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From Conflict to COVID: How Shared Experiences Shape Our World and How They Could Improve It

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Abstract

The human capacity for cooperation is at the root of many of the most impressive accomplishments of our species—from the evolution of language and tool use to the construction of pyramids and space stations. Although some forms of cooperation are motivated by self-interest or fear of punishment, the forms of cooperation that are most likely to succeed in the face of personal costs stem from love of the group. In this article, I consider one of the most intense forms of ingroup love known to psychology—identity fusion—resulting from shared suffering, from the battlefield and football pitch to the hospital ward and prison camp. Though often harnessed in ways that fuel intergroup conflict and violent extremism, fusion can just as easily be channeled into peaceful and consensual forms of prosocial action, for example, to tackle climate change, reduce crime, prevent intergroup conflict, or respond to pandemics. Understanding and applying the insights generated by research on fusion can help policy makers foster more effective forms of cooperation for the public good.

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What do conflict and COVID have in common? Surprisingly, perhaps, the answer is quite a lot. Both are a source of shared suffering in human groups and, as a consequence, both have the potential to create powerful social bonds. In the Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion (CSSC) at the University of Oxford, we have been building a rich body of evidence that shared suffering produces a strong and highly durable form of social glue, known as “identity fusion”—often described as a visceral sense of oneness with the group.¹ We have been studying the causes and consequences of fusion in groups as diverse as Melanesian cargo cults, revolutionary insurgents in Libya, football hooligans in Brazil, and Muslim fundamentalists in Indonesia, as well as populations that hadn’t really thought of themselves as groups before disaster struck, ranging from the random victims of terrorist attacks around the world to, most recently, those affected by the COVID pandemic.²

When we find ourselves with our backs to the wall—whether because of enemy attack, disease, or some other threat to our well-being—it can lead us to bond together much more strongly than before. When groups become fused through shared suffering, they are capable of extraordinary acts of cooperation. This point is vital for the policy community to understand. All too often, the powerful social glue that is present in the wake of civil wars, terrorist atrocities, and natural disasters is tragically squandered—or worse, used to fuel social discord. And yet, if only policy decisions were more fully informed by the scientific research on shared experience and group bonding, we could potentially harness social cohesion, in consensual ways, to heal divisions in society and motivate forms of cooperation essential to future peace and prosperity. The first step is to grasp the fundamentals of cooperative behavior from a psychological perspective.

The human capacity for cooperation is unparalleled in the natural world and has grown ever more elaborate with the evolution of states and empires in world history. Humans have justly been described as “super-co-operators,”³ a species that has not only mastered many of the forms of cooperation predicted by games theory⁴ but uniquely augmented them in heritable cultural systems, progressively increasing the scope and scale of collective action.⁵ This ability to work together often requires the sublimation of personal needs and desires for the good of the larger group or cause. Broadly speaking, there are two deep motivations for self-sacrifice for the greater social good.

One of these motivations is fear. This could be fear of punishment by secular authorities (such as a military court), by moralizing gods (such as the supreme deities of the Abrahamic religions), or simply by the threat of ridicule, ostracism, or other sanctions imposed by one’s peers (such as may be observed in cultures with very tight norms and limited opportunities for social mobility).⁶ Fear is a strong enforcer of conformism and conservatism, but it is not the most powerful driver of self-sacrifice for the group. Military leaders with first-hand experience of the horrors of frontline combat maintain that coercion is not the most powerful method of inciting heroism on the battlefield.⁷

The most powerful driver of extreme forms of self-sacrifice is in many ways the opposite of fear. It is love—love of the group (its members, its identity, and its values, beliefs, and rituals). From the professional soldier who throws himself onto a grenade to protect his fellows to the suicide bombers of Al Qaeda, willingness to lay down one’s life for the group may be rooted more deeply in bonds with the in-group than by fear of any form of external inducement, threat, or coercion.⁸ The question, then, How do such fanatical forms of commitment come into being?

A growing body of scientific research over the past decade suggests that one of the most potent psychological drivers of extreme pro-group action is a form of powerful social glue known as “identity fusion.”⁹ The fusion construct was first developed by psychologists in Texas and Madrid, using a measure that involved showing people a series of circles with varying degrees of overlap (see Figure 1). Participants were told that the little circles

represented them as individuals and the big circles represented a particular group to which they belonged, and they were invited to say which of the series of depictions of the degree of overlap between big and little circles best characterized their relationship with the group. Those who chose the depiction in which the little circle was entirely enclosed by the big one were said to be fused with the group.

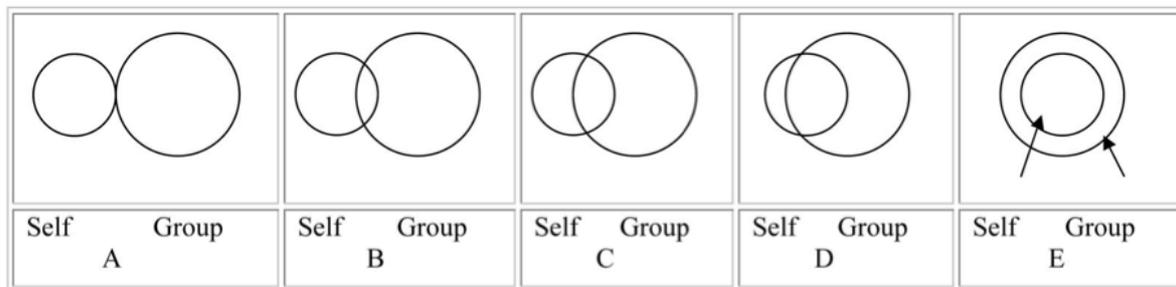


Figure 1. Identity fusion measure (reprinted from William B. Swann Jr, Ángel Gómez, D. Conor Seyle, J. Francisco Morales, and Carmen Huici, “Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 [2009]: 995)

Fusion differs in a fundamental way from identification. For decades, social psychologists have observed that when people identify with a group, this identification produces a hydraulic relationship between personal and group identity. So, when you make their group identities salient, their personal identities become less accessible—and vice-versa. For this reason, identification is a depersonalizing form of group alignment. It’s as if the group identity eclipses one’s sense of self. By contrast, when people become fused, the relationship between personal and group identities is synergistic—the one amplifying the other.¹⁰ Fused people say that they personally make the group strong and also, the other way around, they are strengthened by the group. And this also means that when fused groups come under attack, they take it personally and will do whatever it takes to defend the group, even to death.¹¹

Much of the research on fusion has focused on its capacity to fuel intergroup conflict, by motivating group members to fight and die to protect their fellows and defeat their enemies. Most of these studies have involved measures of willingness to fight and die, often based on trolley problems in which people are presented with scenarios in which they could save other members of their group from being crushed to death by an oncoming train only by throwing themselves onto the track.¹² Fusion consistently predicted people’s expressed willingness to sacrifice themselves for the group more readily than identification.¹³ But a limitation of these studies is that the fight-and-die measure is hypothetical and expressed willingness to lay down one’s life for the sake of a group is not the same as actually doing so. To provide a more compelling demonstration of the link between fusion and self-sacrifice, it is necessary to investigate situations in which defending the group was really a matter of life and death. Thus, in 2011, the year of the Arab Spring, I traveled to Libya to find out what motivated revolutionaries to lay down their lives for each other. There, civilians-turned-fighters did so by the thousands (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Portraits of civilians-turned-fighters in Misrata who laid down their lives to effect regime change in Libya (photo by author)

We designed a survey in Misrata that was administered to a sample of 179 insurgents, all members of a paramilitary battalion or *katiba* responsible for prosecuting the revolution that led to the overthrow and execution of Muammar Gaddafi.¹⁴ Using the pictorial fusion scale shown in Figure 1, we asked each of these insurgents to say which configuration of circles best captured their relationships with family, close *katiba* friends, members of other *katibas* they had not met, and supporters of the revolution who were not members of any *katiba*. We found ceiling levels of fusion with family and *katiba* members but almost floor levels of fusion with those who supported the revolution (so were on the same side ideologically) but who had not undergone the shared experience of participating in the uprising.

A central hypothesis behind this research was that in order to bring about identity fusion, emotionally intense experiences need to endure in memory, becoming a focus of subsequent reflection so that they effectively shape one's essential autobiographical self.¹⁵ In other words, fusion is based on sharing not just any sorts of experiences but only those that become a permanent part of who we are as distinct individuals. We developed constructs to get at this dimension, designed to measure the extent to which an experience was self-shaping and personally transformative.¹⁶ These included statements such as, "If I had not had this experience, I would not be the same person I am today," which research participants were invited to endorse or reject by degrees on a scale. In our study with Libyan insurgents in 2011, we divided the sample of participants into two categories, in an effort to capture different emotional intensities of experience.¹⁷ Roughly half our sample were frontline fighters who endured the most horrific and personally self-shaping ordeals of the insurgency. The other half of our sample were providers of logistical support to the frontline fighters—*katiba* members

who fixed vehicles, drove ambulances, and provided other kinds of essential back-up but who didn't endure the most horrific and never-to-be forgotten experiences of direct engagement with the enemy. To investigate differences in fusion between our two categories of participant, we asked a forced choice question: If you had to choose only one group as the one you are most highly fused with, which would it be? As predicted, we found a striking difference between our two categories of insurgent. If you were a frontline fighter, you were far more likely to choose your comrades over family than people who only provided logistical support.

According to our theory, it was the more intense shared sufferings of frontline combat that produced the higher levels of fusion among frontline fighters. But in this study, we could not rule out the possibility that higher fusion levels were driving fighters to the frontlines in the first place, since we could not measure the extent to which *katiba* members were able to influence their own roles in the insurgency. To address this issue, we ran a number of studies with groups, such as US military serving in combat roles in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, who had no control over whether or not they were deployed in combat settings, showing that intensity of shared dysphoric combat experiences does predict fusion among combatants.¹⁸

The discovery that sharing traumatic ordeals with others can produce very strong forms of social cohesion is not new. This pathway to identity fusion appears to have ancient roots in human societies and has often been deliberately exploited in the rituals of minority religious sects, warrior cults, terrorist organizations, and even elite schools, over many millennia and all around the world. Examples of such rituals include the many extremely painful initiation rituals of tribal groups in Melanesia, Amazonia, West Africa, and first nations groups in North America and Australia.¹⁹ These rituals are often so traumatic that they have been described as rites of terror.²⁰ Numerous experiments and surveys have shown how these kinds of rituals can have a transformative effect on participants' personal and group identities, laying the foundations for identity fusion.²¹ At the CSSC, we refer to these rituals as "imagistic" because of the powerful imagery they evoke, which in turn can contribute significantly to the transformative processes by which personal and group identities become fused.²²

The link between fusion and willingness to fight and die for one's group has been documented repeatedly in studies not only with military groups but with a range of other populations that condone or actively engage in violence toward outgroups. For example, my colleagues and I have run numerous studies with hardcore football fans around the world, including in South America, Europe, Australasia, and Southeast Asia, showing that the emotionally intense experiences of soccer supporters give rise to fusion and this in turn motivates extreme forms of pro-group action, including violence toward rival fans.²³ We have found that the less successful teams have more highly fused and loyal fans than the more successful ones and the reason is that *losing* important matches produces both personally transformative and group-defining memories.²⁴ It is crucial to emphasize, however, that fusion among football fans is capable of producing peaceful as well as violent forms of pro-group action. Moreover, while some of the most passionate supporters surveyed in our studies were prone to outgroup hostility, this hostility tended to be targeted toward threatening others who could harm the group or the group's reputation.²⁵

These findings fit with a growing body of research suggesting that the relationship between fusion and pro-group action is mediated by a range of other factors, including the kinds of norms that the group valorizes (e.g., violence-condoning versus law-abiding norms), on one hand, and perceived levels of outgroup threat, on the other.²⁶ Research at the CSSC has shown that fusion can be harnessed in a wide range of peaceful forms of prosocial action, from giving blood to supporting wildlife conservation. We are starting to discover how shared experiences also have exacerbated divisions resulting from Brexit in Europe and Trump's presidency in the United States but, most recently, how globally shared experiences of COVID might actually help us transcend those divisions.

As an example of how shared suffering, even as a consequence of outgroup hostility, can produce nonviolent forms of cooperation and self-sacrifice, consider how people reacted to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, in which three people were killed and hundreds of others were injured. In the wake of this carnage, we conducted a survey among Bostonians focused on feelings of psychological kinship with their fellow Americans.²⁷ Before the bombing occurred, we already had measures of fusion with the United States on the part of average Bostonians. Immediately after the bombing event, fusion did not increase, but what we were most interested in here was the role of psychological kinship in mediating fusion's effects on behavior in the wake of the bombing. So we asked people questions about their psychological kinship with fellow Americans. And then we measured willingness to make personal sacrifices to help the victims of the bombings. We found that psychological kinship mediated the effect of fusion on support behaviors.

Peaceful pro-group action of this kind, even when people have been enraged by acts of violence, has been shown to result from fusion not only with people from one's own community but with complete strangers and even with individuals of a different species. For example, back in 2015 many people around the world reacted strongly to news of the illegal killing of a lion at a national park in Zimbabwe by an American trophy hunter. The lion, nicknamed "Cecil," posthumously became an overnight celebrity when news of his killing was broadcast by the world's media. This story prompted tens of thousands of people to write to the conservation unit here in Oxford responsible for studying Cecil and other lions at this particular national park. Most were asking what they could do to help conservationists protect lions in the wild, typically offering to make donations of money. I persuaded colleagues here in Oxford, who had been working with Cecil, to let us run a longitudinal survey with a sample of 160 donors, to help us understand the psychological impact of Cecil's death and to explore people's reflections on the event during the months that followed.²⁸ This study helped us to see more clearly how processes of reflection were feeding directly into the fusion of personal and group identities, in this case leading to fusion not only with those engaged in lion conservation but with the lions themselves—and especially Cecil, whose sufferings were felt by many of these donors to be personally shared.

Understanding these processes is key also to appreciating how events within our own countries impact national cohesion and societal stability. In the run-up to the Brexit referendum, for example, we ran a survey of voters, revealing that levels of fusion with the United Kingdom were remarkably similar among both Remain and Leave supporters. What differentiated them were their levels of fusion with Europe—relatively high for Remainers but, unsurprisingly, very much lower for Leavers.²⁹ Since the referendum, however, we have been running a longitudinal study, showing how the Brexit result has created deep divisions in the UK electorate. For example, the shared suffering of those opposed to Brexit when they first learned the outcome of the referendum, and in particular the visceralness of their memories of that fateful day, predicted higher levels of fusion with fellow Remainers, pitting them ever more deeply against the leave camp.³⁰ We also ran similar studies to explore the effects of Donald Trump's election on Democrat supporters in the United States.³¹

Much of our research on the effects of Brexit focuses on the psychological effects of the actual withdrawal from the European Union on Remainers. We are particularly interested in whether the withdrawal itself would be experienced as an imagistic ritual, prompting strong emotions and subsequent processes of reflection, capable of driving identity fusion with fellow Remainers. In practice, however, the anticipated ritual has not been unfolding as planned, causing our research design to go awry. To begin with, the withdrawal scheduled for October 31, 2019, was postponed, which meant we collected a lot of data about people's reactions to a nonevent. Then, on December 12, the general election result provided Boris Johnson's government with a mandate to push Brexit through. But by the time Brexit eventually happened

on January 31, 2020, the public imagination had been so fatigued by the prolonged process and news saturation that it, too, proved to be something of an anticlimax. Then in March 2020 the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic, the United Kingdom went into lockdown, and at the start of April the prime minister himself was being treated in intensive care for the symptoms of coronavirus. In effect, it seemed that the woes of Remainers had been superseded by a new set of problems, this time shared by Britons on both sides of the Brexit debate.

Consequently, we have since been collecting data on the impact of various aspects of pandemic threat, and its practical consequences in people's lives, on their fusion levels with Remainers, Leavers, fellow Britons, Europeans, and humanity at large. Our working hypothesis is that the most personally transformative shared experiences of the pandemic will predict the most significant changes in fusion. In particular, we expect the shared sufferings of fellow Europeans in countries hardest hit by coronavirus to change patterns of fusion that have divided Leavers from Europeans and Remainers from Leavers. If we are right about this, it has potentially important implications for the way the Brexit process is conducted—but it is doubtful that government policy will be capable of detecting and adapting to underlying changes in the country's group alignments unless the right kinds of research are being rapidly conducted and the findings seriously considered by politicians.

Fusion research also has potentially profound implications for public policy in relation to a number of global challenges. First, consider the ever-evolving climate crisis. All too often, climate change is seen as a problem posed by, and perhaps best solved by, the scientific community. But while there is an important role to be played by scientific and technological advances, the most important changes depend on global cohesion and collective action aimed at changing behavior. One of the greatest sources of social cohesion in human history is religion. All the world religions provide scriptural support for stewardship of the planet. Yet very few governments or international bodies are asking how we can harness the cohesion of religions to address climate change. This is all the more surprising when you consider the demographics. The overwhelming majority of people in the world are religious (roughly seven billion believers compared with only five hundred million atheists) and there is evidence that people make many decisions, including environmental decisions, very substantially on the basis of their religious convictions. Some organizations already recognize this fact. Religions for Peace, for example, has issued a "call on religious believers and all men and women of good will to an urgent and sustained response to the challenge of climate change."³² The problem is that such calls tend to preach to the converted and do not take full advantage of what we have learned about the psychology of religion and group cohesion. We need to develop a much more specific and targeted approach.

The unifying effects of religion, however, are by no means always global or universal. Often, they are parochial and sectarian. And, as we have already seen, when highly fused in-groups come under attack, they may stop at nothing to defend themselves. In some cases, this action takes the form of violent extremism. Our research suggests, however, that approaches to tackling this problem by trying to "de-radicalize" would-be terrorists proceed from the misguided initial premises. If fusion rather than ideology is the main motivation behind violent self-sacrifice, then challenging people's ideologies and group identities is the wrong place to start. Instead, a more productive approach might be to focus on challenging the *sharedness of self-shaping experiences*.³³ Not only is this approach less likely to meet with resistance, if done with the involvement of other in-group members, it is more likely to lead to lasting defusion.

Just as shared experiences may provide the key to defusing extremists, they could also help us develop diagnostic tools to detect individuals and even populations at risk of becoming violent. Our latest research on this topic is spearheaded by Julia Ebner, who has been studying violent extremism groups undercover on the dark web for several years.³⁴ Ebner is seeking to

develop new ways of diagnosing the more dangerous signs of fusion and threat perception in online chatrooms. Meanwhile, as part of a new Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office project promoting freedom of religious belief (<http://forbln.net>), we are developing a volatility index, designed to identify populations at risk of turning to collective violence in response to perceived outgroup threats.

The potential practical implications of our growing understanding of group bonding are wide ranging and seemingly inexhaustible. To take one more example, we are currently exploring the various ways in which identity fusion among football fans could be used to help ex-offenders stay out of prison.³⁵ We are working with the creators of a new initiative in the United Kingdom to twin professional football clubs with their local prisons.³⁶ Trainers from these clubs go into prisons to form football teams that bind inmates together and commit them to law-abiding values associated with healthy living and self-discipline.

In all these ways and more, our aim at the CSSC is to help bridge the gap between the science of group bonding and the possibility of making the world more peaceful and tolerant. Part of the challenge is to understand better how to prevent and tackle intergroup violence, especially violent extremism, and how to bridge the divisions between groups with histories of sectarianism, criminal activity, or outgroup hatred. But the same research that helps us unpick the roots of conflict has the potential also to help us reap the benefits of other kinds of shared suffering, from the consequences of global pandemics to the effects of global heating and rising sea levels. As the story of the legendary Phoenix reminds us, every disaster has the potential for regrowth and especially for generating the social glue necessary to foster a more peaceful and sustainable world.

Notes

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