

IN MEMORIAM

James H. (Jim) Sidanius (1945–2021)



Photo by Rachel Arnett

Jim Sidanius (née James Brown) was one of the foremost social and political psychologists of his generation. His theory of social dominance redefined the scientific study of intergroup relations, advancing novel hypotheses regarding the causes and consequences of intergroup conflict and inequality by integrating insights across the social and biological sciences. Jim's theoretical insights were matched only by his empirical prowess; he was a master at analyzing large data sets with advanced statistical methods, methods that he taught to hundreds of doctoral students over the years in his notoriously challenging but rewarding graduate statistics courses at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and Harvard. Beyond his teaching of statistics and advanced topics in social psychology and African American studies, Jim mentored dozens of aspiring intergroup relations scholars over a 44-year career. As one of few Black social psychologists, he served as a role model for young Black scholars in particular.

Jim Sidanius was born December 3, 1945, in New York City. His formative years were defined by the struggles of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. In a 2012 book chapter, Jim recounted how, as a 10-year-old, he was mesmerized by a magazine article about a Black man castrated by a group of White men after being accused of whistling at a White woman. At 16, Jim himself was beaten by White police officers for “insubordination” because he challenged an

officer arresting him for what Jim described as “the crime of having a White girlfriend.” The experience of being the target of racial violence was a turning point, and Jim went on to play an active role in the Black Power movement, eventually renouncing his U.S. citizenship and leaving the United States in 1970 in what he described in an autobiographical essay as “an attempt to escape the ever present and soul poisoning effects of American racism.”

After leaving the United States, Jim spent time in Canada, France, Germany, Denmark, Algeria—where he bore close witness to the revolutionary movement resisting French colonization—and finally Sweden, where he settled and earned a PhD in political psychology in 1977 at the University of Stockholm. He remained as a faculty member at the University of Stockholm from 1977 to 1983. During his extensive travels, Jim realized that he could not escape ethno-racial conflict. While he did not experience the level of virulent racism in Sweden that he did in the United States, he observed that every country he visited was governed by some ethno-racial hierarchy. This universal principle later became a foundational premise of social dominance theory (SDT).

In Sweden, Jim collaborated extensively with his PhD classmate, Bo Ekehammar, documenting time and again gender differences in sociopolitical attitudes. These studies later informed the *invariance hypothesis* within SDT, the observation that men tend to be more antiegalitarian than women across cultures. Jim also developed *context theory*, which advanced the counterintuitive view that political extremists were more cognitively sophisticated than moderates, since adopting and defending extreme views required the careful study and processing of political content.

Although Jim's time in Sweden was productive and personally rewarding, he decided to return to the United States, where he felt his research would have more influence. He took a position as postdoctoral fellow and visiting assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University from 1983 to 1984 and then as assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Texas from 1984 to 1988. In 1988, Jim was recruited to a tenured position in the Psychology Department at UCLA, where he spent the next 18 years. In 2006, Jim joined the faculty at Harvard University, where he remained until his death, as John Lindsley Professor of Psychology in memory of William James and Professor of African and African American Studies.

At UCLA, Jim, together with Felicia Pratto, developed SDT to explain why group-based oppression is a feature of all

societies with economic surplus, though it plays out with varying severity and along the lines of different groups (e.g., race, religion, class) in each setting. SDT is multileveled in its focus, analyzing how individual motives, intergroup dynamics, institutional practices, and ideological narratives conspire to create and sustain systems of group-based dominance and inequality. Departing from contemporary assumptions in psychology about the roots of intergroup conflict, SDT argues that group-based prejudice and discrimination can be partially traced to human evolutionary processes, involving coalitions of men competing with each other for access to resources and mates. Sexism, in turn, could ultimately be attributed to men's desire to control the sexual prerogatives of women.

Though informed by evolutionary reasoning, Jim was no biological determinist. He recognized the influence of societal context in individuals' preferences and motives for group-based hierarchy, or their *social dominance orientation* (SDO). Drawing on sociology and political philosophy, SDT also recognizes the role of *hierarchy-enhancing* ideologies, such as racism, appeals to the Protestant work ethic, and meritocracy, which it argues are promulgated by elites to justify and maintain their domination. SDT observes that members of marginalized groups seemingly acquiesce to these ideologies to a surprising extent. Conversely, *hierarchy-attenuating* ideologies, such as the notion of universal human rights, exert strong counterforces on inequality and are supported by institutions that aim to reduce inequality in society. Nevertheless, as people's SDO tends to increase with their own dominant position, and because societal narratives are shaped by powerful institutions and actors, societal equilibria will ultimately lean toward group-based hierarchy of some form. Thus, Jim's work synthesized insights from across the biological and social sciences to reveal how evolution prepares, society shapes, and intergroup interactions reinforce or challenge, the human proclivity toward systems of group-based oppression.

Throughout his 44-year career, Jim's intellectual prowess, daring, and unparalleled work ethic inspired dozens of PhD students who worked under his supervision, including James Liu, Michael Mitchell, Shana Levin, Colette van Laar, Joshua Rabinowitz, Rosemary Veniegas, Stacey Sinclair, Christopher Federico, Brian Lowery, Yesilernis Pena, Carlos Navarrete, Hillary Haley, Ludwin Molina, Kris-Stella Trump, Robin Bergh, Milan Obaidi, Sarah Cotterill, Rachel Arnett, Sa-kiera Hudson, Gregory Davis, Lumumba Seegars, Asma Ghani, and the authors of this piece, as well as dozens of postdoctoral and visiting scholars. In remembering how Jim's penchant for scholarly debate and Socratic teaching method often instilled fear, social psychologist Brian Lowery shared,

As a young Black scholar, I loved that Jim evoked those responses. Even when I was intimidated, I understood what it meant that this Black man's intellect demanded respect. You either learned to appreciate the brightness of his presence and the demands he made of you, or you avoided him. I felt sorry for those that avoided him.

Jim was beloved by his students, many of whose lives he changed. He was devoted to helping them bring their own ideas to fruition and loved fierce theoretical combat, but was scientifically nondefensive and delighted on the rare occasions a student proved him wrong. He had high expectations but there was no end to his help in meeting them. At one point, he even insisted on editing student articles from his hospital bed while in critical care. Jim instilled in us his own scientific credo of always letting the data speak, even when the answers are uncomfortable; that knowing as much as we can about the truth of the world is the first step in changing it for the greater common good.

Jim's intellectual contributions were widely recognized by the broader academic community. In 2006, Jim was recognized by the International Society of Political Psychology with its Harold Lasswell Award for Outstanding Scientific Accomplishment in Political Psychology, and in 2007, he was inducted as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Jim's articles have received the Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Prize from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (2014, 2017) and the Scientific Impact Award from the Society for Experimental Social Psychology (SESP, 2019). In 2014, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology recognized Jim with its Career Contribution Award, and in 2020, the SESP followed suit with its Distinguished Scientist Award. Beyond social and political psychology, Jim was recognized by the American Psychological Association with its Distinguished Scientific Applications of Psychology Award in 2021 and (posthumously) by the Association for Psychological Science with its William James Fellow Award for a "lifetime of significant intellectual contributions to the basic science of psychology" in 2022.

Aside from being passionate about his work, Jim also had a range of interests. He loved driving powerful cars, playing chess, and had music tastes ranging from Gregorian chants to Tupac Shakur.

Jim Sidanius died on June 29, 2021, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his wife, Miriam Sidanius, by his side. He also survived by his son, Che Sidanius, and his grandson, Alexander. The generations of students he trained and mentored will sorely miss him and cherish his memory.

Authors are listed in order of when they graduated from Jim Sidanius' lab at Harvard University, with most recent first.

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