Group Culture and the Interaction Order: Local Sociology on the Meso-Level

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Abstract

Although explicit attention to the role of small groups has waned in sociology, an empirical understanding of the interaction order is increasing. A focus on the group—the meso-level of analysis—enriches both structural and interactional approaches, stressing shared and ongoing meaning. Groups constitute social order, just as groups are themselves constituted by that order. The examination of local action reveals how interaction orders emerge and create meanings that spread throughout a wider network. Despite the limits of a meso-level analysis in examining both external webs of constraint and immediate negotiations, this approach addresses identity, social capital, collective action, group culture, networks, and civil society. By building on collective identity, shared history, common spaces, and ongoing social relations, groups provide mechanisms through which individuals fit into larger structures and through which social structures shape individuals.

BRINGING GROUPS BACK IN

Analyzing intellectual networks (theory groups) in sociology, Mullins (1973, p. 105) labels small group theory as "the light that failed." It is an ironic description for a tradition to which Mullins's own analysis contributed. Here was an approach to which the 1954 *American Sociological Review* devoted a rare special issue but that has since been marginalized (Steiner 1974, Hackman & Katz 2010), seemingly unable to extend the analysis of group dynamics to intellectual questions outside the delineation of how groups operate (Collins 1999).[1] In place of examining continuing social relations—the interaction order—structural models of society have dominated sociology, and cognitive models of individual action have dominated psychology. However, the study of ongoing groups is crucial to examining how affiliation, community, and culture are generated. Assessing the health of a research domain is difficult, as sociologists may study groups without defining their research as being about groups. But the lasting contributions of Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead, George Homans, Charles Horton Cooley, and Erving Goffman, which created the infrastructure of the discipline, suggest that the study of groups belongs to the sociological core. Still, the assessments of Steiner, Hackman & Katz, and Collins of the marginality of group research are persuasive, and even those who call for multiple levels of analysis often excise the interaction order, examining individual, structural, and institutional processes, but not groups (Jepperson & Meyer 2011).

My charge is not simply to bring groups back in. Emphasizing the ongoing context of interaction addresses a set of sociological problems that otherwise remain opaque. It is the meso-level of analysis to which groups belong.[2] Local domains create the conditions for social order (Brint 2001) and bridge the self and the institution (Hallett & Ventresca 2006). Recurring, meaningful, referential interaction constitutes the core of meso-level analysis (Maines 1982, Turner 2005). Social structures depend for their tensile strength on groups with shared pasts and imagined futures, that are spatially situated, that create identification, and that are based on enduring relations (Fine 2010). In contrast to those who imply that order is constructed anew in interaction scenes [a complaint made of ethnomethodology and dramaturgical analysis (Fine 2010)], microcommunities create social stability. A local context, or set of shared understandings arising from continuing interaction, provides the cultural basis for action, a point Goffman (1983) emphasized in depicting the interaction order.

By "group" I refer to an aggregation of persons that is characterized by shared place, common identity, collective culture, and social relations, although groups vary in the extent to which they apply. These four features constitute the basis of the group form, and I return to them as crosscutting themes as I subsequently discuss bodies of research that emerge from a focus on the group. Within the group, participants may know each other either as discrete persons or through their social roles. These include traditional primary groups (such as family) and secondary groups (including workgroups or voluntary associations). Interaction is often face-to-face but may include telephonic or cyber communication.[3] What is important is that the action and response have temporal immediacy.

Although size helps define what constitutes a small group, the term has no precise numerical

[1] A Google Ngram search of the term "small groups" reveals a steady rise in the published use of the term from 1945 to 1965, and then a steady decline from 1965 to 2008 (a decline of nearly 75%).

[2] Meso-level analysis has had several meanings within sociology, at times depicting research at the level of the organization. For my usage, I focus on the space between individual interaction and that of large-scale organizations and institutions: not untethered behavior, but the interaction order.

[3] Virtual communication has expanded significantly since Bales's writing, leaving open whether face-to-face interaction is essential or whether virtual communication will suffice. Cyber communities have features comparable to interactional spaces (Boellstorff 2008), but participants in such communities often desire to meet personally in order to emphasize that their relations are real.

limits, but refers to a set of persons who recognize each other as belonging to an interdependent community (in this review, I do not distinguish between groups and small groups; in all cases, it is assumed that most participants will be aware of each other). Bales (1950, p. 33) defines a small group as "any number of persons engaged in interaction with each other in a single face-to-face meeting or series of meetings, in which each member receives some impression or perception of each other member distinct enough so that he [or she] can, either at the time or in later questioning, give some reaction to each of the others as an individual person." This process occurs across time as groups develop structure and culture, trust and conflict, all of which lead to research on stages of group development (Hare & Naveh 1982, Farrell 2001). Despite its apparent simplicity, the group is a complex system of status, authority, and meaning (Arrow et al. 2000). Following traditional practice, I write of the group as an obdurate, observable entity. However, although participants often define their tight-knit relations as constituting a group, the group form ultimately is an analytic construct with boundaries set by observers; it is a construct that often maps well with the lay concept of the group, however.

BUILDING A LOCAL SOCIOLOGY

Recognizing that much research examines groups implicitly, I draw boundaries in this review. Although I cite studies outside sociology, I do not emphasize the streams of applied research or theory within communications, management, or education. I also do not address research that analyzes behavioral patterns within a group setting but that ignores the group as an action domain (as does, for example, McGrath 1984). This eliminates important streams of social psychological research—including much of the literature on group process, such as status characteristics theory—unless the analysis addresses the group as such. I do not focus on person-to-person transactions but rather on action that is tied to group belonging and that represents the group.

Experimental research often examines a minimal or stripped group. An evanescent group is created, but without commitment, identity, or a past. Although this research is crucial to analyzing action in the presence of others, it is less relevant to ongoing groups into which participants invest time and energy.

The group is an arena through which individuals collaborate and use their shared identities to link to larger communities, just as larger communities constrain group action. In this sense, groups and society are mutually constitutive. Given the prevalence of groups in establishing social order, society can be conceptualized as an ecology of groups, recognizing both the group's prevalence and local placement. Groups, overlapping like fish scales, share traditions and members, allowing individuals to gain influence that is absent in individual action.

Simultaneously, groups make organizational life possible. Organizations survive not just because of the formal arrangement of personnel but because of the interaction scenes the arrangements generate. Organizations are embodied and, as a result, become powerful action realms, as Hallett (2010, Hallett & Ventresca 2006) argues based on ethnographies of conflict in public schools and industrial organizations.

To extend Goffman's (1983) interaction order we must connect an action present with a collective past. Groups provide opportunity structures that permit the development of meanings and social systems that extend beyond group boundaries. Emotional commitment to a group and its local culture produces standards for action that both shape the group and radiate outward (Lawler et al. 2009). In the strong case, affiliation directly shapes an actor's identity, motivating change or encouraging adherence to accepted standards. In the weak case, it creates a tacit desire to follow propriety. In neither instance do individuals negotiate their relationships afresh at each encounter; instead they rely on expectations developed through shared experience. Because every act is set within a local context—a set of shared understandings—the organization of these

contexts as sites for interpretation and action is crucial to a group-based sociology.

Although this approach challenges perspectives that favor structure over action, a recent upsurge of interest in contextual forces is evident through an emphasis on the emergent, the brokered, the attached, and the embedded. In this use of context, I refer to a system of meanings and relations that provides epistemic stability, permitting the creation of expectations through the recognition of shared experiences. A broad range of recent research topics recognizes the importance of local contexts: emergent mechanisms of cause and effect (Sawyer 2005), socially embedded and networked brokerage in economic transactions (Hillman 2008), emotional attachments to nested groups (Lawler et al. 2009), local structures that shape identity (Bearman 1991), and the conditions of scientific production on discovery (Knorr-Cetina 1999, Henke & Gieryn 2008). These studies, different in method, substance, and theoretical orientation, treat local contexts as the shapers of action. The influential neighborhood-effects literature demonstrates that broad structural forces alone do not shape personal outcomes but are mediated through the power of surroundings. Variables such as collective efficacy depend on continuing group relations, as not all poor communities are alike (Sampson et al. 2002). Sometimes the forces that shape group relations are ambiguously specified, but more specification is part of the research agenda. As Harding (2010) suggests in his study of poor neighborhoods in Boston, in order to understand neighborhood effects, one must observe communities through local cliques, relationships, and cultures.

Within an institutionalized macrosociety, decisions are made and actions taken through groups or small communities. This small-group decision making is evident in juries as local systems for generating justice that are separate from the abstraction of law (Diamond & Rose 2005, Burnett 2001), in congregations as loci for the display of faith (Becker 1999, Chen 2002), in family and relationships as commitment devices (Oring 1984, Bendix 1987), in neighborhoods as generators of social order (Grannis 2009), and in work teams as culture carriers (Sparrowe et al. 2001, Lipman-Blumen & Leavitt 2001). Microinstitutions are not always efficient or collegial (Kaufmann 2009, Weeks 2004), but they organize society through granulated structures.

To explore how groups provide opportunity structures, I examine six domains where a meso-level focus has contributed to our understanding of social order: The first pair focuses on individuals in groups, the second focuses on groups as shared action spaces, and the last examines groups in extended systems. To provide a crosscutting perspective, I refer to those elements that characterize groups: identity, relations, culture, and place. I begin by examining how groups shape selves through identity (being in groups) and social capital (belonging to groups); I turn to groups as spaces for the creation of shared meaning, establishing collective action (bonding by groups) and group cultures (building groups); and finally I examine the extension of groups, revealing how groups contribute to social networks (bridging of groups) and connect citizens to civic life (groups as buffers).

Being in Groups: Social Identities

Identity, the presentation of selves to publics, is the access point for sociologists to treat persons as social entities. Rather than by cognition or emotion alone, identities develop through ongoing and referential interaction with influential communities. To understand identity development, one must not only focus on the individual as shaped by expansive institutions, but also recognize the influence of identification with one's social relations. Routine copresence, along with the history that such interaction implies, builds a secure sense of self. Who one is, and also who one imagines that one is, depends on those who surround one and those spaces and scenes in which one participates (Tajfel 1982). The body of experimental research that grows out of self-categorization theory demonstrates the importance of identity boundaries for creating identities based on

both social categories and groups (Hogg et al. 2004). Identity is never simply about "me," but about "we" (Burke & Stets 2009). Of course these we's do not necessarily refer to organized groups as opposed to categories, larger social segments, or even idiosyncratic constructions. The assumption that identities always develop from groups is untenable, and further, such identities can be multidimensional and shifting. Their complexity is often ignored in experimental and survey research. As a result, group membership does not map completely as the basis of identity (Turner et al. 1987). Still, although there are multiple templates on which to draw, the recognition of social relations helps define one's identity, especially with regard to tight-knit communities such as families, work teams, sororities, military units, congregations, or cliques. Beyond these relations, the places in which one is active shape the embrace of and comfort with identity. For instance, research on identity authenticity in workplaces, creating a true self, reveals the desirability of social consistency through which groups bolster or undercut selves (Sloan 2007).

Much work in identity theory treats the group as an anchor for the self, an argument made explicit in Manfred Kuhn's Twenty Statements Test (Kuhn & McPartland 1954), in which respondents had to answer the question, "Who Am I?" Although the question or the setting may have primed the response, crucial to identity were social categories and microcommunities with which individuals identified. Reference group theory and social comparison theory, as developed in the 1960s, extended these claims, arguing that identity is connected to one's imagined affiliations with other groups. Recent research suggests that the power of group identification affects attitudes toward law and assessments of justice, as in decisions of tax compliance (Wenzel 2004). Individuals search for groups whose members they deem comparable to judge their own accomplishments and may use the culture of the group to shape personal identity (Dutton & Dukerich 1991).

The fundamental claim is that a personal sense of self does not come from within or from beyond (or only from within or beyond), but from comparison with groups of meaningful others. Identity is fundamentally interpersonal to the extent that it is based on groups to which the actor holds loyalty. Positive affiliations determine selves, but so do the social boundaries that separate "us" from "them" (Hogg & Abrams 1988, Lichterman 2005). As Riley & Burke (1995) argue, a shared meaning structure develops among group members, and this interpretation validates the participant's identity. In other words, it is not simply participation but the willingness to embrace the history and culture of the group that generates identity. When the group member's role diverges with the implications of identity, she will be less satisfied with participation (Riley & Burke 1995). Although there can be little doubt that groups matter in identity work, we must be wary of embracing this model too tightly; considerable variation in self-building occurs within any population, and the subtlety of meaning structures is often erased as they become operationalized. Sociologists have been wary of using personal case studies, but it is in such cases—psychiatric or grounded in autobiography (Bertaux 1981)—that the complexity of the self can be seen. Individual assessments reveal the diversity of selves that are found in any community, no matter how tightly knit or powerful the attachments (Hogg et al. 2004).

The most prominent line of research on the connection of social placement and identity, social identity theory, was developed by Tajfel et al. (1971), Turner et al. (1987), and Hogg et al. (1995). As they have argued, based on a series of experimental and questionnaire-based studies, identity derives from group commitments and boundaries, and further, these identities shape intergroup relations. We define ourselves in light of the categories and groups with which we identify and with which others identify us, and this becomes our basis of action. These relations serve us well for purposes of self-enhancement (Rubin & Hewstone 1988) and self-verification (Burke & Stets 2009).

Whereas early work on identity emphasized broad social categories, such as race or gender,

recent attempts have explicitly applied social identity theory to group life, recognizing the specificity of identity (Hogg et al. 2004, Hogg 2006, Stets 2006). As groups have entitativity (Campbell 1958), sharing common fate, interaction, shared goals, and interdependence, the identity derived from group membership is made powerful. Self-esteem is part of a collective, shared self (Rubin & Hewstone 1988), even recognizing that in practice groups are internally differentiated (Stets 2006) and identities are linked to subgroups.

Recruitment to groups shapes not only action but also selves. Groups often grow by incorporating members (Levine & Moreland 1994); in domains in which social problems are salient, the constructed identity (along with claims of injustice and the possibility of agentic action) is crucial to participation in protest movements (Klandermans 1997). Klandermans details this process by showing how groups created identities in the movement of Dutch farmers opposing EU and national regulations (Klandermans & de Weerd 2000).

But we must not assume that one master identity suffices. Recent research and theory have emphasized that the idea of a single self is inadequate. Just as one does not participate in a single group, one may have multiple selves, a point emphasized in Gergen's (1991) model of the saturated self. Persons are not limited to single selves; selves oscillate in response to immediate circumstances, a feature of postmodernism. Lahire (2011, p. xv) similarly speaks of "the plural actor," emphasizing the effects of interactional contexts on the disposition to act and to believe. Still, whether one focuses on a dominant self or multiple competing selves, a long-standing social psychological research tradition demonstrates that the microcommunities with which we feel allegiance actively shape self-definitions.

Belonging to Groups: Social Capital

Groups do more than shape selves; they also provide resources that contribute to actors' satisfaction and achievement of goals. With their knots of personal relations, groups are a prime source of social capital. In addition to being an anchor for identity, a group is a community, evidenced in group feeling tied to communitas or Gemeinschaft. Groups not only provide identity verification, but also, through the mechanism of collective support, generate attachment, trust, and emotional affiliation (Burke & Stets 1999, Brint 2001, Lawler et al. 2009). The relations within the group provide for the creation of social capital, establishing mechanisms for transforming interpersonal relations into desirable ends through the sharing of resources. To the extent that an interaction order recognizes a common purpose, social capital increases. As Lim & Putnam (2010) suggest in analyzing the effects of belonging to church congregations, these groups produce communal fulfillment that then creates satisfying lifeworlds. Being in a congregation—of whatever denomination—increases life satisfaction. Religion does not matter; churches do. Congregations both provide social service and create belonging (Wuthnow 1994, Chaves 2009). This argument suggests that the beliefs of the denomination are not critical if congregants feel a tight commitment to each other, as mediated by sharing a worship space, although this may downplay the psychic comfort of particular systems of faith by emphasizing social support over content. Further, congregations vary in their organizational structure and preferred mode of discourse (Bartkowski 2000), and not all congregations generate positive affect, as conflict over resources or beliefs is often found within churches (Becker 1999). However, commitment to other seekers is often as powerful—or more so—as one's relationship with the divine. Whereas faith-based groups are an exemplary form of community, leisure worlds, such as local reading groups, demonstrate that shared culture can create social capital if a common purpose builds a caring community (Long 2003). Although social capital derives from personal ties, group ties based on individuals together in a common place are an especially efficient means of generating resources to fulfill one's goals.

The relationships embedded in group life provide the structure of meaning and constitute what symbolic interactionists term social worlds (Strauss 1978, Unruh 1980). Although not all social capital is embedded within ongoing communities (distant, mediated relations matter as well), the presence of others provides a space in which relations are translated into material and moral support. Sociable organizations such as Mensa (Aldrich 1971) reveal the power of the group in establishing social capital as participants embrace the group's history and culture. When participants return repeatedly to a shared space—a third place, in Oldenburg's (1989) terms—identification is magnified through continuing relations. In this regard, Tolbert (2005) finds that locally oriented retail businesses provide positive benefits for the civic community, including increased sociability and decreased poverty and crime. By knowing each other and sharing standards, alienation and isolation decline. Third places, such as restaurants, generate communal support during crises and demonstrate how affiliation trumps apathy (Katovich & Hintz 1997, Erickson 2009).

Putnam (2000) is the leading proponent of the importance of groups in generating attachment, speaking of the virtues of bowling teams and parent-teacher associations and the dangers of social isolation. His work is simultaneously influential and controversial, criticized for confusing the features of groups (or organizations) that make a difference. Putnam emphasizes the importance of more formal, bounded groups, downplaying informal cliques. Regardless of whether groups—especially nonkinship groups—and the intimate ties associated with them have declined in modern society (McPherson et al. 2006), research supports the claim that group participation benefits social welfare, net of obdurate economic realities. Common purpose establishes a basis for trust and a commitment to group members' welfare, what Haidt (2011), in examining the social dynamics of morality, speaks of as "constrained parochialism," or a locally embedded basis of morality. As McNeill (1995) points out, people rarely give their lives for their country, but often do for their comrades, and groups in sync are more effective than those less coordinated (Wiltermuth & Heath 2009). The value of transforming I's into we's is emphasized in the work of the Finnish philosopher Tuomela (2007), who argues that a class of groups, we-mode groups (as opposed to weaker I-mode groups), serve as commitment mechanisms. These groups permit participants to overcome social distance by creating an ideology of cohesion, an effect evident in the case of amateur mushroom collectors who balance the secrecy in knowing hunting sites with the desire to create a community (Fine & Holyfield 1996). Not every group can build a culture of concern, as self-interest rarely vanishes, but at times self-interest becomes tied to group accomplishment. Whereas sociologists may define sociability (acquaintance) networks (Riviere 2002) as thin interaction, group sociality potentially constitutes a thick form of community through what Garfinkel (2006, p. 189) speaks of as "working acts," collaborating for common goals.

Part of the power of voluntary groups is that through selective recruitment relations are based upon homophily, the similarity of participants as judged by their characteristics and past cultures. Evaluating friendships in 304 face-to-face groups, McPherson & Smith-Lovin (1987) found that friends are more similar on status dimensions than chance would predict, suggesting that similar backgrounds, and not only shared endeavor, create attachment. But if a group includes diverse individuals, the fact that they are collectively engaged can lead to a diversity of friendships, building social capital.

Bonding by Groups: Collective Action

Few concepts are more central to the sociological study of change than collective action. Although we speak of institutional or societal change, social arrangements alter because people in common cause make it happen; change is rarely the result of a single actor or an inchoate public. As the English writer Rudyard Kipling (1919, p. 29) memorably asserted, "For the strength of the pack is the wolf and the

strength of the wolf is the pack." Put differently, groups depend on their members and to achieve change members rely upon their groups.

At times a group can become, in effect, an actor, operating through control of the actions of members (List & Pettit 2011). But actors gain confidence from those who stand with them. Emotional affiliations support even high-risk activism, as Goodwin (1997) found in the Huk rebellion in the Philippines. A similar, if less dramatic, phenomenon became evident in the 1970s as collective consciousness-raising groups (Cassell 1977) emerged in support of the feminist movement. Although membership in such groups ebbed and flowed, leading to instability, it provided moments of solidarity. As Durkheim (1912) understood, groups produce collective effervescence, creating passion and even ecstasy in shared spaces. The challenge is to sustain that emotional attachment in the face of routine and external demands (Bartkowski 2000, Collins 2004).

The limiting power of the group is evident in the phenomenon of groupthink (Janis 1972), a process by which some groups ignore useful information and alternatives of action. It is a potentially dysfunctional form of collective action, as demonstrated in the Bay of Pigs intervention, which led to a policy debacle (Hart 1994). Group history is so powerful that alternatives can be ignored. In other instances, groups weighing multiple options, as during the Cuban Missile Crisis (Gibson 2012), produce salutary results. Vigorous debate exists over the extent to which the character or style of groups affects decision making, as opposed to the interests of individuals or large-scale institutional pressures. But the bounded group is recognized as the proper place for decision making, as demonstrated by the prevalence of commissions and boards as decision-making fora. Groups that are charged by institutions—whether juries, steering committees, or policy-making groups—are alike in that they *as groups* have the authority to decide. Institutional practices treat groups as the proper loci of decisions.

Although much social movement scholarship examines the relationship between the movement and the state, between the movement and the individual, or in the search for resources, other analyses argue that movements depend on ongoing affective relations. Although movements can be extensive, often they are organized through interlocking groups, cells, or chapters (Lofland & Jamison 1984), making intense identifications easier. Movements are in this sense reticulated organizations (Gerlach & Hine 1970), with locals having distinctive cultures, resources, and leadership and producing variable outcomes (Reger 2002, Andrews et al. 2010), as evident in groups as diverse as the Communist Party of America, local Tea Parties, or Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Depending on the desire of a central committee to coordinate action or institute surveillance, the connection among independent chapters may be strong or the groups may be loosely coupled.

For a movement to grow, become institutionally stable, and gain the allegiance of others, commitment units are essential. Groups help overcome the free rider problem (Olson 1965) through selective reputational and material incentives that microcommunities with tight surveillance, emotional support, and control through gossip networks can provide. As Snow and colleagues (1980) demonstrate in observing the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement, groups first recruit through networks, building on preestablished relations and differential association. Only later does publicity serve for recruitment. While not denying the importance of linkages to resources, states, and other action groups, movements require network linkages to potential supporters. In other words, groups gain strength through the identification that they engender, even leading to commitment to costly action (Della Porta 1988, Sageman 2008). Through relationships, small-scale networks build solidarity and grievance frames that larger units cannot as easily generate, overcoming fears of retribution by state actors (Gamson et al. 1982, Gould 1995, Pfaff 1996). Commitment may be so powerful that even failure does not produce disillusion (Summers-Effler 2010). Although close ties matter, Kitts (2000)

argues that such ties may inhibit participation or encourage disengagement, especially when the ties are external. But when friends agree on collective action, the movement can thrive. Singles attend rallies, marches, protests, or events infrequently, but do so with friends and acquaintances (Aveni 1977, McPhail 1991). What appears to be a mass is often a collection of groups, forming an evanescent, "wispy community" (Fine & van den Scott 2011).

An effective organization must incorporate numerous separate, tight-knit groups. Most challenging is building on crosscutting connections (Whyte 1974, Robnett 1996). When McAdam (1988) speaks of Freedom High as an integral component of the civil rights movement, he refers to efforts by organizers of the Mississippi Freedom Summer to establish cohesion through classes, parties, and discussions, creating commitment in the face of internal divisions and external threats. A similar sociality benefitted the Ku Klux Klan, which recognized the fiery entertainment of cross burnings as a form of group history (Blee 1991, p. 167). Polletta (2002) suggests that stories and deliberative meetings—democracy in practice—establish connections that override participation costs.

Studies of collective action emphasize that groups regulate member ingress and egress. Accretion and attrition slowly alter culture in laboratory experiments (MacNeil & Sherif 1976); the same occurs in naturally occurring groups, in which the characteristics of new members may shift over time, creating microcohorts with different ideologies and tactics, as in the abstinence and feminist movements (Gusfield 1957, Whittier 1997). As relations change, novices must embrace identification with a group and its culture just as members embrace the integration of new relations through shared activities.

Finally, successful groups enforce social control. As Ellickson (1991, p. 4) underlines, through the moral weight of a group, "order without law" emerges. In small-scale social systems, such as roommate dyads (Emerson 2008), strategies of informal control emerge, building on an overwhelming desire to maintain smooth interaction and encouraging accommodation and local remediation (Morrill 1996). Formal control is possible, but small groups are often more effective when power is hidden.

Building Groups: Idiocultures

Experimental research typically treats groups as content-free, but group culture and group history provide participants with the recognition of community. Despite connections with institutions or societies, culture is learned and used in local circumstances. In laboratory studies, groups are often treated as interchangeable but rarely, given the difficulties of operationalizing culture, as meaningful. Local cultures can generate intense affiliation and sturdy boundaries, conveying symbolic messages about otherwise implicit group norms (Bjorklund 1985). An interaction order relies upon continuing references that historicize the group (Mechling 2001, Fine 2010) and a group style that filters and localizes collective representations and structures of thought (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003, Ignatow 2004). In establishing a common history, these shared references reveal in discursive form that group members belong together (McFeat 1974)—that their relations are ongoing—and this encourages face-to-face gatherings. Interaction produces shared knowledge, and shared knowledge recursively promotes interaction (Carley 1991). Interaction and culture are mutually implicated in the establishment of social order, providing a lens by which widely shared experiences are made local, anchoring identities through the shared perspectives of others. There is not only a looking-glass self but also a looking-glass society.

This linkage of action and history is evident both in experimental studies of group development (Rose & Felton 1955, MacNeil & Sherif 1976) and in ethnographic studies of the unfolding of group life (Sherif & Sherif 1964, Wiley 1991). Groups are the crucible of cultural creation, whether constituted by decision-making strategies (Harrington 2008), traditions (Collins 2004), shared ethos (Patrick 2006), or negotiated emotional practices (Hallett 2003).

A solidified culture creates boundaries, separating insiders from those who stand outside the realm of collective knowledge. Artistic circles are sites of activity, identification, and friendship (Becker 1982, Farrell 2001), supporting a shared vision of creativity, but they are also fragile as career trajectories veer in different directions. Organizational behavior theorists discovered the value of a strong organizational culture (Ouchi & Wilkins 1985) and warned of intraorganizational hostility (Weeks 2004). But as Martin (1992) points out, cultures can not only unite corporations but also divide and antagonize. Despite the claims of promoters, culture is not necessarily a balm. Countercultures exist as well as integrative cultures, but whether successful or not, culture shapes organizational capacity. Further, organizational cultures differ in scope. Whereas some research has analyzed the culture of a large corporation beyond the level of the interacting group (IBM or Apple culture), an organizational unit may reveal a strong group culture (Roy 1959–1960), and multiple local cultures may exist within larger units. Organizations are collections of groups, formal and informal, cohesive and disputatious, coordinating and conflictual.

Idiocultures are endemic to ongoing groups, and they develop over time (Gorman 1979). As Fine (1987, p. 125) notes, "idioculture consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serve as the basis for further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation they will be understood by other members, thus being used to construct a social reality for the participants." This collective meaning system, creating identification and control, has been referred to as idioculture, microculture, and small-group culture. These cultural systems separate group action from untethered interaction, which lacks affiliation and history, and from large organizations in which socialization and affiliation occur through a more formal process. Meaning derives not from interaction as such, but through continuing interaction, suggesting that commitment to the culture (Carley 1991) and the recognition of boundaries (Cravalho 1996) provide mechanisms by which idioculture builds order.

Bridging of Groups: Extended Networks

Focusing exclusively on the group, a structure that depends on the immediacy of interaction and strong ties, ignores how social relations and cultures reverberate throughout society. A group operates within complex arrangements that extend beyond its boundaries. The group and the network are intertwined, and groups are often treated as micronetworks (Katz et al. 2004, Crossley 2010), which, unlike networks, depend upon the merging of social relations within a shared space and with a recognizable culture. Although groups are distinguished from networks through their boundaries, pasts, and identifications, groups are in some regards dense networks (strong ties do not inevitably suggest a group as, in contrast to cliques, chains of strong ties need not constitute a group). Groups provide influential first-order ties that may be bolstered through networks with second- and third-order ties: what Christakis & Fowler (2009) speak of as the effect of friends of friends of friends [Noel & Nyhan (2011) caution about assuming this influence, suggesting that homophily is confounded with social influence]. Although local effects may be indirect, actors are influenced by the multiple groups in which they participate. Dunbar's (1993) claim that the human brain can process 150 associates suggests the possibility of simultaneous involvement in smaller groups with cross-group linkages. Bounded groups are connected to other groups through interlocking ties, including multiple group memberships, acquaintances, or media. These relationship structures create the conditions through which a Goffmanian interaction order develops, a world that depends on a complex and differentiated set of social relations. As Fine & Kleinman (1979) discovered in the linkages and shared identity of local youth cultures, weak network ties are

supported by the stronger ties of gangs, clubs, and teams. This is equally evident in Uzzi's (1996) depiction of strong and weak ties in the fashion industry, based on bridging and bonding functions. Beyond providing resources, network ties also generate stability, protecting the group from the shocks of cultural innovation or changes wrought by participant transitions.

To understand the cascading influence of groups, linkages with other groups, which create a more expansive sense of belonging, are critical. Within a dense, multistranded society, individuals may participate in several subcultures (Dowd & Dowd 2003), even if such connections lead to scheduling challenges (Gibson 2005) and sometimes produce competing identifications when groups have different values (Wilkins 2008). A network of networks exists in which recurrent interaction creates structures of trust (Van Overwalle & Heylighen 2006).

An approach that connects groups can extend to national cultures through the dissemination of local productions by mass and social media. Still, although cultural industries reveal the routine processing of group productions (rock music, couture, cinema), they ultimately distribute locally created products (Hirsch 1972). Although all forms of culture rely upon group creativity (Gilmore 1988, Sawyer 2003), cultural domains with low levels of institutionalization may be more committed to treating audience members as belonging to their social world (Grazian 2003), constituting themselves as scenes without divisions between producers and consumers.

Rarely is culture shared by all in a complex society, but it gains authority through the commitment that subdivisions generate (Lizardo 2006, Vaisey & Lizardo 2010). Silver et al. (2010) emphasize that microcommunities are linked to scenes, places in which individuals with mutual interests gather in recognition of the likely presence of friends and with the expectation to engage in shared action. In practice, scenes may be too diffuse for a group analysis, but when attendance is routinized, groups can emerge from or characterize them. Scenes build on divisions based on class, race, age, gender, or style—any category that produces a common identity and feeling of belonging to a shared space (Grazian 2007). Such domains include truffles merchants in Provence (de la Predelle 2006, pp. 139–51); classical South Asian philosophers (Collins 1998, pp. 177–271); teenage goths (Wilkins 2008); and poets in Tokugawa, Japan (Ikegami 2005, pp. 171–203). The underlying point for a microsociology of subcultural groups is not the existence of common interests or demographic characteristics as such, but that these shared features shape the diffusion of and engagement with cultural elements (Muggleton 2000) and status beliefs (Ridgeway & Balkwell 1997).

Diffusion patterns expand the reach of traditions. As Shibutani (1955, p. 566) remarked, "Culture areas are coterminous with communication channels." Kitts (2003) finds with regard to housing co-ops that what one believes results from the information one receives through patterns of discourse, creating overestimates of collective agreement on existing norms. Pitting groups of preadolescent campers against each other, Sherif discovered in his classic Robbers Cave experiment that, when a threat is salient from those outside the group's boundaries, a stronger and more controlling group culture is likely (Sherif et al. 1987).

In contrast with face-to-face interaction, subcultures do not depend on copresence, but on patterns of communication. Whereas physical places bolster affiliation, virtual sites connect face-to-face groups with nodes of dissemination, such as social media and topical discussion boards. These locations create knowledge boundaries in which participants recognize cultural forms of which outsiders are unaware, as with racialized pools of knowledge that divide black and white public spheres (Maines 1999). Crucial for bridging knowledge gaps are the intersections of groups, coupled with the communication networks that link these nodes. Bridging ties connect knots of strong ties. Media outlets that target multiple groups can contribute to the development of a common culture, but this is an uncertain process. Differential association links populations to

particular cultural forms, a common theme explaining similar cultures among hostile gangs and resistance to those outside the community (Anderson 1999).

Subcultural theory has focused on those defined as outside the boundary of mainstream culture, often recognizably deviant groups that reject established norms and values. Although mainstream culture is itself internally fractured, subcultural groups often stand apart from these legitimated segments. The concept of subculture, in effect, operates as a boundary, evident in cultures of delinquency, cultures of poverty, and cultures of violence. These divisions depend on a dialectic between categories of Us and Them, even if most of Us are Them on occasion. Subcultural theory recognizes an otherness coupled with a belief that those defined as Others conform to local (but distinct) norms, values, and rituals, even if current scholarship emphasizes fluid boundaries (Muggleton 2000, Huq 2006). The challenge is to balance a confrontational style with the recognition that all cultural domains operate through similar discourses of community (Hebdige 1981, McRobbie & Garber 1976).

This perspective on subculture emphasizes the importance of local networks in the creation, activation, and perpetuation of culture. Cultural systems constitute social worlds, a concept derived from Strauss's (1978) research on competing psychiatric ideologies in hospitals; different groups of therapists, committed to their ideologies, beliefs, and science, are organized through distinctively different institutional systems. Unruh (1980, p. 277) defines social worlds as "amorphous, diffuse constellations of actors, organizations, events, and practices which have coalesced into spheres of interest and involvement for participants [and in which] it is likely that a powerful centralized authority structure does not exist." Yet the more amorphous the community, the more difficult it is to point to the mechanisms of group action. The social world—or the scene—stands between the group and the subcultural network as diffuse patterns of involvement displace a formal authority structure. Downplaying demography, the social-world approach emphasizes common knowledge, shared spaces, and relationships as the bases of community and the means to generate culture. A social world, whether in high schools, neighborhoods, or voluntary clubs, makes communal concerns concrete in the absence of a formal authority structure, while still incorporating norms, values, beliefs, and performances.

Although small groups are often studied as closed systems, participants rarely interact exclusively with one another. In contrast, groups operate through a set of interlocks or connections that together create the possibility of a "small world" (Milgram 1967, Watts 1999, Schnettler 2009). Linkages take many forms, but the effect is to create the possibility of connection outside of a local context, extending customs and performances into a more expansive interaction order.

Groups as Buffers: Civil Society

A final challenge for group research is to explain how small groups constitute civil society, encouraging citizens to take political action and serving as a buffer against top-down institutional power. Does a public sphere emerge only through mass publics and mass media? Or does it require commitment established in copresence? This latter perspective suggests that tiny publics are the building blocks from which political order is possible. The salience of groups links a theory of politics and a theory of local relationships, recognizing the importance of gathering places where individuals with shared interests congregate (Oldenburg 1989). Voluntary communities create both the possibility of civic engagement (Furman 1997) and a sense of common history, as well as the possibility of collective apathy and distance from public engagement, as Eliasoph (1998) discovered when observing groups ostensibly focused on community goals.

Rather than treating civil society as solely dependent on individuals or on masses, the significance of groups is illustrated in the creation of the public sphere from the late

seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Civil society requires the local regulation of social relations, evident during the industrial revolution (Calhoun 1982, 2001). Social relations are established within ongoing interaction spheres, the basis for democratic engagement. This encourages the establishment of spaces that provide opportunity for discourse, often (although not inevitably) marked by powerful rituals that serve as boundary markers. Theorists of civil society point to the formative role of small-group settings such as the coffeehouse (Back & Polisar 1983), the lodge (Koselleck 1988, pp. 70–92; Kaufman 1999), the club (Amann 1975, pp. 33–77), the salon (Giesen 2001, pp. 223–24), and the literary society (Habermas 1962, p. 34). Small (2009, p. v), describing the empowerment provided by urban daycare centers, demonstrates that small institutions provide clients with social resources to achieve ends that their limited material resources do not permit. In addition, public meetings and community institutions invest citizens in civil society, whether through gatherings in urban neighborhoods in Brazil or town meetings in New England (Baiocchi 2003, Bryan 2004). The ability to argue and to accept the outcomes of arguments is a measure of collective commitment. Even de Tocqueville (1966 [1835], pp. 662–66), often treated as an associational theorist focusing on larger organizational forms, asserts that associations can be "very minute" and "carry out [a] vast multitude of lesser undertakings," more like a committee than a movement. De Tocqueville envisions a small group of like-minded others engaging in civic projects. The ability of a minute public to generate an alternative space that can challenge state and family has been posited as central to the development of civil society, though these theorists often lack an explicit microsociology. Thus, group dynamics has been downplayed in treatments of the public sphere, at the cost of ignoring the practical, meso-level solution of a linkage between the individual and society. Some forms of democratic theory treat the small group as a means by which persons become committed to communities and institutions. Walzer (1992, p. 107) argues that "[c]ivil society itself is sustained by groups much smaller than the *demos* or the working class or the mass of consumers or the nation. All these are necessarily pluralized as they are incorporated. They become part of the fabric of family, friends, comrades, and colleagues, where people are connected to one another and made responsible for one another." Walzer sees society as a web of groups "establishing small publics" (Cohen & Arato 1992, p. 252), or what Fine & Harrington (2004) label "tiny publics."

In a related argument, Goldfarb (2006) emphasizes the sociology of small things, examining how small actions affect large processes. Goldfarb, basing his research on Eastern European resistance to an overpowering state, theorizes that the hearth [or for Ellickson (2008) the household] is a zone of privacy with protections against state intervention. As Warner (2005) suggests, in such a setting activity can be private and public simultaneously. The autonomous domain in which mundane events occur creates shared perspectives, shaping political cultures. The hearth operates as a free space in the resistance to control, evident in studies of oppositional movements in democratic polities (Evans & Boyte 1986) and of struggles with authoritarian regimes. Forms of commitment linking discourse and action are common in engaged publics (Mische & White 1998, Emirbayer & Sheller 1999). Participants assume that others share history, empathic concern, and a recognition of lasting relations. These intimate spaces—communities of interest and experience (hair salons, coffee shops, or church suppers)—support civil society as they are where politics is discussed and enacted (Walsh 2003).

A microsociological perspective is implicit in the literature on civic engagement. The idea of associationism, with its implications about the strength of civil society (Kaufman 1999), affirms the centrality of group interactions. But this is made concrete through narrative—the discursive reason-giving—that group members provide, revealing through stories and personal

experience shared perspectives and occasional differences (Polletta & Lee 2006), mirroring the similar process institutionalized in jury deliberation (Manzo 1993). Surely it is a mistake to suggest that talk can stop a tank, but it does provide the desire for strategies that would do so, as people come to fight for their colleagues and not for ideas.

This approach emphasizes interaction contexts as the microfoundation of civic society. Small groups are cause and consequence of civic engagement. The attachment of individuals to the small groups in which they participate reveals how public identities develop and how individuals use these embedded identities to create interstitial forms of local community. Focusing on small groups permits an understanding of how civil society can thrive even if formal and institutional associations have declined.

SOCIOLOGY WITH GROUPS

To assert that all sociological analysis must incorporate the study of groups is an act of hubris. However, a sociology without groups is an incomplete and thin discipline. Sociologists have addressed forms of group life, even if they have not always explicitly recognized this focus as constituting a unique level of analysis. But it is through groups, cementing individuals into ongoing, self-referential projects, that community is built. A local sociology recognizes that ongoing interaction domains bind people together and with institutions and reveals the importance of the continuity of personal relations. A social order in which individuals were not in routine contact and did not consider that contact to be salient would lack awareness of the power of community. It is not interaction as such that matters, but rather ordered interaction with culture, identification, common spaces, and relational boundaries. Groups are essential to society, even if their boundaries with networks, communities, and organizations are fuzzy.

An emphasis on local context, as seen through group action, connects structure and interaction through the organizing force of culture. This analysis is found on the meso-level, that space between agentic action and the structural constraints of institutions and organizations. Interaction provides a dynamics for social life but lacks the structure on which action creates stability and self-reference. Groups provide this structure. However, even when we accept the power of structural conditions and the immediacy of interaction, we still must explain how agentic choices fit within an obdurate reality. The relevant mechanism is that group cultures organize action into systems of constraints. Culture incorporates temporality into social life through shared pasts and prospective futures (Katovich & Couch 1992).

Local spaces permit the examination of how structure, culture, and interaction interpenetrate and of how groups and society are mutually constitutive. The salience of groups supports identity continuity. These linkages operate not only on the cognitive and emotional level but also by recognizing that identity claims are forms of action, cementing individuals to scenes and creating boundaries with and passageways to them.

Community depends upon the benefits that groups provide to individuals and to large units, evidenced in social capital and collective action. Further, groups, connected through networks, rely on each other. Social structure constitutes an integrated network of local worlds or microcultures. Intersecting groups and the forces that bind them, often other groups with surveillance and resource power, constitute a model of structure. Ultimately, social order is an achievement of individuals working jointly.

Treating networks as linked groups, we recognize that scenes are not isolated. Participants engage in multiple scenes, simultaneously and sequentially, and become aware of other scenes that are models and points of comparison. Integrated groups form institutions, communities, and ultimately societies that, although grounded in ongoing interaction scenes, are larger, more established, and more solid.

But groups not only knit together; they also divide and stratify. Through the choices of individuals to participate and through the

recruitment of participants, groups can build or reproduce social divisions. Groups do not welcome all, but they frequently replicate relations and culture. Intake boundaries are micropolitical borders that reinforce differentiation and structural discrimination. Who is able to participate in action scenes determines the form of local cultures and the extension of those cultures.

Although I argue for the value of a meso-level analysis, we should not neglect the limitations of such an approach: limits that are evident in theory and in methodology. To focus on the local downplays the isomorphic qualities of social relations and also diminishes webs of power. Whereas small groups may set military policy, tax rates, or media productions, large populations (say, voters or consumers) are effective actors in ways that are not easily negotiated by small communities. To erase structures of authority or the influence of markets as they are given and as they are taken is to present a limited perspective. Further, erasing the individual, agentic choices of actors to withhold support or to reject consensus misjudges the power of actors with their individual backgrounds. Methodologically, a group-based sociology may have a constrained focus on a single group or a small number of groups, forgetting that one of sociology's strengths is comparative analysis and the recognition of supragroup social facts.

Despite their value as a distinct level of analysis, groups are neither interchangeable nor homogenous. Once institutions and systems of power are built—even if directed by groups—the behavioral basis of these systems may be erased as relations among groups are treated as standing above the level of action. Explaining how this happens in an interaction order and why it need not is, as Goffman (1983, p. 17) remarked, our inheritance and what we can bequeath.

Group life provides a basis by which individuals fit into society and through which social structures shape them. The group establishes and validates meanings that constitute the propriety of action. However, a group is also a community that establishes boundaries and divisions, where inequalities are resisted or reproduced. Groups expand and fracture, both internally and within the wider social system. The salience of groups provides a challenge for sociologists to expand our models, open our methods, and enlarge our theories. By watching groups, we may discover society, perhaps a subsociety, a social world, or a scene. But what we always find are people, committed to their histories and relations, playing out the interaction order.

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