

How Can Social Glue Foster Cooperation Rather than Competition? A commentary on *Three Wishes for the World* by Harvey Whitehouse

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In an audaciously ambitious article, Whitehouse proposes a solution to three of the world's perennial problems: (a) predicting, preventing, and resolving civil wars; (b) channeling social cohesion for the collective good; and (c) mobilizing a global response to economic inequality and environmental threat. The solution, he contends, is to buttress our understanding of something he calls "social glue".

On the face of it, the core argument here seems plausible enough. That is, there is evidence that people who are identified or fused with groups are disposed to band together with other group members and make significant sacrifices for the group. Presumably, if one could expand the visions of group members so that they embraced "humanity" rather than their local group, the goals that Whitehouse laid out for us would be within reach. But how does one expand the horizons of group members in this way? Thus far, research has focused on the ways in which social glue fuels, rather than minimizes, divisions between people. For example, social identity researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that highly identified persons are biased toward the ingroup and against the outgroup, even when membership in the group is completely arbitrary. Similarly, the identity fusion literature has demonstrated that highly fused persons endorse fighting and dying for the ingroup against the outgroup. Such evidence suggests that social glue may contribute to intergroup competition and violence rather than cooperation and peace.

If I were looking for ways to make social glue foster cooperation rather than competition, I might look in two places. Within the social psychological literature, Sheriff's (1955) classic Robber's Cave experiment showed that intergroup rivalry could be overcome by inducing rival groups to pursue the same superordinate goal. In a field experiment at a summer camp for boys, the researchers engineered a situation in which the only way for two groups of boys to achieve their goals was to cooperate with the rival group. Once the boys realized that they could achieve their own goals only by cooperating with a group they viewed as rivals, they set aside their differences and began working together. Soon, the barriers that had divided members of the two groups melted away and their relationships

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blossomed. Apparently, superordinate goals represent one means of fostering social glue.

For additional strategies for fostering social glue, I would look at Steven Pinker's (2011) book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. Pinker argues that the rates of violence in the world have declined precipitously over the course of human history. He attributes this decline to several factors, the most important one being the rise of the modern state, which suppresses violence and settles disputes among its citizens. In this instance, the modern state does not directly foster social glue. Rather, by regulating behaviors that are known to foster suspicion, distrust, and violence, the modern state creates conditions that favor the development of glue among its members.

Pinker also identifies several additional methods through which societies have fostered social glue, including the empowerment of women, increases in literacy and communication, and the rise of international trade. Much like superordinate goals, these factors have produced increases in empathy and better understanding of members of other groups, both of which may foster social glue.

In Pinker's scenario, then, the monumental changes he depicts came about through both indirect and direct strategies working together: strong government to prevent or punish destructive behaviors and social psychological processes such as super-ordinate goals that serve to bind people together. Working together, such processes may produce the social glue that encourage the better angels of our nature to emerge.

References

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