

Presentation

This book has two aims: first, to introduce Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory to students and researchers of health systems interested in health services provision as a social system; second, to encourage the use of Luhmann's theory in health systems research. During his productive life, Luhmann covered the social systems of media, law, politics, economy, art, education, religion and others. However, he did not apply his theory to health as comprehensively as he did for the other systems. This book therefore is an attempt to apply his concepts more extensively to health services provision and show the analytical possibilities the theory opens.

In the international health arena, Health Systems Strengthening (HSS) and Health Systems Thinking (HST) have acquired prominence, influencing agendas of international organizations and academic institutions in the last two decades. However, the theoretical underpinning is sketchy, borrowing concepts and tools from diverse fields of knowledge, without a unifying vision of what a health system is. Although it has received some attention, Luhmann's theory is largely unknown among health researchers, and the resources the theory provides for solving identified weaknesses remain untapped. The Social Systems Theory constitutes an integrated theoretical body with consistent articulation of a number of constructs; therefore it has more to offer than just collections of unrelated theories and narrow frameworks.

Luhmann's theory is complex and has a plethora of concepts. It was developed over the course of around 30 years. This book has been conceived to introduce a comprehensive summary of the theory for those who are coming into contact with Luhmann's work for the first time or have only superficial information about it. Therefore, the text tries to be as reader-friendly as is possible for such a conceptually rich theory. Nevertheless, the book also introduces references to advanced topics for those interested in delving deeper into the theory.

The book is structured with an introduction and nine chapters. The chapters intend to gradually immerse the reader in the conceptual network while acquiring a good grasp of its particularities. With this orientation, the **introduction** prepares the ground for the subsequent discussions, presenting the current use of notions of systems in health systems studies.

The **Chapter 1** presents the key concepts of the theory. **Chapter 2** applies the concepts to health systems, referring to the texts Luhmann wrote on health as a social system, where he stated that the systems of provision of healthcare could be analysed as a social system, having standard features of functional social systems. This chapter is a generic application of the theory with brief explanations about how the theoretical concepts can explain health systems' structural and functional features, without looking into details of programmes, institutional roles and operations.

Chapter 3 discusses methodological issues concerning research within the scope of the theory and **Chapter 4** discusses the differences between health system from Luhmann's perspective and Health Systems Thinking (HST) approaches. This chapter discusses critical views of HST. Sequentially, in light of the theory, **Chapter 5** offers in-depth discussions of tools promoted by HST.

Chapter 6 further expands the application of the theory and presents *methodological* implications for *health systems strengthening* initiatives; it introduces the discussion of relations between *political systems* and health systems; and discusses issues of *complexity* and health systems. The chapter reflects on important implications for applications of the theory.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to *health organizations*, such as hospitals and polyclinics. Occupying a prominent position in Luhmann's conceptual architecture, organizations are defined as one of the three types of social system. His theoretical contributions in the field of management theory have received considerable attention in Scandinavian and German-speaking countries. Health systems researchers may find valuable elements for reflection.

Chapter 8 presents some criticisms that have been formulated about Luhmann's theory. Readers interested in becoming further acquainted with the debates will find the pertinent literature recommended in the chapter. **Chapter 9** reflects on the way forward, exploring possible avenues for applications of the theory, discussing a number of alternative approaches and interpretations of recently published health systems research.

Final remarks addresses the issue of assessing theories, distinguishing science from the technologies it brings about. The message is directed to those

interested in reflecting on the value of the work of building and assembling theories.

An **Annex** is added to introduce some advanced topics; readers can find snapshots of the more demanding conceptualizations appearing in Luhmann's works, such as: Medium and forms; Symbolically generalized medium of communication; Paradoxes and contingency formulas; Structural features of the political system.

While readers may have interest in the topics addressed in specific chapters, it would be advisable to start with the introduction and the first two chapters, and move on to selecting the theme of interest. The composition of the chapters follow an ascendant "spiral" format, whereby the theoretical concepts reappear, progressively bringing formulations of higher levels of complexity.

Due to author's limitations, Luhmann's original texts in German could not be studied. However, readers will find in the reference section an extensive list of Luhmann's books published in English and Spanish, with a number of Luhmann's key texts that are not found in English but are available in Spanish translation.

