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### The Echo Chamber Phenomenon and It's Effect in Community Development Practice: A Case Study in Cigugur Girang, Bandung Barat

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#### Abstract

The existence of closed communication patterns between individuals in groups describes the phenomena of echo chamber, which is a form of communication in which a person only hears to the same opinion as he thinks. If there is polarization of opinion among groups in society, this phenomena will become a problem. As a result, macro social workers must see this occurrence as a potential threat in their work. The purpose of this research is to define the echo chamber phenomena and its implications for community development practice. The issues of community empowerment practices carried out by social workers in Cigugur Girang village are described in this study using a qualitative approach and a case study method. The findings conclude that the echo chamber effect can arise among persons who are in conflict. The conflict causes societal polarization, which has an impact on macro social worker practice. It's tough for social professionals to find a place amid polarized groups. As a result, the empowerment goal will be hampered.

**Keywords:** Community Development, Echo Chamber Phenomenon, Social Work Macro Practice, Societal Polarization

#### Introduction

Community empowerment is a form of social work practice on a macro scale, social work practices and policies (Netting et al., 2012). The definition of empowerment can also be explained as a process or change towards better conditions. The empowerment process includes the enabling, empowering and maintaining components (DuBois & Miley, 2005). The empowerment process is carried out as a series of activities to strengthen and empower powerless groups in the social system (Suharto, 2010). Community empowerment can be practiced on a small scale to a large scale. On a small scale, empowerment is aimed at increasing the power of disadvantaged people (Ife & Tesoriero, 2008). On a large scale, empowerment is aimed at the circumstances or results to be achieved by empowered communities (Suharto, 2010).

The process of community empowerment is not always what was planned. The empowerment process involves many parties, such as the government, private sectors, organizations, and the community (DuBois & Miley, 2005). Each party has their respective interests. Careful planning and organizing are needed in practicing it. Interested parties are those who have resources. The government as the holder of the highest mandate has the functions of regulator, dynamic, facilitator, and catalyst in empowerment (Midgley, 2020). The role of the private sectors and organizations has a civic

engagement function (Snyman, 2017). The function of the community in empowerment is participatory, including participatory input and participatory output (Abbott, 1995).

Many determinant factors in the empowerment process affect the outcome of an empowerment (Tilahun, 2018). There are supporting factors and inhibiting factors for community empowerment. One inhibiting factor is the low community participation in empowerment programs (Tilahun, 2018). Community participation is the action or fact of partaking, having, or forming a part of (Mulyawan, 2016). Some communities have interests that are not represented. In practice, people who are not represented form a separate group. People who have the same views, opinions have a tendency to group (Du & Gregory, 2017). The grouping of people can cause social isolation. Socio-political isolation has an impact on the emergence of polarization in society (Shaffer, 2020).

This research was conducted within the scope of the community of Cigugur Girang, Bandung Barat. That place was the target of the "DESA BERDAYA" program, a community empowerment program by Rumah Zakat. The target of the empowerment program is community groups that qualify as beneficiaries or in terms of zakat, including in the "mustahik" group. Empowerment activities are professionally guided interventions (Netting et al., 2012), by a macro social worker or someone who understands the science of community empowerment. The empowerment process carried out in Cigugur Girang is carried out by a community assistant called a "Relawan Inspirasi". Relawan Inspirasi are local community leaders who help guide the process of empowerment activities. The expected outcome of the Rumah Zakat's "DESA BERDAYA" program is to be able to produce beneficiaries who have independence in running their businesses and living their lives. The achievement of independence is in line with one part of the mission of Rumah Zakat as an institution managing zakat funds, which is to facilitate the independence of the mustahik in running a form of business.

In the implementation of the empowerment program, there are obstacles in the form of conflict between the people. The conflict created community polarization. Polarization and conflict form a pattern of communication in society that we call the echo chamber. It is the phenomenon that we want to examine in order to identify patterns and characteristics that are formed. With the hope that these phenomena can be identified and become lessons for the science of community empowerment.

## Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. Qualitative research is used because it fits to develop concepts, insights, and understanding patterns the data (Taylor et al., 2016). Case studies are used by using a single interlayer subject. Interlayer subject on this study means single case embedded design. That design will fit if there are two or more "embedded units" in one case and one context (Yin, 2009). The data in this study are collected by using interview and observation. This study interviewed and observed informants consisting of a perpetrator of community empowerment and community groups who rejecting the community empowerment program.

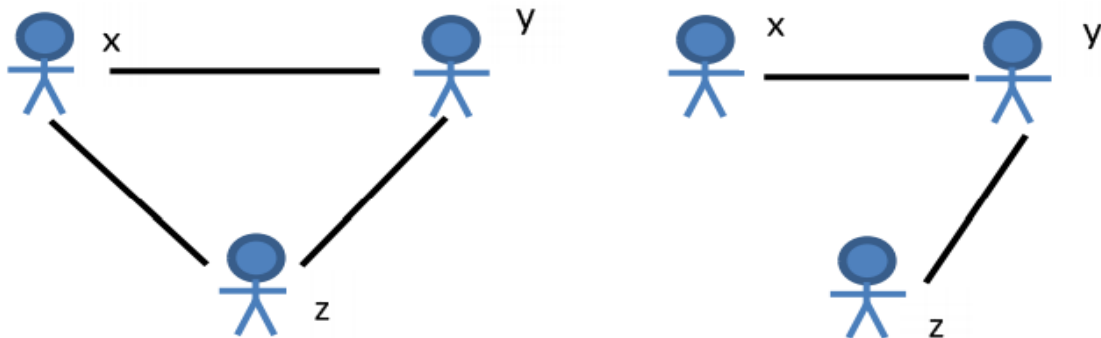
## Result

The purpose of this study is to find and describe a unique pattern called the echo chamber. This pattern has special characteristics where there is polarization and conflict in it. These characteristics lead to the creation of a closed communication pattern among the people. The pattern is a general description of a term called the echo chamber.

Based on Oxford Learner's Dictionary, Echo chamber means "an environment in which somebody encounters only opinions and beliefs similar to their own, and does not have to consider alternatives". Echo chamber is illustrated as a communication network in which individuals are connected to one another. As in Fig.1, individuals are connected and follow one another (Du & Gregory, 2017). Based

on this concept it can be concluded that the echo chamber is an embodiment of a pattern of communication between individuals who only accept or hear the same opinion or belief.

**Fig.1** (a)  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  follow each other, forming a triangle. When collecting all followings and all followers of a user, this triangle can easily be found. (b) However, when collecting followings and followers partially, this triangle might be ignored



Source: Du and Gregory, 2017

That definition refers to the social environment, one of them is the community itself. Communication that occurs within the community is influenced by internal factors and external factors. Internal factors such as opinions, beliefs, and social relations between one another and external factors such as the social, economic, and political climate. These factors can affect relations between communities both individually and in groups. In a negative context, the impact caused by these factors can lead to conflict.

## Discussion

The pattern can be interpreted as a model, which is a way to show objects that have the complexity of the process in it and the relationship between the supporting elements (Wiryanto, 2004). The elements in it are individuals who communicate with each other in a certain condition. In the context of the echo chamber, individuals convey information to each other with special tendencies to individuals who share the same opinions and beliefs.

With the polarization that occurs, the resulting communication pattern has its own pattern. The community polarization that occurred in Cigugur Girang Village formed a closed communication pattern within the confronting group. The pattern is star-shaped (Fig.2), where information is only conveyed and received by members of the group. This results in the closure of information originating from other sources or sources not originating from its members. Information that is repeated in that pattern forms the echo chamber phenomenon.

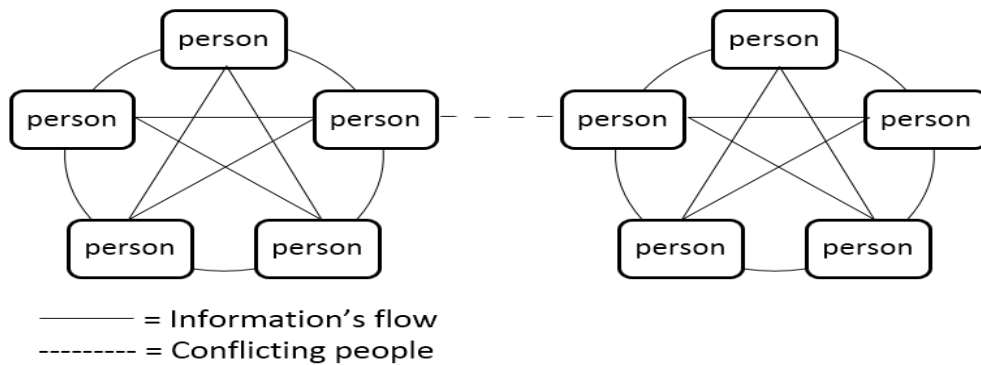
## Polarization And Conflict

Ideally, community communication is at the equilibrium point. If the similarities or differences reach a certain extreme point, it can result in the emergence of strong polarization. The echo chamber phenomenon cannot be separated from the existence of polarized patterns. The wider and higher the differences and similarities, the stronger the polarization.

Community polarization is one of the causes of conflict. Conflict is not always connoted in a negative perspective. Modern sociology figures, such as Lewis A. Coser see conflict as a "safety-value" of an organization or society (Tualeka, 2017). According to Coser, conflict is categorized into two, realistic

conflicts and non-realistic conflicts. Realistic conflict is derived from disappointment with special demands in a relationship and looking at what is aimed at the object is considered disappointing. Non-realistic conflicts are conflicts that do not originate from the purpose of competition, but originate from the manifestation of the inability to fight the groups that are their enemies.

**Fig. 2** People only communicate with people who have similar opinions, beliefs, etc. The communication patterns in it are symbolized as stars, which are interconnected with one another



In this study, a realistic conflict occurred in the Cigugur Girang community, Bandung Barat. The people there are facing political conflict. The conflict was caused by differences in political choices and the loss of one of the election participants who had great power. The polarization led to conflicts between supporters of Participant A and Participant B. Based on the results of observations, the people of Cigugur Girang Village confronted each other between groups. Confrontation between groups can be categorized as polarization in political aspects. In terms of authority (Susan, 2019), there are only two groups that conflict, namely between the holder of authority and subordinates who have certain interests.

Polarization and conflict that occurred in Cigugur Girang resulted in instability in the political conditions of the village. Various programs and activities are affected and hampered, including community empowerment program. Reviewed from the communication process, polarized community communication patterns become noise in the communication process that occurs in community empowerment. So the information conveyed by the sender is not fully received by the receiver, which results in misunderstanding information.

## Conclusion

The results are concluded that the existence of the echo chamber phenomenon in the practice of community empowerment. Echo chamber is an environment where someone only hears the same opinions and beliefs with him. The communication patterns formed in the echo chamber are symbolized as stars. In the context of community empowerment, it can occur when there is conflict and polarization in the community. Conflict and polarization results in people only hearing the same opinion as what they think. Like the star symbol, the people inside are connected to each other.

In this study we recommend special attention in community empowerment practices. Unique phenomena like this can occur elsewhere if they have the same situation in society. The need for special sensitivity for macro social workers or empowerment actors to identify phenomena like this. These skills will be useful in order to create a conducive situation in the midst of conflict or community polarization

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