Grid/Group Cultural Theory
& the future of cultural typologies

Yochanan Altman

IACCM Symposium, Vienna

[Let's Call the Whole Thing Off?](#)

- You like potato and I like potahto
  You like tomato and I like tomahto
  Potato, potahto, tomato, tomahto.
  Let's call the whole thing off

- You say laughter and I say larfter
  You say after and I say arfter
  Laughter, larfter, after, arfter
  Let's call the whole thing off

George & Ira Gershwin (1937) *Shall we dance*

Questions

- Our relentless thrust for efficiency transposes itself t
  a quest for parsimonious ways in understanding a
  complex, multi-cultural world. That quest is at the ro
  of all cultural models.

- Consequently, we commit a double sin: reductionism
  and we take it as axiomatic that culture can and
  should be explained (and controlled).

- So implicitly, all cultural models are judged by what
  we gain. **But what about what we lose**?

- Perhaps it is time we revisit our assumptions and
 examine our motivations in explicating culture?

Grid/Group (cultural theory)
A typology of elementary forms

- **Group** (meaning a general boundary around a community) shows on the horizontal axis; and **Grid** (regulation), on the vertical.

- Individuals are expected to move, or be forced to move, across the field, according to choice, or according to circumstances.

High Grid

individuals' choices are highly circumscribed by their position in society

Fatalist
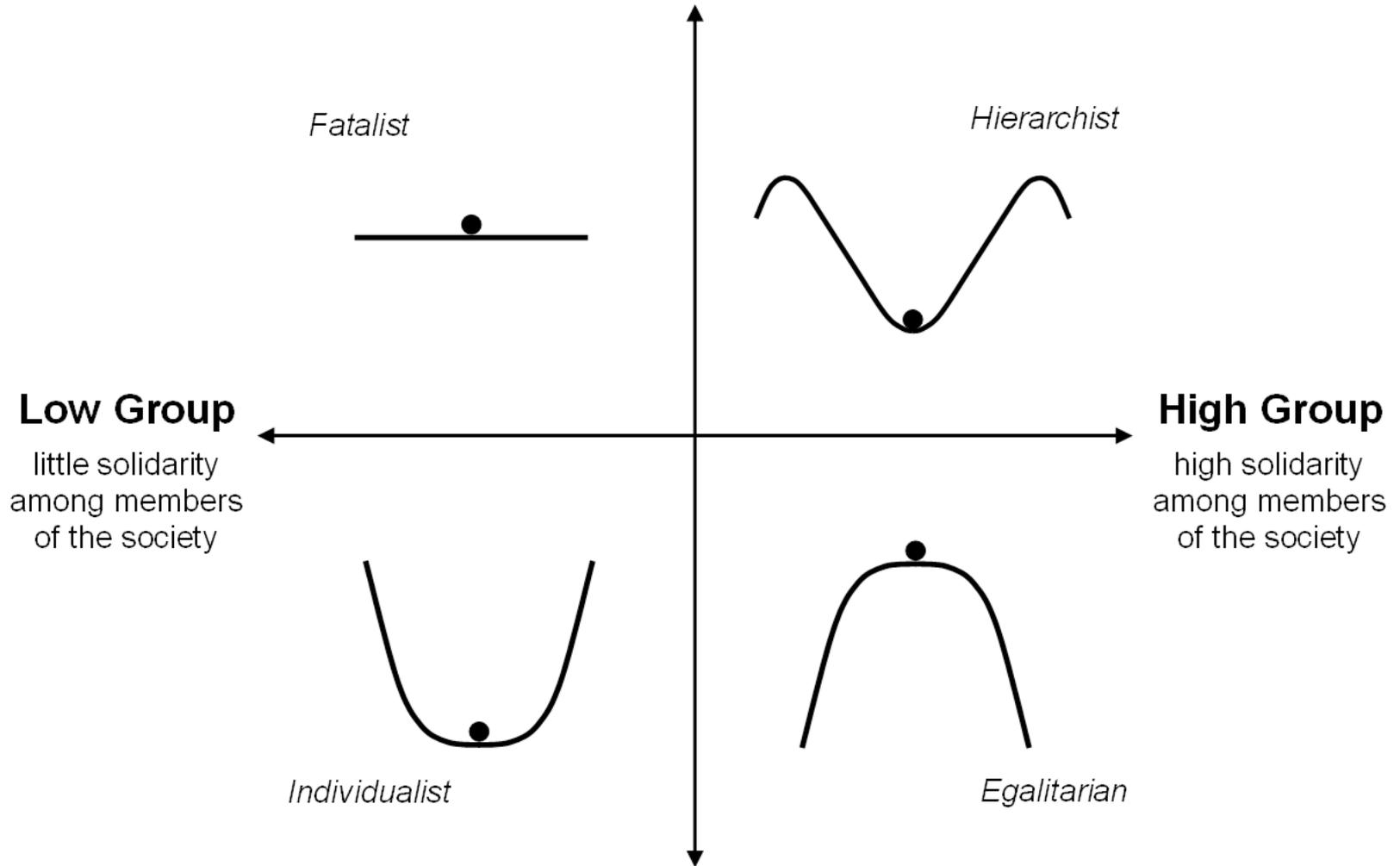
Hierarchist

Low Group

little solidarity among members of the society

High Group

high solidarity among members of the society

Individualist

Egalitarian

Low Grid

individuals' choices are un-circumscribed by their position in society

High Grid / High Group

- **Hierarchist** see a society with a well-defined role for each member. Thus , they believe in the need for a well-defined system of rules, and fear social deviance (such as crime) that disrupts those rules.

- Hierarchists see nature as "perverse/tolerant": it can be exploited within certain limits, but if those limits are exceeded the system will collapse.

Low Grid / Low Group

- **Individualists** see their choices as unconstrained by society and they lack close ties to other people. They value individual initiative in the marketplace.

- The individualists view nature as resilient. Like a ball resting at the bottom of a cup, nature will return to its original stable position after any disturbance (exploitation).

High Grid / Low Group

- **Fatalists** feel isolated in a world that imposes arbitrary constraints on them. There is little they can do to control their situation, and they resign themselves to riding out whatever fate throws at them.

- They view nature as a ball on a flat surface, rolling randomly in any direction.

Low Grid / High Group

- **Egalitarians** archetypal environment are self regulated associations where everyone is equal and there is a tight boundary separating it from the outside.

- Egalitarians see nature as fragile, like a ball balanced precariously on an overturned cup. Any small disturbance will send it crashing down.

Lunch Breaks

Isloates (high grid – low group) *Highly time and space regulated - atomised and episodic* ⑩ PA lunching at her desk in office	**Hierarchy** (high grid– high group) *Highly codified environments prescribing routine participation and normative consumption* ⑩Army platoon lunching at the canteen icanteen based
Individuals (low grid – low group) ***Freedom & flexibility: time, space, company, consumption…*** ⑩ **devour a sandwich opposite the computer screen; a lavish 5-course feast for clients or friends**	***Peers (low grid – high group)*** ***Emphasis on commensality & equal sharing*** ⑩ ***share a pizza take-away over a working lunch; a buffet made of participants' pre-prepared food (everyone contributes)***

G/G Cultural Theory
is different…

- It is not a theory about culture, but a theory about relationships and relating

- Culture does not explain! Culture is a result of and caused by structural configurations

- Small scale entities are the building blocks – communities, organizations, groups, professions….not nations, countries

- Change a result of inbuilt dynamics/tensions that call for negotiations and compromise (clumsy solutions)