

# Identity Fusion

William B. Swann Jr.<sup>1</sup> and Michael D. Buhrmester<sup>2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin; <sup>2</sup>Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford; and <sup>3</sup>Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queen's University Belfast

Current Directions in Psychological Science  
2015, Vol. 24(1) 52–57  
© The Author(s) 2014  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0963721414551363  
cdps.sagepub.com



## Abstract

Identity fusion is a visceral sense of “oneness” with a group and its individual members that motivates personally costly, pro-group behaviors. Past approaches, most notably social identity theory, have assumed that when people align with groups, the group category eclipses both the personal self and the relationships among individual group members. Also, social identity researchers have focused on intergroup processes. In contrast, fusion theory emphasizes the role of the personal self and intragroup relationships in extreme pro-group action. Strongly fused persons are especially inclined to endorse pro-group action when either the personal or the social self is salient, when physiological arousal is high, or when they perceive that group members share essential qualities (e.g., genes, core values) with one another. Moreover, feelings of personal agency, perceptions of family-like ties to other group members, and a sense of group-related invulnerability mediate the link between identity fusion and pro-group behaviors. All of these effects emerged while controlling for identification, which predicted the effects weakly if at all. By specifying some of the key antecedents of extreme pro-group behavior as well as the role of the personal self and familial ties in such behavior, the identity-fusion approach fills an important explanatory gap left largely unaddressed by earlier perspectives.

## Keywords

identity fusion, social identity, self-sacrifice, extreme behavior

More than a century ago, Le Bon (1895/1947) contended that group membership can be the enemy of personal agency. In his account of crowd behavior, the collective imposes a “group mind” on members and reduces them to puppets who robotically follow its directives. The identity-fusion approach (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012) highlights a very different scenario. Upon developing a visceral feeling of “oneness” with the group, strongly fused persons retain their sense of personal agency and channel it into pro-group action. Further, rather than focusing on the collective at the expense of fellow group members, strongly fused persons regard other group members as “family” and derive a sense of invulnerability from them.

Together, feelings of personal agency and familial ties to other group members are remarkably strong motivators of pro-group action. Indeed, dozens of studies have shown that measures of identity fusion outperform alternative measures of group alignment (e.g., “identification”) in predicting endorsement of extreme pro-group behaviors, including even sacrificing one’s own life. In this article, we focus on the nature and consequences of

identity fusion and probe into the psychological mechanisms that mediate its effects.

## Nature of Identity Fusion

Theorists have discussed many distinct forms of alignment with groups over the years (see Swann et al., 2012). Of these predecessors to identity fusion, the best understood is group identification, a construct that social identity theorists developed to explain intergroup relations (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Like fusion, identification refers to an alignment of people’s personal identities (i.e., aspects of self that make people unique) and social identities (i.e., aspects of self that align them with groups—e.g., being Jewish or Catholic). As identification

### Corresponding Author:

William B. Swann Jr., Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station, A8000, 108 E. Dean Keeton St., Austin, TX 78712-0187  
E-mail: swann@utexas.edu

increases, however, the personal self fades into the background and people come to see themselves as exemplifying qualities of the collective category. This shift encourages them to adopt prototypical behaviors, such as favoring the in-group over the out-group (e.g., Turner et al., 1987). In contrast, although strongly fused persons align themselves with the collective, they nevertheless retain an agentic personal self and cultivate close ties to fellow group members as well as to the collective category. Evidence that identification and fusion are distinct constructs has come from demonstrations that items from scales measuring the two constructs load on separate factors in factor analyses (Gómez et al., 2011; see also Buhrmester et al., 2012) and that fused persons and highly identified persons respond very differently to contextual manipulations, such as arousal and threats to the personal or social self (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann, Gómez, Dovidio, Hart, & Jetten, 2010; Swann, Gómez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009).

We hypothesized that fusion would be an especially potent predictor of extreme sacrifices, such as risking one's life for the group. For example, in 2011, we studied combatants in the Libyan revolution against Gaddafi (Whitehouse, McQuinn, Buhrmester, & Swann, 2014). We discovered that relative to militiamen who provided logistical support, those who chose to engage in frontline combat reported feeling more fused to their militia than to their own families. These findings are consistent with our assumption that identity fusion encourages people to put themselves in harm's way for the good of the group (although it could also be that engaging in frontline combat fostered fusion with the group).

Recognizing that it is rare to study people who are actively engaged in warfare, we also developed ways of measuring the propensity to self-sacrifice. One such measure is a 7-item self-report measure of intentions to fight and die on behalf of one's group (Gómez et al., 2011). As shown in Figure 1, fusion robustly predicted responses to the fight-and-die measure (controlling for identification) in 11 countries spanning six continents (Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014).

Others have developed moral dilemmas based on the classic *trolley dilemma* (Foot, 1967). In a prototypical trolley dilemma, participants imagine that they are standing on a bridge overlooking a set of train tracks. On the tracks below, they see that five countrymen are imperiled by a rapidly approaching train. Participants must choose between (a) standing idly by as their compatriots are killed or (b) jumping to their deaths, causing the train to stop before crushing their compatriots (Swann, Gómez, Dovidio, et al., 2010). Responses to this dilemma provide converging evidence that strongly fused persons are especially apt to endorse sacrificing their lives for fellow in-group members (but not out-group members). We

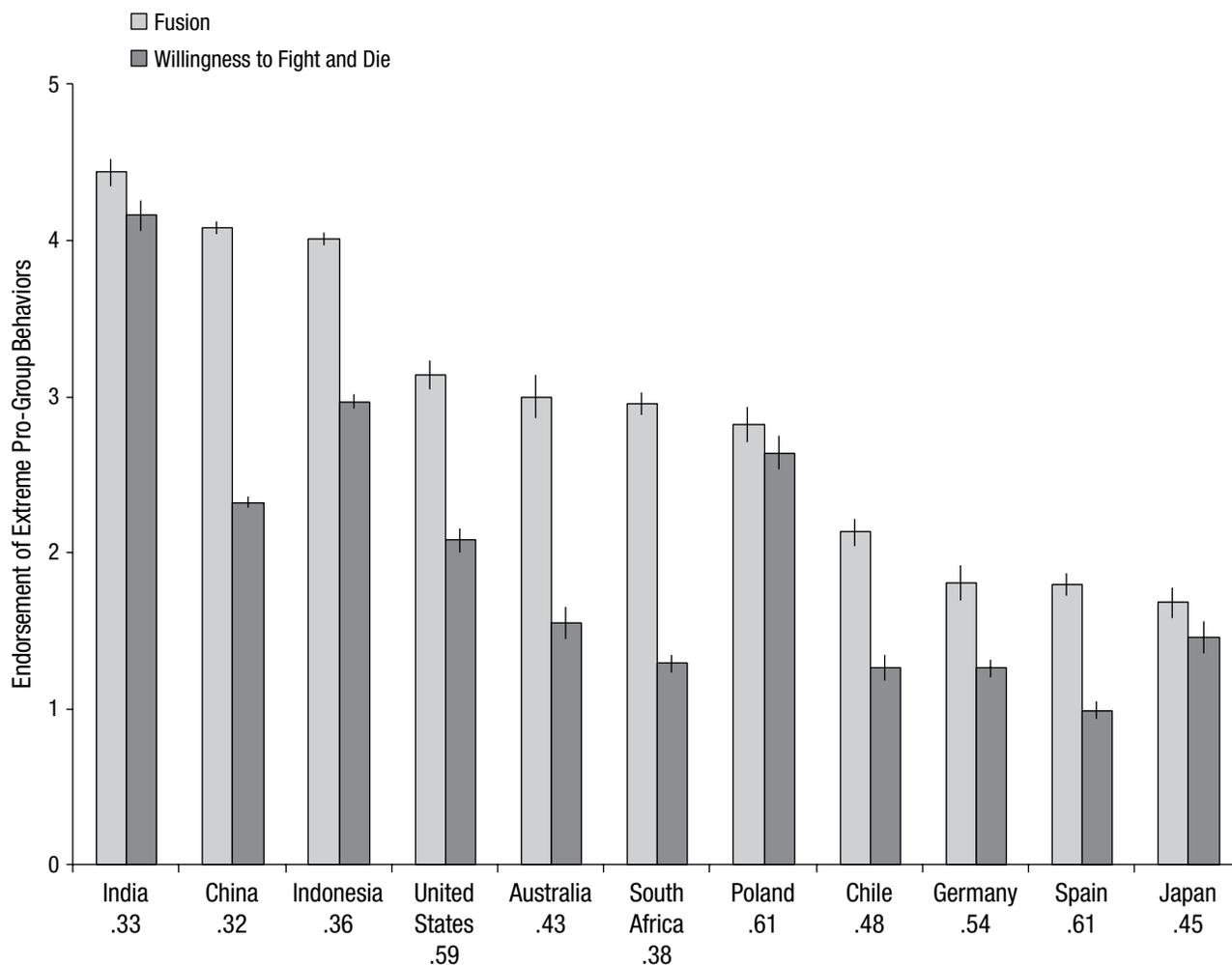
recently replicated these effects with additional dilemmas (Swann, Gómez, Buhrmester, et al., 2014).

Still other researchers have developed measures of less extreme, but nevertheless personally costly, pro-group actions. In one study, strongly fused Spaniards were especially likely to donate personal funds to support financially distressed group members (Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales, & Hixon, 2010). Similarly, strongly fused persons have been shown to provide social or emotional support to fellow group members. In one cross-cultural investigation, for example, Canadian, Chinese, and Indian participants played a resource-allocation computer game (Semnani-Azad, Sycara, & Lewis, 2012). Participants who were strongly fused with their nation allocated more resources to their compatriots and made fewer selfish requests for aid than did weakly fused players.

### ***Principles of identity fusion***

Conceptual analysis has identified four unique principles of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012). The *agentic-personal-self principle* suggests that the personal self can motivate pro-group behavior by channeling personal agency into pro-group action (see also Haggard & Tsakiris, 2009, Swann et al., 2012). To test the idea that heightened arousal fosters feelings of personal agency and thus increases endorsement of extreme pro-group behaviors, researchers experimentally increased physiological arousal through physical exercise. Consistent with their predictions, increased arousal bolstered endorsement of extreme pro-group behaviors (e.g., sacrificing one's life for the group) among strongly fused individuals but not among weakly fused or highly identified ones (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann, Gómez, Huici, et al., 2010; Swann et al., 2009). Furthermore, in several studies, researchers have assessed participants' self-reported feelings of group-directed agency (e.g., "I am responsible for my group's actions"). Perceptions of personal agency mediated the links between fusion and pro-group behavior (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009). Such findings offer converging evidence for the causal role of the personal self in the pro-group actions of strongly fused persons.

The *identity-synergy principle* suggests that the personal and social identities of highly fused persons may combine synergistically to motivate extreme pro-group behavior. If so, it should be possible to amplify the pro-group behavior of highly fused persons by activating either their personal or their social self-views. Consistent with this prediction, activating highly fused persons' personal selves (by asking them how they would react to a threat to their personal well-being) or their social selves (by asking them how they would react to a threat to their



**Fig. 1.** Results from Study 1 of Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014, showing that identity fusion with one's country predicts endorsement of extreme pro-group behaviors. The number appearing under each country name refers to the correlation ( $r$ ) between fusion with country and endorsement of extreme behavior for the country (all  $ps < .001$ ). Adapted from "What Makes a Group Worth Dying For? Identity Fusion Fosters Perception of Familial Ties, Promoting Self-Sacrifice," by W. B. Swann Jr., M. Buhrmester, Á. Gómez, J. Jetten, B. Bastian, A. Vázquez, . . . and A. Zhang, 2014, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106, p. 916. Copyright 2014 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

group) increased their subsequent endorsement of sacrifices for the group (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009). In contrast, highly identified participants displayed more pro-group behavior in response to activating their social selves but not their personal selves.

The *relational-ties principle* recognizes that strongly fused persons care about individual members of the group as well as the abstract collective. For this reason, strongly fused persons should be especially inclined to endorse sacrificing their own lives to save the lives of individual members of the group (e.g., when imperiled by a runaway trolley). In over a dozen studies, fusion predicted self-sacrifice, but identification did not (Swann, Gómez, et al., 2014; Swann, Gómez, Dovidio, et al., 2010). Further support for the relational-ties principle comes from two forms of evidence. First, when strongly

fused participants learned that group members might be killed in a hypothetical trolley dilemma, they became upset, and these emotional reactions predicted subsequent endorsement of self-sacrifice for the group (Swann, Gómez, et al., 2014). Second, self-reported feelings of familial connection to other group members statistically mediated links between fusion and pro-group outcomes (Buhrmester, Fraser, Lanman, Whitehouse, & Swann, in press; Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014). 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.

The *irrevocability principle* indicates that once people become highly fused with a group, their feelings of fusion will be supported not only by their alignment with the collective but also by their personal selves and ties to

other group members. As a result, once strongly fused, people will tend to remain fused. Support for this hypothesis comes from several studies in which researchers had participants complete the fusion scale developed by Gómez et al. (2011) once and then again up to 18 months later. Strongly fused participants (i.e., those scoring in the upper tertile) displayed stable rank orderings over time, whereas the scores of moderately or weakly fused participants fluctuated. This evidence of “irrevocability” among strongly fused persons puts them in sharp contrast to strongly identified persons, whose rank orderings vary with changes in the context.

### ***Local versus extended fusion and the psychology of self-sacrifice***

Evolutionary theory suggests that people should sacrifice themselves for others when they share genes with those others (Hamilton, 1964). This explains willingness to self-sacrifice among members of small groups composed of genetically related kin. Surprisingly, however, people also make the ultimate sacrifice for genetically unrelated others in large, diverse groups (e.g., nations, religious groups). Why?

The distinction between local and extended fusion provides a conceptual framework for understanding self-sacrifice for genetic strangers. Whereas local fusion occurs in relatively small, homogeneous groups in which members have direct personal contact (e.g., work teams, fraternities and sororities), extended fusion occurs in relatively large groups consisting of many individuals with whom the highly fused individual has no contact. Not surprisingly, when asked if they would be more willing to die to save members of their family versus members of various large groups (e.g., nation or religious group), the vast majority of people from all over the world endorsed dying for members of their family (Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014).

But if the perception of family ties motivates willingness to self-sacrifice, why do people die for large groups and abstract causes? One possibility is that extended fusion entails the projection of relational ties onto genetically unrelated group members, thereby transforming them into fictive kin (Atran, 2010). This projection process could persuade highly fused persons to sacrifice themselves for members of a heterogeneous group.

Recent research has identified key variables that may trigger this projection process. In particular, when highly fused people perceive that group members share core characteristics, they are more likely to project the familial ties commonly found in smaller groups onto the extended group. Consistent with this reasoning, encouraging strongly fused persons to focus on shared core characteristics of their countrymen and -women increased their

endorsement of making extreme sacrifices for their country (Swann, Buhrmester, et al., 2014). This pattern emerged whether the core characteristics were biological (genes) or psychological (core values) and whether participants were from China, India, the United States, or Spain. Furthermore, priming shared core values increased the feeling of familial ties among strongly fused group members, which, in turn, mediated the influence of fusion on endorsement of extreme sacrifices for the country. These findings suggest that, for strongly fused persons, recognizing that other group members share core characteristics makes larger extended groups seem “family like” and worth dying for.

### ***Identity fusion and morality***

Although most people can readily distinguish moral actions from immoral ones, *knowing* what is right does not guarantee *doing* what is right. This is particularly true when the moral course of action involves the ultimate self-sacrifice. In such instances, identity fusion may moderate the propensity of people to translate their moral beliefs into corresponding actions.

In one recent study, researchers had participants respond to one of two moral dilemmas in which they could save five members of their country by sacrificing themselves (Swann, Gómez, et al., 2014). In both dilemmas, over 90% of participants acknowledged that the moral course of action was to sacrifice themselves to save the in-group members. Nevertheless, only those who were strongly fused with the group were likely to endorse self-sacrifice. Moreover, among strongly fused participants, the decision to sacrifice oneself was motivated by emotional engagement with the group. In those relatively rare instances in which weakly fused participants endorsed self-sacrifice, it was for utilitarian rather than emotional considerations. Finally, whereas strongly fused persons knew immediately that self-sacrifice was the right thing to do, weakly fused persons arrived at this decision only by reflecting on the costs and benefits of various courses of action.

These findings suggest that moral convictions are necessary but not sufficient to motivate moral action. The fabric of people’s social relationships—particularly their feelings of fusion with fellow group members—may often determine their willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice.

### ***Future Directions***

Although recent research has provided some intriguing insights into the nature of fusion and the processes that link it to extreme behavior, much remains to be learned about the construct. One general question involves the

causes of identity fusion. Whitehouse (2004) has reported that some religious groups employ rituals that serve to create fusion-like bonds within the group (see also Atran, 2010). Military boot camps, fraternity pledge weeks, and gang initiations do much the same thing. Future research should explore the mechanisms that underlie these phenomena.

Another important next step will be to expand our focus on combative outcomes of fusion (e.g., fighting and dying for the group) to include noncombative outcomes of fusion. One goal will be to identify the contextual and personal variables that determine whether strongly fused persons pursue the goals of the group through violent versus peaceful activities. Such work will provide important insights into the conditions under which identity fusion has negative or positive social consequences. Here, too, it may also prove fruitful to explore how divergent levels of fusion versus identification may interact. For instance, might highly identified but weakly fused members disregard the well-being of individual group members, endorsing violence and the sacrifice of in-group members for the good of the collective? Evidence that highly identified persons are no more likely than minimally identified persons to endorse self-sacrifice in intragroup versions of the trolley dilemma suggest so (Swann, Gómez, et al., 2014; Swann, Gómez, Dovidio, et al., 2010).

In closing, we suggest that Le Bon (1895/1947) was onto something important when he noted that people are sometimes taken over by the “group mind.” Nevertheless, we assert that some individuals become enraptured with a group yet retain a strong personal self. Such strongly fused persons subsequently deploy their personal agency in the form of bold, pro-group action, including even the ultimate sacrifice.

### Recommended Reading

- Swann, W. B., Jr., Buhrmester, M., Gómez, Á., Jetten, J., Bastian, B., Vázquez, A., . . . Zhang, A. (2014). (See References). Presents evidence for the universality of fusion effects as well as the role of familial ties and perceptions of shared essence in fusion effects.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Gómez, A., Buhrmester, M. D., López-Rodríguez, L., Jiménez, J., & Vázquez, A. (2014). (See References). Reports several studies examining the cognitive and affective processes that underlie the decision to endorse self-sacrifice for one's group.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Gómez, A., Huici, C., Morales, F., & Hixon, J. G. (2010). (See References). Reports several studies providing evidence that physical exercise amplifies willingness to endorse fighting and dying for one's group.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Gómez, A., Seyle, C., Morales, J. F., & Huici, C. (2009). (See References). The first explication of the identity-fusion construct and initial evidence for it.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Jetten, J., Gómez, Á., Whitehouse, H., & Bastian, B. (2012). (See References). A formal exposition of identity-fusion theory and its implications.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

### Funding

The research discussed here was made possible by support from National Science Foundation Grant BCS-1124382 to William B. Swann Jr. and postdoctoral support to Michael D. Buhrmester through Economic and Social Research Council Large Grant REF RES-060-25-0085 and John Templeton Foundation Grant 37624.

### References

- Atran, S. (2010). *Talking to the enemy: Faith, brotherhood, and the (un)making of terrorists*. New York, NY: Harper-Collins.
- Buhrmester, M. D., Fraser, W. T., Lanman, J., Whitehouse, H., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (in press). When terror hits home: Identity fused Americans who saw Boston bombing victims as “family” provided aid. *Self and Identity*.
- Buhrmester, M. D., Gómez, Á., Brooks, M. L., Morales, J. F., Fernandez, S., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (2012). My group's fate is my fate: Identity fused Americans and Spaniards link personal life quality to outcome of '08 elections. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 34, 527–533.
- Foot, P. (1967). The problem of abortion and the doctrine of double effect. *Oxford Review (Trinity)*, 5, 5–15.
- Gómez, A., Brooks, M. L., Buhrmester, M. D., Vázquez, A., Jetten, J., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (2011). On the nature of identity fusion: Insights into the construct and a new measure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 918–933. doi:10.1037/a0022642
- Haggard, P., & Tsakiris, M. (2009). The experience of agency. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18, 242–246.
- Hamilton, W. D. (1964). The genetical evolution of social behavior: I. *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 7, 1–16. doi:10.1016/0022-5193(64)90038-4
- Hornsey, M. J. (2008). Social identity theory and self-categorization theory: A historical review. *Social & Personality Psychology Compass*, 2, 204–222. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00066.x
- Le Bon, G. (1947). *The crowd: A study of the popular mind*. London, England: Ernest Benn. (Original work published 1895)
- Semnani-Azad, Z., Sycara, K. P., & Lewis, M. (2012). Dynamics of helping behavior and cooperation across culture. *Proceedings of Collaboration Technologies and Systems*, 2012, 525–530. doi:10.1109/CTS.2012.6261100
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Buhrmester, M., Gómez, Á., Jetten, J., Bastian, B., Vázquez, A., . . . Zhang, A. (2014). What makes a group worth dying for? Identity fusion fosters perception of familial ties, promoting self-sacrifice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106, 912–926.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Gómez, A., Buhrmester, M. D., López-Rodríguez, L., Jiménez, J., & Vázquez, A. (2014). Contemplating the ultimate sacrifice: Identity fusion channels pro-group affect, cognition, and moral decision-making. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106, 713–727.

- Swann, W. B., Jr., Gómez, A., Dovidio, J. F., Hart, S., & Jetten, J. (2010). Dying and killing for one's group: Identity fusion moderates responses to intergroup versions of the trolley problem. *Psychological Science, 21*, 1176–1183. doi:10.1177/0956797610376656.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Gómez, A., Huici, C., Morales, F., & Hixon, J. G. (2010). Identity fusion and self-sacrifice: Arousal as catalyst of pro-group fighting, dying and helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 99*, 824–841. doi:10.1037/a0020014
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Gómez, A., Seyle, C. D., Morales, J. F., & Huici, C. (2009). Identity fusion: The interplay of personal and social identities in extreme group behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 96*, 995–1011. doi:10.1037/a0013668
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Jetten, J., Gómez, A., Whitehouse, H., & Bastian, B. (2012). When group membership gets personal: A theory of identity fusion. *Psychological Review, 119*, 441–456. doi:10.1037/a0028589
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole.
- Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell.
- Whitehouse, H. (2004). *Modes of religiosity: A cognitive theory of religious transmission*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Whitehouse, H., McQuinn, B., Buhrmester, M., & Swann, W. B., Jr. (2014). Brothers in arms: Libyan revolutionaries bond like family. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1073/pnas.1416284111