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The Microfoundations of Community: Small Groups as Bridges and Barriers to Participatory Democracy

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Participatory Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews research on the small group foundations of community participation and civil society. The approach used is interdisciplinary in nature, combining social psychological and microsociological research with wider-reaching theories of civil society and democratic theory, and arguing that the two are fundamentally linked. First, it is argued that associational groups provide both opportunities (bridges) and obstacles (barriers) for participation on a wider level, each of which is discussed in turn. It is argued that small groups provide micro-environments that allow individuals to develop cognitive and emotional models of citizenship, empowerment, and inclusion. However, the small group literature also points to cognitive biases, exclusionary tendencies, and irrational behavior associated with groups that call into question their ability to provide sustainable models of democratic participation. It is argued that many of the failings of participatory democracy cannot be understood without reference to the small group origins of modern democracies. In order to chart a path between these seeming contradictory findings the chapter concludes by posing the question of whether a polity based on principles of group psychology can sustain universalistic aspirations such as tolerance, universal participation, and mutual respect, or whether ultimately such aspirations break down into in-fighting and factionalism. An attempt is made to suggest provisional solutions based on social psychological research. Specifically, research on group relations that examines moderators of inter-group biases and factors that promote inclusion is suggested as a fruitful direction.

INTRODUCTION

Community empowerment within democratic societies depends on the ability of a populace to generate ways of governing themselves from the bottom-up, a process which implies a thriving civil society based on informal group associations (e.g. Habermas, 1991). The idea that associational ties in civil society are essential to functioning democracies was popularized by Robert Putnam (1995), who argued that local networks of community members, through their informal friendship and associational networks, lay foundations of trust that underlay democracies. Since Putnam, this idea, often referred to by the term “social capital”, has provided an important bridge between the areas of interpersonal communication and social psychology, on the one hand, and political science and economics, on the other hand. According to Goette & Huffman (2007), social capital provides community members with stable social bonds that are required for trust to develop. This trust allows market and other transactions to take place in informationally asymmetric situations. Without this possibility, the development of liberal democracy would be hindered or slowed.

Although civil society associations are necessary for liberal democracy, these associations need not be overtly political or economic in nature; rather, they tend to consist in a wide variety of interest and grass-roots associations that are political only indirectly (Habermas, 1991). According to Flyvbjerg (1998, p 211), “The fundamental act of citizenship in a pluralist democracy is that of forming an association of this kind”. Linking sentiments such as trust and solidarity to wider political structures, therefore, involves an exploration into the small group foundations of such structures.

The current chapter attempts to clarify the link between small groups and wider civil society participation by examining the ways in which groups can both aid and

hinder the formation of community cohesion. It is argued that personal identifications with small groups provide the basis for wider conceptions of community and civil society empowerment. Fundamentally, small groups lay the psychological groundwork for citizenship and participation, providing models for how individuals relate to the public spheres they inhabit.

Recent work has suggested that small groups provide a “microfoundation” for communities and social movements (Collins, 1981; Summers-Effler, 2002). According to this perspective, civil society relies on group identity in order gain a sense of empowerment (Bernstein, 1997) and to mobilize effectively (Calhoun, 1994). These small groups rely on group communication and identity building in order to identify, develop and lobby for political and social benefits. In addition, Klandermans (1992) argues that the development of political interests itself is tied to the formation of cohesive group identities which act as incubators and mobilizers of these interests. According to Johnson (1991), such groups empower communities within democratic societies by spreading an ethic of patriotism and democracy.

On the other hand, social psychology alerts us to the danger of what Fine and Harrington (2004) call the “balkanizing” effect of groups. Groups establish and reproduce boundaries between their members and the outside world, often separating members from the wider society (e.g. Pratt, 2000), and denigrating out-group members (e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In addition, a long tradition in social psychology has pointed to the irrational and often absurd behavior of groups (e.g. LeBon, 1895; McDougall; Janis, 1982). If such groups form the basis for democratic society, then it is questionable whether such a society could be built on the rational basis that classic and contemporary democratic theory has hoped (e.g. Habermas, 1981).

Thus, parting from the supposition that groups are important in the study of democratic civil society, the questions remain: In what ways and under what conditions do groups provide important bridges from individual citizen to the wider political sphere, and in what ways and under what conditions do they erect barriers to political participation. The remainder of the discussion consists of an attempt to make inroads into these two questions.

SMALL GROUPS AS BRIDGES

Empowerment in Groups and Innovation

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jurgen Habermas (1991) argues that a key development in democratic society occurred when public or quasi public spaces became forums for discussion among members of the community. These spaces, which existed between the market and the state, formed a sphere of public discourse that provided a basis for the collective development of public rationality, diffusing ideas among members and leading to a participatory, progressive growth of social ideas.

The idea that community participation in discourse and decision making can lead to innovative outcomes is strongly rooted to the small group level of analysis.

Habermas' public sphere developed in coffee houses and other small spaces, spaces where community groups rather than large public manifestations would have dominated. These small groups act, in effect, as "incubators of innovation" (Fine & Harrington, 2004) where synergy between individual's ideas is possible, with neither the impersonal social pressure of larger collectives nor the solipsism of the isolated individual.

In line with this idea, empirical work in group and team research suggests that small groups can stimulate processes important for social functioning. For example,

Dennis & Valachich (1993) found that small groups in an interactive setting produced more ideas on average than individuals acting separately. In addition, Watson, Michaelsen & Sharp (1991) found that group improvements over individual problem solving increased as groups gained experience with each other, a condition more likely to reflect real world group circumstances. Such effects may be best explained by Osborn's (1957) notion of group "synergy" in which the feedback mechanisms among members ensure that the intellectual product of the group is more than the sum of its individually acting parts. The small group thus becomes both a mechanism for individual development and a sounding board through which individuals' ideas can become transferred into the public sphere.

Groups as a Basis for Trust and Commitment

A second way in which small groups can provide the basis for a larger community orientation toward participation is through the establishment of bonds of trust and confidence. Some authors (e.g. Geertz, 1978) have noted that trust is a key component for market functioning, and that problems with coordination in markets are often resolved through interpersonal trust. Fukuyama (1999), for example, argues that the interactions required in modern production systems require trust among the various levels of management. These bonds of trust are often established on the basis of experiences in everyday social groups (Fukuyama, 1995). If the larger political sphere is often characterized as based largely on self-interest and power, then small groups may provide a setting in which influence and trust co-exist as bases for group continuance, laying a foundation for civic virtue that is later projected into the political sphere (Fine & Holyfield, 1996).

Relatedly, notions of citizenship and identity with the political community may find their origins in small group life. According to Billig (1995), personal identities are

based in lived experiences that are difficult to ground in the universalistic and formal bureaucracies of larger polities. Such lived experiences are generally in the context of the personal associations with a person's life, and thus the individual's self-concept as a member of a community is more strongly bound to these associational groupings than to more abstract civic ideals at the national level.

The above does not imply, however, that small group and national identities are at odds. On the contrary, small groups may lay the groundwork for national identities by providing the format for stories of citizenship, heroism, and inclusion that create pride in larger national structures (Johnson, 1991). Were it not for such ground-level associations, the nation-state could seem alienating and removed from the individual lifeworld; small groups, however, reconnect these two levels by sharing stories and discourses that reinforce citizenship, and censuring behavior that seems anti-social.

Informal norms and the Maintenance of Social Order

Fourth, interpersonal community groups can increase the effectiveness of political institutions by reducing the need for legal monitoring and enforcement. As Fine and Harrington (2004) point out, top-down monitoring and policing can be expensive and ineffective policies, for which few are willing to contribute and which can cause resentment; however, community policing, by contrast, involves a sentiment of "community service" and can avoid such resentment. In addition, with community enforcement of institutional rules through voluntary associations can both effectively pressure individuals to fall in line with social norms and instill a sense of neighborhood pride.

In addition to security and policing, small groups alleviate much of the work that would fall to public institutions by codifying informal dispute resolution norms which regulate relations between people within a community (e.g. Ostrom, 1999). Such norms

act in practice as de facto judicial systems, exerting social pressure short of violence to impose order. In this way, neighborhood community and other small organizations can perform “public” services, tax-free, on a purely voluntary basis (Ellickson, 1991).

Social Action and Mobilization

One of the factors that prevent people from engaging with the political process is the fear that they will be acting alone, and therefore will be ostracized (Moriarty, 1974) or ineffectual (Granovetter, 1977). Rather than an irrational fear, they may be right; groups tend to criticize members who do not conform to group norms (e.g. Goffman, 1963), and social action, in order to influence macro political process, must reach a certain threshold of popularity before it becomes an important force (Granovetter, 1977).

Psychologically, we can link threshold models with a common human drive to search for social reinforcement of beliefs and behaviors (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Social psychology has discovered robust social effects of groups on individual thought and action, such as conformity effects (e.g. Asch, 1951), groupthink (Janis, 1982) and group shift (Myers & Lamm, 1976). Although these effects will be discussed in the next section in terms of their potentially fallacious effects on cognition, the propensity of groups to “stick together” as a unit (entitativity cite) is also an important precursor to political participation. As in Hirshman’s (1986) “bandwagon effect”, people often are only willing to engage in social activity if they see others who are willing to join them, or who are already so engaged.

Politically, groups also tend to exert policy pressure in ways impossible by either individual citizens or larger public associations. Because interest groups are shielded from the exigency of impartiality that modern bureaucracies stress, they can openly lobby for political outcomes that would be difficult to promote from within the system.

Larger than individuals, but treated as individuals (e.g. Calhoun, 2002), larger organic groups can effectively promote social change. Gould (1993), for example, analyses how much of the social pressure in worker's movements came from small groups of networked individuals, and not from a large rival political parties.

In sum, groups provide an important bridge between individuals and their governments. When combined synergistically, groups can produce more ideas and innovation than individuals. Groups provide a basis for trust in an otherwise impersonal market economy, buffering against uncertainty and facilitating economic interaction. Groups create models of national identity, passing along civic virtues and templates for treating fellow citizens. Groups enforce norms and maintain order in otherwise difficult to police situations, saving time, money, and legitimacy which would be wasted were these tasks done publicly. Finally, groups create a critical mass needed for political mobilization, convincing citizens to partake in the political process for both rational and irrational reasons. In all these ways, associational groups seem an intrinsic part of a participatory democracy, echoing Toquevilles (1969), and more recently, Putnam's (1995) celebration of the group bases of democratic politics.

However, a closer look at the details above already suggests that there may be a negative side to small groups, which can act as barriers as well as bridges to democracy. The policing functions described above, the tendency for conformity and the possibility of group biases all can give rise to both pro and anti- democratic tendencies. In the next section, I will attempt to make sense of the negative side of small groups in the context of democratic participation.

SMALL GROUPS AS BARRIERS

The previous section built upon the idea that small groups can provide a bridge between individuals and the larger civic sphere, mainly through their ability to link

community values to the lived experiences of individuals. However, many decades of research on group behavior has shown that groups can produce divisiveness as well as cohesion, and that that this divisiveness may in fact be a *product* of the very group cohesion celebrated in the civil society literature (Tajfel, 1982). In addition, within the group itself, factors present in the group process can lead to inhibited cognitive processes (Janis, 1982; Janis & Mann, 1977) as well as the inability of the group to produce decisions that rival the quality of individually made decisions (e.g. Aldag & Fuller, 1993). Beginning with the taxing effect that groups can have on rationality, I will then discuss how motivated cognitive biases can lead to intergroup discrimination and the loss of a sense of the wider community, ultimately leading to intergroup exclusionary behavior and, at the extreme, group dehumanization and aggression (Goldstein, 2002).

The Irrationality of Small Groups

An important aspect of participatory democracy is that, rather than imposing a pre-set system of preferences and values on a polity, it allows these preferences and values to emerge organically from within the polity. This aspect, for better or for worse, essentially guarantees that there will not be a determinate outcome to public discourse, but rather an ongoing conversation that provisionally establishes the public culture at any given snapshot of time (Chambers, 1995).

For such a conversation to lead to a just society, however, this conversation must approximate an ideal conversation among rational actors, who interact not on the basis of their own material interests, but on the basis of a true search for a legitimate social order (Habermas, 1981). Needless to say, such an ideal conversation is not an empirical description of democratic reality, but a moral ideal which exists as the goal of a legitimate democracy (Chambers, 1995).

Empirical studies of group interaction, by contrast, have shown a much different picture of interpersonal process, one less rooted in an impartial stance toward outcome and more of a hodgepodge of emotions, interests, and identity negotiations (e.g. Kelman, 2006). To the extent that group biases derail the Habermasian process of legitimation, they may undermine the theoretical possibility for a rationally justifiable democratic society.

For instance, classical research in social psychology has established that people tend to conform their responses to group norms, even when those responses are obviously and absurdly wrong (e.g. Ashe, 1951). In addition to erroneous responding, Sherif (1935) found that, even after controlling for group presence, isolated individuals who had been influenced by their group continued to believe in group norms after the group had been disbanded. Similarly, Tetlock, Skitka & Boettger (1989) found that people who know their audience's views are likely to modify their arguments to fit with the groups pre-existing opinions. These results suggest that, both behaviorally and cognitively, people produced biased outcomes due to small group influence. Tempered by such conclusions, it may seem unreasonable to expect small groups to inculcate values of rational democratic participation, and may be more likely to promote conformity and a lack of discussion.

Perhaps the most well known example of irrational group behavior is the phenomenon of groupthink (Janis, 1982). Groupthink occurs in small groups with high cohesion, complex issues to resolve, strong emotional bonds between members, and low external accountability, a list which may accurately describe many civil society groups. This combination, according to Janis, results in a resistance to considering diverse alternatives, blind adherence to a leader's directives, "mindguards" to censure and exclude peripheral members, and an illusion of anonymity. In a similar vein, the group

polarization hypothesis of Myers and Lamm (1976) posits that group members, in the presence of like minded members, tend to polarize their views on topics, holding more extreme opinions than they would have otherwise. Finally, the common knowledge effect (Gigone & Hastie, 1993) suggests that people in groups focus on similarities rather than differences, talking only about commonly held topics. This produces an illusion of consensus that can suppress debate. In short, decades of social psychological research in different theoretical lines have converged on a picture of group life that not only fails to confirm, but actively refutes, the picture of group interaction as a paradigm of participative democratic communication.

Intergroup bias and discrimination

From the above, it should be clear that group interaction can lead to barriers to thought and dialogue that can threaten the ability to participate rationally in a democratic community. These processes limit the democratic value of groups by showing how groups can fail to realize the idea of free participation. However, while the biases discussed above limit the usefulness of groups, they do not actively erode the communities in which the groups exist. However, some evidence suggests that groups not only are imperfect vehicles for community participation, but can actually harm the formation of a unified community and create a divided citizenry.

The most important line of research in this vein is Tajfel & Turners (e.g. 1986) social identity theory, which attempted to explain how people are motivated to think in biased ways about social groups. Tajfel's (1970) work involved "judgmental accentuation", in which people tend to exaggerate salient aspects of cognitive categories, viewing members of categories as homogeneous and polarized with respect to non-members. In the context of social categories, the implication was that people view their groups as fundamentally different from out-groups, and would, as a

consequence, exaggerate group differences. Tajfel (1970; Tajfel, Flament, Billig & Bundy, 1971; Tajfel & Turner 1986) experimentally showed that psychologically salient groups led to out-group derogation and could be a basis of group conflict, even when no resource conflicts existed between the groups. In other words, the simple presence of group boundaries led to out-group derogation. People were likely to view positive aspects of their group, and negative aspects of other groups, leading to negatively biased out-group views (Dovidio et al, 1998), stereotyped judgments of others (Smith, 1999), disrespect for out-group members (Linnehan et al, 2002), and withholding of important resources from other groups (Sidanius, Pratto & Mitchell, 1994)

Not inconsistent with the above, recent research suggests that not only do individuals positively bias their in-groups and denigrate out-groups, but they actually tend to view out-group members as less “human” than in-group members (Leyens, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, Guant, Paladino, Vaes & Demoulin, 2001; Vaes, Paladin & Leyens, 2006). According to this literature, group membership can produce “infra-humanization”, where uniquely human traits, such as human emotions and intelligence are attributed only to in-group members. In particular, traits associated with “humanness” usually included those associated with rational cognitive functioning, culture, and agentic aspects of persons (Demoulin, Leyens, Paladino Rodriguez & Dovidio, 2004). It is specifically these more human traits that tend to be compromised through the formation of in-groups and out-groups.

The infrahumanization bias creates a barrier to the building of a participatory democratic ethos in two important and related ways. The first is through the erosion of a universalist and rationalist view of the human agent as a foundation for democratic society. Modern thinking in the democratic tradition has held the rational agentic person as a fundamental unit of analysis in understanding the political order. This has

taken the form of a universal imperative to treat persons as agents rather than as means-to an end (Kant, 1959) as well as in utilitarian claims that each person is fundamentally the best judge of his or her own good (Mill, 1998). Contemporary theorists like Rawls (1971), building on the Kantian tradition, argue that we must be able to put ourselves in an “original position” where we can take the perspective of citizens independently of our own social position. Even critical theorists such as Habermas, recognizing that community is necessary for rationality, still treats individuals-in-conversation as able to seek objectively legitimate solutions through rational discourse (Habermas, 1981). Ultimately, it is this aspect of persons that justifies the delegation of political power to the people themselves, rather than the concentration of power in a small group of decision makers. In other words, it only seems legitimate to empower communities if we see the people that make up those communities as able to understand what is best for themselves and their communities. Such a capacity, moreover, involves the recognition of humanness in all citizens, of their capacity to participate fully in a community of conscious citizens.

While the inhumanization perspective emerged as an attempt to explain ethnocentrism and intergroup discrimination (Vaes et al, 2003), and was not directly linked to civil society and community empowerment, a link to the latter can clearly be established. To the extent that the formation of small groups leads people to systematically undermine the “humanness” of other citizens, it short circuits the presupposition of a rational subject that underlies democratic moral theory. To treat people as less than full participants in the social order would be to erode the participatory ethic that undergirds democratic morality.

Thus, the biasing effect of small groups in the first way that inhumanization undermines participation. The second way is through the problematization of the idea

that small groups provide a template for citizenship through the inclusion of social mores in the lived experience and identities of individuals. As discussed above, one of the hopes for small groups as “carriers” of civic virtues was that these groups, but grounding social relations in lived, everyday experiences, could make civic participation more palpable in people’s lives. By contrast to the formalistic and abstract principles of democracy at the national level, participation in groups would teach people that participation is about making real decisions in concrete contexts that affect actual people. The hope was that such a grounding could lay a basis that would then be transferred into a notion of citizenship more generally (Johnson, 1991).

If, however, the very process of establishing cohesive small groups causes people to undermine civic values outside the group, then the metaphor of “transfer” may be misplaced. Seemingly, forming groups can create close community ties, but it is not certain if these ties will generalize or not. The key questions are: “Under what conditions does establishing community ties within a group reinforce community ties generally, and under what conditions do within group ties substitute or undermine wider citizenship relations?” Unfortunately, current research does not provide a consistent answer to this problem yet.

BETWEEN BRIDGES AND BARRIERS: CHARTING A PATH FOR SMALL GROUPS

This chapter has argued that the group foundations of civil society provide opportunities (bridges) and obstacles (barriers) for participation on a wider level. I argued that small groups provide micro-environments that allow individuals to develop cognitive and emotional models of citizenship, empowerment, and inclusion. However, the small group literature also points to cognitive biases, exclusionary tendencies, and irrational behavior associated with groups that call into question their ability to provide

sustainable models of democratic participation. It is argued that many of the failings of participatory democracy cannot be understood without reference to the small group origins of modern democracies.

In order to chart a path between these seeming contradictory findings regarding small groups within civil society, the final section of this chapter attempts to resolve the seeming dichotomy between discussing the universalism versus particularism in group life. The key question is whether a polity based on principles of group psychology can sustain universalistic aspirations such as tolerance, universal participation, and mutual respect, or whether ultimately such aspirations break down into in-fighting and factionalism.

A provisional solution to inter-group factionalism may be aided by research on group relations that examines moderators of inter-group biases and factors that promote inclusion. If the positive elements of groups can be maximized, while avoiding the more divisive aspects, such a solution seems possible. Three areas are suggested as important (but not exclusive) starting points; the negation of group “faultlines”, the salience of super-ordinate goals, and the promotion of interaction rituals that reinforce community sentiment. Each of these is discussed in turn.

Patching Faultlines to Minimize Intergroup Conflict

As discussed above, in-group categorizations can lead to biased information processing, stereotyping, inter-group discrimination, and infra humanization (Tajfel, 1982, Vaes et al, 2006). These effects are established by the creation of psychological barriers that separate groups, creating a feeling of “us” versus them.

The concept of *faultlines* (Lau & Murningham, 1998; 2005) may be useful in understanding how these various categorizations can amplify or cancel each other. According to this concept, people belong not to one but to many various groups, and

thus have multiple social identities. When the membership of one group overlaps closely with membership in another or various other groups, a faultline is created which amplifies the effects of group division. For example, a white male and a white female share membership in a racial, but not a gender, group, whereas a white male and a black female are divided on both racial and gender lines. When groups form such that many group membership overlap with each other (e.g. everyone from a certain neighborhood also goes to the same church, supports the same sports team and also belongs to the same activist group), then in-out group relations can become exacerbated, because the salience of one group identity can be easily transferred to the other identities as well. On the other hand, if group memberships are “staggered” such that an out-group member in one group is an in-group member of another group, then the contagious effect of out-group discrimination is minimized.

In the context of community empowerment and small groups, the faultlines construct provides a possible solution to negative aspects of groups. These aspects are most destructive when various group identities are aligned, particularly when social groups are aligned with demographic categories such as race or gender (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). Attempts to promote diversity within civil society groups may have the beneficial effect of “crossing” demographic lines within social groups. While demographic diversity has often been endorsed as a way to increase creativity and innovation by adding different experiences to groups (e.g. Cox & Blake, 1991), this suggest another possible benefit. Such diversity, according to the faultlines perspective, may interact with other social category effects, “patching up” a faultline and reducing the basing effect of social groups *even where these other groups were not the target of diversity efforts*. Thus diversity in one social category may reduce group tension in other categories.

Establishing Superordinate Group Goals

A second important way in which group bias can be reduced is through the establishment of superordinate goals (Allport, 1954; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1961; Gaertner, Dovidio, Banker, Houlette, Johnson & McGlynn, 2000). In their famous Robber's Cave experiment, Sherif and his colleague showed that rival groups, when faced with a common challenge, tend to increase cooperation, fairness and liking. From this result, the notion of superordinate goals became an important moderator of the inter-group bias effect.

Two important caveats, however, deserve mention. First, even within the Sherif study, the de-biasing effects of a superordinate goal were temporary (Gaertner et al, 2000). Once the goal dissipated, the underlying group based conflict re-emerged. Applying and generalizing to the political sphere, we may speculate that resurgences of ethnic and other inter-group conflict may occur after the disappearance of a common antagonism for both groups, which would explain the post colonial and post Cold-War origins of some ethnic conflict (e.g. Brubaker & Laitin, 1998). This suggests that using such goals to galvanize diverse civil society groups within a polity may be a temporary solution at best, particularly if the group categories involved are resistant to re-categorization (e.g. Gaertner et al, 2000) and thus will tend to reassert themselves.

Building on the notion of re-categorization, the second caveat against superordinate goals involves the benefits of group membership. Although avoiding group discrimination, bias and conflict is important, some avoidance strategies may come at the cost of losing the empowering benefits of group membership (civic values, trust, community bonds). Approaches to reducing bias often are based on de-identifying or re-identifying with a different group (e.g. Gaertner et al, 2000). The de-identifying strategy avoids discrimination at the cost of the benefits of groups, while the

re-identifying strategy risks recreating antagonisms at a different level. Thus, while identities may be strategically managed (Bernstein, 2005) to avoid particularly difficult group conflicts, such a management must be careful not to lose the benefits of social belonging, trust, and meaning that groups provide.

Promoting Interaction Rituals that Bridge Groups and Politics

As discussed above, the power of studying community participation through its microstructures of interpersonal and small group relations is that these relations describe the everyday lived experiences of individuals, which are often not done justice by the large, long term and formalized structures of “macro” politics. The latter may, however, become salient in the minds of individuals through ceremonial and ritual events, which highlight wider community values (Durkheim, 1961; Trice & Beyer, 1984). These rituals put national identities into palpable form by linking wider social structures to spectacular, memorable events, thus symbolically anchoring national identities in ways that do not contradict the day to day group existence of individuals. Such events do not have to recur continuously to have an effect on identities; annual events such as national celebrations of independence or occasional political elections may function through their symbolic weight rather than the frequency of their recurrence. Some ritual events, such as marriages, graduation ceremonies, and other rites of passage effectively create psychological identifications that last throughout an individual’s lifetime even if they occur only once (Van Gennep, 1960).

In terms of the creation of participatory democracy, ritual participation can involve groups and at the same time signify wider community identity. Pratt (2000), for example, found that small group meetings among Amway workers fed into a larger organizational identity that worked through, not against, individual mentor relationships. Another particularly interesting example is Ackerman and Fishkin’s

(2004) idea of “Deliberation Day”. This proposed national holiday would be comprised of small groups that meet on an official national holiday to discuss national issues, in an attempt to stimulate democratic deliberation among the populace. The immediate format of the groups would be small and interpersonal, but the content of the discussion would be national, thus linking the immediacy of small group deliberation with concern over important social issues.

While the above ideas do not exhaust the possibilities for trying to combine small group life with political participation and the wider civil society, they attempt to offer some directions in thinking about this topic. The key message is that, despite potentially destructive group processes, the relation between groups and politics is not necessarily antagonistic. The focus for future thought on this topic should be to more intricately describe when micro identities feed into macro identities, and how the strengths of the two can be used together.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has attempted to clarify the role of small groups in creating participation in democratic public life. While recent literature in the social sciences (e.g. Putnam, 1995) has touted the importance of associational grouping in establishing and maintaining healthy democracies, it is important to recognize that the two do not always go hand in hand. Groups can be key in forming the basic social makeup of individuals, teaching persons how to be citizens by forming bonds of trust and identity. They can be engines of ideas and motivational forces that stimulate public participation. However, they can also generate irrationality and division. Thus, thought in this area must attempt to look in closer detail at the specific process that cause groups to boost or undermine community sentiment. Such inquiry is important to ensure that our political process affirms and represents the lived experiences of the people that it governs, while

recognizing equally that politics does not flow seamlessly from interpersonal relations into governance structures. As mediators of the relation between individuals and society, groups can channel individual sentiments into participation or into rejection of societies, and for this key role are essential to democratic thought.

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