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Tiny Publics and Group Practice: A Response to the Comments

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by Gary Alan Fine, Brooke Harrington *and* Sandro Segre

Scholarly journal articles advance arguments directed at the tiny publics of academia: invisible colleges and networks of colleagues. While authors know the readers are "out there," somewhere, we rarely have the privilege of hearing from them. Engagements such as this are doubly pleasing, both because they are insightful and challenging, and because they engage the kinds of small group interaction our essay recommends to the attention of the discipline. We are grateful to our colleagues for being willing to shape, push, and prod our argument.

About a decade ago, the first author came to recognize that sociology – and much of the social sciences – had largely and uncritically abandoned its earlier embrace of the small group. This domain of action had once been consequential, not only in symbolic interaction and Chicago school sociology (as Philip Smith notes) but also within the tradition of group dynamics that stretched back for Kurt Lewin and was influential in related ways to the research of George Homans and Robert Freed Bales. The idea of group in these perspectives was as an arena in which action was played out and as a crucible in which action was shaped. These arguments, ultimately more behavioral (but not behaviorist) than cognitive, served to remind sociology that among our focal concerns is how social order is generated through action. Individuals create lines of action that others identify with and respond to. Borrowing Goffman's phrase, sociology is "where the action is" [Goffman 1967].

This article, then, is a piece of a project of recovery and of advancement: to remind our colleagues of the importance of local conditions in the creating those institutions, organizations, states, and communities that we come to think of as constituting social structure. We use the construct of tiny publics, an insight from some

empirical analyses of civil society to emphasize that political groups are anchored in shared spaces by means of discourse. This view is in accord with that of Jeffrey Goldfarb, who calls for attention to the "Politics of Small Things," as he points to the meanings that are created across kitchen tables. Goldfarb [2006, 15] writes in a vein similar to that which we are arguing, "When friends and relatives met in their kitchens, they presented themselves to each other in such a way that they defined the situation in terms of an independent frame rather than that of officialdom." From the hearth, an independent frame that emphasizes the agentic responsibility of the group, individuals can come to see their world as consistent with or in opposition to the standards of their community. Hearths are duplicated throughout the land, each with their own culture. These tiny publics specialize in the politics of small things, which when taken together – in networks and through widely disseminated cultures – come to control attitudes towards large things.

Eiko Ikegami is, as she indicates, one of the fellow travelers in this movement. Her work on the organization of early modern Japanese society takes seriously the idea of publics and small, focused communities, tight networks and gatherings that through their identity and focused activity helped to build a political system, as they are integrated through shared history and common discourse.

In his comment, Rosati raises an essential and valid point: that democracy (and indeed all forms of public participation) is grounded upon "common practices." This claim, central to our mission, is to remind scholars of what a Durkheimian model of "collective representations" often is taken as lacking. We must not be satisfied with generating a sociology that emphasizes cognition over all else – an inside-the-head sociology, avoiding a sociology of action. This line of argument proposes – as Eliasoph and Lichterman did in their influential 2003 *AJS* article, "Culture in Inter-action" [Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003] – that action derives from interpretations rather than interpretations from action. Far closer to our argument is Eliasoph's *Avoiding Politics*, which, focusing on two tiny publics, is explicitly tied to group action [Eliasoph 1998]. Rosati's argument is very much in line with our own thinking in treating local contexts as being the generator of community affiliation.

Smith comes at our project from a different angle. He is one of the Yale cultural scholars who are attempting, along with Jeffrey Alexander, to propose a strong program of cultural sociology. This macro-level argument proposes that culture is an autonomous entity operating upon social beings – a stance that we question. And without irony or jest, we must note a sense of déjà vu about Smith's commentary: many sociologists might consider the issues he raises with regard to our article to have been settled a few decades ago by Homans' "Bringing Men Back In" [Homans 1964], or at the very latest by Giddens' structuration theory [Giddens 1984].

But let us take this opportunity to clarify that nothing about our small groups arguments *excludes* culture from analysis: we are not proposing an either/or model of social life, in which the small group obscures all other forces. Instead, we model culture along lines quite consistent with most sociological practice: culture is a toolkit [Swidler 1986], or a set of shared references; these tools and references are used by people and groups to achieve instrumental and expressive ends in the context of an idioculture or microculture; culture both shapes groups and is shaped by them [see Fine and Harrington 2004 for further elaboration of this process in the context of civil society]. For sociologists accustomed to a post-Parsonian world in which agency, conflict and change are acknowledged in theoretical models, our propositions should thus be relatively uncontroversial. While we can only be flattered by the terms "bold" and "near-Tocquevillian," this certainly exaggerates the novelty of our claim, so aptly summarized by Smith, "that face-to-face encounters play a role in the construction of a civil society."

In fact, as the classical theory section of our paper shows, these ideas have a long history in our field; we are proposing to take up these neglected tools and put them to new uses. And they are indeed handy to have around, as evidenced by excellent questions of the kind Smith poses in his comment. For example, to his trenchant query "how are human subjects formulated and naturalized such that they feel compelled to engage in democratic politics?," we can start by pointing to our discussion of Simmel, who argued that the development of small groups, civil society and civilization in general are inextricably connected to one another [Simmel 1968, 325-326, 571-573]. Weber, for his part, contended that traditions of self-government at the local level are also the traditions of a thriving civil society, as fostered by interactions among individuals and groups [Weber 1971, 399, 405]. Along similar lines, we note in the paper that while Durkheim viewed shared beliefs as promoting shared practices, he also saw beliefs as promoted by practices [Durkheim 1998, 493, 497]; if Smith's theoretical perspective emphasizes the former at the expense of the latter, then we can only submit that he is not really arguing with us, but with a century of sociological tradition.

In other words, it is not a question of *either* culture *or* small groups dominating the other – as Smith's critique seems to imply is at stake in this discourse; rather, explanations within the small groups perspective seek to understand the dynamics of mutual influence – a more complex model, to be sure, than the either/or model that Smith has brought to his commentary, but surely a more accurate approach to accounting for social facts. As Eiko Ikegami so aptly phrased it in her comment, the small groups perspective argues for "the centrality of fluid interactional processes in understanding social realities."

As a concrete example of the model's implications, consider Smith's observation that the Twenty-first century is increasingly informed by mass communication and populated by virtual societies (like MySpace and YouTube). We can only agree with Smith on this point; our perspective departs from his mainly in his argument that this development is making (or has already made) small face-to-face groups obsolete. This either/or perspective – that is, either the culture drives social life from the macro-level, *or* the small group does from the micro-level – is puzzling in its rigidity and failure to consider a third possibility (which, in fact, is at the heart of our paper): that while small groups do work within and are shaped by mass culture, groups also challenge that culture and create new cultures of their own. Walter Privitera's incisive comment summarizes the problem with treating mass communication or other forms of culture as an autonomous force that acts upon social beings without the mediation of small groups: "Naturally, communication too is a phenomenon rooted in the microcontexts of face-to-face meetings, and this does not change, even when much larger publics are being addressed."

Indeed, this would seem to be *prima facie* evident in the very examples Smith cites to make his case: that participants often use virtual communities as ways of ratifying the existence of face-to-face groups, or to establish new ones. As Fine [1977] argued over thirty years ago, media representations are as products created and distributed by and for groups; groups consume and respond to those representations, and the cycle continues. Twenty-first century dictators understand this very well, which is why they are so concerned about limiting their citizens' access to mass media and internet communication: because those virtual communities aren't going to stay virtual for long. One could cite numerous examples of the ways in which the virtual and face-to-face realms work *together*, reinforcing one another as much as competing with one another; again, it's not either/or, but both.

So in answer to Smith's question "Is there a middle ground?," we are happy to report that the answer is a resounding "Yes – and it is precisely the meso-level theory we propose." While one can willfully ignore the level at which actions are performed, the result is a minimalist theory of a thin behavioral world – a transparent, static slice of the real. This does violence to how things really happen; developing models that offer rigid causal rules at the expense of explanatory power strips sociology of its purpose. Aren't we all, at the end of the day, in the business of discovering and explaining how social life works?

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Abstract: The structure of society is shaped within small groups, a feature of social order that we have termed "tiny publics." These tiny publics provide the basis of collective action and political change. Yet, in current sociological theorizing this meso-level of analysis has often been downplayed. In this article, we argue that classical sociological theorists, particularly Simmel, Durkheim, and Weber, recognized the essential role of small groups in political and economic life, creating a local sociology. To focus on small groups as a field of action recognizes the centrality of interaction and negotiated order as standing at the heart of the political process.

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