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Harmless Social Labeling Isn't So Harmless After All: Ethical Issues Behind the 'Us-Them' Group Dichotomy

Benjamin Ruark · Wednesday, March 24th, 2021

Background on the Social Construct of 'Us-Them'

Author's Note: In reading this paper, for ease of comprehension, think of 'us' and 'them' as proper names applied to two equal but separate groups of people: Group-Us and Group-Them. Doing so will eliminate a lot of otherwise awkward wording juxtapositions occurring throughout.

'Us-them' with respect to social groups happens to be a social-psychology phenomenon. Yet one as natural and customary as coffee alongside the morning newspaper. And just as seemingly innocuous is its custom of social labeling: a wielding of differentiating social labels with enough self-sustained *momentum*—a potency the equivalent of Robusta-blend caffeine—to achieve one-sided advantage for anyone belonging to any in-group referring to itself as 'Us.'

In making sense of our world we apply basic subject-object duality in our everyday language to differentiate ourselves—the subject—from anything we perceive—the object. Yet when a group does this, the mere existential practice of splitting subject from object for convenience of differentiation and the like, takes on darker tones: whereby *favoritism is awarded to the very subject who invoked such a dichotomous distinction at the start*—'Us.'

Said differently, the artificial splitting of a single group of people into two groups does more than merely afford a speedy and convenient label for the split-offs, 'Them.' For the simple act of putting a fraction of its own kind into a separate reference-bin, a group has set them apart just far and wide enough to view them as *unlike*. As *other*. Which is where various social labels instrumentally figure in. The 'them' group is now situated in a neutral corner whereby the manner in which they're perceived and treated is fair game for all manner of erratic and fluid interpretations. And from those will predictably spring a likelihood for disadvantageous labels, as will be clarified later. In any event, harmless conduct has just nudged open the door to potentially harmful conduct.

More than Just Serviceable to Spoken Language, Us-Them's Roots in Humanity's Darker Side

During the late 1970s the work of a pair of British psychologists, Henri Tajfel and John Turner, led them to theorize that members of a group conform to it out of a deep need to belong, fit in; and from this elemental social act of assimilation into a group they would then derive higher self-esteem, pride, and special sense of group identity (McLeod, 2019). Fittingly, the theory became known as social identity theory. Further to their theory, they argued that group members are

naturally given to categorize other related groups based on comparisons made between themselves and those they relate with. The social labeling, or stereotyping, that ensues, wouldn't (and won't) go awry unless *group bias* somehow gets triggered and establishes a foothold.

Based on the psychologist pair's experimental work they found that Group-‘Us’ (the so-called in-group) has a more or less built-in bias and the fitting name given for it being *self-favor*. Similarly, from Steven Handel's article on this subject, I saw the implications for automaticity in any Group-‘Us’ to leap into *irrational group favoritism* (2020) as though it were a purely natural deed. After reading several interpretations of this conundrum, one view attributes egocentrism within individual members of Group-‘Us’ to have been taken up a collective notch, and now manifesting as in-group sociocentrism: whereby an entire group magnifies its own self-enhancement at the expense of debasing and denigrating an out-group, Group-‘Them.’

A similar view also suggested of Group-‘Us’ says their particular biases slant more towards utter rivalry, winning *versus* losing; or ‘Us’ *against* ‘Them.’ Under such contentious instances tendencies towards self-favor are anchored to the cause of winning. Regardless of psychological account, there's a *prevailing underlying negativity brooding* when two groups become estranged: one that finds Group-‘Us’ invariably donning a posture of superiority wedded to partiality. Having gone that far, almost in knee-jerk response, by contrast they view Group-‘Them’ as necessarily occupying a position of inferiority.

Supporting this dark predilection in in-group behavior, according to Handel's paper, research has shown how easily people become susceptible to group bias; *even over the most meaningless of group comparisons*. Conclusion: there's apparently no lower limit, no floor, setting the boundary at which group bias against another group can no longer be triggered.

Implications-wise, this frequenter of workplaces, all-around kibitzer to toxic work environments—‘Us-Them’ mentality—comprises an issue not to be taken lightly in any work setting and even in a number of informal social settings as well.

<u>Group Relationships</u>	<u>Equitable</u>	<u>Inequitable</u>
1) Associations-Memberships	X	
2) Competitive / Rival Groups		X
3) Collaborative / Partnership	X	
4) Governments-Civilians		X
5) Interdepartmental Groups	X	X
6) Management-Employees		X
7) Parents / Guardians-Children		X
8) Social Groups (Miscellaneous)	X	X
9) Service Providers-Customers		X
10) Superiors-Subordinates		X

Figure 1. 'US' – 'THEM' Relationships: 10 Sample Types

However, despite this phenomenon's apparent potency, not all 'Us-Them'-prone groups suffer a relationship disequilibrium; not all are unfair to the point of prejudicial and unjust conduct being exhibited by an omnipotent in-group. A sample of group relationship types is listed in Figure 1. Depending on the type of group relationship in force, and its context, inequality may even be rightful and mutually expected: then again, as is obvious, not to a point of being abusive and injurious. Four of the sample of 10 types shown are characteristically equitable by their nature; with only the occasional instance or two of deviation-from-normal occurring in two of that cluster. However, 6 of the 10 typically exhibit group inequality. Incidentally, superior-subordinate relationships is a catchall category for sponsors-protégés, teachers-pupils, trainers-trainees, and military drill instructors-recruits, to name a few.

'Us-Them,' with regard to military usage, worldwide, has always been found to be useful-to-a-fault, and in an appalling way: whereby 'Them' gets conveniently fitted with various surrogate denigrating labels designed to dehumanize and debase the enemy. In World War II, the Germans were pejoratively dehumanized as Krauts. In Vietnam, the Viet Cong were degraded as gooks, or zipper-heads. In the Gulf War, the Iraqis were called ragtops. In every instance it made the

transition easier for our soldiers—the ‘Us’—to wage war with our enemy, ‘Them.’

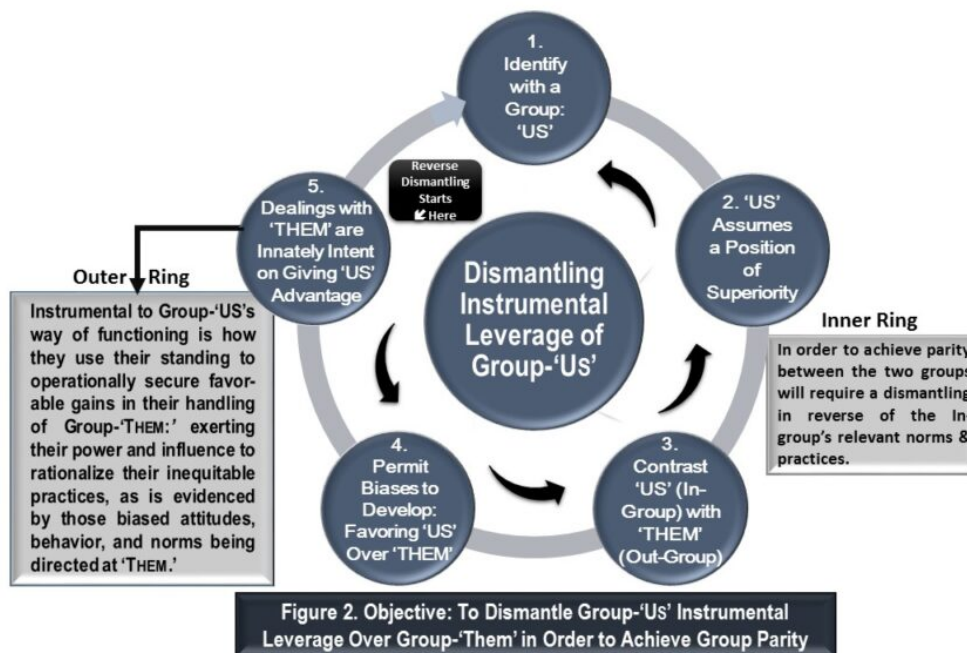
Again, the ‘Us-Them’ disequilibrium isn’t a certainty. In research, in some athletic arenas, in philanthropy, and purportedly in journalism, if there’s an ‘Us-Them’ presence to be found, objectivity and parity win out. Ethics and professionalism are sometimes successfully stalwart guardrails against inborn group biases and overt/covert power grabs to secure favor by adopting a position of ‘Us.’ That said, if attempted, one could probably draft a list of a score/more of categories that are susceptible to societal ‘Us-Them’ schisms (see sidebar figure).



‘Us-Them’ Malignancy: Irrational Group Bias Achieved so Effortlessly

The ‘Us-Them’ social blind spot is clearly evident in politics, religious circles, runs amok in world affairs, and also invades our private lives on a routine basis. For example, now mature adults, some children have patiently watched the years pass by, still waiting for their parents to start responding to them as grownups of equal stature, worth, and respect. But biases are not always so innocently unknown. In fact, they can be quite willful and openly exhibited.

Which is why I believe Handel's thesis that an in-group's aberrant behavior stems from *irrational group bias* is accurate only initially—at its onset. However, over time its norms and practices *become more rational* from the standpoint that the means—biased norms and practices—now instrumentally serve various coveted ends; that is, all manner of added in-group advantages. As Figure 2's *outer ring* depicts, with every embryonic 'Us-Them' thought or utterance, with an uncanny force similar to a nuclear blast's pressure wave rippling forth: power gets unequally distributed; the divisiveness of 'Us' and 'Them' takes on darker tones; 'Us' then self-assigns privilege and prestige. Now on a roll, 'Us' malignly assigns disadvantage and lesser rank to 'Them;' 'Us' next adopts *carte blanche* in their treatment and handling of 'Them.'



Regardless of situation and setting, count on 'Them' having poor prospects for faring well. A nuclear fallout of unfair, sometimes ridiculous, sometimes harmful, practices will befall 'Them' under the whole or partial influence of an omnipotent and covetous 'Us.' A flurry of examples of abusive and injurious actions toward 'Them' surge readily into foreground:

- *Condescending Language and Handling Actions* – saying and doing demeaning and patronizing things with utter disregard for feelings, situational context, and outcomes
- *Overall Responsiveness* – responding belatedly, slowly, or not at all to a need or request expressed or required by 'Them'
- *Withholding of Key and Potentially Vital Information/Knowledge* – perceiving 'Them' ignorant or dimwitted—and lacking in capacity to grasp and/or act accordingly—justifies a neglect to provide or allow access to key information/knowledge that 'Them' has an implied or contractual right to know
- *Provision of Inferior Service Aids, and Customer Supplies* – using and dispensing second-rate service aids and customer consumables/supplies, respectively, as an acceptable 'good enough for 'Them'' standard
- *Denied Giving a Voice in Decisions Directly Impacting 'Them'* – 'Us' freely make frequent or special short-/long-term decisions of high impact that are independent of Them' ever being given notice and access to, or being allowed adequate representation at their making
- *Inferior and/or Deficient Service Delivery* – manufacturing one-size-fits-all and/or one-

scenario-fits-all service approaches and solution strategies to ‘Them’—thus neglecting interaction effects such as individual differences and prior histories—in operation’s self-served attempt to maximize allocated resources, efficiency/productivity, and overall operational convenience

- *Apply Power and Pressure in Seizing Advantage* – orchestrating or deliberately inciting interpersonal encounters of unequal power distribution for purposes of gaining advantage over ‘Them’; forcing ‘Them’ to react from an inferior position, partially or wholly defensively, with chance predictably favoring dim outcomes for ‘Them’

Put into relevant street context: in both service and manufacturing environments, a workforce is predictably the self-anointed ‘Us’ and the customers are predictably ‘Them;’ just as management is predictably the ‘Us’ and employees are predictably ‘Them.’ Employees may refer to themselves as ‘Us,’ but with little/no power to act like a ‘Us;’ hence the reason for unions. Group-‘Them’ invariably gets the short straw on being disfavored by mere status.

‘Us-Them’ Autopsy: Restoring Norms & Practices of Group-‘Us’ to Harmless Levels

Irrespective of whether it’s an informal groups setting, or formal groups setting within an organization, the same correctional approach is taken: referring back to Figure 2’s *inner ring*, it becomes a matter of dismantling what’s been erected and replacing it with something more equitable. Group-‘Us’ will need to conduct a ‘leverage-dismantling workshop,’ following the steps listed next.

1. *List Generation* – Group-‘Us’ leaders generate a list of all norms and practices that refer to their handling of, and interactions with, Group-‘Them.’ If a formal organization is involved, and services are provided to Group-‘Them,’ those services must also be listed.
2. *Favoritism Extrapolation* – Going down the list of norms/practices/services, identify those which apportion advantage for their (in-)group, and in so doing disfavor/disadvantage Group-‘Them.’ Extrapolate obvious or hidden assumptions about, and attitudes towards, ‘Them’ that enabled the rationale that led to self-favoritism.
3. *Reframing in Positives* – Reframe each revealed assumption and attitude as a positive Group-‘Them’ attribute posing relatively equal status with their own group. Be prepared to make difficult compromises and sacrifices: Group-‘Us’ insatiable self-interests likely earned it the usual array of conveniences, self-apportioned pleasant tasks, and unmerited moral superiority in decisions concerning Group-‘Them.’ All those self-appointed perks now go away.
4. *Equitable Norms/Practices/Services Conversions* – Draft new sets of mutually-equitable norms, practices, and services impacting Group-‘’ [Readers who’re reflecting on their own workplace culture about now, and believe theirs is headed towards a toxic ‘We-Them’ dichotomy, there’s an ample number of articles on the Internet outlining specific preventive measures.]
5. *Talk-Through Review* – Meet with leaders from Group-‘Them’ to share a concern for making the ‘playing field more level’ than it previously was—or some other metaphor that’s more appropriate. Explain this meeting’s purpose: to talk ‘Them’ through all the changes they’ll be experiencing from this point forward. That their comments, questions, and feedback are welcome while the talk-through is presented. The talk-through is then conducted. Any newly raised concerns from ‘them’ either get resolved or at least adequately addressed.

6. *Finalization & Implementation* – Finalize the new norms, practices, and services (as applicable) with any inputs from ‘Them’ being appropriately integrated.
7. *Educate/train and coach all Group-‘Us’* members in adopting the transformative changes that now define Group-‘Us’ new identity.

Finally, readers who’re considering attempting a group or organizational renewal based on a more equitable relationship with another group/organization: you hopefully possess enough social capital to have considerable sway (as well as tact and diplomacy) behind your entreaty. Social capital is basically the amount of good will and merit you’ve amassed over time for your allegiance, contributions, and aptly fitting-in with your Group-‘Us.’

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