

The Notion of “Identity Fusion” Raises More Questions Than It Answers. A commentary on *Three Wishes for the World* by Harvey Whitehouse

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In his target article Whitehouse describes a fascinating and extremely worthwhile program of research. We understand that this research is in its early stages, and so we are not too concerned that at the moment, his exposition of it raises many more questions for us than it answers. We offer up these questions, not really as criticisms, but more to help him communicate the value of his project by attempting to answer them in the future.

How prevalent is identity fusion? The concept of identity fusion is introduced without any data (either here or – less forgivably – in the fuller treatment of the concept by Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012) on how common a phenomenon it is, whether it takes place equally in men and women, the age at which it first takes place, etc. Without such data it is impossible to draw any conclusions on whether identity fusion is part of normal human development, or a localized reaction to extreme social circumstances. Hence, it is very difficult to assess its importance for human cooperation.

How is identity fusion distinguished from social identification? Whitehouse implies that identity fusion is logically distinct from social identification, because in the latter process the personal and social selves have a mutually inhibitory relationship, whereas in the former they have a complementary relationship. Yet social identification tends to be defined in very broad terms, simply as a feeling of belonging to a certain social category (Swann et al., 2012). Presumably, it is a prerequisite for feeling fused with a certain category that one should also feel that one belongs to that category. Therefore, identity fusion is not logically distinct from social identification, but an extreme form of social identification characterized by an abnormal relationship between the personal and social selves. Furthermore, it ought to be acknowledged that the personal and social selves are not as distinct, even in non-fused individuals, as Whitehouse suggests. The social self implies certain

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internal states (e.g., commitment to a social role, feelings of duty or obligation, feelings of guilt or shame), while the development of a 'personal' self relies on various kinds of information supplied by the social world, in forms such as internalized narratives (Vygotsky, 1986) and social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954).

How does identity fusion relate to other motivations for altruism?

Identity fusion is clearly not the only motivation for cooperative or humanitarian behaviour; yet Whitehouse occasionally comes close to claiming this, with statements like: "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." This ignores the fact that many humans have an abstract, and probably innate, sense of justice (Walsh, 2000), which potentially applies equally to all other humans – or at least all other citizens – regardless of the extent to which one feels "fused" with them. (Was the heroism of the Fukushima nuclear workers really dependent on the fact that it was co-nationals who were the principal beneficiaries? Is it not more likely that as the only people qualified and on hand to deal with the crisis, they felt a sense of moral duty to humanity, and indeed the environment?) Proponents of identity fusion theory need to acknowledge that cooperation, cohesion and even self-sacrifice can all be achieved without any feelings of fusion: the latter just makes them more likely.

Why are shared trauma and dysphoric rituals believed to be so important for identity fusion?

Whitehouse clearly believes that shared trauma is vital for promoting identity fusion. However, while he offers anecdotal evidence that trauma is a sufficient condition for fusion, he supplies no evidence that it is a necessary condition. A lot of the empirical research on identity fusion has taken place on individuals who have not in fact suffered any serious collective trauma (e.g. the Spanish participants of Gómez et al., 2011). Similarly, events such as the Nuremberg rallies, which Whitehouse holds partially responsible for the high levels of identity fusion that were presumably characteristic of Nazi Germany, were not dysphoric but rather euphoric occasions. Thus it may be that it is high levels of emotional activation in general, not just activation of negative emotions, that are important. If trauma is not necessary for building social cohesion, we are left with the question of why it is necessary to have dysphoric rituals at all. One possibility is that they are a kind of test of how group members will behave under

genuinely dangerous conditions (which would explain why they are so characteristic of initiation rituals).

What are the key differences between fusing with a small group of known others (what Whitehouse describes as “local fusion”) and fusing with a large, impersonal group such as a nation or a religion?

The target article does not explore the differences between the “local” and “extended” forms of identity fusion. We are sceptical that these really represent the same kind of process. Analyzing affiliation to an abstract category of nation or religion in terms of fusion with a vast group of unknown others seems problematic, because in such cases it is really the ideas that define the group, rather than vice versa. The group of one’s co-religionists, for example, tends to be defined subjectively as the set of all those who follow the principles of one’s religion correctly. People who socially identify with a particular religion but who are perceived as violating certain “sacred values” (Atran & Axelrod, 2008) of that religion will not be seen by the perceiver as fused with them; indeed, extremists’ most bilious outpourings of hate are often reserved for such individuals. Atran’s (2010) study of Islamic extremists is more sophisticated than simply relying on identity fusion, because it explicitly takes into account the interactions between young men’s social commitments to their comrades in arms, and their ideological commitments to the sacred values of their shared religion.

How exactly can an examination of the ‘social glue’ produced by shared trauma be used to solve major social problems?

Whitehouse proposes – without going into many details – that when we better understand the social glue of identity fusion we may learn to use it for peace. Yet if identity fusion is most likely to occur in the case of shared traumatic experiences (including dysphoric rituals), is it possible for it to work in circumstances devoid of any sort of trauma? Will we need to inflict simulated trauma on ourselves in order to achieve collective fusion, and therefore peace? In this respect it may be fortunate that collective trauma does not in fact seem to be necessary for identity fusion (see Question 4). But another problem is that it will be very difficult, if not impossible, ever to achieve identity fusion with people who hold different sacred values from our own (see Question 5).

Perhaps, if these questions were answered satisfactorily, we would be more convinced of the unique value of identity fusion in explaining altruistic behaviour. As things stand, it seems more plausible to us that identity fusion is simply an extreme form of social identification (see Question 2), which naturally predicts

extreme forms of social commitment (such as laying down one's life for one's countrymen) better than does simply stating whether one belongs to a particular social category.

Yet Whitehouse's article is valuable in that it draws attention to the parallels between affiliation to small groups and affiliation to big cultural ideas. Perhaps, rather than invoking a specific construct of identity fusion, we may account for these parallels by falling back on the construct that inspired much of the work on social identification and identity fusion: that of attachment (Bowlby, 1969). There may indeed be a difference between groups to which we merely feel that we belong in an abstract sense (social identification), and those to which we also feel that we really belong (are attached) in an emotional sense. Attachment broadens considerably during childhood and adolescence as we become less dependent on close family members, and more dependent on first peers and then sexual partners. Although speculative, one possibility is that during a certain sensitive period in adolescence and early adulthood, it is also possible to become strongly attached to an idea (such as nationality or religion). It may be that reflection on dysphoric (or indeed euphoric) shared experiences plays a key role in this new attachment process.

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