated appearances. This list offers a starting point for further investigation of the four nomenclatures. In this overview, I endeavour to link the four categories with a whole range of designations that appear in philosophy, sociology, ethnography and other disciplines.

Table 2. Overview of related concepts, viewed from a normative perspective

	Individual	**Conglomerate**	**Person**	**Community**
Action	Propose	Identify	Request	Adhere
Articulation	State	Display	Orate	Synthesise
Constitution	Ego	Group of individuals	Connected-self	Group of persons
Difficulty	Selfish	Partisan	Conservative	Sectarian
Drive	Accumulation	Control	Vocation	Preservation
Existence	Alone	Establishment	Together	Commons
Focus	Power	Accumulation	Authority	Harmony
Honour	Acknowledgment	Ranking	Integrity	Relevance
Information	Knowledge	Empirics	Knowing	Consequences
Institution	Job	System	Tenure	Communiversity
Orientation	Competition	Strategic	Contribution	Convention
Output	Accomplishments	Contracts	Supporters	Consensus
Position	Homo economicus	Social contract	Homo situs	Embodied habitus
Purpose	To excel	To obtain	To know	To be together
Recognition	Skills	Reputation	Wisdom	Grace
Resource	Ability	Capital	Stewardship	Endowment
Success	Winning	Agreements	Consultations	Fellowship
Mechanism	Doing	Text	Being	Conversation
Truth	Utility	Constructed	Revealed	Disclosed

Since the nominal withdrawal of colonial powers led to a plethora of sovereign countries, non-Western views have had the chance to become more pronounced and heard. From a recognition of the significance of non-Western philosophies and their derivatives, also through post-colonial studies, and from exercises in the shedding of coloniality (e.g., 'Rhodes must fall', see Nyamnjoh, 2016), a demand has emerged for the recognition of

non-Western views. Non-Western views are best assessed in decolonial settings. Here, ambitious and dynamic processes are set in actively developed value epistemes. Insights into journeys of life are framed by accumulative insights. They emerge from experience and flow from a constant reiteration of the present, given a changing history.

Unhelpfully, much work on the description of communities in Africa, South America and Asia is framed in, and constitutive of, the politics of the former colonial systems. Views of community were – and still are – a target for the colonial matrices of power. Especially in indirect rule, the Western perception of 'traditional communities' has been used as a means of control (Mamdani, 2012). In the setting of this paper, colonial powers have tried to coerce communities to act as conglomerates, in the hope they could assert competing forces and create rivalry – a strategy of divide, conquer and rule. Through the colonial lens, a Eurocentric and colonial social anthropology provided the 'scientific confirmation'.

In many settings, perception leads to understanding – involving all humans and non-humans in the vicinity – to be able to judge (in line with the values) and, subsequently, take action. In this work, I glean common, non-Western values from the concepts of *ubuntu* and *buen vivir*. What is known as *the Big Five* (van Stam, 2017a) – developed to guide interaction, research and development in the South – provides the framework for my transdisciplinary analysis.

Table 3. Overview of related concepts, viewed from a dynamic and integrative perspective

	Individual	**Conglomerate**	**Person**	**Community**
Affect	Reserved	Pronounced	Inclusive	Habituated
Discuss	Assertive	Juridical	Authoritative	Comprehensive
Share	Autonomous	Structured	Customary	Cooperative
Align	Defiant	Legal	Respectful	Inclusive
Flow	Distinctive	Uniform	Situated	Variable

Discussion

Tables 2 and 3 can fuel many discussions on the social categories presented in this paper, from the (possibly conflicting) viewpoints set in various disciplines. However, such a discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the tables indicate the potential for a fruitful debate on the implications of the proposed categories. In this section I take up some of the issues involved with the contexts and social movement between the proposed categories.

Cultures and worldviews

Cultural work and feminist theory show that one's view of reality depends on one's context and, I argue, one's outlook. This, of course, depends on a person's position, worldview, and culture. For instance, the frame in which individuals operate – individualism – embeds specific outlooks and values linked to time and place. Individuals in conglomerates use planning in time and space, while persons in community contain time and space spontaneous in order to share it with those who happen to drop by (cf., Bidwell et al., 2013; Brumen, 2019). In addition to experience and observations, texts and scriptures are important for individuals and conglomerates to develop a solipsistic cognisance, while persons and communities focus more on conversation and orality to augment their intersubjective insights (cf., van Stam, 2013).

Cross-cultural work involves moving across philosophies. In turn, theories are set in worldviews and their metaphysical narratives. A diffusionist ethnographic view argues that distinct features exist and cross-pollinate. This involves reconciling the effects of observable attributes like people's appearances, the multitude of languages in use, and differences in religious concepts and beliefs. In academia, it appears that most works remain in a Eurocentric bubble or normative epistemologies. Even Kapuściński seems to struggle with cultural concepts outside of 'talking to European individuals.' His writings address the reader as an individual, providing narratives like movies are offered in a cinema: extraneous, outside oneself. He concludes: "The Stranger, the Other in his Third World incarnation (and so the most numerous individual on our planet), is still treated as the object of research, but has not yet become our partner, jointly responsible for the planet on which we live" (Kapuściński, 2008, pp. 60–61). Such a partnership needs sensitive and inclusive dialogue, sensitive to the various ways of approaching theory and knowledge.

Individual and conglomerate, versus person and community

The category 'community', as defined in this paper, does not align with how many use the word in Western settings. For instance, the definition does not conform with the use of the word by ethicist Józef Tischner, who described a community as facilitating individuality by providing awareness of oneself. He summarised it as follows "I know that I am, because I know another is" (Kapuściński, 2008, p. 68; citing Tischner, 2006, p. 219). Tischner's description fits better with the category conglomerate, as defined in this paper.

Community, as shown in this paper, fits in with narratives like those of Desmond Tutu. He explains, "It is not 'I think therefore I am'. It says rather: 'I am human because I belong'. I participate, I share" (Tutu, 1999, p. 34). In such an understanding of community,

one cannot be at peace without forgiveness, because the wellbeing of others (benefactors or offenders) is directly connected to one's own welfare.

Energy needed to cross categories

Social movement between the four categories takes energy. For individuals to convene, there is a need to interact with other human beings. Kapuściński (2008) explored this act of labour in his book *The Other*. He refers to Emmanuel Levinas, who came with individual-sensitive arguments that the individual is not able to 'know himself' without the reflection, looking into the mirror, of the other.

The move from communities to conglomerates could be assessed using classical works like Ferdinand Tönnies' (1887) work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. This work has been cited to position transitions from so-called traditional, affectual societies to a so-called rational, calculating and modern society (Waters, 2015). Tönnies, Weber's *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Kapuściński, and Levinas, among others, posit their theories within specific or generic Eurocentric framings, often from European experiences, and for a Eurocentric audience. Eurocentric, framings of what is 'natural' and superior (as Tönnies saw it) have a long and questionable history of normalising and dominating the academic assessment of experiences and the constitution of (colonial) powers outside of Europe (Mamdani, 2012; Mawere & Nhemachena, 2016).

There is little work describing the move from person to individual. However, this move can be recognised, for instance, in the history of universities, where tenured academics (persons) moved towards being ranked and measured production units (individuals) in a competitive 'knowledge market'. The move from conglomerates to communities is claimed, but, in view of the above, appears challenging to realise.

In all of this, the theme of 'conversation' is central. Human beings use the facility of communication, whether by oral, textual, or other means, to establish and sustain conversations. It is through dialogue that one can travel from the state of 'being alone' to the state of 'being together'. Western philosophies about conversation seem to focus solely on how individuals converse. An expansive library of books is available on individuals who seek to transmit their experience, and how it could help others to manage and 'make the most' out of similar experiences. Methods abound for how 'to work together' (in conglomerates). It appears that the dialectic practice of persons grouping in communities has been relegated to history books or to the vast realm of oral communication.

Universalism or polyvocality

Reaching for the other – as a 'partner' – is a call for relationship. In conglomerates, which are set in universalism, personhood exists by virtue of being connected. Here, 'the other' acts like a mirror in which the individual sees (or discovers) him/herself. In the polyvocality of communities, on the other hand, relationships provide for transparent windows, through which the person gains insight into the world.

Conclusion

Starting from discomfort with the use of the word community describing an aggregation of individuals, I have provided an argument for recognising four categories as being in play: individuals and individuals congregating in conglomerates and persons and persons congregating in communities. This categorisation provides a more nuanced view of social entities and groupings, shedding light on our understanding of what a community is, derived from a dynamic and integrated meaning-making.

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