

## **Identity (con)fusion: Social Groups and the Stickiness of Social Glue.** A commentary on *Three Wishes for the World* by Harvey Whitehouse

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*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. —Margaret Mead*

Harvey Whitehouse argues that we will be better able to resolve major challenges of the 21st century—civil wars, collective action, poverty, and environmental change—if we understand the “social glue” that binds people together in common cause. In the past, research on this idea has been dominated by social identity theory (SIT), in which individuals identify with and favor ingroups. Whitehouse and colleagues suggest that SIT applies well enough to large, anonymous groups, but fails to capture perhaps the most powerful social glue of all: that which occurs in small groups undergoing danger or hardship—a different phenomenon they call “identity fusion”. In identity fusion, individuals and groups effectively melt into one entity, permitting extraordinary levels of cooperation and altruism. SIT has been a bedrock concept in social psychology for decades, and we welcome the opportunity to rethink and bash the paradigm. We are fully onboard Whitehouse’s boat, but want to paddle in a slightly different direction.

First, we think identity fusion highlights a major problem with SIT: how membership in one group overlaps with memberships in other groups. Social identity theory is problematic because it fails to predict how people will behave when there are multiple overlapping groups, and identity fusion offers an opportunity to sort out this deficiency. It offers predictions for when the glue will be strongest, not least because fused identities trump social identities when small groups share traumatic experiences.

Second, while identity fusion expands the SIT paradigm, we see fused identity and social identity not as different types of social glue, but rather as having different levels of stickiness. Individuals’ level of identification with groups follows a continuum, from national identity that we have whether we like it or not (some reject it), to teams of fire-fighters, say, whose group integration is a matter of life

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or death. Social identity is usually just glue, and sometimes fails to do anything. Identity fusion is superglue, and often has amazing outcomes.

## **When Does Glue Become Superglue?**

We think the notion of a continuum of levels of stickiness can help to reconcile Whitehouse's argument that there are two types of glue, with the counter-argument that there is only one glue, making identity fusion a version of social identity (see Ingram and Prochownik's commentary). We suggest that identity fusion explains interpersonal relations according to context. In the absence of groups, the notion of fused identity still seems to have a role as evinced by Whitehouse's example of "survivor bonds". But in group contexts, while fused identities may tend to occur in smaller groups, those individuals who make up that group inevitably belong to some of the same wider ingroups. In this way, fused identity seems located within social identity to an extent (which can vary), and not necessarily an alternative. Of course, Swann and others argue that identity fusion is empirically different from social identity, so there are two things to explain. But this may be a failing of definitions of social identity rather than of the concept itself (see also Ingram's follow up comment).

But how might a fused identity arise from a social identity? Such a question is key for those of us who are interested in explaining the process of radicalisation, and hinges on the assumption that there are different levels of 'groupness'. This problem is, we think, indicative of our own scholarly identity confusion: not knowing whether and how to separate an individual-as-a-group-member from a range of possible groups (social identities) that seem inextricably linked to one another, yet are also distinct in different contexts. Where does a fused identity start and a social identity end?

A good example of this might be the army unit, the regiment, the service (army vs. navy etc.), and the nation. The unit is fused having endured the same costly rituals, training, and sharing the same type of traumatic experiences of combat (Rielly, 2000). But this small group of individuals, so tightly bonded, are also members of the wider armed forces, who are distinct from the civilians they are fighting to protect within their nation, of which they are also members. Whilst the unit itself is likely to be most tightly fused, the fused group still has intimate ties with these larger, and more inclusive ingroups. These ingroups are examples of social identities. Of course, the argument may arise that they are members of "external identities" (one category of identity fusion), but is there enough to differentiate between external identity and social identity?

## **From Social to Fused Identity**

The question then becomes, beyond a highly indoctrinated training programme utilising rituals and shared experiences (such as military training), or the direct experience of extreme hardship or danger, how do people form fused identities within, or even against the grain of, social identities? Here we return to the process of social identity and suggest that individuals who vicariously experience, say, injustice or prejudice on account of their group membership (social identity) are likely to try and interpret these events through the lens of that group membership (see Ginges and Atran 2011). So, for example, I may not have been in Derry on bloody Sunday, but I was personally traumatized by the killing of my Catholic brothers. Social identity helps people understand this injustice according to their group membership— thus the very interpretation of events are increasingly based on group membership rather than individual experience (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Deschamps, 1982; Hewstone and Jaspars, 1982; Tajfel, 1979; Cairns, 1982; Rabbie and Horwitz, 1982; Van Knippenberg, 1978).

It could well be this process of viewing the world through an ingroup lens that enables, in fact, some degree of identity fusion with a set of likeminded others, particularly in groups that may not have been particularly salient before a particular nasty event (such as Bosnians before the Serbian invasion). If so, identity fusion may begin to explain the notion of saliency of social identity (i.e. how important to the self-concept the group membership is) and interpersonal relationships within an ingroup that may lead to factions. This is important to understand involvement in extremist and terrorist groups. Often terrorists are not directly affected by the events that underlie their grievances, but they are sufficiently impacted by the suffering of fellow ingroup members that they are prepared to die for the cause.

## **Self- versus Other-Centricities**

Whitehouse differentiates the way in which social identity in individuals, and fused identity in individuals, enable the perception of other members of the ingroup. Social identity tends to lead to the deindividuation and homogenisation of others within the ingroup as group members rather than as individuals, whilst fused identities are porous, resulting in more vicariousness of experiences of other (fused) group members who are nevertheless recognised as unique individuals (Hornsey, 2008; Swann, et al., 2013). As Whitehouse suggests, fused and social identities appear to serve different functions. The process of identity fusion may enable a sort of other-concern, which enhances feelings of empathy towards ingroup members (although to what extent is not clear—i.e. to fused identity others or wider ingroup others?), whilst social identification triggers self-concern,

since the status of the group is reflected in the individuals' self concept (although see Brewer (1991) for an alternative to self concept).

But in the absence of context (that is, different levels of groupness) it is difficult to say whether this would change. For instance, a study by Hein et al. (2010) showed that individuals in a group who experienced and then watched others (ingroup and outgroup members) experience electric shocks had more activation in the empathy areas of their brains (anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex) when watching ingroup rather than outgroup members receiving the same shocks. Group membership was football team supporters and subjects were tested in pairs. Would the shared suffering of group membership and electric shocks lead to some type of fused identity? Or were results simply based on group membership? We cannot be sure, but certainly there is a link between the two since there was a difference in activation and behavioural responses according to group membership. Interestingly, empathy was also triggered, albeit on a lesser scale and much less frequently, when outgroup members suffered too and this effect was mediated by positive personal opinions of the outgroup individual. There may be hope for us as a species yet.

## **Putting Social Glue to Use**

In sum, identity fusion is a very welcome and much needed addition to social identity theory that can shed light on some of the crucial, yet underdeveloped concepts it is hinged on. We suggest that identity fusion operates within the rubric of social identity—an extreme form of social identity—in which rather than the group taking over the individual, the group becomes a vessel for the individuals to be bonded together rather than bonded to the group. The glue is not sticking them to a group concept, but to each other directly. This enables us to see how an individual may go from self-centric yet group-oriented (via social identity), to other-centric yet individual-centric (via identity fusion). Finally, it highlights an important limitation of social identity theory which is the inability to deal with multiple groups within groups and how those different groups might be separated from one another. Identity fusion sticks where mere social identity breaks.

If identity fusion is a superglue version of social identity, then what are the implications for Whitehouse's three wishes of resolving civil war, collective action, poverty and environmental threats? On the one hand, it may bring these wishes closer to the realms of possibility. If the vicarious exposure to injustice and prejudice—to an ingroup as a whole—can achieve some degree of identity fusion, then we may be able to make social glue stickier without putting people through traumatic experiences themselves. Information, presentation, and framing of good and bad events may be even more critical than we thought. On the other hand, it suggests that we have an additional obstacle, because in a globalizing world of

broadening as well as narrowing groups (federalism versus devolution, migration versus ghettoization, world unions versus highly specific online groups), everyone is suffering from an increasing confusion of identities—family, party, religion, state, nation, social network, west, east and so on. With so many strings of glue we may be pulled in counter-productive and unpredictable directions. Finally, we should not see social glue as a panacea. Roosevelt and Stalin got along well enough when they had a common enemy in Hitler (and Japan). No glue was necessary for remarkable levels of cooperation. But once Hitler was gone, the world was divided for decades by the communist block and the free world. There may be challenges of such gravitas that no glue is necessary to pull people together in common cause, as well as divisions of such perceived importance that no glue can bind them together.

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