Enhancing Interaction in Group Homes
A Collaboration between the Centre for Language in Social Life, Macquarie University, and the NSW Department of Community Services

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Group Homes as Social Networks: A Unit of Community Membership

The Social network is a concept widely applied in social research, from anthropology to social sciences including linguistics (Boissevain, 1974; Milroy, 1981; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). In essence, it addresses the fact that human social memberships need to be interpreted in the terms of actual exchanges and contacts, not the putative (idealized) memberships which are too global and distant to ever register in the daily behaviours of a community. A social network is usually characterized as the human connections which sustain a person – the typical reciprocations (of meanings and resources) that constitute life as it is experienced.

The extended sub-title of Boissevain’s (1974) volume – “Friends of friends and the networks which helps us survive” – brings out the force of the concept for social research. As the British linguist J.R. Firth (1950:180) often emphasized in his contextual, social approach to meaning in linguistics: the linguist needs to be focused upon the “typical–actual”, with all its apparent pluralism and variability. Firth himself saw the relevant study of human meaning to be at the scale of what he called, a “restricted language” – what today we would refer to as a register or functional variety. The importance of this orientation, and its contrast with so much more recent idealizing psycholinguistics (viz. Chomsky, 1965; 1972 etc.) is fundamental to our present argument.

When the social analysis, especially linguistic analysis, begins at the systemic dimension of particular human exchanges the resulting account interprets the individuals under consideration ‘on their own terms’ (quite literally). The study does not impose any a priori norm – for example, of pragmatic appropriateness or of linguistic well-formedness – on the social interaction. On the other hand, again following Firth and the work of his student Halliday (1974, 1984), the typical-actual for a given group of individuals can be described systemically and poly-systemically so that nothing is lost of the regularities in a pattern of behaviour (i.e. the linguist simply sets out the actual choices relevant at each point of the social context).

The relevance of such an approach should be immediately apparent to those working with special sub-groups of community members, with individuals who may have special needs of
care, and who may have their own mode of communicative behaviours. The issues are intensified when a sub-group is not self-selected and not integrated by shared conventional channels of expression or meanings.

The residents of a group home are just such a sub-group at the same time as being a social network i.e. connected vitally in sustaining the patterns of each resident’s well being. Group homes are a product of policy and history; and while the intention of deinstitutionalisation was to widen the options for the individuals who were previously residents of large (and therefore more generic) institutions, the reality turned out to be that group home organization did not involve selecting co-residents on the basis of any theory of communicative and behavioural compatibility (although compatibility tools have since been developed (Bourke, M.E., Michaud-Gazel, A. and Tucker, J., 1998)¹ and there seems little doubt that all day-by-day decisions concerning group home members are made by officers who are most mindful of this kind of variability). For example, speakers of Italian, Croatian, or Sign were not identified so that these components of their communicative repertoire could be utilized, should staffing and other residents provide such an opportunity to link up with other speakers of those languages. Other factors, relating to similarity of potential and compatibility, have had to be addressed in the course of running the homes (a situation not conducive to the interests of any stakeholders whether they be residents, parents, or staff).

When we conceptualize a group home as a system of communicative links, and enquire into the traffic of information across those links, we are representing that home as a social network. This social network is itself part of two larger networks – the government body overseeing the management and support of the homes; and the community in all the ways it impinges on, or enhances, the activities of those in the group home. These two larger networks can be thought of as systems of systems, or poly-systems, by analogy with the systems of systems view of meaningful choice, emphasized by the linguists Firth and Halliday (as cited above).

This communicative mapping approach to meaningful behaviour in group homes offers a number of helpful perspectives for the many groups of stakeholders and participants. The advantages of perspective include:

(1) Communicative behaviours are seen against their functional outcomes – their particular meaning bearing properties. These are narrowed down by interpreting such behaviours

¹ See also Ferguson, D. *Interpretation of Behaviour Sheet* DoCS.
against the backgrounds of circumstantial arrangements which appear to motivate them, and those which are the outcomes of their enactment. This approach to meaning (through social consequences) brings out the force of saying that we can look at communicative behaviours in their own terms: the personal habits and expressions of an individual are interpreted, first of all, as "modes of action" (Malinowski, 1923), whose meaning is their potential for changing or controlling social circumstances.

(2) 'Challenging behaviours' are construed socio-semantically, as instances of the meaning-making described in (1) above. This construal offers a coherent framework for those charged with working with individuals who are 'challenging’ through their behaviour. If one can chronicle the circumstantial settings that pertain to such behaviour, it may be easier to:

a) **pass on** relevant information to others e.g. the missed outing on a Monday that may be relevant to those coming into the house on a Friday; the signs that the competitive behaviours between two residents have escalated; namely, the kind of information that experienced professionals and other 'insiders' keep track of in the course of their daily experience with residents.

b) **manage** the potentially destructive effects of the behaviour (viz. such behaviour threatens all social bonds in its environs, especially if seen as physically threatening at the same time), by construing the behaviour as a generalised 'speech' function (i.e. "I challenge those around me to 'fix' the trend of the current situation") rather than as targeting in a personal way (i.e. when a recipient of such behaviour feels challenged/ at a loss about how to ease a resident's distress).

c) **relate** the experiences of those working with group homes to other aspects of community services, especially when those aspects involve, as they often must, working with individuals with idiosyncratic communicative repertoires.

d) **explain** challenging behaviour to other residents, and possibly even to the behaver (in some circumstances).

Let no one misunderstand these proposals and observations – we are not suggesting that these observations are not already part of the institutional wisdom of those working in a system like DoCS/DADHC. It is just these very people who have drawn the issues to our consciousness as 'outsiders' who are trying to create a useful representation of the dynamics of such contexts. What we are seeking through such a representation is a better guide (or a tool) by which the insider wisdom/knowledge can be made more systematic (i.e. more accessible and easier to
enact) for all those involved in the contexts of group homes. And this is even more crucial when, as in our project, we focus on particular situations of workers coming into the DoCS/DADHC system, workers who may be at first overwhelmed at what seems to them the absence of normative patterns, or even channels, of communication in those individuals to whom they have a professional duty of care.

The Dynamics of Communication in a Group Home

The two principles guiding our project work are:

1) Interpretation of group homes as social networks
2) Interpretation of resident behaviour as communicative behaviours in a social network.

These two principles are different perspectives on the same phenomenon - point 1) approaches the home as a 'unit' which interacts with the wider world; and point 2) takes up the role of individuals as contributors to a given unit.

The aim of the project is quite simply the enhancement of living in a group home for the residents. To fulfil this aim, we know that the sustainability of the group home as a human network has to be thought of from the point of view of all stakeholders – those who work in the homes, and those who interact with the homes as responsible parents or guardians.

The essence of this broad based approach can be summed up in the word 'stability'. People need continuity – continuity of connection to others; continuity of place; continuity of resources; and reliability of expectations. No one we have heard or conversed with concerning group homes has ever raised the slightest doubt or qualification concerning the crucial role of these stabilities.

There is a better term, perhaps, than stability, albeit one with a more technical provenance: 'homeostasis'. With this term, the issues of stability, change, and individual needs can be better accommodated. Homeostasis is the term applied to a system which can adjust to change, and even 'correct' its internal relations when the ongoing balance of the system is under pressure from changing internal and/or external factors. A family, school, team, community, household, or business has to have sufficient organisation to re-establish its balance (its 'stasis') as it experiences change (e.g. growth or loss), the absence of a key contributor (e.g. a key co-coordinator, player or participant), the emergence of novel demands
(e.g. over work or resources), the appearance of new legal or financial expectations (e.g. rule changes and accountability).

"Homeostasis" is significant because it is about achieving continuities of behaviour and opportunity in the face of the inevitable changes in living experiences: professional appointments can not be guaranteed; skills may be transferred or lost; and people themselves come to want something different in a human arrangement (no matter how successful such an arrangement may have appeared to those in and around the people concerned). Homeostasis is the potential for maintaining balance, without resorting to the fiction that things can be static.

By becoming increasingly explicit about the dynamics of a given group home, our project seeks to make the goal of homeostasis easier to achieve for all residents and participants in the household. It is an attempt to enhance that organisation which assists all humans through a transition – especially, an organisation which helps everyone to recognise communicative behaviour when they are confronted by it, and which helps house managers and others to pass on the knowledge (within this social network and out to the wider DoCS/DADHC network).

Information and knowledge ARE the organisation which carries a social network across phases of dynamic transition. Residents, staff, participatory guardians, options for work, excursions, and household routine all must change. The issue then is not just that we 'need to settle the house down'; the major problem may be that we need to be building the circumstances that ameliorate the worst conditions that follow from inevitable changes. In this, the idea of the group home as a social network has much to offer.
The Group Home as a Social Network

No members of any community can ever live with four or five other members without phases of difficulty: quarrels, jealousies, injured pride, frustrations, and aggravations. This prospect must be increased by the situation in which those involved have no real power of co-selection over whom they 'share with'. Any five person household will test the communicative virtuosity of all residents, and their wider interactants. Patterns of interaction which develop include one like the following represented in figure 1, a basic social network diagram.

![Figure 1 Symbolic Exchange in a Share Household](image)

The diagram above, (figure 1), represents six individuals (1 - 6). Persons 1 and 2 have been given larger circles to indicate the extent to which 'talk' in this household has to go through them. They feature as powerful personalities, so much so that 3, 4, and 5 are like satellites to their dominating interactions. The absence of any solid lines and the presence of dotted lines indicates that 3, 4, and 5 only connect to one another via the transactions of 1 and 2, and that 1 and 2 make only occasional two way interactions with them (hence the dotted lines). Member 6 is an isolate, communicatively, not having taken sides in the power blocs that have evolved (viz. 1 and 3 on one side, and 2, 4, and 5 on the other).

The household may appear stable, but the situation is hardly productive for the personalities involved, not even for 1 and 2 (who may come to resist any development which threatens their dominance of the interactive 'floor'). Such stability maintains the isolation of resident 6, who pays the highest price for no one rocking the boat. Such an overall dynamic is not unusual in networks of peers in a team, a school, a political party, or a shared household. We have been told by a number of the most experienced DoCS staff that they can cite group
homes in which the same general pattern has very clearly developed. Such knowledge raises a conundrum, whether for a group home, or any other unit: namely, is it sufficient to say that the situation of member 6, and of the others in the home, must be a result of what they find comfortable and necessary for their day by day routines?

We would expect that the answer to this question would differ depending on whose point of view you represent. If you were the parent or guardian of 6, you must have some doubts or feel aggrieved. The relatives of the other residents may be thankful for the equanimity overall, and may feel that the compromise is realistic, i.e. their person may be somewhat overshadowed, but that still offers a 'space' which he or she can utilise i.e. by comparison with a household in which the 'floor' was constantly being contested with competitive behaviours unsettling everyone on occasions.

As mentioned already, the dynamic here discussed does not apply only to a group home, nor do the responses above pertain to parents/guardians of those who are residents in group homes. In fact, the group home is quite different from the picture presented so far. The social network of a group home has a number of layers that do not pertain to most other kinds of home – it has an involved structure of support staff, rostered over 24 hrs, 7 days per week. Furthermore, it has managerial connections to Government departments and legal authorities. It has a pattern of other visitors, beyond parents and guardians, which may include medical officers, speech therapists, and others with some responsibility to intervene, or record information. We have tried to represent this layering of the network in the diagram in Figure 2. We are taking the previous diagram (Figure 1) as the residents picture for the purposes of developing discussion.
The picture is now easier to interpret for its logistical difficulties, these being potentially as precipitous as any other issue in unsettling the equanimity of residents. The staff, (S), are both within the household and without, constituting a very permeable boundary. Furthermore, the brace suggests that their input to the home is, or needs to be, co-coordinated. This is a result of knowing the state of the relations between the residents, their current needs, their most recent activities, and their updated health regimen, which in many situations is a relatively tall order. The staff are the mediators for the residents to other community based networks, in particular, those of possible work and of the immediate local surroundings.

By comparison, the interactions between parents/guardians (P) or visitors (V) and the household cross a less permeable barrier. These people are not part of the daily routines of the household in the way that staff become, but they may be crucial for 'goods and services' and may be also part of a weekly cycle (i.e. a regular routine of a larger scale than 'day by day'). In total, the comings and goings of the home can present a relatively varied and fluid picture, relative that is to the regular faces which visit a standard nuclear families.

If the inner dynamic of the six residents is regarded as interpersonal zone A, the staff/parent/visitor proximity can be thought of as interpersonal zone B, and the community fields beyond can be regarded as interpersonal zone C. The staff (S) role is clearly, in terms of the diagram, a "tricky" role to negotiate. Every transaction with the household will be an intervention in the flow of communication. Staff may have more interactions with residents over a week than some residents have with other residents, even when interaction is defined in the minimal terms of: 'any engagement equivalent to, or beyond, utilizing a common space/room at the same time'. The situation of resident 6, for example, gives little sign of exchanges in this interpersonal zone A; and staff, by comparison, will often dominate as the visible presence in the household.

The difficulties surrounding interpersonal zone B raise important questions for all responsible persons who work with, or even visit, a group home. The diagram helps to bring questions out into professional consideration: for example,

a) Will the working premises of managing the home require that all residents receive the best possible chance of interaction in, and across, all three zones?

b) If parents/guardians of resident 6 note that the most proximal zone of living (Interactional zone A) is not currently providing their son or daughter with communication, should they complain about the isolating pattern? If they have
noticed the dominating pattern of residents 1 and 2, is this something to which they can reasonably object?

c) Should staff members act to change the status quo when there may be an isolating pattern for one or two residents, but when there is, at the same time, a generally settled (“static”) environment in the household overall?

d) How does one establish the reasonable potential (and goals) for a resident in the face of the chance that intervening could create anxiety in the very person who is being offered a wider range for operating (in any or all of the three zones)?

Social networks can be “measured” along a number of dimensions relevant to group homes: density of connections; multiple nature (multiplexity) of the roles which connect individuals; centrality of a participant to the information passed between all members; direction of flow; clustering in the inner and outer circles…While the measures most often pursued are relevant concepts (even when not quantifiable precisely) are the latter three: centrality of the resident to the symbolic transmissions which do take place; the direction of the flow in any given connection - more crucially, the proportions of direction; and the overall clustering of connections or the morphology of the connections. The more general notions of density and multiplexity will move into the foreground when regarding a resident’s world beyond the actual home, when there is a need to measure the context of social interaction on offer by an excursion or work (for example, in relation to the risks involved in independent travel or other contingencies).

The direction of our discussion has been well set out by career specialists in the area of disabilities, in particular by Sigafoos and colleagues (for instance in Butterfield, Arthur, and Sigafoos 1995) and by Stancliff and colleagues (eg. Stancliff and Kean 2000). Their observations, as experts in the area of community services, are built out of direct experience (e.g. exemplar drawn from case histories) and the relevant records by which a group home profile can be built up therefore on an individual by individual basis.

Our efforts are an attempt to ground the communicative approach in a functional linguistics and, more specifically, in the register theory and social network theory elaborated by Halliday and Milroy (respectively). Through register theory, we can map out the actual and potential meanings of an individual or a group by network choices, each offering immediate sources of comparison across different times/phases of the life
of one person. Through social network mapping, we can treat the networks, rather than any individual, as the entity at the focus of research.
References


Ferguson, D. *Interpretation of Behaviour Sheet*. Department of Community Services.


Appendix A: Some key concepts in Social Networks

1. Transactions. Note in Milroy, the distinction transaction vs. exchange. A transaction may be asymmetrical; an exchange is usually symmetrical. The degree of pressure exerted and content is also at stake.

2. Diversity of Linkages: multiplexity, overlap. Members get access to greater social support and social resources in multiplex linkages.


4. Frequency and duration.

5. Structure: morphology of the network.
   a) **Size**: the “social universe of persons who could help him solve his problems.” (Boissevain, J. 1974:36)

   b) **Density**: degree to which members are in touch independent of Ego.

   Two measures and Formulas:

   \[
   D = \frac{100 \text{ Na}}{1/2 \text{ N} (\text{N}-1)}
   \]

   where Na = Actual links, and N = Total persons. (Boissevain, J. 1974:ch2).

   \[
   D = \frac{100 \text{ Na}}{\text{N}}
   \]

   where N = Total number of possible links.

   c) Degree of **Connexion**: mean number of relations of each person in the network.

   \[
   d = \frac{2 \times \text{ Na}}{\text{N}}
   \]

   where Na = actual number of relations, and N = total number of persons.

   d) **Centrality**: accessibility and the number of communication paths which pass through the subject.

   \[
   C = \text{sum of shortest distances from everyone to everyone else} / \text{sum of shortest distances from Ego to everyone else.}
   \]

   e) **Clusters**: compartment with relatively low external relations. “A person plays different parts…” Boissevain p43. See Summary p.45. and subjective criteria.