What motivates devoted actors to extreme sacrifice, identity fusion, or sacred values?

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<CT>What motivates devoted actors to extreme sacrifice, identity fusion or sacred values?

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<C-AB>**Abstract:** Why do some individuals willingly make extreme sacrifices for their group? Whitehouse argues that such willingness stems from a visceral feeling of oneness with the group – identity fusion – that emerges from intense, shared dysphoric experiences or from perceived close kinship with others. Although Whitehouse's argument makes a valuable contribution to understanding extreme sacrifice, factors independent of identity fusion, such as devotion to sacred values, can predict self-sacrifice.

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Ever since Darwin (1871), scientists have puzzled over why some people, such as heroes and martyrs, willingly self-sacrifice, even when facing overwhelming odds and apparent defeat. The global advent of suicide attacks has transformed the issue into a paramount policy challenge for governments and their publics. Whitehouse's article is informative and timely, focusing its explanation of violent extremism on an interrelated complex of cognitive and emotional means for binding groups (perceptions of shared essence, actual and imagined kinship, shared episodic memories, and intense emotional experiences), while offering general understanding of self-sacrifice applicable to many cultural contexts and times. However, Whitehouse risks overstating his case, by claiming that identity fusion is the primary, if not unique, driver of extreme sacrifice.

In the last decade, experiments performed on five continents have shown identity fusion as a reliable predictor of willingness to fight, kill, and die for one's group. Identity fusion theory originated with William Swann and Ángel Gómez in 2005. It was initially conceived to help explain the September 11, 2001 attacks and March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombings (Europe's worst terrorist attack to date). It was then empirically validated in several publications (Gómez et al. 2011a; Swann et al. 2009). Whitehouse subsequently joined the effort (Swann et al. 2012), applying the theory with colleagues to an impressive set of field settings from initiation rites in New Guinea to the Libyan insurgency against Gaddafi (Whitehouse et al. 2014c).

The target article is compelling when extending fusion theory to explain the group-binding functions of intense, dysphoric experiences in painful rituals or other emotional life-shaping experiences (e.g., frontline combat). Whitehouse convincingly

relates such experiences to kin psychology: attitudes and feelings associated with immediate familial ties, which can be extended to larger groups – from tribes to transnational movements – via participation in intensely emotional rituals or attention to symbols that evoke shared intense experiences. Previous fusion research supports the connection between these mechanisms and fusion. For example, individuals diagnosed with gender dysphoria (i.e., transsexuals), when fused with their preferred gender, are willing to suffer painful experiences (e.g., major surgery) to belong to their desired sex group (Swann et al. 2015). Other studies also show that fusion promotes self-sacrifice, including dying for a group, by fostering perception of familial ties (Swann et al. 2014a).

Less compelling is Whitehouse's argument that identity fusion is generally the principal determinant of willingness to self-sacrifice. Other anthropological and psychological research indicates that commitment to so-called sacred values can motivate extreme and costly behaviors (Baron & Spranca 1997; Graham & Haidt 2013; Rappaport 1971; Tetlock 2003). Whitehouse dubiously acknowledges sacred values by assimilating them to identity fusion. Thus, "extreme beliefs [may] become so closely linked to the group that they take on an aura of sacredness"; however, "what connects those values to acts of self-sacrifice may well be fusion with the group rather than commitment to any kind explicit belief system" (sect. 2, para. 6).

Yet, among Itza' Maya in lowland Guatemala, we find strong commitment to spiritual values that summarize millennial experience – but no significant contemporary group bonding, ritualized or otherwise – driving very costly rainforest management (Atran et al. 2002). Studies in Western Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East

reveal sacred values and identity fusion to be uncorrelated, independent predictors of willingness to engage in, and suffer, extreme violence. When individuals perceive a threat both to their fused group and to sacred value, identity fusion and sacred values interact, leading to greater willingness to sacrifice than for either factor alone (Atran et al. 2014; Sheikh et al. 2016). Sometimes identity fusion takes precedence over sacred values (Gómez et al. 2016a). In other circumstances, sacred values prove more important. For example, in our study of frontline combatants in Iraq (Kurdish PKK and Peshmerga, Sunni Arab militia, Iraqi Army, captured Islamic State fighters), those most willing to make costly sacrifices (as verbally expressed and in terms of actually being wounded and voluntarily returning to fight) were ready to forsake their fused group, whether their genetic family or any other group they were fused with, rather than their sacred values. This finding was replicated among subjects most willing to make costly sacrifices in a sample of more than 6,000 Western Europeans (Gómez et al. 2017) and with young men just emerging from Islamic State rule in the Mosul area of Iraq (Atran et al. 2018).

Whitehouse questions these findings, arguing that "measures of sacred values … are related to similar measures of willingness to sacrifice for sacred values" (sect. 2, para. 6). Our sacred value measures chiefly concern unwillingness to trade the value against material gain or loss (Ginges et al. 2011), although in some studies additional indicators of sacredness include insensitivity to discounting, immunity to peer pressure, and blindness to exit strategies (Sheikh et al. 2013). But in our frontline studies, for example, we see no support for Whitehouse's intimation that refusing material incentives for assessing sacred values, such as Sharia law, are conflated with outcome measures of costly commitments such as "dying, letting one's family suffer,

undertaking a suicide attack, torturing women and children" (Gómez et al. 2017:678).

Whitehouse surmises: "willingness to fight and die is not motivated by doctrines and ideologies, religious or otherwise, but by a particularly intense love of the group" (sect. 2, para. 7). Previous research suggests that even for some suicide attacks in the name of religion or for a political goal, group dynamics can be more important than confessional or ideological affiliation (Atran 2010; Sageman 2004). But in other circumstances, devotion to sacred values may be primary (Atran et al. 2018; Gómez et al. 2017) or be important even without any longstanding relationship to religious or ideological doctrine (e.g., right to nuclear capability among some Iranians [Dehghani et al. 2010]). Whitehouse (2000) distinguishes ideologies and doctrines from the imagistic and emotion-laden aspects of ritual and dysphoric experiences that, by and large, distinguish spiritual life in small-scale societies (e.g., pre-state cultures, contemporary New Guinea tribes) from the "doctrinal" religions and political ideologies of large-scale societies (e.g., empires, nations). Sacred values, though, appear to have privileged connections to emotions and can be as imagistic and intensely felt (Atran & Ginges 2012; Durkheim 1912; Ginges et al. 2007; Gómez et al. 2017), as they can be part of religious or ideological doctrine.

A general theory of extreme self-sacrifice should consider, at a minimum, that people can make extreme sacrifices for a group but also, or even independently, for a cherished cause.

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