



Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind

David Berreby

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This groundbreaking and eloquently written book explains how and why people are wedded to the notion that they belong to differing human kind/tribe-type categories like races, ethnic groups, nations, religions, castes, street gangs, sports fandom, and high school cliques. Why do we see these divisions? Why do we care about them so much? Why do we kill and die for them? This is the stuff of news headlines. How has a nation gone from peaceful coexistence to genocide? How does social status affect your health? Why are teenagers willing to kill themselves in hazing rituals in order to belong to a fraternity or social group? How do terrorists learn not to care about the lives of those they attack? US AND THEM gets at the heart of these profound questions by looking at their common root in human nature. Politics, culture, and economics play their parts, but it's the human mind that makes them possible, and that's the focus of US AND THEM. We're not born with a map of human kinds; each person makes his own and learns to fight for it. This is a crucial subject that touches all of our lives in ways both large and small, obvious and subtle. Human-kind thinking—whether beneficial or destructive—is part of human nature, as David Berreby's brilliant book reveals.

Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind Details

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Matt Motyl says

This book provides an excellent interdisciplinary explanation for why people form groups and why those groups tend towards conflict with each other. During the first 95% of the book, I was enthralled. The concluding chapter was underwhelming, lacking a powerful take-home message.

Jim says

Us and Them totally blew me a way. This is a fantastic exploration of neuropsychology, social psych, group dynamics, cognitive psych, motivations, game theory and on and on.

Berreby's book led to a spate of blog posts for me and directly impacted how I work with my clients.

Years of study and work have made me very familiar with the elements of this book, but Us and Them ties them into a neat, readable package.

I've already passed this around the office. My copy is littered with margin notes. All the blank pages in back are filled with epiphanies.

This is a must read for anyone interested in how people respond to group situations and why groups of all types influence our thinking and actions.

If you work in management or social networking and have not read this book, you are underinformed.

Mafalda says

Social science is not, by any means, my area of expertise. But, as a human being, I'm curious in trying to understand why people feel such a strong urge to propel their "tribal mind", deliberately associating themselves with people that are similar to them, even if that similarity is just apparent and very insignificant in terms of substance.

It was a very interesting read, non-fiction of course.

Res says

About our perception of what the author calls 'human kinds' (from racial groups to rival sports fans) -- where it might come from, how it might function, etc.

There's apparently quite a controversy about this. I'm not equipped to make any intelligent judgment about which side is right and wrong, and thus I feel I should mistrust the way this book mostly rings true for me.

The author's view is a fairly optimistic one. It's difficult, or maybe impossible, to prevent people from sorting everyone into us-and-them groups -- but it's also difficult or impossible to prevent people from identifying across group lines.

Full of fascinating trivia; for instance, the Renaissance fashion of dagged (slashed) sleeves? Was originally required by law of minstrels, tinkers, and other undesirables, and then aped by the privileged young, like today's saggy jeans.

Motorpsyche says

Superb book on just how easily we divide ourselves in to in groups and out groups. This comes about as close to required reading as it gets for me.

More to follow

Adrian Verster says

This book touches on a fascinating topic, which is how we understand who is like us and who is unlike us. It approaches the topic from a number of different perspectives: psychology, anthropology, neuroscience and other, in order to try and give an understanding of this phenomenon.

I enjoyed most of the book, it's filled with nuggets of interesting information on the notion of identity, things that I would not have considered otherwise. For example, in medieval France there was a sort of ethnic minority known as the cagot, who were condemned to separate parts of town, to enter the churches using a separate door, who had to use separate fountains for holy water. What is strange is that they weren't ethnic minorities as we understand the term today, they were white, they spoke french, they were christian, they followed all the social and cultural customs of the day. Instead they were conjured out of the population, that enough people accepted their existence and treated them differently was enough to create such an underclass.

Despite this, I found the writing in this book on the repetitive side, and at times I felt myself on a goose-chase trying to understand how some of the examples supported the points he was making. Definitely worth reading if you are interested in the topic, but isn't going to blow you away.

Lynne says

Interesting theories on how and why humans divide into 'tribes' - including but not limited to race, ethnicity, politics, the list goes on and on. The author explains how tribes help us find our place in the world but that they can also be self-limiting and destructive. And, even though we may understand the concept and that placing ourselves in tribes can be a negative thing, it's impossible to stop!

Meen says

This is the human tendency we have to grow beyond.

Rhys says

Some wisdom about our proclivity to divide people (and non people) into groups of Us and Them; an exploration of the elusive 'causes' of categorizing into 'kinds'; and a discussion of both the positive and negative aspects of creating identity.

"The human ability to imagine that a stranger is not an enemy , that a stranger can feel like Us, is an essential part of our humanity" (p.220).

Bob Nichols says

Berreby provides a detailed and up-to-date review of the literature that describes our tribal nature in all of its facets. His examples are straightforward and highlight what most can readily understand.

The author's underlying theme is that despite all the problems created by our tribal nature, we can transcend them by choosing for "human kind." The "Us-Them code does not own you; you own it," he writes. "This power to believe in human kinds, and to love or hate them, is part of your human nature." In asserting this perspective, Berreby takes on sociobiology and its contemporary iteration, evolutionary psychology. He characterizes these thinkers as genetic determinists who leave no room for mental control and free choice.

Berreby's criticism is well-founded, documented and argued. For example, he provides some much needed critical review of kin selection, and thoughtful arguments on behalf of reciprocal altruism. Regarding determinism, Berreby rightly argues that behavior is highly dependent on circumstance. He also comments that not all genetic expressions have to have adaptive value and, interestingly, he says that many traditional notions of mental experience - memory, perception, emotion and free will - may make no sense as we learn more about how the brain is physically organized.

Berreby, however, goes too far in his criticism of Darwinian theory. He, himself, perhaps engages too much in the "we versus them" debate when he refers to the "tribalism" of evolutionary psychology and his reference to the selfish-gene "crowd." This detracts from his otherwise thoughtful work. Frustratingly for the reader, Berreby, does not take the extra step in explaining evolutionary bases for behavior. He argues we can make a free choice to love "human kind" (his term) but he doesn't discuss the key issue that's involved with free choice, motivation. On what basis do we choose for human kind if there's no motivation to do so? Berreby is silent. He assumes, perhaps, that the choice is obvious, but that ignores the lessons of history. Elsewhere, Berreby says that stereotypes depend on circumstance, but that begs the question as to why we stereotype at all. He writes about the power of social convention, but doesn't talk about why social conventions should have such power.

In these examples, Darwinian theory can help. Individual survival depends on being members of a group. It

might be we imprint on, and are loyal to, our group based on self-interest and that those who are different in essential ways - dress, speech, customs, etc. - are signals that they are, at least potentially, threatening. We can, as Berreby argues, overcome our tribal bias when we see that it's in our own self interest to accommodate to a larger world. Yet, as Darwin observed, the strength of our group loyalty - because our own survival has depended on it through the eons - is such that we are far less free than Berreby suggests.

Richard says

The author was interviewed by the New York Academy of Science's Science and the City program in early 2006. Their website provides a flash video of his presentation, as well as a downloadable podcast and extensive notes and a bibliography.

Keith says

He does a good job of explaining why we think in human kinds and actually offers an interesting counter point to Steven Pinker in the Blank State when he says that prejudices are just good statistics from common people. Nice read.

Arielle says

Great gift from an intern. At first I thought it was going to be another "it's out biology, so suck it up" tome that I would have oodles of problems with. But aside from some "scientists are the best kind of people" threats early on, I quite liked it. Now I'm just curious what someone who's not, ehm, white might think of it.

Lisa says

Too many anecdotes, not enough neuroscience. This book was at least 350 pages too long.

Tracey says

"No dog quits her humans because they have converted to Catholicism or put a peace sign on their lawn... only human beings trust symbols to tell who is kin and who is a friend."

In this book, Berreby uses psychology, sociology and neuroscience to explore our need to divide humankind into human-kinds... the Us and Them of the title. He believes this is a basically innate desire, below conscious thought and is related to the brain circuitry involved in learning and following rules. He spends some time looking at the similarities and differences between animal groupings & human groupings. Most animals do not fight (at least seriously) within their own group, which is usually genetic in basis.

However, as humans, we can perceive ourselves and others as members of any number of different groups,

often using symbols or other abstract elements to determine the grouping, such as a study done in the 1930's on two groups of boys at summer camp & how quickly they developed not only their team culture, but a dislike/hatred of the other team... which dissolved just as quickly, given the right set of circumstances. Groups can become entities which have goals and aspirations (Americans, the GLBT community, etc.). Berreby also spends quite a bit of time on stereotypes, considering them as describing the relationship between the two parties, as much as the two parties themselves.

He wraps up the book with an examination of human-kind thinking in science & medicine, and how the differences we perceive may or may not line up with reality: "So it's never a good idea to try to pour science into molds made by unscientific means." Overall, Berreby states that human-kind thinking is an important, perhaps essential part of being human; however, it is the ends to which we put this thinking that can be so harmful: "We imagine ourselves in a world of nouns... but the mind's environment is a world of verbs ... [where] categories are like adverbs that color experience."

Recommended to anyone looking for a overview of both biology & sociology as they related to the topic of stereotyping and group behaviour.
