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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 and 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, phenomenological, 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 organisation: e.g. 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 *cliques*) and their violent activities has not, to date, been addressed in detail (with the exception of Marivoet, e.g. 2009). In 2003, Portugal had 43 organized firms that assumed an ultra identity (Marivoet, 2009) and since 2009 it is mandatory for the firms to be registered in the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth. However, numerous ultras do not want to be identified, resulting in the registration of only 23 firms prior to 2017 (Paulo, 2017). Nevertheless, 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, destruction of public and private property, players’ cars, firm buses, etc. 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 one of the most significant incidents was the assault on the Academy of a club of the first Portuguese football division, in which fifty hooded individuals armed with baseball bats, belts, and

torches attacked several football players, the coach and other members of the staff. The 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, J., 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) suggests 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 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 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 such a phenomenological 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 broaden 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 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 come more or less formatted according to the 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) 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 We-positions to become progressively stiff and relentless. In these cases, it seems crucial to promote the flexibility of borders and a decentralizing movement, that allows for a meta or a promoter I position emergence, capable/potentially capable of reaching a sense of integrity and coherence through a

democratic society in the self (Hermans, 2018).

Method

Participant

Samuel (fictional name) is 34 years old, married, and has two young children. He heads a non-registered football ultra firm in Portugal, which represents his main occupational/professional activity. He has been part of / has been a member of this football firm since its foundation, at about 15 years ago, and he has been a fan of this firm's football club since he was born. The name of the city and of the football club will not be revealed in order to preserve participant's identity. Before the creation of his current football firm, Samuel was a member of another firm from his 14th until his 18th birthday, approximately.

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/is 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) and proved capable of grasping the developmental nature of participants' multivocal self, regarding the processes of engagement/disengagement from an armed group and radicalization/deradicalization about violence. In this sense, Samuel's multivocal self was analyzed regarding the development and maintenance of his identity fusion with an ultra firm. Particularly, this exploratory analysis attended to his 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 Sinergy 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

The analysis of Samuel's interview revealed that all four theoretically-driven themes were present. 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 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.

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

Insert Table 1 about here

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*. According to Samuel, a person born in this 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 only hears about the club, goes to school and is all about the club (...) everything is around the club... when he/she gets to know about other clubs, the passion for the club has already settled in". Samuel also describes the rituals that are transmitted from generation to generation —"I have two daughters 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. Thus, "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

Insert Table 2 about here

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*". Such a need for a violent response is rooted, according to Samuel, in old rivalries between certain football clubs. 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.

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 the coalition of I and We-positions related to the firm and his members —*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. 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: “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 “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

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. As he explains:

“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 remaining coalition) and motivating Samuel's engagement into extreme violence acts: “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 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 out 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 he socialises with people who have never been part of the “ultra world” (e.g.,

colleagues of his wife) 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 *Society outside the ultra world* is activated the *I as a man* has a voice, but it appears to be granted by the *I as an ultra* —the synergy between positions seems to exist, but the *I as a man* is the front cover. However, it can also be hypothesized that 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”.

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 coalition is supported by other internal I-positions associated with the external I position *Society outside the ultra world – I as a husband, I as a father* – which distance Samuel from violence. Samuel admits struggling to explain his wounds to his daughters or his engagement into violent 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”.

Identity fusion on *relational ties* positions

Insert Table 4 about here

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). He says that during the journey to the matches: "The people who are there on the bus, these relationships are important. And we in the lead 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 with 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.

Due to the strong friendship bonds between ultras, Samuel knows that if something happens, they will always be there for him: "my people will come and get me". 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

Samuel 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”. Moreover, this coalition of external 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 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 and a promoter/meta-position to emerge. Consequently, no promoter or meta-positions were found in Samuel's interview. 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. This dominance 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/regional 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— providing support for its main tenets and assumptions and

illustrating the significance of a dialogical operationalization of identity fusion.

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 society of mind, 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 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 go through a decentralizing movement. This movement would predictably allow for meta and promoter I positions to emerge, to favor the internal dialogue by allowing the voices of the whole I/We positions repertoire to be heard, and to prompt innovative positions and more flexible dynamics in the self system (Hermans, 2018).

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Table 1

Contextual background positions

External I/We positions	Internal I-positions
<i>My city</i>	<i>I as a supporter</i>
<i>My club</i>	<i>I as a fan</i>

Table 2

Agentic personal self positions

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

Table 3

Identity synergy positions

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

Table 4

Relational ties positions

External I-positions	Internal I-positions
<i>My people</i>	<i>I as friend</i>
<i>The ultras</i>	<i>I as man</i>
	<i>I as a firm leader</i>

Table 5

Irrevocability principle positions

External I-positions	Internal I-positions
<i>My club</i>	<i>I as an ultra</i>
<i>The ultras</i>	
<i>Our opponents</i>	