

PSYCHOLOGY

Leveraging the collective mind

Shared social identities can better prepare us to confront societal problems

By **S. Alexander Haslam**

In the early 1990s, Karl Weick and Karlene Roberts conducted extremely influential field research to understand why, on the flight decks of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers where there were “a million accidents waiting to happen,” almost none of them did. The answers they provided set the stage for a groundswell of research into what came to be known as high-reliability organizations (HROs).

At the center of their analysis was an observation that the key psychological hallmark of an HRO was something the researchers referred to as collective mind. As they put it, “A well-developed organization mind, capable of reliable performance is thoroughly social. It is built of ongoing interrelating and dense interrelations...As people move toward individualism and fewer interconnections, organization mind is simplified and soon becomes indistinguishable from individual mind. With this change comes heightened vulnerability to accidents.”

As HRO research has evolved, many of Weick and Roberts’s findings have been

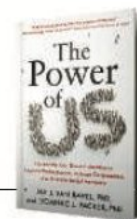
The reviewer is a professor of psychology and Australian Laureate Fellow at the University of Queensland, St Lucia, QLD 4072, Australia, and the coeditor of *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19* (Sage, 2020). Email: a.haslam@uq.edu.au

confirmed and consolidated. Nevertheless, their central insight has become increasingly obscured as researchers have fallen back on individualized approaches to HRO conceptualization and assessment. This drift toward individualistic models of human behavior mirrors trends in a host of related spheres. However, it is both limited and limiting. In *The Power of Us*, Jay Van Bavel and Dominic Packer explain why this is the case and map out in accessible terms why only an expanded model of self will allow us to tackle the pressing intellectual, social, and political problems of today.

Drawing on a corpus of research dating back to the groundbreaking work of Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, they elaborate a model that embraces the productive potential of a collectively defined self wherein people think, feel, and behave in terms of shared social identity (“we” and “us”), not only in terms of personal identity (“I” and “me”). The book clarifies the implications of this model for a wide array of contemporary phenomena—everything from social media use to populist leadership—and is strengthened by its grounding in the authors’ own pioneering work on the technological and neuroscientific frontiers of social psychology.

Written specifically for the popular end of the market, the book is also notable for

The Power of Us
Jay J. Van Bavel and
Dominic J. Packer
Little, Brown Spark,
2021. 320 pp.



going well beyond other texts that have traversed this terrain in recent years and for avoiding the pitfalls to which many have succumbed (one notable exception being Rutger Bregman’s *Humankind*). In particular, when other writers have broached the topic of social identity, they have tended to associate it with ineluctable bias characterized by in-group love and out-group hate. Such interpretations vulgarize the message of Tajfel’s original research, in which schoolboys assigned to meaningless groups were found to discriminate in favor of their in-group without obvious reason, implying an alignment with the dark conformist message that commentators customarily derive from psychology’s other classic studies. This is seen, for example, in narratives of Latané and Darley’s helplessly irresponsible bystanders, Milgram’s mindlessly obedient electrocuters, and Zimbardo’s heedlessly sadistic prison guards.

Van Bavel and Packer challenge this dark imagining of group psychology by breathing fresh life into Turner’s insistence that the social self is flexible and highly responsive to both social structural reality and normative influence. In particular, this sensibility points to the productive potential of “identity leadership,” which crafts and embeds particular versions of the collective self in ways that can render “us” a source of resistance and emancipation.

In the process of advancing this argument, *The Power of Us* compellingly debunks many of the myths that have arisen not only around social identity research but also around social psychology as a whole. Of these, the most enduring are those that paint groups as inevitable sites for corruption of self and loss of reason. The triumph of this book is how it shows that this framing is not only wholly wrong but also dangerously misleading. As Weick and Roberts recognized, if we are to have functional and resilient organizations, institutions, and societies, we must understand and draw upon the power of collective mind. ■

10.1126/science.abl5269



A man signs a petition in 1969, joining like-minded opponents of the Vietnam War.