

# Exploring Root Cause of Social Problems in China: Concept, Framework and Methodological Potential of Social Ecology

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## Abstract

In China, the conflicts between economic development and social ethics caused by social transformation become increasingly prominent, thus triggering a series of novel social problems. These novel social problems are causing great damage to the stability of China's society and therefore push us to search for a new theory or consummate an existing theory to illustrate the underlying mechanisms behind them. This paper argues the root cause of social problems in recent China lies in the absence of harmonious social connections and inadequate social resources after elaborating the concept of 'social ecology' and its conceptual model. We further illustrate the methodological potential of social ecology in solving social problems by exploring the dynamic equilibrium and disorder of social ecology and its causes.

**Keywords:** Social Ecology; Social Ecological Systems Theory; Methodological Potential

## 1. Introduction

China now is undergoing a period of more profound society transition (Guo & Meng, 2014; Jiaming, 2010; Xiaohong, 2014). The transition has caused contradictions between economic development and social morality, thus bring about a series of social problems. Over the past few years, many widely-concerned social problems happened in China like 'China Shandong Illegal Vaccine Scandal', '2008 Chinese Milk Scandal', 'Death of Wang Yue', and various corruption problems (Ohuchi, Suzuki, Yamamoto, Kuriyama, & Ishida, 2015; Pei et al., 2011; Yao, 2002). Different from social problems in the early periods of the People's Republic of China (Feilong, 2009), today's social problems in China show a variety of new features focused on food safety, doctor-patient trust, corruption, spectators psychology, internet addiction of the youths and so on. These kind of new features push us to search for a new theory or consummate an existing theory to illustrate the underlying mechanisms behind them. As far as we know, previous studies on the social problems are mostly based on particular cases (George & Bennett, 2005; Stake, 1978). However, if social problems are studied from a perspective of system theory, it can be found that what has led to social problems are not separated, but are related to and nested in each other (Jun, 2000; Liu & Bian, 2014). If the entire social environment is in an unhealthy state, then any organizations or individuals inside it can't survive and develop in a healthy way. This paper argues social problems to be the consequence of the disordered social ecology after defining the meaning of 'social ecology' based on the 'social ecosystem theory' (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 1994). We elaborate that 'social ecology' has two decisive factors: the 'environment-factor' and the 'relationship-factor', and propose a conceptual model of social ecology based on its element composition and hierarchical structure. We argue that the imbalance of either of the above two elements of social ecology will inevitably cause social ecological disorder and thus social problems, and proposes solutions. We believe the sociological exposition of 'social ecology' in this paper provides us with a novel analysis framework for in-depth understanding of the complex relationship between social problems and social environment. Based on that, we can not only analyze the root causes of concrete social problems, but also can pertinently select policy instruments to solve them. Undoubtedly, this paper has methodological potential for promoting the in-depth analysis of social issues, and provides a new perspective for the innovation of social management.

The rest of this paper is organized in the following manner: Section 2 gives the concept, basic elements and a generalized model of social ecology; Section 3 illustrates the methodological potential of social ecology by exploring in detail the dynamic equilibrium and disorder of social ecology and its relation with the two basic elements of social ecology, as well as how to construct a benign social ecology to get social problems solved based on our proposed model. Section 4 summarizes and makes the conclusion.

## 2. Concept, Elements and Conceptual Model of Social Ecology

The Society Ecosystems Theory, also known as the Ecosystems Theory, was initially put forward by Urie and Morris (1979). This theory regarded the social environment in which human survive as a kind of natural ecological system, and believed that the environment was of vital importance for the analysis and understanding of human behaviors. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (1994) further improved this theory by consummating a generalized model. This model illustrated that the social environment was a functional integrity composed of a

series of interrelated basic elements such as family, school and community, and that the whole social environment can be divided into three hierarchies: the micro system, the intermediate system and the macro system. In summary, the Society Ecosystems Theory tried to examine and regulate the social practice of human beings based on improving the overall system. It emphasized the harmonious interaction between the individual and the social environment, therefore pursuit the harmony and stability of the whole social ecosystem.

Based on the Society Ecosystems Theory, this paper argues that a well-functioned social ecosystem should have two basic features: on one hand, attention should be paid to improve the relationship between the individual and the social environment to ensure that individuals can be well adapted to the environment. On the other hand, the social environment itself should be improved to effectively satisfy the material demand and information requirements of individuals. Therefore, according to the above analysis, we elaborated the concept of 'social ecology' as the 'environment-factor' and the 'relationship-factor' of every hierarchies of the whole social ecosystem. The environment-factor refers to the resources and conditions necessary for the survival and development of an individual, including opportunities for individuals to get access to resources. The relationship-factor refers to the condition of the interaction between the individual and the social ecosystem: for example, whether the information transformation and communication is smooth in the social ecosystem, whether the individuals can adapt well to their social environment, as well as interactions among different hierarchies of the social ecosystem. At the same time, this paper also divided the 'social ecology' into three levels: the micro-ecology (refers to the individuals and their directly interacted environment such as family and school); the medium-ecology (refers to a higher level of the social ecosystem formed by the micro-ecologies and the interactions inside it such as the community); the macro-ecology (refers to the consistency of the social ecosystem at the scale of the cultures and sub cultures, such as the custom and institution), and proposed a conceptual model of social ecology based on its essential elements and hierarchical structure following our previous work on symbiosis network (Leiyong, Feng, Xiangze, Lei, & Miao, 2013) , as shown in Figure 1.

### **3. Methodological Potential of Social Ecology**

#### *3.1 Equilibrium and Disorder of Social Ecology*

Just like the natural ecosystem, the function of the social ecosystem also depends on the maintenance of its internal homeostasis: the social resources must meet the needs of all people in every stratum of society, and the individuals can interact well with their external environment (Folke, 2006). The inadequate supply of social resources or tensions between individuals and the environment will cause social ecological imbalance. The imbalanced social ecology will further lead to the malfunction of part of the social ecology system and eventually cause social disorganization, in which situation the structural disorder or chaos will happen in the society while at the same time, the previous regime and social system remain unchanged (Bursik, 1988). Either of the two basic elements of social ecology (the environment-factor and the relationship-factor) going wrong will inevitably cause the imbalance of social ecology and induce a series of social problems. The more serious consequence of the social ecological imbalance will lead to social disintegration that the entire social system will collapse. The dynamic maintenance of social ecological equilibrium was shown in Figure 2 below.

##### *3.1.1 Relationship-factor Caused Ecological Disorder and Social Problems*

The relationship-factor refers to the extent to which an individual can be adapted to the social environment as well as whether the interaction between different ecological hierarchies is smooth. We argue that the lack of interaction between the individual and their surroundings in the process of social transformation is a major cause for social problems. In traditional family-based social networks, people usually share a close interrelationship. However, industrialization and urbanization brought about by social transformation broke the traditional social network and put forward new goals and requirements to people's relationship with the environment. For example, the continuous emerging of hi-technology or the change of career mode could exacerbate the tension of personal feelings. If individuals cannot quickly adapt to the environment with increasing external pressures from school, work or everyday life, they may have feelings of confusion, lack of belonging, anxiety and so on. Therefore people will be produced with a sense of detachment or a sense of confrontation with the society. Under these circumstances, the choice of indulging in the virtual world to avoid interaction with the real world is no doubt an attractive option for people who have failed to adapt to the social transformation, thus bring about social problems like drug and network addictions (Parrillo, Stimson, & Stimson, 2004). At the same time, indifferent neighborhood association and interpersonal relationship in a highly-urbanized community or the non-personality labor mode in assembly line factories will make the connections between people and people separated from each other, thus triggering social problems like spectators psychology.

##### *3.1.2 Environment-factor Caused Ecological Disorder and Social Problems*

According to the theory of functionalism, social disorganization will occur once personal or group goals cannot be fully realized. Two elements play a vital role in the cause of social disorganization: the 'goal' that is recognized and pursued by a particular society or culture; and the 'criterion' defined in a society or culture as legal means to achieve the 'goal'. We attribute the above two elements to the 'environment-factor'. Normally, a proper social

opportunity structure provides the legal means for the realization of the goal, thus, the deviant behavior occurs less frequently. However, once there are enough conflicts between ‘criterion’ and ‘goal’, there will be people trying to achieve their goals through illegal ways and social disorganization occur thereupon. For example, some violence and crime can be to a certain extent attributed to the unfairly distributed social resources. Differences in age, gender or social class may limit the opportunity of a person to pursue its goals. At this time, if the society does not provide for people rational approaches to obtain their expected social status and lifestyle, there may be some people trying to achieve their personal goals by illegal means, thus bring about social problems like violence and crime. The absence of social criterions such as ‘hidden rules’ may cause serious "unfairness" feelings in some people, these unconscious influences will inevitably lead to some of the public rights holders psychologically-imbalanced and conduct rent-seeking behaviors. This will certainly lead to serious corruption problems. Similarly, the growing food safety problems in recent China is also a consequence of enterprise’s unfair competition for economic benefits regardless of social criterions (Jingshan & Hailun, 2012).

### 3.2 Constructing a Benign Social Ecology

In the theoretical framework of social ecology, the due function of the individual or organization in the society was based on the overall consistency of the social values of all hierarchies of the social ecology. Therefore the construction of a good social ecology depends on the bottom-up individual participations, as well as top-down policy interventions: to improve the social ecology, first of all, the individual's thought and behavior must be changed to be consistent with the overall social value, which is the bottom to up procedure; at the same time, only the overall social ecological environment has been improved, can the individual's thought be more unified, which is the top to down process. For example, usually the actual effect of a specific-issue-aimed policy is limited. This is because that the local ecology that contributes to social problems usually has a strong ability to offset the external interventions, therefore control measures from external policies will gradually vanished with the depletion of the support fund or the termination of the policy. Similarly, the huge social problems to be really solved requires the whole society to provide a large-scale and sustained resource mobilization, which must be guaranteed by the improvement of the whole social ecology and the participatory, spontaneous social ecology construction as believed by (Maton, 2000).

Therefore, this paper argues that social ecology can be improved through the following two ways: firstly by strengthening capacity building such as improving pedagogical resources of school, strengthening government administration ability and social welfare to make the environment better meet the needs of people; Secondly by strengthening the connections between the environments and people, which can be done by optimizing social resource allocation, establishing social environment of fairness and justice and creating harmonious social network, such as increasing public participation in decision making, making the access of economic, psychological and political resources to the vulnerable groups more easily.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper defines the concept of social ecology based on the ‘society ecosystems theory’, and further elaborates the inscapes of social ecology. We argue the ‘environment-factor’ and the ‘relationship-factor’ are the two basic elements of social ecology and attribute the cause of social problems to the imbalance of either of the above two elements. A benign social ecology must be constructed to actual solve the social problems, which can be achieved by capacity building and strengthening human-environment interrelationship. We believed that the concept of social ecology in this paper has great methodological potential, which can be used for in-depth mining of the root cause of social problems and thereby guiding social management. Our future work will be focused on the evaluation of social problems with times feature to perform empirical studies based on our analysis framework in this paper, such as find out the root cause of food safety problems in China and provide related solving method or figure out the root cause of doctor-patient trust problems using specific cases.

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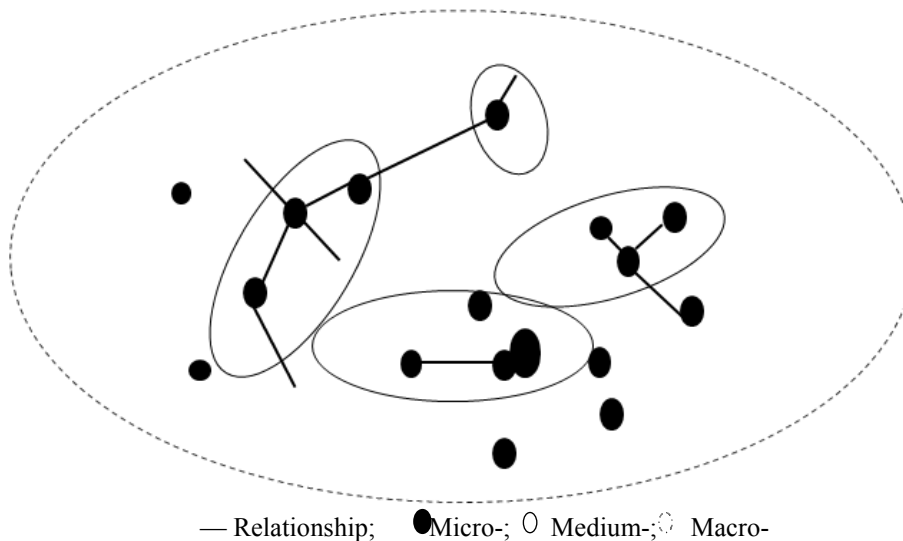


Figure 1. The Element Composition and Structure of Social Ecology

The social ecology has three hierarchies, the micro-ecology, the medium-ecology and the macro-ecology. The black solid point in Fig.1 represents the micro-ecology, the white round frame is the medium-ecology and the dotted circle stands for the macro-ecology, the lines indicated that all hierarchies of the social ecology are closely related. Different ecologies can be closely related or isolated from each other, and secondary ecologies are either included in the ecologies of the higher level or are free from them. The diameter indicates the intensity of the environment-factor. A well maintained social ecology depends on proper environment-factor strength as well as enough connections among ecologies. Social ecology disorder happens once there is too much dissociation among ecologies or the environment-factor is not sufficient.

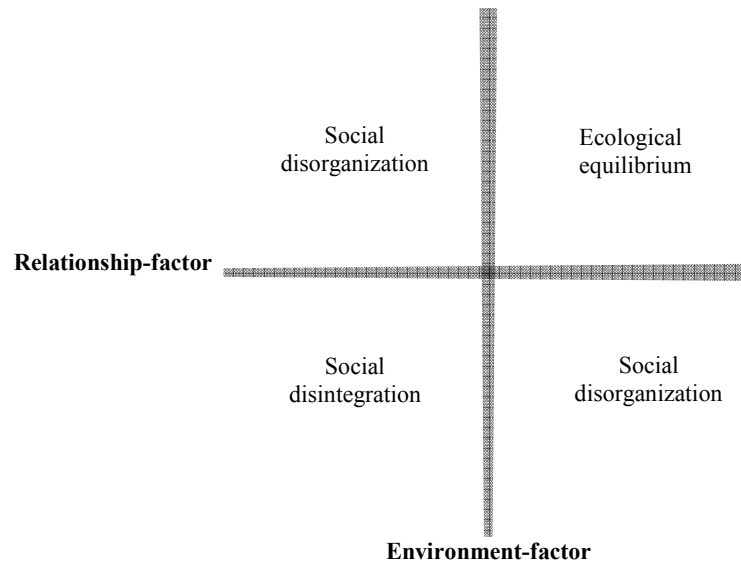


Figure 2. Equilibrium and Disorder of Social Ecology

Figure 2 indicates that either of the two basic elements of social ecology going wrong will inevitably cause social ecological disorder (defined as social disorganization) as shown in the second and fourth quadrant of the coordinate. A more severe social ecological disorder (described as social disintegration) will happen if both of the relationship-factor and the environment-factor are weak. Under the circumstance that the relationship-factor and the environment-factor are both strong, the social ecology is in a state of equilibrium (as shown in the first quadrant of the coordinate).