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Jermaine McGhee embodies a versatile and charismatic educator, dance artist, and choreographer. McGhee began training through the Education and Arts Enrichment program at North Carolina Dance Theatre, now Charlotte Ballet. In 2018 McGhee earned the BA in Performing Arts, May 2020 McGhee graduate with the MFA in Dance: Creative Practice, both from Saint Mary's College of California. McGhee's thesis research surrounding the exploration of African Aesthetics in American Culture supports his ongoing creative scholarship in black dance forms, and implementation of digital/social media platforms in shaping popular dance from the perspective of the black dancing body.

## CHAPTER 9: MEMES AS A SOCIOLOGICAL ACT

**H**umans tend to gravitate towards others based on a series of essential demographic characteristics (being born in the same city, being in the same age bracket, having similar education levels, coming from related economic backgrounds, going to the same church, etc.), sharing the same psychographic motivations (having parallel value systems, holding common overarching beliefs, expressing identical attitudes about defined social elements, or performing corresponding behaviors towards others), or other markers that help us feel like we are together as a communal spirit (as opposed to being physically close together). Studying why people come together and how they interact is part of the field of sociology.

Specifically, we can examine a small sliver of the sociological field through the framework of understanding how group identities are formed through the interactions between group members and in-between groups. The nature of such interactions is based on how many members make up the group, the level of formality between members, and the locations in which those exchanges take place. In the past, sociological studies focused on a specific physical site that acted as the arena of those exchanges. However, it is fair to argue that sociology has escaped the need for a singular real-world place due to modern online interactions (Zhang & Dholakia, 2018).

Meme scholars using a sociological frame look for the patterns of interactions to conclude something about the groups they are studying. Those patterns arise when group members react collectively to social forces and cultural movements and happen most

of the time because of one or more internal guiding principles that define the group interactions, such as:

1. customs which represent the past practices of the group
2. rituals that group members perform based on social factors, timing, and other cultural traditions
3. laws that maintain the social norms of the group
4. common moral beliefs and values that drive group members' behaviors and
5. other cultural rules that make up the daily routines of group members' lives

These guiding principles allow sociologists and meme scholars to define the group's scene, which is how group members see their ability to act within the group and how they coordinate with one another to accomplish anything as a collective (Grey, 2017).

This chapter will focus on the aspects of memetic culture that lend themselves to sociological study. Social psychology will be the binding force for this section of the book, as this chapter is designed to help therapeutic professionals work with clients to either create memes or discuss the use of memes in social interactions, as they relate those internal guiding principles that define group interactions. Memes express group customs by connecting aspects of popular culture to the past practices of the group. Rituals can be the performative elements of memetic artifacts. The other cultural rules can be part of the memetic layers described earlier. These elements are worth examining because the memes can help make the invisible aspects of society and culture visible. We will begin by addressing two of the common sociological markers one would use to explain social patterns.

## MEMES AS DEMOGRAPHIC MARKERS

Sociological studies use demographic characteristics to establish how those social patterns relate to various populations. **Demographic characteristics** allow those studying a population to delineate separate groups within that more extensive population base to develop theories about how individuals react to different stimuli based on how other people who shared those demographic traits would respond. For example, we can look at how often white suburban Midwesterners under the age of eighteen go to a fast-food restaurant. White, suburban, Midwestern, and age are all demographic characteristics. Understanding common reactions based on shared demographic characteristics allows sociologists to craft paradigms that form theories regarding a society that other researchers can test and create experiments to generalize a given community and its members.

Memes tend to reflect demographic characteristics in the various layers. These reflections are **demographic markers**, as there are layers within the meme that are meaningful to a given subgroup of a population that share demographic characteristics (Liefbroer & Toulemon, 2010). A classic example of a demographic marker is near and dear to anybody that lives in Ohio. It is common to see a picture of a construction barrel being shared on social media with the words “The State Flower of Ohio.” Construction barrels are a common occurrence in Ohio (as in other states) and have become part of the shared social experience of living in Ohio. Another shared social experience is the speed at which weather changes. All of these everyday occurrences are part of the daily lived happenings of an Ohioan.

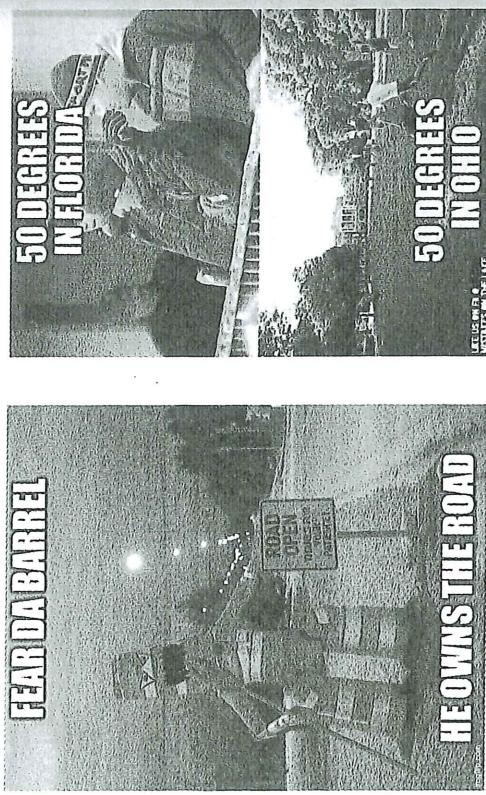


Figure 19: Two examples of symbolic demographic markers within a meme. “Construction Barrel” memes are popular with those living in Ohio based on observational datasets and the weather memes speak to the living experiences of those in Ohio. Photo Sources: “Construction Barrel Monster” by ericmerrill is licensed with CC BY 2.0 from <https://search.creativecommons.org/photos/7563a055-7976-411b-bdd8-d6340d58ef03>; “50 Degrees” by “Mistakes on the Lake” from <https://www.facebook.com/mistakesonthelake/posts/3527945770668111>

Meme creators use those demographic markers to highlight how those subgroups differ from the general population. Those demographic markers are meaningful to the specific subset the meme is referencing. We discussed one type of demographic marker in the form of a meaningful symbol. These significant visual representations of a demographic group are the most recognizable and most often used. Referencing well-known people or locations within a meme can also act as a demographic marker. For example, the name Tim Misny will likely mean nothing to

ever, “Misny Makes Them Pay” (the slogan that Misny uses in advertisements) billboards are part of the outdoor landscape in that part of the country. Misny and his billboard are part of the memetic language for those that live in the region.

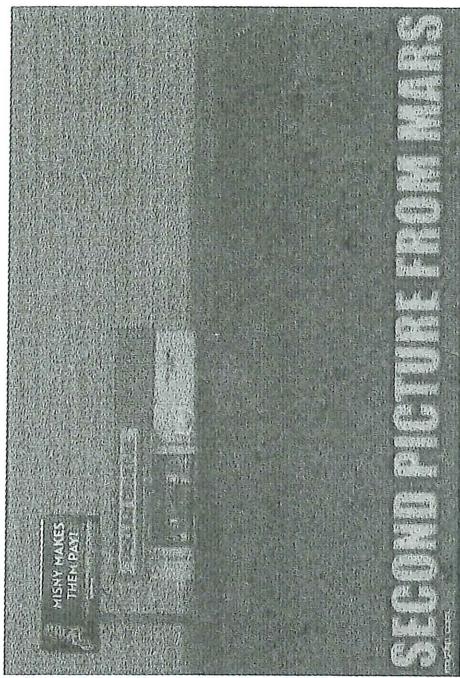


Figure 20: Another example of a demographic marker within a meme. “Misny Makes Them Pay” is a billboard that would have significance to those living in Northern Ohio. Source: “Mistakes on the Lake” Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/mistakesonthelake/posts/3518190781643610>

Demographic markers functionally work the same as the popular culture content one would find within a meme. They require a person to have the cultural capital to understand the significance of those symbols, people, or locations. Unlike the popular culture content, a person’s lived experiences traditionally provide enough cultural capital to surmise what the demographic markers mean. These modes of identifying others who share demographic characteristics make it easier to communicate and interact with others

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It is fair to argue that demographic characteristics are a surface-level mode of sociological analysis. Those characteristics and markers partially come from the socioeconomic status of community members, which represents a wide variety of various aspects of daily life (from the health of the community to the lifestyle that they enjoy) and reflected in the multiple forms of communication that community members use (Wani, 2019). Other demographic components are surface-level observations of the community. The next level of sociological analysis as it relates to memes comes from a more profound place.

## MEMES AS PSYCHOGRAPHIC MARKERS

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Memes also show a community's collective beliefs, values, behaviors, and attitudes as expressed through artistic works. Unlike the demographic ones mentioned earlier, **psychographic characteristics** embody internalized aspects of the personality that manifest themselves into the individual's needs, wants, and desires (Leyva, 2017). **Psychographic markers** are the community's concrete representations of their needs, wants, and desires in the form of layers within a meme. Often psychographic markers are proxies for those needs, wants, and desires as those are too abstract to accurately show (for example, dollar bills representing wealth).

Memes are best at expressing the community's collective interests, specifically what community members spend their free time doing. The rationale for this ability is that most interests have recognizable symbols and signs that people would connect with a given hobby, passion, pastime, or fandom. It is not unusual for a community's collective interest to crossover in some of their demographic markers or characteristics. For example, long-distance runners in New York City would have merchandise for the Big Apple Marathon, or college students would express their political interest by joining Young America's Foundation, College Democrats, Young Ecosocialists, or Students for a Libertarian Society. All groups and events have symbols that tie demographic and psychographic characteristics into a base set of symbols that become those psychographic markers. Imagery of this nature is easy to incorporate into a meme and be recognized by others.

Another psychographic characteristic that memes can mark with signs is the lifestyles of community members. These markers are more than just the consumer behaviors they exhibit (even though that is a psychographic characteristic associated with lifestyle). **Lifestyle markers** express a collection of day-to-day

activities that would resonate with most community members (Carducci, 2020). Motivations to perform those tasks are celebrated within memetic content and worth critically examining as part of the social life of a community member. Memes reveal this information even if community members themselves are not aware of the significance of their lifestyle.

The final psychographic characteristic to denote (beyond the beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, and opinions discussed earlier in this book) is how personalities are expressed within the community and (eventually) in the community's memes. The HEXACO Model of Personality Structure (Ashton et al., 2004) is a reasonable means to examine how aspects of personality are reflected in memes. Community members' honesty/humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience become arguments within the meme about the general nature of the community. An example of how memes show **personality markers** would be when Canada is referenced in memetic content, reinforcing the stereotype of always apologizing and being too polite.

Psychographic markers are useful to examine in any memes as they represent internal aspects that community members shared. The popularity of those memes containing psychographic markers allows therapists and memetic researchers to focus on those markers and explain why members would highlight them in memes. This knowledge is vital, especially when the same psychographic marker appears over and over again. This thematic repetition happens when a psychographic quality embeds itself in the shared social experiences of the community.

## MEMES AS SHARED SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

These connections between memes and the shared social experiences between community members depend on the type of community. There are six different types of these organizations that are worth denoting when addressing these shared social experiences, as those occurrences will vary depending on what maintains the cohesiveness of the community (Tilton, 2020). The memes from these communities will be fundamentally different as they are by-products of the community.

A **community of locus** (or location) typically has a similar set of “shared social experiences” reflected in geography, institutions, and social structures (like community organizations or government agencies) of a given region of the world that the community or audience has some permanence or semi-permanence to that given area. People in that community are tuned to the daily happenings of other community members through interactions associated with the various social institutions in the community (like churches, schools, or businesses). Your hometown is one such community of location. Online communities can be an extension of these types of communities. Both online and real-world interactions are based on members’ familiarity with the daily happenings of those local institutions and social structures. Those interactions tell the story of the local community. Memes that reflect a community of locus tells those stories in memetic form.

Another type of community that develops shared social experiences would be those of **communities of convenience**, which are defined as communities that are temporarily together based on external factors that momentarily connect people. Community members form from an ad-hoc organization where none of the people are “bound” to the group for an extended period. Festivals and other short-term events (like Burning Man, South by

Southwest, or the Conservative Political Action Conference) tend to be the primary communities of convenience. It is important to note that people do not have to attend the event specifically to become members of that community. Those that are there will have stronger shared social experiences when compared to those that experience the event for a distance. Memes from these communities will revolve around icons (e.g., the SxSW logo), “inside jokes” about what happened there, or any other interaction that “you had to be there to experience.”

Unlike communities of convenience, **communities of circumstance** are defined by community members’ social status or life experiences rather than a given profession. Grad students tend to be a community of circumstance as they yet to become professionals in the field of study. It is not unusual for webcomics to be used as the central layer of memetic content shared by these communities (e.g., Ph.D. Comics) as they speak to those shared social experiences.

A group that is a more long-term version of this community would be a community of practice. **Communities of practice** share a common set of ethical standards, training, and skills to maintain the status quo and advance their occupation or vocation. Professionals who practice medicine would be one example of such a community. Members of the community bond over the labors it took to be a part of this group and often use jargon to define their profession within memetic content. Those struggles are part of the collective identity and are reflected in the memes created by community members.

One community is more internal in both the motivations and bonds than the previously listed communities. **Communities of purpose** are people going through the same process or trying to achieve a similar objective. Members of a community of purpose share common motivations, desires, and directions to meet their

goals. Alcoholics Anonymous would seem to be an excellent example of this type of organization, as their focus is semi-permanent. Shared social experiences and memes from these communities are based on the stories that community members tell about going through the process or meeting their goals. The imagery and context related to these shared social experiences will be more concrete and meaningful than the previous communities’ content, as it is purpose-driven.

Finally, a **community of interest** promotes the passions, knowledge base, and mutual respect of the criteria that define a hobby or pastime. For example, anime fans would be a community of interest. Community members use the hobby or pastime to guide interactions or communication with others, as it is the arena in which they are the most comfortable interacting with one another. These interactions or exchanges of information within the community will reinforce the shared knowledge base as layers within memetic content. Some anime titles and characters are more meaningful to the community of anime fans. This meaningfulness allows memetic content to focus on those aspects of the hobby to create niche mediated works (e.g., subbing an anime scene to reflect the results of a national election).

All of these communities have different shared social experiences that are meaningful. Still, some of those social experiences cross communities to become significant in different ways (e.g., the hells of grad school [“community of circumstance”] become the bonding experience to college professors [“communities of practice”]).

## MEMES AS A FORM OF SOCIAL AGENCY

Graduate students, much like other socially marginalized populations, are denied access to various aspects of social life in their given community (in this case, the academic world). They are

not considered faculty members, nor are they really considered traditional students (read as undergraduate students). They also have limited rights on campus (at the time of this writing, most do not have the right to unionize). A casual observer would argue that they have little social agency. **Social agency** is the ability of people or groups in society to influence the daily actions of others, change their status within the community, represent themselves without others interfering, or be recognized as a member of the community (Traugr, 2008).

One of the areas that memes grant social agency is their ability to perform political participation within the community. **Political participation** in memetic content focuses on the actions that would normally be considered civic engagement to get others in the community to care and act upon issues that affect their community and learn more about civic topics that can improve community members' lives (Hanley, 2010). Involvement in the political realm of any community forces members to reduce those issues and topics to fit the context of memetic content. That reduction can turn more significant issues into slogans (e.g., Get Brexit Done, No Justice No Peace, #MeToo) or visuals (e.g., umbrellas for the Hong Kong protests, red ribbons for HIV/AIDS awareness, the peace symbol) that gain significance through consistent use across a multitude of platforms which use them for the same purpose.

Another way that memes provide social agency is that memes are the end result of creators having technological affordances due to newer communication technologies being readily available to socially marginalized populations (both in the form of hardware like inexpensive smartphones that are powerful enough to craft mediated content and software like social media services). These technological affordances also include "the lack of gatekeepers, easy dissemination of information, lower barriers to access, and so

on" (Burton, 2019, 4) that grant users of those technologies more direct access to members of their community than they might not be afforded to in the real world (Bennett, Freelon, & Wells, 2010).

One final way that memes represent social agency is how they allow creators and users to express cultural resistance regarding how topics and issues are presented online by members of their community by shaping the narrative within the memes that they create. Cultural resistance happens when a community uses meaningful symbols from the general public or a powerful section in society to change or disrupt how those populations interpret the meaning of those symbols (Duncombe, 2002). Resistance happens in memetic content when the community treats popular culture content as a commodity that they can engage with, cooperate to create new content from the older works, and use those more contemporary works to "jam up" the cultural and creative industries that mass produce works of popular culture.

A natural way to sum up memetic content's role in developing social agency is related to how memes address changes in society. Communities will use the tools of communication available to them to express their thoughts, opinions, and beliefs about the world around them. Online communication has become an extension of how members declare their overall concerns for their communities. Memes give community members limited control of how they present themselves to the general public. Workers in a particular office might use memes from *The Office* (for mostly positive situations) or *Office Space* (for mostly negative situations) to represent their daily working environment. Exerting this form of power becomes a coping mechanism that acknowledges the stress one experiences and says something about it.

## MEMES AS A FORM OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

There are two ways to think about social capital, especially as it relates to memetic content. Pierre Bourdieu's (2021) *The Forms of Capital* is the foundation of how we have defined capital throughout this book. Sociologists who study the concept of social capital frame the term around class arguments related to how one gains power within society.

Economic capital is what we would generally think about when describing capital. It is the ownership of the materials that allow an individual or organization to gain money. But there is also cultural capital, which is the knowledge of the difference between high and low culture within a society based on a cultural work's objective nature (physical goods vs. digital content), the embodiment of social norms (defining ourselves in society), institutional recognition (certified as belonging to a specific aspect of society), technical merit (having the skills to pay the bills), emotional maturity (being empathetic or sympathetic to certain social situations), and understanding national and cultural traditions.

Therefore, Bourdieu argues that the final form of capital is social, representing having connections with others to have the power to change what is happening within a given community. This long-form analysis of capital is only the first way to think about social capital as it denotes power structures within the society (Siiisiainen, 2000). The second way to think about social capital is more about building social engagement between community members.

A group of sociologists led by Lindon J. Robison (2012) proposed a second way to think about social capital in their article *The Relative Importance of Selfishness and Social Capital Motives*. Robison et al. argued that people attempt to gain social capital based on four dynamics. The first way people gain social capital

is to build a strong connection with others in a community, which validates that their actions within the community reflect that person's true self and meets the community's behavioral standards. Secondly, people are looking for other's approval. Social capital in the form of support from the community is a representation of that approval. The third point is that people want to feel like they belong in society in some role. Social capital can be built in the form of a purpose, position, or station within an organization. Finally, social capital is pathos-driven. We help out others in the community based on feeling a sympathetic connection with community members. We spend that social capital as it increases our validation within the community and maintains our sense of belonging to the group. Both Bourdieu and Robison et al. help us understand why memes are a form of social capital.

We have touched on why meme scholars and psychological professionals could apply Bourdieu's definition of social capital to memes. They can influence people's perceptions about the topics and issues facing a community. We used them as a mode of communication to address the points that we consider valid as part of a political discussion or cultural dialogue. The combination of the various layers that make up a meme from the rhetorical position that we hold and, in turn, have the power to influence others' thoughts on those subjects. Bourdieu's writing would seem to support the claim that memes represent social capital.

The points raised by *The Relative Importance of Selfishness and Social Capital Motives* would also seem to support the claim that memes are a form of social capital. The meme creator expresses themselves through memetic content, hoping that the community will make the meme popular, thus validating the meme creator's experiences. A meme becoming popular means that the meme creator would see their work and message approved by the community. If a meme creator has several of their memes widely used

by the community, they would rightly claim that they belong to the community, as they have addressed the community's thoughts in a form that members can easily share.

Understanding memes as social capital means that a therapist can examine how their client connects with the rest of the communities they belong to and discuss how they contribute to the overall health of that community. Suppose a person feels a strong sense of belonging to a particular community. In that case, it is fair to argue that some aspects of the community resonate with the client's beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, opinions, or identity. For example, the Minecraft Community are bound together for their love of Minecraft, which is a gaming platform/open-world digital environment/place for online engagement. More likely than not, members of the Minecraft community believe in a broad definition of the concept of a game. One of the values that tends to connect community members is being creative in Minecraft is an admirable trait. Aspects of identity are more aesthetic in nature, as the blocky graphic of the game tends to be distinctive. People who post pictures of the Minecraft creations online are easily identified as members of the community, thus others can connect and communicate with those that show-off their love of the game. The collective community composition of beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, opinions, and identity form the foundations of most social movements.

dity of an action, and using symbols that people will recognize makes it easy for movement organizers to explain what drives their movement and engage with people who might want to get involved. Topics and issues that the members of the movement care about are often part of the central messaging of those memes.

One such example of how memetic communication guides engagement with social movements came in 2014 in Colorado. Conservative activists attempted to reform the Advanced Placement U.S. History standards set by the College Board. They got three reform candidates elected to the Jefferson County School Board to inject curricular changes to the teaching of American history. Students and community members protested those changes by creating a memetic template that was "an irresistible invitation to remix historic facts and undermine conservative efforts to dictate how lessons from history were taught" (Foust & Weathers, 2021, 135) and using the Twitter hashtag #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory as a banner and a way to organize memetic content under one central theme. Some of the examples of tweets that used this memetic template included:

- Bay of Pigs was a very cute event where pigs were let loose on a bay in Cuba to symbolize freedom for everyone
- In 1787, Jesus wrote the US Constitution
- British give poor Indians blankets to keep them warm, no smallpox intended

## MEMES AS THE GUIDEPOSTS FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Memes often make the movements spotlighted by hashtags, trending topics, and other social media functions more understandable to the average person. The combination of a humorous tone, highlighting the irony of a situation, pointing out the absurdity of an action, and using symbols that people will recognize makes it easy for movement organizers to explain what drives their movement and engage with people who might want to get involved. Topics and issues that the members of the movement care about are often part of the central messaging of those memes.

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Tweets using the #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory hashtags were used by those that opposed the standard reform to illustrate the

absurdity of the position held by the reform candidate and highlight the damage that such candidates would have a school system (that is lowering the quality of education through these new “poorer” educational standards). The social movement’s goal was to remove the three school board members and return a sense of normality to the school system. Supporters of the #JeffCoSchoolBoardHistory movement met their goals as the memetic content provided the community with an “argumentative kernel” amplified through social media exchanges and local community interactions (Deuringer, 2015).

Ryan Milner (2013) has referred to this amplification of social issues through memes as “pop polyvocality,” since the messaging of the problems is merely one of many voices being expressed within the meme. Using popular culture content as a platform to discuss issues central to the causes supported by a given movement means that the aspects of that content (in the form of characters, sayings, symbols, locations, or other imagery that found in graphic novels, television shows, video games, feature films, musical works, or any other creative product) are adding to the political discourse about those issues. One such example came from the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement.

Milner notes the memetic content created by activists and “culturejammers” (i.e., AdBusters) helped make the protest more visible, even when there was little media coverage focusing on Zuccotti Park (the central area near Wall Street where most of the demonstrations were taking place) and various other protests against the “unchecked capitalism” that lead to the 2008 worldwide economic collapse. Spreading memes on Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, and YouTube helped demonstrators connect with others that were supportive of the OWS movement. Those memes also introduced new concepts to the general public, like The People’s Microphone, participatory democracy, and the Assembly Hand Signals (Radovac, 2014).

It should not be surprising that memes are used this way by social movements. All successful social movements embed a centralizing message within a slogan, sign, or symbol that protestors and supporters can easily repeat to unify the group. Hashtags and memes are the digital components of this unifying communication. Slogans ring in the air, signs move with the people, symbols are left behind as marks of remembrance, and these digital works move in a digital environment to promote the ideas of these movements. Both hashtags and memes can promote the agendas of social movements because they can bridge the offline-online barrier and address the “digital dualism” problem (Jurgenson, 2011). These mediated works allow the general public to shift their focus from the memes associated with a given hashtag to the real-world impact of that hashtag’s social movement.

## MEMES AS THE EXTENSION OF THE SOCIAL NETWORK

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## FERDINAND TÖNNIES AND MEMETIC COMMUNITIES

Therapeutic professionals and memetic scholars can cultivate an appreciation for memetic communities by understanding real-world communities and how they develop over time. A reasonable way to begin this process is by examining the work of one of the foundational scholars in this field. Ferdinand Tönnies refined the theoretical comprehension of community development at the end of the 19th century. His 1887 book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Community and Society) looked at the differences between the rural areas of Germany with their small and traditional villages and the modern urban cities with the industrial infrastructures.

The rural villages of Germany fit the *Gemeinschaft* model of community development as personal ties enhanced by in-person interactions define those social groups. Traditional communal rules allowed the community to develop an overall cooperative social organization based on a standard set of values and beliefs shared by most, if not all, community members. All members use personal interactions to organize the community’s priorities that align with their beliefs and values. Community spirit and traditions were based on what the community feels emotionally attached to and their sense of moral obligation. Current memetic communities share these underlying principles expressed by Tönnies as those aspects of the community affect the presenta-

tion and messaging of memetic content. Reddit communities, for example, often codify those effects in the rules for posting content on subreddits (Crossman, 2020).

Urban centers contained the *Gesellschaft* spirit within their borders. *Gesellschaft* explains the modern, industrial experience as primarily consisting of indirect interactions among people living in the same city. The by-product of those interactions is that citizens have this level of disconnection with others. Most daily actions are handled via impersonal (read as “non-face-to-face”) transactions with people that have indirect and weak social ties. There is a rational driving force that maintains the social order within the collective. Memes also play a role in this form of society. Daily life within this environment is marked with characteristics that meme creators living there can quickly turn into memetic content. The United States Postal Service’s speed is one such example, with memes featuring Newman from Seinfeld, turtles delivering the mails, and other representations of this service that resonate with citizens.

Like other theoretical models, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* have no perfect examples in the real world. Most places where people live, work, play, and interact with one another will have aspects of both. Tönnies’ models explain the way that social orders work in cities and towns. The bureaucratic components of daily life are the *Gesellschaft*, as are the policies that drive government action. The feeling that you belong to a city or your hometown is *Gemeinschaft*, as are the common characteristics you share with your high school classmates. People who live in Chicago experience *Gemeinschaft* when they talk about their favorite pizza place, their favorite sports team<sup>14</sup>, or the city flag (Mars, 2015). *Gesellschaft* is experienced in paying a water bill at your village hall or attending a village council meeting.

<sup>14</sup>I was going to add “Daaaaa Bears!” reference, but figured it was too old.

Memetic communities develop not because all members talk using memetic communication or even mimic each other's actions. It would be fair to argue that it would be more (to borrow the Star Trek allegories previously used) Borgian in nature as the community would be a hivemind instead of allowing community members to express themselves freely. Communities are memetic in nature when they use the allegorical communication model to develop quasi-personal relationships on the social media service (Gemeinschaft) through the limitations of the user interface that controls the interactions that social network members can have (Gemeinschaft). Memes express the spirit of the given community (Gemeinschaft) by crafting memetic content with a graphic design program, a classic *Gesellschaft* tool.

## THE THERAPEUTIC CONSIDERATION

It should be no surprise that the therapeutic considerations based on this chapter are grounded in the realm of social psychology. We addressed aspects of social psychology in the third chapter during the discussion of memetic structures. Communities and collectives are central to this chapter, the third chapter, and the means to work with clients in a therapeutic setting. One of the theses for this book is that people will use memes to find their place in society, connect with others, and gain acceptance for their expression of their beliefs and values. The various case studies, figures, and examples from this book should provide evidence for these claims.

A reasonable therapeutic practice would be having the client pick a meme that they think best represents one of the communities that they spend time online interacting with regularly. The focusing question would be, “what do you think this meme says about that community?” This question works as a point of reflect-

tive analysis that might get the client to discuss shared social experiences, beliefs, values, and attitudes that would be more difficult without a prompt of this nature. Following up that previous question could examine why that message or ideology is essential to the community.

Another line of questioning can focus on using repeated symbols and phrases within a collective of memes. “Why is [the visual or phrasing in question] repeatedly used in community memes” allows the client to be the gatekeeper into the community mindset. Their translation of the meaningfulness of those symbols may not be 100% correct due to the “unreliable narrator” aspect of this interaction (Bartesaghi, 2009). However, the client doesn’t have to present an accurate representation of the community. Instead, their understanding of community interactions can help the client explain how they think they connect with others online.

The last therapeutic consideration is more in line with an art therapeutic practice. It is fair with this knowledge to have the client create a meme in front of you that they would use to explain to their online community what happened today, during the session, or any other event that the therapist would find significant. A term of art useful in this practice is that the client is “translating in real time” those experiences into content that their community would understand. This “guided ethnography” (Tilton, 2012) becomes the grounding for a conversation of how the client communicates with their community.

Therapists who approach these types of sessions with a social psychological mindset need to be prepared to understand these interactions using an “ethnographic sensibility” to contextualize their interactions (Salmenniemi et al., 2020). Online relationships described by clients might have a parasocial aspect, in so far as the connections have been developed mostly in the client’s mind (Daniel, Crawford Jackson, & Westerman, 2018). However, dis-

cussing these relationships (parasocial or otherwise) can provide therapists enough information on interacting with their clients.

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