

Target Article Author: Harvey Whitehouse

Commentary Title:

Motivational (Con)fusion: Identity Fusion does not Quell Personal-Self Interest

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Abstract:

We question whether altruistic motivation links identity-fusion and extreme self-sacrifice. We review two lines of research suggesting that the underlying motivation is plausibly egoistic.

Main Text:

We question whether altruistic motivation links identity-fusion and extreme self-sacrifice. Whitehouse argues that “altruistic motivation is a necessary condition” (p. 7) 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” (p. 36). 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, Sedikides, & Graetz, 1999; Nehrlich, Gebauer, Sedikides, & Abele, 2018), meta-analysis (Gaertner, Sedikides, Vevea, & Iuzzini, 2002), and cross-cultural comparisons (Gaertner et al., 2012) evidence a motivational hierarchy topped by the personal-self, followed by the relational-self, and tailed by the collective-self (Sedikides, Gaertner, Luke, O'Mara, & Gebauer, 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 ingroup members (Swann et al., 2014; Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012), 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 such is not the case (Heger & Gaertner, 2018). Participants in both experiments were randomly assigned to describe an ingroup to which they are fused or not-fused and were continuously primed with that ingroup 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 & Guiliano, 1980). The other experiment used a self-description task in which participants ($N = 126$) wrote 20 descriptions to answer "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., 2011), fusion did not alter the motivational hierarchy. When thinking of either a fused or not-fused ingroup, 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 ingroup for the benefit of the personal-self (Heger & Gaertner, in press). As Whitehouse reviews, fusion positively predicts reported willingness to sacrifice the self for the ingroup. 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 ingroup for the self. To test this possibility, we revised the scale typically used to assess self-sacrifice (i.e., fight-and-die scale; Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009) in order to measure group-sacrifice. A pilot-study ($N = 120$) and two primary studies ($Ns = 190$ and 189) replicated the typical finding that fusion positively predicts reported willingness to sacrifice the self for the ingroup, and additionally found, in those same participants, that identity fusion positively predicts reported willingness to sacrifice the ingroup 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 ingroups are positively interdependent and share a common fate, actions that benefit the ingroup 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” (Whitehouse, p. 12) implies personal distress or feeling-*as*-others-*feel* and points to the possibility of egoism (O’Mara, Jackson, Batson, & Gaertner, 2011). Whitehouse’s theory emphasizes the moderating role of outgroup 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.

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