

Indeed, this comment registers that people first choose the group, given that all choices are forward looking. Facts inherited from the past are ultimately backward looking and, hence, cannot ultimately determine how people choose their group identity. As they look forward, people choose groups that suit their needs and consequently search their past for motifs, anecdotes, and memories to manufacture group identity that cements the chosen group.

To demonstrate the reversed causality, it is important to distinguish between two broad kinds of group identities: politics-based group identities and community-based group identities. People choose politics-based groups to advance collective interest and aspiration, which is defined by a territory and its natural resources. In contrast, people choose community-based groups – such as families, temples, and gender- and ethnic-based organizations – to fulfill the need for friendship, communal solidarity, sense of belonging, and emotional comfort.

Adam Smith observed the difference. He identified “the love of country” as the emotion that cements the politics-based group, whereas he identified “the love of humankind” as the emotion that cements the community-based group (Khalil 2018; Smith 1982, pp. 228–230).

Let us examine the proposed reversed causality with respect to the politics-based identity, the love of country, with respect to the rise of the American Republic and its 1776 Declaration of Independence. The British people and their colonial subjects had shared biology. They also had shared experience, as attested by the recent French and Indian War, led by no less than George Washington. Still, people in the American colonies chose a separate group from the “motherland” and became very busy in creating a new past.

The history of international relations is replete with instances of how people create new group identities in accordance with changing economic and strategic conditions. To make sense of this history, we should start with forward-looking decision makers as they assess their collective interest and aspiration; then we can make sense of why people are ready to fight for the chosen group while defending its territorial integrity and are even ready to die to further its imperial boundary at the expense of other people.

Let us examine the proposed reversed causality with respect to the community-based identity, the love of humankind, with regard to aiding other people in the case of earthquakes or other natural disasters. The criterion for the commonality of the interacting individuals is the set of human features. But the criterion need not be always cosmopolitan. The criterion can be more limited, such as sharing a common language, love of some ethnic cuisine, a hobby, communion (i.e., common religious faith), gender, age and race. Such community-based groups do not necessarily require a territory to subsist. The expected benefit is usually the emotional comfort of belonging, to have friends, and to call a place home.

At first approximation, again, the person chooses the community-based group that suits his or her needs the most. The past history cannot be determinant because the past holds enormous repertoires, and one has to be selective, especially as one grows older. To wit, the example of hazing, which Whitehouse discusses at length, supports the thesis that shared experiences are not essential for the group. Once one determines the best community group, and if the group members do not have much shared experience but still want to bond, hazing rather acts as a substitute for the missing history.

Besides illustrating the reversed causality, there is another payoff of distinguishing community- and politics-based identities.

The benefit from community-based groups varies according to the scale: one usually benefits more from identifying with the local church or the local sports club than from the worldwide church or club. Scale seems to be relevant for community-based groups.

Scale, however, does not seem as relevant to politics-based groups, such as the nation-state. The benefit from such a group arises from the collective action to defend against outsiders, take advantage of common resources, and so on. The benefit is the outcome of the effort of abstract citizens, where such citizens are important for their effort and not for the friendship or comfort that they afford.

Whitehouse somehow senses the asymmetry of the relevance of scale. He invokes the terminology “local fusion” and “extended fusion” to capture this scale asymmetry. For him, local fusion is bottom-up fusion of identities at the local level, whereas extended fusion, or what he calls “identification,” is top-down fusion that takes place in the abstract when the person identifies with a belief or an ideology.

The local/extended terminology is confusing, however. There are gradations of community-based identity along the scale of distance from local to global, where the “global” can be confused with “extended.” So, it is not clear whether Whitehouse’s “extended fusion” is simply global church or denotes what is called here politics-based groups.

Besides illustrating the reversed causality, there is another payoff of distinguishing community- and politics-based identities: how to deal with terrorists dying for the group. Let us take Islamic-inspired suicide terrorists. Are they upset at the perceived threat to their religion, that is, community-based identity? If so, it is easy to undermine their ideology by pointing out how the targeted governments permit the building of mosques and so on. Or, are they upset at the perceived threat to their autonomy, that is, politics-based identity? If so, this requires a totally different response, a response that points out that the targeted governments actually respect their autonomy.

Toward a more comprehensive theory of self-sacrificial violence

Jordan Kiper^a and Richard Sosis^b

^aDepartment of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095 and ^bDepartment of Anthropology, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269.
jordan.kiper@ucla.edu <https://www.jordankiper.com>
richard.sosis@uconn.edu <https://richard-sosis.uconn.edu/>

doi:10.1017/S0140525X18001802, e206

Abstract

We argue that limiting the theory of extreme self-sacrifice to two determinants, namely, identity fusion and group threats, results in logical and conceptual difficulties. To strengthen Whitehouse’s theory, we encourage a more holistic approach. In particular, we suggest that the theory include exogenous sociopolitical factors and constituents of the religious system as additional predictors of extreme self-sacrifice.

Whitehouse offers a compelling general theory of extreme self-sacrifice, insofar as it draws from an impressive body of empirical work on social cohesion and extreme group behavior. However, as researchers who investigate similar phenomena and wish to build upon Whitehouse's theory, we have two primary concerns. First, we are uncertain about the underlying logic of Whitehouse's central thesis. Second, Whitehouse's focus on identity fusion as the determinant of extreme self-sacrifice is outwardly too limiting. We suspect that other pertinent factors, such as exogenous socio-political dynamics and constituents inherent to the functioning of religious systems, will be essential to building a general theory of extreme self-sacrificial behavior.

Beginning with the logic underlying Whitehouse's theory, we are uncertain about privileging only identity fusion and group threats as the necessary conditions of extreme self-sacrifice. To illustrate this point, consider the heart of Whitehouse's explanation regarding the pathway from fusion to sacrifice (his Fig. 1):

Stable perceptions of shared essence created by either of these pathways [i.e., intense collective experiences or shared biology] is predicted to give rise to fusion with a locally bounded group or relational network. Fusion produces a strong impression that members of the group are one's kin, eliciting willingness to pay high personal costs to support the group and, in the face of out-group threat, to fight and die if necessary to protect members of the group. (sect. 1, para. 6)

Accordingly, if person P is willing to engage in extreme self-sacrifice, then P is identity fused and P's group is threatened. The difficulty in accepting this proposition, given that it accurately reflects Whitehouse's central thesis, is that research on collective violence in the social sciences suggests that other conditions – besides identity fusion and group threat – are equally as necessary for extreme self-sacrifice. For instance, minimal group contact between P and the out-group targeted by P's sacrifice seems necessary, because increased and sustained contact between two groups reduces one's willingness to harm the out-group in question (Al Ramiah & Hewstone 2013). Additionally, postconflict ethnographies find that sociohistorical grievances toward an out-group, or perceptions of perpetual in-group victimhood, strongly motivate combatants, who willingly engage in the act of killing to protect or avenge their group (Hinton 2004; Mamdani 2001; Schori-Eyal et al. 2017). Finally, persons who willingly sacrifice for their group, such as combatants who volunteer for conflict or undertake acts of collective violence, are often incited to do so by inflammatory media, propaganda, or group leaders whose vitriolic speech inspires their actions (Leader et al. 2016).

A more striking problem is that the core proposition of Whitehouse's theory seems to beg the question, given Whitehouse's conceptions of identity fusion and extreme self-sacrifice. He writes that identity fusion, especially local fusion, is characterized by a willingness to fight and die when the group is under attack (sect. 1, para. 2). He then defines extreme self-sacrifice as a form of altruistic suicide, in which one gives his or her life for the group (sect. 1, para. 2). Therefore, saying one is willing to engage in extreme self-sacrifice, which is to die for the group, whenever one is identity fused, which is characterized by a willingness to die for the group, appears circular.

Granted, we do not intend to oversimplify Whitehouse's overall theory, which is quite promising, but the purported circularity in the underlying argument is apparent in a few key passages, such as the conclusion, where Whitehouse says:

What would be fatal for the theory is if it turned out that convictions of shared essence failed to predict high fusion scores or if fusion (plus out-group threat) were shown to be a poor predictor of actual (as opposed to declared) willingness to fight and die for the group. (sect. 7, para. 4)

Although we admire Whitehouse for positing such a bold proposition, we are again puzzled by the circularity of the statement before the disjunct. Put simply: Because high fusion scores measure convictions of shared essence, it is unclear how they could then fail to predict fusion scores.

Circularity aside, limiting the determinants of extreme self-sacrifice to identity fusion and group threat is likely to weaken the theory as opposed to strengthening it. After all, the above passage implies that a person's willingness to engage in extreme self-sacrifice is determined by identity fusion and group threat alone. We suspect that research will falsify this claim, given the limitations of identity fusion as a measurement. For instance, Kiper (2018), undertook fieldwork among former combatants and survivors of the Yugoslav Wars in Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Serbia, where he surveyed hundreds of participants on identity fusion (based on Swann et al. 2012). He found that many communities had individuals who scored high on identity fusion scales, but were expressly against going to war for their group. Kiper also noted that many communities reached saturation points with identity fusion, with nearly everyone maximally fused, rendering data difficult to interpret. Specifically, although many Serbs and Bosnians were maximally fused, measurements did not reveal whether they had similar understandings of what it meant to be maximally fused with their group. Furthermore, identity fusion was often unpredictable of one's willingness to participate in collective violence. Whether these findings are anomalous or cohere with the next generation of scholars investigating identity fusion remains to be seen.

As a final point, we stress that we agree with Whitehouse that identity fusion plays an important role in understanding terrorism, ethno-religious violence, and self-sacrificial violence (Kiper & Sosis 2016a), and we agree that ritual is vital to this process (Sosis & Kiper 2014). Nevertheless, we think his theory would be strengthened by recognizing that such violence is also characterized by a manipulation of recurrent features of religious and quasi-religious traditions, such as myths, sacred values, symbols, and both meaning and moral systems (Kiper & Sosis 2016b). In other words, understanding self-sacrificial violence will likely require a more holistic approach that includes the sociopolitical factors highlighted above, as well as those factors that motivate sacrificial behavior across religious systems (Sosis et al. 2012).

A potential explanation for self-radicalisation

Justin E. Lane^{a,b,c,d}, F. LeRon Shults^{b,e} and Wesley J. Wildman^{d,f}

^aInstitute for Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford, Oxford OX2 6PN, United Kingdom; ^bNORCE Center for Modeling Social Systems, 4630 Kristiansand, Norway; ^cLEVYNA, Masaryk University, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic; ^dCenter for Mind and Culture, Boston, MA 02215; ^eInstitute of Religion, Philosophy and History, University of Agder, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway and ^fBoston University School of Theology, Boston, MA 02215.