Episode 115: Avi Kaplan

# KL: Katie Linder

# AK: Avi Kaplan

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and fifteen.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I am joined by I am joined by Dr. Avi Kaplan, an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia. Before that, he was a faculty member in the Department of Education at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. Avi’s research interests focus on motivation and identity development, with particular interest in the role of the environment in these processes. His recent research involves the application of the Complex Dynamic Systems approach to identity and motivation, and the use of collaborative design-based interventions for promoting educators’ and students’ motivation and identity exploration around the curriculum. His recent publications include chapters in the 2012 APA Educational Psychology Handbook on the application of motivation theory to educational practice, and in the 2016 Handbook of Motivation at School on learning environments and motivation, and special issues in the Educational Psychologist and in Contemporary Educational Psychology on identity formation and motivation. Avi is a Fellow of the Association of Psychological Science, the American Psychological Association, and the Eastern Psychological Association. He is also the current Editor of the Journal of Experimental Education. Avi received his Ph.D. from the Combined Program in Education and Psychology at the University of Michigan.

Thanks so much for joining me on the show today, Avi.

**AK:** Thank you for inviting me!

**KL:** So I’m really excited to dive into this topic of learning motivation, um which is a key area of your research. First I’d like to start by just talking to you a little bit about what lead you to study motivation in learning. What was kind of the motivating factor for you?

**AK:** Well – you know, asking a motivational psychologist how they came to do something, it’s like asking a physician about their health, or a teacher about their learning. It’s like me asking you, what it would be like to make a podcast about making podcasts [**KL:** Right, right]. So one is the case of what one does, which should teach us about it, right? Um I majored in psychology, um and actually minored in philosophy and political science in my undergraduate studies, mostly because of a combination of what I considered then to be my interests and non-interests, the availability of majors, [*indiscernible*] a consideration of prestige. Once I was there, I had great experience in a course on education and psychology, and also had educational experiences as a counselor in youth movements, and I was working in [indiscernible] education while I was in college. So in graduate school I decided to pursue school psychology, but I had a partner at the time who wanted to go do her M.A. at University of Michigan, so I differed and moved to Ann Arbor for the year, and while I was there I started exploring what programs they had there at that university. They didn’t have School of Psychology, but they did have a combined interdisciplinary program in education and psychology. So went and interviewed there, applied, was attended – admitted with full scholarship, which allowed me to do this because I didn’t have the means. And as it happens at that time, this was the center for motivation and education, and I had incredible mentors and incredible peers, Um and theoretical orientation that my mentors took aligned with my progressive values and ideas about education. Um so education is invariably intertwined with identity development, so I graduated with an identity of the scholar of motivation. Um so, when thinking about myself as a case of this, my motivation to study motivation and my development of a motivational researcher is based on this idiosyncratic combination of personal interest, and goals, and values, my background that I had opportunities that were available to me in my particular context – the means that I had to pursue some but not others. Tremendous amount of serendipity in all of this. And also the developmental stage I was in, you know, ready to explore my career and who I wanted to be, and to a very large degree, the people that I interacted with – my mentors, my fellow graduate students, my colleagues, and later my own graduate students, educators, and administrators, and students that I had collaborated with. And all of this continued to support my fascination with motivation, and my belief that my education is correlated to knowledge while simultaneously trying to do some good in the world.

**KL:** I love hearing about all of those different factors. What have you learned thus far from your own research on motivation and learning? What are some of the key points that are kind of takeaways for you?

**AK:** Well you’ve heard my personal story about my motivation in studying motivation – becoming a scholar. Um so it wouldn’t surprise you that what I’ve learned about motivation is that it’s actually a highly complex phenomenon, and that there is no single recipe for how all individuals are motivated – how they learn and develop. So motivation involves a host of personal and developmental, cultural, social, unconscious, situational processes - including serendipitous events or chance. And they integrate in idiosyncratic and continuously shifting ways for each individual. So for example in the same classroom, or the same family, or the same workplace different individuals will have different motivations, because each one experiences a different integration of these hosts of parameters. Um and people have different goals, and different interests, um different background, different personal characteristics - um so they have different perceptions of the environment and what this environment entails. They pay attention to different aspects of the environment. Um they live in different situations in a way, so they have different perceptions of what they are able to do and not able to do, and different people will have that in the same context. So this is way different students, or different workers in the same workplace will have different responses to the same incentives – because they actually are not the same incentives for them. Um these incentives integrate with many other things to propel their experience in different motivation. Now this doesn’t mean that anything goes. The fact that it’s a highly complex and involves a lot of idiosyncrasies doesn’t mean that anything goes - there are certain features of the human motivation system. So while it’s very complex, while it’s very contextualized and idiosyncratic, we do know that there are certain parameters of mechanisms that are part of this interplay of factors and processes. And along the past decades, motivation researchers actually identified quite a few of these distinct parameters of mechanisms. So for example, we know that perceiving oneself as capable to handle the task is a central important motivation parameter. Um we know that believing that one can increase their ability for effort and use their strategies as an important motivating parameter. We know that goal setting—and particularly setting goals that are proximal, specific, self-referenced, and important to the person is an important mechanism that is motivating. We know that valuing the task, because it’s perceived as interesting, or important, or useful is a motivating parameter. We know that experiencing self-determination – that one is doing something with the feeling that it’s something worthwhile doing for its own sake is a motivating parameter. Another important parameter is the feeling that you and people like you belong in context, and that you have social legitimacy to improve the task – is a very important motivating parameter. Um we also know that motivation is a social construction, so it’s a – something that happens through social relationships and interactions. Strongly influenced by conversations, by persuasion, by the negotiation of meaning – of what it means to do something in this situation. So there are many mechanisms and parameters of research—research identified demotivating parameters and mechanisms. So we know that an experiencing, uh experiencing coercion is demotivating. We know that perceiving the task as a highly taxing in effort for example, or exposing risk to self-worth, or a risk to a social relationship, or a risk to successions other important tasks is demotivating. Uh and we know that perceiving the - or the feeling that people like you do not belong in the context, or you’re not perceived as legitimately engaging in a particular task is demotivating. What we know less about is, and actually what research is scarce about, is how all of these mechanisms and parameters integrate um in the unique experience of individuals in the particular context and a long time to manifest in the motivation and learning. So knowing the mechanisms is very important, but it’s hardly enough. And each mechanism may be more or less salient to different individuals, and even for the very same individual along situations in time. So what we need to do is investigate the principles by which these mechanisms integrate and shift, and by this maybe generate some of the nature of this complex motivational system and how it operates, and in recent work we have been pursing such principles. So you asked how I understand now motivation based on my 20 years of research in the field, and we found very useful, to think about motivation in the person’s identity - who the person believes they are in the particular situation. This is perhaps a bit of a simplistic way, but in thinking about how all of these parameters and mechanisms integrate, we contend that they to some degree reflect the processes that underlie the person’s decision to act in particular ways in order to pursue particular goals in the situation, in light of their assumptions about the situation and themselves in that situation. So we are researching this module, if you will, and the complex processes that underlie making the decision about action and how that emerges in these situations.

**KL:** So I think that connection between motivation and identity makes a ton of sense, because it would also explain why someone might have a motivation that changes over time. Like I can imagine as a college student, maybe I would be motivated to complete a survey if you gave me a hundred dollars and it was going to take a lot of my time. But now I might say, “Well I don’t really need a hundred dollars, I would rather have my time. So no. I’m not going to complete that survey.” But I’m still the same person, I’ve just been kind of – you know, I’m in different context, I have a different maybe sense of my identity, or my financial worth, or the worth of my time or whatever it may be. Um so is that kind of a good example of tying motivation to identity and how it can shift over time even with the same person?

**AK:** Yes, and even more so, identity is the whole podcast – well actually several podcast in itself, because it’s very, very complex term, like motivation is. Um and it has been looked at in very diverse ways in the literature. The way we look at identity is that it is actually constructed in each situation. Of course it’s not constructed in a vacuum or a blank slate, but it’s integrating what the person brings with them to the situation, and officials of the situation – and we base it in the role that that person occupies in that situation. So you for example, yes you had the role of a college student, and what that meant to you because – so there’s the cultural role of the college student, but then each person fills it with their unique contents, um but even now for example that you’re not a college student anymore, you don’t have that role. It’s actually a past role that you have. But right now you have multiple other roles, and in each situation you shift, and you occupy more dominantly a particular role, and it’s a hierarchical system also, because within a particular role – let’s say a teacher, there are sub roles in that. So there’s the role of the classroom disciplinarian, and there’s the teacher of content and the evaluator of learning. So there’s multiple sub roles under the role of the teacher, and what guides your motivation and action in a situation is which role is dominant in guiding your meaning making in that situation. And what we are interested in is how to describe this role identity as we call it. Um and the little model that I had described to you before, so how does one make a decision in particular ways in light of perceiving a particular situation – and themselves in the situation, that sort of encapsulates how we consider role identity, and it’s complex dynamic system. It continuously shifts, and is influenced by unconscious processes, and culture, and social interactions. Um and in the domain in which you operate in serendipitous events. So what we’re trying actually to capture in our research, is the principles by which role identity motivational system operates. And it’s – I will give you a metaphor that I give to my students. Some people look at psychological phenomena like motivation as a Rube Goldberg Machine, so it’s very complicated, it has many, many elements, but each element is connected to the next element in a very linear, particular way, that operates the same way again, and again. Um and some people study motivation in such a way. Um we look at motivation and goal identity motivation using a different metaphor. So our metaphor is a school of fish and how school of fish move in the ocean, or a murmuration of sterlings, or flocks of birds that move in very complicated and dynamic and complex non-linear ways. And so the motivation of the person is like this flock of birds. It looks different every time. However, there’s certain principles by which these flocks operate. Not everything goes, there’s some boundaries and control parameters that govern the behavior of this flock of birds, and we see transfer this understanding to motivation and that is how we try to understand it.

**KL:** Okay so this is incredibly complex. I feel like we’re just unpeeling layers of an onion here. We’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’re going to hear a little bit more from Avi about some of his work with methodological diversity. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** So Avi, one of the areas of interest I know that you have is methodological diversity. And you use such a range of methods in your work, from case studies to designed based research. How are you choosing which method aligns with a particular research question?

**AK:** Well selection of methodology should be done to align with the assumptions that the researcher has about the phenomenon of study and the research question. Some people find it useful to think about it in sets of assumptions or paradigms. Um so in motivational research, educational psychology, and in fact in psychology more generally, the dominant paradigm is post positivism. Um so there’s a set of assumption that psychological processes operate on certain general, natural cause of laws that are the same across all people and that the goal of research is to identify these laws. Most researchers understand that we can never really identify these laws absolutely, but the belief is that by using scientific methods, we can use theories and then general hypothesis, and test them in an attempt to falsify them in fact. And as long as they’re not falsified and they can replicate, then we can work on the – we can assume that they are close enough to the truth. Um and such assumptions call for methodologies that help test these hypothesis about causal laws. This is why the randomized controlled trials are considered the gold standard in psychological research, because they provide probably best -even not a good one, but the best available methods to identify causal mechanisms, and rule out alternative hypotheses – explanations. Um but, there are psychologist who hold different paradigms, different sets of assumptions about psychological phenomenon. For example, some psychologist hold psychological phenomenon to be based in the meanings that people make about their experiences in their life and in their actions. And these meanings to a large degree are cultural, contextual, and idiosyncratic – and the goal of research in this paradigm is not to test hypothesis about general causal laws, but to understand how people make meaning about their life and about their actions, and what these meanings are, how these meanings influence experience and actions, and how they are constructed. So um, and also once you understand this, maybe you can know how to influence these meanings so that they are more adaptive. So in such assumptions call for different research methods to pursue these means and how they operate.

**KL:** So in a recent piece that you’ve done, and we’ll link to this citation in the show notes so folks can follow up if they’re interested, but you argue that educational psychology is failing at methodological diversity. I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you mean by that.

**AK:** Um so, what I mean by that is – in educational psychology, the ruling paradigm is post positivism and the methods of choice within this paradigm are quantitative methodologies and research methods that use quantitative data to test hypothesis. No increasingly, educational psychologist acknowledge that this is a limited way of looking at this phenomena, and that the methods are limited. Um and they may present to us a very narrow view of the phenomena we might not understand, and there have been attempts to diversify the methodologies and they have not been successful. So what happens is the central journals in educational psychology are less likely to publish articles that use qualitative methodologies, narrative research, um design based research, um or even quantitative methodologies that are not based on hypothesis testing. Um so – editors now try to create more hospitable environments in their journals for these kind of articles, and kind of studies. It is slow to happen – it is happening though, which I am happy about. So for example, the recent effort by the editor of the *Journal of Educational Psychology,* which is the flagship journal of the field, they are now – they have organized a special issue to highlight these kinds of methods and methodologies to indicate to their community members that the journal will except and consider such studies. Unfortunately what happened is that before this there have been, perhaps for more than a decade, there have been calls to diversify the journals, which has not been successful. Hopefully now things are changing.

**KL:** So I think you’ve pointed to one of the challenges of diversifying methodologies and that there are maybe some gate keepers in the field that are causing some obstacles to have that be happening, but I’m wondering if there are some other challenges to achieving this kind of methodological diversity. I mean, is it that people aren’t trained in these methodologies? Or are there other kind of challenges that you can identify?

**AK:** Well sure. I think training is a big thing. I think that the post positivist paradigm is taken for granted in the field. People are not even reflecting that these are the set of assumptions they operate under. And the way that we train doctoral students in educational psychology, and in psychology more generally, it is – according to the post positivist paradigm, without even naming it. So what happens that people who are graduates are socialized into thinking that this is the open and true way of looking at these phenomena and investigating them, so other ways are just not legitimate and not considered scientific. And therefore, editors and reviewers just don’t consider these legitimate and reject these manuscripts. So I think we need – it’s an educational process. It’s an educational process that focuses on philosophy of science. And what of these set of assumptions make them explicit, have people actually construct intentionally their belief system about the phenomenon of the study, then align their methodologies to the assumptions and the research questions they’re asking.

**KL:** Mhm. Let’s flip it around. What are some of the benefits that you’re seeing? I mean, this is something that you’re saying is slow going, but it’s happening. What are the benefits that you see striving toward having this kind of methodological diversity in the field?

**AK:** The benefits are much richer understanding of the phenomena that we are studying. Uh and constructive critique of findings from one methodology to the findings of the other so each methodology has its own benefits, strengths, and limitations. And by combining insights and engaging in the intellectual effort of integrating insights from diverse methodologies into a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, we are to gain both richer and more robust understanding of the phenomena while being more humble about the findings that we get from a particular methodology.

**KL:** So I’m wondering what you think the starting point is for this. I feel like there have been a few avenues you’ve mentioned. You know, one is the training of graduate students, one is the kind of opening up of journals – two differences here. But I would also imagine, and I’ve seen this in educational research more broadly, is that the federal funding mechanism is also pretty narrow in terms of what they’re willing to accept. Um and as you’ve mention gold – randomized control trials are certainly the gold standard across the board, not just in educational psychology. Where is kind of the places where we’re going to see this change emerging from? Is it all of those things plus? You know, where are the strongest areas that you see this happening that could really cause the most change?

**AK:** Um, so I think that along with everything you’ve mentioned is involved, there is change in all of these. So even in federal funding, so I.E.S., the Institute of Educational Sciences has now funding programs that will fund partnerships for designed-based research. The National Science also has – increasingly is hospitable to grant proposals that are not just hypothesis testing. Um so we see a positive move there, but I think that education is – and educational broadly is defined. In philosophy of science and awareness of the assumptions that go into choice of methodologies and the legitimacies of the findings that come out of different studies – I think that’s paramount. And it’s happening. It’s happening, as I said, in these federal funding agencies, in the journals its happening. I think it’s happening less, as far as I know, in training of Ph.D. students. And the main place that it needs to happen is in communities of tenure – promotions and tenure in universities. They need to acknowledge journals that publish qualitative studies or studies from other paradigms as legitimate. They need themselves to consider research as legitimate, and they need to – some of the standards of what’s considered top journals versus second tier journals, or third tier journals. I mean, all of these – this needs to become a conversation in order to change the field and incentivize, particularly in early researchers engaging in such work.

**KL:** What I think you’ve pointed to an important issue here, which is there’s a little bit of a risk to engaging in methodological diversity in some fields, and it may be that these conversations need to be happening from the people with tenure who are kind of demonstrating how to do this, because as you’ve mentioned doctoral students are being trained in a certain way because they know that that’s what they need to succeed right now and don’t want to put them in a situation where they’re not going to have the tools they need to achieve tenure to advance in their fields. It seems like maybe these conversations need to be happening at a post tenure level.

**AK:** Oh for sure. Yeah. And I think that to go back to our previous segment on identity and motivation, how do we facilitate the constructional identities and motivation among doctoral students and then early career researchers where their identities are pursuit of knowledge, being aware, and being agents of their own identities and motivation to pursue knowledge along values that they have in environments that are more hospitable and accepting of diverse perspectives.

**KL:** So I do want to point our listeners to a previous episode that we had, we’ll link to it in the show notes, with Nina Huntemann where she talked about learning new skills mid-career, and what does it mean to kind of shift methodologies or shift paradigms of thinking about research. Avi, I would love to close with just hearing, you know, for people who are listening to this as individual researchers and are thinking, “I’m curious about his, I want to broaden my understanding of my own kind of methodological diversity.” Where would you start? You know, in terms of just kind of thinking about how to learn a methodology that’s maybe not familiar to you, or – do you have any ideas for individual researchers who are curious and want to maybe start thinking about this for their own careers?

**AK:** There is a lot of literature on paradigms in social science research. Um the leading names perhaps are and Lincoln, who published in the 80’s and 90’s – 1980’s and 1990’s – about these different paradigms there, the different ontological assumptions that these paradigms have about phenomena, different epistemological assumptions that one adopts within these paradigms, and the methodologies that are aligned within these ontological and epistemological assumptions. We can put a link to their work – that would be a good start. And then there’s other researchers who have been writing about methods alternative to the dominant methods – randomized controlled trials for example – pointing to that they’re limited to strengths, but also that they’re limitations and alternatives. Uh, Maxwell from James Madison University, for example, he’s a research - a scholar that I appreciate a lot in writing for about a certain approach in philosophy of science that’s called critical realism. That is an alternative to the regularity perspective on causality that post positivism is dominated by. So there is a lot of interesting scholarship out there to learn from.

**KL:** Well we will definitely put these citations in the show notes, link to the things that we can so that people can check them out. I have a couple in mind myself that have been very helpful as I think through these issues. Avi, I want to thank you so much for coming on the show, sharing your expertise, and giving us a little bit of a window into learning motivation and also methodological diversity. Thanks for your time today!

**AK:** Thank you very much! It’s been a pleasure.

**KL:**  And thanks also to our listeners, for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this bonus clip for Episode 115 of the Research in Action Podcast, Dr. Avi Kaplan discusses methods for measuring motivation. Take a listen.

Avi, I’m curious, what are some of the ways that motivation is measured, maybe just within your own work or just in the field as you’re looking at motivation? What are some of the ways that it’s measured?

**AK:** Uh well this perhaps relates to the second segment that we were talking about methodological diversity. It’s measured in very different ways. By observation, looking at people and what they do. Uhm by having people report on the reasons of what they’re doing badly – either by interviews or through self-report scales. Uh by combination of these methods, um we conduct observations and then interview about what they did, we interview people about things that lead them post-talk after they’ve done it. I think that a main method at the moment, which again relates to the non-diversity of methodologies and motivation, is that a lot of the measures are self-reported scales.

**KL:** So I’m curious, like connected to that Avi, to what degree to you find that some people might not know what their motivation is? I mean, is this something that’s always apparent if they’re self-reporting, they may not really know, or maybe it’s unconscious.

**AK:** So there is a lot of unconscious processes and motivation, and interestingly, as the feel of motivation research moves along the decade, the emphasis on unconscious processes has shifted. So it was very prominent in the 1950’s and 60’s, but then with the cognitive revolution in psychology more generally, it shifted away from unconscious processes also in motivation to cognitive processes. Um now – there’s always been a group of researchers who have continued to study unconscious motivational processes, and now they are experiencing some comeback with an integration of unconscious and conscious processes. So to go back to the question of measurement, so unconscious motivation is studied with projective [*indiscernible*].So people are getting an evocative image, like a picture, and then they’re asked to tell stories about - hypothetical stories, and then their unconscious motivations are derived by coding these stories and what it reveals about people’s assumptions and emotional connections with particular stimuli that they may not even be aware of.

**KL:** Okay, that’s really fascinating. That’s like a podcast episode in itself I think – that we could go into all of that.

You’ve just heard a bonus clip from Episode 115 of the Research in Action Podcast with Dr. Avi Kaplan Discussing Methods for measuring motivation. Thanks for listening!

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