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William B. Swann Jr & Sanaz Talaifar

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Introduction to special issue of *Self and Identity* on identity fusion

William B. Swann Jr and Sanaz Talaifar[§]

University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the special issue on identity fusion, the co-editors begin with a brief history of the theory. They then discuss the unique properties of the theory and its relationship to related constructs. Next they explain how each of the articles in the issue advances the theory. Finally, they discuss future research directions.

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Identity fusion; group identity; progroup behavior

It was nearly a decade ago that the first article on identity fusion made its way into the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. As the articles in this special issue attest, the subarea has come a long way since then. But before turning to the exciting contributions to this volume, we offer a brief history of the construct.

The embryonic ideas that led to identity fusion were laid out in Austin, Texas in 2005. Angel Gomez was visiting the first author and the conversation drifted to a discussion of the bombers who attacked New York in 2001 and Madrid in 2001. They agreed that it was crucial to understand the reasons underlying the actions of the bombers and that these actions could not readily be explained by the dominant theory of group processes, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Instead, the actions of the bombers were expressions of something deeply personal. It seemed like the bombers personal selves had become “fused with” the group, so even if they died, they lived on in the group.

Fusion theory was therefore developed with an eye to explaining extreme pro-group behaviors, such as self-sacrifice. To this end, the theory emphasized two novel contributors to progroup behavior: the personal self and strong ties to fellow group members (Swann et al., 2012). The research literature has supported the role of both of these potential contributors to extreme pro-group behavior. Consider first the personal self. Increasing the salience of either the personal or social self (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010; Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009) amplified the relationship between fusion and willingness to sacrifice the self for the group. Moreover, feelings of personal agency mediated the link between fusion and pro-group behavior (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales & Hixon, 2010). This research shows that strongly fused individuals' behavior is explained by the personal and social selves acting simultaneously in a synergistic manner.

CONTACT Sanaz Talaifar  stalaifar@gmail.com

[§]University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA.

Research has also documented the role of relational ties in pro-group behavior. For example, people who score high on measures of identity fusion report perceiving ingroup members to be “like family” (Swann et al., 2009). Moreover, familial ties mediate the impact of fusion on pro-group activities and endorsement of fighting and dying for the group (e.g., Buhrmester, Fraser, Lanman, Whitehouse, & Swann, 2015; Swann et al., 2014). Furthermore, in a study of soldiers in the 2011 Libyan revolution, frontline combatants reported being as strongly fused with members of their battalion as they were to their own families (Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, & Swann, 2014).

There is also evidence of quantitative as well as qualitative differences between measures of fusion and rival measures of alignment with groups, such as identification. Regarding quantitative differences, fusion outpredicts identification when the outcome is endorsement of fighting and dying for ingroup members (Bortolini, Newson, Natividade, Vázquez, & Gómez, 2018; Gómez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009), self-sacrifice to save group members in variations of the trolley dilemma (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann, Gómez, Dovidio, Hart, & Jetten, 2010; Swann et al., 2014), or donating personal funds to group members under duress (Buhrmester et al., 2015; Swann, Gómez, Huici, et al., 2010; for reviews, see Fredman et al., 2015; Gómez & Vázquez, 2015; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015).

Regarding qualitative differences, when researchers in the foregoing studies substituted measures of identification for measures of fusion, very different patterns emerged. For example, activating the personal self amplified the effects of fusion (but not identification) on pro-group behavior. Similarly, measures of relational ties mediated the effects of fusion (but not identification) on pro-group behavior (Swann & Buhrmester, 2015). Furthermore, Heger and Gaertner ([this issue](#)) report that fusion predicts endorsement of having the group fight for the self but identification does not. Together with evidence of quantitative differences between measures of fusion and identification, these findings indicate that measures of fusion tap a phenomenon that is new and distinct.

In addition to clarifying the nature of fusion, foundational research on fusion also documented its consequences. Most of these consequences had the potential for harming outgroup members, such as fighting in a revolution (Whitehouse et al., 2014). Others were morally dubious, such as curtailing medical aid to an outgroup (Fredman, Bastian, & Swann, 2017). One of the articles in this special issue extends this work on the negative consequences of fusion. In particular, Buhrmester, Newson, Vázquez, Hattori, and Whitehouse ([this issue](#)), show that strongly fused persons aggressively work to maximize their national sport group’s competitive edge even when such efforts are costly to the self as well as its victims. This effect is particularly pronounced when people believe that the sport constitutes part of the group’s “essence.”

On a more upbeat note, several authors in this special issue have moved beyond the dark side of fusion by exploring its positive consequences. Consistent with Buhrmester et al.’s ([this issue](#)) evidence that people give careful thought to maximizing their group’s outcomes, Paredes, Briñol, and Gómez ([this issue](#)) report that strongly fused people carefully calibrate how much they do for their group. Rather than redundantly expending group resources, strongly fused participants seem less willing to fight and die for the group when they learn that other group members will do their sacrificing for them. In addition, three papers extend fusion to the domain of prosocial behavior. Misch, Fergusson, and Dunham ([this issue](#)) report that fusion fosters donations to the ingroup; Carnes and Lickel ([this issue](#)) show that identity fusion mediated the effect of moral convictions on willingness to sacrifice for the group; and

Segal, Jong, and Halberstadt ([this issue](#)), reveal that fusion mediated the relationship between fear associated with a catastrophic earthquake and donations of time and money to the community. Finally, a study by Walsh and Neff ([this issue](#)) demonstrates that fusion with one's partner fosters adaptive coping in couples. This striking finding, which extends fusion research to couples, points to a unique, identity-based mechanism for fostering harmony in intimate relationships.

Another common theme in the special issue involved work on the causes of fusion. In a study of pre- and post-election politics, Misch et al. ([this issue](#)) report that fusion with political party significantly increased before, but not after, the 2016 presidential election, and these effects were not moderated by whether the party's candidate won. Segal and colleagues also examined changes in fusion as a function of recalling memories of the devastating Christchurch earthquake in New Zealand. Fusion increased as a positive function of the fear participants felt and the personal harm they suffered. In an interesting twist, these fusion effects were most pronounced among participants who attributed the event to a supernatural agency.

As for the future, one fusion-related theme that we believe is particularly meritorious of future attention is that fusion not only augments and empowers the group, it also augments and empowers the self. The Heger and Gaertner ([this issue](#)) paper addresses this issue. Building on past evidence that identity fusion predicts endorsement of sacrificing the self for the group, they demonstrate that fusion predicts endorsement of having the group fight for the self. But there are surely many other ways in which fusion to a group could benefit the individual. In fact, we and other fusion researchers are currently investigating the many ways in which fusion and the behaviors it promotes (including prosocial behavior) promote personal performance and wellbeing.

But enough of our take on this special issue. Now it is time for readers to take a look for themselves!

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