

Stephen Wilson. *Informal Groups: An Introduction*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978, 279 pp.

In an otherwise adequate attempt, Stephen Wilson's textbook designed for undergraduate courses in the sociology of small groups is ideologically bound, theoretically vacuous and organizationally faulted. *Informal Groups* numbers ten chapters. The first three serve to introduce the rest: chapters four through six concentrate on 'internal' substantive issues (the emergence of norms, status, and leadership); chapters seven and eight concentrate on 'external' environmental influences on groups; and the final two chapters cover the topics of committees and therapy groups. Wilson attempts to organize this apparently disparate body of research by focusing on the concept 'group solidarity.' ". . . every topic introduced is discussed in terms of its function in either contributing to or detracting from group solidarity" (p. xii). The selection of this focus suggests Wilson's ideological bias.

Solidarity is divided into six dimensions—interaction, norms, status, goals, cohesiveness, and common perception of membership. Noticeably absent from this list is power, a concept scarcely mentioned in the text. This neglect of issues of power and the forcing of variables under the rubric of solidarity indicate Wilson's affinity with Parsonian and Durkheimian functionalism. This is borne out in the author's lengthy discussion of Robert Bales' work, the most Parsonian small grouper. The dominance of functionalist assumptions is especially evident in the discussion of the emergence of status. "In these cases, status structures are seen as necessary means to solving various social-emotional problems that inevitably arise in informal groups" (p. 129). Even the entire discussion of the power and coalition formation literature, which all together totals less than four pages, is subsumed under the theme of solidarity (p. 139). Wilson's use of functionalist assumptions would be less troubling if he explicitly articulated them and attempted to estimate their limitations. Unfortunately, he does neither. Evidently, Wilson sees his selection of solidarity as an organizing concept as a mere convenience in the avoidance of a 'disconnected presentation.' One cost of such a convenience is the arbitrary rejection of many small groups studies which do not fall

under the rubric and another is the arbitrary interpretation of many other studies which are forced into it.

In addition to its ideological boundedness, *Informal Groups* is theoretically vacuous. The first gross theoretical error occurs early in chapter one with the discussion of 'external' and 'internal' approaches to the study of small groups. The external approach is equated with 'philosophical realism' and is generally used by sociologists. The internal approach, on the other hand, is equated with 'philosophical nominalism' and is used by psychologists. Esthetically, these linkages are inelegant; empirically, they are useless. Amazingly, George Homans, the avowed psychological reductionist, is placed in the external-realist-sociologist camp. Unfortunately, this meaningless organizational tool is about as close as Wilson gets to theory. A second example of his theoretical naivete is revealed in his chapter on 'standardization.' Norms are said to be the product of 'forces toward solidarity' in the first half of this chapter. In the second half, norms are explained by 'forces toward anomie.' The author fails to detail a force that does not give rise to norms. He never specifies when norms emerge and when they do not. More generally, concepts such as force, environment, factor, goal, and function are frequently used but never specified. Consequently, discussions often conclude with non-falsifiable arguments. Group goals, for example, evidently may be unconscious and discovered after the fact (p. 38).

Wilson commits another theoretical faux pas with his uncritical borrowing of Festinger's distinction of physical and social reality (p. 33, p. 101). The perception of physical reality is not affected by social factors, whereas the perception of social reality is. This distinction is presented as an absolute separation, which is an indefensible epistemological position. The underlying epistemology throughout the book is decidedly conventional. This is revealed in the absolute opposition of individualism and interdependence. Individualism results in anomie; interdependence results in solidarity—just as Durkheim would have it. Wilson's most serious theoretical defect, however, is his total avoidance of any discussion of the relation of theory or method to small groups research. One would think both have some essential relation to such research; consequently, their omission is unforgivable.

*Informal Groups*' organizational faults are largely a product of the emphasis on solidarity. Many studies, such as Emerson's work on power, are neglected. Further, this organization seems arbitrary and forces a single interpretation on an extremely varied subdiscipline. The organizational scheme notably fails in the last two chapters which seem disconnected from the rest of the text.

Despite these serious defects, the text does have some virtues. Most of the 'classic' small group studies are presented in some detail. Second, even though Wilson's synthesis has severe limitations, it is still an attempt at making the area sensible to the introductory student. Third, the text is frequently well written. Consequently, if the book is critically assessed and balanced with other readings, it should function adequately as an introduction.

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