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Exploring identity fusion from a dialogical perspective**

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Understanding extreme violent behavior in ultra firms: Exploring identity fusion from a dialogical perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores a dialogical operationalization of identity fusion in the context of

football firms. An in-depth life story interview with a longstanding member of a

football firm involved in several violent episodes was qualitatively analyzed. The

variety of positions of the self (I-positions) as well as the dialogical relations

established by such positions were examined under themes associated with identity

fusion, in an attempt to understand pro-group radical violent behavior. Results suggest

that a core coalition of internal I-positions and external We-positions favouring

extreme ultra violence appeared to dominate the participant's self-system. This

coalition seemed to have soft boundaries among the positions compounding it and, at

the same time, rigid boundaries with other positions of the self-system, operating as

an *I-prison*, preventing alternative counter-violence voices to be heard and promoter

or meta-positions to emerge. Considering that functionally equivalent forms of

identity fusion have been identified in radical football violence and terrorism, this

knowledge can contribute to tackle the pathways for engaging in extreme violence in

favour of a group/organization. Moreover, it can be used to develop more effective

programs to promote individuals' de-fusion from different groups, whenever group

adherence proves dysfunctional and risky for themselves and/or others.

Key-words: violence, radicalization, ultra firms, identity fusion, dialogical self

Ultras' violent radicalization constitutes a worldwide phenomenon that puts at stake the well-being and life of ultra members, sports fans, athletes, coaches, referees, and other professionals, but also implies high economic costs for governments. Identity fusion (e.g., Swann & Buhrmester, 2015; Whitehouse et al., 2017) has emerged as an important conceptual tool for understanding these extreme self- and other-endangering acts of violence in the context of a football firm. However, a deeper examination of some questions around fusion is still needed (e.g., why do some people become fused with a particular group while others do not?) (Gomez et al., 2011). As most identity fusion studies are quantitative and grounded on a mainly monological psychological view of the self, in which the group is considered as an external entity, operating outside the self, we believe that a qualitative and dialogical operationalization of this construct may contribute to advancing the current state of knowledge on identity fusion development and its association with ultras' radical violence engagement.

Ultra firms

Ultra firms may be described as "militant fan groups", usually exhibiting highly structured organization, whose main goal is to provide "colourful support to the team" (Spaaij, 2007, p. 414). Nevertheless, ultras are also known for frequently engaging in extreme acts of conflict and violence with ultra opponents and police forces (Spaaij & Vinãs, 2005). According to Kennedy (2013), ultras tend to be young and native, their number fluctuates from hundreds to thousands, and their membership varies from informal to formal, depending on each country's regulations and laws. There seems to be a high degree of heterogeneity in ultra firms, namely depending on the cultural, social, and historical specificities of the local region (Kennedy 2013; Spaaij & Vinãs, 2005). Nevertheless, ultra groups tend to operate in a way somewhat

similar to a military organization: for example, ambushing rivals to capture their

banner, having headquarters, and accepting a code of conduct devised by a leader

(Jones, 2016). Ultras are frequently distinguished from other regular team fans by

their in-stadium behavior, characterized by "theatrical displays" such as continuous

singing of team support songs and previously-planned "choreographed flag and

banner displays" (Kennedy, 2013, p. 133).

In Portugal, the phenomenon of ultra firms (called *claques*) and their violent

activities has not, to date, been addressed in detail (with the exception of Marivoet,

e.g., 2009). In 2003, 43 organized firms assumed an ultra identity in Portugal

(Marivoet, 2009), although prior to 2017 only 23 of these were registered (Paulo,

2017). However, considering that numerous ultras do not want to be identified the

actual number of Portuguese firms may reach over a hundred (Graça, 2015). Two

deaths due to ultra-related violence were registered until 2018 but, over the last two

decades, there have been increasing demonstrations of violence, such as threats,

aggression, assaults, and destruction of public and private property. The Portuguese

state spends close to 3.5 million euros in public security police to assure surveillance

and security in football games related just to the first Portuguese football division (*I

Liga*; Sales Dias, 2015). Between 2010 and 2013, two hundred and ten people were

sentenced for diverse crimes related to football violence and between 2010 and 2014

police officers registered 1200 incidents in football stadiums and arrested 129

individuals (Sales Dias, 2015). In 2018 fifty hooded individuals armed with baseball

bats, belts, and torches attacked several football players, the coach and other members

of the staff. The suspected perpetrators are currently facing a criminal indictment for

terrorism.

In this sense, football violence seems to have individual, social, and economic implications that have been escalating locally and worldwide. Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand this global phenomenon in an attempt to design effective interventions to its management. Interestingly, in the last few years, research has been suggesting that identity fusion may be an important process accounting for the difference between common football fans' and organized firm member's behavior (Newson, 2017). Following this empirical lead, in the following section we will explore the concept of identity fusion, its distinctive characteristics and its association to pro-group extreme violent behavior.

Identity fusion

Identity fusion implies a process of fusion between an individual's personal identity and group identity (Swann & Buhrmester, 2015). This reciprocal and visceral sense of oneness between individuals' personal self and their group identity is thought to underlie most forms of radical pro-group behavior, ranging from more or less extreme acts of violence towards out-group members to more or less extreme forms of self-sacrifice, including suicide (Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). In this sense, research has been attempting to define a) the factors involved in the development of identity fusion, b) the distinctive characteristics of identity fusion and, c) the way in which identity fusion may promote extreme pro-group behavior.

Previous studies (e.g., Whitehouse 2018; Whitehouse et al., 2017) suggest two main origins implied in the pathway towards identity fusion: 1) sharing a biological connection with other group members and 2) experiencing shared transformative experiences with other group members. Although the first may be seen as strictly innately determined, some authors suggest that it can also be constructed by implementing rules, norms, and referencing terminology within the group that

promotes the development of family-like links (e.g., Whitehouse, 2018). The second

one probably underlies most forms of fusion and entails three components: 1)

experiencing of euphoric and dysphoric personal life events with other group

members; 2) subsequent shared reflection on those auto-biographical memories

content; and 3) interpretation of these memories as self-defining, influencing the

creation of personal and social identities. Jong and colleagues (2015) provided

preliminary support for this second pathway, suggesting that when individuals shared

significant and emotional negative experiences associated with the Northern Irish

conflict and the Boston Marathon Bombing, and when these experiences were

followed by a shared reflection, identity fusion was more likely to occur.

Identity fusion research (Gomez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2012) has identified

four principles which characterize fused individuals: 1) the relational ties principle; 2)

the identity synergy principle; 3) the agentic personal self-principle; and 4) the

irrevocability principle. The first one refers to fused individuals' perception of

themselves as being tied not only to a group category but also to other group members

with a strong familial bond and it has been proposed as one of the most distinctive

features of identity fusion underlying extreme pro-group behavior (Gomez et al.,

2011; Swann et al., 2012). In the words of Gomez and colleagues (2011, p.919),

"rather than focusing on the group as a relatively abstract social category, fused

persons perceive it as a *family* consisting of members who all share a common bond".

Furthermore, this strong connection may contribute to another distinctive

characteristic of fusion: fused individuals appear to display an increased permeability

between their personal and social selves —identity synergy principle (Gomez et al.,

2011; Swann & Buhrmester, 2015). Accordingly, every time fused individuals'

personal or social/group identity is challenged, they tend to engage in self-verification

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actions (e.g., behave in ways that are consistent with their self-views, even if these

self-views are negative ones; see Swann, 2011) which reinforce both their personal

and group identity and can make them more suitable to fight or die for the group

(Swann et al., 2012). Fused individuals also perceive any pro-group behavior as a

form of social and personal expression and tend to project their personal and social

selves into other group members —whenever a group member is perceived at risk,

fused individuals' personal sense of agency is activated and any required action (even

if extreme and self-endangering) is performed (Gomez et al., 2011). Empirical data

suggests that this assumption of mutual defensiveness promotes a sense of reciprocal

strength and invulnerability in fused group members (Swann et al., 2012). In fact,

invulnerability and agency seem to fully mediate the association between identity

fusion and actual engagement in self-endangering or extreme pro-group behavior

(Gomez et al., 2011; Swann, Gómez, Huici, Morales, & Nixon, 2010).

This sense of personal agency not only appears to be preserved in fused

individuals —agentic personal self-principle— but also has been presented as one of

the most distinctive characteristics of identity fusion (distinguishing it from group

identification) and one of the factors that contributes the most for these individuals'

engagement in extreme pro-group behavior, particularly when the group is perceived

as under threat (Swann et al., 2010). When fused individuals' sense of agency is

augmented (e.g., by increasing psychophysiological arousal) they tend to intensify

their involvement into pro-group behavior, including extreme actions of fighting and

dying for the group (Swann et al., 2010).

Finally, it has been proposed that identity fusion, contrary to group

identification, is a tendentially permanent process —irrevocability principle— even in

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the absence of the contextual factors originally associated with the fusion (Swann et al., 2012). This fact is probably associated with the relational ties principle, considering that the individual is not only emotionally linked to the collective phenomena but also to other group members (Swann et al., 2012).

In sum, different studies have supported the assumption and illustrated how identity fusion can account for violent extremism. Ultra firms are considered a relevant context to study identity fusion and extreme pro-group behaviors (e.g., physical violence) as it is a global phenomenon and can extend previous fusion research on military, paramilitary, and radical groups (Newson, 2017). However, to our knowledge, qualitative studies focusing on identity fusion are missing. We believe that an exploratory directed content analysis approach would add considerable knowledge regarding how and why identity fusion develops and, particularly, how it relates to the engagement in violent pro-group behavior. Moreover, studies supporting the identity fusion approach present a mainly *monological* view of the self, attempting to understand how individual and group identities relate, and how an individual personal self works within a group. The operationalization of identity fusion in dialogical terms may allow us to broad our knowledge on the associations between this construct and extreme pro-group behavior. Such an operationalization assumes a more dynamic view of the self and enables the understanding of how the group works within the self in different situations and time frames. This dialogical perspective considers that groups (e.g., football firms) do not exist exclusively outside the self but also within it, as we will explore in the next section.

Dialogical Self Theory

According to the Dialogical Self Theory (DST), the self is not perceived as a single static entity but as a multiplicity of dynamic I-positions, framed into a given

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time and space (Hermans, 2001; 2018). Across situations, different I-positions construct different meanings from the very same experience, expressing an imaginative voice that communicates its point of view, desires, motives, feelings, and memories (Hermans, 1996). These positions are independent but inter-related (frequently acting as coalitions or counter-positions) and may assume two main forms: internal positions, sensed as a part of the individual ("I as a father", "I as an enjoyer of football"); and external positions, sensed as part of the environment that the person identifies as belonging to him or herself ("My children", "My firm colleagues"). In addition, social groups to which the individual belongs also play a role in the self-society as We-positions (i.e., a collective voice, e.g., "My religion", "My culture", "Our football team"). The relations and intersubjective interchanges between these group or collective voices and the internal or individual voices within the self-system appear to be a particularly important focus for a dialogical operationalization of identity fusion and its account of extreme pro-group behavior. Importantly, these "We-positions" are not simply "internalized" but rebuilt in the individual's own personal terms (Hermans, 2003). According to Hermans (2001), collective voices can sometimes be particularly constraining, considering that they are shaped by assumptions of the group of origin. At times, individuals' personal and collective positions may be in conflict, generating a field of tension that will impact their construction of meaning.

The existence of a highly diversified repertoire with a permanent possibility of innovation (through existent I-positions dialogue and new I-positions integration) is one of the greatest potentialities of this dialogical conception of identity. Regarding the situation at stake, I-positions establish a hierarchical structure with some having more power and being more relevance. In this process of innovation, Hermans (2018)

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highlights the importance of two integrative higher-order positions: the promoter

position and the meta-position. A promoter position grounds on the past, present, and

future self to lead the way towards innovation, differentiation, and self-achievement.

A meta-position, allows the individual to enunciate the connections between several I-

positions in a reflexive way, which is of extreme importance to change. Nevertheless,

individual's self-system can become stuck at a given position —I-prison— impeding

the self from exiting that metaphorical space and constricting the dynamic interchange

between positions, with obvious implications for the opening of innovative

movements within the self (Hermans, 2018). Self-system innovation may also be

blocked by the quality of I-position boundaries —i.e., degree of permeability and

cooperation existing in the connections and exchanges among I-positions (Hermans,

2018).

　　　According to Hermans (2018), the engagement into extreme violent behavior

towards the self and others by extreme orthodox religion's members may be

accounted both by the spotlight of these individuals' religious I-positions —assumed

as core positions, that subjugate all the others— and by the existence of rigid and

closed borders that delimitate the Ingroup/Outgroup related I-positions. On the one

hand, this organization provides them with a sense of coherence and reassurance

(particularly for individuals struggling with identity formation) but on the other hand,

it severely limits the consideration of alternative, innovative and counter I-positions

voices, causing the unified coalition of I-positions to become progressively stiff and

relentless. In these cases, it seems crucial to promote the flexibility of borders and a

centralizing movement of Ingroup and Outgroup related I-positions, that allows for a

meta or a promoter I-position emergence, potentially capable of reaching a sense of

integrity and coherence through a democratic society in the self (Hermans, 2018).

This study aims to illustrate the dialogical interplay on the course of development of

identity fusion in the case of Samuel, a Portuguese ultra, through the analysis of a life

story interview regarding his ultra identity and his involvement in the football firm's

violent episodes.

Method

Participant

At the time of the interview Samuel (fictional name) was in his thirties,

married with young children. He was part of the directive board a football ultra firm

in Portugal. He has been engaged in the "ultra world" since he was about 14 years old

and has been a fan of this firm's football club from an early age onward. The name of

the city and of the football club and other demographic data will not be revealed in

order to preserve participant's identity.

Interview Procedure

After providing informed consent, Samuel participated in a semi-structured

life history interview. The semi-structured interview schedule (provided on request)

was adapted from a protocol developed in a study on engagement/disengagement and

radicalization/deradicalization regarding violence in former political militants (see da

Silva, 2019; da Silva, Fernández-Navarro, Gonçalves, Rosa, & Silva, 2018). The

interview script was used in a flexible way to help stimulate reflection on important

topics related to the processes of engagement/disengagement into football firms and

radicalization/deradicalization regarding violence acts, while allowing the interviewee

to lead the course of the conversation and to choose what and how to recount the

events. The interviewee had the liberty to tell thorough, multilayered stories about his

life, while being particularly encouraged to narrate his relationship with the football club and the football firms in which he was engaged.

Data Analysis

The current study applies a qualitative methodology, previously used in a case study of former political militants (see da Silva et al., 2018). Samuel' multivocal self was analyzed regarding the development and maintenance of his identity fusion with an ultra firm. Particularly, we applied an exploratory directed content analysis that attended to the participant's perspective favoring extreme violent acts, departing from a structured framework of themes. A team of three researchers with different areas of expertise (political violence, dialogical self, and narrative change processes) gathered to define and operationalize the analytical framework. After a literature revision of the themes that have been described in the literature as important in the analysis of identity fusion, they consensually selected four theoretically driven themes: Agentic Personal Self Principle; Identity Synergy Principle; Relational Ties Principle, and; Irrevocability Principle (see introduction section). In an attempt to integrate a top-down with a bottom-up approach, two coders checked whether these theoretically driven themes were capable of grasping the contents of interest, and which of Samuel's pro-violence and counter-violence internal and external I/We-positions could be identified in each one.

Results and Discussion

Throughout the analysis of Samuel's interview coders were able to identify excerpts representing all four theoretically-driven themes. Moreover, from a bottom-up approach one new theme emerged: contextual background. In addition, coders were able to identify several internal and external dialogical positions within each

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theme. Specifically, it was possible to categorize these positions as more closely

associated with pro- or counter-violence perspectives and behaviors. Next, the internal

and external positions identified, with a special focus on pro- and/or counter-violence

movements, will be presented, with each theme being dealt with. Additionally, some

excerpts are used for further illustrate the identified positions.

On the development of identity fusion: *Contextual background* positions

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Insert Table 1 about here

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This first theme focuses on the development of Samuel's identity fusion with

the ultra group. This process seems to undergo from his infancy, emerging from two

external We-positions (see table 1), deeply intertwined and rooted in his contextual

background: *My city* and *My club*. When asked to tell us about the club, Samuel starts

by saying that a person born in his city will hardly be from another club. However, he

does not see this as an innate characteristic "there is no such thing as being born of a

club". On the contrary, he narrates the process of acculturation that seems to happen

in a natural way: "A child is born in a home where the child only hears about the club,

goes to school and is all about the club (…) everything is around the club... when the

child gets to know about other clubs, the passion for the club has already settled in".

We probed this issue of not being an innate club supporter, to which Samuel offered

the description of the rituals that are transmitted from generation to generation leading

children to become club supporters —"I have children and the day after they were

born, I registered them as members of the club. This is something that was taught to

me, my father did the same, my grandfather did the same, my colleagues do the

same".

In this sociocultural framework, the *I as a supporter* and the *I as fan,* or in Samuel's words the "demonstrations of love for the club", soon developed in his self-system. According to Samuel, the club and the city, composed by its citizens, are deeply intertwined. In this sense, when asked about the importance of the club for the community, Samuel answered that "the club is the best flag of the city" and the citizens dedicate all their love to the club: "they are happy when they win, sad when they lose, stop working to go to football".

Thus, this contextual background theme seems to reflect some features that have been identified as crucial in identity fusion development: 1) sharing a biological connection with other group members and 2) experiencing shared transformative experiences with other group members. However, in Samuel's case, the biological connection and the shared experiences are not directly related to the ultra group but with social and cultural groups closely related to it and with a strong influence throughout his development: the city and the club.

Identity fusion on *agentic personal self* positions

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Insert Table 2 about here

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The *We as an armed arm* emerges as one of the main external We-positions that seem to account for the association between Samuel's identity fusion with the ultra firm and his engagement in self and other-endangering violent actions (see table 2). Whenever the club or its supporters are perceived as under threat, Samuel's personal and collective sense of agency is activated, frequently culminating in situations of conflict and violence: "We are the shield and the armed arm of the supporters of the club". When probed about such a need for a violent response, Samuel pointed out to the old rivalries between certain football clubs which create a

sense of threat. This sense of threat is voiced through the external We-position "*Our opponents*" and exacerbated in match days, starting with the exchange of offensive comments previous to the match, songs, choreographies, and objects (e.g., banners); resulting in violent confrontations.

In this context, Samuel recounted an episode in which a rival firm started throwing stones at Samuel's bus upon the arrival of his firm. Samuel and his comrades made the bus driver stop and headed after the stone throwers, entering a fairly violent confrontation, which resulted in an open wound on Samuel's head. Despite needing medical attention, Samuel refused to enter the ambulance, signing a statement of responsibility, and joined his comrades in watching the game and attempting to reach their opponents and confront them. He only went to the hospital upon his arrival at his hometown, which was more than a few hours after the confrontation between rival firms, to receive 15 stitches in his head. According to Samuel, his actions were justified by "the adrenaline, I just wanted to kill them [...] [just thought] 'let's go to the match, let's get on top of them and we don't leave this place without killing one of them' and all that bullshit". Even though we may assume the presence of I-positions, such as *I as an injured man* who needs medical treatment, this individual I-position seems to have been completely silenced by a coalition of I and We-positions related to the firm and his members that are feeding and strengthening each other —*I as a firm leader,* who must be in charge until the end, *I as a firm member* whose pride has been wounded, *My people* and *My club supporters* to whom I owe loyalty and who need me, *We as an armed arm*. Thus, the external We-position *Our opponents* seems to have been immediately activated by the stone throwing, motivating Samuel's sense of personal and collective agency and leading Samuel to engage in extreme self-endangering behavior, in the search for power and

survival. When asked how it feels to be in the frontline of violent confrontations, Samuel mentions that "when the moments of confrontation arrive, it is automatic — "either you kill or you get killed". He acknowledges that "fear is always there", but the *I as fearful* does not seem to be heard. Samuel assumes that he usually does not spend too much time thinking about what could go wrong, instead in this situation he simply focused on what had to be done to harass and fight the rival firms: "You feel the adrenaline, a mix of emotions". This excerpt illustrates previous studies' assumptions (e.g., Swann et al., 2010) that psychophysiological activation also seems to play a role here —the sense of increased arousal appears to activate his sense of personal agency and engagement into extreme pro-group behavior. On the other hand, for Samuel, these high levels of violence feed the myth around the firm and attract football fans: "We have had massive beating up festivals. Everyone likes to come to our hometown, because we put up a good fight. We face the dogs […] It's a myth […] It's recognition, you're strong, you show strength, you see?".

The sense of loyalty seems to underlie all of these positions (see table 2), fostering Samuel's perception of invulnerability and engagement in higher risk behaviors. Also, the external We-position of *My people* is apparently strengthening the supremacy of this coalition of positions in his self-system. Regarding the sense of comradery within the firm, Samuel affirmed: "I know that my colleagues could not guarantee my safety, but they would do everything to try to get me out of there".

Identity fusion on *identity synergy* positions

Insert Table 3 about here

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Samuel is very clear regarding the prominent role of the core internal I-position *I as an ultra*, which invariably dominates the self-system when it is activated. When asked to explain what it means to be an ultra, Samuel said:

> To be an ultra is to defend the club, is to live for the club 24 hours a day. If an ultra has 100€, he will not buy a shirt, he will buy a club's sweater. He is broke, he wears fake sneakers, but he buys the club's coat. That's being ultra. If the club launches something, a key-ring, you buy the key-ring. If it launches a nail clipper, you don't even need one, but you buy it. Do you understand? This is to be ultra, to live for the club.

In this quote the external We-position *The ultras* seems to guide Samuel's identity and behavior mainly through its proximity to the internal I-position *I as an ultra* (see table 3). Considering that *The ultras* are voiced as guardians of the club, club's fans and the firm's honour, the attacks against the club, the club's fans, or the firm's honour are simultaneously felt as personal attacks. For instance, when Samuel perceives that the club is being attacked the *I as an ultra* and the *I as a man* internal positions seem to be simultaneously activated. Samuel explains that hearing "the club is shit or being called son of a bitch is the same. For me, it's the same. Well, not exactly the same, because my mother is my mother, but it hurts similarly".

The external We-position *Our opponents* seems to be determinant in activating *I as an ultra* position (and the coalition of I and We-positions related to the firm and his members previously referred —*I as a firm leader, I as a firm member*, *My people*, *My club supporters, We as an armed arm*) and motivating Samuel' engagement into extreme violence acts against rival firms only — "Other than these, I condemn any kind of violence. We don't have to invent new rivalries, we already have enough". *Our opponents* are voiced as cruel and ruthless, and a serious menace as Samuel

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explains: "if you're ultra, you have to beat them up because if they have the chance, they will do the same to you".

In other situational and contextual configurations, outside the ultra world, Samuel reports a lower likelihood of engaging in extreme violence, even with supporters of other football clubs, considering that these are not perceived as *Our opponents* but instead as *Society outside the ultra world*. This last external position appears to shield his ultra identity and allows him to function in society. This counter-violence position voices how violence outside the firm is meaningless. When asked how different it is to socialise with people who have never been part of the "ultra world" (e.g., colleagues of his wife), Samuel affirms that the use of violence is not considered, even if these people support other clubs: "I'll not waste my time with them because they'll never understand my passion […] at the social level, in daily life, to the ordinary citizen, our violence doesn't make any sense". Yet, Samuel concedes that such a contact with people outside the firm makes him consider different viewpoints —"I start to see that maybe there is not only this world [the ultra world], there is more world out there". Thus, it seems that when S*ociety outside the ultra world* is activated the *I as a man* has a voice that is struggling to be heard in opposition to the *I as an ultra.* In this sense*,* these instances outside the ultra world may constitute an important source of innovation and opportunity for the *I as a man* to have an independent voice in "the world out there".

Therefore, the external I-position of *Society out of the ultra world*, appears to cooperate with other internal I-positions such as —*I as a man*, *I as a husband, I as a father*— forming a coalition of counter positioning which distances Samuel from violence. When asked how he balances being an ultra and a family member, Samuel admits struggling to explain his wounds to his children or his engagement into violent

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conflicts to his parents. The coalition of these family-related I-positions end up

justifying Samuel's current preference for non-violence, and the apparent weakening

of the *I as an ultra* position – "I am softer, I am calmer. Sometimes I think that I am

getting too old for this bullshit". Besides these external counter-violence positions,

Samuel's narrative account also points to the emergence of some innovation in the

coalition *I as an ultra* internal I-position and *The ultras* external We-position,

claiming: "We are not the only people who are right".

This analysis suggests that these counter-violence positions are the only ones

presently breaking the almost monological functioning of Samuel's self-system. Most

of the I-positions identified throughout this analysis (either already presented or to be

presented in the following topics) are similar in content and goals (Ultra prone

internal and external I-positions —for example *I as an Ultra, I as a firm leader, The*

Ultras, My club). Moreover, they favour a monological self-functioning by boycotting

contrasting alternative and dissonant I-positions to emerge and to be heard. Despite of

the importance of these counter-violence contrasting positions in favouring dialogue

and multiplicity, they appear to assume a segmented and not integrated role within

Samuel's present self-system. There seems to exist an I-prison, with rigid boundaries

shielding the dominant coalitions of ultra related external and internal positions,

hampering new positions to break in and new pathways of change to emerge.

Identity fusion on *relational ties* positions

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Insert Table 4 about here

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The importance of the relationships and close links between the firm members

is a topic that Samuel highlights throughout his narrative account. His *I as a firm*

leader I-position seems to form a coalition with the *I as a firm member*, the *I as a man*

and the *I as a friend* (see table 4). When questioned about the role of interpersonal

dynamics management in a firm, Samuel says that, for instance, the bus journeys to

the matches are quite important: "The people who are there on the bus, these

relationships are important. And we in the leadership have to know how to cultivate

them". Samuel further clarifies this when he explains that with certain firm members,

the ones with whom he grew up, he maintains such a strong friendship that they

provided a crucial presence at some of his special moments, even more than some

biological family members. For example, he says that "when my wedding arrived, it

was for them that I had a special affection, much more than perhaps for some cousins;

[…] we do not choose family, but we can choose our friends". These hardcore

relationships represent an external We-position that stands out in Samuel's self-system

—*My people*. Such an intense friendship is also rooted on the external We-position:

The ultras which voices a shared devotion and passion to their club —"the friendship

is the chain and the football is the padlock that armours even more our friendship".

Also, it seems to represent the "spirit of comradeship", the assurance of never letting

another ultra down, mentioned in the previous section. The protective relational

context that seems to be associated with *My people* and *The ultras* We-positions is a

privileged stage for the experience of moments of great intensity and complicity. In

Samuel's opinion it is this assurance which keeps them united and gives them

"strength and courage" to engage in violence.

Identity fusion on *irrevocability principle* positions

_____

Insert Table 5 about here

_____

When asked about how long Samuel plans to be an ultra for, he affirms that he

will be always "faithful" to *My club* and to *The ultras* comrades (see table 5). In this

sense, these two external We-positions seem to support and extend Samuel's *I as an ultra* internal I-position for the eternal future:

"This is my life. I'll always be ultra. I can be very old but I'm going to be there. I'm not saying that I'll stay in the firm forever, but I'll be old and I'll go to the stadium to watch the match, I'll be singing, I'm not going to be singing the 90 minutes, but I'll always be there".

Likewise, Samuel thinks that violence is inherent to the ultra's world and he would always be available to engage in violent acts if needed and if his conditions allow —"every time I can and while I can". In this sense, the external I-positions *The ultras* and *My club* seem to form a coalition with the internal I-positions *I as an ultra*, that feed and strengthen each other. Moreover, this coalition of I-positions is strengthened by *Our opponents* external We-position, that also assumes an irrevocable status. Samuel claims that some clubs will always constitute an "eternal rival". Therefore, there seems to be evidence for a coalition of external and internal positions, perceived as irrevocable, that seem to impede the emergence of innovative, counter-violence positions in Samuel's self-system, not only when he considers the present moment but also when he anticipates the future.

Conclusion

The first main contribution of this study stems from the exploration of a dialogical operationalization of identity fusion in the context of football firms. Results illustrate the presence of distinctive characteristics of identity fusion in Samuel's interview and confirm the important role of this psychological process in his engagement into extreme pro-group violent behavior in ultra firms. Furthermore, a coalition of several internal and external I and We-positions related to his ultra identity appeared to underlie the development and establishment of identity fusion and

engagement in violence. This coalition seemed to have soft boundaries among the

positions compounding it and, at the same time, rigid boundaries with other positions

of the self-system, operating in the form of an I-prison, preventing alternative counter-

violence voices from being heard. It also should be underlined that all the external

positions that emerged in Samuel's narrative, were also We-positions closely related

to the ultra firm (e.g., *We as the armed arm, My people, My club*). This result seems to

support the dominant role of these We-positions that, in coalition with other I-

positions also related to the ultra firms (e.g., *I as a leader, I as a firm member*),

contribute to the core dominance of the *I as an ultra* I-position in Samuel's self-

system. Moreover, this dominance impedes Samuel's dialogical self-functioning,

leading him towards a monological self-system that appears to be currently shut down

to any form of contrast, opposition, or negotiation between dissonant positions. In this

sense, when the coalition of counter-positions emerging in Samuel's self-system

(*Society out of the ultra world*, *I as a man*, *I as a husband, I as a father*) struggle to be

heard, they are split from his core self. In the words of Hermans (2003, p. 99), it

seems as if "sharp boundaries are drawn around one or a few highly centralized

positions, and any dialogical interactions with boundary positions are precluded".

This split appears to be blocking the emergence of a meta-position that could assume

a distanced, comprehensive, and reflective perspective over Samuel's self-system. For

its turn, the lack of a meta-position appears to compromise the emergence of a

promoter position that would allow a balanced movement, first of decentralization and

ultimately of centralization, fostering Samuel's self-system integrated and diverse

development. Consequently, no promoter or meta-positions were found in Samuel's

interview. In sum, the dominance and rigid boundaries shielding Samuel's ultra

identity of I- and We-positions appear to be determining a monological functioning of

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his self-system, impeding a meta-position and a promoter position to emerge, which

feeds the maintenance of identity fusion between Samuel's personal identity and the

ultras' social group identity and the continuous engagement in extreme violence.

Another contribution stems from the conceptualization of Contextual

Background as a relevant theme for understanding Samuel's identity fusion

development. Considering that literature has suggested the importance of local culture

in the formation of ultra groups' specific behavioral characteristics (e.g., Kennedy

2013), it would be useful for future research to test whether this theme is specifically

applied to Samuel's case or if is generally of relevance for the development of identity

fusion in ultra groups.

In sum, this study brings together two theoretical approaches —Identity

Fusion and DST— illustrating its main tenets and assumptions. Samuel's *I as an ultra*

position seems to be placed at the head of his self-system, organizing all of the other

I/We-positions according to its terms and impeding any innovative dialogical

breakthrough through the establishment of an I-prison. In this sense, there seem to be

rigid borders separating the Ingroup- from the Outgroup- related I-positions, as if

there were two separate communities in the self, which are unable to communicate

and in which one of them is clearly dominant and the other is clearly dominated. This

hierarchical imbalance and supremacy of Ingroup-related positions appears to be

manifested in every theme associated with identity fusion herein examined.

Considering that functionally equivalent forms of identity fusion have been identified

in radical football violence and other forms of extreme violence and terrorism

(Whitehouse, 2018), the dialogical operationalization of this construct can start to

pave the way to deepen the understanding of processes of engagement in radicalized

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forms of violence in a group context. Also, this goal appears determinant for the

future development of more effective programs to promote individuals' de-fusion

from groups whenever this group adherence proves dysfunctional and risky for

themselves and/or for society. In these cases, following dialogical theory assumptions

(e.g., Hermans, 2018) and the results from the current study, it may be important to

promote the flexibility of Ingroup/Outgroup related positions' borders, aiding the

fused individuals to move beyond this split and go through a centralizing movement.

This centralization would allow new positions to have a voice firstly and then to be

integrated in the self-system so that it becomes liberated from the over-arching

dominant ultra positions. Such centralization would create a fertile soil for the

development of meta-positions that would broaden the limited scope of the self and

for promoter positions able to give a developmental impetus to a more diversified self.

(Hermans, 2018).

Despite the relevance of the current contribution, it should be acknowledged

that this only represents the first step towards the understanding of how a dialogical

operationalization of identity fusion may be used to deepen our knowledge regarding

the engagement/disengagement from radical violence. These results should be

cautiously interpreted considering that they are driven from a case study (with its

inherent idiosyncrasies) in the specific context of football firms' radical violence.

Different (and possibly more complex) forms of radical extremism, associated with

religious, ethnical, or political issues may be featured by other variables not

anticipated or addressed in the current study. In this sense, future studies exploring

this framework of analysis in other contexts of radicalization emerge as an important

direction to pursue.

Epilogue, comment on Toon Van Meijl's contribution

Van Meijl's paper takes Dialogical Self Theory (DST) as its starting point to deconstruct the discourse of cultural integration in postcolonial European nation-states in order to contribute to the de-radicalization of inter-ethnic relations. In our study, we start from DST to explore identity fusion development and its association with ultras' radical violence engagement in order to contribute to the design of more effective de-radicalization interventions in specific extreme group contexts. In this sense, several common grounds may be found between the two contributions.

First, both articles reflect on the relevance of contextual, social, religious and/or cultural discourses in shaping the perception of a group that holds different behaviors, beliefs, principles, values, preferences or assumptions as an "Outgroup" and consequently as "strangers" or "unacceptable others", in opposition to an "Ingroup" which may foster reciprocal cycles of segregation and violence. These segmentation prone discourses seem to strength a process of identity fusion among "Ingroup" members, further distancing them from "Outgroup" and increasing the chances of radicalization. Van Meijl particularly considers the implications of these discourses in encouraging radicalization, segregation and ultimately violence between inter-ethnic groups mainly by planting fear and a "need to close boarders" for protection of Ingroup values, cultural integrity and even physical safety. Our case study results suggest that this is also the case in the ultra world, where different team firm members are perceived as unacceptable Others, posing a threat to Ingroup integrity and safety, and leading to radicalization, segregation and ultimately extreme violence.

Secondly, the two contributions argue that this phenomenon of closing boarders may be mirrored in individual's self-system through the development of self

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I-prisons. When I-positions are shut down in an I-prison, individuals are unable to

look for Ingroup/Outgroup potential shared interests, emotions, aspirations, behaviors

or shared values. Instead, they tend towards the development of a monological self-

system resistant to any form of negotiation between "Ingroup" and "Outgroup" related

I-positions.

Finally, both papers assume that whenever there is no space for difference, a

fertile soil for radicalization emerges which leads us to the idea that building bridges

between imprisoned Ingroup and Outgroup I-positions appears to be a significant path

to pursue in de-radicalization intervention programs, regardless of the specific target

population. The answer may thus be, as Van Meijl states in p. 9, to "shift the focus

from differences to similarities".

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Table 1

Contextual Background Positions

External I/We-positions	**Internal I-positions**
My city	*I as a supporter*
My club	*I as a fan*

Table 2

Agentic Personal Self Positions

External I/We-positions	**Internal I-positions**
We (the ultra firm) as an armed arm	*I as a firm member*
Our opponents	*I as a firm leader*
My people	*I as an injured man*
My club supporters	*I as fearful*

Table 3

Identity Synergy Positions

External I/We-positions	**Internal I-positions**
Our opponents	*I as an ultra*
The ultras	*I as a man*
Society outside the ultra world	*I as a husband*
	I as a father

Table 4

Relational Ties Positions

External I/We-positions	**Internal I-positions**
My people	*I as friend*
The ultras	*I as man*
	I as a firm leader

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Table 5

Irrevocability Principle Positions

External I/We-positions	Internal I-positions
My club	*I as an ultra*
The ultras	
Our opponents	