

## Nothing Is Wrong: Change Is Inevitable

A Review of

**Understanding Group Behavior, Vol. 1:** Consensual Action by Small Groups

by [Erich H. Witte](#) and [James H. Davis](#)

Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996. 323 pp. ISBN 0-8058-1639-9 (hardcover); 0-8058-1640-2 (paperback). \$69.95 hardcover; \$34.50 paperback

**Understanding Group Behavior, Vol. 2:** Small Group Processes and Interpersonal Relations

by [Erich H. Witte](#) and [James H. Davis](#)

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Reviewed by

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In 1974 Ivan Steiner asked “Whatever happened to the group in social psychology?” The question, a reflection of the general malaise that settled on the entire field of social psychology in the mid-1970s, highlighted the gradual decline in interest in groups and their processes. Groups, once the centerpiece of social psychology, had been pushed aside by other interests, including attributions, attitudes, and other cognitive phenomena. Steiner wondered if social psychology was abandoning the study of groups, or simply changing focus in response to society’s declining interest in social issues and activism.

Witte and Davis’s edited two-volume set, *Understanding Group Behavior*, answers Steiner’s question by drawing together the theoretical and empirical products of leading American and European researchers in the field of group dynamics.

The two dozen or so chapters are based on presentations made at the 1992 Conference on Theoretical Developments in Small Group Research held at the University of Hamburg (and sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). This conference stressed the need to strengthen the conceptual foundations of research into groups, and the papers all reflect this orientation.

### What happened to the group?



So what did happen to the group in social psychology? As Davis explains, “Nothing is

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wrong; change is inevitable" (Vol. 1, p. 9). Nothing is wrong because groups remain a central topic of study within social psychology. As these two volumes demonstrate, in the years since Steiner posed his question investigators have expanded our understanding of a variety of group processes—particularly in areas that have always interested researchers: group decision making and group performance. Kameda, for example, describes how groups in organizational settings in Japan reach consensus without conflict through a method called *nemawashi*. Latane explains the processes that sustain diversity of opinions within spatially distributed groups. Stasser and Vaughan develop a computer model that accurately predicts who will speak in a group discussion. Moreland, Levine, and Weingert pinpoint the key factors needed to unify groups that vary in size and diversity into effective units. Stroebe, Diehl, and Abkuumkin explore the rarely seen case of groups working harder than individuals, which they label the "Kohler effect." Wilke claims that the pursuit of status congruence explains group behavior in intergroup conflict situations. Other chapters in these two volumes offer similarly insightful analyses of groups, and thus index the progress of the field over the past two and a half decades.

## Cognitive group dynamics

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Davis also reminds us that "change is inevitable." The chapters reflect new theoretical orientations—especially the growing dominance of cognitive approaches. Although research into groups remains steady, much of the more recent work in the field has a distinctively cognitive flavor. As Moreland, Hogg, and Hains (1994) recently concluded, if studies of group members' perceptions (of one another and people outside their groups) and studies of collective cognition were removed from the pool of empirical studies of groups, then the research rate in the field would be declining rather than holding steady.

*Understanding Group Behavior* offers readers an insiders' look into the cognitive mechanisms that operate in decision-making and performing groups. Group dynamics researchers have, for some time, been intrigued by the relationship between cognitive processes and such group processes as brainstorming, decision making, group-think, transactive memory, and group polarization, but the cognitive side of social psychology often clashes with the interpersonal side. Yet, as Fiske and Goodwin conclude in their Introduction to Nye and Brower's (1996) *What's Social About Social Cognition?*, "small group research and social cognition research need each other" (p. xiii). The marriage of small group research with studies of social cognition (currently mainstream social psychology) and other small groups' literature in various disciplines helps enliven and broaden the interest in small groups.

*Understanding Group Behavior* underscores the value in considering groups as processors of information, but at some cost to the interpersonal side. Missing from the chapters are analyses of uniquely "social" processes that one typically associates with groups, such as communication, common goals, and cohesiveness. Although communication is central to group life, the chapters, particularly in Volume 1, explain

consensus processes in groups without reference to communication. Gigone and Hastie are the most explicit in this regard, claiming that group judgment is a function of individual member judgments and not group discussion. The second volume of the Witte and Davis books offers a bit more in terms of social processes, but many of the processes that are commonly regarded as fundamentally “groupy” are not examined. Despite the broad title, *Understanding Group Behavior*, the chapters concentrate largely on social combination processes, decision making and influence, and information integration. The Witte and Davis volumes view groups as information processors (i.e., processing inputs to yield group outputs). The formal theories presented therein portray groups more like machines than the familiar creatures that we all know through our own experiences as members of families, friendship groups, committees, and athletic teams.

## Theoretical intensity

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The chapters are theoretically sophisticated. Indeed, they are based on a conference that sought to survey and summarize empirical accomplishments in the field, but they also extend the field's theoretical foundations. Many of these chapters draw on Davis's own social decision scheme (SDS) approach, which models how members' prediscussion opinions (input) combine to yield group decisions (output). Davis's chapter extends an SDS model to groups that make quantitative judgments. Both Tindale and Kerr use an SDS approach to explain why groups make decisions that are sometimes more and sometimes less biased relative to individuals, and Stasser and Vaughan's computer model predicts turn taking and floor yielding in discussions. Although impressive in scientific rigor, readers without formal modeling experience may find it difficult to understand critical points. Help, in the form of chapter overviews, editors' notes, or comments exchanged among the chapter authors, would have eased the reader's interpretive burden.

## Interdisciplinary challenge

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Levine and Moreland (1990) offer a second answer to Steiner's “What happened to groups?” question: It moved—out of psychology and into other disciplines. Both Witte and Davis agree with that assessment, concluding “small group research is multidisciplinary” (Vol. 2, p. 7) and that “the original group-level research topics have evolved into multidisciplinary problems of different kinds and have attracted investigators from a wide variety of areas outside of social psychology” (Vol. 1, p. 9). Witte even claims that the crisis in the study of small groups does not lie in the dearth of small groups research, but in the “independent, segmented approaches or disciplinary matrices that ignore the other approaches but nevertheless feel that each needs a supplement through other kinds of small-group research” (Vol. 2, p. 7)

*Understanding Group Behavior* offers a social psychological view of groups, rather than an interdisciplinary one. The majority of the chapters in the first volume examine the emergence of consensus within a group through the integration of individual members'

attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, expectations, and behaviors. These chapters were written primarily by social psychologists from what McGrath (1997) calls the "Illinois School" approach. This approach to collective consensus processes portrays groups as mechanical processors, producing a group output (i.e., a decision) that is merely the function of member inputs (i.e., member preferences). The second volume examines a wider range of topics, including leadership, status, intergroup relations, minority influence, and social identity. However, these chapters also draw on the work of social psychologists, many of whom come from a European tradition that emphasizes social identity processes and minority influence. (Wilke's chapter in Volume 2 is relatively unique, for it is more sociological than psychological.) Readers who are seeking a broader view of groups that includes such fields as communication and organizational behavior will be disappointed, but those who wish to immerse themselves in the psychological approach to groups will be more than satisfied.

The chapters also reflect the continuing division between American and European researchers. More than 80 percent of the chapters in Volume 1 are written by American researchers, whereas 90 percent of the chapters in Volume 2 are written by European researchers. American researchers continue to emphasize consensus-seeking processes and majority influence, whereas European researchers continue to study identity processes in groups and minority influence. The goal of integrating contributions from various disciplines, perspectives, and regions remains elusive.

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## Groups are alive and well



Limitations aside, the chapters, taken together, provide an answer to Steiner's question in that the study of groups is alive and well in the field of social psychology, but it remains true to its basic nature. The field has long been preoccupied by certain topics—decision making, leadership, and performance—and the contents reflect that continuing emphasis. Witte and Davis have done the field a great service in bringing these papers together for publication.

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