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Rethinking Identity Fusion
A Critical Examination

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ISBN 978-3-031-46982-4 ISBN 978-3-031-46983-1 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-46983-1

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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About the Book

Rethinking Identity Fusion presents a critique of Identity Fusion Theory, an identity-based social psychological approach to understanding pro-group extremism. It scrutinises the theory's main theoretical claims and research methods, exposing serious inconsistencies and gaps in how the theory handles the concept of identity and in its research programme. The book demonstrates the flattening of the theory's main concept, "identity fusion", and the general state of confusion in the recent literature as to the theory's claims and predictions.

The book offers a reinterpretation of Identity Fusion Theory through a discursive perspective, critiquing its cognitivist assumptions about the nature of human relationships and identity. In this way, its scope extends to wider critiques of experimental and quantitative methods in contemporary social psychology. It argues that such theoretical and methodological shortcomings, rather than hindering a flawed approach, can accelerate its adoption in social psychology by creating an image of theoretical unity and consistency on top of a field characterised by confusion and contradiction.

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Metodi Siromahov is a social psychologist and a lecturer at the Department of Experimental Psychology, University College London (UCL). His academic interests are in the areas of ideology, group identity, and nationalism.

Annie Hata holds a BSc in Psychology from UCL and is undertaking an MSc in Developmental Psychology and Clinical Practice at the Anna Freud Centre in collaboration with UCL. Her interests lie in community psychology and the intersections between social and clinical psychology in the context of race and identity. She was responsible for conducting the literature review on Identity Fusion Theory in her role as a research assistant.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract The chapter provides a brief outline of Identity Fusion Theory (IFT) and describes the aims and approach of the present critique.

Keywords Social identity • Self-categorisation • Identity fusion • Cognitive psychology • Terrorism • Extremism

Identity Fusion Theory (IFT) was first proposed by Swann et al. (2009) 15 years ago as an attempt to explain extreme acts, such as terrorist attacks or self-sacrifice, committed in the name of a group. It is a cognitive theory of identity which, although based on and borrowing a conceptual vocabulary from earlier theories of social identity, has become established as an elaborate theory and a vibrant research field in its own right. The hypothetical phenomenon of identity fusion has been studied using both quantitative and qualitative methods and has been used to interpret passionate forms of collective identity in contexts as diverse as Libyan rebel groups, Viking war bands, football fans, nationalism, brand loyalty, gaming subcultures, and wildlife conservation movements. It was also the subject of a special 2018 issue of the journal *Behavioural and Brain Sciences,* where it generated a lively critical discussion.

Emerging in the post-9/11 world of the late 2000s, the theory is perhaps best understood in the context of contemporary debates about the hypothetical roots—cultural, ideological, personal, institutional, etc.—of

M. Siromahov, A. Hata, *Rethinking Identity Fusion*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-46983-1_1

acts of terrorism involving violence against civilians and self-sacrifice on behalf of the perpetrators. The first publication outlining the theory (Swann et al., 2009) even opens with an explicit reference to the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, the 2004 metro bombing in Madrid, and the 2005 bombings in London. Rather than blaming the perpetrators' ideology, as was common at the time, identity fusion theorists turned to more universal psychological processes to explain such extreme acts. Whitehouse, one of the main researchers working on IFT since its inception, has explicitly pointed to his earlier anthropological work on collective rituals and group cohesion as influencing his approach to the subject (Whitehouse, 2017). The theory views such extreme acts of violence as essentially pro-group acts in support of a tightly knit collective (such as a terrorist cell or a combat unit) carried out by particularly devoted members, and explains this extreme commitment as the product of psychological processes involved in the formation and maintenance of a collective identity. People who are willing to make extreme sacrifices in the name of a group are said to do so because they relate to that group in a specific way—seeing other group-members as an extension of themselves, like a close-knit family. This state of "visceral sense of oneness" with a group is called identity fusion.

IFT starts with a long-established conceptual distinction between one's *personal identity* (reflecting one's individual characteristics) and the *social* or *collective identity* (reflecting one's membership in a group, e.g., being an American or a Democrat). The theory holds that, for most people who belong to a group, the two identities are mutually exclusive—for example, when our group-memberships are important to us, our individual characteristics fade into the background, so that a strong social identity often comes at the expense of a weakened personal identity; such people are said to have little sense of who they are beyond their group-membership, and end up becoming conformist, obedient, and lacking in personal agency. But, crucially, in a minority of individuals the two identities can become 'fused' in a way that enables both to be active at the same time:

> … we propose that the personal self remains potent and influential among fused persons. In fact, for fused persons, group membership is intensely personal, for they feel that they care as much about the outcomes of the group as their own outcomes. (Swann et al., 2009)

In such a state of identity fusion, having a strong attachment to a group does not diminish one's sense of personhood or agency. Instead, strongly 'fused' people perceive the wellbeing of the group as indispensable for their own wellbeing and view threats to the group as threats to their own life. It is precisely the fusion and simultaneous salience of the two identities that is said to enable such individuals to go to extremes in defence of the groups they belong to:

> [this disposition to extreme sacrifice] would be motivated by a highly salient personal and group identity between individuals, with a visceral feeling of deep union between the personal self and the social self, so that the delimitation between both identities becomes indistinguishable (Henríquez et al., 2020)

We can see examples of this deep enmeshment with others in close-knit families, where a person can go beyond merely identifying with the group category in the abstract, and can also form close and meaningful connections with group-members as individuals. Identity Fusion theorists go a step further by claiming that such a dynamic can exist not only in small family-like groups (like a football team or a terrorist cell), but also in large, impersonal groups, where the 'fused' individual cannot possibly know most of the other group-members personally—up to the level of whole nationalities. When a person's individual and social identities become merged, they are said to 'project familial ties' onto the group, in effect perceiving it as an extended family, with all the deep emotional attachments and feelings of protectiveness that one has for one's own family:

> … self-reported feelings of familial connection to other group members statistically mediated links between fusion and pro-group outcomes […] Apparently, highly fused persons view their group members as fictive family members, and these perceptions motivate them to take extreme actions on the behalf of these individuals. (Swann & Buhrmester, 2015)

In this way, identity fusion is used to explain not only deep emotional connections with one's family or comrades but also large-scale social phenomena such as extremist nationalism or religious fanaticism (e.g., Besta et al., 2014). This 'extended fusion' with nations and other large, impersonal collectives has been a major focus of IFT research since its inception, and subsequent publications have extended IFT to study 'identity fusion'

with out-groups, famous individuals, animal species, and abstract entities, such as brands and ideologies. IFT can make that jump from deep personal connections with known group-members to equally deep attachments to strangers or abstractions because its approach is essentially cognitive—it assumes that the 'fusion' between the personal and collective identities is a cognitive process in which two mental representations become merged in the person's mind; and, since any two cognitive representation can ostensibly undergo the same process, the range of things that one can become 'fused' with is potentially limitless.

On this theoretical foundation a large body of empirical, predominantly quantitative research has been accumulated. Fusion theorists have conducted studies to support the main theoretical claims of IFT, for example demonstrating that *identification* and *fusion* with a group are two distinct phenomena, and that fusion is a more reliable predictor of extreme pro-group behaviour than identification (Swann, Gómez, Huici et al., 2010; Swann, Gómez, Dovidio et al., 2010). They have explored the causes of identity fusion, demonstrating that people are more likely to become 'fused' with groups with which they share the same genes or culture (Vázquez et al., 2017), or if they have gone through traumatic or otherwise dysphoric experiences together (Jong et al., 2015). Finally, they have traced some of the consequences of identity fusion, such as long-lasting attachments (Newson et al., 2016; Talaifar et al., 2021) and an increased propensity towards political violence (Kunst et al., 2019). More recent studies have extended the explanatory framework offered by IFT beyond the study of group memberships: a particularly fruitful research area has been identity fusion with individuals (such as political or religious leaders; Kunst et al., 2019; Nikolic, 2021), animals (Buhrmester et al., 2018), or even abstract concepts like brands (Lin & Sung, 2014; Hawkins, 2019; Krishna & Kim, 2021).

We have attempted to produce a précis of IFT's key claims and ideas, which have been developed over the span of a decade and a half. However, such a summary can only ever be partially successful. As we will argue in this book, IFT's use of language is often slippery: sometimes the theory gives multiple non-overlapping definitions for the same concepts, making it difficult to fix its claims in place; and other times it leaves important concepts under-theorised, especially ones that are already common currency in everyday language but are used in IFT with a peculiar, counter-intuitive meaning. Distilling its tenets requires us to cut out aspects of the theory that sit uneasily alongside each other, and simultaneously elaborate