The Sociology of the Local: Action and its Publics*
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What is This?
Sociology requires a robust theory of how local circumstances create social order. When we analyze social structures not recognizing that they depend on groups with collective pasts and futures that are spatially situated and that are based on personal relations, we avoid a core sociological dimension: the importance of local context in constituting social worlds. Too often this has been the sociological stance, both in micro-sociological studies that examine interaction as untethered from local traditions and in research that treats culture as autonomous from action and choice. Building on theories of action, group dynamics, and micro-cultures, I argue that a sociology of the local solves critical theoretical problems. The local is a stage on which social order gets produced and a lens for understanding how particular forms of action are selected. Treating ethnographic studies as readings of ongoing cultures, I examine how the continuing and referential features of group life (spatial arenas, relations, shared pasts) generate action and argue that local practices provide the basis for cultural extension, influencing societal expectations through the linkages among groups.

For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin, I can get to the heart of all cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal. (James Joyce)

In his provocative, transformative fashion, emphasizing the power of the local, James Joyce posed a challenge for thinking about society. For insights to be universal, they must be local first. This, of course, is the novelist's creed. Each story describes a scene, but each must brim with insight, convincing audiences that the act of reading is not voyeurism, but education. The places, the actions, and the persons depicted stand for more than themselves.

In arguing for a sociology built on the local, I embrace the Joycean challenge: How does attention to the local create the conditions for general theoretical analysis? In some regards this confronts much of sociology, a discipline committed to examining how broad and unseen structural realities (“social facts”) overwhelm or even erase the specific characteristics of place, identity, and apparent idiosyncrasies of group life. This is not to deny the presence of micro-sociology, but often micro-sociologists, just as macrosociologists, strive to discover transcendent forces or generic processes (Couch 1984; Prus 1987), relying on methodological individualism. Yet, the group represents a distinctive sociological meso-level of analysis, a level that too often

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has been ignored (Steiner 1974) through an emphasis on selves and structures, on individuals and institutions. Order cannot be explained by erasing the mechanisms of its production and its continuity.

A local sociology emphasizes that particular circumstances provide opportunity structures that allow for developing meanings and structures and that these meanings and structures reverberate beyond group boundaries. This approach is based on the recognition that commitment to a group and its local culture produces standards for action, which then shape the group and are radiated outward (Lawler 1992). By local culture I refer to those sets of meaning that are tied to a recognizable interaction scene and its routine participants. In the strong case affiliation shapes the actor's identity and generates motivation for change or for adherence to accepted standards. In the weak case it creates a desire to follow tacit understandings of propriety. In either case individuals do not negotiate their relationships afresh every time they meet, but rely upon expectations that have developed over the course of their relationship.

Since every act constitutes and is constituted by a local context, particularity is universal. If everything is situated, that situated quality becomes a feature of social organization. However, simultaneously a situated context shapes the evaluation and interpretation of action. Put another way, the local provides a stage for action and creates a lens by which participants typify groups or gatherings, establishing boundaries. As a result, the local is both a material reality and a form of collective representation. Action is always generated in response to other actions within a local scene as well as to the local meaning of that scene.

The tension that Joyce refers to between universalism and particularism has long been evident in sociological theory, although we might alter his wording to a distinction between generalism and localism. This strain is not the division between theory and empiricism or between generalization and description or even between macro- and microsociology. Rather, it reflects a division over the extent to which action is seen as responsive to the conditions of those settings in which it emerges as opposed to viewed as resulting from general forces separate from embedded practices. Meaning-making is an ongoing process that is achieved through shared histories. While meanings are negotiated, they are never negotiated anew, but based on established understandings (Strauss 1978). I do not deny the obdurate reality of structures, but treat them as developing from and cemented in action. Consistent with Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, structure emerges from repeated action and local practices: what Sawyer (2005) labels "emergentist" theory.

Although this approach challenges certain standard views that have ignored the cultural contexts of action, sociologists are beginning to appreciate the influence of the contextual. One can find increased attention to localism in several research domains including the “neighborhood effects” literature in criminology and inequality (Quillian and Pager 2001; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002), the theoretical analysis of mechanisms of cause-and-effect (Gross 2009; Hedström and Swedberg 1998), socially embedded and networked political and economic transactions (DiMaggio and Louch 1998; Hillman 2008), the importance of emotional attachments to nested groups (Lawler 1992), the centrality of local orientation to identity (Bearman 1991), and the recognition that the conditions of scientific production affect discovery (Knorr-Cetina 1999; Collins 1992; Henke and Gieryn 2008). The diversity of such efforts suggests that an ontology of the local is not tied to any epistemological strategy, but relies on a conception of the locus of social causation.
Of course, to list these research streams perhaps suggests that an emphasis on local culture has carried the day. This is not the case. While a valuable start, these streams often refer to context without addressing the specifics of group interpretations. Even an ethnographic approach such as the extended case method (Burawoy 2009) often is more concerned with the structural processes affecting action than with the contours of group life. The influential neighborhood effects literature suggests that broad structural forces alone do not shape outcomes, but that variables such as collective efficacy (Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls 1999; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999) depend on local conditions. This research approach is insightful in questioning the view that all poor neighborhoods are alike and recognizing that community can buffer external threats, providing for distinctive cultures under certain circumstances (Fischer 1982). Yet, it does not examine the historical processes (Brown-Saracino 2009) and the spatial features (Grannis 2009) through which neighborhood cultures are developed. Valuable as these perspectives are in recognizing local diversity, the outcome of many of these research traditions is to downplay the processual how of local effects.

However, my goal is not to situate a localism argument in contrast to other work on context, but rather to differentiate this approach from one that on its surface seems a good deal closer both methodologically and in its theoretical traditions. Specifically, I claim that the interactionist tradition in sociology has downplayed the importance of history and collective understandings in favor of emphasizing that order can be constructed anew. I begin my critique by accepting much of the interactionist perspective, while pushing for reform. To analyze how social structures form and survive without recognizing that they depend on micro-communities with common pasts and joint imagined futures, that exist in space (physical or, increasingly, virtual), and that have social relations generated through patterns of emotional energy is to miss the process by which an interactional order comes about (Harrington and Fine 2000). This is not to suggest that all action is interaction or that humans do not act outside of the presence of others. Such a claim is self-evidently false. Actions beyond the reflex or the biological—such as voting, jogging, praying, or writing this article—have been learned, involve our imagination of others, depend upon beliefs or practices that are believed to be widely held, and rely upon implicit standards for performance. Even private acts result from the embrace of local or group-based values. While I emphasize how interaction is consequential in generating social order, private acts, too, are shaped by having occurred within or connected to groups, and are also resources for shaping those groups.

Localism and Negotiation

A local sociology illuminates several critical theoretical concerns. Localism uncovers the processes through which innovation, socialization, and change are constituted in practice, revealed in action that is tied to social commitments. Through the dynamics of community affiliation, localism stands at the junction of the interactional and the institutional, escaping the traditional black box that links micro- and macro-interpretations. The challenge for actors within ongoing, unscripted interaction is to organize social relations shaped by stochastic and external forces, interpreting them in light of shared pasts and local histories (Katovich and Couch 1992). In this they transcend moment-by-moment interactionism. Whether action arises from agency or structure (traditional sociological models based on individual reductionism
and social facts, respectively), participants respond in light of established systems of interpretations. This context provides the mechanism through which behaviors become models for future action.

I extend the approach pioneered by Anselm Strauss and his colleagues (Kling and Gerson 1977; Strauss et al. 1964; Strauss 1978, 1982) that recognizes that negotiations never occur anew, but are based on sedimented understandings. This approach challenges those interactionist, phenomenological, and dramaturgical models that treat meanings as continually being formed and reformed given the needs of the moment (Blumer 1969:2; Denzin 1985). Although not the only variety of dramatism (Brissett and Edgley 2005; see Burke 1984; Evreinoff 1927), Erving Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) has been taken as providing the charter for the belief that it is the “moment of action” that creates expectations within fleeting gatherings. It is not that dramatism denies order, but rather it makes order “fully situational” (personal communication, Charles Edgley 2010), continually establishing relations within encounters. Ephemeral micropublics (“Goffman publics”) (Ikegami 2000:997; White 1995), found in public spaces, suggest that interaction lacks tradition; in contrast, ongoing groups, through established practices, can overcome the problem through shared ritual and common expectations (Collins 1981).

Dramaturgical theorists, borrowing implicitly or explicitly from Simmel (Zerubavel 1980), properly uncover regularities in the formal contours of interaction in anonymous domains, treating scenes as invitations for choosing among situational definitions. And these domains of anonymity and spontaneity do exist. Using the heuristic of life as theater, we adopt a model that is more improvisation than script, a world in which we do not know in advance what direction the scene will take. These scholars construct a *model man in a modal scene* whose motivations—such as preserving social order or bolstering the primacy of interaction—are characteristic of “natural” human desires, and suggest that these motivations to cope with immediate uncertainty, rather than shared and confident understandings, determine the course of action. These processes are treated as generic and not as tethered to established relations among micro-communities of history and relations. The specifics of meaning are epiphenomenal, and draw on the standard reading of Thomas and Thomas’s (1928) dictum that all that is needed is a new, emergent definition and situations can change radically. Perhaps, if challenged, few would deny that embedded, stable meanings matter (Goffman 1974:1), but the interactionist approach has frequently promulgated a fluid model of behavioral preferences that rapidly alter social arrangements: a view that emphasizes immediate preferences over established understandings.¹

Despite a mutual concern with interaction ritual, *dramatism*, emphasizing the ongoing shaping of untethered interaction routines, contrasts to *localism*, the claim

¹One can see this strain in Goffman’s (1983) consummatory “The Interaction Order,” an undelivered oration that warns against “rampant situationalism,” while recognizing the shared basis of an understanding of that interaction order. A similar tension exists within ethnmethodology between approaches that emphasize how interpretations are freshly constructed in situ as local projects (e.g., Garfinkel 1967:35–75) and those that depend upon the existence of ongoing local cultures (e.g., Garfinkel 1967:76–103). Essentially Garfinkel’s argument is that local cultures constitute the default condition of interpretations with responses to disruption constituting a measure of just how preferential those cultures are. While lacking space to treat fully the ethnmethodological attention to local context, I recognize that tradition’s emphasis on particularity (e.g., Heritage 1984; Maynard 2003; Schegloff 1986). Yet, much of the emphasis in conversation analysis has been precisely how interactional strangers struggle to create meaning in the absence of local traditions.
that action is shaped by and responsive to group belonging. As a result, practices—
actions understood by reference to local cultures—are central. The response to sit-
uations is a grounded performance shaped by a self-referential group that shares
(albeit imperfectly) an interpretation of norms, values, beliefs, and rituals (Eliasoph
and Lichterman 2003). These cultural elements develop from the awareness of a
larger social system organized through membership in multiple groups, media rep-
resentations, and institutions of socialization (Fine and Kleinman 1979). Even though
actions reverberate beyond the interacting group, it is the group that establishes their
legitimacy. No matter how much we emphasize the here-and-now, a self-referential
history sets the terms for negotiations.

A local sociology asserts that interaction provides the basis of culture, but also
that local culture provides the basis of interaction. Because they are bounded and
segmented, groups provide opportunity structures for organizing society: not only
are they outposts of society but they are models for how society should be. Through
maintaining boundaries, local settings become the site for exclusion or segregation,
suggesting why members of social categories have differential access to knowledge,
resources, or relations. Local settings are sites where processes of stratification are
generated, reproduced, and transformed, both as a result of “selection” effects as
to who participates and as a result of the “treatment” effects of participating in
the group (personal communication, Omar Lizardo 2009). What happens in the
group does not always stay in the group. Global phenomena are constituted by local
processes, but at the same time the group, by limiting participation and selecting
participants (even if ostensibly based on voluntary choice), creates and reaffirms
status divisions.

A Puny Program? The Significance of Context

How is context to be brought into the theoretical armature of sociology, explaining
agentic choices? People make choices, self-consciously or not, but are these choices
externally determined, are they outgrowths of the psychic underbrush, or are they
shaped by forces within gatherings and groups (Sewell 1992)? I treat culture as lo-
cated within groups, shaped by shared experiences or background knowledge of
participants. Instead of presenting a strong program of cultural sociology (Alexander
2003), in which culture is a determining, exogenous force, I suggest a program that
is deliberatively and unabashedly puny. I claim this playfully, but also with a vital
purpose. I move culture from an autonomous force to a marker whose recognition
and use reveals social relations. The issue is metaphorical, but it is also real. It is
not that believers in a strong program deny that actors matter, but their strategy of
analysis deemphasizes how the choices of actors shape culture, emphasizing struc-
tures and institutions (e.g., Alexander 2006:4–5). In contrast, building on Swidler’s
(1986) metaphor, culture is a resource for agentic action. It is a tool for creating
moral order and behavioral routine by those with interests. Treating local scenes as
fields of action provides an understanding of the centrality of groups and gather-
ings. Our challenge is to examine how groups with local micro-cultures are linked in
associative networks (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999:145; Ikegami 2000:998), building
structures that transcend the local. We should not lay everything at the door of
the institutional or a discursive regime that lacks speakers. Put another way, the
sociology of local effects is a strong program, but of a different sort: a recogni-
tion that actors respond to their surroundings, as they shape these surroundings. As
scenes are often isomorphic (Goffman 1983:4)—a result of shared socialization and
cross-group communication—similar outcomes might imply that culture was operating autonomously.

For a local sociology, culture is a form of group practice, linked to the meso-level of analysis (Maines 1982; Strauss 1982), used by members to achieve personal and collective ends. It occupies the space that links individual action and the structural constraints of institutions, often constituted in the form of bounded social worlds (Becker 1982; Unruh 1980), a tradition that reverberates from the ethnographies and community studies of the original Chicago School (e.g., Abbott 1999). Interaction provides the dynamics for social life, but lacks recognition that shared references constitute an essential way in which actors transform their interaction into routine, ritual, and tradition, establishing boundaries and expectations. Local worlds, and not interaction alone, provide action with meaning, establishing tightly held values and in this sense incorporating cultural continuity. As Mische and White (1998:695) explain, “social action is interaction that induces interpretations and thus builds continuing relations.”

Group culture creates an ongoing social order through building shared pasts and prospective futures (Heimer and Stinchcombe 1980; Katovich and Couch 1992). As a result, local action systems become the guarantors of societal order through fostering civic commitments (Mische and White 1998:696). This approach stresses the importance of ongoing gatherings (willed communities and socializing micro-institutions [Emirbayer and Sheller 1999:152]), tied together through loosely linked networks. Since shared meaning contributes to the establishment of cohesion and communal identity (Katovich and Couch 1992), we extend local sociology beyond the interaction scene, emphasizing belonging and shared affect (Lawler 1992) and treating locally produced meanings as moral imperatives. Affiliation with ongoing groups is a means through which actors use their social environment as a frame to determine what is valued (Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982; Snow and Benford 1988).

Towards a Sociology of the Local

No one doubts that context shapes behavior, but is context theoretically crucial? Does it only constitute error variance? Claiming that social order is generated through routines, habits, and rituals, supported by emotional energy, Collins argues that collective awareness and attention provide a basis for social order. As Collins (2004:xiii) puts it: “The aggregate of situations can be regarded as a market for interaction rituals.” This approach, emphasizing local cultures and conditions, is consistent with the process that James Scott (1998:6) refers to as mètis, emphasizing the knowledge that derives from everyday experience. Scott (1998:316) writes: “Mètis resists simplification into deductive principles which can successfully be transmitted through book learning, because the environments in which it is exercised are so complex and nonrepeatable that formal procedures of rational decision making are impossible to apply.” Scott refers to this as “the art of the locality.”

To borrow from Jeffrey Goldfarb’s resonant image, we must focus on the sociology of small things, a phrase that captures the place of action more than its inherent

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2The meso-level of analysis, while separate from micro-analysis and macro-analysis, has several different meanings and references, including the examination of organizations, communities, and, as used here, a focus on groups and ongoing interaction systems. For a discussion of the range of meso-theory, see Turner (2005).
importance. Small things matter to big processes. Goldfarb begins by theorizing the kitchen table. His point is not simply that mundane events must be theorized, but that it is the conditions of the place in which they occur that create allegiance and shared perspectives. Or in words of Goldfarb (2006:15): “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 officiandom.” They constituted a tiny public that motivates action. The hearth became a central symbol in the resistance to Eastern European authoritarianism, but kitchens and porches are also found in democratic polities. Similar discourse can be found in bookstores, salons, clubs, and even in public meetings and gatherings (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999:150; Habermas 1989; Mische and White 1998:706).

Participants assume that others share history, emotional concern, and a sense of belonging. Tiny publics (Fine and Harrington 2004), small communities of interest and experience, provide the basis of civil society as they are where politics is discussed and enacted (Fraser 1992).

In this analysis I examine arenas, relations, and shared pasts as building blocks for developing a local sociology. I then discuss how through action meaning can be treated as consequential within a group. However, we must extend beyond the local, developing mechanisms that “link up” from groups, incorporating group cultures within larger social systems. To this end I suggest how groups are linked in associative networks through interlocks. These are sites of communication that connect groups into larger publics (White 1995:1053), often tied to places where groups can communicate in “free spaces” (Evans and Boyte 1986). Through the iterations of micro-cultures, groups provide larger systems with tensile strength based on communal affiliation.

THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE LOCAL

In any sociological treatment of the local ethnographers have an advantage: they espy the corners of Dublin—or Chicago—and understand them microscopically. Observing practices comes naturally. Even though the recognition of the local is not tied to any one methodological tradition, ethnography can describe how group life operates as an arena of action. Ethnography opens social mechanisms to examination, particularly when ethnographers focus on how participants respond to group contexts in shaping social organization. However, it is not ethnography as such that provides this opening, but rather the form of ethnography that focuses on understanding continuing social relations: groups as ongoing, self-referential projects. This approach was enshrined in such canonical studies as Street Corner Society (Whyte 1943), Tally’s Corner (Liebow 1967), or A Place on the Corner (Anderson 1979). The corner serves for sociologists as the tribe served for anthropologists. One burrows into group space, observing until one can present the contours of corner culture and subsequently can address how this culture reveals trans-situational processes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). It is not that any methodology is privileged, but long-term ethnographies have advantages for exploring culture as group practice. In contrast to scatter-shot ethnographies, observations of public behavior, surveys of attitudes, or institutional censuses of behaviors, the ability to watch culture over time provides unique insight.

I draw upon ethnographic material, largely from my own research, to argue that practices on the local level provide the basis for a meso-level perspective based on self-referential action contexts (Fine 2003). These projects include analyses of
youth baseball teams, fantasy gaming groups, trade school classes in culinary arts, restaurant kitchens, mushroom clubs, high school debate squads, folk art collecting venues, meteorological offices, and chess clubs, designed to reveal how group cultures are built from shared experiences, and utilized to achieve group goals and create shared identities. (Smaller studies involved a movement group supporting the rights of victims of claims of child abuse and local activists of a political party.) Unlike other ethnographies, these projects focus directly on the group, rather than individual action (Lofland 1974) or structural relations and “extended” cases (Burawoy 2009).

I return to the Joycean challenge: how the particular—that regime of detail in which ethnography excels—can be translated into the general. I address practices through which local scenes generate social stability and that extend outward. Every group with which we identify creates a culture from its opening moments (Fine 1979; McFeat 1974; Sherif and Sherif 1964). These cultures are the means through which identification occurs and by which groups have consequences. Local culture generates emotional energy, cohesion, and action routines that promote order by investing participants in group outcomes. In the process, these local arenas also produce distinct knowledge regimes that generate stratification, building a hierarchy of groups. I rely on Collins’s (2004) account of interaction ritual chains, emphasizing that social relations are embedded in tradition and in prospective futures. Further, the linkage of groups extends the influence of any interaction scene. As a result, local cultures are more than transient scenes but through their connections serve as the basis of a broader social order.

The local is simultaneously a stage on which social order gets produced and a lens that allows actors to typify scenes. It is both an opportunity structure that generates action and a nexus point through which action has consequences. Examining the local as a stage, I focus on features that motivate participation, using arenas, relations, and shared pasts as theoretical concepts and as sites for analysis. The metaphor of the local as a lens treats action as an interpretive mechanism. From the creation of boundaries and bridges, based in the extension of cultures, actors can create associational networks, established through interlocks among groups (Lichterman 2005).

The Local as a Stage

**Arenas.** Every local scene is shaped by the constraints, opportunities, and understandings made possible through the physical (or virtual) space in which it unfolds: an arena of action. While numerous resources must be mobilized for group life, finding a place to gather is among the most essential. A vibrant public sphere requires numerous such places. Obtaining material resources cascades from that choice. Behaviors, thoughts, and emotions are generated and performed because of the symbolic meaning of space. We believe that churches demand quiet attentiveness, that schoolrooms promote ordered participation, and that taverns encourage sociable involvement. An ongoing interaction scene requires locales where individuals regularly gather with their expectations intact. This does not require formal meetings or routine schedules, but suggests that the availability of spaces will characterize the group. In some instances—Little League baseball schedules, restaurant kitchen hours, or school classes—presence may be required, but other places can be magnets for voluntary groups, such as fantasy gamers, mushroomers, or political activists. While some groups are spontaneous, many adult groups, tied to a tyranny of scheduling, establish timetables. Fantasy gamers, for instance, knew that a group would form
each Friday evening at the start of the weekend in the community room of a po-
lice station and mushroomers gathered Mondays at a community center to display
specimens found that weekend. While group organizers provide these locations, once
present the group shapes the space through rearranging furniture, setting displays or
literature on tables, or, if the location is “owned” by the group, decorating the walls.
For the period of use, the group transforms the space into a home field (Oldenburg
1989) or free space (Evans and Boyte 1986). For instance, in their borrowed space
amateur mushroomers adjusted the placement of chairs and later returned them
to the original configuration. In contrast, the meteorologists had lengthy discussions
with their union and their supervisor about how the office space should be arranged.
The staff debated the location of the printer as that choice would advantage some
employees and disadvantage others; they also discussed the height of partitions in
the office, a decision that influenced sociability and private concentration. These
groups recognized that how they shaped their space contributed to the quality of
their social interaction.

Established and self-referential groups require spaces for scheduled meetings: time
and space have to be coordinated. In a world in which spontaneous neighborhood
groups have diminished in salience, replaced by affinity groups, the planned and
announced use of space as a local outpost of action has become more common. Yet,
in established neighborhoods—gritty corners or leafy cul-de-sacs—gatherings can be
spontaneous. A mix of the scheduled and the impromptu is evident in those arenas
where members of a group know that acquaintances are likely to be found: the parks
of preadolescents, white box gallery openings, or welcoming cafés.

Often, to identify the locale is to recognize the group. This centrality of place is
crucial in the case of ensemble comedies in which the locales of action define the
show. The sports bar Cheers on the eponymous situation comedy was emblematic
of the relationship of the characters and, in turn, the physical space shaped beliefs
about what actions could and should be performed, as well as providing response
cues to audiences. While television sitcoms use place as an access point for viewers,
unscripted groups likewise depend on the ability to read place. Gallery openings or
forest forays have expectations, shaping dress codes and behaviors. The first ethno-
graphic challenge is to understand the culture of place. A Little League baseball field
is a stage set for performances, encouraging the belief that the game is a metaphor
for professional baseball. The boys chew gum, cheer, or even fight in their social
imaginaries of professional players. Similarly, walking in the woods (the “temple of
nature”) to find mushrooms promotes environmental concern and reverence for na-
ture. The tight, greasy, and loud backstage spaces of kitchens and the calm, clean,
and bureaucratically-ordered offices of meteorologists similarly channel the routines
of participants. The arena provides participants with a context by which some per-
formances are encouraged and others rejected. Even when no single space exists,
such as for folk art collectors or political activists, the group colonizes spaces. When
a group met for an opening, auction, foray, or tournament, they understood that
their shared arena led to shared expectations.

The ability to provision space is essential for group life. Ongoing social worlds,
even those of voluntary or leisure groups, depend on an authority structure—within
the group or outside—providing resources to achieve group goals. Someone must
select and maintain the place. Lacking this, the continuation of community life
is uncertain. At one point a local mushroom club almost foundered over heated
debates on where their meetings were to be held. Did they wish a university space
with microscopes for examining specimens or would that make the club a scientific
gathering? Did members wish to rent a central location or receive gratis a more
distant locale? These choices proved controversial.

Groups use arenas to provide places in which local rules become tacit; places
serve as invitations to a particular definition of the situation. Through experience
in similar domains participants develop shared expectations of what behavior is
permissible. Just as groups colonize settings, settings colonize groups. Oldenburg
(1989) in discussing “third places” argues that an array of spaces, separate from
home and work, is utilized by groups for the development of a community. Third
groups and third places are inescapably linked.

Relations. A core challenge for sociologists and novice members alike is to read the
interactional map. Who knows whom and what are their ties, affective and material?
The examination of social relations reveals how structure, culture, and interaction
interpenetrate. If interaction is a performance, it is a performance that is shaped to
satisfy an audience (Smith 2009). Performances are not only set in place, but rely
on a social cartography. As Goffman (1983:4) notes in “The Interaction Order”:
“each participant enters a social situation carrying an already established biography
of prior dealings with the other participants.”

A scene is constituted by social ties as by material conditions. These relations—
the interpersonal context of action—channel emotional energy (Collins 2004). As
Emirbayer and Sheller (1999:174) argue, this “includes relatively long-lasting durable
matrices of attachment and emotional solidarity, as well as negatively toned currents
of hostility and aggression. The nodes in these processes-in-relations are not ‘posi-
tions’ . . . or ‘symbols’ . . . but rather whole persons, aspects of persons, fantasized
substitutes for persons, or ideals.” They are, in other words, built upon the relations
within the group, and depend upon trust in known others. For instance, at offices of
the National Weather Service work practices depended on those who were on duty.
The office could be raucous with joking about “mad scientist” experiments or qui-
etly contemplative, only punctuated by meteorological comments. Examining parallel
groups within the same cultural field, whether Little League baseball teams, kitchen
crews, or local meteorology offices, reveals that relations among participants shape
group cultures. Some Little League baseball teams have recognized leaders who help
adult coaches instill instrumental values by creating customs or rituals; other leaders
serve as counter-institutional rebels, undercutting the authority of the coach; still
other teams lack a consensual leader and because of uncertain status relations the
team struggles with commitment. Restaurant kitchens, too, are shaped by whether
the chef promotes emotional stability and interpersonal harmony among the crowded
group of workers and whether workers accept these claims, often through teasing
or joking. Kitchens in which employees felt that they were treated with respect op-
erated with more deference than those in which workers believed that a politics of
preference was operating.

In addition to shaping action directly through the energy derived from affective
ties, the recognition of relations also shape identity (Snow and Anderson 1987),
which in turn shapes action. Social identity theorists emphasize that the ability to
relate to a local community produces identity continuity (Turner 1987). How one
defines oneself derives from groups with which one belongs, to which one gives
emotional salience, and with which one identifies (see Stryker and Burke 2000). As
Boltanski (1999:8, emphasis in the original) notes in discussing the local constitution
of compassion: “It is precisely this conjunction of the possibility of knowing and the
possibility of acting that defines a situation characterized by the fact that it offers
the possibility of being involved, of a commitment.” These social relations commit individuals to engagement in local scenes, creating boundaries with other scenes, and establishing passageways to them.

Voluntary organizations are salient in this regard. It is not sufficient that people choose activities that they enjoy, but they should enjoy those who share their interests. Leisure groups benefit when they emphasize the pleasure in each other’s company. As one political leader repeated, his goal was to make his party a “party.” Group organizers rely on rituals of pleasure to create affiliation and then identity, cementing a commitment that validates the behaviors of others (Roy 1959–1960). This recognition of the need to link satisfaction to affiliation is central to solving the free rider problem (Olson 1965). Interpersonal affection can overcome the costs of participation. The sociology of pleasure, dependent on the desire to be with others, is integral to the recognition of how local structures are stabilized, avoiding contentious rituals. Thus, in voluntary political engagement, the reality that the means often serve as the ends motivates participation (personal communication, Jeffrey Goldfarb 2009). Social relations provide the conditions for the diffusion of a local culture. As Camic (1995) notes with regard to the cultures of academic departments, collegial ties provide the basis from which individuals collaborate to produce products that then are shared with others, affecting a wider network (see Collins 1998; Farrell 2001).

Shared History. Each ongoing gathering develops an idioculture, a set of references that permits groups to identify themselves as meaningful micro-communities. Groups as focused domains establish collective memories that define the group to participants. As Harvey Molotch points out, communities have their futures set through a shared recognition of local character and tradition that shapes subsequent decisions, a “rolling inertia” (Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen 2000). In a similar way, Suttles (1984) recognizes that local cultures—both collective representations and material artifacts—are not merely residual features of communities, but are drawn upon to allow citizens to think and to feel how their community should be organized, recognized, and publicized. For Suttles, this localism shapes development decisions, land-use planning, and shared identities. The common past that a group has experienced or to which new members have been socialized is crucial as shared meaning constructs the boundaries of the group, separating insiders from outsiders and defines how members imagine their linked future. Typically we can find a “standing behavior pattern” (Goffman 1983:4; Barker 1968).

Beyond its material structure, groups revel in shared experiences; stories and anecdotes stand at the heart of group life, as communities have the purpose, in Hayden White’s terms, of translating “knowing into telling” (Ikegami 2000:996; White 1987). Discourse woven around stories provides a moral basis of community (Perrin 2005; Polletta 2006; White 1995:1044). To establish a collective selfhood the past must be incorporated into an insistent present, cementing the group’s recall by emphasizing that to know and to narrate is to belong to the group. This is evident in joking cultures as humor underscores common references, bolstering the continuation of social interaction (Fine and DeSoucey 2005). Humorous performances provide more than momentary laughs, but link to group history, providing a power that evanescent merriment lacks.

Group culture has what Erving Goffman (1981:46) speaks of as a referential afterlife. For a time cultural elements can be shared with the belief that others will comprehend what is meant. In this sense each reference is set in time. Even if lacking
formal rituals, group culture is grounded in history; a local sociology is inevitably historical. However, as Goffman emphasizes, what is recalled is not eternal, and what is remembered at one moment can be forgotten later. Through the shifting of personnel (as in restaurant kitchens with staff turnover or on Little League baseball teams and high school clubs that alter with rising student cohorts) the group culture shifts while remaining recognizable (MacNeil and Sherif 1976; Rose and Felton 1955).

Group culture is also forward-looking in that cultural tools are available for subsequent action. As culture becomes elaborated, the reach of the group as a meaning-maker is expanded. Group life is an ongoing project, not a momentary scene. Thus, identity incorporation becomes critically important as groups socialize new members. Participating in chess clubs novice members (although not necessarily novice players) learn expectations for the preferred amount of talk during matches and one’s proper response to victory and defeat. Adolescents in fantasy gaming groups learn which fantasies to keep private. Through these claims and their acceptance, participants define themselves as belonging to the group.

Idiocultures provide the basis for stable expectations, crucial to collective comfort. Since ambiguity has a social cost (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972; Smelser 1998), groups create routine practices that maximize clarity; most groups promote continued interaction over systemic ruptures. Members expect that themes of interaction tomorrow will be similar to themes of interaction today. In this they are usually correct. Tradition and ritual—both on the societal level and on the local level—are important to social organization (Shils 1981), whether in the daily meetings of restaurant cooks, in gatherings on the mound in Little League baseball, or in the identification of mushrooms after a foray. Randall Collins (2004) properly emphasizes the iteration of interaction ritual chains; traditions build on each other. The more rituals in a group, the more new or elaborated rituals that will follow; culture produces culture. Idiosyncratic actions become practices when they are seen as serving group needs (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 1979; Sherif et al. 1987). Once neophytes can read this interactional grammar, they are treated as competent members, differentiated from those outside group boundaries.

Even the most minute social units, such as couples and families (Kauffman 2009; Oring 1984), develop local cultures in which future practices build on those previously established and buffer participants from external demands. These practices reify group history, setting the terms for propriety, creating structure from talk. The existence of lines of action does not deny the possibility of negotiations or the possibility of shocks to the system, but their solidity reveals the costs of rapid change, even while their ongoing iteration may produce incremental change.

Yet, a critic might point to the very smallness and apparent randomness of those cultural forms. In group life we often find unpredicted events that spark common knowledge. These “triggering events” cannot be guessed, but neither are they random. Events that shape collective life are readily predictable after the fact (reading backwards), but cannot be predicted before they occur (looking forwards). However, once they are seen as relevant for group identity, actors scramble to shape their behavior, aligning ongoing action with group culture (Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Even if we cannot predict the moments of everyday life, such as jokes, insults, flubs, or queries, when they occur participants incorporate them into an orderly meaning system. This commitment to stability (Goffman 1974)—the devotion to a smooth flow of action—allows actors to feel confident in their tacit expectations, even as new interpretations are generated.
The Local as Lens

Seeing the World Through Action. Borrowing Erving Goffman’s (1967:149) famous phrase, sociology has the mandate to study “where the action is,” connecting place, community, and interpretation. Sociologists study actors, not individuals. Performance is essential, and, as a result, sociology has been open to a metaphor that played off the life of the gambler, no matter how contrived that claim. Performance is a form of personal action, even if shaped by a web of collective understandings. In seeing performance as action, we must recognize that performative logic (Alexander and Mast 2006:1) depends on local, in situ performative cultures.

The sociological examination of action is a long-standing theoretical stream with distinguished practitioners, a diverse lineage that includes Simmel, Homans, Blumer, Goffman, Schutz, Garfinkel, and even Parsons after a fashion. This history emphasizes that as sociology has the mandate to study invisible structures, it also examines the visible, the negotiated, and the local. We are a discipline of people and process as well as a discipline of populations and patterns: we examine social facts on the ground as well as social facts in the air.

Any approach that places action at the center of sociological analysis argues for the primacy of coordination over cognition and constraint. The stability of groups through continuity and change emerges from adjusting lines of action. These actions are not haphazard, but are ritually replicated. Certain actions become treated as proper, and, unless special circumstances apply, these expectations hold sway. The importance of action within a local sociology is that it is performed within focused gatherings that have feedback loops that alter, challenge, and direct future action. Actions may be free, but they have costs, encouraging or discouraging repetition.

Sociology of action does not erase obdurate reality, but neither does it eliminate options. At each interaction inflection point, choices are required. Perhaps responses are shaped by structures, but they are not fully determined by them. Whether we call these options tools, mechanisms, or decisions, group members select their actions, particularly if other groups with greater resource power or moral authority permit the choices. The examination of play, games, and sport—voluntaristic systems that depend on decisions—is revealing. For a contest to be worth engaging in, choice and uncertainty must be present. Ballplayers and chess players each draw from a range of potential moves, and the move that is selected affects the situation to which competitors respond. If only a single option existed, behavior would lack the game-like uncertainty that motivates involvement.

Action alternatives permit participants to forge their worlds and to be formed by those worlds. In intense idiocultures that require temporal, material, or emotional investments this recursive shaping is evident as the standards of the group channel participants, even as members determine those standards. Elaborated and ongoing cultures often have greater stability and strong boundaries, increasing entry costs and the extent of surveillance (Carley 1991).

The presence of options does not suggest that local scenes permit unconstrained action. While a vast array of behavior is physically possible, much is not morally permissible, especially given that intense groups have more complete surveillance than larger institutions and communities. The presence of feedback reminds participants that others may define their performance as outside moral boundaries, possibly

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3The Parsonsian project (Parsons and Shils 1954) to create a “General Theory of Action” is engaged in colonizing action in order to make a structural sociology complete.
provoking sanctions. I was struck in observing organizations supporting those who had been accused of child abuse of the presence of social control in redirecting seemingly mundane, but potentially stigmatizing talk, threatening the group and its members. One could not joke in this arena about hitting one’s child or spouse, common jocular tropes in popular discourse (viz The Simpsons). Even if everyone knew what was “really” meant, some narratives were disallowed for fear of alternative interpretations.

Yet, in tight-knit, stable scenes participants are often given considerable leeway to act, revealing the sympathetic willingness of others to accept behaviors that might otherwise be outside group boundaries. Still, idiosyncrasy credits are not unlimited (Hollander 1958). Every favor bank places limits on withdrawals. Group members may encourage deviants to accept consensual traditions before coalescing to solidify the boundary of the group to exclude or sequester the problematic member (Goffman 1971). Voluntary organizations transform deviants into nonpersons; their presence is no longer acknowledged and participation becomes more difficult. Choice encourages willing participation in group life and the pleasures that depend on an optimal level of unpredictability, but the boundaries that bracket these options also make the group stable and satisfying.

Groups are dynamic action systems. Their self-referential quality suggests that the group stabilizes itself through adjusting to the responses of participants. This is consistent with the argument in pragmatic philosophy and Meadian symbolic interaction that meaning (patterns of action) results from the responses of actors (Mead 1934). Social life involves a process of call and response (Goffman 1981). The intersection of meanings, expressed through the negotiation of lines of action, constitutes a community. Individuals enter groups with diverse perspectives and only eventually understand the meanings that others hold. This is evident in the research of Muzafer Sherif (1935) on the establishment of group norms in reaction to the autokinetic effect. When viewing a point of light in a darkened room that lacks visual cues, individuals express widely divergent assessments of the distance that the light appears to travel. However, over a set of trials most groups develop a firm consensus; conformity becomes thoughtless and norms shape perception. The same is true of evaluations of action: in time new members learn what those more senior, experienced, or with more authority consider proper. At first judgments are explicit and considered, but eventually group standards shape an actor’s mental calculations so that they become tacit and intuitive.

When group members realize that they will continue to interact, when they are committed to these ongoing relations, and when they identify with their colleagues, they show deference, even in the face of centripetal forces (Goffman 1967; Munroe 2007). At first, disagreements may be concealed, but as individuals publicly assert shared values, those values come to be held, and not just claimed. As a result participants treat the local scene as an outpost of and model for society. Of course, divisive forces can overwhelm this desire for harmony, as groups split and dissipate or alter boundaries, but cohesion is expected, and should these divisions and barriers be too prominent, this may lead to the belief that society as a whole is as contentious as the local scene.

THE EXTENSION OF THE LOCAL

A sociology that focuses exclusively on small, interacting groups is inherently limited. Except for a few microscopic “tribal” societies, groups link to other groups. This
recognizes the presence and power of networks in creating and extending social control and normative order. As Tamotsu Shibutani (1955:566) argued, “cultural areas are coterminous with communication channels.” Culture spills from local scenes through processes of domain extension. Scenes build on each other to create a larger, more robust social system. Local domains of knowledge are expanded when groups come into contact through the linkages of members, the deliberate diffusion of information, or the use of resource power to force others to heed the choices of those dominant. Groups vary in their authority and ability to control, affecting the choices of other groups. The position of a group within a hierarchy of groups shapes the forms and the effectiveness of diffusion. Groups are not created equal in their ability to affect the network of groups, either from network centrality, size, interest in shaping the actions of others, or in resources to diffuse their culture.

Networks are never simply linkages among individuals; they are linkages among individuals embedded in groups, leading to advantages for those widely known and those with extensive linkages (Burt 2010). Granovetter’s (1973) influential distinction between strong and weak ties finds that an associational network constitutes clumps of strong ties, linked by weaker, acquaintanceship ties. As Calhoun (1993:37–38) phrased it, in “nearly any imaginable case there will be clusters of relatively greater density of communication within the looser overall field.” Since most individuals participate in multiple groups or shift their group affiliations (Ikegami 2000:1002; Mische 2007), linkages become complex. Brokers who are tied into several groups and who can link groups are particularly influential (Burt 2005; Hillmann 2008); agents of control bring demands from one group (a police unit or legislative assembly) to another (a gang or small business). As White (1995) argued, those sites in which groups (or, more precisely, their members) gather become points of connection and diffusion, permitting the coordination of local settings (personal communication, Omar Lizardo 2009). The bridging and brokerage function of salient group members helps establish interstitial networks (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999). Moments of group activation are crucial to the expansion of a cultural context. In this light Yablonsky (1959) spoke of the activation of “near groups” in describing how groups (in his case gangs) activate those who belong to the penumbra of a group, extending the local culture. The existence of such quasi-groups recognizes that boundaries are flexible and can be expanded under conditions in which the scene is defined as “where the action is.”

Those who have detailed the cultural components of subcultures emphasize the salience of linkages that connect groups (Barnes 1969). Fine and Kleinman (1979:10–12) point to a set of mechanisms (or interlocks) through which local communities are connected into wider networks: multiple group memberships, weak ties, institutional roles, and media diffusion. These capture the reality that within a social system, institutions (organized through intersecting small groups) knit groups and spread culture, while recognizing that groups are often spatially and temporally bounded. They are specialized publics in an institutional division of labor. As a result, people may participate in groups in several lifeworld domains (work, family, religion, education, leisure). Involvement in multiple groups raises the possibility of boundary spanning. Occasions that bring sequestered groups together (movement rallies, Boy Scout jamborees, political conventions, scholastic chess tournaments) serve to extend networks.

These linkages are evident in the ethnographic examination of group cultures. For instance, political tasks are organized on the local level (“think global, act local”). A group of political activists I studied volunteered in a state representative
district, and the participants knew each other from being neighbors and working on the same local campaigns. However, at various times they were recruited for congressional, gubernatorial, or national campaigns. At these times similar-minded participants from numerous local districts meet each other, mixing their local cultures. Conventions and rallies as ritual moments have the same effect. Small groups are incorporated into larger ones. Restaurants have a different linkage structure. As the job market for cooks is fluid, workers frequently change position, moving from one restaurant to the next. However, the close ties at the previous restaurant did not disappear, and cooks would occasionally return to their former workplace or would meet in after-hours sociability, combining groups and networks and sharing ideas about cuisine and customers. In youth sports, participants had extra-group connections, allowing rapid cultural transmission (Opie and Opie 1959), because of family networks, parental migration, or participation in schools, churches, or leisure worlds. Internet networking creates tight-knit virtual groups that have many characteristics of group dynamics, except for face-to-face communication, as well as less intense acquaintanceships.

A similar process is found within elite social fields, domains in which research access is often limited. Government or institutional decisions are rarely made by individuals in isolation, but through the advice or vote of working groups, situated in interactional webs (Hart 1994; Jackall 1988). While we can say that the White House, a bank, the Pentagon, or a university “acted,” this convenient shorthand elides how and where the decision was made. Through connections among groups with the authority structure that this implies, the decision is spread to other micro-publics. A sociology that overlooks the dynamics by which decisions are made in practice ignores shared pasts, current relations, and collective futures.

At the core of all associational networks are tight local relations through which cultural elements are produced, retained, and disseminated. When participants extend their group identification to a larger subsociety or network, the local context provides the basis for an extended civil society. This constitutes a “network of publicity” (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999:145) through which what is known locally is incorporated into a larger and more comprehensive network. Even if one treats media as a primary basis of cultural extension, media are constituted by local workgroups, just as their audiences often are groups themselves, rather than isolates.

Developing a theory of group extension is crucial for treating the local interaction scene as a means through which wider cultural relations and behavioral commonality are built. Ethnographic corners, while a basis for the intense investigation that field researchers hold so dear, are never so bounded that they do not have ties to other corners, blanketing the city and beyond. Those found at corners have resources to shape what happens in other spots. The question for further meso-level research is how extensive and in what patterns do we find translocal connectivity.4

A LOCAL SOCIOLOGY

I return to James Joyce’s challenge. How do we see the general within the particular? A sociology that theorizes the conditions under which action is generated is a sociology that recognizes that meaning and society are achievements. These are

4“Small world experiments” (Travers and Milgram 1969) reveal that some network strands are shorter than others: not all ties have six degrees of separation, as groups (and individuals) can be more or less integrated.
achievements not simply of individuals who congregate and negotiate the organization of their gatherings, but achievements of those who build upon the past, on established relations, and on ordered places: achievements of groups. The group constitutes an opportunity structure for the development of stability and change. In this way, such a project is to be differentiated from those interactionist projects that focus on the immediacy of interpersonal behavior. Interactionists are correct in their embrace of negotiation, but inadequate in downplaying the power of shared pasts. No study of action should ignore the local histories in which it unfolds.

Further, I challenge a traditional micro-sociological model in that I emphasize that social scenes are not isolated. Participants engage in multiple scenes, simultaneously and sequentially, and in the process become aware of other scenes that serve as models or as points of differentiation. Whether consciously recognized or tacit, the experience and recognition of these groups provide a basis by which a local culture reverberates through time and space, creating a network of groups and gatherings. These tiny publics are knit together to form institutions, communities, and ultimately societies that, although grounded in ongoing interaction scenes, are larger, more established, and more stable. To have predictable effects social order cannot be momentary and evanescent; an interaction order depends on interaction being durable and continuing. The local context of action invests a social world with longevity as it builds upon collective interpretations, common references, and shared identity: character and tradition that can be borrowed or extended.

Participation in continuing scenes is not random. Just as groups produce outcomes (treatment effects), they also recruit selectively (selection effects). Through the choices of individuals to participate and through the encouragement of participants to welcome new members, groups establish or reproduce social divisions. We should not downplay the reality of intake boundaries as the basis of social differentiation (and various forms of structural discrimination). Who gets to participate in action scenes produces local cultures and the extension of those cultures. The local produces stratification as well as community. Hierarchy operates within groups and among them.

My claim is not that sociologists should study local scenes to the exclusion of institutions or societies, but that a focus on the group provides the basis for meso-level analysis. Ongoing groups build on each other, and become linked in expansive social orders. Societies are constituted by a network of local worlds (Fine and Kleinman 1979). These intersecting groups and the forces of control that hold groups together—groups with surveillance and resource power—are what we refer to as the “social structure” in a metaphor we take as real.

Social psychologists have often treated actors as merely congregating for a moment—tourists in an ephemeral micro-public to which they hold little allegiance, responding impetuously to the press of personal interests and idiosyncratic motivations. But this view, common in interactionism and elsewhere, misses the power of interactional domains. Because context is locally generated and referential, actors committed to these communities supply a tensile strength to social order. Social stability is a routine and thoughtless achievement because it is part of the commitment that participants make to those tiny publics to which they belong.

I call for a sociology that emphasizes the importance of the local. But such a charge tends to homogenize groups to make its point. Yet, groups are not interchangeable and groups and networks are not equally accessible to all. Local scenes divide and separate, just as they provide a basis for integration within and between
groups. And once institutions and systems of power are built—even if directed by groups—the behavioral basis of these systems may be erased as the relations among groups are taken as a reality that stands above the level of action. Examining how this happens and why it need not is, in Goffman’s (1983:17) words, our inheritance and what we can bequeath.

In a meso-level sociology, the local is both a stage and a lens. It is a stage in that as a place (physical, affiliative, and historical) it provides meanings that set the propriety of action. Action results from adjustments to events and performances as participants are committed to creating workable lines of action. Even in conflict, these lines are present, directing changes in prevailing practices or provoking a restructuring of community boundaries. But the local is not limited to the metaphor of a stage of action. The local also provides a lens through which social actors create typifications of groups, gatherings, or publics and establish boundaries and divisions. Watching groups we may see society, perhaps a subsociety (tied to class, race, gender, age, or region), or a local scene. What we are watching is not generic, but particular.

It is not that James Joyce wrote about Dublin, but he wrote about gatherings, relations, and corners in Dublin. With his miniaturist microscope, he created a world that we know because those scenes are ours as well.

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