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Elisabeth Brooke Harrington, *Copenhagen Business School*
Gary Alan Fine, *Northwestern University*

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Opening the "Black Box": Small Groups and Twenty-First-Century Sociology

BROOKE HARRINGTON
Brown University

GARY ALAN FINE
Northwestern University

As sociologists look into the new century for sources of explanatory leverage, we argue that small group research contains untapped theoretical potential. Small groups have been largely ignored as a topic in their own right; instead they are treated as a "black box" in which other social phenomena are observed. We propose a reassessment. By opening the "black box," sociologists will find that the core issues of the discipline come together in small groups. We draw together the literatures of five domains, across which the findings on small groups are fragmented. These findings show that small groups are the locus of both social control and social change, where networks are formed, culture is created, and status order is made concrete. We refer to these as the controlling, contesting, organizing, representing, and allocating features of small groups. As the crossroads where agency meets structure, small groups offer the micro foundations for a twenty-first century sociological agenda.

Small groups appear to be a natural topic for social psychological analysis within sociology. The group represents an archetypal example of an organization in which interactional processes can be observed *in situ*. In the small group, larger social processes can be observed on a limited and focused scale, an example of "sociological miniaturism" (Fine and Cook 1998) generalizing to organizations and to larger social domains. Small group research involves meso-analysis (Maines 1982), situated between individual agency and structural processes.

Given their propitious location for addressing general sociological questions, it is somewhat surprising that small groups, at least as viewed from the brink of a new century, have been so undertheorized and so little researched as social categories in their own right. Indeed, the question raised by Ivan Steiner (1974) some 25 years ago continues to haunt us, certainly within the discipline of sociology: whatever happened to the small group in social psychology?

Paradoxically, research *using* small groups is flourishing in specialty areas such as organizations, gender, education, and culture. Studies of expectation states (e.g., Berger and Zelditch 1985) and organizational demography (for a review, see Williams and O'Reilly, 1998) have been especially successful in using small groups for theoretical advancement in areas of status processes and institutional efficiency.

Our claim is not that small group research is dead, but rather that the small group has lost its place as a sociological topic in its own right—an area in which generic interactional processes are examined. An examination of the contents of *Social Psychology Quarterly,* as well as the *American Sociological Review,* the *American Journal of Sociology,* and *Social Forces,* demonstrates few papers that explicitly attempt a theory of small group behavior. Notable exceptions include: Kathleen Carley's (1991) analysis of how groups maintain their stability over time; Farrell's (1982) work analyzing the impact of group dynamics on the creation of artistic products; and Fine's (1979) analysis of the role of culture creation in achieving collective ends. Each shows how general group dynamics can help explain the content of particular interaction scenes, suggesting that a sociological analysis of groups can be theoretically fruitful. In

addition, these studies show what twenty-first century sociology can gain from once again taking up a comprehensive theory-building program on small groups.

By embracing and extending Steiner's contention that small group research has declined, we do not suggest that sociologists and social psychologists have stopped examining small group settings, but rather that they express little interest in small groups as an organizing principle of social life. Our goal in this article is not to look backward, exploring the methodological, substantive, or theoretical rationales for this redirection of energy, but to face forward, suggesting reasons to restore small groups to a central place in sociological analysis.

Within sociological social psychology, small groups serve as a "black box." That is, they are used as a mediating form linking social structure and individual action. Sociologists such as those working on group process theory (e.g., Berger and Zelditch 1985) and organizational effectiveness (e.g., Hackman 1990) address issues concerning small groups, but they do not conceptualize the principles through which the group *itself* operates. As a result, the small group is left as a "black box." Once, groups were studied as social entities in their own right; now, they are used as a vehicle for examining other social phenomena.

For instance, group process theory is no longer the study of *group* process. It has become a set of theories that address issues such as how individuals see themselves and others in light of social categorizations, power, and status. With few exceptions, this body of research does not examine collective behaviors within interacting groups (but see Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989 on interruptions in small groups). Often, measurement focuses on the attitudes of others who believe they are part of virtual groups. The old, venerated group dynamics tradition—an observational approach straddling the boundaries of sociology and psychology (Bales 1950, 1970; Slater 1966; Strodtbeck 1954)—has largely vanished.

In fragmenting small group research among a variety of subfields, sociology has lost a valuable resource—one that should be recaptured in order to advance the field into the next century. What has been lost in fragmentation? Most notably, the ability to account for broad conceptual regularities, as well as for the complex interaction of processes in small groups. Yet the scattering of small group research among multiple subfields is a testament to the wide variety of processes that occur in groups. For example, many researchers use groups to study the effects of demographic composition, or the process of culture creation. But we could also ask how demography and culture interact. Lacking a comprehensive theory of group dynamics, it becomes difficult to account for these interactions, and thus to build bridges among subfields.

This paper brings together the key pieces that small group research has contributed to sociological knowledge, in an effort to make the case for a renewed interest in studying groups in their own right. Many of the points we make were widely acknowledged in the heyday of small group research during the 1950s and 1960s. But these points either were never recognized widely, or have disappeared from view. Our intended contribution is to clarify the significance of groups, and to restore a core set of questions to the prominence they deserve.

To achieve this, a sensitizing definition is necessary. We draw upon the classic analysis of Bales (1950:33), who writes, "A small group is defined as any number of persons engaged in interaction with each other in a single face-to-face meeting or series of meetings, in which each member receives some impression or perception of each other member distinct enough so that he can, either at the time or in later questioning, give some reaction to each of the others as an individual person." Hare (1976:4–5; see Sherif 1954; Znaniecki 1939) suggests that the recognition of similar goals, behavioral expectations (norms), differentiated roles, and networks of attraction distinguishes a "group" from a collection of individuals. In this analysis, the important point is that the group involves an interaction scene, an identification of the unit as meaningful, and a differentiation of participants into positions. Given the growth of virtual communication, however, one might question whether face-to-face interaction is essential for the existence of a small group.

In this analysis we examine five components of small groups that suggest the value of these micro-organizations as explanatory tools, and we discuss their potential for advancing the discipline. We view each of the five components as analytically distinct, and often in tension with one another—as in the tension between groups as vehicles both for social control and social change. Yet we wish to do more than emphasize how many social phenomena occur in small groups. Rather, we propose that the literatures of many subfields—research that uses small groups to study other issues—collectively form a bigger picture. These literatures show small groups bridging the individual and social structural levels of analysis, acting as the means by which social constraints are made real and social change is organized.

First, groups provide for the socialization of individuals to communal standards. Small groups are particularly effective in this way for two fundamental reasons. First, group members are easily able to observe the actions of others; in this respect, the small group is a form of Bentham's panopticon. In addition, because groups matter to the identity of members, the pressures of group life are likely to carry considerable weight in channeling behavior.

Second, just as groups socialize members, they also can provide an arena in which to challenge communal standards and expectations. Thus groups can serve as incubators of social change. Groups form the nuclei of social movements that contest forms of social control; in turn, social movements often are composed of a reticulated network of small groups (Gerlach and Hine 1970).

Third, groups provide for the establishment of network "clumps" or nodes: those segments of networks in which weak ties (e.g., Granovetter 1973) are replaced with a set of strong and intimate ties. This model helps to explain the diffusion of cultural forms: traditions that spread from group to group in social networks through weak ties, and then diffuse rapidly within each group. In this model, diffusion is viewed as occurring within networks of groups.

Fourth, groups provide spaces for the collective development, appropriation, and interpretation of meanings and cultural objects. This activity permits communities to represent themselves in symbolic terms. Every small group is associated with an idioculture: a set of meanings that individuals can refer to and employ in creating their collective identity. Groups are not merely interactional arenas, but cultural arenas as well.

Fifth, small groups are domains in which status processes and social identity are made concrete and individuals are allocated to social positions. These assignments take different forms, depending on the kind of characteristics to which we refer. In the case of ascribed characteristics (Parsons 1951), groups provide the rewards or punishments that generate status meaning, training actors to manage their stigma or to advertise their virtuous characteristics. In the case of achieved characteristics, groups often are the domain where these achievements occur. Simultaneously they are the location of active resistance against and reformulation of assigned status roles and identity.

Thus, we point to five processes through which small groups operate in sociological space and mediate between levels of analysis. We refer to these five processes as the controlling, contesting, organizing, representing, and allocating features of groups. We do not contend that these exhaust the full repertoire of group processes; rather, they represent a starting point for opening the "black box" of group life. Our intended contribution is to show how these processes suggest a larger theoretical picture. After explicating each process in greater detail, we conclude with suggestions for integrating small group research into contemporary sociology.

SMALL GROUP PROCESSES

Groups and Control

The small group can be conceptualized as an especially effective agent of direct societal power—a means by which collective power is made real and consequential for individuals. Among the various techniques by which social order is made palpable, socialization is the primary form of control. Although socialization should not be conceptualized as a one-way street in which individuals passively receive community expectations, it is a process in which society

presses itself upon the individual, shaping thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, even when some negotiation and resistance are possible.

As theorists from Jeremy Bentham to Michael Hechter (1987) have noted, the intimacy of groups facilitates the monitoring and sanctioning of individual members. The immediate presence of others—those who serve both as role models and as the distributors of rewards and punishments—has the greatest effect in forming persons. It is significant, but not surprising, that much of childhood is organized through the power of small groups: families, peer groups, and classrooms.

The coercive potential of groups is evident not only in childhood but throughout the life course as well. Individuals are continuously influenced by the presence of others, both authorities and peers. As amply demonstrated in the Milgram (1974) study of obedience, the immediate presence of an authority is powerful in enforcing the claims of the social system. Authorities have substantial power to monitor and sanction individual behavior. Yet peers, of course, potentially have this degree of social control, as individuals look for cues to learn what behavior is right in a particular situation (Corsaro and Rizzo 1988).

The group embodies the power structure of the social order on an intimate level. Small groups are important mechanisms of social control not only because individuals are assigned to places within a particular hierarchy, but also because they are exposed to the control (or lack of control) associated with these positions. Larger institutions have their effects on individuals within the context of interaction systems, influencing their material and phenomenological realities (Lovaglia and Houser 1996). Here, stigmas of various kinds are made palpable, and persons with esteemed social characteristics find that those characteristics bring rewards and lead to advantageous treatment (Berger, Rosenholz, and Zelditch 1980). Because they are closely knit, groups are particularly effective in providing rewards and punishments for interactants, linking these outcomes to a sense of identity (Lois 1999).

Forces of social control do not operate most effectively in dyads or in large, diverse populations; rather, they exert power when mediated through groups. This influence may include police interaction with gangs, teachers' discipline in school classrooms, family dynamics, and constraints on work teams in organizations. Because members can observe each other, deviations can be managed quickly. If, as Foucault (1979) emphasizes, society depends upon discipline and punishment, the small group—by virtue of its opportunities for open observation and its apparent freedom as a behavioral space—is an efficient arena for the operation of those forces.

Groups as Agents of Social Change

In addition to serving as vehicles of socialization and social control, groups are mechanisms of contestation and change. Individuals do not passively receive socialization through participation in group life; they also use groups to remake society (Fine and Stoecker 1985). As Giddens (1984) remarks, groups are simultaneously tools of human agency and means of constraint.

Groups provide the "microstructure" (Snow et al. 1986) through which individuals mobilize to create social transformation. Groups (and their members) need not merely relay social expectations to passive individuals; they also can be turned to the service of structural challenge.

How do small groups become the agents of social structural change, particularly given their localized character? Early work on the subject treated the small group as a repository for grievances, particularly those stemming from relative deprivation (Gurr 1970; Smelser 1963). Later research raised doubts that social change was motivated by purely psychological motives, and refocused attention on resource mobilization: the ability of small groups of activists to gain access to resources such as money, new recruits, media attention, or the support of elites (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Yet although explanations within social movements theory have moved gradually toward more resource-based accounts, the small group remains the centerpiece of social change.

The ability of small groups to mobilize resources efficiently depends largely on their success as micro-level social control systems. As Olson (1968) emphasized, collective

action is possible only in groups that effectively monitor and manage member participation, including limiting the presence of free riders. The smaller, more exclusive, and more tightly knit the group, the greater the ease in coordinating behavior.

Most important, the very act of participating in a small group builds commitment to ideologies, or frames, of social change (Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Hirsch 1990; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980). That is, individuals do not necessarily require prior ideological commitments in order to join a social movement. Rather, the fact of participating in the small group environment, with its associated community and identification, produces this level of engagement. This process of building commitment to social change—what Snow et al. (1986) label "micromobilization"—occurs via negotiation and persuasion, consciousness raising, and decision making. In other words, social change starts with talk. In consequence, the small group becomes the central arena for the formation of social movements (Benford and Hunt 1992; Fine 1995).

Groups and Network Organization

Small groups have the potential to demonstrate why networks are consequential in social life. Although the knowledge that individuals are acquainted does not in itself explain much, small group research helps us answer a more interesting question: what are the consequences of these affiliations? And how are these ties created within an interaction system? We can look at these questions in two ways. On the one hand, small groups are the means through which networks become visible and concrete to participants. Networks affect how individuals function in small groups, and different types of network ties produce different consequences. On the other hand, we can recognize that networks are composed of ties among groups, as in interorganizational relations. In this sense, networks represent a web of groups. In both cases, small groups are the "microstructure" that underpins institutions and other macro-level activity.

Small group interaction is the mechanism through which networks produce consequential social events. For example, social ties such as friendship produce more demographically homogeneous groups than do instrumental ties, such as those forged at work and in educational settings (Blau 1977; Kadushin 1995; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987). As a result, small groups based on social ties may have less information available for decision making (Granovetter 1973) and often perform less well than groups based on instrumental ties (Harrington forthcoming). These dynamics play out in organizations: strong social networks among corporate elites may become visible in the form of a board of directors' reluctance to punish executive misconduct. As Pfeffer (1992:107) writes of a CEO legendary for his survival skills, "William Agee's ability to win a showdown with a group of unfriendly board members depended significantly on social ties with other board members and on the favors he had done for them."

Small groups constitute a node of strong ties within a network of weak ties (Granovetter 1973, 1974)—an island of intimacy. Many types of networks are structured in this way. For example, Galaskiewicz (1985) and Useem (1984) have documented networks among elite groups in philanthropic and corporate executive circles, respectively. Further, as Fine and Kleinman (1979) argue, the nationwide diffusion of information (jokes, pranks, parody songs, contemporary legends) among children who lack access to media sources is a consequence of "interlocks" that connect geographically separate groups.

Once information, power, or resources are transferred from group to group, those properties spread readily within the group itself, creating a powerful subculture that transcends the boundaries of the individual group and provides a basis for concerted action and shared identification. Such a model emphasizes actors' embeddedness in a social system. In this sense, we can speak of individuals as "belonging" to groups, just as we can refer to groups as "belonging" to larger social systems.

The challenge in creating a set of intimate actors within a broader social system is to provide a nexus for the formation of group interlocks. This can be achieved through a

number of structural mechanisms. For example, Useem (1984) argues that the concerted activity of corporate elites in the United States and the United Kingdom does not take place through conspiratorial efforts by individual executives, but as a result of two distinct network mechanisms: interlocking boards of directors and a variety of overlapping social ties, including club membership. Because members of the corporate elite are frequently together in these small group settings, they share information, which leads to coordinated action.

Similarly, Galaskiewicz's (1985) study of interorganizational relationships in an urban grants economy finds that elite philanthropy is motivated by competition for social prestige with other members of the elite. In other words, the mechanisms linking elites to nonprofit organizations are none other than the small group processes of social comparison and status seeking. Small groups and their distinctive social processes are the "glue" of an extensive network involving scores of organizations and individuals.

Groups and Representations

Small groups also serve as the mechanism through which culture is created and enacted. Groups have cultures (Fine 1979; McFeat 1974), and these cultures are consequential not only for participants, but also for the society overall. It is within groups that individuals utilize their cultural tool-kits (Swidler 1986) to create symbolic and ideological structures that constitute collective representations. Within groups, individuals use their cultural toolkits (Swidler 1986) to create symbolic and ideological structures that constitute collective representations. Expressive symbols are not formulated in mass settings, but within particular interaction systems (although as noted above, cultural images can spread outside the group through a variety of network connections).

As Becker (1982) notes with regard to art worlds, the creation of culture depends upon collective activity: activity that is constituted in interaction systems, emphasizing the links among culture, interaction, and structure. With the creation of images, other groups or the system as a whole can come to define these images as constituting a form of collective representation. Consequently, the narrative of art history is often couched in terms of "schools" rather than in terms of individual artists (Farrell 1982). For example, the cultural works produced by the Impressionists are quite distinct from those produced by Cubists or Surrealists; this is a function of group process. This is not to say that the works of individuals such as Renoir and Monet cannot be distinguished from one another—nor those of Braque from Picasso, or Magritte from Dali. Rather, beyond individual differences, these works are identifiably products of a small group culture: a group that shared a philosophy, a set of techniques and experiences, common exhibition venues, and often a social life as friends and neighbors.

Whenever sociologists have inquired how societies create culture, the answer has involved interaction in small groups. These cultural creations, in turn, become the foundations of social structure. For example, Durkheim (1915) argues that religion—as a set of representations that pervade social life—was created in the crucible of the small group. Indeed, he claims that religion in its elementary form is a *self-portrait* of the small group, designed to sanctify and reinforce group cohesion. The dramaturgical (Goffman 1956, 1959) and symbolic interactionist (Blumer 1962) traditions took this line of research a step further by arguing that all meaning is socially constructed in the course of interaction. Although these theories often have been criticized as antistructural, they depend entirely on the assumption (often unstated) of a structural underpinning consisting of small groups (Fine 1991). For example, Goffman's (1959) writings on frontstage versus backstage behavior—indeed the entire dramaturgical project—makes sense only when a small group acts as "the audience" for various modes of self-presentation.

Small groups help us understand not only how culture reaches the macro-institutional level, but also how representations trickle down to individuals. The use of focus groups in marketing attests to the value of small groups as the microstructural bridge in this two-way symbolic traffic. Parents' and educators' concerns about monitoring chil-

dren's peer groups stems from a similar insight about the power of small groups to diffuse culture. The group is the mechanism by which fads and fashions, as well as symbols and norms, are transmitted back and forth throughout populations.

Groups and Allocation

Small groups are also the venue in which individuals negotiate their positions in the status hierarchy (Goffman 1959; Ridgeway and Berger 1986). In this setting, stigmas of various kinds are made real and advantageous social characteristics are rewarded: a central insight of group process theory and symbolic interaction alike. The group provides the arena in which individuals meet the power structure of the social order face-to-face. Not only are individuals assigned to places within a particular hierarchy, but also—as noted above in the discussion of socialization—individuals are exposed to the expectations that their positions entail. Groups allocate individuals within segmental and institutional worlds, and are the agents behind the reproduction of the social order. Further, larger institutions have their effects on individuals in the context of interaction systems, shaping their realities.

At the same time, groups offer the opportunity to contest the status hierarchy face-to-face. Indeed, many groups form exclusively for the purpose of transforming members' status. For example, organizers of ethnic or gay pride parades share a mission of status enhancement.

Group members look to others for cues about their identity and status. For example, gangs, cliques, clubs, and other voluntary organizations have the dual function of providing identity and status to members. The price of this self-placement is often a controlled set of behaviors, such as getting a tattoo, not associating with members of certain other groups, or engaging in self-defining deviant activities. For instance, being a member of the "popular" crowd in high school means not associating with those who are less popular (Eder 1985); membership in the Rotary Club means being defined by a set of sponsored community service activities.

One of the most persuasive and productive lines of research on the allocation of position in small groups has converged around the role of gender. Although this research program is complex and multifaceted, several studies deserve mention for their importance to sociology and social psychology.

For example, research by Deaux (1984) indicates that masculinity and femininity, far from being innate and fixed features of individual identity, are actually "performative" variables. That is, gendered behavior is elicited to varying degrees in individuals by the characteristics of group settings, particularly through norms and expectations. Groups simultaneously attach status to individual identity and to social category. Studies of men and women in conversation (Aries 1976; Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989; West and Garcia 1988) show how women's lower social status is made concrete in mixed groups through frequent interruptions by men. Martin (1998) demonstrates how the link between gender and status is established early in preschool groups, where teachers take children who are similar in comportment, appearance, and behavior and transform them into "boys" and "girls."

Expectation states research has demonstrated that adults coming into work organizations have similar experiences. Workers who are otherwise similar in terms of qualifications are sorted into status groups in the course of group interaction; this sorting occurs according to the power and prestige order of the larger social environment. Status is not conferred automatically, but rather is assigned interactionally; thus, the assignment appears to be linked to the particular characteristics of individuals.

For example, Elsass and Graves (1997) point out that task groups often enact the low social status of women and people of color by restricting their opportunities to speak or participate in decision making. Such exclusion or limitation of low-status individuals produces expectations that guide individuals' behavior and their interpretations of others. These expectations create self-fulfilling prophecies in which individuals are assumed to have abilities consistent with their status until they prove otherwise.

At the same time, unlike the preschool children in Martin's (1998) study, adults in organizations frequently seize the opportunity to disrupt the status order. For example, in experimental settings, women and people of color have used demonstrations of task competence to obtain higher-status roles in the group (Berger and Zelditch 1985). Thus small groups not only make the status structure concrete, but are also a crucible for change.

SMALL GROUPS AND THE FUTURE OF SOCIOLOGY

As sociology moves into its next century, it is useful to ask where the next major gains in theory and explanatory leverage may be found. In this article, we have proposed turning our attention back to the micro foundations of social life. We argue that the future development of sociology may lie in a "black box" that has been within easy reach for decades.

We have presented a set of sweeping claims for the legitimacy of small group analysis in sociology. This is a bold strategy for a concept that exerts only a modest impact on the discipline at present. Yet we believe that, in practice, many of the core processes of the discipline are embedded in the small group.

Because of its size and because of the emphasis on meaningful, situated interaction, the small group creates a space where individuals can accommodate themselves to larger units. Various institutions—the family, the church, medicine, the economy, education—maintain and reproduce themselves through small groups. The small group frequently represents the face of institutional power. By the same token, macro structures such as status hierarchies are transmitted and experienced in small group settings. In this regard, the small group makes real and immediate the social fact of structure.

The small group embodies central organizational principles. The group, in this sense, is society writ small. Because small groups bring society down to the face-to-face level, they have the potential to become mechanisms for social transformation. The group is not only a vehicle for conveying social control or culture to submissive individuals; it is also a two-way transmission device that individuals can use on their own behalf to amplify their aspirations and grievances. In addition, each small group is created through and expands upon network relations: such relations among groups create important micro-macro links. Thus, as network builders and as nodes, small groups form the connective tissue of social life. Finally, small groups are the locus of cultural transmission and enactment. We learn about culture through groups; we make and use our cultural tool kits in small group interaction.

Control, contestation, organization, representation, and allocation are central roles of small groups. The fragmentation of the small group research agenda has meant that each of these social processes has been studied separately in different subfields, using small groups as a vehicle for examining other issues. In contrast, we propose that sociologists should recognize that small groups are the linchpin of the social system. Most of the topics in the discipline involve small groups. We have made a case for the importance of *what* they do; now we must examine *how* they do it.

In this respect, small group research can redirect sociology's twenty-first-century agenda toward the microstructural arena as a basis for creating new theory. Specifically, we propose that future research should renew the quest for a comprehensive theory of small groups in their own right. We suggest the following topics as objects of inquiry: 1) identifying the core group processes underlying many areas of scholarly inquiry; 2) examining the interactions among small group processes that are currently treated as independent of one another; 3) and studying the creation, maintenance, and reproduction of small groups. These broad topics have fallen off the scholarly agenda due to fragmentation of small group research.

Recurring Themes

In reviewing just five areas of research, we have uncovered a number of recurring theoretical motifs: key mechanisms and processes that appear throughout a variety of subfields. They suggest the outlines of a comprehensive theory of group processes, and

point to the following areas on which future research might build.

Monitoring and sanctioning. The effectiveness of small groups in monitoring members, as well as in meting out rewards and punishments, plays a central role in the literatures of several different subfields. It has obvious implications for social control and status allocation, but is equally important to studies of social change and resource mobilization (see Olson 1968). In addition, monitoring and sanctioning underlie the development of social capital outlined in network theories (see Useem 1984). Future research might examine the varying ways in which groups perform these functions, particularly in light of new surveillance technologies, such as hidden cameras trained on household workers and electronic ankle bracelets for parolees.

Creating collective meanings. As the studies reviewed in this paper suggest, small groups are meaning makers. Identity, roles, symbols, interpretations, and other cultural artifacts are all the products of group life. Though this process is most often associated with the sociology of culture, it also plays an essential role in the social movements literature. As suggested by Hirsch (1990) and by Snow and colleagues (1980), small groups' ability to develop compelling ideologies is essential to both recruitment and action. Future research should consider how groups create, interpret, and disseminate meaning. In particuar, it would be valuable to know whether the development of new communication tools, such as e-mail and cellular telephones, significantly alter groups' culture-creation processes.

Compositional effects. The importance of group demography is a recurrent theme in research on both networks and allocation. For example, McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1987) show how demographic characteristics—specifically network homophily—create the framework in which new organizations are created. The literatures in organizational demography and expectation states, reviewed above, demonstrate how the relative distribution of member characteristics such as race, gender, or age affects individuals' satisfaction, level of contribution, and leadership potential. This research is extending the influence of group composition into other areas as well, including organizational performance (Harrington forthcoming). With the increasing diversity of the U.S. workforce and the expansion of the global economy, groups' demographic composition will become an increasingly pressing issue for twenty-first-century sociology.

Information processing. One of the most important tasks of a twenty-first-century research program in sociology will be to examine the role of small groups as information-processing units. This theme recurs in all five of the special interest areas we have reviewed, and deserves to be considered in its own right. As the link between individuals and social structure, small groups process information about community expectations, roles, and norms. Thus, information processing is essential to both social control and status allocation. In addition, groups create and transmit culture through the processing of symbolic information. As agents of social change, small groups must process strategic information concerning resources and activities. Small groups form out of networks, and networks form out of connections among groups, as a result of information sharing among members (Granovetter 1974).

The advent of new and powerful information-processing technologies, such as the World Wide Web, poses a particularly interesting set of questions for research in the new millennium. Will the new technology reduce the importance of small groups by mimicking their information-processing functions? Or will tools such as the Web increase the number and role of small groups in everyday life? The emergence of "virtual" groups and other artifacts of millennial culture offers new avenues for the renewal of a comprehensive small groups research program.

Extending Connections

Because of the interactions among processes that are currently treated as independent of one another, twenty-first-century sociology has yet another reason to pursue a research program focused on small groups in their own right. While previous researchers noted the interactions between processes of social control and social change (e.g. Giddens

1984), the connections could be extended in future research. For example, numerous social movements of the twentieth century, including the civil rights and the women's movements, made the transformation of status and role expectations a central objective. In other words, processes of change often interact with processes of status allocation. By the same token, studies of the diffusion of culture along network lines (see Fine and Kleinman 1979 on the diffusion of humor in adolescent culture) point up the interaction between these two processes. These examples only suggest the kinds of interplay among small group processes that should prompt us to renew our interest in a comprehensive research program.

General Issues

Finally, we argue that the following general issues have been neglected in sociological research due to the fragmentation of the small group research agenda:

Recruitment and selection into small groups. How does social structure generate small groups? Who participates? Why are some people relatively isolated from small group interaction? These issues have been examined empirically in the literatures on networks (e.g., McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987) and social movements (e.g., Snow et al. 1986), but the process of group formation as such has been undertheorized.

How small groups get things done. Answers to this question are scattered among a variety of literatures, including decision making and conflict resolution (see Beach 1997 for a review), organizational effectiveness (Hackman 1990), and leadership (Hollander 1985). However, we propose a shift of focus away from individual agency (such as leadership) and specific goals (such as conflict resolution). Instead, we suggest that a new sociology of small groups would concentrate on finding the regularities in interaction processes that shape both agency and outcomes.

How small groups reproduce and perpetuate themselves. As Bales (1950) pointed out, groups exist not only to get things done, but also to maintain themselves as social units. Even small groups brought together to achieve a temporary goal often find ways to extend their lives, or to metamorphose into new groups. The fiftieth reunion of Allied soldiers who fought on the Normandy beaches during World War II is only one recent example of groups' ability to extend their life spans far beyond attainment of a particular goal.

CONCLUSION

If we take seriously the contention that small groups are the micro foundations of social structure, it becomes imperative to understand their origins, purposes, and maintenance. In addition, the evidence that many subfields in sociological research are united by a handful of core group processes (many of which interact with one another) suggests the tremendous theoretical leverage in renewing a comprehensive research program. In opening up the "black box" of small groups, we discover much of what is most worth examining in social life, as well as the underpinnings of many of the subfields in the discipline.

Sociologists, in attempting to create a seamless, integrated discipline, search for places in which the macro and the micro, agency and structure, freedom and constraint interpenetrate. The small group serves this agenda admirably, and provides an excellent platform for the advancement of theory. If the small group has been ignored because of challenges of research methodology or because the group has seemed neither wholly social psychological nor social structural, we should recognize that its liminal quality is also its advantage.

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Brooke Harrington *is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at Brown University. Her research has looked at small groups in the context of economic and organizational sociology; currently, she studies investment clubs.*

Gary Alan Fine *is Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University. For two decades his research has focused on the role of culture in small group interaction. His book,* Gifted Tongues: High School Debate and Adolescent Culture, *will be published next year by Princeton University Press. He is currently examining the creation of a market in self-taught art.*