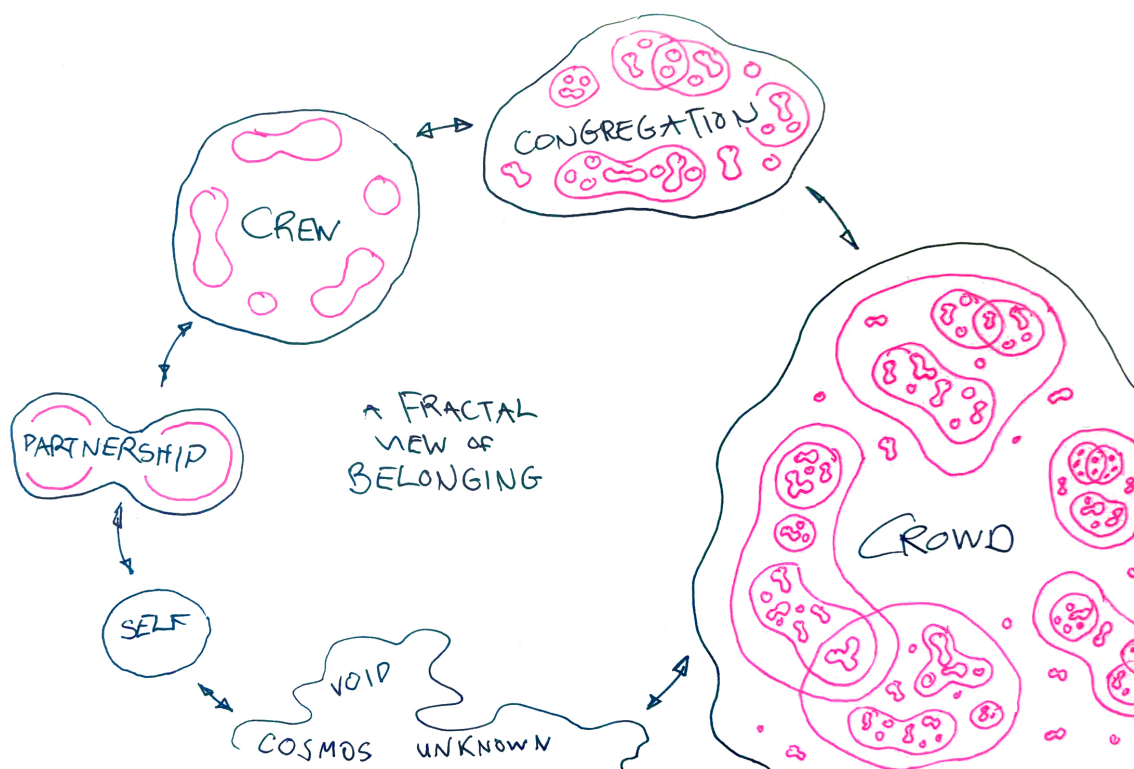# Microsolidarity

Microsolidarity is a community-building practice. We're weaving the social fabric that underpins shared infrastructure.

The first objective of microsolidarity is to create **structures for belonging**. We are stitching new kinship networks to shift us out of isolated individualism into a more connected way of being. Why? Because **belonging is a superpower**: we're more courageous & creative when we "find our people".

The second objective is to support people into **meaningful work.** This is very broadly defined: you decide what is meaningful to you. It could be about your job, your family, or community volunteering. Generally, life is more meaningful when we are **being of benefit to others**, when we know how to contribute, when we can match our talents to the needs in the world.

Learn more…

For a thorough introduction to the project, read through these five Essays in sequence:

1. **Background & Introduction** — What is microsolidarity? Who is using it? Why?
2. **Five Scales of Microsolidarity** — The only theory you need to grasp: groups of different sizes are good for different things.
3. **Leadership as Hospitality** — A distinctive way of thinking about power, authority & hierarchy.
4. **A Developmental Pathway** — How to cultivate the capacities of a mature practitioner.
5. **From Domination to Partnership** — A fractal, radical, constructive approach to transforming power dynamics in groups of any size.

Once you've read these essays, if you want to learn more, get started, or find out how you can participate, you'll find the most up to date information on the project website: microsolidarity.cc

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1. Background & introduction

At a minimum, microsolidarity can be practiced with a small group of 3 or 4 people connecting regularly to get to know each other & support each other in pursuing their developmental goals. At the larger scale, many of these small groups can congregate into a larger body which can coordinate collective impact and manage shared infrastructure, like: amazing gatherings, co-working spaces, or experiments in collaborative finances.

Why practice microsolidarity?

The people who practice microsolidarity are motivated by a range of questions, like:

- How do we create a community that supports our growth?
- How do we cultivate high trust relationships in an organisation that mostly collaborates online?
- How do we activate more mutual aid, creativity & community within a local neighbourhood?
- How do we gradually develop the skills & relationships needed for high-stakes collaboration, e.g. starting a worker cooperative or building a co-housing village?
- How do we deepen intimacy and commitment in a loose network? E.g. developing real friendships and collaborations with people who only know each other through social media or through a conference.
- How do we create the high-trust culture necessary for a self-managing organisation to thrive?

Who practices microsolidarity?

There are many groups around the world practicing microsolidarity to create belonging in different ways. The principles are flexible and adapt to the specific needs of different groups. Some of the communities & networks currently using microsolidarity:

- Enspiral is a network of about 200 freelancers & entrepreneurs supporting each other to do more meaningful work. It's the original community in which I learned

how to do microsolidarity. We noticed that the people who get the most benefit from the Enspiral network have a solid sense of membership in a smaller group (e.g. 4-10 people in a company, project, or peer-support pod). This is why microsolidarity is focused on small groups.

- Cultural Catalyst Network is a community of practice for activists & changemakers exploring personal, interpersonal, and systemic transformation. They're using microsolidarity in conjunction with therapeutic modalities like Internal Family Systems to do a kind of peer-to-peer counselling.

- Pico Island Congregation is a local land-based community with no digital dimension (in contrast to all the other examples here). They've been deepening relationships since 2020 and are now starting to activate practical projects on the island.

- Tangerine is a network of young professionals employed at UNFPA, experimenting with more decentralised, self-managing ways of working within the hierarchy of the United Nations. They use microsolidarity practices to create the foundation of trust required for effective self-management in the network.

- WildSeed Society: is a BIPOC-led community, who use microsolidarity (and many other practices) to cultivate a spiritual, political, and economic community moving towards collective liberation.

- Intentional Society is a community for people who want to grow. They draw from sources like Robert Kegan's adult development theory & Ken Wilber's Integral, and practices like Circling & Authentic Relating. (See their excellent website for more info about all these peculiar terms.)

The state of the network in 2022

Microsolidarity was initiated by me, Richard D. Bartlett, when I published the original proposal in 2018, announcing my intentions to start a small mutual aid community for people to do a kind of personal development, in good company, for social benefit. The plan struck a chord with a surprisingly large audience, so in 2020 I shifted focus, to not just build one community but to support many communities to form.

Over 2020 & 2021 my partner Nati Lombardo and I trained more than 200 people in the fundamentals of microsolidarity. I've also been working with about 15 community founders, accompanying them through the struggles and joys of establishing their own communities. The network has been developing mostly underground; I meet with community founders one at a time and occasionally publish interviews on YouTube. My

intention for 2022 is to open up this network to be more public, so more people can come in and learn together and support each other directly without me being a bottleneck. To that end, I've published this new series of essays.

What we have in common

The baseline that all these microsolidarity communities share is an intention to create relationships of **belonging**. We do this through mutual support: giving and receiving care in reciprocal peer-to-peer exchange. We're forming groups where people have the sense that *"I belong here; people know me & I know them; we have each other's back; I know how to contribute."*

Emotional intimacy before economic intimacy

Many of these communities also have an **economic** dimension. We tend to start with emotional intimacy (relationships of care and authenticity) and then progress to economic intimacy (sharing money, resources or practical support). If you want to do high-stakes economic collaboration, we recommend building up the skills, experience and trust with gradually escalating commitment e.g.

- **Low intensity**: coaching each other to reflect on your careers and take steps towards doing more meaningful work.
- **Medium**: freelancers share work opportunities with each other, collaborate on client projects, or share some of their income in a peer-to-peer solidarity fund.
- **High**: people in a land-based community share housing or other material resources.

As we escalate in commitment, we also escalate in group size. Read on...

2. Five Scales of Microsolidarity

Probably the most distinctive piece of microsolidarity theory is the focus on group size: one of the "core competencies" of a microsolidarity practitioner is to develop a literacy of scales, to understand how a group of 4 is different from a group of 12 or 12,000. We're learning the social physics of belonging.

The only theory you need to grasp is that different-sized groups are good for different things.

Unfortunately in English, we are missing words for different types of groups. When I say "group of people", I could mean 3, or 300, or 3 million. These missing words are symptomatic of missing ideas and skills. In microsolidarity we use some new words, to be more precise and to develop a sensitivity to the unique qualities of groups of different sizes.

Currently there are 5 group sizes that we're interested in:

1. The self-as-a-group
2. The dyad (2 people)
3. The crew (about 3-5)
4. The congregation (about 15-150)
5. The network of congregations

1: the Self

The first group has only one person, it's Me (or You). Maybe it's peculiar to think of an individual as a group, but I found it really useful to think of myself as a collection of parts, a network of overlapping identities who share custody of this body called Me.

This way of thinking has been used, for example, in formal therapeutic modalities like Internal Family Systems and Transactional Analysis. You'll also notice it in informal usage, for example when you say, "there's a part of me who wants X, but another part wants Y..."

The metaphor of self-as-group highlights the parallels between how I relate to the different parts of myself and how I relate to other people.

For example, there's a part of me who's anxious as I'm typing this, feeling uncertain, imagining there are people out there reading and evaluating my competence as a writer. I want to do a good job, I want to impress you, and this anxious part can catastrophise and say, *"Oh, you're doing a terrible job Rich, this is not working, this sucks, you suck!"* It's easy for this anxious character to take up a lot of space.

I get to choose how I relate to the anxious parts of myself. There's one mode where I can try to squash them down, push them out, disown them. My mental narrator puts on a brave loud voice and says, *"Anxiety is not welcome here! What's needed is confidence and certainty. Just shut up and go away!"*

I don't know about you, but this attempt to disown my anxious parts doesn't actually do much to address my anxiety. It's not effective for me.

An alternative approach is to treat that part of me kindly, like I would treat a friend. *"Hey man, how's it going? What do you need? It's okay, people are not going to be judging you intensely. If you don't write everything perfectly, it's probably fine. Do you want to take a break?"*

There's a way I can relate to the anxious parts of me, which is more compassionate, more curious, more welcoming, and more calming.

I invite you to imagine how the relationship between the parts of yourself has a parallel to your relationships with other people. If I'm constantly trying to disown, or ignore, or

dominate the anxious parts of myself, I'm going to have the same instinct when I see the anxious parts of you, right? If you come to me with anxiety, I'm going to be defensive and polarised against you, which is not going to be a great foundation for a warm trusting relationship. If I can learn to be more compassionate towards these parts of myself, I'll be more available to be compassionate towards you.

The parallel works in both directions too; sometimes I find it easier to give compassion to my friends than to myself. So I can practice giving kindness to you, and use that as a kind of role model for how I treat the different parts of me that I have a hard time relating to.

This is a foundational part of the practice of microsolidarity: **cultivating friendliness towards yourself**, understanding that there are group dynamics going on between the parts of yourself that will affect how you show up in groups with other people.

ℹ️ *Further reading:*

- *Internal Family Systems (IFS) is one therapeutic modality that has extensively developed this "parts" metaphor. See this <u>short video</u> or this <u>longer demonstration</u> of IFS used in trauma therapy, or read <u>this essay</u>.*
- *Or read Emmi Bevensee's article on the "<u>networked self</u>" for an example of the parts metaphor outside of the IFS school of thought.*

2: the Dyad

A Dyad is a relationship between two people.

Microsolidarity is deeply informed by <u>Rianne Eisler's work on partnership and domination</u>. I'll unpack that in a <u>later essay</u>, but for now we can use the oversimplified version:

- **Domination** is imbalance, coercion, abuse, colonialism, the most controlling parent of the most acquiescent child.
- **Partnership** is the balanced and consenting intimacy of two interdependent adults (could be a best friend, sibling, therapist, mentor, coach, imaginary friend, spirit guide, etc).
- Domination is **unilateral**; partnership is **reciprocal**.

Speaking for myself: I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian household, so while there was a lot of love in my family, there was also a strict authoritarian dimension. Our family had an explicit pecking order with the kids at the bottom, then mum, dad, church, and finally God at the top. This authoritarian principle continued at school: the teachers had the power to decide when I could speak, what ideas were acceptable, and when I could go to the toilet, and they'd physically punish me if I broke their rules. When I entered the workforce, there was the same domination-submission pattern: at first I had to submit to my boss, until eventually I reached a middle-management position where other people had to submit to me. Thankfully, I've also had friends, lovers, colleagues and collaborators that treat me as an equal peer: we relate as partners.

Take a second to scan through some of the important relationships in your life and see where they sit on the partnership-domination spectrum. Your story will be different to mine, but it's a pretty safe bet that some of your formative relationships taught you more about domination & submission than about partnership.

So far I've only named fairly small groups (family, school, workplace), but this lens also applies to very large groups: think about the relation between women & men for instance. Most women have been taught to submit to men, and decades of feminist movement have only made partial progress on rectifying that balance.

The partnership-domination lens applies to all scales

You can dominate yourself, individuals dominate each other, and groups of all sizes get stuck in domination-submission relations too. **Domination relationships are the root of all injustice, and partnership relationships are the root of all freedom.**

Imagine what society would be like if all these domination relationships flipped into the partnership mode: I'm talking adult-to-adult, not parent-child relationships, from home to school to work to community to government. This is a vision of society that gets me super excited!

With just two people, an intentional dyad is one of the simplest places to observe relational dynamics. It can be a potent space for growth, healing, and self development, a place to notice when am I being more like a partner, and when am I being more like a dictator. In a dyad I can develop the fluency to come out of domination patterns and into partnership.

Honestly, I don't know if we can create a partnership society. But I'm sure we're more likely to get there if we know how to create partnerships at the Dyad scale.

ℹ️ *Further reading:*

- *Black vegan feminist Aph Ko argues that all oppression can be understood through the human-subhuman divide in their essay "Why Animal Liberation Requires an Epistemological Revolution" (chapter 15 of their book Aphro-ism).*
- *Transactional Analysis is a therapeutic method for understanding interpersonal behaviour as parent-, child- or adult-like.*
- *And check out 'NO! Against Adult Supremacy', an anthology of zines available online & in print arguing that all the domination & abuse in the world has its root in the dehumanisation of children.*

3: the Crew

The third scale, I call the crew. I chose that word because I was thinking of the crew of a sailing ship, where everyone has a role to play: it's active, dynamic, practical, engaged, all the parts are plugged into a coherent whole.

A crew is a very small group. The numbers are not precise, but I think about 3, 4, 5 or 6 people. It's a group that can fit around a dinner table and have one shared conversation. If you have 8 people for dinner, the conversation will almost always break into multiple sub-conversations. This is just a result of our cognitive capacities: it's easy for 4 or 5 people to hold a shared mental context, but the complexity increases exponentially with the size of the group. So the crew is on the small side of that line, where we can develop a shared understanding very efficiently. It's within our natural limits. We don't need a lot of infrastructure to keep a group of 5 people coherent, whereas a group of 50 people requires governance, structures, rules, and so on.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." — Margaret Mead

A crew is a really efficient unit & it can also be highly impactful: five or six people can make a massive contribution to the world. One of the crews that made the most difference to my life was a company that I co-founded called <u>Loomio</u>. Loomio is a cooperative, we started with six people. We make software for democratic decision-making in groups. Our tool has helped hundreds of thousands of people around the world: a level of impact I could never have created on my own.

For most people, if you want to create a livelihood of meaningful work, you'll need a crew to do it with. The size is important, because it is small enough to stay highly coordinated with minimal explicit rules & roles, and large enough that your enhanced impact is worth the cost of collaborating.

Not all crews are about "getting stuff done", though. I'm in another crew that's met every 2 weeks since the start of the pandemic. The space we've created together is tender: we share what's going on in our emotional lives and exchange commiserations & celebrations. This crew is not about "doing stuff" at all, and yet it has had a significant impact, creating more ease in my life, alleviating the loneliness of lockdown, and giving me new opportunities.

Generally speaking, **the crew is the main site of activity in microsolidarity communities**: occasionally we have gatherings at the larger scale, but most of the time, you're meeting with 3 or 4 other people.

4: the Congregation

The Congregation is somewhere between 15 to 150 people: small enough that most of the members can know a bit about each other and big enough to support many Crews to coalesce.

I call it a "congregation" because the main activity at this scale is congregating. We get together once or twice a year for a really great time. Ideally the gathering is face-to-face, but it's possible to do it online. I think of it like a dating pool, an opportunity for people to meet each other, for crewmates to find each other and for new crews to form.

The "minimum viable purpose" for a congregation is that it supports crews to form. In my experience the best way to find your crew is to spend some time in a congregation: I found my Loomio crew after I joined the Enspiral congregation (a professional network of 100-200 friends supporting each other to do more meaningful work).
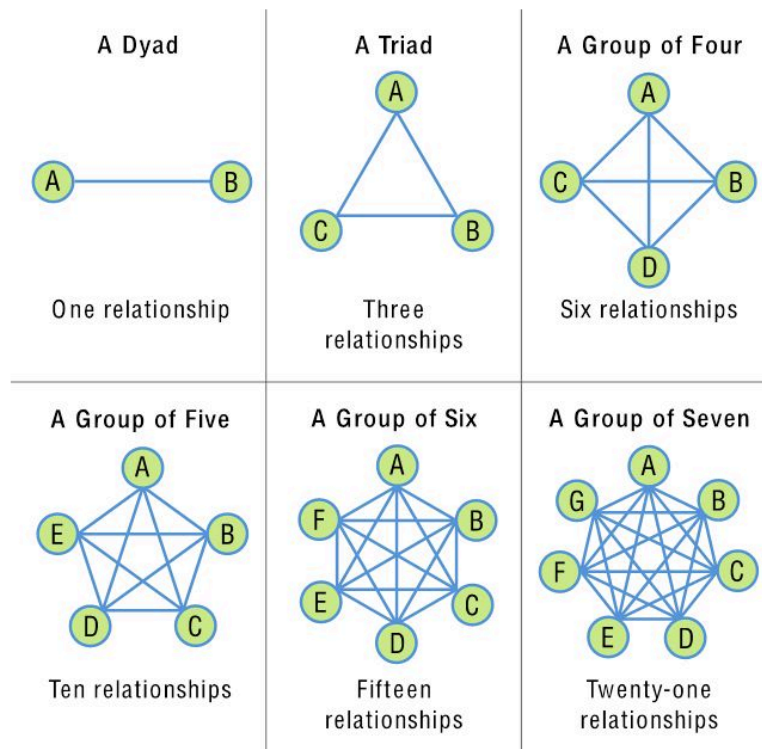
The crews and congregation are in reciprocal co-development. Loomio wouldn't exist without Enspiral, and Loomio's success has made major contributions to the development of Enspiral. So there is an advantage to working at both of these scales simultaneously.

Social fabric is the substrate for shared infrastructure

In addition to the minimum purpose of supporting crews, the congregation can also pursue other ambitions. The larger scale creates opportunities for more collective impact. The Enspiral congregation for example has delivered numerous projects that require coordination beyond the crew scale: operating co-working spaces; organising conferences, retreats and workshops; publishing a book; and running many experiments in participatory budgeting & other forms of economic mutual aid. (Read more in the Enspiral Impact Report.)

While a crew can develop high coordination with little more than "vibes" (high trust & implicit shared understanding), coordinating a congregation requires more physical, financial and legal infrastructure. Successfully managing this shared infrastructure requires mechanisms for commons governance, including the ability to create and adjust rules, resolve disputes, and sanction antisocial behaviour.

The Effects of Group Size on Relationships

A Dyad

A — B

One relationship

A Triad

A, C, B (triangle)

Three relationships

A Group of Four

A, C, B, D

Six relationships

A Group of Five

A, E, B, D, C

Ten relationships

A Group of Six

A, F, B, E, C, D

Fifteen relationships

A Group of Seven

A, G, B, F, C, E, D

Twenty-one relationships

PEARSON

Coordination costs scale nonlinearly with group size: a group of 5 people has 10 relationships, but a group of 50 has 1225. That's 1225 possibilities for interpersonal tension, conflict & mistrust. So the bigger the group, the more difficult the governance challenges. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar suggests there's a threshold, somewhere around the 150-person scale ("Dunbar's number"), which is about the limit of how many relationships one person can keep track of. This is why the maximum size for a congregation is around 150 people. Up to this size, the coordination can be fairly informal & efficient, especially in a group that puts extra effort into cultivating high trust relationships, so everybody knows a bit about everyone else. But in a group of 100,000, most people are strangers to each other, so it becomes a very different kind of organisation, with governance challenges that are out of scope for the microsolidarity practice.

People before projects

For collaboration and governance geeks like me, this is all fascinating stuff, but for a lot of people this is daunting or uninteresting. So it's important to remember the shared infrastructure, commons governance & collective impact are optional extras. If you're

not interested in this level of coordination, just return to the "minimum viable purpose": if the congregation is only supporting crews to form, then it is successful.

Note: for now, a congregation is broadly defined as 15-150 people. It's likely that there are other important thresholds within that range, e.g. at 15 or 50 people. In time, we may find it useful to create new terms to distinguish these additional sizes.

5: the Network

The Microsolidarity Network is a new addition in 2022. It's the space for congregation hosts to get together, to learn & support each other through the ups and downs of community life.

If you want to join, you're welcome: there's an online space to chat with other practitioners, and we're hosting gatherings in Europe and the USA in 2022.

Notice it's "the network" not "a network": there is currently no generic term for a collection of congregations. Maybe in future we'll see congregations coming together to form their own "federations" or "assemblies".

All good things happen inside a good context

Through each of these 5 scales I'm trying to illustrate a particular attitude towards development: **growth always happens inside of something else**. Your personal development is much more likely to proceed smoothly when you have a crew. It's easier to find a crew when you're in a congregation. The congregations are learning from each other in the network. Each step up the ladder of scale creates a developmental container for the previous.

On the other hand, larger groups are more complex: trust decreases and coordination costs increase with the square of the number of relationships. That's why it's called "**micro**"solidarity: for most people, it's more fruitful to focus on the smaller scales, where groups are easier to manage. And if you have the ambition to make social change at the very large scale, you'll almost certainly need to have firm foundations at the small scale.

Once you start to understand the "social physics of belonging", the distinctive characteristics of groups of different size, the next topic we have to address is leadership. Read on...

3. Leadership as Hospitality

Another distinctive aspect of microsolidarity is how we think about power, leadership & authority.

Microsolidarity communities are designed to distribute authority and maximise autonomy, but it could be misleading to call them "non-hierarchical". Non-hierarchy implies that nobody has more status or importance than anyone else. In my work with non-hierarchical groups all over the world, I've never met one that achieved true equality. Even when we remove the formal ranking system of a management hierarchy, some people have more status & influence than others.

So while there's no *formal* hierarchy in a microsolidarity community, some people inevitably have more influence than others. For example, if you spend weeks preparing and organising a community gathering, you'll have more influence on the event than a participant that just showed up briefly. There are inevitably concentrations of power, but they can be temporary & dynamic, flowing through a living system of relationships. We strive to work with these power imbalances with a high degree of awareness and care, sensitive to how concentrations of power increase the likelihood of domination. While we're used to seeing people use their power to disempower others, power can also be used for liberation.

Not all hierarchies are domineering

Whenever we see hierarchical structures, we expect to see domination, but to me it's very important to decouple "hierarchy" from "domination". There are hierarchical forms that are not domineering. Think for example of the relation between a tree trunk and its branches, or between an apprentice and mentor.

ℹ️ *I've written elsewhere about the difference between hierarchy & domination, where I unpack these concepts in more detail and suggest 11 practical steps towards healthy power dynamics: Hierarchy Is Not The Problem... It's The Power Dynamics.*

For a lot of people "leadership" is a dirty word, because we've had so many negative experiences with inept & unaccountable leaders. The kind of leadership we practice in microsolidarity has more to do with **hospitality** than **authority**: think about host and

guest, rather than boss and employee. A **boss** has coercive authority. They tell you what to do and you must obey or face negative consequences. In contrast: a **host** has no coercive authority. The host creates a context and invites you to participate, and you are truly at choice: there's no punishment if you decline the invitation.

This approach to leadership is invitational, generous and flexible. The host's job is to elevate the dignity, wellbeing and autonomy of their guests. Ideally, the host can tell the guests to "make yourself at home" – this is the point where the distinct roles dissolve and everyone becomes equally co-responsible.

In a microsolidarity community, anyone can make an invitation, e.g. to initiate a project, host an event, or discuss a governance proposal. Everyone is encouraged to take these acts of leadership. But we have to be honest: some people's invitations are more likely to be accepted than others. So you could say in microsolidarity communities, **leadership is the capacity to make a compelling invitation**.

How do you develop this capacity? It's partly about knowledge: knowing what's happening in the community, knowing a lot of the people, having a sense of what the group needs or what it might respond favourably to. And it's also about trust: people are more likely to accept your invitations if they trust your integrity, that you'll do what you say, and that you have their best interests at heart.

ℹ️ *Creating a compelling invitation is just one aspect of leadership; for a more comprehensive picture, refer to* <u>Full Circle Leadership</u> *by my brilliant crewmate Alanna Irving.*

Here's some of the principles of leadership we're aiming for:

- **Temporary**: nobody leads all of the time, everyone leads some of the time. We take turns and share roles with a peer or understudy.
- **Liberatory**: your maturity as a leader is measured by the degree to which you help others activate their own agency and come out of domination-submission habits.
- **Legitimate**: you can be an effective leader so long as people respect you. You will lose that capacity if you lose their respect.
- **Accountable**: people with more influence need more accountability. We take extra care of how power imbalances interfere with consent, e.g. when making commitments, divulging vulnerable information, or with issues like sex, money, drugs & spirituality.

- **Always a teacher, always a learner.** Know who your mentors are. Who do you learn from? Who gives you tough feedback? Who are the specific people you are accountable to?
- **Effective:** you've earned people's trust because you have a track record of getting stuff done.
- **Growing:** you own your mistakes and take difficult feedback as an opportunity to learn. You're willing to work to restore the trust in your partnerships after a conflict.

The next article describes a "developmental pathway" you could follow to develop the competence to take on significant leadership roles within a microsolidarity community. Read on...
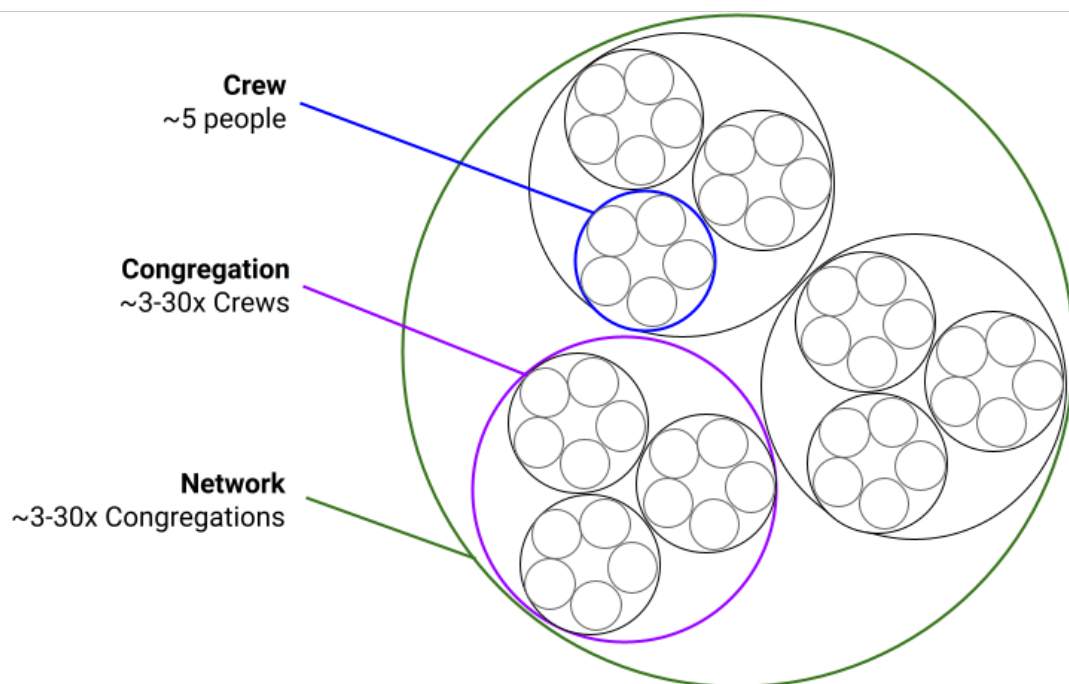
4. A Developmental Pathway

While there is no formal credentialing system for microsolidarity, you can be a more or less mature practitioner. A really mature practitioner will have developed in many areas, including:

- **skills** like meeting facilitation, conflict resolution, or introspection;
- **reputation**, the product of time spent developing relationships and making contributions to a group;
- **character**, e.g. generosity, courage, humility, grace, and other virtues which can be cultivated with practice & support.

This is a non-exhaustive list and the process of developing these areas is non-linear. Like other practice-based methodologies, the proof of work is in the embodied presence of each practitioner.

It may be useful to think of the developmental pathway in terms of group size: hosting a group of 50 is more challenging than a group of 5. So if your aspiration is to host a group of 500, you can cultivate your competencies one step at a time, in groups of escalating size.

This article describes a possible developmental pathway for how you could develop the capacity to confidently host a Congregation. It's important to note: as a rule of thumb, my recommendation is *not* to start "working on yourself" or to work at the dyad scale, but to start with a crew. The crew is a safe & cozy container to get started: it's more supportive than working on your own, and less exposing than working in a dyad.

In the absence of a formal credentialing system, you can self-evaluate your competence with the support of people who know you well. Ask questions like: "what skills do you think I should develop to be better equipped for this role?"

Participating in a Crew

The minimum requirement for anyone participating in a microsolidarity community is a kind of "**interior curiosity**". This is the capacity & willingness to investigate your inner experience. In a conflict for example, this means you are not purely fixated on what the other person has done; you can also look inwards to explore your own feelings, needs & desires. You can examine the judgements & stories that you're attaching to your experience.

One of the reasons to participate in a microsolidarity community is to develop your agency. Agency is the opposite of helplessness: it's the capacity to take purposeful action.

Interior curiosity is a prerequisite for agency, because it helps you to articulate your desires, fears & boundaries.

Interior curiosity can be cultivated through meditation, contemplative practice, psychotherapy, coaching, Gendlin Focusing, Circling, etc. If you participate in a Microsolidarity Practice Program or a Gathering, you will experience some of these practices to cultivate your interior awareness.

If you are willing to develop your interior curiosity, you are "qualified" to participate in a crew.

Hosting a Crew

To **host a crew**, you don't need much more, just some basic organising and facilitation skills. This means you can coordinate & schedule a sequence of meetings, help the group to settle on a "good enough" plan, and guide them through the kinds of group practices <u>documented in the Practices section of this site</u>.

Crews usually have a "**caller**" or "convener" (the person who creates the first invitation to meet), and then the hosting responsibility will be rotated so each participant can practice being a host.

It doesn't take much effort to start practicing your crew-hosting skills. See for example the How You Can Get Started section, which describes a process where four friends meet for six one-hour meetings. Think of it like courtship: you'll probably need to go on a few "get to know you" dates and meet a range of different partners before you even think about marriage and babies.

When you're hosting a crew, you may notice that you want to develop in certain areas. This might be practical e.g. to develop your skills in facilitation, conflict mediation, or project management. Or you may encounter your own behaviour patterns that limit your ability to be an effective host, e.g. if you react defensively to criticism, or you're not sure what to do when someone is feeling upset.

Some of this development could happen in a crew (e.g. giving each other feedback; or taking an online course together to learn new skills), or it might be better in a dyad (e.g. working with a therapist or coach).

Hosting a Congregation

After you've hosted a few crews and you have developed a sense of competence at that scale, you might be ready to host a congregation. This is mostly about creating the space for many crews to form, so it requires more facilitation & coordination skills. You have new questions to answer, like: *how will potential crewmates get to know each other? Who is invited to join? What do we do when community members come into conflict?*

As the group size increases, you are likely to encounter some of the common challenges that all decentralised organisations face. While 5 people can develop a high degree of

trust & shared understanding with very little effort, you'll never find a group of 100 people where everyone trusts everyone else. **As group size increases, you collectively need to learn how to grow, maintain, and repair trust.** Practically, you will need to develop skills in decision-making, conflict resolution, project management, feedback and learning. You can learn more about these in <u>The Hum's online course: Patterns for Decentralised Organising</u>. (Remember, it's easier to learn these skills with 15 people before practicing with 50.)

Furthermore, your role as a congregation host is to support the development of any congregation members that want to take on more responsibility. Ideally, most participants will feel confident to host a crew, and many will be willing to take on some of the congregation-hosting responsibilities.

If you want to be part of a co-owned community, it's imperative to start cultivating decentralised leadership as soon as possible. For example, I was one of the hosts for the first gathering of the Enspiral Europe community. For the second gathering, I played a logistical support role in the background, but the main hosting energy came from two other community members.

It's possible for a community to mature to the point where it is truly co-owned by the participants, and your role as the original founder is no longer critical to its ongoing success (e.g. see this <u>discussion with Enspiral founder Joshua Vial</u>). It could take multiple years to reach this point, so as a new congregation host you can expect to make a long term commitment to holding the community as it develops.

Note: to be an effective congregation host, you should also be participating at the smaller scales. You're not creating a community *for* others, but *with* others.

Participating in the Network

The Microsolidarity Network is the place where Congregations connect. Until now, the Network has been mostly invisible. I've been meeting with congregation hosts one at a time, and publishing <u>interviews on Youtube</u>, but there has not been an active conversation space for them to meet each other.

We're now in the process of creating a new digital meeting space and defining the terms of engagement. If you want to participate, please join the <u>Discord community</u>: a space

to chat and coordinate with other practitioners. In 2022 we'll have some meetings online and in person so we can deepen the connections across the network.

Hosting the Network

At the moment the Network is hosted by me; I currently have sole "authorship" rights to define the microsolidarity framework and to make any decisions about how the network functions.

As the project develops in size & maturity, there are governance questions to answer e.g. *Who decides what is included as an essential component of the microsolidarity practice? Who gets to call themselves a microsolidarity practitioner? How does a community join the network? How does someone contribute to the project? Where does funding come from and who can spend it?*

Currently all these questions are answered by me, i.e. I'm acting like a "benevolent dictator". As the network matures, it seems natural that it should become more collectively governed over time. I imagine a "Meta Crew" working together to host the network and develop the big picture. This is ironic, but honestly I'm unsure about the best way to find my partners for this Meta Crew! I'm nervous about the "design by committee" effect, where my precise and opinionated authorial voice gets diluted by too many compromises. But I'm more concerned about working alone: it's incoherent & unsustainable.

So by publishing this new series of essays I'm hoping I might find some co-hosts who can help me steward the mission. I don't know exactly what I'm looking for. I can imagine many people making diverse contributions, like illustrations, zines, or blog posts, without needing my permission. But for the more significant governance questions, I feel I need to be more selective. I'm looking for people with sufficient experience at the congregation scale to be able to meet me as a peer. I think it's also important for the Meta Crew to be connected to diverse contexts, not just 30-something techy white guys who all listen to the same 5 podcasts. Most importantly I want to convene a group with that mysterious thing called "chemistry". This is a live question so I'm eager to hear your thoughts. If you have ideas, please join the Discord and share!

I want to be a host, not a dictator. To further unpack the difference between these two, read on...

5. From Domination to Partnership

I've spent the last decade working in groups who organise without a traditional command-and-control hierarchy. My journey started with the Occupy Movement in 2011 and has taken me into many different groups since then: open source software projects, cooperative companies, social movements, DAOs, networks and associations. I've worked with everyone from anarchist collectives to the United Nations. All of these groups are striving for a way of working that decentralises power, authority & decision-making.

Some of these groups have been exquisite, most of them struggle, and many of them fail. A more pessimistic person might conclude that we are fundamentally incapable of working together without a central authority, but I've seen enough evidence to know that's not true. It's not that people are *incapable* of collaboration, it's just that most of us lack tools, skills and role models. We've been trained and conditioned to relate to each other in hierarchies of domination, so becoming the kind of people that can thrive in egalitarian networks is "easier said than done".

Because of the over-use of hierarchies in contemporary society, many of us lack the techniques, behaviours, role models, ideas, tools, experiences, beliefs and values required to thrive in egalitarian groups. Many of us don't really enjoy being in groups, because most of the groups we've been in are dysfunctional, with weird power dynamics, unwritten rules, slow decision-making, and unresolved conflict.

Microsolidarity is designed to remove some of the obstacles that keep us separate from each other. It's a guide to bring us back into a collaborative way of being, it's a reminder of what it means to be a social animal. The goal is not to obliterate hierarchies or individual autonomy, but to redevelop our atrophied muscles of collectivity & collaboration. It's a ladder that connects the very small scale to the very large, in distinct measured steps.

Two different kinds of relationships

My understanding of groups is deeply informed by Riane Eisler, who explains that we have a spectrum of options in how to organise, from very egalitarian to very

authoritarian. She described the "**partnership-domination spectrum**" as a lens for understanding groups:

> "In the domination system, somebody has to be on top and somebody has to be on the bottom. People learn, starting in early childhood, to obey orders without question. They learn to carry a harsh voice in their heads telling them they're no good, they don't deserve love, they need to be punished. Families and societies are based on control that is explicitly or implicitly backed up by guilt, fear, and force. The world is divided into in-groups and out-groups, with those who are different seen as enemies to be conquered or destroyed.
>
> In contrast, the partnership system supports mutually respectful and caring relations. Because there is no need to maintain rigid rankings of control, there is also no built-in need for abuse and violence. Partnership relations free our innate capacity to feel joy, to play. They enable us to grow mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. This is true for individuals, families, and whole societies. Conflict is an opportunity to learn and to be creative, and power is exercised in ways that empower rather than disempower others." – Riane Eisler, Partnership 101

In my writing elsewhere I use many related terms fairly interchangeably: horizontal and vertical, decentralised and centralised, egalitarian and authoritarian, self-managing and hierarchical. Each of these terms has their own nuance, but they're all roughly pointing at the same spectrum. I think Eisler's formulation of partnership and domination is the most precise and useful.

- "**Partnership**" is when we join together in networks of free association, where people are **linked** by shared interests and diverse competencies. People with power use it to elevate others.
- "**Domination**" is when we're organised into hierarchies and people are **ranked** in order of power & importance. People with power use it to make others smaller.

This is a simple framing, but for me it represents some very powerful insights. What I take from Eisler's work is fractal, radical, and constructive.

Fractal = common features at all scales

The partnership-domination lens is scale-invariant, meaning you can use it to evaluate groups of any size. You can look inside a family to see if the relationships are more partner-oriented or more domineering, and you can also look at the relationships between countries, genders or species.

The large and small scales are mutually interactive. After escaping the Holocaust as a child, Eisler went on to examine what were the features of German family life that created the conditions for the Nazis to take over the country. She developed the 'partnership-domination' lens to explain the interaction between large & small groups: dominator countries create dominator families and vice versa.

Nazi Germany is an extreme case, but for the last few thousand years of human history it seems like we've been more-or-less stuck at the domination end of the spectrum. Hierarchies are the norm in many parts of contemporary society, especially schools and workplaces, but also many families, churches, and clubs. Even in social groups that lack a formal hierarchy, status games are ubiquitous; there's some part of us keeping track of everybody's ranking, looking for ways to win favour with the high-status people, and to "get ahead" of those with low status.

Seeing the interaction between large and small is hopeful, it gives me the sense that we can change the world by changing our neighbourhoods.

Radical = getting to the root

The will to dominate is at the root of racism, sexism, ableism, and all the other -isms. Domination is the common cause. We could eliminate all of these -isms, but if we don't know how to come out of domination patterns, we'll just invent new -isms, new excuses to dominate each other. *(See A Class Divided for an example where a schoolteacher contrives to create prejudice by splitting her classroom based on eye-colour.)*

It's important to understand how everyone's experience of domination is different due to their race, class, gender, etc. But it's possible to be overly-focused on the differences and lose sight of the common cause at the root: the domination! There's a fundamentalist streak that appears sometimes in the contemporary movement for social justice that is willing to use domination to achieve its aims. For me that's intolerable and incoherent.

(That's a complex & controversial topic which I will only briefly touch on here. If you want more context please read my other articles: <u>On Leaving the Church of Social Justice</u> and <u>Metamodern Social Justice</u>.)

Constructive = focus on what you want to see more of

I share Visakan Veerasamy's <u>motto</u> that in the long run, it's more effective to "focus your time & energy on what you want to see more of", rather than to define yourself by what you're opposed to.

I've spent a lot of time in groups that are oriented "against" something: anti-capitalism, anti-globalism, anti-racism, anti-hierarchy. While it's important to understand the forces that are opposed to your mission, I think it's often counterproductive to organise a group around an "anti-" framing.

It's easy to unify people around what they're opposed to, but it's a temporary & shallow bond. It's dangerous to know more about what you're against than what you're for. It creates a culture of infighting & witch-hunting. We become oversensitive, jumping at anything that vaguely resembles the thing we're against.

Look at "anti-hierarchy" for example. Anti-hierarchy is intimately coupled to hierarchy, the concepts are tightly bound together. Anti-hierarchy is permanently constrained by what it is not, so the space for creative possibility is artificially truncated. This is why 'microsolidarity' is named for what it is, not what it isn't.

I want to live in a society that has much less domination, but my primary orientation is not *against* domination exactly, it's *for* partnership. Partnership requires justice, respect & accountability and it invites pleasure, joy & exchange. Partnership celebrates difference, it breeds hybridity and creates thick harmonies.

Putting it all together

This fractal, radical, constructive framing of power dynamics creates a mission for us.

We know a lot about hierarchy & domination; but the partnership end of the spectrum has not had so much attention. We're thoroughly trained for domination: most of us have

spent more than 15,000 hours in schools organised around the dominator principle. If you grew up in a WEIRD (Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic) country you're steeped in the lineage of thousands of years of domination-based society.

If we want to live in a world that has less domination at the large scale, it makes sense to me to start making headway at the small scale. This is one of the key objectives for microsolidarity: to help us grow out of domination and into partnership habits. We're only focused on the small scale, up to 150 people. Even at the micro-scale, there's a lot of work to do! I notice how I habitually dominate the parts of myself I've classified as shameful. Just practicing with one other person, or with 5 people, or with 50, at that small intimate scale I can pay attention to when am I being more like a partner, and when am I being more like a dictator. I can get curious, increase my awareness, and develop the fluency to move towards partnership.

ℹ️ *This essay is just a brief intro to a complex topic . For a deeper dive into this way of thinking, see* The Chalice & The Blade *by Riane Eisler, and* The Dawn of Everything *by David Graeber & David Wengrow,* Emergent Strategy *by Adrienne Maree Brown, and* The Authoritarians *by Bob Altemeyer.*

Microsolidarity is an R&D project

So microsolidarity is like a distributed R&D project, exploring a very challenging and complex set of research questions.

One of our lines of inquiry is investigates the power dynamics illustrated in this essay:

- How do we, as people conditioned for domination hierarchies, grow into the kind of people who can thrive in egalitarian networks?
- If we've been trained for dominance and submission since childhood, can we learn as adults to relate to each other in a spirit of partnership?
- We've spent so much time practicing for competition; can we balance these skills with an increased capacity for collaboration?
- When coercion is the norm, how do we learn to activate our own agency and celebrate the autonomy of others?
- Can we use our differences as a resource rather than a source of conflict?

To me, the power questions are an essential component of some of the other questions about community and belonging:

- How do we re-stitch trust in societies where it has been eroding for decades?
- Can we create resilient communities adapted to our contemporary context, where more people are living in multicultural urban environments, working precarious patchwork careers, and socialising extensively through digital connections?
- How do we replace what is lost by the receding tide of religious social practices?
- Can we have belonging without conformity?
- How do we cultivate a community context that supports our growth?
- How do you develop curiosity about your inner experience and friendliness towards yourself?
- Can we learn to see groups as a collection of relationships, not just a bunch of individuals?

In my brain at least, all these questions are knotted together, they can't be cleanly decoupled. You start tugging on one, but it is tied to all the others. If you want to join the R&D project, visit the website for info about how you can get involved.