

'Fused' people eager to die and kill for their group, research shows

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People with extremely strong ties to their countries or groups are not only willing, but eager, to sacrifice themselves to save their compatriots, according to new psychology research from The University of Texas at Austin.

In a study to appear in *Psychological Science*, Bill Swann, professor of psychology, and a team of researchers found the majority of "fused" people, those who view themselves as completely immersed in a group (be it ethnic, national or other), are willing to commit extreme acts for the good of their compatriots.

"Fused group members believe that through suicide, their lives will achieve tremendous significance," Swann said. "Their strong sense of moral agency drives them to see not only that justice is done, but to also take an active role in its implementation."

The psychology researchers who co-authored the study included Sonia Hart of The University of Texas at Austin, Angel Gomez of Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia in Spain, John F. Dovidio of Yale University and Jolanda Jetten of the University of Queensland.

In the study, the researchers recruited 506 college students at the Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia in Spain. Based on the students' answers in online questionnaires, the researchers identified 38 percent of the participants as "fused" as compared to "non-fused," with Spain. They then measured their self-sacrificial behaviors.

To test the subjects' willingness to die for their group, the researchers based their Web surveys on different variations of the "Trolley Problem." Coined by British philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomas in 1967, the "Trolley Problem" presents a hypothetical moral dilemma in which a person must choose whether to kill one person to save five strangers from a fatal trolley collision either by pushing a man in front of the tracks or simply flipping a switch that would automatically kill an innocent bystander. To put a new spin on the [moral dilemma](#), the researchers added self-sacrifice as a means of saving a member of their group from a runaway trolley.

The study revealed that an overwhelming majority of fused respondents are willing to take extreme, bold steps to save the lives of their group members. According to the findings:

- 75 percent are willing to jump to their deaths to save the lives of five group members, compared to 25 percent of participants who were not fused with their country.
- 88 percent said they would die to save five members of an extended in-group (Europe), but not members of an out-group (America). The researchers used Europe as an example of an extended in-group (outsiders with close cultural or moral affiliations) because of its common social, political and economic ties to Spain. They used America as an example of an out-group because it is far removed from Spain.
- When given the option to push aside a fellow group member who is about to sacrifice himself to kill some escaped terrorists, 63 percent said they would push the group member aside so they, themselves, could leap to their deaths to divert a train that would then kill the terrorists.

Swann said the study may offer new insights into the mindsets of groups with extremist ideology.

"In an era in which the act of sacrificing one's own life for the group has had world-altering consequences, it is critical to learn more about the psychological underpinnings of such activity," Swann said.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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