



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

Us vs. Them with Jay Van Bavel

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Andy Luttrell:

I grew up in the Chicago suburbs. When it came to baseball, we were a Cubs family. I remember being in preschool and it was naptime, but the teacher quietly told me not to take a nap and I was like, “What do you mean? I’m four. This is what I do.” But the reason was because my parents were picking me up to take me to a Cubs game. Every summer, my dad would take us to Wrigley Field to see a game. I had this Cubs hat when I was little. It was adorable. But Chicago had two baseball teams: The Cubs and the White Sox, and I don’t know why my family was a Cubs family, but that’s just what we were. When I found out another kid at school was a Sox fan, well, I just lost all respect for him.

So, fast forward a decade or so. The thing you need to know is that the Chicago Cubs haven’t generally been very good, like they’ve been historically, famously not great. Sure, they’ve had their moments, but their World Series dry spell was noticeable, and my dad had had enough. One day after rooting for the Cubs his entire life, he announced that he was now a Sox fan. And like I don’t even really care about baseball myself, but even I knew you’re not supposed to do that. But my dad said it was just more fun to be a Sox fan.

Now, fast forward again just a couple more years and my dad is very much back on the Cubs train. Could it have anything to do with the Cubs winning the 2016 World Series? We’ll just never know. Whether you’re a Cubs fan or a Sox fan in the end means almost nothing, but these allegiances are still part of who we are. Even in small ways, it stings when our team loses, and it feels great when they win. The team, the fans, the city, it becomes part of how we see ourselves. It’s what we call our social identity. But these identities are more than sports fandom and playground cliques. They’re also part of bigger societal forces that divide us.

You’re listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I’m Andy Luttrell, and this week I talk to Doctor Jay Van Bavel. Jay is an Associate Professor of Psychology at New York University. He studies all sorts of things: neuroscience, morality, political cognition, but on this episode we’re talking social identity theory. It’s a classic theory in social psychology that is as relevant as ever. Later this year, Jay and his colleague, Dominic Packer, are releasing a book on social identity theory called *The Power of Us: Harnessing Our Shared Identities to Improve Performance, Increase Cooperation and Promote Social Harmony*. Since so much of our opinions about ourselves and the people around us are

wrapped up in who we are and the groups that we belong to, I thought it was a good time to talk with Jay about the basics of social identity and what his own research reveals about why it's important to understand now more than ever.

Okay, so yeah, I wanted to just kind of talk to you about social identity theory as a general thing that we could use as a way to teach the world about what that idea is all about, and then if there's time, talk a little bit about the work that you've done, and your lab has done related to that. So, just to start, I guess the first question I had was you have a book on this coming out, so I wondered where the impetus for that came from.

Jay Van Bavel:

Yeah. The funny thing about the book is it's really about identity and social identity theory, although it's a trade book. There's actually not a lot of trade books that have addressed that issue, which is so basic in the field of social psychology. So, what we try to do, it's with my colleague Dominic Packer, is take social identity theory and apply it to all kinds of issues that matter to people. So, those extend from leadership, how do leaders motivate groups of people and get them to all be on the same wavelength, to things like prejudice and discrimination, economic decisions... So, there's a kind of a niche area of economics where people look at identity and how that affects decisions on what to buy and what to wear.

We also look at it obviously in issues of like conformity and social influence, so what makes you go along or get along with others? And as well as the flip side of that, dissent. It turns out that social identity plays a big role in dissent and this is where Dominic's research has really been influential. He finds that people who are identified with the group surprisingly are often the most willing to dissent, because they care the most about the group when it's going wrong. And so, we talk not only about the science of all these things and try to use rich, real world examples, but then try to give people tools to understand it in their own life. So, whether you're coaching your daughter's soccer team, or you're an academic running a lab, or a CEO, that you will have a better understanding of how to manage groups, because that lies at the heart of so many things that we do, and that you can manage them in an effective way.

So, when people talk about social identity theory, they think of you know, it's carving the world into us and them, and that intrinsically comes with all these bad things about groups. You know, like mob behavior, discrimination, mistreatment of outgroup members, and what we try to point out is it doesn't necessarily do that. So, there's lots of pieces where people can identify the in group and be compassionate and care about outgroup members. And you know, in my mind maybe the best example of that is like the Olympics, where everybody's national identity is like hyper salient, you're all dressed up in the colors of your country, waving the flag, you have rabid fans cheering you on and everybody in your nation watching. And at the same time, it's like if you've ever gone to Olympic Village, they're like the most harmonious place on Earth.

In fact, there's an issue with STD transmission in the Olympic Village where all the athletes are. You have to have hand out condoms to these people because they're all super athletic, attractive people, single, all hooking up in the Olympic Village. So, that's a really good case where you can have very strong identities and still be engaging in a very positive, harmonious way with people from other identity groups.

Andy Luttrell:

If we start right at the beginning and just sort of outline what we mean by social identity, what does that actually mean? When psychologists say social identity, what does that refer to?

Jay Van Bavel:

Yeah, so the way most, I would say the average citizen thinks about identity, certainly in North America, is through an individual lens. That when I say I have an identity, it's my history, who I am, what my personality is, what my preferences are as an individual. What social identity did, social identity approach and social identity theory did, was make us realize that that sense of identity is often ground in the groups that we belong to, especially in powerful ways that we might not appreciate and might be affecting our behavior in all kinds of unconscious ways.

And so, it's basically changing the way we think about ourselves from me to we. And when you have that social identity activated, so for example I'm Canadian, and I've been watching the World Junior Hockey Championship, which probably means almost nothing to anybody who listens to this podcast unless you're Canadian and it's like this tradition around Christmas and it's one of the most popular things Canadians watch during that period, or really for the whole year on TV, is their junior team, which is like players under age 19 playing for this championship. And when I watch it and I see all these players in the red, with the maple leaves on their jerseys, and they play the national anthem after the game, I'm thinking about myself as a Canadian.

You know, when I talk to you, that shifts. I might be thinking about myself as an academic or a social psychologist, or maybe since we both came from Ohio State, I'm thinking about the National Championship football game that's on in a few days. And that's the type of thing that dominates that campus this time of year. And it's a very different identity, but... So, I'm a fluid person. I'm somewhat of a social chameleon just like we all are in that whichever person I'm interacting with, or what I'm watching on TV, or how I'm interacting on social media activates different types of shared identities that I have with people and then I see myself in a different way, and think in a different way, and act in a different way.

Andy Luttrell:

So, then according to social identity theory, what are the implications of these identities and whichever ones happen to be salient at the moment?

Jay Van Bavel:

Yeah, so whatever happens to be salient at the moment shapes who we are as individuals. It shapes our sense our self. And then everything flows from that. So, there's a great quote from this John Turner paper, who is one of the founders of social identity theory, and he said that all cognition is social cognition. Which is essentially saying that like the moment that you see yourself a certain way, it has this kind of cascading effect through all these systems of the brain. It shapes what memories come to mind. It shapes where we look, so where our visual attention goes. It shapes our feelings, our thoughts, our goals, and so it's one of these things I think is a very powerful influence no matter what area you are studying in psychology or the social sciences. You should be mindful that the impacts of identity seem to shape and tune all kinds of aspects of our mental life.

Andy Luttrell:

So, as I understand it as a bit of an outsider, is that the... So, one's own self-esteem is really integral to how these identities operate and the goals that we have to sort of see our own groups positively. Is that in your view, because I know there's some debate around that. In your view, how important is self-esteem, and to the extent that it is, what is the importance of that?

Jay Van Bavel:

Yeah. So, according to the original work on social identity theory and the whole social identity approach, one of the core reasons we identify with groups is because it makes us feel better about ourselves. We want to be part of distinctive, positively distinctive groups. Groups that are doing well in society. You know, you don't want to often identify with low status groups. And in fact, people will shift how they identify to align with... I have the flexibility as I said to identify as a Canadian, as an academic, as a dad, as an Ohio State alumnus, and that might shift depending on what's going on in the world.

So, if Ohio State wins the National Championship, I'm gonna be posting about that, but there's great research from Ohio State that the students and fans there after a game that they lose disidentify with the team. They'll say, "them," as the players lost. They didn't lose. Whereas when the team wins, they say, "We won." And so, we have a lot of flexibility in how we identify ourselves, and so that's one of the interesting things about it is we tend to do it strategically in ways that might make us feel good about ourself.

Now, the problem is that that... There's a lot of mixed research around that kind of self-esteem piece. But there's lots of other research suggesting that self-esteem might be a really small part of the puzzle when it comes to identity. The way I think of identity is it fills all kinds of goals, and so one goal that we might have is to understand what's going on in the world. And so, you look to fellow in group members for clues about how to behave and what's going on, and so it serves what's known as an epistemic function. It gives us in groups, gives us knowledge.

Groups also help resolve uncertainty. So, if we're in a period of uncertainty, certain groups are gonna be very appealing, especially if they talk very clearly and have very strong world views. And this is one of the reasons why people are very attracted to extremist groups, or religious groups, because they often have very clear senses of systems of meaning. So, there's all kinds of needs. Another one that comes to my mind that was made famous by Marilynn Brewer was optimal distinctiveness.

Groups fulfill our sense of belonging. So, you belong to a group and that means that you have social connections to others. They support you. And that's really a fundamental human need. You know, humans are very flimsy creatures, and our evolutionary ancestors would have died if they were left to fend on their own. We're not very fast or strong like other predators. And so, we survived by collaborating and cooperating. And so, we're the ancestors, we've inherited that kind of mental set of systems that encourage us to connect with others.

But what Marilynn says is that's often in contrast with the need for distinctiveness. So, to be different from other people. And so, what she said is the groups that tend to be the stickiest in

terms of attracting people and making you feel a deep sense of identity are the ones that kind of optimize both needs. So, the groups that fulfill a sense of belonging but are also distinctive or different from other groups in the world. And so, this is one of the reasons why people identify with groups that are counterculture. So, you think of like punks, or hipsters, or goths, if you talk... I ride the subway. I'm on the subway. If I see people all dressed that way and you ask them why are you all dressed so weird, they'll say, "Because we're nonconformists." But then you step back and look at them, they all seem to be conforming very closely to one another.

And so, what they've found is an identity that's distinctive. In our world, that comes from things like all the pressure, right now it's admissions time for a lot of high school students and they want to get into a high status university. And the more selective the university is, it allows them to claim a sense of distinctiveness. You know, and then if they get into a selective university, they can put that sticker on their car, or their parents put the sticker on their car, because they're kind of borrowing some of the prestige from the selective identity. And so, one of the reasons that I think Americans more than many other countries are obsessed with that is because we've designed very clear rankings of status, and then we've attached distinctiveness to them.

Andy Luttrell:

Was Marilyn at OSU when you were there?

Jay Van Bavel:

Yeah. Marilyn was at OSU and I didn't really work with her because she was just winding down her career to retire, but she was one of my mentors. Someone I went to her office a lot to get advice about how to think about my work and how to think about identity. And she was still absolutely brilliant, you know? Every time that at a talk I would be thinking about a question, developing it, and she would always... It would come to her much faster than me. I was like halfway there and she already had the well-articulated incisive thought on things. So, she was really amazing.

Andy Luttrell:

I was curious, because I know you primarily through the route of iterative reprocessing and Wil Cunningham world, and so I'm just sort of curious for you, what was the road that took you to social identity?

Jay Van Bavel:

So, my interest in it started in groups and prejudice when my first job out of undergrad in psychology was at an anti-racist organization in Northern Alberta, in Canada. And I would go into high schools and we did plays and stuff to try to draw out how discrimination, and stereotypes, and prejudice work, and I'd be in these kind of in-depth discussions with grade 10 social studies students about all the types of bias that exist. And I would hear them constantly rationalizing and justifying and arguing for certain stereotypes. And that motivated me to go back and do my PhD in intergroup relations.

And so, I went to Toronto, the University of Toronto, and I was originally working with Ken Dion, and we were looking at things like implicit bias and how that gets manifested in the way we interpret the outcomes for certain groups, kind of like rationalizations of our prejudices, and Wil arrived, and he was a brand new faculty member, and I met him on his first day and I wanted to

do a collaboration with him looking at how coalitions or group identities shape our implicit biases. And I pitched it to him, I was really anxious, we met for lunch, and he's like, "That's an awesome idea. Let's do that." And I had like three or four ideas to give him, because I didn't think he would like the first few ideas, but he liked the first one. And so, I started working with him and then a few months later, very tragically my advisor, Ken Dion, passed way. And so, obviously it was really upsetting, but it also meant I was without an advisor, and so I shifted into Wil's lab and he was really just focused on attitudes and evaluation, and so what I was able to do was combine my interests in groups, and prejudice, and implicit bias, with his growing interest in kind of basic questions about the way the brain allows us to make judgments, especially rapid judgments of people, or things, or places.

And so, that was my entry point into attitudes work, implicit evaluation, social neuroscience, because he was using all these really cool new methods. And so, it grounded my thinking about the way identity shapes things in kind of a more fundamental view of just how we judge anything as good or bad.

Andy Luttrell:

So, the social biases part was there from the beginning it sounds like.

Jay Van Bavel:

Yeah. That was something I brought to graduate school. And so, as you've probably... after I left Wil's lab and started as a professor at NYU, my work has more and more gone back towards social identity, morality, groups, politics, and less... away from these basic foundational questions of attitudes and evaluations. So, you know, it's one of those things. Sometimes when we're trying to hire people, for example, we're trying to figure out how much is them and how much is their advisor? And so, you don't really know that until five or 10 years hence, and so now you can probably look and see what parts of me were influenced by Wil and what parts were probably stuff I would have done on my own or with anybody.

Andy Luttrell:

In terms of sort of basic social identity theory, in terms of how you can study it, right, we know that identities are loaded up with all sorts of baggage that is accumulated over many years, and so it's hard to be like, "How much of this is about just the fact that you're part of that group," versus other assumptions you already have baked in about that group. And I know you've used the minimal groups paradigm in a handful of cases. And so, I wondered if you could just explain to people who've never heard of it what that style of study is and why it's useful?

Jay Van Bavel:

Yeah, so it starts for me if you take a real world example. So, let's say you take something like racial bias, and you see someone's engaging in racial preferences in let's say their hiring decisions. So, there's lots of potential reasons that might be. One is that they have been exposed to racial stereotypes their entire life. The other is that they're trying to reinforce existing hierarchies in society because they want to preserve the status quo. Or they have political allegiances or ideologies that motivate them to engage in discrimination.

Another element of discrimination is some part of it is often due to just their identity. Do they identify as a certain group and disidentify with another group? And so, when you're studying something like racial bias, which I was interested in when I started grad school and still am, you'd see all of these papers on racial discrimination, racism, racial bias, implicit racial bias, and it would be often hard to tell what was driving this behavior. And so, what the minimal groups research allows us to do, and this was invented by Tajfel and his colleagues back in the early '70s, what they did and what I've tried to do a lot of is basically you can just flip a coin and turn any group of people into two subgroups.

And what he found, and I think it was a remarkable surprise to him at the time, still seems surprising to me, is once you flip a coin and create two groups in a classroom, or at a summer camp for kids, or at a workforce, what it does is it creates a sense of us and them. And people automatically start to identify with their in groups, and what Tajfel found was that they will discriminate in favor of their in group. They'll give more money to the in group. Especially in ways that optimize the gains of the in group relative to the outgroup, so they really want to maximize the difference between the in group and the outgroup in how they give money and resources.

Anybody who's ever played like pickup sports. I remember if you go to the local gym and play a game of pickup basketball and you just randomly choose two teams, you immediately start cooperating with your in group, trying to figure out who they are, and I have had this experience when I was a kid growing up, like I had this one, one of my best friends, whenever we'd play pickup sports, if I was on the same team as him we would just get along famously. If we were on other teams, we were both pretty competitive, and we would be at each other's throats within like half an hour. And so, it was that simple, just that simple arbitrary act of being part of a group shifts... It's almost like a switch is flipped in our brain and it changes how we think of ourselves and members of our own group and the other group into kind of an us versus them mindset, especially if you're competing over a resource.

And that element can be studied in a very careful way in the lab. It can be carefully controlled. There's often no stereotypes involved. The groups are different on history, or oppression, and you can see how much of the types of discrimination we observe in the world or the labs is just driven by that root of bias, which is just this sense of us and them. And so, I've done many studies and we found a lot of things that we see that look like they might be driven by stereotypes of other types of historical biases, or ideology, or goals of oppression, a lot of it is really just driven by this foundational element of identity. Or you can at least reproduce the same effects by creating two arbitrary teams.

And so, it's useful scientifically to understand what's going on. Also suggests ways to intervene, which is can you build a common sense of identity? You can imagine like a science fiction movie, like Independence Day, where the aliens come and invade Earth. Would that be enough to get us all on the same page for a moment to rally together to fight off the aliens? And not only on the same page in say America, but to cooperate with countries like Russia, or China, who are normally adversaries. You'd be cheering for them too to help fend off the alien invasion. And so, the reason for that presumably is identity. Because you... It's unlikely you've seen a lot of media coverage of aliens and their characteristics and so forth.

It's not to say that things like stereotypes don't matter. They matter enormously in all kinds of domain. Histories of oppression matter a great deal. You know, and those things often in many contexts matter more than identity. So, what happens in the real world, unfortunately, is certain groups are victim to like three or four or five of these problems, that you have white racial identity, so if you take white supremacy and white racial identity, you have a history of oppression, you have systemic inequality, you have a political ideology all layered on one another in a way that can make the discrimination faced by certain groups incredibly, incredibly hostile and oppressive.

And so, what we try to do as scientists, of course, though, is figure out what's driving what, in which context, and by whom.

Andy Luttrell:

I had heard a story that when Tajfel started the minimal group stuff it began almost like you were saying it was a surprise. It began as like, "Let's understand all this fighting between groups and we'll start where it obviously wouldn't happen, which is we strip everything away and just make groups. And then we'll just establish a baseline and go from there." And then even at that point there was this conflict. Is that right? Is that kind of the impetus for that program of work?

Jay Van Bavel:

That's my understanding of it. Yeah. In many ways, the minimal groups are like one of the most interesting control conditions in the history of social science. You know, as you know, as scientists we're always trying to strip everything away, get rid of the stereotypes, the conflict, the resources, the history between two groups, and you strip out all those things that you think are causing the conflict and you realize, "Wow, you can get discrimination with none of those things." That's remarkably surprising. And I think what he was hoping to do, my understanding is that he was gonna get rid of all those things and slowly add them in one at a time to see what really drives group conflict and was surprised to find you actually don't need any of those things to get very serious discrimination.

Andy Luttrell:

I want to be mindful of your time. Just a last question. Just to think to the future, like what is next for social identity? What are the kinds of things that you're doing in your work to sort of look at social identity in this new era?

Jay Van Bavel:

Yeah. I think that there's a lot. One of the great things about social identity, it was developed in the '70s. The minimal group studies are turning 50 years old this year. And so, it is one of those foundational insights, and set of studies, and launched this whole theoretical framework. And you might think maybe it's run its course by now, but on the other hand, if anything, I think that identity theory is more... Social identity theory is more invigorated than ever. And so, I'm now... I'm Canadian, but I can't help studying American politics, and polarization, and partisanship, and seeing how it shapes beliefs in all kinds of crazy, nonsense things, and conspiracy theories. And so, I've been really drawn into the role of identity in that and you see political scientists talking about social identity theory more and more and more. Lilliana Mason has a great book really just drawing social psychology and applying to all these topics they study in politics.

The other types of things that are going on where you see identity playing a huge role is in social media. So, now I think over four billion people are on social media, and the average person, I read the other day, scrolls through 300 feet of social media news feed every day. On TikTok, or Twitter, or Facebook, so that's the height of the Statue of Liberty. Because every time you swipe down, that's about five or six inches. Do that 600 times during the day, you've essentially gone up the Statue of Liberty. And what draws your attention? What triggers you to engage? How do you talk about yourself and present yourself?

A lot of that behavior, our studies are finding, is driven by identity concerns. And it can be incredibly polarizing. Not just polarizing in a political sense, but I've seen it in scientists talking about like open science practices. We get polarized and you see people expressing their scientific preferences through the lens of their identity. And I just keep on thinking that's a risky and dangerous thing to do because we know from a thousand other studies that framing it that way can backfire if it's not managed well.

So, I think that it happens there, and then I'll just say one other domain of technology where I think it matters a great deal is we've moved more and more towards machines, and machine learning, and data-driven approaches, but they end up affirming differences based on identity. And so, there's an emerging literature of all the ways that bias that was baked into training data sets gets recapitulated in machine learning algorithms. So, you might think, "Well, we can get by our human biases by just creating these impartial programs." But if the impartial programs are A, drawing from a database where identity type information is unevenly distributed, you're gonna reproduce that. Or you might have programmers who come from one certain identity group and they're not thinking about the considerations of other stakeholders.

And so, you can get selection in New York City into certain selective schools that's heavily slanted against certain groups. And so, all of these types of identity play out in the domains of modern technology, where we think we've stripped away human bias, and so I think having an understanding of how identity works there is gonna be incredibly critical for designing systems that are fair, and equitable, and also getting people to see them as legitimate. Because if people don't see these systems as legitimate, they won't engage with them. Or what you're seeing right now is that a lot of Trump supporters have gone off mainstream social media and they're on things like Parlor, or they watch Newsmax, or OAN. These are like really far right conspiracy theory cesspools in some way.

Andy Luttrell:

And identity affirming, right?

Jay Van Bavel:

They're identity affirming. They're like cognitive dissonance reduction machines, but they have the quality of information they are getting is incredibly low. It's leading to increased conflict. It's thrown the entire democracy we're in into jeopardy. And so, if you don't understand identity and just assume that it's not gonna be an issue, you'll get all these problematic consequences, I think, in identity groups in society.

So, understanding and managing identity in a healthy way is something that people need to be proactive about.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, let's cross our fingers and hope that the science gives way to those new interventions. Jay, thanks so much for taking the time to talk about this stuff. I appreciate it.

Jay Van Bavel:

Thanks, Andy, and thanks for putting this together. I really appreciate all the work that you do with your blog and putting these videos and the podcast to make this work accessible for such a big, broad audience. It's really a major contribution to the field.

Andy Luttrell:

Cool. Thank you.

All right, that'll do it for this episode of Opinion Science. Big thank you to Jay Van Bavel for carving some time out of his busy schedule to talk with me. To learn more about Jay and his research, check out the show notes for a link to his lab's website and links to the topics that we covered. Also, I first reached out to Jay because I was working on a YouTube video that gives an accessible overview of social identity theory. As I record this, I'm not sure if that video has already come out or is about to, so you can just check out my YouTube channel or follow me on social media for updates. Hey, speaking of following me on social media, why don't you follow the podcast on all the things? First, subscribe, obviously. Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, Google, RSS, wherever you get podcasts, we're there. Then, follow @OpinionSciPod on Twitter, or like it on Facebook, then tell the world. Rate and review the show, email a link to your uncle, any way to get the word out sounds great to me.

Okay, that's all for this time. A bit short and sweet this week, but I'll be back in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Bye-bye!