



RIMA-MARIA RAHAL



**THE FIRE BURNS
WITHIN: INDIVIDUAL
MOTIVATIONS FOR
SELF-SACRIFICE**

Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 41, e214,
2018



Authors: Rima-Maria Rahal



Title: The fire burns within: Individual motivations for self-sacrifice

Published in: Behavioral and Brain Sciences

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Year: 2018

Volume: 41

ID: e214

**DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1017/
S0140525X18001851](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X18001851)**

The fire burns within: Individual motivations for self-sacrifice

Published in:

Behavioral and Brain Sciences (2018), Volume 41

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/behavioral-and-brain-sciences/article/fire-burns-within-individual-motivations-for-self-sacrifice/77C377635CA685C8B691D11037AE04D9>

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X18001851>

Rima-Maria Rahal

Department of Psychology, Goethe University, Frankfurt, 60323, Germany

Gielen Leyendecker Research Group, Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods, Bonn, 53115, Germany

rahal.rimamaria@gmail.com

<https://rimamrahal.wordpress.com>

Abstract: Extreme self-sacrifice in intergroup conflict may not only be driven by situational factors generating “fusion,” but also by inter-individual differences. Social Value Orientation is discussed as a potential contributor to self-harming behavior outside of intergroup conflicts, and to the general propensity to participate in intergroup conflict. SVO may therefore also be a person-specific determinant of extreme self-sacrifice in intergroup conflict.

The fire burns within: Individual motivations for self-sacrifice. The question whether individual behavior is driven not only by situational circumstances, but also by person-specific differences, has long occupied psychology (Epstein & O’Brien 1985), and also applies to extreme self-sacrificial behavior in intergroup conflict. Whitehouse’s theory largely considers situation-specific factors as drivers of self-sacrifice in intergroup contexts: “Fusion” with the in-group as an antecedent for individuals’ willingness to self-sacrifice for the group is thought to stem from transformative experiences and perceived shared biological properties. Adding to the theory from a perspective of inter-individual differences, I argue that actors’ motivations and individual level characteristics could contribute to extreme self-sacrificial behavior. I approach the question which individual level differences could increase individuals’ propensity to commit self-sacrificial acts in intergroup conflict from two lines of reasoning. First, I consider person-specific factors associated with individuals’ probability to commit self-harming acts outside of intergroup conflicts, arguing that a general individual level tendency toward such behavior may also manifest in an increased inclination to self-sacrifice in intergroup conflicts. Second, I consider person-specific factors associated with individuals’ probability to enter intergroup conflicts, arguing that people who are more likely to join intergroup conflicts are also more likely to take extreme measures in these conflicts.

In sum, I argue that understanding self-sacrifice requires a broad integration of situation- and person-specific factors.

First, predictors of individuals' propensity to commit self-sacrifice in general could also predict self-sacrifice in intergroup conflict. Inter-individual differences have been considered to explain self-harm both regarding clinically relevant behavior (Gratz 2003; Gratz et al. 2002), which has been related to individual emotions and relationship attachments, and non-clinical self-harm, which has been related to narcissism and risk attitudes (Bobadilla 2014; Vazire & Funder 2006), as well as self-deception (Fink & Trivers 2014; Trivers 2006). Moreover, martyrdom, defined as individuals' readiness to suffer and sacrifice their life for a cause, has been related to the readiness to self-sacrifice in a video game, and the endurance of pain (Bélanger et al. 2014).

Additionally, self-sacrifice can be explained from the perspective of decision theory as an individual's choice, affecting both own and others' outcomes. To reach a decision, individuals are argued to weight outcomes for themselves and other parties affected, and to have stable social preferences, i.e. preferences for outcome distributions (Messick & McClintock 1968). Such social preferences can be construed as inequality concerns (Bolton & Ockenfels 2000; Fehr & Schmidt 1999), or individuals' social value orientation (SVO) (Messick & McClintock 1968). Self-sacrificial behavior can be understood in the scope of the continuous model of SVO (Griesinger & Livingston 1973) as assigning no or negative value to own outcomes, and differentiated by its motivation to promote, disregard, or decrease others' outcomes (Figure 1). For example, when the Vietnamese monk Quảng Đức decided to publicly burn himself to death in 1963 to protest the persecution of Buddhists, he incurred extremely negative outcomes for himself. However, this decision also imposed extreme costs on the oppressive Diệm government, which would eventually be overthrown, and extreme

positive outcomes for Buddhists in the country. In other words, understanding self-sacrifice as driven by a preference to incur costs or to disregard own outcomes may be a promising approach to understanding individual level motivations as drivers for this type of behavior within and beyond intergroup conflicts.

Second, individuals' propensity to join intergroup conflict could explain why some also choose self-sacrifice as a means to contribute to intergroup conflict. For example, some groupy decision makers consistently favor their in-group across different situations, while others are conditionally groupy or non-groupy (Kranton & Sanders 2017). At least in part, some theories of intergroup conflict recognize the contribution of inter-individual differences to individual behavior in intergroup conflict (Duckitt et al. 2002), juxtaposing authoritarian attitudes and social dominance. For example, social dominance orientation (SDO) (Pratto et al. 1994; Sidanius et al. 1994), the individual preference for between-group hierarchy in society, has been associated with a competitive, cutthroat worldview (Perry et al. 2013), aggressive intergroup attitudes (Ho et al. 2012), and support of violence against out-groups, e.g., against immigrants (Thomsen et al 2008). Extreme preferences for socially dominating others may therefore also be connected to extreme out-group violence, even including self-sacrifice as a tool for domination.

Again taking a decision making perspective incorporating social preferences, individual behavior in intergroup conflict could be construed as choices in a public goods game (Choi & Bowles 2007). Individuals decide how much effort or other resources to invest in intergroup conflict, and although the individually rational option is to contribute nothing, the group goal (survival, social dominance, etc.) requires the in-group to invest more than competing groups, leaving all in-group members better off in case of success. Investments in intergroup conflict for the benefit of the in-group or to hurt the out-group at one's own cost

(e.g., parochial altruism, Bernhard et al. 2006), may depend on SVO (Aaldering et al. 2013, but see Thielmann & Böhm 2016). Among individuals who chronically disregard or discount their own outcomes and assign positive value to in-group or negative value to out-group outcomes, self-sacrifice could be understood as a rational (yet extreme) tool for resolving intergroup conflict.

In sum, I propose enriching Whitehouse's framework by considering individual differences as additional drivers of extreme self-sacrifice. In particular, I suggest that SVO is a promising framework to understand both the propensity to self-sacrifice and to engage in intergroup conflict from the perspective of decision theory. Beyond SVO, other inter-individual differences such as SDO, the tendency to deceive oneself, or narcissism and risk-seeking, could be investigated to predict extreme self-sacrifice. Empirically assessing the predictive power of such person-specific factors in relation to and interacting with situational factors might enrich the theoretical model describing self-sacrifice.

References

- Aaldering, H., Greer, L. L., Van Kleef, G. A. & De Dreu, C. K. W. (2013) Interest (mis)alignments in representative negotiations: Do pro-social agents fuel or reduce inter-group conflict? *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 120(2):240–50 doi: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2012.06.001
- Bélangier, J. J., Caouette, J., Sharvit, K. & Dugas, M. (2014) The psychology of martyrdom: Making the ultimate sacrifice in the name of a cause. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107(3):494–515 doi: 10.1037/a0036855
- Bernhard, H., Fischbacher, U. & Fehr, E. (2006) Parochial altruism in humans. *Nature* 442:912–15 doi: 10.1038/nature04981
- Bobadilla, L. (2014) Martyrdom redefined: Self-destructive killers and vulnerable narcissism. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37(4):364–65 doi: 10.1017/S0140525X13003361
- Bolton, G. E. & Ockenfels, A. (2000) ERC: A theory of equity, reciprocity, and competition. *The American Economic Review* 90(1):166–93 doi: 10.1257/aer.90.1.166
- Choi, J.-K. & Bowles, S. (2007) The coevolution of parochial altruism and war. *Science* 318(5850):636–40 doi: 10.1126/science.1144237
- Duckitt, J., Wagner, C., du Plessis, I. & Birum, I. (2002) The psychological bases of ideology and prejudice: Testing a dual process model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83(1):75–93 doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.83.1.75

- Epstein, S. & O'Brien, E. J. (1985) The person-situation debate in historical and current perspective. *Psychological Bulletin* 98(3):513–37 doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.98.3.513
- Fehr, E. & Schmidt K. M. (1999) A theory of fairness, competition, and cooperation. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114(3):817–68 doi: 10.1162/003355399556151
- Fink, B., & Trivers, R. (2014) Cognitive simplicity and self-deception are crucial in martyrdom and suicide terrorism. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 37(4): 366–367. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X13003385>
- Gratz, K. L. (2003) Risk factors for and functions of deliberate self-harm: An empirical and conceptual review. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10(2):192–205 doi: 10.1093/clipsy.bpg022
- Gratz, K. L. Conrad, S. D. & Roemer, L. (2002) Risk factors for deliberate self-harm among college students. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 72(1):128–40 doi: 10.1037/0002-9432.72.1.128
- Griesinger, D. W. & Livingston, J. W. (1973) Toward a model of interpersonal motivation in experimental games. *Behavioral Science* 18(3):173–88 doi: 10.1002/bs.3830180305
- Ho, A. K., Sidanius, J., Pratto, F., Levin, S., Thomsen, L., Kteily, N. & Sheehy-Skeffington, J. (2012) Social dominance orientation: Revisiting the structure and function of a variable predicting social and political attitudes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38(5):583–606 doi 10.1177/0146167211432765

- Kranton, R. E. & Sanders, S. G. (2017) Groupy versus non-groupy social references: Personality, region, and political party. *American Economic Review* 107(5): 65–69 doi: 10.1257/aer.p20171096
- Messick, D. M. & McClintock, C. G. (1968) Motivational bases of choice in experimental games. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 4(1):1–25 doi: 10.1016/0022-1031(68)90046-2
- Perry, R., Sibley, C. G. & Duckitt, J. (2013) Dangerous and competitive worldviews: A meta-analysis of their associations with social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism. *Journal of Research in Personality* 47(1):116–27 doi: 10.1016/j.jrp.2012.10.004
- Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., Stallworth, L. M. & Malle, B. F. (1994) Social dominance orientation: A personality variable predicting social and political attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67:741–63 doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.67.4.741
- Post, J. M., Ali, F., Henderson, S. W., Shanfield, S., Victoroff, J. & Weine, S. (2009) The psychology of suicide terrorism. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, 72(1):13–31 doi: 10.1521/psyc.2009.72.1.13
- Sidanius, J., Pratto, F. & Mitchell, M. (1994) In-group identification, social dominance orientation, and differential intergroup social allocation. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 134(2):151–67 doi: 10.1080/00224545.1994.9711378

Thielmann, I. & Böhm, R. (2016) Who does (not) participate in intergroup conflict? *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 1948550616660160–1948550616660160
doi: 10.1177/1948550616660160

Trivers, R. (2006) The Elements of a Scientific Theory of Self-Deception. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 907(1):114–131 doi:
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.2000.tb06619.x>

Thomsen, L., Green, E. G. T. & Sidanius, J. (2008) We will hunt them down: How social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism fuel ethnic persecution of immigrants in fundamentally different ways. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44(6):1455–64 doi: 10.1016/j.jesp.2008.06.011

Vazire, S. & Funder, D. C. (2006) Impulsivity and the self-defeating behavior of narcissists. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10(2):154–65 doi:
10.1207/s15327957pspr1002_4

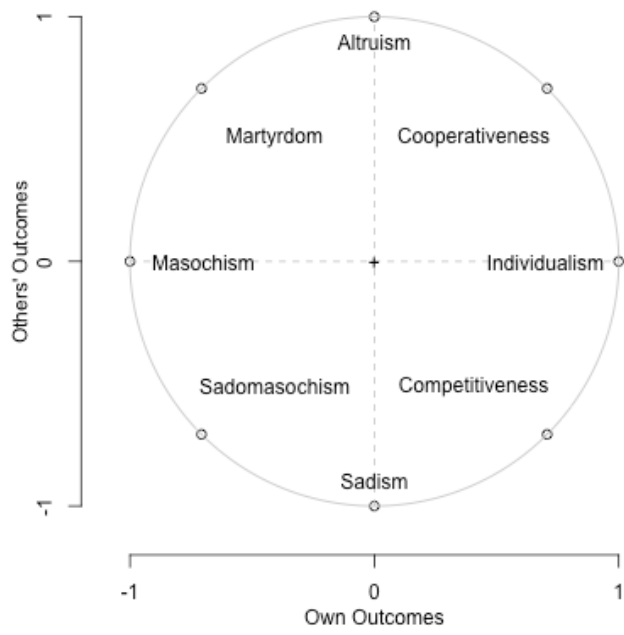


Figure 1. Graphical model of the SVO dimensions.