

Group Life: An Invitation to Local Sociology [Book Review]

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Group Life: An Invitation to Local Sociology

Gary Alan Fine and Tim Hallett

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Sociologists are meant to be interested in everything. That's the problem, the curse if you will, of sociology. The core disciplinary issue, how social structures affect everyday actions and behaviours, is everywhere you look.

However, Gary Alan Fine and Tim Hallett, the well-respected and highly experienced authors of this new book, argue that sociologists are frequently failing to look everywhere. Clearly written, and drawing on around a dozen case studies from their own qualitative studies, *Group Life* argues that the many groups we join or are enmeshed in should be thought of as central organising facets of life. They are 'crucibles' in which change and conflict can bubble and build, and 'hinges' where people meet the micro and the macro (p. 4). But too much sociological research and writing, Fine and Hallett caution, is concerned with the experience of individual lives and how structures play out within them, or institutions that stand above and beyond groups and their members. Sociology is either looking too macro or too micro, and missing the relational meso, which tells us a great deal about social life and experience. Implicit within this book therefore is the idea that sociology is over-prioritising demographic identity at the expense of group identity: instead of studying how individuals from a certain background or with a certain experience encounter the world, we should look at how a self-identified collective meet and encounter each other, and resultantly, the world. As a researcher focused on civil society it's a general argument that appeals.

Yet, if you are going to argue that sociology—the whole discipline—is currently failing to do something, one feels that you really have to work comprehensively to demonstrate the truth of that assertion. Overall, I don't think Fine and Hallett meet that expectation. Early on they set out that they want to introduce those who emphasise individual actors or collective entities to the importance of communities of interaction, but hold back in presenting examples of the supposedly many researchers they feel fall into these camps. That may be out of politeness, and in a book aimed at the advanced student market perhaps makes sense. But it would have been mightily beneficial to see examples of what they were arguing against, and if they had explored a case study or two of where and how their approach would have made an existing study better. Each central chapter focuses on a different aspect of group life (belonging, building, bonding, other words coincidentally beginning with B) and two of the authors' own studies are used to illustrate central arguments. As they note, these studies are largely of White, middle-class people from the United States—a flaw, perhaps unsurprising due to the power of homophily, but one that does the mean the examples do feel rather samey after a while, with the concepts each case used to identify feeling slightly random. The importance of 'belonging' in groups is illustrated with reference to Fine's work on kitchens and school debate teams but could just as easily have been showcased by other studies used in different chapters.

After reading, one is also left rather unconvinced by the eliding of the ideas of 'groups' and of the 'local'—these terms are used throughout (and in the book's title) rather interchangeably. The actions of a group or collective—such as a debating team or a Dungeons and Dragons society—are not the

same as a local community, and can change hugely dependant on context (a point noted by the authors). Studies focused on local, place-based communities and the issues they face are myriad, and do much of the meso work Fine and Hallett feel is missing. From the longstanding research field of community studies, to modern place-based, issue-centric ethnographies (Colin Jerolmack's [2021] recent work on fracking leaps to mind), sociology of a local area or areas feels vibrant and alive. Small civil society groups are overlooked certainly, but labelling a project exploring a kitchen or university Masters course as a 'local' sociology feels unhelpful, especially in a book primarily for students.

If you are studying Fine or Hallett's work for the first time, or are about to conduct original qualitative research on a small group, this is a good overview, and provides a starting point for thinking about the 'level' at which sociological analysis should occur. But the more political point about lack and gaps within the wider discipline of sociology feels like a strawman.

References

Jerolmack C (2021) *Up to Heaven and Down to Hell: Fracking, Freedom, and Community in an American Town*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.