

Book Review:

Jetten, J., Reicher, S. D., Haslam, S. A., & Cruwys, T. (Eds.) (2020).

Together apart: The psychology of COVID-19. Sage.

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The book can be summed up in a seemingly simple adage, “United we stand, divided we fall”. United not just within individual clusters of a particular community or nation, such that we treat each other as adversaries. Not as a motley collection of human groups embroiled in veiled or explicit hostilities with each other, see-sawing in classifying other groups as friends vs. foes, contingent on the extent to which that suits our own vested interests. Instead, transcending exclusionary and elitist groupism within and across nations to stand united as a collective humanity to defeat one common enemy, Coronavirus, and surmount the multiple longer-term challenges arising from the current Covid-19 crisis.

“Together Apart: A Psychology of COVID-19” itself represents teamwork, led by social psychologists and Covid-19 advisors Jolanda Jetten, Steve Reicher, Alex Haslam and Tegan Cruwys, along with 24 other authors. Grounded in theoretical convictions centring around Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory, it is one of the most cohesively edited books that I have read, with each contributor speaking with one voice. Well-organised and comprehensive, the book has 20 chapters divided into five sections. The interwoven leitmotifs are very evident across the book and include the deconstruction of human frailty/deficiency models in favour of human strength models, the need for leaders to view the public as the solution and not the problem, the desired movement from I/me to an inclusive we/us, and the relevance and application of social identity to

understanding and best negotiating the Covid-19 crisis.

In the first chapter, Jetten and colleagues argue that an effective response to Covid-19 requires as much focus on psychology as on biology. Plausible, as we have a rapidly mutating submicroscopic parasite (therefore, virology, medical microbiology, pharmacology for example) pitted against humans and their behaviours (therefore, psychology). Moreover, it is group psychology and not a psychology of individual differences that is most pertinent in the face of a pandemic, which by definition is a disease spread across the world. Hence, in Chapter 2 we see that a pandemic by virtue of being a collective human experience brings one's social identity rather than personal identity to the foreground. Whereas a personal identity involves definitions of self-based on personal characteristics (e.g., how much I like to read), a social identity is derived from group membership. We define ourselves through the groups with which we identify, and perceive as well as experience a belongingness. From this point onward, social identity is the mantra on which each argument is founded and elaborated in the book. Across 149 pages, there are 174 mentions of social identity (or identities).

The second section covers the social influence processes that can help foster and strengthen a shared social identity or "us-ness" which is vital for the levels of cooperation, coordination and compliance needed in the successful management of Covid-19 (Chapters 3 to 6). Effective leaders (Chapter 3) are inclusive, rising above differences in political party worldviews and any other sectarian or divisive politics. They frequently use "we/us/our" in their communication whilst simultaneously avoiding and discouraging an "us vs. them" characterisation. They inspire people to come together and energise the group to take positive action on collective goals. Followership is neither blind nor a personality trait; compliance and followership (Chapter 4) are products of the unity and cohesiveness of groups, and trust in a leader binding them together. Members are likely to comply and devote themselves to common goals when they feel accepted and respected, and are treated equitably. Regardless of whether it is hard or soft, paternalism is less effective than social identity processes in enabling behaviour change (Chapter 5) en masse (e.g., social distancing) because it represents externally-imposed rather than internalised commitment

to behavioural change. Conspiracy theories (Chapter 6) can derail positive group action. The suspicion and distrust that fuel conspiracist worldviews are indicative of social alienation. It is this lack of social identification that needs to be attended to sensitively.

The Covid-19 context carries multiple risks and opportunities related to social identification and connectedness, which are discussed in the section on social (dis)connectedness (Chapters 7 to 11). Two types of group threats (Chapter 7) abound in a pandemic: intragroup threats which erode solidarity, and intergroup threats which engender solidarity within the group at too high a cost for outgroup members. If we stretch our shared social identity to include all of humanity, and recast the virus as the outgroup, we may optimise connectedness. Risk perception (Chapter 8) is aligned with social identification and often faulty in a pandemic. Thus, distrust and disgust are reserved for outgroup members and people regrettably engage in high-risk behaviours with their ingroup, especially family and friends. Again, reframing social distancing as indicative of caring rather than distrust will increase connectedness and cooperation. Lockdown and quarantine measures have made social isolation (Chapter 9) a Covid-19-related experience for many, including the aged (Chapter 10). These undeniably important measures however do not have to impair social connectedness. Given that social connectedness reduces morbidity and mortality and improves mental health, and that group-based connectedness has added advantages for older adults over and above connectedness at a one-on-one level, it is clear that substitute forms of social contact need to be maintained (e.g., interacting on a virtual platform) such that one is “together apart”. Even in the absence of customary social contact, it is critical that we feel connected to one another and experience being part of a bigger whole. This can help us cope with the collective trauma (Chapter 11) that Covid-19 entails and facilitate resilience.

In the fourth section, the authors debunk negative stereotypes of collective behaviour, each of which reflect human frailty models (Chapters 12 to 16). Mob psychology is rejected in favour of a social identity perspective in explaining the action of crowds (Chapter 12). A mob or a crowd does not nullify the self; social identity (part of selfhood) becomes centre-stage among individuals comprising a crowd, alongside collective ideals and norms. Panic is not what typifies people's

response to an emergency or disaster (Chapter 13); long-lasting solidarity, social support and cooperation among even strangers typically emerge in response to disasters/emergencies. Such solidarity (Chapter 14) is well explained by the notion of a shared social identity. Crowds can be managed optimally in crises (Chapter 15) when the foundation of community-authority relations is a shared social identity and authority/leaders respect the people as trustworthy partners rather than considering them to be prone to panicking and requiring to be controlled. If not, the outcome can be social disorder (Chapter 16), which is worsened when the authority/leaders' distrust of members of the public coincides with structural social inequalities in a society.

Intergroup relations (Chapters 17 to 20) are examined in the final section of the book. Group-based inequality (Chapter 17) which translates into an inequitable disease burden and results in wider gaps between the advantaged and disadvantaged, an us-vs-them polarisation (Chapter 18), and concomitant prejudice and discrimination (Chapter 19) are disempowering at specific and holistic levels. The shared sense of social identity, pivotal for the success of immediate and long-term responses to Covid-19, is thwarted and weakened. The answer lies in our banding together as one into a common humanity (Chapter 20), facing one enemy, the Coronavirus.

The tone in the book is unmistakably that of social activism. Jetten et al.'s skilful combination of theoretical and practical knowledge is intended to promote advocacy and impact policymaking. The writing is educative, compelling, simple to comprehend and upholds universal values.

Any reservations that I may have about the book spring from my perspective as an Indian. At the risk of sounding partisan and defensive, I found that India was portrayed somewhat unfavourably. India is mentioned in six of the 20 chapters, and in five chapters the orientation is unequivocally negative. Three allusions to India, in my view, are misrepresented. Firstly, unlike what is presented in the book, the prime minister has not blamed any particular community for the Covid-19 outbreak in India. Furthermore, like one of the churches in South Korea, an international Muslim religious congregation (Tablighi Jamaat) at the Nizamuddin Markaz mosque in Delhi was a major Coronavirus hotspot in India.

Sadly, I do agree that news of this hotspot event led to anti-Muslim sentiments riding high, especially among misguided internet trolls and also among some of the general public; I also understand that these hostilities are not new in the country (or in the world) and that the hotspot was yet another reason to latch onto discriminatory rhetoric and actions. Nevertheless, I still take issue with the Covid-19-related discrimination against Muslims being described in the book. Thirdly, the migrants at a suburban long-distance railway station in Mumbai who gathered in hundreds and clashed with the police did not represent a failure in compliance. The migrants had converged onto this railway station because although no trains were operational at that time in the lockdown period, a miscreant had circulated a message on WhatsApp that the government had organised special trains for them to travel back to their homes.

I also decided to compare the references made to India with those made to China in the book. After all, Covid-19 has originated from Wuhan, China, for reasons which are still shrouded in mystery and at best conjecture. China is mentioned in three chapters in the book with none of the descriptions blatantly negative. The only aspect that could be considered criticism is the acknowledgement that China at an initial stage conspired to keep the rest of the world in the dark about the new Coronavirus. In fact, the remaining descriptions are either neutral or present China and the Chinese (or those of Chinese/Asian descent) as victims of prejudice.

Unfortunately, human rights violations, microaggressions, prejudice and discrimination are far more prevalent cross-nationally than should have been the case given that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in December 1948, almost 72 years ago. If we are to play a blame game, I would blame social identity. Even the animosities that reared their ugly head in India after the Tablighi Jamaat hotspot, emerged out of the righteous indignation associated with the social identity of being a Hindu vs. a Muslim. Of course, Jetten et al. do recognise the darker side of social identity, and repeatedly advocate the notion of an expansive, inclusive social identity. I would like to point out that as each of us participates in multiple social groups of varying levels and scope, our social identity has to be plural and multi-level. Does an inclusive social identity replace or co-exist with narrower, more exclusive social identities? In the Indian

philosophical tradition (e.g., J. Krishnamurti, Nisargadatta Maharaj), identity is a primary source of conflict, including intrapersonal conflict, and we are urged to relinquish the identity to experience nothingness and paradoxically a connection to everything. The inclusive identity perhaps is closer to such a transformational experience and less to do with identity per se.

The application of social identity theory is one pathway that can spell success during a pandemic. Redundancy and equifinality as principles of development would indicate that there has to be more than one efficacious pathway. Reflecting on my own experience during the lockdown in Mumbai, I must say that my continued experience of belongingness to multiple groups (through technology) has been playing an important role in sustaining my personal well-being and in ensuring my cooperation. Also central for me is my connection to God and spirituality, which is another pathway to well-being and cooperation. With regard to this book, readers can gain value about how to use social identity theory in managing the Covid-19 crisis at a personal, group or societal level. Readers and the authors could also consider alternative, supplementary routes to bolstering cooperation and well-being during and after this pandemic.

Reference

Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. C. 1979. "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict." In *The social psychology of intergroup relations*, edited by W. G. Austin and S. Worchel, 33-48. California: Brooks/Cole.