

Cooperation and coronavirus in the village community of Heckenbeck

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Question: What role do top-down and bottom-up communication and cooperation play in coping with the threat of a pandemic?

Thesis: The immune system and social behaviour (bottom-up), i.e. primarily direct interpersonal contact, are crucial for people to stay healthy (in relation to a viral disease). Appropriate behaviour in response to a threat can be guided and supported by relevant information provided top-down.

Heckenbeck is a traditional village west of Bad Gandersheim. It has about 500 inhabitants¹. It is the only village in this rural area that has seen an increase of about 25% in its population over the last 30 years (partly due to people moving in from larger towns), while other villages have seen a decline of about the same percentage. In addition to a lively traditional club life, Heckenbeck has had a new community life since the mid-1980s, characterised by diverse communication applications² and a pronounced bottom-up co-creativity. This has led to the creation of a free school, a kindergarten called "Pustebblume" (Dandelion), a socio-cultural centre called "Weltbühne" (World Stage), a SoLaWi for vegetable cultivation and numerous other projects (see

¹ In order to do justice to both genders in language without overly complicating the flow of writing and reading, I will use the masculine form in the singular in accordance with the conventional spelling, unless it explicitly refers to a woman, and always use the feminine form in the plural, unless it refers exclusively to men.

² Particularly in the 1990s and subsequent years, free and co-creative group discussions, co-counselling, talking stick rounds, forums, psychotherapeutic methods and intervention were used in numerous different groups (e.g. in courtyard groups, vision groups, men's and women's groups and many project groups).

NDR film 2015³). Many children play in the streets. It is a somewhat alternative community scene within the overall village community. Life in Heckenbeck reminds many adults of Bullerbü by Astrid Lindgren.

The so-called Neu-Heckenbeckerinnen have no common political, ideological or spiritual orientation. What unites them is a sense of community, a desire for more communal communication and cooperation, and a diverse, generally diffuse ecological orientation. A mailing list, the so-called marketplace with approximately 200 recipients, which also includes a number of so-called Alt-Heckenbeckerinnen, enables rapid communication about requests and offers.

The disruption caused by the coronavirus and a single wave of COVID-19

As everywhere else in Germany, the beautiful and co-creative village life was disrupted by the coronavirus and the restrictive measures imposed by the government, which affected everyone. The Weltbühne (a small village theatre) had to close, and schools and nurseries were temporarily shut down and then adapted to comply with regulations. Surprisingly, despite many outside contacts and lively communication, it took a long time for there to be a Covid-19 case in Heckenbeck. During the first three waves, the people from the village had only very sporadic contact (as far as I know, three times) with the virus – there was no wave of infection. Most citizens kept their distance from other people outside their families. The residents of residential courtyards with several families occasionally saw themselves as one family when it came to coronavirus measures. But even where a Covid-19 case was diagnosed, no one else was infected. In interpersonal contact, they largely trusted their personal mindful perception and their social immune instinct⁴, which leads to non-cooperation with the virus. If the virus finds no carrier and no host, it disintegrates – without a fight. Not cooperating with the virus therefore means communicating with people predominantly at a distance. This is certainly a major challenge for some – especially younger people. They need understanding support in this. With insightful, mindful, collaborative cooperation (see excursus), this can apparently be mastered quite well. In addition to a physical immune system, humans are equipped with a social immune instinct, an anti-infectious social behaviour pattern that can be activated and reinforced by accurate verbal information – analogous to how the physical immune system is activated by biomolecular information.

There were individual and small group protests against coronavirus measures and against wearing masks. In order to discuss the coronavirus issue, which affects everyone, a coronavirus mailing list was set up, where the topic was discussed very controversially – with all the opinions that were also present in society at large.

As far as I know, face-to-face events in rooms only took place to the extent permitted. It is estimated that there are more vaccine sceptics and unvaccinated people among the under-65s in the so-called Neu-Heckenbeckerinnen than the national average.

It was not until the fourth wave of coronavirus with the Delta variant at the end of October 2021 that a small "superspreader event" occurred. The virus was probably transmitted to almost all participants in a singing group. Both unvaccinated and vaccinated people were affected. The virus

³ From my perspective as the oldest newcomer to Heckenbeck and now Bad Gandersheim, the film should be called "Cooperation makes you happy," because cooperation is what makes the people of Heckenbeck happy (see also digression).

⁴ This pattern of social immune instinct includes the innate disgust reaction to the smell of decay, which non-verbally communicates to fellow human beings the request to keep their distance due to the risk of infection! Probably linked to this innate reaction pattern is a spontaneous distancing reaction to people who are coughing and sniffing, which is presumably learned.

was probably brought in by a vaccinated person. This was not entirely unusual for the fourth wave of coronavirus with the Delta variant – not because of the alleged ineffectiveness of the vaccine, but because the narrative that the vaccine protects against infection and transmission in more than 90% of cases still found many believers. These people then behaved carelessly, while most unvaccinated people became increasingly cautious – as far as I could observe, and in line with the psychology of action and cooperation. The wave of infection was now present in the village community.

Within about 10 days, there were 45–50 confirmed cases. This corresponds to a 7-day incidence rate for the village of almost 10,000 per 100,000. No one needed to be hospitalised. The infected were treated by local doctors, who were not vaccinated themselves at the time. News of the infection spread quickly throughout the village. The threat posed by the virus was immediately apparent. The usual spirit of cooperation within the village community unfolded immediately, regardless of political opinions. The citizens paid more attention to social distancing and refrained from close contact. Everyone reacted with significantly increased caution, especially in terms of social distancing, and even the children, who otherwise play freely in the village, were often encouraged to play with only one or two friends and to keep their distance otherwise. Those who fell ill also spoke very positively about the compassion shown to them.

After a good three weeks, there were no new infections in 2021. The incidence rate in the village fell to zero. Within three weeks, the challenge had been overcome and life could return to relative normality, apart from the general official restrictions. No special top-down coercive measures were necessary to achieve this.

Reflection on the case

First of all, is the successful local community response to the wave of infection a special case? Without researching it, I would say no. Similar successful responses to waves of infection have also been seen in other small communities. Here in the small town of Bad Gandersheim, with a population of around 8,000, I can report that nine days after a celebration of German reunification in October 2020, 125 people in a religious community tested positive for Covid-19. None of them needed hospital treatment. However, the restrictive measures for the entire district were significantly tightened (resulting in collateral damage), even though the infection was confined to the religious centre. There, it was brought under control in about three weeks.

One difference to Heckenbeck, however, was that in this case – at least in terms of public image and perception – the official coercive measures were very much in the foreground and the authorities took full credit for overcoming the wave of infection. The Faith Centre's external image also emphasised strict compliance with official orders and its own even stricter hygiene concept, presumably in order to be able to shift the blame away from itself (see also the power-victim pattern in the excursus). This highlighted the top-down cooperation. Unfortunately, the bottom-up cooperation based on partnership, which most likely also existed, did not play a role in public reflection. Thus, the public focus shifted away from the cooperating individuals and onto the top-down coercive measures. With a such a public orientation of attention, the cooperation of individuals, which is crucial for preventing the transmission of the virus, is devalued and weakened.

One possible positive effect of top-down communication is that it provides people with early and transparent information about the dangers and the ways of averting them (e.g. respiratory masks, working from home, etc.) and offers support in doing so. This is where the role of political leaders in cooperating with citizens lies.

In Heckenbeck, the proportion of self-determined cooperation based on natural social immune behaviour was more clearly visible because the only restrictions in place were those that had already been in force previously. This behaviour was explicitly reinforced by the knowledge that existed and was published in the culture, which was brought into the community via the internet by both doctors and other informed individuals. The residents thus cooperated largely self-determinedly and cautiously to protect themselves from infection in aversion mode, which was controlled by coherence mode (see excursus).

Excursus on a systemic psychology of cooperation

"In the social sciences, there is no more important problem than explaining cooperation." Mancur Olson, University of Maryland (cited in Axelrod 2009 U4)

Cooperation – working together towards a common goal – characterises the interactions of subsystems within a living system. Within an organism, the organs work together to produce the overall function of the living individual and enable the self-regulation of the individual organs and cells. Ultimately, what is decisive for cooperation is the life of the organism as a whole.

Humans have the ability to resonate with the intentionality of other humans (cf. mirror/resonance neurons Bauer 2005; Petzold 2021) and to develop a motivation to act/cooperate from this. This ability to resonate, to share a then common intentionality, can be seen as the origin of cooperation in supersystems. Through this resonance process, the actions of the subsystems, or "agents" (as the active subsystems are called in complexity research (see Bircher 2019)), are aligned to establish the coherence of the system (see Fig. 1).

Fundamental to any sharing of intentionality is trust in connectedness. When trust that has been given (advance trust) is disappointed by selfish behaviour, the "TIT-FOR-TAT" rule comes into play (Axelrod 2009). Within the framework of this rule, successful cooperation can be restored by repeatedly giving trust.

A systemic psychology of cooperation assumes that the members (subsystems, agents) of a system have a tendency, a need, to cooperate for the coherence of their supersystem. If they perceive significant inconsistencies between their own coherence and that of the supersystem, or between the supersystem and the super-supersystem, they may refuse to cooperate with the representatives of the supersystem and possibly enter into other cooperations for what they consider to be a more coherent order.

The four skills for cooperation described by Tomasello and Hamann:

1. Responding to others;
2. Finding a common goal (sharing intentionality);
3. Coordinating roles; and
4. Helping the partner when needed.

The four quality criteria/rules of Tomasello and Hamann (2012) (see box) may form an internal standard for assessing the coherence of a cooperation. If the representatives of the supersystem disregard one or more of these rules, the agents begin to develop mistrust and become cautious about their commitment to the cooperation and their dedication to the system.

Since this is an active process that also contributes to shaping the whole, the term integration seems more appropriate than adaptation, as many biologists call it. It is not a one-sided adaptation process, but a reciprocal, co-creative top-down and bottom-up integration and design process.

Kommunikation, Kooperation und Macht in Übersystemen

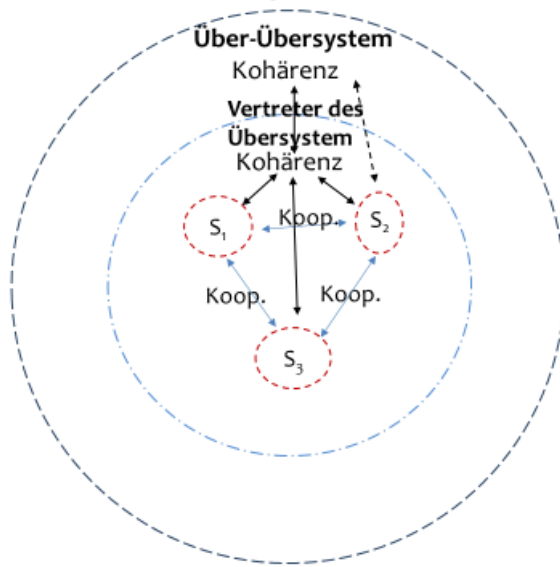


Figure1: A supersystem is decisive for the cooperation of its subsystems. In human systems, individuals take on the powerful and responsible task of being role models and/or providing guidance as leaders with power and responsibility. They must serve the system and its members. This is the core of top-down communication and cooperation. The resonance of the subsystems (agents) with this creates, maintains or destroys coherence in the system. Resonance of subsystems can also occur in relation to a super-supersystem and then contribute to constructive/creative change in the supersystem.

Top-down and bottom-up for cooperation

As active and autonomous members of a system, we are its "agents". As a human being, I can simultaneously be an agent of my whole self, my family, a company, a state, a culture, the whole of humanity, the solar system and the universe. In doing so, I have – presumably – a certain freedom of choice in terms of which system I am currently acting within. This freedom to make conscious decisions probably only exists in the motivational coherence mode⁵.

When aversion mode controls behaviour, thinking and feeling are restricted to the threat (*angina mentalis*). One seeks allies to fight against the danger. This cooperation is usually short-lived. Once the danger has been eliminated, in the best case scenario everyone goes their separate ways; if this is not to be, aversion mode is applied to the cooperation partner, leading to internal conflicts.

Even when the appetite mode takes control via the internal reward system, behaviour is restricted, albeit to a different category of goals, to an enticing object – in extreme cases, to a drug. Here, too, cooperation can be effective, as is the case with hunting prey in the animal world. These collaborations are also usually short-lived. Once the goal has been achieved, selfish attempts to divide up the prey can easily occur if the cooperation partners are unable to switch to coherence mode in time.

In coherence mode, they can share fairly, feel free and even refrain from sharing if it seems sensible. In coherence mode, they want to cooperate fairly. Only in coherence mode is truly co-creative communication possible.

⁵ A detailed description of motivational systems and the power-victim communication pattern can be found in Petzold 2021.

Thoughts on a mass psychology of cooperation

Three categories of systemic cooperation

The motivational aversion mode plays such an important role in psychological mass phenomena because only in threatening situations is uniform mass cooperation necessary for the preservation of the system. In times of need, especially when faced with external threats, people unite against the enemy and demand strong leadership. Some governments have already exploited this systemic psychological mass effect to remain in power.

In contrast, agents in secure situations can relax and live and love freely with each other in coherence mode, pursue their individual, social, cultural and spiritual needs, develop their abilities collectively, and help shape and develop the system in a playful and co-creative way. In coherence mode, people are autonomous and responsible for their coherence with their supersystems and the cooperation required for this. Their autonomous resonance with the coherence of their supersystems is part of the inherent nature of individual living beings.

Appetence mode plays an important role in the mass psychology of advertising, which seeks to motivate us to buy certain products with enticing images and metaphors that often have nothing to do with the product itself but activate our internal reward system. It also played an important role in the psychological management of the masses during the coronavirus pandemic when it came to selling vaccinations. In some places, those who accepted a vaccination (paid for with taxpayers' money) received a pizza or money in addition, and in any case a promise of freedom. Nudging: Vaccinating people in car parks is a classic nudging tool.

The Victim-perpetrator-avenger/saviour relationship pattern (power-victim triangle)

Unfortunately, creative human cooperation is repeatedly disrupted by a specific communication pattern that is widely practised in all areas of society, the victim-perpetrator-avenger/saviour dynamic. A similar pattern was first described by S. Karpman (1964) as the "drama triangle". I have observed it more comprehensively and in greater detail and have termed it the power-victim pattern (see Petzold 2021). In order to achieve successful cooperation, it is helpful to reflect on this pattern and to engage in it less and less frequently.

However, in order to rise to the top in party politics, politicians need to communicate in this power-victim pattern, which functions in aversion mode with fear. The feeling of being the injured victim of an act triggers aversion mode: the perceived threat must be averted and the perpetrator rendered harmless. This is where the desire for revenge, retribution, deterrence and punishment begins, the implementation of which requires power. If you feel too weak on your own, you look for allies, supporters, if you want to act in this pattern. If you have been seriously injured, you need help, a saviour. In human cultures, the avengers have been replaced by the judging and punishing courts and the executive branch. The role of saviour has been taken over by medicine in particular.

When an act is avenged on the perpetrator, the latter becomes a new victim who may in turn seek revenge. In order to prevent the resulting bloodshed, advanced cultures have replaced vigilante justice with the judicial system, and Christianity has preached forgiveness. However, a perpetrator also becomes a new victim when he is convicted and punished. This often leads to them striving once again for enough power to exact revenge. To be an avenger and thus also a perpetrator, one needs power over the potential victim. Professions such as judge, police officer, politician, doctor, etc. are attractive for this reason. This relationship pattern thus operates in an internal dynamic of changing roles, from victim to perpetrator or saviour and judge and back to victim again. These roles can change several times within a conversation, e.g. when someone

accuses another person. Because they feel like a victim, they assume the role of judge and try to make the alleged perpetrator the victim. The latter begins to defend themselves by justifying themselves (role of judge) and/or criticising the former in order to avoid becoming a victim themselves. This is how an escalating argument begins, in which the dynamics of this power-victim interaction pattern take on a life of their own.

This interaction pattern is addressed and triggered both by judging people and by uninvited attempts to rescue them. The fatal thing about this is that it always produces new victims – when applied en masse, even among those who were originally uninvolved. In war, the latter are called "collateral damage". In the "war"⁶ against Corona, these were and are not insignificant⁷.

Coherence and inconsistency – truth in communication and life in language

If a cooperation partner shows us the way to a source we are looking for, but following their instructions leads us to a precipice, we are unlikely to ask this person for directions a second time.

For any cooperation, it is important that the information provided is accurate = true. The reaction "Once you lie, no one believes you" follows from the above-mentioned ability to cooperate and the search for successful cooperation. When people, in order to cooperate with someone to defend against viruses, forego uplifting human contact with hugs, sociability and other direct exchanges, as well as income, and then realise that it was a false alarm and/or that the promoter of this cooperation has gained excessive profits from it, they easily feel cheated and may not take such warnings so seriously in the future, or try to take power away from the promoter.

For coherent communication, it is not crucial that the same thing is always repeated, but that it is said authentically, transparently and in detail to those affected. It is helpful if it is reflected in the standards of cooperation (see Tomasello's four rules). Mistakes and uncertainty about knowledge should also be communicated – even if this is tactically exploited and criticised in the context of the power struggle between parties. Only transparent discussion and communication enable cooperative partnership, which involves thinking and shaping together, as well as learning from mistakes together where necessary. All political parties should value and respect successful cooperation and place it above their quest for power.

Vaccination campaigns played a particularly ambivalent role in this regard, which will not be discussed further here. A sober reflection on this is still pending. This should also examine the possible placebo effect of the promises of healing through vaccination and the nocebo effect caused by the demonisation of Covid-19.

The inconsistency of statements and assessments of scientific activities and regulations that were claimed to be correct has put many people into a trance (overload as hypnosis induction) due to mental overload, in which clear thinking is shut down because the statements are no longer comprehensible. Then only emotionally appealing messages (such as fear and reward) reach the subconscious. As a result, many people have entered an induced hypnotic state of stress/anxiety that was cognitively inaccessible to arguments and led to depression in several cases. As a result, there is still mass hypnosis in this state today, which is now leading many citizens to demand even

⁶ "Sars-CoV-2 is our common enemy. We must declare war on this virus. This means that countries have a responsibility to do more, to arm themselves and to strengthen themselves." (António Guterres in a guest article for the Süddeutsche Zeitung, 15 March 2020)

⁷ In September 2020, German Development Minister Gerd Müller (CSU) already said: "Far more people will die from the consequences of the lockdowns than from the virus." There are now many different figures on this, depending on where you look, for example, whether you include mental development disorders in children or not.

tougher measures from the federal government, even though, according to an Oxford study group, we already have the toughest measures in the world in Germany (Radtko 2022) and the infection rate resembles that of an endemic disease without the serious threat. What will citizens think and do when they reflect on the context of the coercive measures from a cognitive waking state and possibly in coherence mode?

Mass communication for co-creativity

Living systems are all characterised by top-down and bottom-up communication and cooperation. Powerful representatives of a nation (the system), such as the government and leaders in organisations, are responsible for the coherence and development of citizens (the subsystems) and for ensuring the best possible conditions for the life and cooperation of their agents. It is these agents who cooperate bottom-up to achieve coherence and development of the system and ensure that goals are achieved.

In order for their cooperation to unfold as co-creatively as possible, they need external security, good food and a lot of freedom, as well as challenges, so that they can play in coherence mode and develop their autonomous co-creative abilities to help shape the future. Communication, including via the mass media, can support this mass cooperation for the benefit of as many people as possible by focusing on this free and cooperative partnership when publishing reports and not attempting to manipulate the masses into a certain behaviour (such as vaccination). Tomasello's four criteria are helpful in this regard.

Discussion of the case in the VDW health study group

The suggestion to document this case study relating to a local village community's approach to coronavirus came from Dieter Korczak in this study group. It was also discussed here in conclusion. On the question of whether this approach was a special one that was only possible in such a community, Johann Behrens from the Möckernkiez neighbourhood in Berlin reported that he had experienced a similar approach there: In direct interpersonal contact, most residents did not adhere to the top-down regulations, but followed their own assessments and perceptions. These were probably also influenced to some extent by information from the media. For some people, however, this was paradoxical, in that they behaved in a deliberately different manner to the regulations. There were repeated mass parties in Berlin. However, when a case of illness occurred in the immediate social vicinity, people generally behaved cautiously. We see cautious behaviour in direct social interaction as the most effective agenda for dealing with coronaviruses with the least collateral damage (Dieter Korczak). "In this respect, it can be generalised that life only took place in sufficiently self-determined cooperation, especially in terms of restrictions and renunciation." Despite politically opposing opinions of "lateral thinkers" and "autonomous leftists," they live together peacefully in the neighbourhood.

It is perhaps possible to generalise the conclusion that social interaction (in which the virus is transmitted) has its own rules. In human interaction, there are obviously more important things than complying with a statistical 7-day incidence or hospitalisation rate. In social human interaction, sensual encounters, joy and love are more important than statistics. These human values cannot be easily regulated top-down. Eberhard Göpel referred to the WHO's "Well-being" initiative (2021), which also addresses the top-down and bottom-up issue.

From TD Petzold's point of view, top-down regulation is responsible for regulations in culturally organised public areas, such as organised work, large events and organised healthcare. And here it is important that this organised healthcare system is there to help people in case of illness and not the other way around, where citizens (even children!) are expected to sacrifice their

psychosocial and physical health (think of the bans on movement and play in public spaces) for the functioning of the organised healthcare system. With the goal of "preventing the collapse of the healthcare system," the roles in the social and cultural division of labour have been reversed.

Overall, we can conclude that a threat such as the SARS-Covid-19 virus infection is best overcome through mindful behaviour and good self-care on the part of people in their direct social interactions. It is the task of institutions to enable and promote this mindful behaviour, e.g. through relevant information about the dangers and protective measures (even without or before a vaccine is available), through opportunities to stay away from state obligations such as work and school or other organised gatherings that hinder mindful social behaviour, and much more.

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