



RESEARCHERS' READING LOG – TWO BOOKS ABOUT COOPERATION

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Researchers' Reading Log – Two Books About Cooperation

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The Power of Us - Review

Van Bavel, J. J. & Packer, D. J. (2021).

The power of us: Harnessing our shared identities to improve performance, increase cooperation, and promote social harmony.

Hachette Book Group.

The authors, two social-psychologists from Canada working at universities in the U.S., wrote this book for the public, rather than for fellow academics. This means that they discuss research and concepts from social psychology in a way that most people can understand. Furthermore, Van Bavel and Packer use many stories to illustrate concepts, and they offer practical applications of the concepts. Another of the book's admirable traits is the authors' recognition that individual studies may not be applicable to other settings, for example, because each setting is different.

The book's 276 main pages, not including 20+ pages of acknowledgements and references, provide coverage of many areas in the study of identity, especially the social nature of identity. In Chapter 1 - The Power of Us - the authors invite us to complete the following sentence - I am _____ - 20 times, 20 different ways, e.g., "I am a badminton player" or "I am a vegan" or "I am a teacher who uses cooperative learning," to demonstrate that each of us has multiple identities. This experience of our own multiple identities confirms the excerpt the book offers (p. 22) from the Walt Whitman poem "Song of Myself:"

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then I contradict myself
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*

In other words, we have multiple identities. Furthermore, those identities can change. Perhaps, the book's two most important points about identity are first that identity has a major impact on what we think and how we behave. Groups are important here because "the groups people belong to are often fundamental to their sense of self and understanding of who they are" (p. 31). Second, people often adjust their lives to fit in with their groups

and “try to act in ways that they believe will advance its [the group’s] interests, making personal sacrifices if necessary” (p. 32).

The practical nature of the book is stated in its subtitle: “Harnessing our shared identities to improve performance, increase cooperation, and promote social harmony.” This subtitle attracted me to the book, because as a user of cooperative learning as a learner and teacher, I seek out ideas that might help me better understand and facilitate cooperation in classrooms or anywhere. Throughout this summary of *The Power of Us*, I will share ideas from the book that might be relevant to cooperation.

One of the most incredible findings of the research reported by Van Bevel and Packer is the way that people can easily identify with a group, even if they are randomly assigned to the group. Our species’ readiness to join and identify with groups augurs well for cooperative learning, in which perhaps the key principle is positive interdependence. Johnson and Johnson (2024/1994, paragraph 24) state that “Positive interdependence exists when group members perceive that they are linked with each other in a way that one cannot succeed unless everyone succeeds.”

However, Van Bevel and Packer note that just being in a group does not guarantee a strong sense of identity as a member of a group. Similarly, many teachers and students have observed that students may sit in a group but not work as a group, not feel positively interdependent with groupmates. Fortunately, the cooperative learning literature offers many strategies for encouraging students to care about their group members. These strategies include team building activities, group goals, group celebrations/rewards when goals are reached, roles for group members, distribution of unique resources among group members, use of social skills that facilitate group functioning, structuring interaction such that everyone has and utilizes opportunities to participate in the group, and building a group identity via such means as mottos, mascots, logos, colors, handshakes, cheers, and shared experiences.

The Power of Us discusses another strategy for promoting common identity among group members: competition with/against other groups. Indeed, history as well as current news headlines are replete with examples of group identity as a source of negative actions. However, competition can also be cooperative, because competition often takes place in the context of a rule-governed system, with participants, e.g., at a dance competition or in an election – valuing fair play. Under such conditions, competition can spur improvements which benefit all.

The book’s Chapter 2 – The Lens of Identity – describes research showing that identity can bias our observations, such as followers of two different teams watching the same match, with the followers of each team believing that their team played fairly while the opposing team cheated.

Chapter 3 – Sharing Reality – also looks at bias, with people changing the way they view the world to fit a story that makes their group look good, e.g., how a doomsday cult adjusts their story when the world does not end on the day predicted by the cult leader. Fortunately, this chapter offers ideas for avoiding groupthink, i.e., the harmful practice of people agreeing with the group leaders or consensus without thinking deeply or even if we disagree. Research suggests that even people who seem high in cognitive ability can fall victim to groupthink. Expressing a view reminiscent of Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory (1980), Van Bevel and Packer state, “humans’ understanding of the world is shaped by other humans – ... our realities are fundamentally social” (p. 87). To counter groupthink, Van Bevel and Packer suggest:

- a. Group leaders (whether official leaders or de facto leaders) should give their views last, rather than first;
- b. Promote the idea that “An enemy will agree, but a friend will disagree;”
- c. Include the role of “devil’s advocate” to offer contrary perspectives, and practice the social skill of disagreeing politely;
- d. Encourage input from all group members, possibly anonymous feedback;
- e. As Johnson and Johnson (2024/1994) suggest, groups should spend time discussing how well they function, including what they are doing to reduce groupthink.

Chapter 4 - Escaping Echo Chambers - looks at the problem of people holding fast to perspectives that align with their group identity because what they hear, read, and view comes from sources that reinforce those perspectives. Opportunities to interact - online or in person with people who have different perspectives is one of Van Bevel and Packer’s research-based solutions. Cooperative learning techniques, such as Academic Controversy (Johnson et al., 1996), and social skills building activities, such as practicing paraphrasing and asking for elaborations, provide forums for such possibly mind-opening interactions.

Chapter 5 - The Value of Identity - includes a discussion of trust. Being willing to cooperate with others often involves an act of trust, trust that they will do their fair share in the group. Shared identity increases trust, even trusting people whom we have just met and, therefore, being willing to work with them. If initially, shared identity is absent, other means can be used to build trust, such as those mentioned above in the discussion of Chapter 1. Another way to build trust draws on the many examples in the book of the spectacular successes that have resulted from the power of cooperation, i.e., as stated in the book’s title: *The Power of Us*.

Chapter 6 - Overcoming Bias - and Chapter 7 - Finding Solidarity - look at ways to build common identity between people who for whatever reasons, including structural discrimination, do not trust each other. A famous story from the cooperative learning literature describes how Aronson and a team of other social psychologists went to newly desegregated U.S. schools in the 1970s (Aronson, 2024). Students of different races studied together in the classrooms, but they self-segregated in the school canteens and playgrounds. In response, Aronson and colleagues invented the famous Jigsaw cooperative learning technique in which students form heterogeneous groups, share a common learning goal, have equal status due to the unique information given to each group member, and are encouraged by teachers to collaborate. Van Bevel and Packer tell a similar story in which bias was to some extent overcome when people in Iraq came together on mixed-religion soccer teams. Cooperative learning promotes this mixing of people with different identities via the use of heterogeneous grouping to determine which students will be groupmates. Examples of variables involved in forming heterogeneous groups include race, religion, nationality, gender identity, social class, special needs, and personality.

Chapter 7 explores the potentially useful concept of expanding one’s moral circle (Singer, 2011). We see those in our moral circle as worthy of support, i.e., we feel positively interdependent with them. Van Bevel and Packer recount a study in which supporters of the Manchester United football club were more likely to help a researchers’ accomplice wearing a Manchester United jersey than the same person in the jersey of a rival football club. The jersey of the football club with which the research participants’ identified put the accomplice within the participants’ moral circle, while the wrong jersey on the same person cast him outside their moral circle. Efforts such as the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals encourage people to greatly enlarge their moral circles to include people in other countries, people in other social classes, and even members’ of other species. These expanding circles

also represent an expansion of the cooperative learning principle of positive beyond the small classroom group, beyond the classroom, beyond the school, onward and upward, so that students and others find and act on solidarity with the billions of others whose outcomes are, when thoughtfully considered, positively correlated with their own (Jacobs, 2023).

Chapter 8 – Fostering Dissent – seems somewhat similar to Chapter 3 on avoiding groupthink. Van Bevel and Packer cite studies in which groups of students into which trained dissenters had been placed outperformed groups without dissenters. In Chapter 8, the concept of psychological safety adds an important dimension to the discussion of how to promote an atmosphere in which people are not only willing to dissent but also willing to entertain dissent, rather than dismissing or attacking dissenters.

Chapter 9 – Leading Effectively – cites work by Gardner, known for, among other concepts, Multiple Intelligences Theory. Gardner studied effective leaders and concluded that, “*They told stories ... about themselves and their groups, about where they were coming from and where they were headed, about what was to be feared, struggled against, and dreamed about*” (p. 235). Effective leaders do not only tell stories about identity; they embody the stories by taking action. Of course, it is incumbent upon everyone to decide which leaders we might collaborate with or which stories we should tell when we lead. As Van Bevel and Packer state, “*We get to decide which identity stories we want to embrace,...*” (p. 262).

The book's last chapter, Chapter 10, looks at The Future of Identity generally and focuses on three issues: inequality, climate change, and democracy. One highlight of the chapter was the account of the taking of the famous Earthrise photo by astronauts who reported feeling:

“...a deeper sense of connection with humanity as a whole. After they had seen the Earth from space, the significance of national boundaries waned and the conflicts that divide people on the ground seemed less important. As one astronaut put it, “When you go around the Earth in an hour and a half, you begin to recognize that your identity is with that whole thing” (p. 272).

Van Bevel and Packer conclude their thought-provoking, useful book by reminding us that while, yes, social identities are powerful, we all retain the capacity to decide what to think and do: “*Whether by rejecting or embracing a particular conception of ourselves, by challenging our groups to be better, or by organizing in solidarity to change the world, we take control of who we want to be*” (p. 276).

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Econarrative - Review

Stibbe, A. (2024)

Econarrative: Ethics, ecology and the search for new narratives to live by
Bloomsbury.

The definition of literacy has evolved (UNESCO, 2023). Once, to be seen as literate, people needed the ability to understand basic texts, such as newspapers and instructions. Access to education grew rapidly to meet this need, and the resulting literacy gains have yielded many benefits (National Literacy Trust, 2023). However, the concept of literacy has since greatly expanded. Now, to be literate, people first, need to understand many kinds of texts, including texts found online. Second, understanding texts created by others must be combined with people creating their own texts, alone or collaboratively. Third, and most important to this book review, literacy means being able to read between the lines of texts created by others, to think critically, and to apply knowledge of the world of texts to the texts people create themselves.

Work in the area of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2013) offers many examples of how to apply critical thinking to the understanding of texts. CDA often found fault with texts produced by wealthy and powerful forces in societies, such as corporations. Arran Stibbe (2021) is a leader in using ideas from CDA to do what many call *ecolinguistics*: an examination of the interaction of humans with other species of animals, plants, etc., as well as with the physical environment, such as bodies of water and deserts (International Ecolinguistic Association, n.d.).

Stibbe's (2024) new book, *Econarrative: Ethics, ecology and the search for new narratives to live by*, represents a further development in ecolinguistics which had tended to focus only on criticizing texts produced on behalf of the dominant forces in society, texts that reinforce the status quo. A key feature of this dominant view is known as anthropocentrism (Lin et al, 2023), with *anthro* referring to humans, in other words seeing humans as the Earth's most important residents. This human-centric view justifies doing anything to the planet's other species. Other features of this dominant view include individualism, male supremacy, and consumerism, all of which contribute to the current environmental crisis.

In contrast to anthropocentrism is ecocentrism, a view that encourages humans to value and feel gratitude toward other species and to seek ways to coexist with them. In synch with ecocentrism is ecojustice, a perspective that works for all humans to enjoy the benefits of sustainable development and that works against the unequal suffering of some people due to the environmental destruction wrought by anthropocentric actions. The book *Econarrative* continues and develops an existing trend in ecolinguistics to highlight existing ecocentric texts and to create more of them. Indeed, the book's chief contribution lies in pointing the way in this direction.

Econarrative begins with an extensive introductory chapter, Chapter 1, which provides Stibbe's definitions of key terms and concepts. Here are some of these definitions involving the term *narrative*, but first, Stibbe emphasizes that "*any narrative is only ever a version of the world and that other versions are possible*" (p. 14).

Narrative: Beyond the general meaning of a text (spoken, written, visual) that tells a story, a narrative can also be a more general perspective on the world. Of course, different people will have different perspectives, and these perspectives can change.

Metanarrative: What distinguishes a metanarrative from a narrative is that metanarratives are perspectives in the minds of many members of a culture. Many stories are generated from a single metanarrative. For example, the novel *Jaws* (Benchley, 1974) and the film based on the book tell the fictional story of a shark who kills a human and humans' resulting panic and their efforts to kill the shark. *Jaws* flows from an anthropocentric metanarrative and reinforces an adversarial perspective on relations between the more-than-human world (other species and the physical environment) and humans. A term related to metanarrative is dominant narrative, i.e., a perspective widely held in a society, with a powerful impact on what people in that society think and do.

Econarrative: Many narratives and metanarratives refer only to humans, e.g., the view that most people are basically good (Benkler, 2011). Stibbe directs readers' attention to econarratives, those narratives that involve other species and the physical environment. However, he adds that not all econarratives are likely to positively impact the world and that econarratives, like all narratives, need critical analysis. This analysis must be based mostly on value judgements, not just on "*technicalities of language and narrative structure*" (p. 23).

Chapter 2 deals with creation stories. These can be particularly impactful on people's perspectives, because these stories speak about "*the place of humanity in relation to other species and the physical environment*" (p. 27). For example, Stibbe cites Harari (2022) who links the 21st century's climate crisis to the line in the Genesis section of the Bible calling on humans to "*fill the earth and subdue it*" (p. 28). A key term in Chapter 2 is activation, which is related to but goes beyond the use of the active voice. Instead, activation involves who appears in narratives and whether they have sentient roles such as thinkers, doers, sensors, dreamers, singers, creators, and communicators, or whether they only passively receive the actions of others, usually humans.

The book's third chapter explores people's identities, in other words, the stories that they tell about themselves. Do people see themselves "*as narrowly ensconced within the human world or as interacting with a wider community of life that includes both human as well as non-human beings*"? (p. 58). Stibbe worries that people are increasingly cut off from their "*ecological selves*" (p. 69), and he praises narratives in which humans identify as being linked to other species in relationships of "*mutual care and sustenance*" (p. 58).

Chapter 4 concerns haiku, a form of poetry often but not necessarily associated with nature, a form of poetry that while linked to the Japanese language is now often written in other languages as well. Is haiku even narrative form? For instance, there is no series of events in this haiku cited by Stibbe (p. 74):

*Among lily pads
Across the wind-scoured pond
Flowers of etched ice.*

Stibbe is more interested in the role haiku or any texts can play in changing humans' perspectives and actions regarding nature. He praises haiku for making visible what humans often ignore and for "*arousing compassion for ordinary and often overlooked animals, plants, and aspects of the physical environment*" (p. 90). Perhaps haiku's attentive observation of nature can lead to "*attentive care*" (p. 91). The chapter's conclusion quotes Rigby (2001, p. 19):

"I too would like to believe that poets can in some measure help us 'save the earth,' but they will only be able to do that if we are prepared to look up and listen when they urge us to lift our eyes from the page."

My favorite chapter in *Econarratives* is Chapter 5, "Enchantment: Wonder in Nature Writing." Early in the chapter, the sociologist Max Weber is quoted as stating in 1918 that humanity would be unwise to let go of our feeling of wonder as regards nature (p. 96):

"The growing process of intellectualization and rationalization does not imply a growing understanding of the conditions under which we live. ... It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that on the contrary we can, in principle, control everything by means of calculation. That in turn means the disenchantment of the world. ... We need no longer have recourse to magic to control the spirits or to pray to them. Instead, technology and calculation achieve our ends."

Stibbe, and probably Weber too, is definitely not devaluing science. Instead, like Rachel Carson (1965) whose groundbreaking writing marked a beginning of a modern movement against the harm humans were doing to our fellow Earthlings, Stibbe is saying that science can go hand-in-hand with a feeling of awe about nature. As our scientific understanding increases, so too can our wonder at the diversity and beauty of the world around us. Carson is quoted (pp. 97-98) as writing about:

"[a gift to children of] a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength."

Furthermore, Stibbe stresses that he is talking about the magic of the everyday, not about making a bucket list including the Seven Natural Wonders of the World (World Atlas, 2024) and then burning fossil fuels by flying around the world to see them all. This is not to mention the time pressure of viewing the famous wonders before human-induced environmental destruction disappears them. The genre of New Nature Writing is praised because it *"eschews sublime encounters with spectacular nature in distant places and instead (among other things) opens up paths to reconnect with more mundane and overlooked local nature"* (p. 103).

People can experience the enchantment of nature vicariously via texts, as long as those texts show members of other species as "individuals who can be counted (and therefore 'count')," not as "mass nouns such as biomass or timber measured in mere tonnages of stuff" (p. 100). Other advice on promoting enchantment includes portraying other species "as beings in their own right rather than as resources or human possessions" (p. 101). Furthermore, humans can be portrayed as relating to other species, not as being detached from them, using them, or studying them as uncaring, objective observers.

Chapter 6 highlights the word *ethics* in the book's title *Econarratives: Ethics, ecology and the search for new narratives to live by*. "Narrative ethics regards moral values as an integral part of stories and storytelling because narratives themselves implicitly or explicitly ask the question, 'How should one think, judge, and act – as author, narrator, character, or audience – for the greater good?'" (p. 123). Jane Goodall, the student and protector of chimpanzees and other species is quoted (p. 131) as stating, "to make change you must reach the heart, and to reach the heart you must tell stories. The way we write about other animals shapes the way we see them – we must recognize that every individual nonhuman animal is a 'who,' not a 'what.'"

In his 2021 book on ecolinguistics, Stibbe discusses the role of ideology, which closely relates to metanarratives. He quotes (p. 141) the physicist and environmental campaigner, Vandana Shiva on some of the fundamental ideology underlying anthropocentrism:

“Colonialism and industrialism have destroyed the Earth and indigenous cultures through four false assumptions. First, that we are separate from nature and not a part of nature. Second, that nature is dead matter, mere raw materials for industrial exploitation. Third, that indigenous cultures are inferior and primitive, and need to be ‘civilized’ through civilizing missions of permanent colonialization. Fourth, that nature and cultures need improvement through manipulation and external inputs.”

Chapter 7 emphasizes the importance of emotions if econarratives are to impact people's beliefs and behaviors. Closely linked to emotions are advertisements, the focus of Chapter 8. Stibbe argues that ecolinguistics needs to study advertisements, first, to understand how companies, including those that use our fellow animals for food – one of the most horrific instances of anthropocentric activity – seek to manipulate us and, second, to use the same strategies for ecocentric ends. Toward this second goal, Stibbe quotes ecological activist and journalist Ayana Young, as follows (p. 168):

“What does the dominant culture use to seduce us? And why are we not using those tools to seduce people in another direction? Can we look at what does work and actually utilize those tools with integrity, with love, with devotion for a greater good, and also be creative, make art, and have a fun time doing it?”

Just as Chapter 2, the first chapter after the book's introduction, looked at narratives about the beginnings of life, Chapter 9, the last chapter before the book's conclusion, looks at narratives about possible endings of life. Stibbe questions the impact of texts which foretell ghastly endings to our species, as the damage humans has done crushes us in a cacophony of catastrophe. Instead, Stibbe seems to favor an approach that leaves humans with choices, as is expressed by Rachel Carson (p. 218):

“We stand now where two roads diverge ... The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road ... offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth.”

In Chapter 10, Stibbe concludes his thoughts on econarratives, highlighting not just what they are or where they are found but what they do. On page 222, he quotes Donly, as positing that narratives “serve as a point of comparison between the textual world and the everyday one that the reader inhabits. Within the difference between these two worlds emerges the narrative's power to reshape readers' thinking.”

To conclude this review, readers should bear in mind that, although Stibbe does a fine job of explaining and exemplifying concepts, this is an academic book written for fellow academics, not one written to popularize academic research for the public. Speaking of concepts, Stibbe makes an important point when he states that any concept “has a wide range of definitions in the literature and there is no objective way to decide which of these is the ‘correct’ one. Each definition has advantages and disadvantages in different contexts and for different goals” (p. 127).

As to goals, please note that the last three words of the title of this book as well as of Stibbe's (2021) previous book are “to live by.” Thus, the main goal of reading this book

perhaps should not be to use the book's ideas to complete an assignment at university or to burnish one's CV by publishing a scholarly work. Perhaps the main goal could be to take inspiration from ecolinguistics to change the way we and others live so as improve the way we humans interact with the planet's other species and with the physical environment.

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