SOCIAL EVOLUTION FORUM

Three Wishes for the World

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If you had three wishes to change the world, what would they be? Perhaps you would like to put an end to war? Reverse global warming? Or eliminate extreme poverty?

Introduction

The key to solving all these problems is glue. It doesn't come in a tube. It's a very special adhesive – the kind that holds societies together. Social scientists call it 'social cohesion' or 'solidarity'. Whatever we choose to call it, social glue is what makes people cooperate and solve problems for the greater good.

Understanding how groups become glued together is crucial to addressing some of the biggest issues facing humanity today.

If I had three wishes for the world, they would be:

1. To predict, prevent, and resolve civil wars. We know that about half of all insurgencies peter out within a year of their formation. Those that survive seem to have found the knack for producing the social glue we are interested in. Attacking such groups with bullets and bombs actually seems to bind them even more tightly together. If you want to disband groups like this it would be more effective to sabotage the mechanisms that fuse them to a common cause. The more we understand these mechanisms the more we can do to curtail sectarian violence, genocide, and many other forms of civil conflict.

2. To channel social cohesion for the collective good. Civil strife can produce social glue. We had a researcher on the ground in Libya throughout the recent revolution observing how the collective will of ordinary citizens brought a modern army to its knees (albeit with some help from NATO). We now know more about the mechanisms that made this possible. If only that energy could have been harnessed more productively in the aftermath of Gaddafi's downfall, then Libya might be a very different place today.

3. To mobilize a global response to economic inequality and environmental threat. Many social movements in the twentieth century experimented with rituals aimed at binding us together as a species to solve world problems.

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Those experiments have largely failed – visions of a communist utopia or a brotherhood of man have been shattered by old divisions or faded in time. But that doesn't mean they couldn't work. We are currently studying movements of this kind on the Pacific island archipelago of Vanuatu. Imagine if we could find a new and more effective way of gluing together our species as a whole, championing a set of shared values and goals underwritten by a universal morality rather than a doctrinal orthodoxy of any kind. That would be the first crucial step in solving some of the world's biggest collective action problems – global warming and extreme poverty being only two examples.

Pie in the sky? Some of us don't think so. I direct a project that tries to explain how social glue is produced and how it can be used (Whitehouse 2012; Jones 2013). It is the single largest project ever funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council and it is also the most international one ever, involving the coordinated efforts of scientists not only in North America and Europe, but also around the world, including many countries that are not often associated with scientific breakthroughs. It has to be that way, because the glue we are interested in is often stronger in traditional or rural cultures and weaker in the big urban centres where scientists typically work.

Two Kinds of Social Glue

There are two main kinds of social glue: 'social identification' and 'identity fusion'. The latter is most simply described as a visceral sense of oneness with others in one's group. This may be manifested in a variety of ways. For instance, when another group member is threatened it prompts the same defensive reactions as a personal attack. For the fused individual, the boundary between the personal and social self is porous – activation of one's sense of personal self also serves to activate feelings about the social self. Fused individuals regard other members of their group as irreplaceable, and seek to reform and reintegrate them when they violate their group's norms rather than kicking them out for good. When the group is under attack, or their status threatened, fusion increases commitment to maintain the group.

Identity fusion is a widespread feature of kin groups and other small social units whose members share the trials and tribulations of life together. This sharing of experiences as well as the memories of those experiences, particularly of enduring and overcoming hardships, seems to be an important part of the mechanism generating fusion, most commonly within families but sometimes also within much larger groups.

My mother remembers how tightly glued together our family was throughout the war. During the Blitz they spent a lot of time huddled together in bomb shelters. One night, however, my mother's uncle and aunt and their

young son emerged before the All Clear had been sounded, and went inside. The last bomb of the air raid fell on their house and they were killed instantly.

An evacuee at the time, my mother only heard about the tragedy months later. She was on the top deck of a bus. She remembers it being a glorious day, the pretty summer dress she was wearing, that it was a treat to get the seat at the front. Her mother turned to her and said: "Your uncle and auntie's house was bombed and they were inside it. Your cousin too." That was all. It would have been improper to display emotion in public, so where better to deliver the news than on a crowded London bus? My mother was nine years old at the time.

It is very unlikely my mother would have remembered the weather or what she was wearing or even where she was sitting that day on the bus, were it not for the emotional impact of my grandmother's words. Integral to our sense of self is a set of memories of past experiences, including episodes that are felt to be especially salient in forming who we are. Such episodes will often relate to painful or disturbing experiences because these are generally better remembered than pleasant or gratifying ones.

While these 'bad' experiences come to form part of our personal autobiographies that does not necessarily mean they are rehearsed as narratives. Often, there are social disincentives to talk about such experiences — because they conflict with idealized conceptions of family life, gender roles, Britishness, or whatever. But that doesn't mean the memories are lost. They remain as part of our private sense of self. Indeed this sense of privacy, of experience that is internally generated rather than externally imposed, adds to the authenticity of these aspects of our self-conception.

The impression that highly salient personal experiences are shared by others fuels the fusion of self and other. It is as if those who have been through the same thing are more 'like us' and the boundary between self and other becomes more porous. This would help to explain why people who endure terrible ordeals, such as natural disasters or wars, or who have experienced persecution or oppression, often feel a special bond with their fellow sufferers. My mother, for example, felt a special connection with children who turned up at school with black armbands. And conversely, it can feel as if people who haven't actually experienced your pain themselves cannot truly understand it, and may seem inauthentic if they talk about the subject with an air of authority.

In all these respects, identity fusion differs from what psychologists call 'social identification' (Swann et al. 2012). Social identity theorists have repeatedly shown that personal and group identities are non-overlapping. Social identity and group identity have a sort of hydraulic relationship to each other: the more one is activated, the less the other is. If your group identity prevails in your social life, the less prominently social identity will feature.

Attacks on the group activate social but not personal selves in people who identify with, but are not fused with, the group. Pro-group action is not motivated by the personal self. Members of the group are replaceable and norm violators can be more readily excluded from the group. When the status of the group is threatened, identification with the group is weakened.

Shared Dysphoria, Fusion, and Extreme Rituals

In 2011, project researcher Brian McQuinn went to Misrata, Libya, to study people's experiences of the siege of their city by Gaddafi's troops. Amid the victory celebrations, I joined him there. In collaboration with Bill Swann, a social psychologist based at the University of Texas at Austin, we designed and implemented a survey revealing that the more dysphoric (aversive or distressing) the shared experience of the fighting, the stronger the resulting identity fusion. To understand the mechanisms in more detail we are currently carrying out surveys with veterans of the Vietnam War, members of university fraternities and sororities who have undergone painful or humiliating hazing rituals, mothers who had particularly traumatic birthing experiences, survivors of disasters, and other groups that are formed around shared experiences of suffering.

Dysphoric rituals (such as painful initiations, ascetic ordeals, or severe forms of penance) are a bit like coming under fire in a warzone, but perhaps more powerfully bonding. By definition they are 'causally opaque' meaning that they can be interpreted in a seemingly infinite variety of ways: it's not clear how the actions one performs lead, through a causal chain of events, to any outcomes, so there's a lot of room for speculation and rumination. Unlike a car crash or even a traumatic experience on the battlefield, which provokes a rather limited array of reflections (who was to blame, why me, etc), the range of interpretations that one can place on a dysphoric ritual experience is more open-ended. Indeed, the sense of its significance can actually increase over time, rather than decay. In communal rituals we observe others undergoing the same experience, and can imagine them sharing the same rich interpretive process afterwards. The forces shaping one's own uniquely personal experiences are felt to be shared by a special cohort of others, causing group members who have undergone these rituals to 'fuse'.

That's one of our hypotheses, at least. In a series of experiments using artificial rituals and varying levels of arousal (intensity of feeling) we have shown that, after a time delay, the volume and specificity of interpretive reflection on the rituals is greater among participants in a high-arousal condition than for controls (Richert et al. 2005). Similar effects have been found using field studies, by systematically comparing the interpretive richness of people's accounts of rituals involving variable levels of arousal. The

impression of sharing subtle or hidden meanings of the ritual experience is thought to contribute to high levels of identity fusion among participants. We call this the 'imagistic mode' of group cohesion (Whitehouse 2004).

Shared Identity in the Big Religions

Although the sharing of especially salient and memorable experiences seems to play an important role in identity fusion, this does not seem to be such an important feature of social identification and the categorical ties on which this is based. Social identification is more like a badge or a uniform that we can put on and take off at will. Whereas the building blocks of the personal self are internally generated states (e.g. emotions, memories, and reflections), social identities are acquired from the world around us. The sense of likeness this produces can be compelling but it doesn't penetrate our sense of self to the same extent or in the same way.

When people participate in the same rituals on a daily or weekly basis, it is impossible for them to recall the details of every occasion. Instead they represent the rituals and their meanings as *types* of behavior—a Holy Communion or a call to prayer, for instance. Psychologists describe these representations as 'procedural scripts' and 'semantic schemas'. Scripts and schemas specify what typically happens in a given ritual and what is generally thought to be its significance. In a group whose identity markers are composed mainly of scripts and schemas, what it means to be a member of the tradition is generalized beyond people of our acquaintance, applying to everyone who performs similar acts and holds similar beliefs. This route to the construction of communal identity, based on routinization of rituals and other behaviours, appears to be a necessary condition for the emergence of *imagined communities* — large populations sharing a common tradition and capable of behaving as a coalition in interactions with non-members, despite the fact that no individual in the community could possibly know all the others, or even hope to meet all of them in the course of a lifetime.

Routinization may have other important effects as well. For instance, it allows very complex networks of doctrines and narratives to be learned and stored in collective memory, making it relatively easy to spot unauthorized innovations. Moreover, routinization seems to suppress reflection, in effect producing more slavish conformity to group norms. Part of the reason may be that, having achieved procedural fluency, one no longer needs to reflect on *how* to perform the ritual, and this in turn makes one less likely to reflect on *why* one should perform it. Thus routinization would seem to aid the transmission of doctrinal orthodoxies, which are traditions of belief and practice that are relatively *immune to innovation* and in which unintended

deviation from the norm is *readily detectable*. We call this the 'doctrinal mode' of group cohesion (Whitehouse 2004).

Local and Extended Fusion

So far, both in our experiments and in our studies of dysphoric rituals in the real world, we have focused our attention mainly on rituals in small face-to-face groups. This 'local fusion' may have its evolutionary roots in psychological kinship, where shared experience acted as a proxy for genetic relatedness. Our central hypothesis is that the belief that someone else shares and so truly understands your suffering blurs the boundary between yourself and that other person. But while this can be true among people who witness each other's trials and tribulations it can also be extended by less direct routes, for example by means of especially compelling narratives. To the extent that Jesus of Nazareth's sufferings on the cross can be convincingly equated with our own sufferings it may even be possible to fuse with a person who lived thousands of years ago.

Fusion can also be extended to larger groups and ideologies — and not always in ways we would want. Consider the highly ritualized and emotional gatherings organized at Nuremberg by Hitler and his cronies. During these dark days ordinary Germans were swept up in a tide of nationalistic fervor rooted in shared ritual experiences. Nevertheless, Hitler's rallies were too big for all those attending to have known each other personally. There was also a strong doctrinal aspect that is normally lacking in dysphoric rituals: Hitler was preaching an ideology that, however repugnant to us now, was hypnotically seductive to his audiences. Apparently, people were fusing with a belief system as well as with each other.

Extended fusion of this kind is likely to be different from local fusion. In the case of Nazis at the Nuremberg rallies, they couldn't encode all the other people attending and so couldn't recognize all of them subsequently. Somebody might claim to have been present and there might be evidence to support it but I don't think this could ever be as psychologically convincing as actually remembering them being there. Moreover, at least some of the ideas associated with this kind of experience have an external origin and so are less intimately connected with the personal self. Recall that one of the hypothesized features of *local* fusion is that personal experience, on which my sense of self is at least partly constructed, provides the main reference point for sharing a common bond. So extended fusion would seem to be a more tentative kind of fusion of self and other. Since it depends on external sources as well as direct personal engagement (e.g. testimony rather than experience) it carries less conviction.

You might think that extended fusion is somehow a midway point between local fusion with known individuals and identification with large anonymous communities. But this doesn't seem to be the case – fusion with country, for example, has all the same hallmark features as fusion with family, making both kinds of fusion distinct from identification (Swann et el. 2012).

The Social Functions of Ritual, Fusion, and Identification

Identity fusion could be seen as a form of insurance through investment in social networks based on relational ties. When the fate of the group is threatened or uncertain, fused individuals experience increased commitment. And when a transgressor is identified in the group they might be punished harshly but they are nevertheless welcomed back into the fold. This kind of investment in the group is not provided by identification with groups based on categorical ties. Although there may be some exceptions, when people merely identify with a group and its status declines, so does commitment to the group. And since the members of such groups are eminently replaceable, transgressors can be eliminated (e.g. by exclusion or execution). This means that the members of fused groups can rely on the group for support even when times are hard or when one's reputation has been damaged.

Identity fusion fosters courage and self-sacrifice in the face of external threats in a way that social identification cannot. When the group is at risk of predation, members not only band together but individually experience a sense of enhanced strength, invulnerability, and increased willingness to endorse acts of outgroup hostility. This means that members of fused groups will be more formidable adversaries in inter-group conflict, all else being equal.

Prior to the emergence of the doctrinal mode in human prehistory, group identity was forged largely on the basis of directly shared experiences, including participation in rituals. Thus, the imagistic mode has long been a means of generating the impression of shared mental content based on common experience. With the appearance of more routinized rituals, however, a new kind of group identity became possible based on semantic schemas and procedural scripts that could be generalized to any member of the in-group, even to complete strangers. Simply wearing a certain mode of dress or hairstyle now revealed a lot about a person's beliefs and practices. We could then make inferences on this basis about their trustworthiness, even people we had never met before.

Routinized rituals provide a foundation for social identification with large communities, capable of encompassing indefinitely many individuals singing from the same hymn sheet (literally as well as metaphorically). Expanding the size of the in- group in this way has implications for the scale on which people

can engage in cooperative behavior, establishing a basis for cooperation with strangers simply because they carry the insignia that display shared beliefs and practices. At the same time, however, ties based on identification fulfill different social functions from ties based on fusion.

While individuals are only capable of fusing with a small number of groups (typically two or three at most), it is possible to identify with a great many different groups. This means we can build a complex division of labour in which we shift flexibly between roles as changing social situations dictate. There is no limit on the size of groups with whom identification is possible.

The emergence and spread of the doctrinal mode was facilitated by the appearance of the first ever regular collective rituals, focused around daily production and consumption, and the spread of identity markers across larger populations, for instance in the form of stamp seals used for body decoration and more standardized pottery designs in the Neolithic Middle East (Whitehouse and Hodder 2010). The appearance and spread of routinized rituals seems to have been linked to the need for greater trust and cooperation when interacting with relative strangers. Consider the difficulties of persuading people you scarcely know that they should make long-term investments in your services based on a promise, or should pay taxes or tribute in return for protection or sustenance in times of need. In the absence of more detailed information about the trustworthiness of prospective trading partners or remote governors who promise protection by their militia, shared insignia proclaiming commitment to common beliefs and practices becomes a persuasive form of evidence. In such conditions, groups with routinized rituals capable of uniting large populations will tend to out-compete those who lack shared identity markers of this kind.

Using Social Glue to Change the World

My three wishes for the world may be granted as a consequence of understanding better the way social glue works.

The first of my wishes, recall, is to repair societies torn apart by civil war. People fight and die for the group because they are glued to each other in a particularly powerful way. True, people can be forced to fight on pain of torture or execution but coercion alone is a weak and unstable way of running an army. In a smoke-filled room in Misrata surrounded by eager young men with assault rifles, the head of the revolutionary forces looked intently at me from under his camouflaged cap: “I trained many soldiers for Gaddafi before I trained the men in this room,” he said. “And I tell you that one civilian who believes in the cause and will die for his comrades is more deadly than ten soldiers who kill for a wage.”

One of the most powerful binding agents in the military may turn out to be shared dysphoria – the experience of enduring hardships together, whether in hazing rituals, grueling forms of training, or the experience of coming under fire. For thousands of years tribal groups seem to have exploited this mechanism by using terrifying and painful initiations to fuse together their fighting units and raiding parties. In civil conflicts the outgroup is not always the tribe next door – sometimes it is an organ of the state, such as the British army on Bloody Sunday or the Egyptian police at the beginning of the Arab Spring. But whoever the enemy happens to be, what drives us to fight them is not that they are in the wrong. We may point to this as a rationale but that's not what really drives us. If we fought against dictators and thugs simply because they were in the wrong we'd all be at war, all the time. Rather, when we fight back against injustice it's because we believe that its victims share our suffering. The victims are, in an important sense, one with us. So when we respond with violence it is little more than self-defense.

Shared dysphoria and the fusion of identities it produces are like an unexploded bomb – it takes only one careless move, such as an unprovoked attack by an outgroup, to unleash its lethal force. And so we should treat the presence of this kind of fusion in a population with the same respect that we treat a minefield. Just as mines can be detected and safely exploded, it should be possible also to monitor the fusion levels of communities, identifying those that could blow at any time, and harnessing their capacities for collective action in peaceful and consensual ways. That is more or less what happened in Derry, the site of Bloody Sunday — eventually. But did there need to be years of sectarian violence and appalling loss of life to make a peace process work? If this period of civil war could have been predicted surely it would have been better to begin tackling tribalism and building a more consensual system of governance *before* rather than after so many lives were lost?

Learning how to build social cohesion for the betterment of humanity is the key not only to granting my three wishes but to solving *all* collective action problems facing our species. Understanding how social glue works is the first step. At the moment we have many hypotheses but few hard facts. However, we are now engaged in a massive programme of research to test our hunches against the evidence – from the lab, from history, from buried civilizations, from the internet, from ordinary people going about their lives, and from soldiers on the battlefield. Our project hopes to unlock the secrets of social bonding and cooperation in humans. If only we could understand better how social glue works and what it does, we could harness the passions of the collective and rebuild the social organization of our species in more globally consensual ways.

True, we could continue trying to change the world by hunting down terrorists, bombing dictators, imposing economic sanctions on fundamentalist

states, and playing hardball around negotiating tables. But I believe we can change the world more, and more lastingly, by first understanding ourselves better.

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