whether religious or otherwise, shaping what it is that groups find sacred and valuable – a tendency that likely extends to the group norms governing the appropriate-ness of self-sacrifice and how it can be expressed (Gómez et al. 2017; McGregor et al. 2015).

Self-sacrifice can happen outside of a group setting, as in the case of celebrity suicide imitation (Stack 1987). It can also happen in a group setting in response to collective threats, but in a non-violent way, as in the case of self-immolation (Biggs 2005; Somasundaram et al. 2016). A violence-justifying ideological narrative is needed to help shape expressions of self-sacrifice toward terrorism and other violence-inflicting acts for the sake of the group (Kruglanski et al. 2018). Evidence suggests that specific scriptural passages help encourage violence (Bushman et al. 2007), and religious beliefs have been found to play a key role in explaining religious extremism (Appleby 1999; Dawson 2018; Dawson & Amarasingam 2017; Wood 2016). In some cases, religiosity has been found to correlate with the increased endorsement of violent self-sacrifice (Cinnirella et al. 2010; Rink & Sharma 2018).

In conclusion, Whitehouse’s model can be enriched with the acknowledgments (1) that environmental threats can lead individuals to become extreme outside of a group setting and predispose them to dogmatic ideologies, and (2) that environmental threats and ideologies can shape group norms that help facilitate readiness to violently self-sacrifice within groups. Integration of these factors would enrich Whitehouse’s model, informing scientific understanding of the broader context of self-sacrificial acts and informing practical interventions oriented toward preventing suicide terrorism.

Motivational (con)fusion: Identity fusion does not quell personal self-interest

Lowell Gaertnera, Amy Hegerb and Constantine Sedikidesb

Department of Psychology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996 and Centre for Research on Self and Identity, School of Psychology, University of Southampton, Southampton S017 1BJ, United Kingdom.

https://psychology.utk.edu/faculty/gaertner.php aheger@vols.utk.edu https://www.southampton.ac.uk/psychology/about/staff/cs2/page

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We question whether altruistic motivation mediates the link between identity fusion and extreme self-sacrifice. Whitehouse argues that “altruistic motivation is a necessary condition” (sect. 2, para. 4) for acts such as suicidal terrorism and offers identity fusion as a catalyst, because, unlike other forms of self-group alignment (e.g., tribal instincts, social identification [Richerson & Henrick 2012; Tafel & Turner 1979]), it is a “powerful social glue to overcome selfish drives and impulses” (sect. 6, para. 4). In contrast, we review two lines of research indicating that identity fusion does not quell personal self-interest and propose, instead, that egoism is the motivational link.

One line of research examines the motivational significance of three forms of identity: the personal self, which reflects a person’s subjective uniqueness; the relational self, which reflects attachments to close others; and the collective self, which reflects memberships in valued groups. Primary experiments (Gaertner et al. 1999; Nehrligh et al. 2018), meta-analysis (Gaertner et al. 2002), and cross-cultural comparisons (Gaertner et al. 2012) constitute evidence of a motivational hierarchy topped by the personal self, followed by the relational self, and tailed by the collective self (Sedikides et al. 2013). Relative to their other selves, for example, people respond more intensely to threat and enhancement of their personal self, attribute more of who they are to their personal self, associate more future goals with their personal self, and accredit greater worth to their personal self. But, does fusion moderate this hierarchy?

Given that fusion entails a union of the personal and collective selves and a strong sense of relational ties to in-group members (Swann et al. 2012, 2014a), it is possible that the hierarchy disintegrates, and all three selves are equally valued when the collective self is derived from a fused group. Two experiments, however, suggest that this is not the case (Heger & Gaertner 2018a). Participants in both experiments were randomly assigned to describe an in-group to which they are fused or not fused and were continuously primed with that in-group while performing a subsequent task. One experiment used a pronoun preference task in which participants (N = 155) rated how well a personal pronoun (I, me, my) and a collective pronoun (we, us, our) fit each of 20 sentences (e.g., “The sun went in just when [I, we] decided to go outside” [Wegner & Giuliano 1980]). The other experiment used a self-description task in which participants (N = 126) wrote 20 descriptions to the question “who are you?” and then rated how much each description represented their personal self, relational self, and collective self. Although the fusion manipulation was successful in both experiments (confirmed by the verbal identity fusion scale [Gómez et al. 2011a]), fusion did not alter the motivational hierarchy. When thinking of either a fused or not fused in-group, participants preferred the fit of personal over collective pronouns and considered their self-descriptions to be more representative of their personal self than of either their relational or collective selves.

The other line of research examines identity fusion and reported willingness to sacrifice the in-group for the benefit of the personal self (Heger & Gaertner 2018b). As Whitehouse reviews, fusion positively predicts reported willingness to sacrifice the self for the in-group. Based on the identity synergy principle of fusion theory (i.e., activation of the collective self activates, in turn, the personal self and vice versa [Swann et al. 2012]), we reasoned that fusion would similarly promote willingness to sacrifice the in-group for the self. To test this possibility, we revised the scale typically used to assess self-sacrifice (i.e., fight-and-die scale [Swann et al. 2009]) to measure group sacrifice. A pilot study (N = 120) and two primary studies (N = 190 and 189) replicated the typical finding that fusion positively predicts reported willingness to sacrifice the self for the in-group and additionally found, in those same participants, that identity fusion positively predicts reported willingness to sacrifice the in-group for the personal self.
The reviewed lines of research suggest that if fusion promotes suicidal self-sacrifice, it does so by increasing personal self-interest, rather than diminishing it. Egoism, not altruism, is the motivational link. Given that persons and in-groups are positively interdependent and share a common fate, actions that benefit the in-group can be driven by self-interest (Gaertner & Insko 2000; Gramzow & Gaertner 2005). Empirical efforts to distinguish altruistic from egoistic motivation often dissect the emotional precursors of behavior with (1) an empathic emotional state of feeling for others, leading to altruistic motivation, and (2) emotional states of personal distress and feeling as others feel, leading to egoistic motivation (Batson 2011). The assertion that with identity fusion “when the group is felt to be threatened, it feels personal” (sect. 3, para. 3) implies personal distress or feeling as others feel and points to the possibility of egoism (O’Mara et al. 2011). Whitehouse’s theory emphasizes the moderating role of out-group threat. Perhaps in such a context, where the loss of one’s way of life and/or the death of valued others is imminent, the anticipated psychological pain of living without having tried at all costs to preserve and protect (i.e., an egoistic, not altruistic, concern) overpowers survival and culminates in the ultimate sacrifice.

Self-sacrifice for a cause: The role of ideas and beliefs in motivating human conflict

Jeremy Ginges and Crystal Shackleford

New School for Social Research, New York, NY 10011.
gingesj@newschool.edu  shacc319@newschool.edu
https://www.newschool.edu/nssr/faculty/Jeremy-Ginges/
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Abstract

The role of ideas and beliefs is generally underplayed in Whitehouse’s account. However, just as people may feel that their identity is fused with a collective, they may also feel that their identity is fused with an idea (god, history, justice), which can motivate the same type of behaviors that Whitehouse seeks to explain.

In a fascinating paper, Whitehouse makes perhaps the strongest case yet for the importance of identity fusion in motivating self-sacrificial behavior of individuals in human conflict. His thesis is that when individual identities are “fused” with the group, a threat to the group is experienced as a threat to self, thereby motivating self-sacrificial behavior such as suicide attacks. Whitehouse’s argument gives a primary role to identity fusion and explicitly discounts the theoretical relevance of belief. Here, we argue for the importance of beliefs in motivating much human conflict and sacrifice in the name of the cause.

How can we understand the type of violent self-sacrifice that occurs so frequently in human conflict? Identity fusion seems important, but the fact that an individual is fused to a common identity tells us little about what types of behaviors he or she will carry out for the collective under threat. To explain this, we need to understand how people reason about ideas and beliefs that motivate specific behaviors. Many young groups of Germans in the 1940s were fused with each other, but few sacrificed their lives to oppose the Nazi regime, as was the case with the White Rose nonviolent resistance group (Dumbach & Newborn 2017). People who feel fused with a group in the face of a threat may kill and die, but they may also decide to negotiate and compromise to end intergroup conflict, or they might offer nonviolent resistance. These different modes of behaviors are tied to shared beliefs about the nature of their group, the nature of morality, and intergroup relations (Kruglanski et al. 2013; Rai & Fiske 2011). Sprinzak (1990) described the way the changing nature of such beliefs correlates with changing collective behavior, from nonviolent protest to political violence. Indeed, the stated aim of much political violence is to change the way an already-fused collective views itself, making it ready for rebellion (Ginges 1997).

Whitehouse’s argument is that threat translates identity fusion into action. Although this is likely to be true, threats are more than material in nature. Often, people will be motivated to sacrifice themselves because of threats not to material survival, but to an abstract idea (Bélanger et al. 2014). Shared ideas and beliefs about the world help us to coordinate and cooperate. We use shared beliefs to define self (Atran & Ginges 2012) and tell stories to promote within-group cooperation (Smith et al. 2017). Such beliefs can become so cherished that they acquire transcendental meaning or sacredness, for which people are willing to sacrifice their lives, their family, or their community (Ginges et al. 2007; 2011). Threats to sacred values can motivate noninstrumentally rational commitments to violent action (Ginges & Atran 2011). We die for the group, but we also die for ideas.

A complete explanation of self-sacrifice in human conflict needs to consider the way people conceptualize self relative to collective identities, but also the way they conceptualize self relative to other abstract beliefs. Beliefs are often markers for collective identity, but they cannot be reduced to this. The opposite can be true: Groups are formed because of common beliefs, and a group may split because of different beliefs among its members (Sprinzak 1990). Moreover, sometimes self-sacrifice is carried out for a belief at the expense of a group with which one feels fused. Some years ago, one of us, in the course of carrying out fieldwork with Jewish Israelis living in the West Bank (“settlers”), was told by interviewees that they would refuse to leave their land and homes if the government or even their community voted to leave, because the value of the land trumped all else. In studies with frontline combatants in Iraq and Spanish civilians, Gómez et al. (2017) found that (a) when given a choice between an important sacred value and a group with which they feel fused, frontline combatants are more likely to choose the value over the group, and (b) among frontline combatants, willingness to choose the value over the group predicts willingness to sacrifice in the conflict. Of course, the opposite will also sometimes occur, where people might sacrifice a cherished value for a cherished group.

Why do individual humans sacrifice their own lives, and those of others, for non-kin? One possibility is that neither sacred values nor fused identities have primary roles in facilitating the types of self-sacrifice Whitehouse is seeking to explain. Rather, both are important. Humans frequently sacrifice all in the name of abstract causes. It is not the nature of the cause that is important. The cause may be the group or another abstract belief like...
they motivated by egoism (e.g., self-preservation) or altruism (e.g., concern for the welfare of others)? What can studies of social synchrony tell us about the mechanisms underlying identity fusion? How long does it take for a shared experience to increase trait fusion and what exactly is the process?

A third cluster concerns changes in fusion over the life cycle. For example, do different pathways to fusion emerge during different periods of development (or, does the shared biology pathway become established earlier than the shared experience one)? Does group psychology emerge prior to the capacity to fuse or the other way around? Or neither? Why are fused adolescents, and especially male adolescents, more likely to fight and die for a group?

A fourth cluster focuses on the nature and diversity of fusion targets. For example, how does fusion with a relational group differ from fusion with a group category? How far can fusion be extended? Can one fuse with anyone or anything? To what extent does moral expansiveness affect the degree to which fusion can be extended to encompass species and even objects and concepts unrelated to any in-group?

A fifth cluster of questions concerns the nature of the link between fusion and self-sacrifice. In addition to out-group threat, several potential moderators of the relationship between fusion and violent self-sacrifice were suggested, including violence-condoning norms, access to deadly weapons, absence of peaceful mechanisms for conflict resolution, entitativity, segregation of in-groups and out-groups, and fitness interdependence among in-group members. To what extent do individual differences (e.g., with respect to impulsivity and aggression) affect the likelihood of fusion to motivate violent self-sacrifice? And does fusion predict fighting or dying equally, or one more than the other?

Finally, a sixth cluster concerns the extent to which group experiences can be transmitted across generations. Can the effects of shared experiences and out-group threat on warfare intensity be detected in the human past? If so, can historical patterns of group bonding and warfare be used to predict the outcomes of present and future conflicts?

I thank all of the commentators for generating this formidable list of questions and apologize if any have been inadvertently neglected. Taking these questions seriously and building new research designs to investigate them will not only enable us to understand better why people can be so passionately committed to their groups but may also help us to develop interventions to make the human world more peaceful.

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