Group Life

An Invitation to Local Sociology

GARY ALAN FINE and TIM HALLETT

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Gary Alan Fine
Tim Hallett

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Dedication

> Make the attempt if you want to, but you will find that trying to go through life without friendship, is like milking a bear to get cream for your morning coffee. It is a whole lot of trouble, and then not worth much after you get it.
>
> – Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

We dedicate this volume to Zora Neale Hurston and to those friends who traveled with us. Hurston is correct that one can make one's own way, but it is trouble and not worth much. And, so, we owe much to those who read – and critiqued – an earlier draft of this manuscript: Beth Bechky, Ugo Corte, Michaela DeSoucey, Corey Fields, Nahoko Kameo, Lisa Jo van den Scott, and Hannah Wohl.

_ 1 _
Believing in Groups: The Possibility of Local Sociology

> A nation is the same people living in the same place.
>
> James Joyce, *Ulysses*

At the heart of the writings of James Joyce, arguably the most influential novelist of modernity, are deep and granular depictions of his beloved city of Dublin. Joyce was a master of emphasizing how tiny communities provide a window into the human condition. His magnum opus, *Ulysses*, brims with a multiplicity of groups and connections. Along with its linguistic and literary fireworks, Joyce provides a map of social relations: the novel is a form of social cartography – a travelogue of intimate places. Dublin is the world writ small. As he wrote, “For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin, I can get to the heart of all cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal.” *Ulysses* reveals Dublin’s soul through the details of its scenes. Countries and cities, families, faculties, and factories arise from the particular.

In contrast to much sociological writing that focuses on those institutions and structures that stand above – and often apart from – groups and their members, we take inspiration from James Joyce and his focus on the local. A sociology that does not focus on groups is an inadequate and thin discipline. We address this weakness by developing an approach that we label “local sociology.” As Eviatar Zerubavel (1997) emphasizes, people belong to “thought communities,” but, simultaneously, they belong to action communities. Our vision for local sociology attends

to these thought and action communities via a focus on group interaction.

Local sociology is based on the idea that sociology must include *sociality*. It is an oddity of the discipline that many forms of sociological analysis choose to avoid an emphasis on the social. By this, we mean that they ignore the ongoing interactions and group life that constitute lived experience. Our goal in this volume is to demonstrate how a focus on groups, their meanings, the social relations of members, and their intersections provides a valuable approach. This is not the only way to view the world, but it is a perspective that too often is marginalized when sociologists emphasize structure or personal agency.

In focusing on the local, we argue that group life provides a basis by which individuals fit into society and through which social structures shape action. Sociological analysis has been replete with debates about “micro” and “macro,” but all too often these arguments miss the point. It is not simply that microsociology provides a foundation for macrosociology, or that macrosociology provides a foundation for microsociology, but that interacting groups are the hinge that connects them. Exploring how groups create social order is our topic. To understand how structures matter and how individuals navigate them, sociologists must watch and listen to groups and people gathering in local communities. We provide an approach that demonstrates how the meso-level of analysis informs both the macro- and micro-levels. This is where the action is.

In the pages that follow, we make the case for local sociology, hoping to expose those who emphasize individual actors or collective entities to the importance of communities of interaction. Of course, the pieces of our argument are not new. We have been developing this

approach for decades. Further, this is an approach with a lengthy pedigree in sociology and that resonates with many sociological classics, even if it has never been the dominant model.

This text is a work of synthesis, a compact account of a level of analysis that treats interaction and culture as central. Although we present new material, we draw on research by Gary Alan Fine in his previous books, *Tiny Publics: A Theory of Group Action and Culture* (Fine 2012) and *The Hinge: Civil Society, Group Cultures, and the Power of Local Commitments* (Fine 2021). While hoping for a wide audience, we write primarily for the committed graduate student or advanced undergraduate major who desires an overview of how to think about social order apart from assuming a dominant role of either the individual or the society, a theoretical approach that is distinct from cognitive hegemony or structural supremacy.

Beyond the “Macro” and the “Micro”

The discipline of sociology has long been split over the choice of which analytic level is most valuable, and, it must be admitted, justifications exist for each choice. People and structures will always constitute society, and we do not dismiss either. Sociologists, with their training and their preferences, study what they feel is crucial, and they do it well. As a discipline, we benefit from pluralist lenses, but each way of seeing is also a way of not seeing. Many sociologists argue that the field’s core concerns how institutions, states, and global systems have effects, channeling and constraining personal options. In this vision, individuals and interaction are confined to the margins. Perhaps we might describe this as a social science that avoids the social. In contrast, others examine how persons respond, elevating a social psychology, a world of

selves, buffeted by the institutional. These scholars focus on interpersonal relations, identity, and selves as they affect individuals, but at times they ignore what people do together and how those interactions matter. In a sense, they, too, avoid the social. Our task is to bring these scholars together on the grounds of the social without dismissing either the personal or the institutional.

These two groups of scholars have been labeled Macros and Micros. This division became so solidified that several decades ago some theorists demanded a “Micro–Macro Link” (Alexander et al. 1987), a bandage intended to bind a sociological wound. Individual action – what was described as agency – might, in this view, coexist with institutional structure. Consensus emerged that such a connection was necessary and essential, but its acceptance often rested on a pragmatic reality that the perspectives developed under a protective, if hypothetical, umbrella: a big tent sociology that would let scholars go their own way.

These alternate approaches miss a crucial point. Participation in groups is central to the shaping of identity. That we belong to local communities – and treasure them – provides a grounding that permits us to commit ourselves to building and preserving the world around us as experienced. From this, we argue that joint action is central to society, and that groups are the quintessential sites where people act together. Sociology should theorize this joint action as central to how society is possible. To appreciate the influences of structures and individuals is to recognize how they are connected. To move beyond the limits of the Micro–Macro meme, local sociology recognizes groups as essential for developing a meso-level of analysis that stands between the individual and larger structures (Turner 2005). This approach constitutes the nexus of a full sociology.

Treating the group as a central organizing principle claims that it is metaphorically both a *crucible* and a *hinge*. Local communities are crucibles in that much change and solidarity occur within bounded spaces. These spaces can generate heat and conflict. But they are also hinges in that the group provides a semi-autonomous and flexible means of joining micro and macro. “Crucible” and “hinge” are companion tropes that characterize local sociology. We emphasize the place of engagement (the crucible) and the linkage of levels of analysis (the hinge).

In focusing on groups and communities, local sociology values those methodologies that rely on keen vision, close listening, and precise description: these are our disciplinary birthright. Sociology is a field that thrives *in place*: in the kitchens, parks, taverns, and offices of Dublin, Dubai, Chicago, Chennai, Hong Kong, and Addis Ababa. And currently on Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and Tinder. Honoring local action, observations open windows of understanding. Accounts of what people do and say are inevitably limited in that they present a particular event to reveal more frequent occurrences. This constitutes sociological synecdoche, transforming anecdote into theory. The willingness to report what one witnessed relies on the claim that the particular can be generalized, revealing wider or deeper meanings. Seeing is believing – and persuading. Specifics stand for a panoply of similar events. If audiences judge the account as plausible or if they have had comparable experiences, they treat it as reflecting a widespread practice. Our approach to meso-level theorizing considers ethnographic observation especially amenable to the group-level analysis that justifies local sociology.

To treat the world as social space, we must recognize that groups – their cultures and their dynamic processes – shape who we are, how we behave, and what we believe. When groups change, voluntarily or through pressure,

individuals are altered as well. In short, the communities with which we identify and people with whom we associate direct our practices, both those that are routine and those that are creative. We reside in a world of tiny publics, or, in the language of Alexis de Tocqueville, a crowd of *minute associations*.

One advantage of examining groups is the many cases from which one can draw. Each group provides an observable reality. We have numerous accounts of what the great Polish-American sociologist Florian Znaniecki (1940) spoke of as social circles, with their associated rights, roles, and rules. These include friendship cliques, artistic cenacles, political clubs, work teams, communes, scientific laboratories, gangs, and social movements. From teams of scientists in Antarctica to local Klaverns of the Ku Klux Klan, from the French Impressionists to surfers, from Girl Scout troops to the president's National Security team, groups fulfill our desires for sociability, for identity, for change, and for status. Human life is group life, a cross-cultural reality that defines our humanity and suggests the centrality of interaction for any social science that hopes to explain the world as lived. Separation from others is emotionally devastating, explaining why the COVID-19 lockdowns have caused many to feel less human. We yearn for shared environs that make us whole.

Our goal is to explicate that space – the hinge – between the individual and the institution. This is where sets of individuals *together* shape meaning, separate from what has been institutionally given, and create collective identity, separate from self and demography. Group cultures both shape individual commitments and permit the building of extended systems of constraint. The linkage of groups – small but consequential publics – provides the basis for social order.

By examining community close up and treating it as revealing patterns of relations, we build a local sociology beyond selves or realms: this is a world of joint action, a world of people doing things together (Becker 1986). Of course, in any study, the questions asked determine the proper level of analysis. Every project attempts to answer an open sociological question, and some questions can be answered without attending to group dynamics. Minute communities do not stand opposed to other forms of analysis, but require recognition of self and structure. We celebrate the diversity of sociology by formulating an approach that recovers and builds on longstanding traditions, arguing that, for a social science to thrive, at its root it must be social.

The Light of Sociability: The (Unmet) Promise of Group Theory

In describing the structure of intellectual networks in sociology, Nicholas Mullins (1973) labeled Small Group Theory as "the light that failed." This was an ironic description of a tradition to which his own analysis of "theory groups" contributed. Small Group Theory was an approach to which the 1954 *American Sociological Review* devoted a rare special issue, but which had started to be marginalized by the time of Mullins' analysis, a result of developments in cognitive science and in structural analysis (Steiner 1974; Hackman and Katz 2010). Sociologists struggled to extend group dynamics to core questions of the discipline (Collins 1999).

In place of examining ongoing social relations, structural models have dominated sociology, and cognitive models of individual action have dominated psychology. And yet the study of ongoing, self-referential, close-knit groups remains crucial to examining how affiliation, community, and

culture are generated. In fact, theorists are well aware of the field-defining contributions of such influential figures as Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead, George Homans, Tamotsu Shibutani, Charles Horton Cooley, Helena Lopata, and Erving Goffman. Together these figures and their many contemporary avatars engaged the discipline by emphasizing that groups, sociality, and behavior were central to social organization. The domain of interaction solves a set of sociological problems that otherwise remain opaque. Foregrounding groups demystifies the longstanding puzzle of how structures have effects. Groups and extended networks provide domains in which participants respond to the world around them and contribute to joint projects that shape that world.

By using the term “group,” we refer to an aggregation of persons characterized by mutual awareness, shared place, common identity, collective culture, interpersonal relations, mutual commitment, and understood routines. Not all sets of actors have these characteristics or reveal them continually. However, these features are the basis of group life, be those groups admirable or not. These micro-communities reveal how status, inequality, and biases operate in practice. Despite the allegiances that groups prize and often celebrate, they also may develop hierarchies that at times and in places can be unbending.

Participants know each other as discrete persons or through their personas: their positions or reputations. Community members strive for a recognizable set of common interests or concerns, and they share beliefs in what constitutes decorum and propriety, which in its behavioral form constitutes norms. These norms, when embraced, provide a sense of unity or we-ness (Tuomela 2007), leading to rarely questioned relations of trust. We consider traditional primary groups (family), secondary groups (workgroups, cliques, or voluntary associations),

online forums, and ephemeral groups that gather for a moment and dissipate after their shared experience ends.

While the number of participants helps to define a *small* group, there are no precise numerical limits. Instead, the small group refers to a set of persons who recognize each other as belonging to an interdependent community. Robert Freed Bales (1950: 33), a leading social psychologist who devoted his lengthy career to describing the dynamics of self-analytic groups, 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 can, either at the time or in later questioning, give some reaction to each of the others as an individual person." Bales' approach recognizes that belonging is crucial, tied to the presence of collective identity. Identity construction occurs over time, even if the participants do not consciously recognize local structure, culture, conflict, and trust.

Although much research on groups has emphasized face-to-face interaction, groups may also operate through online, digital, or telephonic communication. Whatever the form, the action and response typically have temporal immediacy. Admittedly, this model of group life may discount disagreement and divergence, important phenomena that we address in chapter 6. Nevertheless, groups exist despite – and because of – conflict so long as participants hold the disruption of the quotidian in check by committing to continuing participation. On some occasions, disruptions solidify allegiance by revealing the stakes and setting the stage for conflicts that, although fraught, provide recognizable positions and become the basis for predictable interaction (Tavory and Fine 2020).

When groups build consensus, social order is possible (Brint 2001). Of course, conflict and disruptions may also be generated, but that, too, reveals the importance of mutual awareness. Regardless, when we assume the salience of a drive toward consensus, recurring, meaningful, self-referential interaction provides for stability and collective identity. Social structures depend for their tensile strength on the existence of groups with shared pasts and imagined futures, that are spatially situated, that create identification, and that desire to preserve enduring relations (Fine 2012). In contrast to those who claim that order is constantly constructed anew in each interaction scene (a complaint commonly made of ethnomethodology and dramaturgical analysis), meso-communities – like those in Joyce's Dublin – establish a solid sense of identity and organization. These are performative spaces, but the performances have recognizable scripts that guide the expectations of participants. Shared understandings that arise from continuing interaction provide the cultural basis for action, a point emphasized by Erving Goffman (1983) in depicting the *interaction order*.

Thinking in this way, the group becomes a crucible in which individuals together align their actions and apply their shared identities to link to larger communities, just as the social control that emanates from larger communities motivates, encourages, or constrains group action. In this sense, we speak of groups and society as being *mutually constitutive*. Society can be treated as an ecology – or a network – of groups. Groups are rarely isolated, and they are knit together in complex patterns, strong or fragmentary. In any complex society, the groups that exist intersect with each other, and may share members. Further, they participate in more extended community cultures. Overlapping like fish-scales, they borrow

traditions. This allows for a spread of influence as groups abut each other and transmit values, norms, and beliefs. This reality forces us to recognize that the image of the isolated pod is insufficient for a robust sociology. We reside in a network of groups (Fine and Kleinman 1979).

The reality that groups engage with each other makes an extended organizational life possible. Organizations survive not only because of the formal arrangement of personnel, but also through the interaction scenes that these arrangements generate, where many groups populate the same organizational environment. Organizations are inhabited, and, as a result, become powerful action realms (Hallett 2010; Hallett and Ventresca 2006).

Although culture, interaction, and structure are central to any model that links levels of analysis, those concepts in themselves are too broad for theorizing. Too much can be treated as culture, interaction, or structure. While the intersection of these concepts serves as the basis of a meso-level sociology, integrating action and order, specific themes permit us to see how civic order results from communal practices. To realize the unmet promise of group theory, we draw on four concepts that, while they overlap, address the linkage of micro- and macro- through the precedence of meso-level analysis: the interaction order, circuits of action, group cultures, and tiny publics.

The Interaction Order

Our focus on groups extends Erving Goffman's (1983) influential account of the interaction order. Goffman argued that interaction is orderly, even while recognizing the agentic choices of participants. Communities create standards for appropriate action. In the public display of these standards, performances solidify social order. This process is inherent in his dramaturgical model, which built

on a theatrical metaphor (Brissett and Edgley 2017). People do not merely think and behave; they perform for others in a staged attempt to manage impressions and, often, smooth over disputes.

However, Goffman's concern throughout much of his writing is to examine those moments in which the parties are not in extended, meaningful contact. He often emphasizes fleeting encounters, such as those between clerks and customers, while only gesturing to the presence of other "deeper" relations that depend on biographic awareness and local cultures.

We are less concerned with fleeting encounters in contrast to the interaction orders of ongoing groups. While we recognize the importance of Goffman's argument that the interaction order operates in its own right with distinctive properties, people believe in and respond to the seemingly obdurate qualities of social structures. Shared practices arise from the repetition of similar types of encounters. Both action and meaning are incorporated into the lifeworlds of community members, contributing to a feeling of normality. While social order depends on the traditions and the standards of societies and subcultures, what we refer to as an *interaction* order emphasizes the salience of local action spaces.

Every interaction order builds on a shared, communal past. Allegiance to these pasts provides a *commitment mechanism* that encourages participation in group life. In the strong case, communal affiliation shapes an actor's identity, becoming a marker of self and of belonging. In the weak case, affiliation establishes a tacit desire to follow what influential colleagues define as proper. Since every act occurs within a limited context, recognizing these contexts as sites for interpretation and action is central to local sociology.

Of course, the immediate encounter does not, by itself, establish a collective relation, but, rather, the collective relation depends on repeated and repeatable patterns of action. In treating our experience of past interaction as a model for the present, recognizing our ability to compare and contrast contexts, society is built through a tacit agreement to transform action into order. Interaction rituals serve as the basis for trust at all levels (Misztal 2001): from the dyad to the crowd, and from the bedroom to the state.

Our approach recognizes an upsurge of interest in processes that recognize the emergent, the brokered, the attached, and the embedded. By emphasizing the context of action, we underscore how meanings and relations provide epistemic stability and intersubjectivity, allowing for shared expectations that flow from common experiences. The range of active research topics that acknowledge the importance of local contexts is large, and includes emergent mechanisms of cause-and-effect (Sawyer 2005), socially embedded and networked brokerage (Hillmann 2008), emotional attachments to nested groups (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2009), local structures that shape identity (Bearman 1991), dual-process models (Vaisey 2009), the locational resources shaping creative performance (Corte 2013), and the spatial conditions of scientific discovery (Parker and Hackett 2012).

These research domains, distinct in method, substance, and theory, appreciate the power of local contexts. A particularly compelling example is found in the neighborhood effects literature. This research demonstrates that broad structural forces do not by themselves shape personal outcomes. Rather, they are mediated through the culture of one’s home turf. Variables such as collective efficacy depend on the form and the history of continuing group relations, as not all poor

communities produce the same outcomes (Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). As David Harding (2010) suggests in his examination of poor neighborhoods in Boston, in order to understand neighborhood effects, one must recognize the impact of cliques, relationships, and cultures.

The importance of interaction orders is evident in a wide array of domains, including juries as local systems for generating justice (Diamond and Rose 2005; Burnett 2001), congregations as sites for the display of faith (Becker 1999; Chen 2002; Putnam and Campbell 2010), family and relationships as points of obligation (Oring 1984; Bendix 1987), neighborhoods as generators of habitual activity (Grannis 2009), and work teams as culture carriers (Lipman-Blumen and Leavitt 2001; Sparrowe et al. 2001). These minute associations are not always efficient or collegial (Kaufmann 2009; Weeks 2003), but they support social order as they provide the comforts of ongoing relations.

Circuits of Action

The ordering of interaction is stressed in Erving Goffman's (1983: 4) comment that "at the very center of interaction life is the cognitive relation we have with those present before us, without which relationship our activity, behavioral and verbal, could not be meaningfully organized." By participating in an interaction order, group members recognize that their associations and their practices are stable, but this stability demands to be considered in its own right. Stability does not emerge from the immediate encounter but is the outcome of a set of *routines* that develop from ongoing social relations.

We describe these routines as revealing the dynamic properties of groups, which we label circuits of action (Fine

2021). That we describe them as circuits suggests that these actions are performed not merely for themselves, but as a *pathway* to further responses: an established itinerary that members understand as part of a larger sequence of routines. Social order could barely exist without predictable sequences of behavior. When linked together, they become the kind of interaction ritual chains described by Randall Collins (2004).

Circuits of action place routine practices as central to local sociology; the concept emphasizes that routines are not only linked to individuals, but part of a desire for sociality, and are responded to as such. They address culturally appropriate reactions to ongoing constraints. In this, interaction is filtered through the awareness of what participants collectively believe is appropriate. We can think of this as extending principles of decorum. In other words, circuits of action mirror the expectations of the interaction order and the content of local cultures in generating predictable action. They are guides to behavior: self-help strategies for living a group life. However, these are not laws or demands. For interaction to be predictable within a collaborative group, adjustments are essential. Symbolic interactionists such as Anselm Strauss (1978) and David Maines (1977) point to negotiation as a tool for building flexible but durable relations, not built afresh at each moment but operating within a pre-existing context. A meaningful, referential past exists on which participants rely to create their futures. Ultimately, people act socially because they expect others to act similarly. Instead of being composed of individuals with distinct minds, groups are comprised of common practices, making coordination possible.

Group Cultures