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THE SOCIOLOGY OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

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Voluntary associations, understood as "formally organized named groups, most of whose members—whether persons or organizations—are not financially recompensed for their participation" (Knoke 1986:2), have been both hailed as the building blocks of American democracy and disparaged as instruments of social exclusion that reproduce racial and ethnic conflict. Similarly, individuals' membership in voluntary associations has been found to have important benefits for their economic, emotional, and mental well-being but also to reaffirm their negative social stereotypes. Regardless of which characteristics of voluntary associations one chooses to emphasize, one thing is certain: The United States has long been and continues to be a "nation of joiners" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000). The voluntary associations that operate in the United States serve a myriad of purposes, many of which supplement functions offered by the state and the private sector. These associations cover the full gamut of human activity, from economic cooperation to emotional support, from professional development to philanthropy, and from religion to recreation.

Given the prevalence of associations in the United States and the fact that they lend themselves well to the study of social interaction, it is not surprising that sociologists have been interested in voluntarism since the earliest days of their discipline. The body of research motivated by this interest spans nearly 10 decades and includes thousands of articles and books from such diverse subfields as the sociology of religion and demography. Our brief review will outline a history of this rich field of inquiry, delineate its major intellectual currents, summarize its most important empirical findings, and offer some new directions for future research.

HISTORY OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION RESEARCH

Alexis de Tocqueville occupies a central position in the origin story of voluntary association research. His rich observations of nineteenth-century American life (Tocqueville [1835] 2000) helped shape an emerging liberal paradigm in political theory, which treated voluntary associations as the building blocks of civil society—the intermediary between the family, political institutions, and the market. Previously, classical political theorists, from Aristotle to Hobbes and Hegel, had viewed civil society as the commonwealth of elites protected by the state, which shared in "the virtuous tasks of ruling and being ruled" (Edwards 2004:6). In contrast, the liberal democratic

framework developed by Madison, Tocqueville, and other Enlightenment thinkers defined civil society as the aggregate of voluntary associations whose primary role was the protection of local interests from the intrusion of government authority. In addition to "curbing the power of centralized institutions, protecting pluralism and nurturing constructive social norms" (Edwards 2004:7), voluntary associations enabled the mobilization of resources toward common goals, increased social cohesion within communities, and supported political debate. This liberal understanding of civil society became fundamental to the pluralistic school of thought in American political theory.

The civil society approach championed by pluralist theorists dominated voluntary association research in the first decades of the twentieth century. However, beginning in the 1920s, its hegemony became increasingly challenged by a newly emergent discipline of sociology. The highly theoretical and abstract arguments that characterized the civil society literature gradually gave way to grounded empirical research pioneered by the Chicago School of urban sociology. Its members systematically studied community life from an ecological perspective, treating neighborhoods as systems of interrelated institutions and practices. The importance of voluntary associations in community life was captured in such sociological classics as Thomas and Znaniecki's (1927) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America,* Lynd and Lynd's (1929) *Middletown,* and Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society.*

While the first wave of the Chicago School was still in its heyday, a number of sociologists began advocating a more generalizable approach to sociological research, one based on quantitative analysis of survey data. While their methodological perspective made considerable inroads into American sociology during the interwar years, it experienced a veritable explosion after World War II. Generous government funding facilitated the collection of unprecedented volumes of survey data on virtually every topic of interest to social scientists, shifting the methodological balance decisively in favor of large-sample quantitative research. This survey revolution produced much of the foundational research in social stratification, sociology of education, demography, and many other core subfields of sociology. Its impact on the study of voluntary associations was no less groundbreaking.

The availability of nationally representative survey data allowed scholars of volunteerism to explore two fundamental questions: Who joins voluntary organizations, and what are the consequences of their membership? To answer the former question, researchers correlated countless sociodemographic variables with voluntary association membership. Race, gender, income, education, geographic location, religious preference, and many other individual-level characteristics were shown to significantly affect the likelihood of affiliation. Some studies introduced more nuanced understandings of the dependent variable by distinguishing between various types of voluntary associations. The most recent additions to this research tradition have reproduced the older participation models in a comparative context, usually at the international level.

Research on the consequences of voluntary association membership has been similarly affected by the proliferation of survey data: Researchers have correlated membership with such diverse outcomes as mental health, life satisfaction, social mobility, and political participation. Since the typical level of analysis in these studies has been the individual, survey research on the consequences of voluntary participation can be seen as a counterpart to the civil society perspective, which has theorized the effects of participation on the political system as a whole.

A handful of researchers have recently begun using survey data to study the dynamic processes that shape the life cycles of voluntary associations. Treating associations themselves as the units of analysis, they have examined the effects of administrative structures, political and economic conditions, and interorganizational competition on the associations' size, composition, and stability. Institutional studies have focused on the first two factors, arguing that associations must be nimble enough to adjust to a continually changing social environment. Structural-ecological studies have built on structuralist theory, social-evolutionary logic, and social network analysis to emphasize the third *explanans*—interorganizational competition—as the fundamental mechanism that drives associational change.

Both the institutional and structural-ecological approaches have two important characteristics that set them apart from the majority of previous research: (1) They strive to develop a general theory of voluntary associations, and (2) they view voluntary associations as collective phenomena rather than mere aggregates of individual behaviors. To examine these properties, researchers have developed new methods for measuring system-level variables, such as organizational size and density, with traditional survey data.

In addition to the growth of structural approaches, the 1990s were characterized by a powerful revival of the civil society tradition in political science, sociology, and international relations. This neo-Tocquevillian phase reached its height in the early 2000s, with the publication of Putnam's (2000) enormously popular treatise on the decline of American volunteerism, which combined traditional pluralist arguments with social capital theory. Although Putnam's work has been widely critiqued, it continues to define much of the contemporary discourse on volunteerism.

TYPOLOGIES OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

Researchers of voluntary associations have developed a number of classificatory schemes based on the defining features of associations, such as the associations' size, internal structure, level of outside control, social function,

source of support, geographic location, and membership characteristics (Smith and Freedman 1972). Since all these criteria have proved useful for the study of various aspects of voluntarism, none of them can be viewed as definitive.

Perhaps due to its simplicity and flexibility, the most enduring and widely employed typology is Gordon and Babchuk's (1959) distinction between expressive and instrumental associations. The primary function of expressive organizations is the facilitation of interaction between members. Hence, participation in such organizations is an end in itself. In contrast, the primary manifest function of instrumental associations is the exertion of influence over specific social conditions. Thus, participation in these organizations is a means to particular extraorganizational ends. Since many associations do not fit neatly into either of these two categories, Gordon and Babchuk (1959) combined them to form a third association type: Instrumental-expressive associations place equal priority on both these dimensions.

Many typologies developed over the past three decades have built on Gordon and Babchuk's original scheme. For instance, DeVall and Harry (1975) distinguish between utilitarian, normative, and normative-utilitarian associations; Palisi and Korn (1989) employ the categories of total voluntary, instrumental, and expressive associations, while Wilson and Janoski (1995) classify voluntary action as self-oriented or community oriented.

The other common approach to classifying associations focuses on their substantive sphere of activity. For example, McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1982) distinguish organizations related to economic activities from those related to community or domestic affairs, while Knoke (1986) lists 14 "functionally specialized" types: "labor unions, churches and sects, social movement organizations, political parties, professional societies, business and trade associations, fraternal and sororal organizations, recreational clubs, civic service associations, philanthropies, social welfare councils, communes, cooperatives, and neighborhood" (p. 2). This approach closely resembles industry classifications used by economists and policymakers. In fact, Knoke's (1986) categories overlap with Salamon's (2002) typology of the nonprofit sector, which includes the following fields of activity: culture, education, health, social services, environment, development, civic and advocacy, philanthropy, international, religious, business and professional, unions, and others.

None of the above classificatory approaches provide a perfect representation of the functioning of actual voluntary associations; each one reduces these complex social phenomena to simplistic and often overlapping ideal types. Nevertheless, these typologies provide convenient and useful conceptual tools for examining various properties of a myriad of diverse organizations. Hence, each typology must be evaluated in light of specific research questions and appropriate empirical evidence. For instance, Richmond (2003) divides voluntary associations into local and cosmopolitan, regardless of their function or purpose. This is an entirely reasonable decision in the context of his study, which examines the relationship between association membership and geographical mobility.

MEMBERSHIP STUDIES

In response to the widespread availability of individual-level data and dedicated survey analysis techniques, researchers have produced hundreds of studies correlating voluntary association membership with sociodemographic variables. Since a complete bibliography of this body of research would occupy far more space than is available in this volume (see Pugliese 1986), we will limit our overview to the most significant determinants of participation. In each section, we will outline the conclusions reached by previous literature reviews and supplement them with more recent findings.

Age and the Life Course

In their 1972 review of voluntary association research, Constance Smith and Anne Freedman conclude that voluntary participation declines with age due to a variety of psychological and structural factors. In a subsequent review, David Smith (1975) concurs but adds that the pattern is actually curvilinear, with the youngest and oldest persons participating less than those in their middle age. The decline in participation in the latter stages of the life course is more "pronounced for instrumental (e.g., occupation-related) [associations] than for expressive ones" (Smith 1975:253). Similarly, Janoski and Wilson (1995) find that as people age their interests shift from "self-oriented" to "community-oriented" associations.

Reviewing the literature on volunteering, Wilson (2000) acknowledges the curvilinear age pattern but notes that participation is actually higher in adolescence than in young adulthood and that its overall decline in old age is accompanied by an increase in the hours of commitment among those already volunteering. In addition, young people participate predominantly in associations related to "self- and career-oriented activism," and middle-age people prefer "more community-oriented work," while older volunteers "turn away from youth-related, political and ethnic groups and toward service organizations, recreational clubs and agencies to help the elderly" (Wilson 2000:227). Other evidence suggests that between 1974 and 1994, age became a less important determinant of the types of voluntary associations people joined (Monti et al. 2003).

In contrast to the above findings, Hendricks and Cutler (2001) demonstrate that the curvilinear pattern of membership disappears once cohort composition is taken into consideration. They argue that after controlling for compositional factors, the rate of volunteerism peaks in late middle age and remains stable thereafter, regardless of whether unions and religious organizations are included in the analysis. This conclusion is consistent with Cutler's (1976)

study, which finds no independent drop in participation after the age of 44.

All the above studies agree on one fact: People volunteer substantially in middle age. To help explain this phenomenon, some researchers have turned to the life-course perspective. Using event-history analysis, Rotolo (2000) demonstrates that changes in participation rates are a result of important role transitions that occur at particular points in the life cycle. For instance, marriage and child-rearing increase rates of participation. Furthermore, Rotolo distinguishes between rates of joining and leaving associations, arguing that transition out of work and marriage, which occurs in old age, results both in fewer new memberships and in fewer terminations of existing memberships. Other explanations for the curvilinear effect of age on voluntarism have emphasized changes in people's attitudes, human capital, and psychological needs.

Gender

Studies conducted in the early 1970s found that men participated in more voluntary associations than did women (Smith and Freedman 1972; Smith 1975) but that this difference narrowed when the level of commitment was taken into account (Smith 1975). By the mid-1980s, most of the difference in overall participation rates had disappeared (Knoke 1986; Monti et al. 2003), and by the 1990s, women were volunteering more than men (Wilson 2000). Although some explanations for the high overall participation rate among women rely on essentialist cultural arguments (Wilson 2000), the long-term shift in the effect of gender on volunteering suggests that structural factors, such as the entry of women into the labor force, play a more important role (Gustafson, Booth, and Johnson 1979; Knoke 1986).

Despite the equalization of overall participation rates between men and women, important differences persist in the type and quality of their respective memberships. Analyses of the sex composition of voluntary associations reveal striking patterns of segregation, which are exacerbated by the tendency of women to participate in smaller associations (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1982, 1986). This pattern does not seem to diminish over time (Popielarz 1999). Furthermore, women's groups are far more homogeneous with respect to age, education, and occupational status than are men's groups (Popielarz 1999).

Gender also functions as a mediating variable for other determinants of volunteering. For instance, while work instability has a general negative effect on rates of voluntary participation, this effect is more pronounced for women than for men (Rotolo and Wilson 2003). Unstable work histories decrease women's participation in all associations other than unions and farm organizations, while for men, they only decrease membership in job-related associations. Gender also shapes the effects of life-course transitions on joining and leaving voluntary associations, with marriage disproportionately increasing the likelihood of women leaving job-related organizations (Rotolo 2000:1152).

Race

According to Smith (1975), research from the 1970s demonstrates that blacks exhibit lower rates of participation in voluntary associations than do whites, though this difference disappears once socioeconomic status (SES) is taken into consideration (Smith 1975). In contrast, Smith and Freedman (1972) report higher overall rates of participation among blacks, regardless of SES, especially in expressive organizations (Smith and Freedman 1972; cf. London 1975). More recently, researchers have found that once SES is controlled for, blacks consistently volunteer more than whites (Wilson 2000; Stoll 2001).

The relatively high rates of volunteering among African Americans are often attributed to ostensibly higher levels of cohesion in black communities, driven by strong racial identification and shared perceptions of social injustice (Knoke 1986; Ellison and London 1992). This argument is supported by evidence that black volunteers show a strong preference for organizations that serve the needs of the African American community (Wilson 2000). However, research on blacks' general attitudes toward altruism and volunteering is inconclusive, calling into question affective explanations of racial differences in participation rates (Wilson 2000).

Studies of the role of social context on volunteering have demonstrated a tendency toward higher participation in ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods (Rotolo 2000; Stoll 2001). Since African Americans continue to experience acute residential segregation, this finding partly explains the relatively high propensity for voluntarism among members of this group.

Like gender, race is also a strong predictor of the internal composition of voluntary associations. Researchers have consistently found that most associations in the United States are racially homogeneous (Christerson and Emerson 2003; Dougherty 2003); for instance, Dougherty (2003) reports that only 8 percent of Christian organizations are racially diverse. The homogeneity of voluntary associations may be a result of the sociodemographic properties of social networks through which members are recruited (Popielarz and McPherson 1995). Because social ties tend to be homophilous, meaning that individuals interact most often with people similar to themselves, the social groups that form at the intersections of these ties tend to be composed of similar members. Structural-ecological theory suggests that new members who are dissimilar from current members are unlikely to remain in the group for a lengthy period of time, while those who are similar have a higher probability of retaining their memberships. A recent study of racially and ethnically heterogeneous religious organizations (Christerson and Emerson 2003) supports this argument, demonstrating that ethnic

and racial minority members incur higher social costs of membership than do majority members.

Socioeconomic Status and Labor Market Variables

Most SES indicators are found to positively affect rates of voluntary participation. This is particularly true for occupational status and education (Smith 1975). Some researchers have also observed that specific job characteristics and not just occupational status have an effect on participation. For instance, individuals with a high degree of control over their jobs tend to volunteer more hours and do so for a wider range of organizations. Although education has been consistently found to positively influence rates of voluntary participation, its effect varies by organization type. For example, the effect is consistent for political groups but not for informal community associations or emergency service organizations (Wilson 2000).

The evidence for the effect of income on volunteering is mixed. Some studies find that wages are negatively associated with volunteering; others suggest that higher overall income increases the propensity to volunteer, while others argue that higher wages increase voluntary activity but higher levels of wealth decrease it. Furthermore, income may be linked to the type of associations joined, with higher-income individuals volunteering more for health- and education-related associations but not for religious and informal ones.

Childhood Socialization

A number of studies point to the importance of socialization in promoting voluntary association membership. Researchers have found strong evidence for the positive effect of parents' participation in voluntary associations on the participation of their offspring, net of SES factors (Smith 1975). Similarly, volunteering during high school years has been found to positively affect the propensity to join voluntary associations later in life (Wilson 2000). It is unclear whether values and attitudes play a mediating role in the transmission of voluntaristic behavior or whether the phenomenon is a result of structural factors, such as social networks and social roles.

Social Context

Although social context has been an underemphasized correlate of voluntary participation, a few studies in the 1970s did examine the role of social networks, work environments, and neighborhood characteristics on volunteering (Smith 1975). They demonstrated that coworkers, family members, and other personal contacts, especially those of high status, have an important impact on voluntarism. A positive effect was also found for SES-homogeneous neighborhoods, longer residential tenure in a community, and communities with less than 50,000 inhabitants (Smith 1975).

Attention to social networks and structural explanations increased significantly in the 1980s and 1990s, giving rise to new traditions of voluntary association research, many of which treat organizations as units of analysis. Social networks have been found to play a crucial role in disseminating information, mobilizing resources, and creating opportunity structures for voluntary participation. Similarly, demographic characteristics of communities have been shown to affect the composition of voluntary associations. For instance, McPherson (1982) demonstrates that the number and size of associations found in a community, as well as the density of interorganizational and interpersonal links, is strongly affected by the size of the community's population (McPherson 1982). Rotolo (2000) argues that neighborhood heterogeneity has a negative effect on participation since it lowers the probability of homophilous social ties through which association memberships are transmitted. This effect is particularly strong for racially heterogeneous neighborhoods. Stoll (2001) finds that neighborhood poverty also decreases the number of memberships present. Finally, Richmond (2003) demonstrates that geographic mobility differentially affects individuals' propensity to join local and cosmopolitan associations.

Cross-National Differences

As outlined above, the growing interest in organization-level analyses has led many researchers to shift their attention from simple correlation studies to more theoretically sophisticated analyses that examine the impact of contextual factors on voluntary association membership. Despite this considerable progress, traditional survey studies of participation still constitute a considerable portion of the field. This is in no small part due to the growing volume of cross-national research conducted by James Curtis and his associates. Initially inspired by Lipset's (1989) theory of cultural differences between Canada and the United States and later by Putnam's (2000) thesis on the contemporary decline of social capital, these researchers have devoted the past decade and a half to comparing the overall membership rates of industrialized nations using data from the World Values Survey.

In contrast to Lipset's (1989) thesis, their findings demonstrate that, with the exception of religious organizations, Americans are no more likely to join voluntary associations than are Canadians (Curtis et al. 1989; Grabb and Curtis 1992). Similar results are found when the participation in the United States is compared with that of other countries, such as Australia, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Northern Ireland (Curtis, Grabb, and Baer 1992). According to Curtis, Baer, and Grabb (2001), high national rates of participation are correlated with "multidenominational Christian or predominantly Protestant religious compositions" (p. 783), longer

traditions of democratic governance, social or liberal democratic systems, and high levels of economic development. Finally, in response to Putnam (2000), Baer, Curtis, and Grabb (2001) argue that the overall levels of participation have not declined in 12 of the 13 countries examined, including the United States and Canada (but see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006).

Correlation studies of the determinants of membership have made many contributions to our descriptive understanding of voluntary associations. However, with some important exceptions (e.g., Knoke 1981; Rotolo 2000), most of them have failed to formulate systematic theoretical explanations for the links between sociodemographic variables and volunteering. As prime examples of abstracted empiricism (Mills 1959), these studies place far more emphasis on the presentation of raw empirical findings than on uncovering the mechanisms that shape voluntary associations.

The few studies that have made educated guesses about the causes of the observed correlations have typically relied on individualistic conceptions of social action, emphasizing the role of attitudes, norms, affects, and cost-benefit calculations in decision-making processes. This framework is questionable because its conclusions are based on loose assumptions that are not grounded in systematic empirical research. Even Wilson (2000), who is generally sympathetic to motive-based explanations, concludes in his review of the literature that "overall, the relation between values and volunteering is weak and inconsistent" (p. 219). Since few researchers of voluntary associations have access to data on people's motivations, individualistic explanations of voluntary participation seem to be granted validity solely because they echo commonsensical understandings of human behavior.

In contrast, recent research on organizational dynamics has demonstrated that patterns of voluntary participation can be better explained using structural arguments that treat associations themselves as units of analysis. Since these arguments are based on measurable properties of social systems rather than imputed motives of individuals, they offer a more reliable and general explanatory framework for the study of voluntary associations. Where appropriate, in the preceding section, we have used explanations generated by this research tradition to supplement the findings of conventional correlation studies.

CONSEQUENCES OF MEMBERSHIP

Research on the consequences of voluntary association membership mirrors the study of participation, since it too is based on the correlation of membership with various individual-level variables. Although this tradition has also been facilitated by the proliferation of survey data and analysis techniques, its scope is considerably smaller than that of participation research. The two areas that have gained the most attention in studies of outcomes are political mobilization and psychological well-being. Others include demographic variables, geographical mobility, physical health, and socioeconomic status. Overwhelmingly, these studies demonstrate that membership in voluntary associations results in numerous material, emotional, and political benefits for individuals. This reinforces the need for continued examination of the unequal distribution of memberships across social groups. In the following sections, we outline some of the important findings for each of the categories of outcomes.

Political Mobilization

One of the most frequently studied outcomes of voluntary participation is individual political action, particularly voting behavior. There is a high level of consensus among researchers about the positive effect of membership on political participation, although explanations of this phenomenon vary. Knoke (1986) concludes that "associations act as mobilizing mechanisms in democratic societies, transforming nonpolitical organizational involvements into political participation" (p. 8) by broadening individuals' interests, expanding their social networks, exposing them to social interaction and leadership, and creating channels for effecting political change (see also Olsen 1982). Other possible reasons for this correlation include sharing of information, development of organizational skills (Schulman 1978), fostering of generalized trust, political socialization (Wilson 2000), and the creation of a sense of community (Cassel 1999). Some studies have found that the level of mobilization is positively influenced by members' commitment to their organizations, while others find no such effect (Knoke 1986).

Psychological Well-Being

The effects of membership in voluntary associations on various psychological outcomes have also attracted considerable research attention. Most studies have found that membership has positive effects on various mental health variables (Wilson 2000), including self-validation, self-confidence, and life satisfaction. Membership has also been found to lower the risk of depression (Rietschlin 1998) and protect the elderly from "hazards of retirement, physical decline and inactivity" (Fischer and Schaffer 1993:9). There is some evidence that the subjective benefits of membership vary by geographical location, SES, age, and marital status (Cutler 1981; Palisi 1985), as well as by type of organization and the salience of participation for the individual (Hougland 1982).

A few studies have examined the negative outcomes of voluntarism. Christerson and Emerson (2003) find that minorities bear relatively high personal costs of membership in ethnically diverse religious organizations, while Erickson and Nosanchuk (1998) argue that membership increases the likelihood of individuals holding negative ethnic and racial stereotypes. Whether this is a selection

effect or causal effect is unclear—for instance, Betz and Judkins (1975) have argued that voluntary associations are more likely to reinforce members' prior attitudes than to alter them or cause the development of new ones.

ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

Since most of the participation studies described above rely on cross-sectional data, they rarely pay serious attention to the inherently dynamic processes that affect the composition of voluntary associations. By failing to formulate convincing theoretical accounts of the formation, persistence, and dissolution of associations, these studies tend to make simplistic assumptions about their subject matter, akin to Rose's (1956) textbook truism, "a voluntary association develops when a small group of people, finding they have a certain interest (or purpose) in common, agree to meet and to act together in order to try to satisfy that interest or achieve that purpose" (p. 305). Such nonexplanations of the origins of voluntary associations are variants of what Mayhew (1980) once described as the central tenet of individualistic sociology: "people do things because they want to" (p. 354).

The investigation of organizational dynamics treats associations themselves as the primary objects of analysis. Scholars in this tradition seek to explain the rise, growth, transformation, and decline of voluntary associations using such explanatory factors as organizational structure, environmental conditions, and ecological competition (Knoke 1986). Although the methods used in this research program range from ethnography to computer simulation, they all share a commitment to examining voluntary associations from a diachronic perspective.

As in most sociological subfields, the methodological approaches used to study organizational dynamics reflect researchers' epistemological convictions, with some committed to the formulation of complex, particularistic explanations and others to the development of cumulative, parsimonious general theory. The former category includes many of the historical analyses and case studies of voluntary associations, while the latter consists predominantly of statistical treatments of survey data obtained through random-sampling techniques.

Historical Studies

In contrast to case studies of particular organizations, analyses of organizational dynamics that employ historical methods examine changes in overall patterns of voluntary association activity in particular time periods and geographical locations. Although their findings may generate theoretical insights, they are rarely directly generalizable to other spatiotemporal settings.

Two paradigmatic examples of this genre are Brown's (1973) study of colonial New England and Eisenstadt's (1972) analyses of the Yishuv (Jewish Palestine) and the nascent state of Israel. Brown (1973) is concerned with explaining the historical roots of secular voluntary associations in post-Revolutionary Massachusetts. Although religious associations had existed in the region since the time of European settlement, their secular counterparts did not gain popularity until the latter half of the eighteenth century. The activities of the secular associations were initially confined to the Boston area, but at the turn of the century, they gradually expanded to other urban centers. Yet even after this period, most associations continued to draw their membership from local populations, operating largely through face-to-face interaction. Brown attributes the rise and expansion of secular associations to three primary causes: the emergence of a new republican ideal of citizenship after the American Revolution, individuals' recognition of emotional rewards stemming from membership, and the increasing density of New England communities. Thus, his explanation relies on a historically conditioned combination of cultural, psychological, and structural factors.

Eisenstadt's (1972) study seeks to explain the transformation of voluntary associations during the political transition from Jewish Palestine (the Yishuv) to the nascent state of Israel. He argues that associations in the Yishuv consisted primarily of primary groups closely related to social movements and political parties, which performed vital community services and were strongly committed to the dominant Zionist value orientation of the community. After the transition, purely social groups multiplied; associations that performed civic duties became less prevalent, giving way to purely philanthropic organizations, and the political functions of voluntary associations became confined to special interest groups that exerted direct pressure on the government. The value system of the new organizations separated social activities from political participation, placed little emphasis on civic duties, and did not encourage political change. Furthermore, the status structure shifted from one that rewarded political and intellectual involvement to one that valued economic and occupational success.

Eisenstadt attributes the changes in the voluntary system to the reconfiguration of power relations in the new Israeli state. The creation of a complex government and military bureaucracy led to "an immense increase in the political power available for allocation and distribution" (Eisenstadt 1972:6). This shifted many functions away from the voluntary sector, changed status evaluation criteria, and increased the social distance between elite and nonelite social groups. As a result, associations became increasingly stratified and specialized, moving away from the pursuit of communal well-being and toward the production of social advancement for individuals and groups.

In Eisenstadt's (1972) study, a crucial factor in the transformation of the voluntary sector was the tension between individuals' status positions and aspirations, both of which were altered by the new political system. In general, each voluntary association "developed its activities in

the direction and social sphere in which its members felt that their status-aspirations and references were not affirmed" (p. 11). Thus, for instance, highest-status individuals did not join many organizations, while those in relatively high economic positions mainly joined cultural and social groups.

The findings from both the above studies contribute to our understanding of the organizational dynamics of voluntary associations in specific historical contexts. They suggest that associations develop at the complex intersection of cultural values, demographic and political changes, status group struggles, and individual motivations. As such, this form of research is quite useful for the construction of more general theories of voluntary association dynamics. However, due to its particularistic focus, it is less well suited for the rigorous testing of existing theoretical models.

Institutional Analyses

A number of researchers have stressed the internal structure of associations and their embeddedness in the broader social environment as factors that influence associational lifestyles. This tradition treats the shifting objectives of particular associations, and their ability to fulfill these objectives, as functions of the configurations of decision-making responsibilities within the associations and of the constraints and enablements imposed on them by external institutions. Hence, an association's survival is dependent on its ability to fulfill its objectives, provide sufficient incentives to retain its members, and adapt to a changing political and economic environment.

One way of addressing these questions is to conduct detailed case studies of the development of specific associations. This is the approach taken by Watson (1982), who analyzes a Canadian health advocacy association in an attempt to explain its gradually declining membership and efficacy. He argues that the association's hierarchical administrative structure precluded it from adapting to a changing environment of health-care provision. As shifts in government policy and advances in scientific knowledge made the association's goals increasingly outdated, a number of members advocated a transition to a federative administrative structure with independently managed local chapters. However, those in leadership positions used their control of the association's communication channels and policy-making capabilities to strongly resist the proposed changes. The resulting internal conflict debilitated the association and prevented it from making the changes necessary for its continued operation in a shifting context.

Mead (2000) also analyzes the decline of a specific voluntary association, in this case, an elite Argentinean women's organization focused on delivering assistance to poor women and children. The study is both historical and comparative since it examines the association's transformation during a 40-year period from 1880 to 1920 and generates explanations based on a comparison of the Argentinean social context with that of France and the United States. Mead cites three reasons for the initial success of the organization: the support of the federal government, Catholic values, and an anti-immigration rhetoric that resonated with the public. Conversely, the Beneficent Society's ultimate decline was a result of its failure to cooperate with newly emerging women's organizations, as well as the professionalization of male-dominated medical care in Argentina, which restricted the association's ability to continue its role as a primary provider of health services to the poor.

The above case studies point to similar determinants of associational well-being. First, internal cohesion is essential for the association's ability to carry out its objectives and to adapt to a changing environment. An excessively rigid administrative structure and high membership heterogeneity can negatively affect this ability by exacerbating conflict between competing interest groups within the association. Second, the actions of external institutions can hinder the association's efficacy by withdrawing financial or political support, exerting pressure over the association's actions, or drastically altering the policy landscape in which the association functions. Both these explanations rest on the underlying assumption that associations must adapt to a changing context by continually adjusting their objectives and administrative structures.

Case studies of voluntary associations tend to focus almost exclusively on advocacy groups, ignoring less instrumental associations (Gordon and Babchuk 1959), such as churches, fraternal organizations, sport clubs, and youth groups. Since instrumental groups tend to formulate more explicit goals, which often focus on the social environment external to the association, it seems reasonable to evaluate their well-being on the basis of their ability to satisfy these goals. However, this is more difficult for expressive organizations, whose goals are often more implicit. Furthermore, it is entirely possible for an association, whether instrumental or expressive, to thrive without fulfilling its overt objectives. Members may continue to participate in the group for reasons that differ from its initial purpose. Consequently, efficacy is a tenuous measure of associational success.

To deal with the above problem, a number of researchers have used a simpler and more reliable indicator of associational well-being: the rate and strength of membership. Since membership levels are relatively easy to measure, they are well suited for survey research, which enables the estimation of trends across a wide population of voluntary associations. This is the strategy used by Knoke (1981) in his study of the effect of associations' political structure on the strength of membership commitment.

Structural Ecology

One approach to the study of organizational dynamics was initiated by McPherson's (1983) article on the ecology of affiliation. Drawing heavily on the evolutionary logic in

bioecology, McPherson argues for a general theory of voluntary association that does not rely on assumptions about individual or group motivations. Building on the work of human ecologists, he instead seeks to capture the system-level processes that shape the behavior of voluntary associations. This inherently relational and dynamic approach views associations as interdependent entities that compete with one another for members. The characteristics of the ecological system have important implications for the growth, persistence, transformation, and decline of individual associations.

The structural-ecological model of voluntary affiliation rests on a few simple assumptions about the nature of the social world. First, social entities are primarily transmitted through social networks; that is, people acquire their behaviors and attitudes from those with whom they interact. Second, social ties are homophilous. Since individuals occupying similar social positions are more likely to interact with one another, entities transmitted through networks tend to be clustered in particular regions of social space. Third, individuals have finite resources, including time and energy. Since each social entity, such as a voluntary association or a cultural preference, consumes a portion of those resources, there is a limit to the number of entities with which each individual can affiliate. Hence, social entities must continually compete with one another for individuals' resources.

McPherson argues that the behavior of voluntary associations is analogous to that of biological species in natural ecosystems. The transmission of memberships across homophilous social ties, which occurs within an inherently competitive ecological system, causes associations to cluster into finite social niches. As memberships are gained and lost at the niche edges, niches gradually shift their position in social space. This process is a direct result of niche competition—members are lost in areas of high competition, characterized by high niche overlap, and gained in areas of low competition, characterized by low niche overlap, causing the niche center to move away from the former and toward the latter.

The same mechanism causes associations to become more or less diverse. An association surrounded by areas of low competition, namely, an association whose niche does not overlap with the niches of other associations, will gain members in all directions of social space, thus becoming more generalist. Conversely, an association surrounded by regions of high competition will lose members in all directions of social space, thus becoming more specialized. In these cases, the standard deviation of the association's membership will change, while its mean, which defines its position in social space, will remain constant.

In addition to its theoretical interest, McPherson's model has a practical advantage for sociologists of voluntary associations: It allows them to explore the effect of social networks on organizational dynamics with conventional survey data. Traditional approaches to network analysis depend on specialized data sets that completely describe the relationships between the nodes of specific networks. Data of this sort are in short supply, restricting the types of research questions that can be addressed using network logic. In contrast, structural ecology incorporates network mechanisms into its model of social space, making it possible to analyze the behavior of voluntary associations using standard sociodemographic variables.

CIVIL SOCIETY

One of the overarching questions that have occupied political theorists since times of antiquity is what constitutes the "good society." The philosophical and pragmatic challenge presented by this question has been taken up by some of the greatest minds in human intellectual history, including Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Marx. In its modern incarnation, the debate over the best way to organize the political structure of society has increasingly emphasized the notion of civil society, understood as "a sphere of social interaction between economy and state, composed above all of the intimate sphere (especially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication" (Cohen and Arato 1992:ix).

Philosophers of the early Enlightenment, such as Hobbes and Rousseau, argued that associations were a necessary evil—they were important for democratic rule but had to be closely regulated by the state. In contrast, liberal democrats such as Tocqueville, Locke, and Mill, as well as their pluralist successors, claimed that democratic systems depended on the existence of independent and unregulated associations. They argued that associations maximized the capacities of individuals, kept government power in check, and socialized the polity (Smith and Freedman 1972). Contemporary pluralists expanded this list of functions to include the role of voluntary associations in distributing power in society, leading to satisfaction with the democratic process, providing mechanisms for change, increasing social cohesion, giving people a sense of efficacy and identification, and enabling individual advancement (Smith and Freedman 1972).

Over the past few decades, pluralist thought rooted in Tocquevillian liberal democratic theory has come under severe criticism. Mills and Marcuse argued that pluralism is a mere façade for elite rule, Barber claimed that it necessarily leads to the development of bureaucratic oligarchies, Pinard and Gusfield questioned its ability to prevent totalitarian rule, and Lowi critiqued it for leading to pathological interest group politics (Smith and Freedman 1972). Others have charged that pluralism relegates political action to the private sphere, thereby "deflect[ing] from political participation or activism on the part of citizens" (Cohen and Arato 1992:18).

Although the basic tenets of pluralist theory, with its focus on voluntary associations, have been successfully

challenged by many of its critics, its idealistic spirit remains dominant in contemporary political theories as diverse as communitarianism and neoconservative antistatism. This spirit is particularly palpable in Robert Putnam's (1995, 2000) work on social capital and community, which has contributed to a powerful revival of the civil society debate among scholars of voluntary associations (see Edwards and Foley 1998; Ladd 1999; Paxton 1999; Rotolo 1999; Shapiro 2000/2001; Edwards and Foley 2001; Etzioni 2001; Wilson 2001).

Putnam (1995, 2000) argues that social capital rooted in voluntary association membership has been declining steadily in America as a result of generational changes in social values. As baby boomers have allegedly abandoned the voluntaristic ethic of the Great Depression and World War II generations, they have contributed to the rapid deterioration of associationalism in the United States, which, in turn, has depleted overall stocks of social capital among its citizens. After demonstrating myriad correlations between social capital and various social and economic outcomes, Putnam concludes that the ostensible decline in the former may have devastating consequences for American society. He goes on to recommend a number of measures for addressing this dire situation.

Aside from its interpretive conclusions, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000) makes a number of empirical claims that have inspired a wealth of subsequent empirical research. The two most crucial of these are that (1) voluntary association memberships in America have declined systematically over the past few decades and (2) social capital embedded in voluntary associations is an inherently beneficial social phenomenon.

The first claim has led a number of scholars to examine trends in membership rates in American voluntary associations and compare them with those in other countries. Rotolo's (1999) analysis challenges Putnam's conclusions by demonstrating that while overall voluntary association participation decreased briefly after 1974, it increased substantially in the early 1980s (but see McPherson et al. 2006). Similarly, Baer et al. (2001) find that between the early 1980s and 1990s, voluntary association activity in the United States, as well as in Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands, has been increasing steadily. Monti et al. (2003) concur, stating that between 1974 and 1994, "Americans have managed the tension between their private lives and broader public duties better and more creatively than we could have imagined" (p. 143). Finally, Warde et al. (2003) corroborate these findings in the British context, arguing that the volume of social capital in Great Britain has not declined in the past decades.

The second empirical claim made in *Bowling Alone* is that voluntary association membership (cum social capital) is an inherently beneficial social phenomenon. This suggestion has inspired a number of studies that present evidence for the insidious aspects of voluntarism. One of the most influential of these is Kaufman's (2002) *For the Common Good? American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity.* Kaufman does not challenge the argument that participation in voluntary associations has declined in the twentieth century. However, unlike Putnam, he sees this decline not as a sign of the unraveling of American democracy but as a mark of a progression toward a more open and inclusive society. At the core of this normative evaluation lies Kaufman's belief that American associationalism has always been a tool of social exclusion, whose legacies include

> a long-standing tradition of racial prejudice and interethnic hostility; a pernicious political system dominated by special-interest groups; an ominous love for guns, accompanied by a menacing fear of government; a weak and subservient labor movement; and a half-hearted tradition of public social service provision, capped by the repeated failure to pass even the most rudimentary universal health insurance legislation. (P. 10)

Kaufman's findings provide a significant challenge to Putnam's view of civic participation. This challenge is bolstered by past studies, which have demonstrated the tendency of voluntary associations to be internally homogeneous along various sociodemographic dimensions (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001) and hence to reproduce structural inequalities in American society (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1982; Popielarz 1999; Christerson and Emerson 2003; Dougherty 2003). These findings demonstrate the need for a more cautious normative interpretation of empirical data on voluntary participation.

One lesson we may be wise to draw from the civil society debate is that complex social phenomena are often morally ambiguous. Since normative arguments that lament social change and warn of impending social crises often reduce this ambiguity to simple predictive and prescriptive judgments, they should be viewed with a degree of skepticism. Associations can play positive roles, such as when they champion the political claims of marginalized groups or provide material and emotional support for the disadvantaged, as well as profoundly negative ones, such as when they contribute to gender, racial, and economic segregation and perpetuate stereotypical conceptions of social others.

THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATION RESEARCH

Each of the approaches discussed has contributed important elements to our understanding of voluntary associations. The civil society literature was the first to alert scholars to the vital role played by volunteerism in American democracy. Tocqueville's insightful work, along with that of other prominent political theorists of the Enlightenment, helped reshape the perennial discussion about the nature of the "good society," shifting its emphasis from the state's control of the polity to the protection of

communities from abuses of state power. As a result, voluntary associations became revered in public discourse as symbols of American entrepreneurship, compassionate individualism, and traditional community life. This perspective continues to characterize civil society research today, as is evidenced by the discussion surrounding Putnam's work.

The tone of the civil society debate has been predominantly normative, as is the case for most work in political theory. Considering the central problem of this research tradition—the achievement of the good society—such a normative outlook is legitimate and understandable. However, the fundamental questions that have concerned most sociologists of voluntary associations, beginning with the Chicago School, were of a different nature. Rather than trying to place volunteerism in the context of idealized political systems, sociologists have sought to understand the functioning of voluntary associations—who joins them, at what rate, and why it matters. The result has been an accumulation of a vast volume of information about the determinants and consequences of membership.

An important limitation of sociological research on voluntary associations has stemmed from its inability to develop coherent theoretical explanations of its subject matter. This shortcoming has led a number of researchers to turn their attention to what we have termed *organizational dynamics.* However, their efforts have been substantially constrained by the inadequacy of available data. With a few exceptions, most sociological surveys of voluntarism have been cross-sectional and individualistic. As such, they have failed to capture the dynamic relationships between members, organizations, and the broader social context.

The challenge for future research is to overcome the limitations presented by traditional survey data. Nationally representative longitudinal or panel data that track the creation and dissolution of both individual memberships and entire associations are essential for shedding theoretical light on the empirical observations gathered by correlation studies. Such data would allow researchers to disentangle the causal relationships between membership changes, social networks, organizational dynamics, and large-scale historical developments. They would also enable the investigation of general trends, such as the alleged national decline in voluntary association memberships (Putnam 2000). Furthermore, researchers could map the distribution of memberships by social characteristics over time to disaggregate general trends and test theories about underlying causal mechanisms.

In the past, the complex data sets necessary for such research were beyond the reach of sociologists. However, due to advances in survey research methodology and data collection technology, as well as to the growing theoretical sophistication of the field, funding agencies are becoming increasingly willing to support these new lines of inquiry. These changes have the capacity to significantly alter the way sociologists study voluntarism, just as was the case with the survey revolution of the 1950s.

Voluntary association research is entering an exciting stage of development. Combining new theoretical frameworks, such as structural ecology and life-course analysis, with sophisticated multilevel dynamic data promises to significantly improve our understanding of the creation, transformation, and dissolution of voluntary associations. If researchers capitalize on this potential, the field will progress far beyond the correlation paradigm that has defined it over the past few decades. As evidenced by existing studies that incorporate voluntary association research and social network analysis (e.g., Mark 1998; McPherson et al. 2006), the progress is well under way.