

research snapshot

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Does Identity Confusion Make People More Zealous and Hostile Toward Other Groups?

What is this research about?

Identity confusion is the sense that important aspects of the self, such as one's values or goals, are unclear or in conflict with one another. It is an unpleasant feeling; people who experience identity confusion will tend to try to resolve it. One way to do so, according to past research, is through zeal and intergroup hostility. It has been found that zeal and intergroup hostility can help people to cope with identity confusion. 'Zeal' is a proud and irrationally ideological conviction. A person who is zealous will demand that others agree with his or her view of things. 'Intergroup hostility' is the tendency to demean groups that hold different values. It can also take the form of aggression. Hostility toward other groups often goes hand in hand with a feeling of exaggerated esteem and loyalty for one's own group. But does identity confusion really make people more zealous and hostile toward others?

What you need to know:

Identity confusion causes people to become more hostile and aggressive toward those who do not share their beliefs.

What did the researcher do?

Professor Ian McGregor, at York University, set out to determine if identity confusion makes people more zealous and hostile toward other groups. In a series of experiments, university students were made to feel confused about their identities. In one case, the students were tricked into fearing that they lacked the aptitude for their chosen academic major. Then, to test their capacity for zealous extremism, the students were asked for their opinions about hot-button topics that reveal values, such as abortion, the US invasion of Iraq, or Islam. They were given a wide range of popular opinions, and then asked to pick the one they most supported. They had to indicate how passionately they felt about their opinion: their conviction for it. They also had to estimate how others felt about it: the degree of social consensus. Finally, the students were asked to rate the competence and character

of the members of their group as well as rival groups.

What did the researcher find?

Identity confusion makes people more zealous and hostile toward other groups. Those who display a lot of pride but, on an unconscious level, are somewhat more vulnerable seemed to be especially hostile.

How can you use this research?

This research improves our understanding of the psychological factors that can inflame hostility. It can help policymakers to develop policies that reduce the extremism and hostility of fanatical groups and individuals. It can also help us to better understand prejudice and terrorism. The present research advances basic research on the self and extremism.

About the Researcher

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Citation

McGregor, I., & Jordan, C. H. (2007). The mask of zeal: Low implicit self-esteem, threat, and defensive extremism. *Self and Identity*, 6(2-3), 223-237. Available online at <http://bit.ly/1111Wog>

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Keywords

Identity confusion, Zealous extremism, Intergroup hostility

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York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

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