What Is in Organisation? Contents of a Self-Contained Container

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to resolve the apparent opposition between the container metaphor of organisation and the communicative constitution of organisations perspective. I draw on works by Niklas Luhmann, George Spencer Brown, and Louis Kaufman to develop a dynamic, communicative concept of containment or "continence". Based on this concept, I demonstrate how organisations can both be constituted by and contain communication. I conclude that the answer to the question of what we find in organisations depends on whether we are interested in the modus operandi or the topics of organisational communication.

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1. Introduction

The English language has a preference for pigeonholing concepts into one another. Whether stress in higher plants, depression in dogs, compliance in schizophrenics, romantic love in female adolescents, or trust in God, one noun smoothly turns the other into its container.[1] It is therefore particularly in the English language area that the "container trope is deeply engrained in human cognition and (…) grounds how we think of the body" (Riad, 2023, p. 1013) not only of animals or natural persons, but also of legal persons.

Organisational researchers have consequently studied countless phenomena *in* organisations. Next to bodies (Lawrence et al, 2023), recent examples of such phenomena include boredom (Driver, 2022, Culié, 2022) and bricolage (Pina e Cunha, 2018); "complexity, change and creativity" (Pick, 2017, p. 804); ghosts (Hunter and Baxter, 2021; Pors, 2021; Pors et al., 2019), genders (Rumens et al., 2019), and gossips (Fant et al., 2021; Liu and Fan, 2022);) or sexuality (Ozturk et

al., 2020), silence (Stouten et al., 2019; Dehkharghani, 2020), storytelling (Boje, 2019), and spirituality (Rocha and Pinheiro, 2021). Add to these classical contents such as work (Cunliffe, 2018), ranks (Courpasson, 2011), and members (Grothe-Hammer, 2020; Grothe-Hammer and la Cour, 2020). As the list goes on, it becomes hard to imagine any aspect of organic, psychic, or social life that cannot be studied *in* organizations; and as organizations appear capable of containing almost everything, it becomes clear why the organizations-as-container metaphor has acted as a "primary" (Cornelissen and Kafouros, 2008, p. 961) or "root metaphor" (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 9) of organization studies throughout the history of the field.

The prevalent propensity to increase the scale and scope of content studied in organization, however, is in sharp contrast to an emerging stream of research showing "how organizational space is an active presence rather than a passive container, both produced outcome and productive force" (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013, p. 1458f), thus "challenging the container view of organizations" (Robey and Mikhaeil, 2016). This line of research has since contested the idea of organization as a taken-for-granted (Besio et al., 2020, p. 413), pre-existing (Stephenson et al., 2020), pre-structured (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1232), or pre-formed container (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004, p. 10) of "communicative contents that were supposedly occurring 'within' it" (Taylor, 2011, p. 1275), and rather argued for more research on how organisations themselves are (re-) constructed by discourse (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004) or constituted by communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren, 2020; Grothe-Hammer, 2022).

As a result, the field of organization studies is divided: On the one hand, there is a majority that tacitly subscribes to the container metaphor of organization (see Schoeneborn et al., 2019; Trittin and Schoeneborn, 2017). On the other hand, there is a minority which overtly rejects the idea "that communication occurs or flows within organizations" (Schoeneborn et al., 2019, p. 486; see also Blaschke et al., 2012, p. 884; Koschmann and Campbell, 2019, p. 178) and insists that this idea is incompatible with a perspective that "treats communication (as a process) and organization (as an entity) as two sides of the same coin" (id., p. 483) because "organizations are understood here as 'processual entities,' emphasizing that organizations are maintained in and through communicative processes that recurrently re-instantiate their existence" (id., p. 482). From this perspective, any form of "organization literally exists in communication" (Ashcraft et al., 2009, p. 9).

The idea that organizations cannot contain communication because they exist in communication, however, is problematic in two regards. First, in its most condensed form, the "organization in communication" (Schoeneborn et al., 2019, p. 475) perspective reveals itself as a simple negative of its rejected counterpart, namely the "communication in organization" perspective. Thus, the container metaphor of organisation is replaced by a container metaphor of communication. As a result of this smart move, the container metaphor remains unchallenged, and all issues that have once motivated problematizations of the container metaphor of organization do now apply to communication. Second, as the container metaphor as such is not challenged, it remains unclear why organisations as 'processual entities' made of communication should not contain communication.

In this text I draw on works by Niklas Luhmann, George Spencer Brown, and Louis Kaufman to overcome the perceived opposition between the container metaphor of organisation and the idea that organisations are constituted by communication. To this end, I show how organisations can both be constituted by and contain communication.

2. Organisations as systems of decision communication

The disposition to reify organisations (Taylor, 2011) or identify them with "physical, objective boundaries" (Putnam and Boys, 2006) is not exclusive to container theories of organisation, but also common in organization theory more generally where the "orientation to solidity also plays out in practices of theorizing, where 'container' metaphors are rife: theory is built, added to, there are gaps, theory is grounded (and there is grounded theory), cathedrals of knowledge are to be erected" (Beyes and Holt, 2020, p. 3).

Though Niklas Luhmann's theoretical edifice is particularly monumental and suspicious "of being inherently conservative and primarily interested in stability" (Becker and Seidl, 2007, p. 941), its statics are anything but static. This is visible in Luhmann's foundational definition that "a system *is* the difference between system and environment" (Luhmann, 2006, p. 44). As is well-known, this definition is inspired by Maturana and Varela (1980) who defined as living those systems that can establish and maintain a border to their environment. These "autopoietic" systems therefore are the distinction they are constantly drawing between themselves and their environment. In this sense, an autopoietic system is indeed defined as its own operation.

While Maturana (2015, p. 177) would always insist "that the notion of autopoiesis does not apply in the way that he [Luhmann] wanted because communications do not interact and thereby produce communications like molecules", Luhmann (2013, p. 79) extended the concept of autopoiesis to the level of social systems on the grounds that it "is relatively easy to see—especially if one considers the linguistic tradition of Saussure, for instance, and all that came of it—that communication occurs via its own differences and has nothing to do with chemical or physical phenomena".

For Luhmann, communication is an emergent phenomenon. Communication is hence not about how organic or psychic systems "participate" in communication or supposedly bring it about, but rather a matter of how precedent communication triggers and defines the margins of subsequent communication. Though initially contingent, successions of communicative events quickly develop a logic of their own like in the case of music where a sequence of three tones is enough to bring about dis-/harmony.

As with all systems, communicative systems are defined by their operation: communication. "Social systems consist of communications" and nothing but communication. "Communication is the autopoietic operation that takes recourse to and anticipates itself, thus generating social systems. There is therefore communication only as social systems and only in social systems." (Luhmann, 2018, pp. 38f)

In looking at Figure 1, we find that Luhmann (1995, p. 2) not only draws sharp distinctions between social systems and other types of autopoietic systems (organisms, psychic systems), but also distinguishes three types of social systems: interaction, organisation, and society.
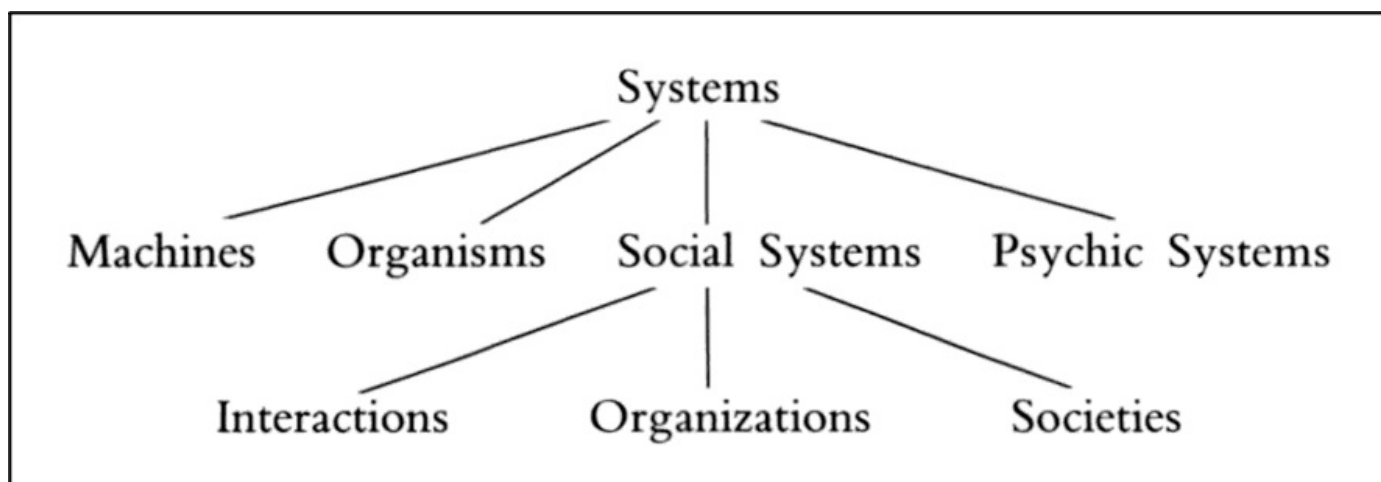
Figure 1. Unnamed figure in Luhmann (1995, p. 2).

Society is the compassing system of all communication, yet Luhmann insisted that the study of this compassing system must not be confused with the study of social systems, of which the compassing system is just one (Luhmann, 2012, p. xiii). This sophistry is indicative of the fact that Luhmann did not conceive of society as a container of communication. Instead, his perspective can be compared to the view of an ocean where waves are shapes of this ocean rather than being contained by it. Both interactions and organizations are hence special cases of the general rule that "social systems consist of communications" and that there is "communication only as social systems and only in social systems." Both interactions and organisations are, therefore, autopoietic systems that co-produce society as the compassing social system without being identical with it.

While the idea that organizations are autopoietic systems is well in line with Putnam and Boys' (2006, p. 548) assumption that an "organisation has self-contained boundaries", it also implies that such a system is more than "a thing *in* an external environment" (Beyes and Holt, 2020, p. 3). If the thing called organisation essentially is the distinctions it draws between itself and its environment, then this thing draws not only its own contours, but also those of its own environment. This implies that different organisations are not located in different corners of one and the same environment, but rather within a multiverse of environments where each organisation creates its own environment and is thus situated in the environment of countless other social systems.

This multiversal perspective also implies that both the "communication in organisation" and the "organization in communication" perspective propagate either flat tautologies or rather problematic assumptions. On a general level, both perspectives effectively boil down to the observation of communication in communication. So, yes, if organisations are social systems, then we would expect to find in organisations what they are made of; and, yes, organisations as social systems are forms of communication. If we are interested more specifically in what forms of communication are observed into one another, however, then the above perspectives seem to imply, inter alia, that we can either observe interaction in organisation or must reject this container metaphor of organisation, switch the poles, and observe interaction as a container of organisation. Yet the crux is that observations of interaction in organisation or organisation in interaction are, in principle, not permitted in social systems theory. As indicated in Figure 1, interactions and organisations are distinct

social systems and thus each located in the environment of the other. Interactions emerge through the communication of absence or presence in communication, while organisations are "decided orders" (Berkowitz et al., 2022; Grothe-Hammer, 2019; Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022; Grothe-Hammer and Berkowitz, 2024) that consist of decisions, that is, of "compact communications" (Luhmann, 2018, p. 148) that communicate not only one selected, but also at least one excluded alternative (Martens, 2006; Seidl and Becker, 2006), and thus their own contingency. These two forms of social systems are incommensurable and irreducible to one another (Demetis and Lee, 2016). As soon as, for example, the circumstance that a third person is ignored by two interlocutors is understood as their decision, we are not observing interaction anymore.

From a systems-theoretical perspective, the idea that we detect communication in organisation (or vice versa) is therefore either completely unspectacular or, if we specify the types of communication in question more precisely, misguided. For why would we expect to find anything else but decision communication in a system made of decision communication? We would also not expect to find a piece of our body in our mind.

Surprisingly, however, social systems theory does not have any problems if scholars first define organization "as an emergent and ever-fluctuating network of interlocking communication processes, rather than merely a container of communication" (Fan et al., 2020, p. 1654) and then present their "empirical study of confidential gossip *in* organizations" (id., p. 1652; our emphasis). This is true as long it is clear that everything "that happens at all happens as the communication of decisions or with regard to this communication. Although other behaviours can also occur in organizations, for example, gossip (just as in living cells there are also minerals that do not participate in the autopoiesis of the system and nevertheless perform important functions), the continuance of autopoietic reproduction and the resulting reproduction of the difference between system and environment are required to maintain the system as a system (of a given type)." (Luhmann, 2018, p. 45)

Apparently, the problem with the container metaphor is not so much whether communication is observed into organisation or organisation into communication. Rather, the more fundamental issue at stake is a proper understanding of containment or, in the word of George Spencer Brown (1979), "continence".

3. Perfect and peripheral containment

We have now established that organisations are systems of communication that contain communication. Whether this statement implies that we can observe interaction in organisation (or vice versa), however, depends on our concept of containment.

Take the example of water: From one perspective, water contains only water. From another perspective, water may contain energy that turns it into steam. From yet other perspectives, water may also contain flavours, fish, or contaminations, and be used to contain fire.

If we follow George Spencer Brown (1979), however, not all these perspectives pertain to containment in a strict sense.

This is true if we "take as given the idea of distinction and the idea of indication, and that we cannot make an indication without drawing a distinction" (id., p. 1). Whenever we observe something, we focus on our object of attention, and not on everything else (Rehm et al., 2022). This implies that "(d) istinction is perfect continence. That is to say, a distinction is drawn by arranging a boundary with separate sides so that a point on one side cannot reach the other side without crossing the boundary. For example, in a plane space a circle draws a distinction" (Spencer Brown, 1979, p. 1). For a distinction to be operative, the two sides of the distinction must be mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. This requirement applies to any form or representation of distinction (id. p. 6). A circle or Spencer Brown's famous "cross" may then be "said to contain what is on its inside and not to contain what is not on its inside." (id., p. 7)
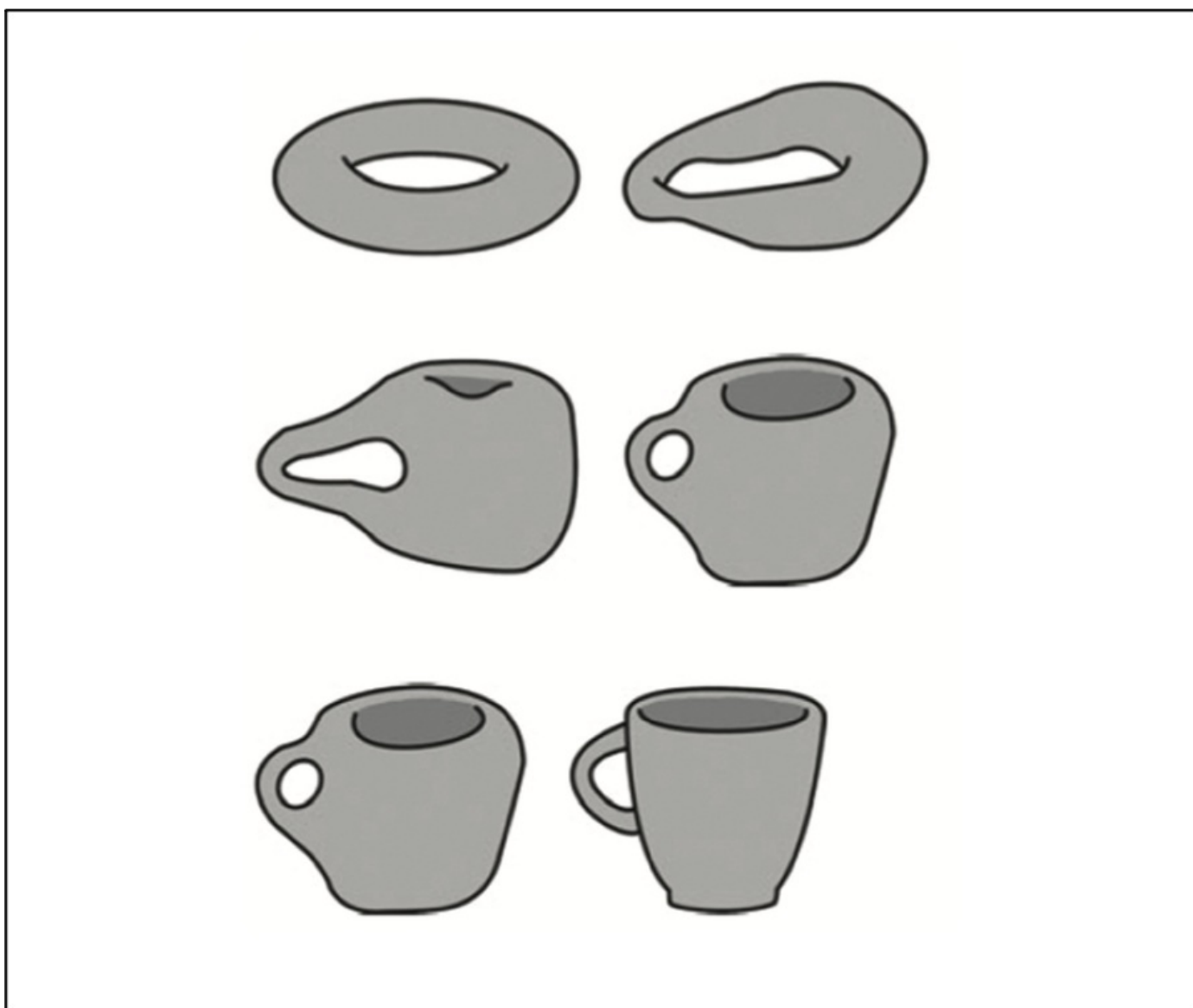

Figure 2. Unnamed figure in Kauffman (2013, p. 54).

In the present context, it follows that if there is a distinction drawn between decision communication and everything else, and if there is a system whose basic operation and mode of existence is the drawing of this distinction (Seidl and Becker, 2006, p. 24), then this system contains decision communication and only decision communication, and not everything

else. This conclusion concurs with the above assessment that there is neither interaction in organisation nor organisation in interaction. Yet even if according to social systems theory there can be neither interaction in organisation nor organisation in interaction, social systems theory does not prevent us from observing either of the two constellations. This at first paradoxical circumstance is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 demonstrates that from "the point of view of topological form, a donut and a coffee cup have the same shape and so the topologist does not discriminate between them. Of course topologists live in the 'real world' and so they communicate this inability to discriminate donuts from coffee cups by showing how to deform one into the other, as the pictures (…) illustrate" (Kauffman, 2013, p. 54).

For the purpose of this article, Figure 2 shows how we can both insist that there is no interaction in organisation (or vice versa) and nonetheless observe interaction in organisation (or vice versa). Let the donut be organisation and transformed into the cup. Let interaction be coffee. It is apparent now how organisation can contain interaction without changing its own content.

The resulting view of organisation is somewhat consonant with Gabriel's (2005, p. 20) idea that organisation "may be not a cage at all, but a display case, a *glass palace*, a container aimed at highlighting the uniqueness of what it contains rather than constraining or oppressing it." Yet, my view cannot be criticised the grounds that

> *"Glass is not shape-shifting but containing; moreover, it is not necessarily transparent. While glass can hold liquid it is neither porous nor viscous when formed. Whatever subject lies behind the glass may be on view but is separate from whatever is on the other side of the glass. By contrast, liquidity coats, smears and makes the subject slippery but still visible beneath the surface, and so for that reason — the creation of slippery and elusive rather than transparent subjectivity — we prefer to explore the liquid metaphor rather than that of the container."* (Clegg and Baumeler, 2010, p. 1715)

Rather, the present view is an example for the fact that "the liquid metaphor" can be applied to a container without compromising its 'continence'. This also confirms that Luhmann's theory of organisation "does not fail to confront even 'fluid', 'virtual', 'temporary', and 'unconventional' forms of organization unknown at the time of the theory's origin." (Besio and Tacke, 2023, p. 1). For social systems theory, there is simply no need for troubled problematisations or demonstrative rejections of the supposedly inflexible container metaphor of organisation.

As our approach to containment or 'continence' is counter-intuitive from the perspective of an everyday language where what is *in* glasses or cups is water of coffee and not glass or porcelain, I am complementing Kauffman's topographical approach by the following illustration (see Figure 3).
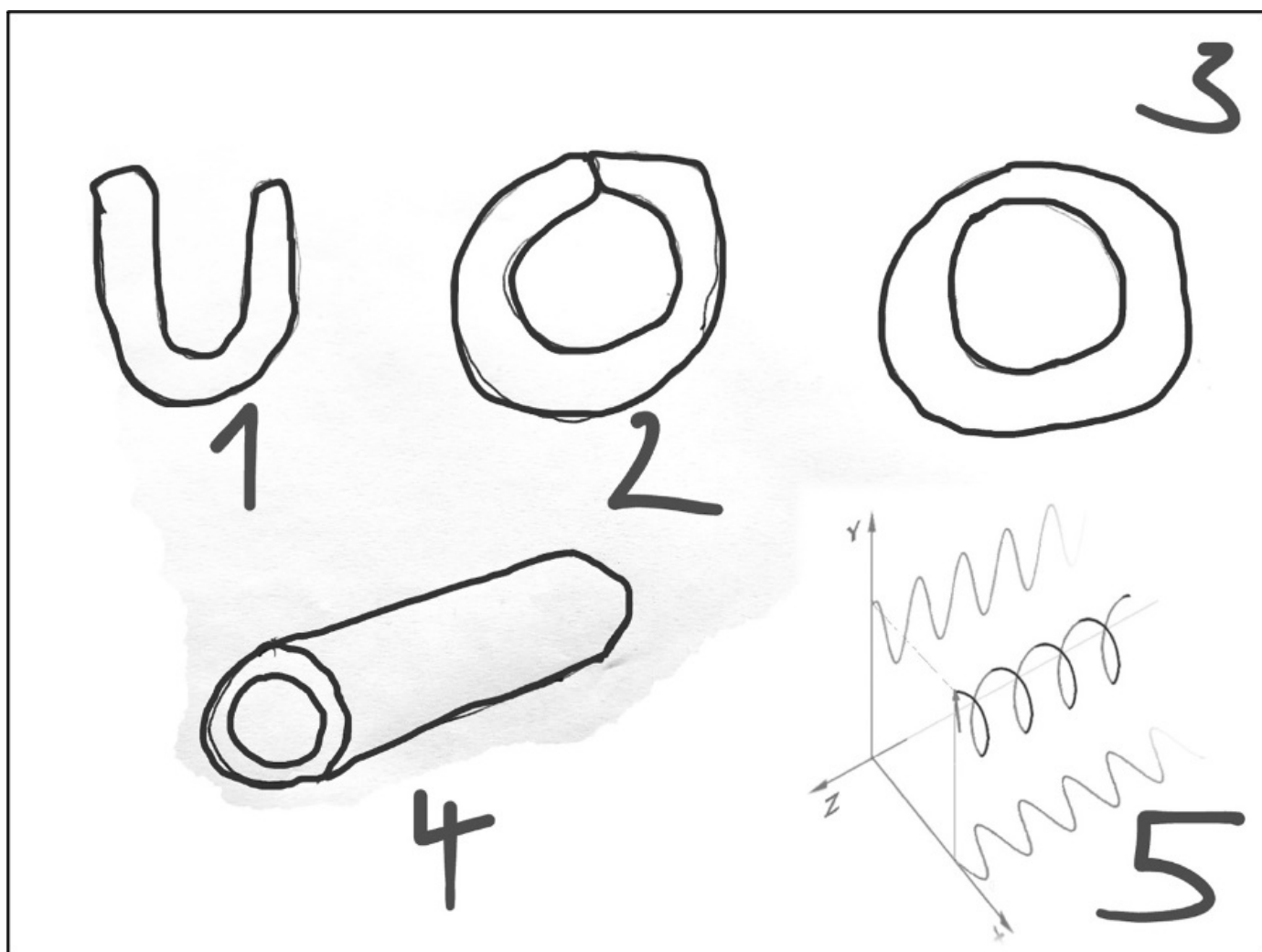
Figure 3. Unnamed figure (author provided).

Sections 1 to 3 of Figure 3 show that the form of containment provided by a glass or cup is not essentially different from the situation where, e.g., a somatic cell contains water and nutrients. Section 4 illustrates that the "paradox" of containment also pertains to complex organisms. Whatever is in our lung, stomach, and other parts of the digestive tract is clearly not in our organism, but just passing through tubes or tunnels made by this organism. Section 5 of Figure 3 finally demonstrates how tubes or tunnels may form in the case of social systems such as organisations.

Section 5 can be thought to display two on/off switches, one located on the x- and the other on the y-axis. As a result of the combination of these two switches, we may distinguish four different states: both switches of; switch x on; switch y on; both switches on. If we now take the z-axis for the temporal dimension, then we see how a continuous switching between these four options creates an identifiable structure.

In the present context context, such tunnel-like structures emerge if organisations switch between the four options resulting from a combination of two binary distinctions. One core operation of a bank, for example, is the coordination of payments and accounts. There is either payment or non-payment, and either accounts or no accounts. If there is payment without involvement of accounts, the bank is not concerned. There is no booking either if there are accounts without

payments, and the bank will only make a new entry if there is both a payment and at least one of its accounts involved in it. The resulting structure can then be represented as a temporal oscillation between states of (in-) activity as in section 5 of Figure 3 as well as in the atemporal form of Table 1.

Table 1. An organisational programme as truth table. The example of a conditional programme (author provided).

IF		THEN
A	B	A AND B
0	0	0
0	1	0
1	0	0
1	1	1

Table 1 demonstrates that the structure resulting from the above combination of distinctions is a decision programme. Decision programmes belong to the decision premises, that is, to the cases where past decisions act as guidelines for future ones. "Conditional programs distinguish between conditions and consequences, purposive programs between means and ends." (Luhmann, 2018, p. 213) As the former programmes are defined to "take the general 'if/then' form" (id., p. 215), the programme represented in the above AND gate truth table may be identified as a conditional programme.

A form of decision communication, conditional programmes can refer to both decision communication and any other topic of communication. These programmes can check if decision communication meets certain criteria (e.g., if decisions have been made correctly), but also more generally whether certain conditions are met for making a particular decision. Among others, these conditions may include the presence or absence of interactions. This in turn means that the relationship between interaction and organisation can be very intimate. Even worse: if Table 1 is an appropriate depiction of a decision programme, and thus of an aspect of organisational structure, then it seems as if this aspect positively contained interaction, that is, the communication of presence and absence represented here by the numbers 1 and 0. And yet this containment remains external as in the case of the above coffee cup or tunnel because it is more than evident that this decision programme is a decision-communicative device that translates everything into decisions. In other words: conditional programmes do not consist of but only condition whatever they translate into decision communication. Thus, the main conclusion of this section remains that organisations are not made of but can contain interactions and other forms or topics of communication located in their environment.

4. The mode and the topics of organisation

The Cambridge Dictionary offers three interpretations of the verb *to contain*: (1) "to have an amount of something inside or within it", (2) "to have as a part, or be equal to", and (3) "to keep within limits". As shown in the previous section, organisations do not have interactions as their parts (2) and thus no interactions inside them (1) except in the sense of their demonstrated capacity to keep interactions within certain limits (3).

This assessment can be matched with Luhmann's (2018, p. 39) distinction between "the topics and functions of communication". Whereas "the ability to become a topic" of decision communication "is practically unlimited" (ibid.) for interactions and all other forms of communication, the function of decision communication has "to do with the autopoiesis of the system, that is to say with the enablement of further" decision communication (id., p. 40). A simpler though less nuanced notion might therefore be that organisations can contain interactions as topics, but not as its constituent operations.

This topic/function distinction also applies to function systems such economy, politics, religion, or science. As shown in the above example of a bank, organisations can refer to the codes of these function systems, such as non-/payment or un-/truth, through their decision programmes. In this sense, an "organisation is a container for several functional systems" (Andersen, 2003) and thus "polyphonic" (Andersen, 2003; 2020; Andersen and Born, 2007; La Cour and Højlund, 2017; Knudsen, 2017) or "multifunctional" (Roth et al., 2020) insofar as its decision programmes may refer to two or more codes and thus condition "the loose media of the functional systems" or otherwise give them "a well-contoured form" (Besio and Tacke, 2023, p. 7). Again, however, this form of containment remains as external as the relationship between cup and coffee or glass and water, and there is no transfer of constitutive elements between the respective function systems and organisations.

Organisations can not only condition or otherwise shape other social systems, but also be shaped by them. For example, an increased flow of interactions passing through the organisational tunnel outlined in Figure 3 may cause congestions or extend the tunnel's volume. While the idea of interactions flowing through organisational tunnels might resemble the 'conduit metaphor' and thus a variant of the classical, static container metaphor of organisation (Putnam and Boys, 2006), the present concept of organisations as dynamic containers made of decision communication suggests neither that "the flow cannot alter the container" (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1230) nor "that organizations are containers that 'hold' the communication that flows 'within' them, implying a strict separation between 'organisation' and 'communication'" (Koschmann and Tajshen, 2019, p. 178). By contrast, as shown in the previous section, my organisations are communicative systems that translate communications of all kinds into decision communication. In so doing, they shape communication occurring on their outside rather than containing it inside, while communication remains "the very process by which organizations are called into being." (Kuhn, 2008, p. 1232)

There is hence no need to problematise the container metaphor of organisation as long as we agree that "decisional communication can bring forth organizations as social phenomena (i.e., organizations)" (Schoeneborn et al., 2019, p. 488).

5. Conclusions

What is in organisation? My answer to this question is twofold. There is only decision communication; and everything else. As demonstrated in this article, an adequate answer to this basic question of organization studies depends not only on how we define organization or the communication is thought to be made of or contain, but also, if not primarily, on how we define what is meant by the words *containment* or *to contain*. If by containment we mean that something is made of something and thus contains what it is made of, then organisation is made of decision communication and nothing but decision communication, just like glass is made of glass and not of the water it might be observed to "contain" on its outside. If, by contrast, it is precisely the peripheral form of containment that we are interested in, then decades of organisational scholarship have provided evidence that organisation is an ultimate container as it seems that basically everything can be observed in organisation. Thus, our idea of organisation depends much on whether we are interested in the modus operandi or the topics of organisation.

Footnotes

[1] This form of attribution is more intimate than in the case of languages such as French or German where attributes are more often features attached to or tagged onto the attributee.

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