

Tiny Publics: Small Groups and Civil Society*

GARY ALAN FINE

Northwestern University

BROOKE HARRINGTON

Brown University

It has been conventional to conceptualize civic life through one of two core images: the citizen as lone individualist or the citizen as joiner. Drawing on analyses of the historical development of the public sphere, we propose an alternative analytical framework for civic engagement based on small group interaction. By embracing this micro-level approach, we contribute to the debate on civil society in three ways. By emphasizing local interaction contexts—the microfoundations of civil society—we treat small groups as a cause, context, and consequence of civic engagement. First, through framing and motivating, groups encourage individuals to participate in public discourse and civic projects. Second, they provide the place and support for that involvement. Third, civic engagement feeds back into the creation of additional groups. A small-groups perspective suggests how civil society can thrive even if formal and institutional associations decline. Instead of indicating a decline in civil society, a proliferation of small groups represents a healthy development in democratic societies, creating cross-cutting networks of affiliation.

“If some obstacle blocks the public road halting the circulation of traffic, the neighbors at once form a deliberative body; this improvised assembly produces an executive authority which remedies the trouble before anyone has thought of the possibility of some previously constituted authority beyond that of those concerned.” —Alexis de Tocqueville (1966:232)

It is a common rhetorical trope to imagine the United States not only as a nation of individuals but also as a nation of individualists. The image of the solo actor is said to define us as a people and often is taken to explain how America is distinctive from other nations—a perspective that has been labeled “American exceptionalism” (Lipset 1996). This image of the defiant self, the proud outcast, or the lone cowboy is pervasive in our national culture (Arieli 1964; Bellah et al. 1985:142–63; Lears 1981:19; Wright 1975).

At the same time, this individualism has been characterized as a threat to civil society, ranging from the psychological (Slater 1970) to the economic (Hartz 1955:211–19) to the social (Putnam 2000). Putnam, for instance, portrays Americans as increasingly anomic and given to highly individualized activities, such as “bowling alone,” at the expense of civic engagement or communal life. The motif of the isolated actor belongs to a tradition as venerable as sociology itself and has resurfaced periodically throughout the past century (Wellman, Carrington, and Hall 1988).

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The “decline-of-community thesis” (Paxton 1999) has its roots in the studies of the transition to urban life (Simmel 1950) and the passage from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (Tonnies 1957 [1887]). For Nisbet (1966:7) this thesis represents the animating force of the development of the discipline of sociology in the nineteenth century, a “revolt against individualism.”

This concern flies in the face of a second common view of the United States, borrowed from a reading of de Tocqueville, as “the association-land *par excellence*” (Weber 1911:53). For every commentator who has remarked on American individualism, another has portrayed the United States as a nation of joiners, tied to an organizational establishment of community. As early as 1835, de Tocqueville (1966) remarked that Americans “constantly form associations”—an observation restated 150 years later by Lipset (1985:141), who noted that compared to other nationalities “Americans are more likely to take part in voluntary efforts to achieve goals.” Banfield (1958:17), too, portrayed American communities as constituted by a dense web of communal organizations, proclaiming that “Americans are used to a buzz of activity having as its purpose, at least in part, the advancement of community welfare.” Riesman’s (1950) “other-directed man” captured something of the same striving for community participation (or at least conformity) through associational involvement, as did Whyte’s (1956) “organization man.”

CIVIL SOCIETY AS A WORLD OF GROUPS

These two venerable traditions, the loner versus the joiner, jockeying for intellectual dominance, have proven difficult to integrate. An emphasis on one appears to discount the other—either one is alone or one belongs to an associational society.

Such a dichotomy neglects an alternative model of civic engagement; significantly, it is an alternative that has been emphasized in studies that examine the birth of the public sphereⁱ from the late seventeenth to early nineteenth Century: the microlevel of small groups. If civil society relies upon the self-organization of social relations (Calhoun 2001a, 2001b), then the formation of the socially embedded small group is central, whether politically self-conscious or not.ⁱⁱ Theorists of civil society point to the crucial formative role of small-group settings such as the coffeehouse (Back and Polisar 1983; Habermas 1991:32), the secret lodge (Koselleck 1988:70–92), the club (Agulhon 1982:124–50; Amann 1975:33–77), the salon (Giesen 2001:223–24), and the literary society (Habermas 1991:34).ⁱⁱⁱ Even de Tocqueville (1966:662–66), long perceived as an associational theorist, recognizes that these associations can be “very minute” and “carry out [a] vast multitude of lesser undertakings”—more like a committee than a movement. In effect, he envisions a small group of like-minded others. The ability of the public small group to generate an alternative to state and family has been posited as central to civil society, even though these theorists typically lack a social psychology by which to interpret their historical claims.^{iv} Thus, the

ⁱ It is not our intention to differentiate these closely related, but separate, concepts (Calhoun 2001a, 2001b). When we speak of a civil society, we are assuming a social system with a vigorous public sphere.

ⁱⁱ It is Koselleck’s (1988:66, 85) claim that even these seeming apolitical groups in fact are political, a claim that Habermas doubts (e.g., Cohen and Arato 1992: 212).

ⁱⁱⁱ The influence of small groups is not limited to the creation of western civic society. Levtzion (2002: 110–16) points to the role of Sufi brotherhood lodges as helping to create a Moslem public sphere.

^{iv} Although in his early work Habermas emphasizes groups, much of his later theory focuses on the role of communicative technology. For Habermas group interaction is not an end in itself but is a means by which a critical audience develops for literary work (Cohen and Arato 1992: 215). For Habermas, the group is an incubator of audiences, not a social psychological microcommunity.

elements of group dynamics largely have been ignored in prior works on the public sphere. Yet the recognition of the importance of intensive interaction exists. As Walzer (1992:107) notes, “Civil society itself is sustained by groups much smaller than the *demoi* or the working class or the mass of consumers or the nation. All these are necessarily pluralized as they are incorporated. They become part of the world of family, friends, comrades, and colleagues, where people are connected to one another and made responsible for one another.” Such a view provides the grounding for an understanding of society as a web of groups, “establishing small publics” (Cohen and Arato 1992:252).^v The group, in providing the basis of and public space for social attachment (Arendt 1972; Back and Polisar 1983), serves as an alternative to the dichotomous model of individualism versus associationism in civil society.

In some sense, this perspective is implicit in the literature on civic engagement. For example, Putnam’s (1995:167) definition of civic engagement—“trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action”—described well what small groups do. Indeed, the very idea of associationism, with all it implies for democracy and civil society (Kaufman 1999), assumes the value of group interaction in a polity.

Building on this approach, we hope to contribute to the debate on civil society by emphasizing local interaction contexts—the microfoundations of civic society. We see small groups as a cause, context, and consequence of civic engagement. The attachments of individuals to those small groups in which they participate permit us to understand how public identities develop and how individuals use these identities. Focusing on small groups permits an understanding of how civil society can thrive even if we assume the decline of formal and institutional associations. A proliferation of small groups without formal affiliations represents a healthy development in democratic societies by establishing intersecting webs of allegiance.

Following the approach of *sociological miniaturism* (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001), we identify a set of interactional processes through which small groups create the foundations of civil society. By examining microlevel phenomena, we can uncover the bases of large-scale social forces (Collins 1981), just as these microlevel phenomena themselves are structured through macrolevel constraints (Fine 1991). Our goal is to extend previous work by moving the locus of analysis from idiosyncratic, individual choice to opportunity structures and constraints created by group settings (Harrington 2001; Harrington and Fine 2000). Our approach focuses on contextual factors that so far have received less attention than they deserve (Hallett 2003; Strauss 1982).

By *small group* we refer to groups that depend upon personal (typically face-to-face) interaction with the recognition by participants that they constitute a meaningful social unit. Although size affects what constitutes a “small” group, generally the term refers to a collective whose members know each other as distinct individuals. As Bales (1950:33) (see also Hare 1976:279) famously wrote, a small group is “any number of persons engaged in interaction with each other . . . in which each member receives some impression or perception of each other member distinct enough so that he can . . . give some reaction to each of the others as an individual person.”

While this definition was tied originally to the experimental tradition in social psychology, it is applicable equally to naturally formed groups, recognizing that the

^vIn contrast to our approach, these theorists have a rather specialized conception of the type of small groups that contribute to the public sphere. Habermas (1991:163), for instance, emphasizes that the presence of political and literary debate characterizes sociable groups that creates a “public.” We have a more expansive view of the role of group culture in civil society.

boundaries and membership of these groups are more fluid, that the interaction is routinized, and that the definition of such groups may alter over time.

Groups are ubiquitous in the social order. Families, friendship cliques, work units, athletic teams, gangs, and leisure clubs form the basis of contemporary social structure. Indeed, the irony of Putnam's memorable slogan is that it is nearly impossible to find anyone bowling alone. Whether Americans bowl in leagues or with acquaintances as frequently as they once did, observation at local lanes indicates that when they bowl, they are bowling with friends, families, and coworkers. Most public leisure life occurs in the company of others.

The small group provides a communal space that tames an alienating, asocial individualism as well as the oppressive conformity of associational control. Even crowds, while appearing "disorganized," are organized through clumps of dense groups (Aveni 1977; McPhail 1991), just as subcultures consist of networks of groups (Fine and Kleinman 1979). Through small groups, individuals find arenas to enact their autonomous selves and to demonstrate allegiance to communities and institutions. They create social order without recourse to legal institutions, as in rural farming communities in which issues of land boundaries can be problematic (Ellickson 1991).^{vi}

Ultimately, small groups constitute a behavioral and discursive space in which civil society is created and enacted. We propose three broad roles for small groups in the civic arena. First, groups are the crucible in which civil society is created. Groups define the terms of civic engagement, provide essential resources—such as networks of participants and the construction of identity—and link movements to larger political and cultural themes. Second, small groups provide a space for the enactment of civic engagement by serving as a vehicle for the distribution and maintenance of collective goods. Finally, small groups are an outcome of civic engagement, with participation and proliferation of groups contributing to social and political health.

SMALL GROUPS AS CAUSAL STRUCTURES IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Small groups are the incubators of civil society. In the course of interaction, participants in small groups define some social problems (but not others) as worthy of a collective response. Having done so, groups then become the vehicle through which people and resources are mobilized to action. We label these the *framing* and *mobilization* functions of small groups. Each is necessary—though not sufficient—for civic engagement. Finally, through the acts of framing and mobilizing, small groups *create citizens*, producing identities that embed individuals within larger entities, such as the nation.

Framing

Framing, as originally postulated by Goffman (1974), Bateson (1972), and Gonos (1977) and extended to the analysis of social movement cultures by Gamson, Fireman, Rytina (1982), and Snow et al. (1986), attempts to answer the question "how do participants in group activity make sense of what they are doing?" Frame analysis

^{vi}In examining the relationship of small groups to civil society, we cannot assume that groups hold any particular position with regard to politics or civic investment. Members of a small group can share any stance, or, as is often the case, have no explicit or elaborated social or political position (Eliasoph 1998). Indeed, they may disagree within the group, preventing a shared front. However, this diversity or even attitudinal apathy does not prevent the group from influencing civil society.

asks specifically how group participants create the interpretive tools they use to unpack the meaning of events. Put another way, framing refers to how groups provide schemas to explain reality and to select responses.

From the universe of potential civic engagement opportunities, small groups serve as the sorting mechanism by which some issues receive a collective response. Groups are the arenas in which individuals distinguish between what does and does not constitute a social problem worthy of collective action. For example, observation of urban neighborhoods in the United States demonstrates that some small groups—such as a block or a cluster of dwellings—define trash on the streets as a civic problem, whereas others do not. This framing decision results not only in neighborhoods that come to look very different from one another but also in a fundamentally different construal of citizenship and civic engagement. From the early studies of Sherif (1936) (see also Asch 1951; Milgram 1974), examining the autokinetic effect, the power of groups in creating collective definitions for members, has been recognized widely.

Group interaction makes some frameworks probable and others unlikely. If, as McCarthy and Zald (1977:1215) postulate, “grievances and discontent may be defined, created, and manipulated by issue entrepreneurs,” those entrepreneurs require an audience to complete the social construction of civic reality. No civic issue is possible without a set of groups to provide sponsorship and endorsement.

Seen in this light, framing is a form of culture creation—a core function of groups in all settings, not limited to the civic arena. Any group in which participants interact regularly and in which they recognize their relationships as meaningful develops a set of symbols and references that can be drawn upon with the expectation that other members of the group appreciate their significance (Farrell 2001; Fine 1979; Wiley 1991). The group culture—or idioculture—provides for a referential past and a prospective future (Katovich 1987) that cement allegiance to the group and support action.

Small groups situate local frames of reference within a larger context, aligning them with broader ideologies, symbols, and movements. For example, group cohesion justifies the sharing of experiences and accounts of that experience (Fine 1998; Mitchell 1983). Through the narration of experience, meaningful group events radiate outward from the locus of interaction. This role of small groups also works in the opposite direction, translating national and regional trends into local terms. For example, constructs of national significance, such as “citizenship” or “sacrifice,” are defined locally as well as nationally, linked to different standards of group interaction and cultural forms. This localism constitutes a major source of variation in the forms of civic engagement: The expression of patriotism in a New England college town may take the form of a demonstration, while in a neighboring rural town it might take the form of a bake sale. Both activist groups may rally around a nationally recognized symbol, such as the flag, but may define patriotism through local norms of participation. This ability to acknowledge diversity and change—while also providing linkages at the macro-level through common processes and shared frames of reference—represents a major strength of the small groups approach to civil society.

Framing processes also showcase this ability of small group theory to account for both variety and regularity, to bridge micro- and macrolevels. Snow et al. (1986) found that the framing of action in social movements, while in some sense unique to each collective, is organized through a fairly predictable set of steps. The process begins with issue definition; followed by bridging or aligning with other groups; then amplification and extension—linking a local scene to broader structural trends and

ideologies; culminating in social transformation. This group process can result in a local issue becoming a focus of national or global civic engagement. For example, Brown's (1997) work on "popular epidemiology" documents how a small local movement, such as the citizen mobilization to resist toxic waste contamination in Woburn, Massachusetts, can radiate outward, linking with other groups and eventually to media, resulting in national-level awareness and political response. Groups can link with others, creating a network with extensive reach and tensile strength. In turn, groups are the vehicles through which national issues are linked to localities, as embodied in the environmental movement's slogan, "think globally, act locally." The group serves as an outpost for the broader network.

In bridging local and national cultures, small groups define and legitimate situations so as to make action possible. This includes not only defining what constitutes an issue worthy of civic engagement but also the process of creating a collective response. Historically, groups have been a locus of tactical innovation in civic activism. Tactics that became hallmarks of the civil rights movement, such as the sit-in or the bus boycott, were developed by small groups responding to local conditions. Their size and possibility of democratic involvement made these groups incubators of innovation, both in terms of policy and of tactics (Polletta 2002). Such innovations have been hailed as critical factors in determining whether movements thrive or die (McAdam 1983; Morris 1981).

The framing of group culture posits—explicitly or implicitly—a relationship to the state, public sphere, and other civic institutions. How the group defines the boundaries of legitimate action shapes the concerns of each participating individual (Eliasoph 1998).^{vii} As a result, civic involvement becomes validated through the frameworks that are embedded within group traditions.

Mobilization

In addition to defining the territory of civic engagement, small groups gather the resources and support needed for collective action. Groups serve as the gravitational centers of civic life, drawing individuals into participation not only through compelling ideas but also through material resources and the commitment of others. As Granovetter (1977) demonstrated in his work on threshold models of collective action, the likelihood of an individual engaging in a civic movement depends on the number of others already involved. The ability to draw a crowd serves as one important signal of a movement's viability, legitimacy and potential impact—what Hirsch (1986) termed the "bandwagon effect."

Groups provide the basis on which involvement takes place. Each member represents a node in a social network—a link to other persons and resources that can be drawn into collective action. As McCarthy and Zald (1977) documented, personal networks may serve as conduits for money, publicity, or materials essential to the survival of civic movements: Activities are provisioned through ongoing social connections (Fine 1989). First and foremost, however, movements must draw people. The small-groups perspective points to the crucial importance of face-to-face interaction for achieving affiliation. Empirical evidence supports this claim, demonstrating that strangers rarely are recruited to participate in social movements. Rather, recruits are

^{vii} This is also an area in which groups can generate an oppressive conformity on members. This does not detract, however, from our general point, which is the power of groups to frame the terms of civic life, for good or ill.

drawn from the active networks of family, friends, and other associates of current movement participants (McAdam 1986; Snow, Zurcher, and Eklund-Olsen 1980).

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That is, civic engagement is rarely a forum in which citizens forge social bonds but rather is a place in which existing social ties are leveraged for collective action (Fine and Stoecker 1985; McPhail 1991).

Creating Citizens

The small group is not only instrumental in the creation of collective action but also determines how individuals conceive of their own identities. There is increasing scholarly recognition that the concept of nation, and hence citizenship, is linked to identity, a point addressed by Anderson in his influential *Imagined Communities*. For Anderson (1991:7), the image of the community is central; he notes that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” Anderson (and others) sees nationalism and civic engagement as cultural artifacts—vehicles through which individuals identify themselves and their “brothers” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Greenfeld 1992; Koselleck 1988). But this literature largely ignores the interactional process through which this identity formation occurs.

It is through interaction and affiliation radiating outward from small groups that civic identity is created. Small groups can represent the state and the nation in microcosm—serving, for example, as repositories of civic memory or as sites for the retelling of national identity narratives (Johnston 1991). Small groups provide the lived experience and the concrete events without which concepts such as national identity largely would be meaningless. The emotions, cognitions, and cultural artifacts generated within small groups (Scheff 1994) connect individuals to nationalist projects, sometimes explicitly, as with those groups that define themselves as reflecting national identity [e.g., Boy Scout troops (Mechling 2001)], and sometimes implicitly, as when nationalist culture is exemplified in food preparation, clothing choices, or holiday celebration. As Billig (1995:6) points out, it is the taken-for-granted, mundane quality of civic identity that makes it so powerful. While our argument is not fundamentally about the construction of nationalism, we propose that whether we examine civic involvement or national identity, small groups generate the identity and the socialization processes involved in creating citizens.

SMALL GROUPS AS CONTEXT FOR THE ENACTMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

In addition to mobilizing the interests, resources, and tactics needed to create civic engagement, small groups also provide a space in which movements grow. At the most basic level, civil society consists of individuals acting in concert to pursue shared goals in the public arena. Small groups provide the context for this concerted action. The small group enacts civil society through a unique constellation of structural properties that induce individuals to forgo their immediate self-interest in favor of collective goods. These structural properties, such as repeated and reciprocal interactions among members, allow groups to perform the monitoring, sanctioning, and provisioning of selective incentives that civic engagement requires (Kaufman 1999).

As Olson (1965) points out, collective action is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. Neither shared interests nor the presence of resources are sufficient conditions to produce civic engagement. Self-interest, opportunism, and the diffusion

of responsibility each create obstacles to collective action. The issue is encapsulated in the “free-rider problem,” which suggests that self-interest leads individuals to try to reap the benefits produced by groups without contributing their share to the production or maintenance of those benefits (Hechter 1987). Many individuals enjoy the fruits of others’ civic engagement around issues of clean air or water without having contributed to those efforts. As Aristotle recognized, “What is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it” (*Politics*:book 2, ch. 3). Or in a more recent formulation by an economist, “everybody’s property is nobody’s property. Wealth that is free for all is valued by none” (Gordon 1954:124).

Rational individuals put the collective interest ahead of their own interest only under very specific conditions—conditions that often are exemplified in small-group interaction. In small groups, individuals can interact in ways that are not possible either in larger institutional settings or in the atomistic free market. Group settings provide a face-to-face context in which individuals develop reciprocal, trusting relationships based on repeated interaction and fine-grained information sharing (Geertz 1978; Uzzi 1997) and in which these interactions lead to the construction of an identity invested in group participation.

Thus, small groups promote civic engagement by placing individuals in a position where they have more to gain, or less to lose, by cooperating with the group effort than they do by acting as free agents. The incentive structure is reinforced within small groups by regimes of monitoring and sanctioning (Hechter 1987). The face-to-face interaction that is characteristic of small groups allows individuals to monitor one another’s behavior for the appropriate amount and quality of contribution to group goals. When individual participation is found wanting, face-to-face interaction provides immediate and powerful sanctioning. Tactics such as ridicule or ostracism commonly are used to discourage individuals from operating outside normative boundaries of group behavior (Dentler and Erickson 1959; Seckman and Couch 1989).

The microstructures present in small groups—opportunity structures as well as mechanisms of accountability and sanctions—constitute a unique contribution of small groups to civil society. Macrolevel entities such as states, complex organizations, or large associations cannot reproduce these structures effectively. When they attempt to do so, the costs are prohibitive, and the results often are perceived as illegitimate and/or inappropriate (Ostrom 1990).

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By the same token, markets do not support the costs of monitoring and sanctioning. For example, few neighborhoods would be willing to pay to post a security officer on every corner to ensure that no one is robbed, but many form volunteer associations in which each resident patrols their block.

Borrowing from the resonant phrase of legal theorist Ellickson (1991), groups provide “order without law.” It is the informal power of the group—the strong motivation to go along, preserve reputation, and enjoy other benefits of community affiliations—that constitutes order. Group members do not always maximize their individual interests (the rational choice assumption of individualism), but by recognizing the value of participating in group life—explicitly or tacitly—personal interests are satisfied.

Gould’s (1993) study of French working-class protests during the nineteenth century demonstrated that participants were mobilized not by class or occupation, as previously thought, but by neighborhood networks—the intersection of small groups. Gould’s (1993:739) evidence, including transcripts from the trials of insurgents, showed that participants in the protests were motivated to civic engagement by

pressure from their neighbors: “Failure to participate in the insurgent effort was construed as a betrayal of loyalty to the neighborhood and sanctioned accordingly” (see, similarly, Calhoun 1982). Other studies have echoed this finding that small face-to-face groups, rather than more abstract relations, such as shared position in the economic or political structures, underlie some of the most powerful instances of civic engagement. Research on the East Germans who tore down the Berlin Wall (Opp and Gern 1993), as well as on American civil rights activists (Chong 1990), indicates that local affiliations were the decisive factor in motivating individuals to participate in democracy movements.

These findings attest to the power of groups to monitor, sanction and offer selective incentives efficiently. Such functions flow from a structure of interdependence and repeated, face-to-face interactions rather than from a particular expenditure of resources. Small groups provide an informal yet powerful control mechanism that prompts individuals to moderate their egocentrism without resorting to the social control that often is characteristic of organizational life. Small groups permit individuals to collaborate flexibly for common interests without the infrastructure and resources that organizations entail.

Underlying the effectiveness of groups is the reality that participants know each other and shape their behavior and self-image in the context of the expected responses of others (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Local cultures generate norms and behavioral expectations, and members in good standing accept these standards as tied to their allegiance. Group expectations are consequential matters—defining the group and drawing boundaries that separate it from others.

To the extent that individuals treat the group as providing a behavioral standard, the necessity for external control is reduced. What otherwise might be conflict among individuals is mediated by the desire to participate in group life, achieving both instrumental goals and expressive fulfillment. Thus, small groups serve an important function that often is associated with formal organizations—the development of enforceable trust. Given that individuals often participate in social life in the context of their groups, civil society reaps the benefits of group surveillance.

Status and reputation, among the most important selective incentives, are enacted within small groups and are shaped by cultural norms and expectations. Small groups create a *social cartography* of others—recognized placements of others within a social space. Each member is situated within a network of power, influence, and action (Bales 1970).

This system of incentives, grounded in reputational politics, is important not only in directing members’ behavior within the group but also in socializing individuals to civic life and legitimizing the status systems of larger public domains. Thus, the family, the first small group in which people participate, serves subsequently (for better and for worse) as a model for how status, rewards, and power should be distributed within public life. The groups in which individuals are socialized (both as youths and as adults) model civic engagement. The ideas of justice, equality, and respect found in small groups are translated into members’ conceptions of the good society. Status becomes enacted within the group, and this serves as a model for status in larger social systems as well.

SMALL GROUPS AS CONSEQUENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

One way to gauge the health of civil society is to measure the proliferation of small groups. Societies in which there is a high degree of civic engagement require a high

5 density of small groups to facilitate the debate and advocacy necessary to produce collective action. As Ostrom's (1990) work on cross-national patterns of civic action showed, the capacity to generate group activity to solve public problems is not a given in social structure but rather is a variable.

Some societies are more successful than others in this regard. Recent empirical studies indicate that the United States remains near the top globally in generating small-group membership (Curtis, Baer, and Grabb 2001; Curtis, Grabb, and Baer 1992).

While it may or may not be true that large and formal associations are declining in the United States, there is evidence that the profusion of unaffiliated small groups offers significant benefits to civil society. While the mere existence of small groups does not a civic arena make, a high density of independent small groups can provide individuals with multiple, and often cross-cutting, opportunities for affiliation. This benefits civil society in multiple ways, exposing individuals to varied experiences and points of view—a critical factor in the democratic process (Sunstein 2000, 2001). While some groups encourage deviance or antisocial behavior, they can work—in the context of other diverse small groups—against the balkanizing pull of “amoral familism” as well as highly concentrated associations (Banfield 1958; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993).

The small-groups approach to civic engagement is distinct from that of social capital theory (Woolcock 1998) in that we argue for the intrinsic value of the interaction and affiliation that small groups produce. In contrast, those working in the “decline-of-community” paradigm appear most concerned with the formal linkages among small groups. Thus, when it comes to bowling, the real issue for Putnam and others is not individuals going to the lanes alone but is the decline of bowling leagues that once connected groups of acquaintances to each other through formal mechanisms. Yet even without these connections, the existence of numerous small groups has value in itself.

The capacity of a society to generate small-group activity is an indicator of civic health because small group membership breeds more small-group membership. That is, groups not only are precursors to civic engagement but also are consequences of that engagement. Participation leads to the desire to continue involvement. To the extent that group members define their activity as satisfying, group involvement justifies further involvement in communal ventures. The satisfaction of group activity frames additional mutual participation. The affective and social benefits in civil society serve to legitimate further involvement. For instance, a satisfying experience within a social movement group makes allegiance to other movement groups more likely. The culture of the group postulates, explicitly or implicitly, a relationship to the state and other civic venues (Habermas 1991:36–37; Koselleck 1988:91). How a group defines proper action in its traditions, beliefs, and actions shape the concerns of each participating individual—setting the stage for continuing participation.

If small-group culture promotes further group membership and civic engagement by creating citizens and “civic-mindedness,” the emotions generated by belonging to a small group also provide an incentive for further engagement. They remind participants of the affective benefits of forgoing individual interest to work cooperatively toward shared civic activities. By providing a structure for affiliation and cohesion, groups offer both a model and a reason for participation in larger social domains. What one learns within the group context can be generalized to other domains; it becomes a resource that can be harnessed for public participation.

The ability of a social system to generate a desire for microcommunities is an indication of the health of that system. It suggests that given the civic religion or

ideology, people wish to collaborate constructing shared meanings that in turn can strengthen the community. At times, these groups may be linked together (as with bowling leagues that are comprised of bowling teams), but even unaffiliated groups of bowlers spending a weekend evening together provide a basis for social allegiance. Just as the group represents the civic assembly in microcosm, the civic assembly motivates individuals to create microcommunities of trust and interest. While we acknowledge the social power of networks of groups (Fine and Kleinman 1979), we also argue for the inherent value of group plurality and decentralization. We remain agnostic on whether associations among groups are declining but find reason for optimism in the rapid expansion in the types and missions of independent small groups, fueled in part by the mass media and high-speed communications (Putnam 1995).^{viii}

Evidence suggests some of the benefits that this expansion of unaffiliated small groups can confer on civil society. Research on civic life indicates that the concentration of power in the hands of a handful of associations is linked to a decline in civic engagement. For example, Nee and Nee (1973) documented the stranglehold that large family associations and the Chinese Six Companies (tongs) held over the residents of San Francisco's Chinatown. The concentration of networks and resources in a few associations, and the lack of alternative affiliations available to individuals, meant that the tongs could enforce conformity to a rigid and narrowly defined social, political, and economic agenda. While this strategy had some benefits to the community, it also contributed to isolating Chinatown's residents for generations from the larger civil society.

Such concentration of power also can be destructive for civil society by creating free-rider problems: decreasing willingness to engage in the civic arena by smaller or less powerful groups and individuals. The perceived benefits of community participation decline dramatically when actors believe that their efforts relatively are ineffectual compared to those of larger, well-entrenched groups. Thus, civic engagement is low in areas dominated by what Banfield (1958) called "amoral familism": the tendency of individuals to cluster into large and powerful family associations to the exclusion of the broader community or smaller, more diffuse social units. Southern Italy, long associated with lawlessness and the *cosa nostra*, often is cited as a vivid example of this problem. On the other hand, when such entrenched communities witness the entry of new groups—and thus the potential for new affiliations—the result can be a renewal of civic health. This was suggested by Portes and Sensenbrenner's (1993) research on Ecuadorian businessmen who have attained success by breaking with the Catholic church—and its onerous cultural requirements of male family heads—becoming Protestant evangelicals. Conversion does not imply necessarily that these men break ties with their families but rather that they reformulate their relationships through adding new, cross-cutting small group affiliations that counter-balance the balkanizing effects of familism.

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Thus, we argue for the benefits of pluralism and diversity of small groups. This also suggests why it is so important that future research on civic engagement focus on the small group. Rather than focusing on intergroup linkages to gauge the health of civil society, a better measure may be the proliferation of small assemblies, clubs, and cliques that are not affiliated formally necessarily with each other.

^{viii} Putnam (1995) himself has acknowledged this development and how it may distort his findings, based on data from old, established organizations such as the Elks Club.

THE LIMITS OF GROUP BENEFITS

In this article we have argued that small groups have benefits for civil society. Yet the small group is not a panacea for all that ails us. However, we acknowledge that there are costs to a society that depends on groups for social involvement. These costs derive from two sources: (1) the balkanizing effects of groups in general; and (2) the ways in which some groups encourage antisocial or “deviant” behavior and attitudes.

Balkanizing Groups

Groups are keenly aware of boundaries and issues of membership. Of course, groups vary in how firmly they patrol their borders, but the concern with “who belongs?” frequently is central. From this recognition one might ask whether a mosaic of groups might create a divided and suspicious society.

This might indeed be the case when groups are closed tightly and in which those outside the group are seen as rejecting the group’s core values. In this instance, the group becomes a *defended community*, and the larger society is seen as rejecting group beliefs. However, while groups see themselves as distinct from others, they usually do not define themselves as embattled with others. This is a crucial distinction in understanding whether groups will have a balkanizing effect on their civic environments. In addition, the boundaries of most groups are porous: Since members belong to multiple groups, simultaneously and sequentially, connections among groups are created, limiting the hostility that otherwise might be felt. Add to this the fact that in most western cultures, the extremely fine-grained division of labor necessitates interdependence among groups—interdependence that can override even established hostilities (Sherif et al. 1961). While opposing groups have the potential for dividing society, most often groups can coexist, even when their values are in conflict, and see their mutual presence as part of a civic game (Fine 2000).

Deviant Groups

Some groups hold values or endorse actions that undermine mutual respect. Whether we talk about terrorist cells, militant militias, or youth gangs, groups represent a wide array of ideologies, some of which are not conducive to the growth of a civil society.

We have argued in this article that belonging to a group often has the effect of taming the antisocial impulses of individuals. This surely is not the case always, as depictions of deviant groups make evident (Horowitz 1986). Still, groups provide for normative control. Even the activities of violent or hostile groups are organized by the standards of the group (Bourgois 2003). To be sure, some groups push their members to actions inimical to civil society that they would not have considered otherwise, but still even such groups provide a structure of social integration should the conflict abate.

Our argument is not that small groups inevitably contribute to civic harmony and mutual consideration within a public sphere but rather that the dynamics of group behavior leads to respect for a set of others, an attitude that under some circumstances can radiate outward. Participating in an ordered social system is likely to create desires that continue and to expand that participation elsewhere.

SMALL GROUPS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

We hope to remedy the neglect of small groups in sociological theory by emphasizing their centrality as a fundamental unit in organizing social and political life. The absence of small groups as a level of analysis in civil society research is startling given their empirical ubiquity in everyday life. Both as scholars and as citizens, we are embedded continually in small groups; groups link the individual and the organization, community, and state. Civic life in any diversified society would be impossible without them. The dynamics of collective affiliation are reflected within small groups, creating social order.

Groups provide an interactional space in which concepts of the good and proper society can be explored and negotiated. Groups also shape civic identity and affiliation by allowing members to communicate within a context where both trust and social influence are central social forces (Fine and Holyfield 1996). While some groups are tied explicitly to political, national, and civic issues, this need not be the case for the group to have impact on civic life. As Eliasoph (1998) demonstrated, group life creates the norms governing the amount of direct and active civic involvement, and, regardless of whether civic involvement is evident directly, the existence of a group connection legitimates civic belonging.

Groups work on several levels to create civil society. They serve as the creative nexus, the context, and the consequence of civic engagement. First, group dynamics create the desire and the means for public action, shaping the sense of institutional identity on the part of participants, as well as mobilizing resources. The outcome of group interaction is a culture in which civic participation, citizenship, and nationalism are created. Second, small groups provide arenas in which the action of civic engagement is played out. It is a discursive space where ideas of patriotism, nationalism, civic religion, and the public sphere can be explored and enacted. Finally, a healthy civil society produces a proliferation of small-group affiliation opportunities, counterbalancing the balkanizing tendencies of large associations. Cliques, clubs, congregations, or teams are not generated spontaneously but are born of other groups. Given that individuals belong to multiple small groups, each presents individuals with an alternative model from which they can choose. A multitude of such groups and cross-cutting affiliations both promote and are the products of civil society.

The small-group perspective on civil society demands greater attention to ethnographic detail. Surely the types of groups matter greatly—in their membership, their beliefs and expectations, their interactions, and in the conditions under which they operate. Theoretical analysis demands empirical cases—studies that examine the variations and the conditions under which broad processes operate, allowing for an understanding of these processes through the miniaturism of interaction scenes (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001).

Isolation in civic life is rare: a matter of deviance, not normalcy. Despite the emotional resonance of the image of “bowling alone,” a society in which people actually bowled alone would be dramatically different from the environment we inhabit with our relatives, friends, and colleagues. One must not make the mistake of assuming that outside of association there is solitude, just as one must not forget that sovereign selves require a little help from their friends. Groups provide autonomy and audience, generating the freedom and the connections on which our allegiance to and membership in social units are based.

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