

Micro-Cultures

GARY ALAN FINE

Abstract

Although understanding the dynamics of culture through the examination of large-scale social systems is important, culture is embedded in smaller systems as well. The exploration of micro-cultures—also termed small group cultures or idiocultures—helps us to recognize that culture is cemented through the interaction of individuals with long-term, ongoing relationships. Structure alone does not create social order, but requires a set of stable collective interpretations. But just as we examine how culture is organized through societies or institutions, we should see the role of culture in smaller units, including families, clubs, workgroups, and other gatherings. As a result, culture and meaning-building emerges within group life and is spread through networks. Seeing culture as resulting from interaction emphasizes the role of talk and action as guarantors of social order and as building collective understanding. By focusing on micro-cultures, social scientists emphasize the importance of the middle level of analysis between the self and structure: what has been termed the meso-level of analysis. Micro-cultures recognize that groups produce a self-reflexive basis for the interaction order. Ultimately, social actors act in concert, producing shared lines of action and creating a tiny public that can then permit individuals to fit into larger social systems, including creating citizens within nation-states.

The flowering of sociological studies of culture over the past quarter-century has demonstrated how large social systems can be understood through cultural models. It is not structure alone that creates social order, but collective interpretations. But just as we examine how culture is organized on the macro-level, it is also organized through processes of micro-interaction. Culture must also be examined within the context of groups and networks. In this essay, the ways in which sociologists and social psychologists have treated culture as a form of meaning-building on the local level is presented.

Treating culture as a form of practice recognizes that shared meaning emerges through talk and action. Culture is built on collective understanding. The study of micro-cultures emphasizes the middle level of analysis between the self or individual and the institution or structure: the level that sociologists refer to as the meso-level of analysis, an approach tied to

ongoing realms of interaction. Continuing groups develop shared meaning systems that generate a self-reflexive basis for an interaction order. In this model, people do not merely respond to immediate goals and needs, but act in concert with others, coordinating lines of action. These shared understandings that are embedded in tightly organized systems have been labeled variously as micro-cultures, idiocultures, or small group cultures. However, whichever term is selected, the concept specifies the locus of culture as being within enduring, historicized systems of action, recognizing that it is not simply that individuals participate in social interaction, but that they are embedded in local worlds.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

The analysis of micro-cultures emerges from the intersection of two lines of research: the classic group dynamics tradition, as exemplified by the research, largely experimental, of Kurt Lewin and later that of Muzafer Sherif and Robert Freed Bales; and the ethnographic examination of gangs and other urban groups, grounded within the Chicago School of Sociology, building on the research of Frederic Thrasher, Everett Hughes, and, later, William Foote Whyte. As a result, the examination of group culture is built upon two distinct methodological traditions with some commonalities of perspective, even if integration was infrequently attempted.

Within the experimental tradition, the 1939 research project of Kurt Lewin, Ralph White, and Ronald Lippett is recognizably classic, perhaps the first study that explicitly considered group culture. Responding to the political climate of the 1930s, including the rise of authoritarian regimes, Lewin and his colleagues hoped to discover whether a group's style of leadership shaped behaviors of members. They organized play groups of preadolescent boys and had their adult leaders direct the boys through one of three styles of leadership: a *laissez-faire*, democratic, or authoritarian style. While the results are complex, and fewer groups were organized than would be optimal for drawing conclusions, the researchers found that democratic leadership had advantages in personal satisfaction and group outcomes. This project led indirectly to the famous Robbers Cave project of Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues. Sherif was interested in the effects of a superordinate goal on conflict. He created two groups of preadolescent campers, examined the development of their status systems and cultural references, and then placed them in that form of competitive conflict so treasured by young boys in which the two groups recognized each other as rivals. Finally, Sherif presented the boys with a challenge that only shared action could solve, and, in time, the groups overcame their hostility. Similar to the Lewin study, the Robbers Cave study had a recognizable political message during the Cold War.

Other scholars, including Edward Rose and Sherif himself, attempted to take the understanding of micro-cultures into the more controlled setting of the laboratory, examining the conditions under which micro-cultures continue or change as a result of membership change or environmental challenge, demonstrating that even after the original members had been replaced, cultures continued. While these cultures, as measured, were not robust or extensive, they did permit systematic analysis.

Although not speaking directly to this social psychological approach, ethnographic researchers, operating from traditions of urban sociology, attempted to understand the real-world implications of group traditions. This is a line of analysis that has its roots in anthropological accounts of “tribal” society. Within sociology, an early and influential example was Frederic Thrasher’s *The Gang* in which he analyzed the characteristics of 1313 gangs in Chicago. While not fully participant observation, Thrasher’s work, guided by the close-textured urban sociology of his mentor, former journalist Robert Park emphasized the importance of group life. Other field studies from the period included Harvey Zorbaugh’s examination of Chicago’s Gold Coast and the Slum and Donald Cressey’s Taxi Dance Hall. But throughout it was the emphasis on the gang as a micro-world that served as the model. The gang became the sociologist’s tribe.

The deservedly classic and most influential work in this line of research is William Foote Whyte’s *Street Corner Society*, an observational analysis of groups of young men within Boston’s Italian North End. Students of sociology are well familiar with the relations of Doc and his Boys, the style of Doc’s leadership, and how the status system in the group shaped outcomes such as bowling scores when the boys were together. However, in the research Whyte did not limit himself to a single clique, but examined several groups within the complex social system of the North End. Whyte provided a model for the examination of the cultures of urban street life, a tradition that inspired important works by Lewis Yablonsky (*The Violent Gang*), Elliott Liebow (*Talley’s Corner*), Elijah Anderson (*A Place on the Corner*), and Ruth Horowitz (*Honor and the American Dream*). This tradition has reemerged in the past 15 years in “urban ethnography” as in Sudhir Venkatesh’s *Gang Leader for a Day*, Mitchell Duneier’s *Sidewalk*, or Loic Wacquant’s *Body and Soul*. Each of these projects argues that the gang or male street group is a cultural unit, and that traditions, customs, and status relations create order that stabilizes interaction and permits interaction with those who stand outside social boundaries.

Attempting to combine the experimental and ethnographic approach is Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter’s 1957 examination of a Millenarian group in Chicago, *When Prophecy Fails*. Under the sway of their charismatic leader, “Marian Keech,” the Seekers were persuaded that the world would soon end and a few faithful would be saved, taken

to Clarion, a distant planet. As they waited for the end of days, the Seekers created a rich and vibrant culture. Festinger and his colleagues saw this as an opportunity to examine cognitive dissonance theory, typically examined in the artificial world of the laboratory, within a naturally occurring situation. What would happen when the world did not end after the predicted day? The theory claimed increased certainty, not disillusion, among the most intensely engaged participants, and the theory was upheld. Despite methodological and theoretical challenges, the work has been a mainstay of social psychology for over a half century.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Since these classic studies, attention turned to the task of systematizing the examination of small-group cultures. Notable in this regard is Gary Alan Fine who, following the group dynamics tradition of Robert Freed Bales, argued that every group from its opening moments had the challenge of producing a shared culture, helping to create a self-reflexive sense of belonging. Drawing from findings of experimental research, Fine conducted a series of ethnographic projects of small groups, including Little League baseball teams, fantasy-gaming gatherings, restaurants kitchens, and meteorological offices, demonstrating how background culture, usable (normative) culture, functional culture, appropriate (status-based) culture, and triggering mechanisms create an idioculture. Rather than seeing a group as a unique constellation of individuals, this approach proposed general sociological principles, an argument extended by Michael Farrell in his *Collaborative Circles*, a detailed account of the temporal stages of culture-producing groups, such as the Impressionists, the Freudian circle, and early feminists. The examination of how local neighborhood effects affect behavior has recently been emphasized within criminology and examinations of urban poverty. Those forms of sociometric analysis that treat networks as constituted by clumps of tightly knit groups, a recognition of Mark Granovetter in examining the intersection of strong and weak ties, also emphasizes the importance of local relations and micro-cultures.

The early writing of Jürgen Habermas about the importance of salons, coffeehouses, and club meetings reveals how significant “tiny publics” can be for the creation of a public sphere. While media can have large reverberations, those places in which people meet and talk matter greatly in cementing affiliation and building commitment. Recently, Kathleen Blee has demonstrated the power of particular forms of group dynamics in the creation of successful activist groups in her *Democracy in the Making*. A similar emphasis on the features of local process is evident in the account of how meetings are structured and how stories are told in Francesca Polletta’s analysis of activism,

Freedom is an Endless Meeting, and Kathleen Cramer Walsh's talking about politics, and the observational research of Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman, together and apart, demonstrate that both volunteering and communal participation is always situated within an interaction order, and, as Eliasoph argues, apathy is itself an achievement that is a response to particular group styles and customs.

This body of research reveals that group cultures do more than explain how small communities operate, but also indicate how their micro-culture fits them into societies. The meso-level of analysis is never separate from the understanding of individuals and institutions.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Predicting the future is a dangerous game. How fields develop depend on the creative inspiration of researchers and writers, responsive to newly developed core concepts and powerful slogans that reverberate through the academic community. However, while the future is hazy, several themes seem to be developing.

In depicting the foundational research on micro-cultures, I pointed to the competing approaches of experimental research and ethnographic understanding, culminating in *When Prophecy Fails*. Indeed, the laboratory can be conceptualized as an ethnographic site. However, more needs to be done in systematizing ethnographic findings in light of hypothesis testing. Fine in his theory of the creation of idiocultures presents several criteria for the development of cultural elements, but these have not been systematically examined. With the development of meta-analysis as a well-established methodology in psychological social psychology, cultural systems can be analyzed in a similar manner. A model of this potential approach is evident in the systematic analysis of Randy Hodson and his colleagues who categorize ethnographic studies of work places to test theories about the conditions that lead to occupational satisfaction and organizational effectiveness. A comparable project could test whether extended cultures (jokes, rituals, nicknames, insults, ceremonies, animosity, romances) create or diminish small group satisfaction or membership turnover or communal stability. We now have enough studies of interacting groups to test these claims.

Understanding how morality fits into people's lives has become of increased attention with the recognition that ideas of the *good* and its expression in ethics toward others in one's personal circle is central to how people feel that lives should be lived and how relationships are built over time. Volunteering, demonstrations of faith, charity, advocacy, and apology are linked to local circumstances. As Penny Edgell Becker emphasizes in her analysis

of congregations, each church develops their own culture, linked to forms of worship, means of handling problems, and forms of community outreach.

A third emerging direction is to specify the relationship between the group and the network. Over the past half-century, the centrality of the group within social science research has diminished as the salience of the network has grown. But the connection between these two crucial concepts depends on how we conceptualize communal boundaries. How much steady interaction and how much identification is necessary for a routinely activated network to become a solidified group? Unless there is clear membership criterion (a fraternity or a gang with ritual interaction or a family with ties defined by the state or by blood), membership can be foggy. There is a penumbra of belonging, as scholars note when discussing near-groups or quasi-groups. People wish to be “where the action is” in Erving Goffman’s terms, and so decide to identify with a group in moments of activity.

Too often network scholars have downplayed the cultural features of group life in their analyses, but the importance of collective memory should not be neglected as an organizing principle in the interaction order. Cultures permit individuals to see themselves as belonging to micro-interactive communities. In addition to “mere” routine co-presence, rituals, customs, humor, and stories provide for a self-reflective community, revealed through known narratives and shared references.

A final direction for research is the linkage between the group and citizenship. As noted, Jürgen Habermas, not typically conceived of as a social psychologist, emphasized the importance of gathering points in the creation of a public sphere. Public spheres are, in practice, small zones of performance and affiliation. The existence of commitment mechanisms between persons builds a civil society. But how?

Research has started that examines interactive domains such as town meetings and neighborhood assemblies in which the work of local politics is done. Furthermore, some scholars in political science and political sociology are examining electoral campaigns as ethnographic sites. Face-to-face interaction sets the agenda for decision making. But even within large conclaves, crowds, and mass meetings, gatherings are comprised of smaller groups of friends, colleagues, and associates. A crowd might seem comprised of isolated monads, but in reality, as Clark McPhail, has argued, a crowd gains its power because within the mass are strong social ties, committing participants to shared action. This provides the groundwork for research that addresses the more macro-concerns of citizenship and civic responsibility through the existence of micro-cultures. When combined through rituals, commemorations, and national performances, these nodes provide a platform of what Benedict Anderson speaks of as an “imagined community.” Civic culture is often found around the hearth. If we understand the process

of how these imagined worlds become solidified, we have a better sense of how people fit into states and how citizenship is not simply enforced, but supported. Of course, a full interpretation of group culture must recognize that groups are not inevitably stable, and that conflict may be part of group life, splitting them apart. Sometimes, these struggles within a culture or social order reflect long-standing divisions, such as race, age, gender, and class that extend beyond the group framework. While much research assumes group harmony, research must explore contentious groups.

Listing these directions reveals challenges, both the methodological ones of combining descriptive analysis and systematic tests, and also calling for the intersection of scholars of institutions and those of personal relations. Scholars must recognize that groups are not walled from each other, and neither do societies move on their own without actors who make decisions together. Fortunately ethnographers who were once limited to addressing isolated scenes are more willing—and better trained—to see scenes as being integrated within a larger network. The possibility of comparing multiple ethnographic sites also permits micro-cultures to be treated as something other than idiosyncratic. By being a linkage between self and society and between ideas and material reality, the examination of group culture has extensive possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Despite their importance, micro-cultures do not explain all cultural formations. It may be true that for culture to be formed a small group is essential, but once formed, cultures can be spread through media or through institutional power. Still, for culture to stick, that process originates within and depends upon local orders. Social science has properly recognized the centrality of the control of the individual and the institution to understand how social order is made possible. However, along with these core concepts is a third, the interaction order, made possible through the commitment of groups to their micro-cultures. The meso-level of analysis, focusing on local action, communal reflection, and collective memory, is as consequential as the micro- and macro-level of analysis.

Groups have cultures, and societies have groups. These realities emphasize that meanings do not only belong to selves and societies, but to those who huddle together creating a network of support in what otherwise would be an anonymous world.

FURTHER READING

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GARY ALAN FINE SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Gary Alan Fine Fine is John Evans Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University. He received his PhD in social psychology from Harvard University, and is the author of *Tiny Publics: A Theory of Group Culture and Action* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2012). He has conducted ethnographic research on micro-cultures throughout his career, including studies of Little League baseball teams, fantasy-gaming groups, chef training programs, restaurants, political volunteers, social movement gatherings, mushroom collectors, high school debate teams, folk art collectors and galleries, meteorological offices, chess clubs, and MFA fiction and visual arts programs. He has been a fellow at the Center for the Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Russell Sage Foundation.

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