Introduction

Tiny Publics as Social Order

All politics is local.

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—Congressman Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill,
member of the House of
Representatives, 1952 to 1987

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I F ALL POLITICS is local, so, I argue, is almost everything else. Action, meaning, authority, inequality, organization, and institution—all have their roots in microstructures situated in what Erving Goffman (1983) described as the "interaction order." Although downplayed in much recent social science, small groups order and organize human life, emphasizing the power of immediate surroundings and microcultures. To revive the small group as an organizing principle of social life is my task. Further, I argue not only that these groups are discrete zones of action but that through their power in defining rights and privileges, they fit into and constitute society. As such, the small group becomes a *tiny public* for the purpose of civic engagement. The group—or tiny public—becomes not only a basis for affiliation, a source of social and cultural capital, and a guarantor of identity, but also a support point in which individuals and the group can have an impact on other groups or shape the broader social discourse. Groups are simultaneously loci of local allegiance and places in which allegiance to the larger public is generated and in which processes of change begin (Lichterman 2005).

Social awareness begins with face-to-face behavior and continues as we learn to account for and make adjustments to the presence and the demands of others. We make collective commitments to a variety of small communities, creating what the philosopher Raimo Tuomela (2007) terms "we-mode" groups.

Yet, surprisingly, in emphasizing cognition, individual agency, organizations, institutions, and societies for the past quarter-century, social scientists have neglected the meso-level of analysis. They have often ignored the local arenas where interaction is performed and institutions are inhabited, turning away from the body of research that had been so

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prominent in midcentury social science. Social relations are organized through a *network of groups,* and these tiny publics provide the *action spaces* in which society and communities are constituted and inequality and social differentiation are created. Small associations of individuals produce industrial wares, artistic products, political struggles, familial affiliations, and personal satisfactions. As sources of integration and affiliation, these social formations are distinct from detached individuals, large institutions, and mass society.

No system can thrive without a flourishing domain of small groups. They are havens in a heartless world where faceless organizations gain a visage. The intimacy, concern, and attention of participants in small groups permit the creation of social identities and linkages to larger units (Collins 2004; Summers-Effler 2010). To the extent that these small worlds are accepting—and groups differ on this—they provide a *soft community* in which various personal styles are accepted and supported.

Social actors are neither disconnected isolates nor a flock of conformists bound by biology or structure; though we are grouped, we are able to select how we affiliate and how we divide. Groups are not homogeneous, but neither are they random gatherings—they promote association among the like-minded. The desire expressed in groups for satisfying interaction is intense, even while the ostensible purpose is to achieve instrumental goals. Over time the expressive satisfactions of group life may support task goals, but they also may challenge those goals, straining the group's capacity to continue. While structure shapes action, that shaping operates through the understandings and preferences of social actors. Constraints and socialization are important, but even constraints and socialization must be organized through an interaction order. People act in concert. Each group, a dense network of relations, constitutes an interactional field that develops and negotiates norms, provides expectations of continuity, and suggests the possibility of change. The *group space* is an arena of action that creates the predictable and ongoing relationships that are essential for a belief in social order. Predictability is not to be taken lightly; our lives depend on it.

Forged within the boundaries of small groups, society is made up of the minute publics that are necessary for a robust social order at all levels. It is for this reason that I title this book *Tiny Publics,* a phrase that highlights the link between the groups model I propose and an understanding of civil society. Groups and local communities are publics, and they are tiny, at least by the standards of mass publics. They are what Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/1966) speaks of as "minute associations." That these tiny publics are embedded in interaction orders provides them with a deeply held set of social relations, a shared past, and a belief in a common future. They are a public, but one with commitment made pow-

erful through their smallness. The title emphasizes that such groups are not necessarily trivial or evanescent—although they may be—but rather that they can be the cornerstone of social order. It is through extensions of the local that societal life is shaped.

When we consider those relationships that matter most, our eyes and hearts are directed to the presence and influence of a handful of others: the rule of modest numbers. These are the companions who not only are *aware* of each other but are *invested* in each other. They are *significant others.* Families, cliques, fraternities, work groups, teams, and gangs reveal the importance of tight and tiny networks, the building blocks of larger networks. Within the crucible of the group, three essential explanatory domains—structure, interaction, and culture—converge to create social order.

Through the small group, social psychology confronts sociology, spawning a distinctive microsociology, a *sociological miniaturism* (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001; Fine and Hallett 2003) in which larger social systems are organized through an array of tiny publics, together constituting intersecting *interaction orders.* A sociology based in a group culture that recognizes shared pasts and prospective futures provides the basis for unpacking the workings of those more macro concerns that have traditionally been treated as the essence of sociology.

We organize our lives by relying on known others to create meaning and then reacting to these proffered meanings. The small group is an interactional arena through which collaboration emerges (Bales 1970; Sawyer 2007). This process, grounded in the establishment of relationships, depends on local cultural understandings—what I have previously referred to as "idioculture" (Fine 1979b). More than situational—a term that suggests a transitory quality—idiocultures are microcultures that are developed from a group's opening moments and that depend on a shared recognition of solidified meaning and perspective, what I term a "local context."

By emphasizing the pivotal role of small groups in organizing social life I do not claim that all human possibility is contained within these nodes of order. Anonymous, imaginary, routinized, and bureaucratic relationships permit instrumental goals to be met. As students of public order have argued, impersonal activities have their own forms of organization (Lofland 1973; Goffman 1963; Edgerton 1979). Social control channels the options of large populations. As Max Weber recognized, structure can be the switchman of history, encouraging some social forms, preventing others. To understand how that switchman directs both large and small forces is to recognize Weber's concern with the waves of history and the patterns of verstehen embedded within tiny publics.

I began my academic career in the early 1970s as a student of group dynamics. Although I was unaware of it at the time, this moment represented the end of an era for this vigorous and consequential branch of social science research, which would be marginalized by the rise of other approaches that eclipsed the importance of group dynamics, notably the growth of cognitive science and organizational studies.

During the 1950s and 1960s, small-group research had had an emphatic impact on social psychology. The approach was so central that in December 1954 the *American Sociological Review,* the discipline's flagship journal, devoted an entire issue to small-group research. This was the golden age of the group, a lustrous moment enriched by research support from the Office of Naval Research, military men with a stake in the dynamics of submarine crews, the archetypal isolated small group. The fate of democracy was thought to hinge on the cohesion of these groups. State support eventually ebbed, as did the role of submarines in the arsenal of American defense. At the same moment that witnessed the growth of computers and the salience of *images* of computers, social psychologists increasingly explained behavior through cognition rather than co-presence, treating humans as "information processors," while embracing a metaphor of the brain as computer. Private thoughts edged out coordinated behaviors. By the mid-1970s, the question was asked: what happened to the small group? (Steiner 1974). Admittedly, small-group experimentation is more difficult to coordinate than tests of single subjects, but the continuing paucity of small-group experimentation is striking. Even *group process theory* focuses on individual status claims rather than on the dynamics of group interaction.

By the late 1970s, two streams of sociological research were swelling: ethnographic observation and the sociology of culture. Field methods were increasingly embraced as a legitimate social science methodology, and the small group—accessible, open, observable, and easily depicted— was its natural focus. The focus on small groups should have generated greater attention to groups in situ (as in classic social psychology, such as Sherif and Sherif 1964; Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956; Roy 1959–1960). However, while some studies—such as those of gang activity (Horowitz 1983), street corner life (Anderson 1979), or workplace dynamics (Burawoy 1979)—examined groups, other ethnographic examinations focused on substantive problems, forgetting that they were observing a sociological "tribe" (Fine 2003a; Maffesoli 1996). Local knowledge was shunted aside in favor of a focus on institutions and communities. With the worthy goal of examining extended cases (Burawoy 1991, 2009), linking ethnography to macrosociological concerns, the interactional basis of sociality was downplayed. Groups were studied, but they were not theorized.

A second, expanding strand of scholarship focused on culture, a topic that had been primarily the domain of anthropologists prior to the 1970s. Sociologists, with their interest in structure and interaction, treated culture as a form of collective action and brought innovative concepts to the exploration of meaning and performance (Becker 1974). While the examination of culture sometimes included local arenas, the cultural turn often led to analysis of how culture creates and is created by extended communities, ethnic groups, or nations. Culture shapes group identity and cohesion, and in turn groups develop their simultaneously unique and borrowed culture through the interaction of participants. Providing frameworks of interpretation and extending personal epistemic schemas into shared understandings, groups are where enactments happen. Thoughts and behaviors become "extra-personal," and the socialness of the world is created.

In the chapters that follow, I build on an approach to social psychology, sociological miniaturism, that John Stolte, Karen Cook, and I developed in an essay in the *Annual Review of Sociology* (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001). We argued there that the distinguishing contribution of sociological social psychology is its ability to link social processes and institutional forces. The outcomes that are often attributed to large-scale social forces originate within small-scale domains. In part this observation reflects a choice of level of analysis, but in fact the intersection of agency and structure—the core topic of sociology—is to be found within these contexts of interaction. Observing such action realms, my colleagues and I have employed metaphors that suggest the presence of institutional and societal forces as actors engage in exchange and negotiation.

As both Georg Simmel (1898, 1902, 1950) and Charles Horton Cooley (1902/1964) recognized, situations are sites where social scientists can uncover broader forces. Microinstitutions simulate the dynamics of larger social units in their causes, processes, and effects. This is not mimicry but rather the revelation within these spaces of the core features of social organization, features that are often attributed to larger institutions. Through an interaction order—*a field of performance*—phenomena that we attribute to external, trans-situational forces have effects. Here is a world that is locally ordered and socially situated (Goffman 1983, 2). This focus on microrealms suggests that rather than embracing the *social-psychological* (that is, basing sociological social psychology on reductionist psychological principles), sociologists must focus on the *micro-sociological.* How do situations and their actors create structures of interpretation and coordination? Acknowledging forces that include the epistemic, the political, and the personal, we examine not the mind in

skull but the mind in place that coordinates with other minds (Zerubavel 1997; DiMaggio 1997).

The miniaturist approach posits three fundamental claims about social reality: transcendence, representation, and generalizability. First, social reality is *transcendent* in that social processes operate on multiple levels. Processes such as justice, inequality, or communion that apply to one level of analysis (for example, the interpersonal) can also be observed on other levels (for example, the institutional) but within different structural contexts.

Second, this approach treats the behavior of individuals as *representative* of social order in larger entities. The individual can stand for the group and, more important, *is taken as* standing for that group by individuals and institutions that thus recognize and respond to the individual actions of an actor as those of a *collective* actor. So, for example, the behavior of clerks can—and often does—reflect on the store or government that employs them. While experiencing bureaucracies through the individual actions of clerks, clients consider these clerks to be representations of the bureaucracy or sometimes even reflections of the states or institutions in which the bureaucracy is embedded. Thus, a citizen seeking to renew his driver's license decides—based on cultural representations and on the perceived typicality of the interaction—whether the clerk behind the desk represents herself, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, or the entire state government. The behavioral options and motivations of individual actors have recognizable parallels in attributions of behavior to groups, organizations, and other collective units. Although individuals need not always represent organizations or be taken as such, this behavioral synecdoche is routine, comfortable, and grounded in commonsense assumptions.

The third component of the miniaturist approach is the *generalizability* of social processes. The experiment that does not apply to phenomena beyond the laboratory is of marginal value for generating knowledge; this claim, a traditional feature of concluding remarks, is critical for justifying both laboratory experiments and ethnographic inquiries. Although most ethnographic studies depict action within an idiosyncratic place, we assume that the local observations transcend the uniqueness of the setting. Data from one case stand for others. The horizontal comparison of scenes, coupled with the ability to see processes operating on vertical levels, links local action to societal effects. In this way, the miniaturist approach uses transcendence, representation, and generalizability to reveal how local action becomes linked to social order.

In any sociological treatment of the local, ethnographers have an advantage: they espy interaction scenes and understand them microscopically. Even though a focus on the local is not tied to any one

methodological tradition it is inherent to ethnography, which describes how group life operates as an arena of action. Ethnography reveals social mechanisms, particularly when ethnographers focus on how participants respond to group contexts in shaping organization. However, it is not ethnography as such that provides this opening but rather a form of ethnography that privileges continuing social relations. This form of ethnography treats groups as ongoing and self-referential domains. The "corner"—*Street Corner Society* (Whyte 1943), *Tally's Corner* (Liebow 1967), *A Place on the Corner* (Anderson 1979), or *Sidewalk* (Duneier 1999)— serves as such a domain for sociologists, as the tribe serves for anthropologists. The corner is the ideal imagined place, and those who hang there are the model tight-knit imagined group. The ethnographer burrows into the group space, observing it until he or she can present the contours of corner culture, and then addresses how this culture reveals trans-situational processes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). No methodology is privileged, but in-depth ethnographies have advantages for exploring culture *as group practice.* In contrast to scattershot ethnographies, observations of public behavior, surveys of attitudes, or institutional censuses, watching culture over time provides unique insight.

In this book, I draw upon ethnographic material as appropriate, largely from my own extensive research, to argue that practices on the local group level build a meso-level perspective based on self-referential action contexts—places in which actions gain meaning for the participants who share the space (Fine 2003b). Over the past thirty-five years, I have conducted a series of ethnographic projects—nine major studies and two smaller investigations. Each of these projects had its own genesis and set of analytic concerns, yet all have been focused on the intersection of culture and group interaction in order to help build a theory of group interaction orders, idiocultures, and tiny publics. Together these projects justify a sociology grounded in microcultures and action contexts.

Since this book draws upon the analysis of these data sets, here I will briefly describe the locales and the theoretical objectives of my field studies. In doing so, I prefigure the ideas on which I elaborate in the rest of the book. These précis present a concise introduction to my scholarly intentions, as carried out in my previous work.

My first ethnographic research project was a three-year observation of Little League baseball teams (Fine 1987b). I stress that the project examined Little League *teams,* not Little League *baseball,* because my focus was on the team as a site of cultural creation (Fine 1979b). The project flowed from an interest in small-group dynamics in the laboratory. My graduate training in the Department of Psychology and Social Relations at Harvard was guided by Robert Freed Bales and Stephen Cohen (1979) and their colleagues, who were then extending interaction process

analysis into a more sophisticated model of group dynamics: the systematic multi-level observation of groups (SYMLOG). They described group interaction and social meaning by means of a three-dimensional space (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957; Heise 1979). I chose to apply this small-group model to the analysis of culture, finding in each group a local set of meanings and traditions. Within this model, group action needed to be understood as resulting from the shared cultures that developed over time. Each team created its own customs, expectations, and proprieties, and a set of shared references had built continuing and meaningful interaction. In this project, I referred to this group culture as an "idioculture," a concept that I have extended and sharpened over three decades (and discuss more fully in chapter 2). I proposed that "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 serves as the basis of further interaction" (Fine 1987b, 125). While I could have gathered data from numerous domains to demonstrate that groups establish and apply local cultures, I focused on ten baseball teams in five leagues, generalizing through the observation of similar groups. The original impetus was not to describe life on preadolescent fields of dreams but to examine how culture is created and embedded in small groups.

Despite my theoretical goals, the reality that I was examining preadolescent males and sporting behavior was central to the substantive analysis. A focus on "boy culture" was a wedge to demonstrate that a subculture is constituted by a network of small groups, a concern to which I return in chapter 8 when I consider extensions of group culture. The content of preadolescent male culture revealed a lively discourse on sex, aggression, competition, and morality. (A similar gendered scene has been evident in several of my projects.) Further, in examining not only preadolescent boys but youth baseball I was led to an analysis of the structure of preteen leisure to explore how adults organize the leisure activities of children (Adler and Adler 1998). Adult authorities impose a moral order to which groups of children respond emotionally, strategically, and sometimes, employing forms of subaltern resistance, subversively.

The topic of my second ethnographic foray stemmed from the limitations of my first project. Little League baseball teams demonstrate the existence of robust group cultures, but the temporal boundary and organizational structure of these cultures limit them as examples of the lasting and consequential influence of an idioculture. Little League teams are thin and partial cultures: they typically meet three times a week for a few hours during the spring. These groups, significant as they were to some boys, do not have the impact of other cultural domains, especially

classrooms, families, and informal friendship groups. Each team establishes traditions and shared narratives, but in a thin and partial culture these are often newly established from year to year. I required a site with a more engrossing culture in order to examine the deep effects of groups on participants. I found such a niche in the world of fantasy role-playing gamers (Fine 1983). These groups consisted of adolescents (again, mostly males) who played games such as Dungeons and Dragons—a manufactured subculture (Dayan 1986)—which in those days before ready access to personal computers was played around a table. I spent approximately eighteen months with these gaming groups, observing a public club that met in the community room of a local police station and two groups of gamers who met in private homes.

These gamers expressly desired to create imaginary "worlds" or "universes." Put another way, their explicit concern was culture building; perhaps they would not have phrased it in this way, but the elaboration of the cultures of their imaginary worlds was central to their enjoyment of each other and of the collective experience. This was an idioculture, but a deep and self-conscious one that would be returned to over and over and that constituted the basis of an ongoing local sociology. Cultures need not be evanescent or peripheral but can be organizing principles of social life.

Through these gamers, I explored how the production of novel and innovative cultures is linked to extant, public cultures, given the belief that, as fantasy, any and all cultural themes are possible. Like dreams, fantasy builds on reality (Caughey 1984; Fine and Leighton 1993; Schutz 1945): it is not *just* made up. In contrast to the belief that fantasy can be anything, fantasies are socially embedded, both within the group and imported from other meaning systems. As with preadolescent sports teams, culture emerges through the small group. The young men playing Dungeons and Dragons formed tight and stable groups, and their continued interaction contributed to their robust culture. They engaged in an ongoing performance that extended their personal fantasies, creating a shared narrative that served as an alternative reality within the gaming context. Throughout the game the responses of participants mattered to all the others and, as a result, permitted the elaboration of their fantasy and an investment in its continuation. While a fantasy-gaming subculture exists—just as a preadolescent culture exists—this more extensive culture depends on allegiances within small groups, since members belong to groups simultaneously and sequentially.

Fantasy-gamers exemplify Erving Goffman's (1974) theory of frame analysis: they have to determine the register (or code) of their talk as they simulate a society with a transformed set of social relations (Hoffman 2006). In this world, imaginary selves act, but it is both a

gaming world, in which players act within a system of contained rules, and a public culture, which is shaped by the gender, age, and backgrounds of participants. Sometimes participants spoke as actors, in the voice of their characters, treating the scenario within the game as their primary reality; other times they spoke as gamers, treating the game and its rules as their primary focus; and at still other times they spoke as natural persons, referring to concerns outside of the game. The challenge for participants was knowing in what normative context the interaction was being formulated—a problem that, as Goffman noted, applies to joking, play, deception, and other ambiguous domains within interaction orders. What seemed like an odd shard of interaction stood for domains in which contrasting interpretive frames abut each other.

My third and fourth projects, moving toward the analysis of idiocultures within important institutional fields, dealt with culinary training and restaurant work. This prior work is connected to chapter 3, where I examine how the concerns of an organizational analysis of the world are necessarily linked to the meanings and interactions within groups. In my first two research projects, I had neglected the power of organization, which is central to how society is structured. Little League teams and fantasy-gaming groups, while organized, float in interactional space. Organizational concerns were not entirely absent (a national Little League organization exists, and corporations, such as Hasbro, manufacture fantasy games), but organizational presence was not an insistent reality for participants. I wanted to extend my analysis of idiocultures by examining it in the context of organizations where coordination between expressive and instrumental results was crucial and by using a neo-institutional framework to see the possibility of understanding how the macrostructures of institutions provide for the foundations of a microstructure. How do small cultures fit into institutional arrangements?

For the first of these paired research projects, I observed cohorts of students training to become cooks at two hotel and restaurant cooking programs at what were then called technical vocational institutes (Fine 1985) but are now labeled, following institutional impression management, technical colleges. The program at one school lasted a year; the second lasted two years. An average of fifteen students were enrolled in each class. Following this project, I conducted ethnographic research at four restaurants for a month each (Fine 1996). Each site was constituted by a small group, once again predominantly male. Participants in these small groups addressed the challenges of producing aesthetic objects and the organizational constraints on that production while working within an economic order in which a restaurant's survival depended on ingredient prices, labor costs, and customer preferences. Beyond the obdurate organizational pressures, there were the pressures of aesthetics.

Given the limitations of language for discussing taste and smell, cooks and cooking students had to develop strategies by which they could convey shared assessments of dishes and recipes. Such aesthetic judgment is central to occupational engagement in many domains, and it depends on small-group dynamics. The interaction order of restaurants is firmly based in issues that transcend any single small organization.

The fifth project, a four-year study of mushroom collectors and the organizations to which they belong (Fine 1998), expanded on issues of aesthetic discourse but linked this subject to an important domain of civil society: the proper treatment of the environment. Here leisure was connected to ideology (a concern I address in chapter 5). I observed amateur and professional mycologists in order to investigate how groups conceptualize environmental ethics in practice, bringing cultural templates to an ideological understanding of nature. By focusing on the Minnesota Mycological Society, an organization with two dozen core members, I once again chose a small group as my primary research site. The repeated interaction of individuals, their shared talk, and their behavioral routines provided an opening to understand how environmental beliefs grow out of the ongoing interaction of these tiny publics. These groups constitute themselves as moral communities, and through their acts and their talk they develop a set of "ought" rules that guide their actions.

Based on a cultural template, the idea of nature—what I termed "naturework"—refers to how individuals define the meanings of the environment in light of cultural images. Naturework is a rhetorical resource through which people individually and collectively construct their relationship to the environment (Fine 1998, 2). These rhetorical constructions generate local norms (which I address in chapter 4). The key point is that nature can never be separate from culture; the two concepts are intertwined in multiple ways, and that reality shapes expectations within the community. First, in talking about nature—in this case, mushrooms—groups build on cultural dimensions (good, bad, pretty, ugly, male, female) as well as on elaborated cultural metaphors. They view the wild through a cultural lens. Second, entering the woods is a social occasion. Even when people traverse the wilds alone, they return with stories, and so nature becomes a platform for communal performance. Finally, nature is experienced through organizations that enable people to acquire resources for participating in the wild. These organizations permit the establishment of a domain of trust and secrecy in a world in which mushrooms are alternately treated as rare, desired objects and as dangerous, arcane ones.

Much ethnographic research depends on attention to talk, frequently more so than observations of behavior. Even though actions can be

dramatic and compelling, talk can be transferred directly and effort-lessly from the scene to the page, and talk typically requires less trans-lation on the part of the researcher. I was interested in how groups conceptualize discourse as a central part of their idioculture. For my next project, I explored the local construction of talk. I searched for a group that talked about talk as a central feature of its identity. After find-ing such a scene in high school debate teams, I spent a year examining two American high school debate squads, each with about fifteen ado-lescent participants (Fine 2001). I attended classes with these teenagers and then shadowed them at local and national tournaments.

This project engaged what was then termed "the narrative turn" in social theory. How do people acquire communicative skills so that others in their scene can understand and be persuaded, given the ambi-guity of language and the uncertainty of narrative consensus? This ques-tion is particularly compelling when the talk of a group constituted as a tiny public is political (a topic to which I return in chapter 7). While as a matter of course these teenagers had to argue all sides of a topic, they also came to terms with the ways in which the topic was linked to their own beliefs, shaped by the perspectives of their teammates. Social prob-lems discourse—here and in other domains—is based on a model in which argumentation is treated as a game (Fine 2001). While debate is a dramatic example of this process, the same dynamic is evident in poli-tics, in which tiny publics engage in lively discourse, however seriously they take it (Eliasoph 1998; Walsh 2003). The particular arguments and forms of talk are constructed in the context of local activity. The judg-ment of talk is not imposed from outside but emerges from within the community, even while drawing on standards and understandings from other, more powerful institutional domains.

My seventh study examined the development of a market for self-taught art (Fine 2004). This project returned to my interest in how groups construct aesthetic value and the boundaries of this construction. Aesthetic ideology is often created in a close-knit network of relations. Self-taught art is linked to the development of norms about the value of authenticity, a value that is mirrored in other domains of contemporary society, including movements for personal growth and selfhood. In this small art world, I discovered that participants proclaimed an inverse relationship between credentials and status: value was constituted through the characteristics and identity of the creators. The embrace of this belief served as a marker of communal belonging and a reflection of socialization to the community.

This five-year study differed from previous research projects in that I observed, not a routinely interacting small group, but a dense network. Although groups existed, such as a folk art study group in Atlanta and

the national Folk Art Society of America, most network venues were shows, museum openings, or auctions where attendance was open to all. These were wispy communities (as I outline in chapter 6). The arenas of local action were powerful during their activation, but they would vanish when participants departed. In contrast to other studies, this art world did not require a stable set of relations but only a shared set of values.

My next research project explored the boundaries of science within a government bureaucracy. I had moved from the voluntary and imaginary idiocultures of free-form fantasy-gaming groups to a set of local cultures linked to institutional bureaucracy, returning to some of the issues I explore further in chapter 3 (on the power of constraint and external pressures). For eighteen months, I observed operational meteorologists at three local National Weather Service offices, each of which had approximately two dozen workers (Fine 2007). In addition, I spent two weeks at the Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma, an office of similar size that generates severe thunderstorm and tornado watches for the United States.

Weather forecasters have the collective responsibility and the authority to predict the future. Twice a day they are required to produce a forecast for the next seven days. These are occupationally based claims that the public, government, and business use to structure their activities. Further, forecasters must warn about the onset of severe weather. How are these consequential decisions made? What are the practical limits of predicting from models and from data, and how are the models and the data integrated?

The National Weather Service is a large government bureaucracy, a key reality for the local cultures created in the small, semi-autonomous offices. Although autonomy must be located in the hands of the applied scientist, personal and team judgments must also be integrated into an organization that requires both routine and immediate answers within a set of government procedures. Interpersonal authority is asserted, but such authority is always understood in light of the needs of the bureaucracy and its consequential publics.

The teamwork embedded in this bureaucracy is crucial. Forecasters do not themselves gather data, produce hypotheses, or test alternative claims. Their task is to transform the information embedded in technological inscriptions and interpret it, with the advice and oversight of others who share their space. (The National Weather Service has three daily shifts.) Even though different shifts with different personnel provide the forecasts, the office management must ensure that they are seen as collective products, not personal ones. In other words, forecasters must make their forecasts in light of what others believe. Further, each

office must coordinate its forecasts with those of the offices that surround them geographically. As I discuss in chapter 8, the creations of groups that are integrated in networks are not theirs alone but are extended to publics—shared with those who are part of their institutional world.

My current ethnographic enterprise is a study of the multiple worlds of chess. I returned to my early interest in games, but with the intention of examining a complex leisure world, a layered world of organizations, networks, and casual affiliations. Over time my understanding of how local groups fit into larger communities became more nuanced, as described in chapter 8, where I examine the dynamics of local contexts and their extensions. The complexity of chess in its multiple locations makes this a particularly compelling world for field observations.

To examine chess in the United States I witnessed numerous sites of activity. These included two local clubs for adult chess players, a high school team, a club for skilled adolescents taught by a grandmaster, a collegiate team, a public park, and several meetings of a scholastic chess team at an elementary school. I supplemented these group observations with interviews and attendance at chess tournaments throughout the United States; attending some that were designed primarily for adults and some that focused on children and adolescents reconnected me with the issue of wispy communities (chapter 6).

My interest in this work is in seeing how status systems develop and how chess players situate themselves by means of a communal history (a long and complex one). Because of the numerical ratings assigned to players, according to their outcomes, chess is an activity in which status systems are explicit and public. To become a serious chess player requires an awareness of the history of the game, and chess training often entails reviewing or replaying the "classic" games of respected chess players and knowing established game "openings." Chess players situate themselves within the styles of play that have been developed over centuries, enshrining a group history. To enter the subculture of chess requires a commitment to the game and affiliation with the community. Allegiance to a shared history transforms a person who plays chess into a chess player.

Two additional studies—each less intensive than the projects described here—complete my eleven ethnographic projects. For several years I observed a group of engaged activists, volunteers for one of America's political parties, on a local, neighborhood level—a case of a tiny public (as discussed in chapter 7). These were men and women who performed basic organizational ("grunt") work such as stuffing envelopes, making phone calls, distributing leaflets, and putting up yard signs. I was interested in the salience of an ideological rhetoric, linked to the party's policy prescriptions. To what extent did the group provide a basis for

public engagement? Contrary to those who suggest that activists are highly ideological, I discovered that political rhetoric was only evident on certain ritual occasions, such as at party conventions. And yet the political commitments of participants in this group did matter on those occasions when they were activated. They were political at hot moments but not in their routine interaction (Eliasoph 1998). In other words, during mundane activities a partisan belief structure was latent, and ideology held sway when politics was manifest. Yet, even if not political all the time, the group provided an entry point into a public sphere. Although volunteers had joined the party organization because of their preferred policy preferences—coupled with personal recruitment (Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olsen 1980)—interpersonal affection proved more crucial in generating commitment on everyday occasions.

The final project, a brief one, involved observation of a nascent social movement made up of individuals who themselves had been accused of child abuse or neglect or who had a spouse who had been so accused, most typically by state agencies. This group, Victims of Child Abuse Laws (VOCAL), had the challenge of maintaining and defending its boundaries in the face of potential claims that the group (or some of its members) was in fact a perpetrator of such abuse. Members were seen as morally suspect by those outside the group, and even by some within. How could the organization maintain its moral legitimacy in the face of the belief that the charges made by authorities might be legitimate? What norms did they need to enforce? How and when? Should they exclude potential members who proclaimed their innocence, despite official charges or verdicts? In this case, the theoretical issue arose from the effects of the opinion of external communities on the normative structure of the movement.

Taken together, these eleven projects provide a platform from which to examine how small groups shape and are shaped by local cultures and to explore the importance of other groups and larger structures. In each project, I examined the impact of an idioculture on lived experience and local organization. To generate commitment, each group required a shared history that demonstrated that the participants *belonged* together. Despite their distinct substantive concerns, all of my studies of these groups have contributed to a theory of group cultures, local contexts, and tiny publics.

The book is divided into nine chapters, each addressing a set of themes by which a group-based analysis of the influence of local contexts explains the dynamics of an interaction order. Although they incorporate new material, these chapters draw upon writings I have published over three decades. I have reshaped, reconsidered, and reordered these writings. None of the chapters have been published in their current form, but

some chapters are closer to the published texts from which they draw. I hope that by being brought together here in this way, my writings over the last thirty years justify the claim that local sociology creates a useful sociological perspective.

In chapter 1, I present an overview of the role of groups, describing how groups structure social life. Groups provide the basis for a meso-level analysis, connecting the microanalysis of persons and the macro-analysis of structures through their roles as structures of control, change agents, forms of representations, and sources of resource allocation. A theory of local contexts is necessary as a basis for understanding social order. Chapter 2 presents the theory of small-group culture I have developed over three decades: the theory of idiocultures, those microcultures that recognize their shared pasts and provide a basis for an imagined future. Chapter 3 draws out the relationship between macroanalysis and microanalysis. Three decades ago, Randall Collins (1981) proposed that macrosociology has microfoundations. True enough. However, micro-sociology equally requires a set of macrofoundations. The impact of exteriority and constraint makes behavior more than evanescent but part of a sedimented social order.

The next two chapters build on the small-group model by focusing on the particular challenges of microcultures and meso-analysis, addressing how a small-group approach incorporates norms and ideology into local culture. In chapter 4, I examine how a theory of group culture treats norms as local expectations that are tied to a shared history. In this model, norms are framed, negotiated, and narrated within interacting communities. Norms create culture just as they reflect it. Even though norms are sometimes seen as residing in our minds, they are equally at home onstage—given reality through performances. In chapter 5, Kent Sandstrom and I develop a theory of ideology as enactment, tied to interactional contexts. Although ideological formations have cognitive components, it is too limiting to suggest that ideology is only cognitive. Ideology is emotional and behavioral as well, and local contexts serve as the anchor for action.

The sixth chapter, developed from a collaboration with Lisa-Jo van den Scott, examines "wispy communities"—communities that exist for a brief period of time for events or gatherings. These communities are larger than the small groups discussed earlier in the volume, but they share a desire to create a local culture and shared past through the intensity of co-presence. Borrowing Benedict Anderson's (1991) construct, I argue that such "imagined communities" need not be political entities but can be cultural scenes that are based on focused gatherings. Occasions such as a chess tournament, a mushroom foray, an art fair, a political convention, or the Burning Man Festival are fleeting gatherings

in which strong cultures emerge and dissipate. In some ways the flourishing of such gatherings provides an answer to scholars like Robert Putnam who worry about the decline of groups producing a society that lacks cohesion.

Chapter 7, based on a collaboration with Brooke Harrington, follows up on my attempts to connect group culture and shared history with larger social segments by developing the idea of tiny publics as a means of organizing civil society. In this chapter, I situate the analysis of groups and idiocultures in the light of political engagement. Civil society and the public sphere depend for their tensile strength on group interaction, which creates tiny publics, and tiny publics provide the platform for collective action. In chapter 8, the conclusion of my attempt to integrate a group theory with societal concerns, I describe how group cultures radiate outward. In this analysis, originally based on collaboration with Sherryl Kleinman, I present a perspective on how subcultures (cultural networks) are constituted by linked small groups. Subcultures require both the strong ties of group dynamics and the weak acquaintanceship connections by which information is diffused widely. In this sense, the book travels from a focus on small-group idiocultures to an examination of the wider social scenes that are more traditionally sociological topics.

A summary analysis of tiny publics and small-group culture is found in the final chapter, where I argue for a distinctive approach to sociological miniaturism. Here I lay out the basis of a *local sociology,* drawing on ideas developed in previous chapters and emphasizing the importance of context within an interactional arena as a means by which social organization is established in both cultural and political realms. Despite its reliance on Erving Goffman's theories, such a meso-level approach to culture and context is ultimately most crucial, not as a metaphor of improvisation to describe situations, but as a group-based theory of action in ongoing local worlds.

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