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Shared reality: Construct and mechanisms

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To provide background for the Special Issue on shared reality, we outline the construct of shared reality and underlying mechanisms. Shared reality is the experience of having in common with others inner states about the world. Inner states include the perceived relevance of something, as well as feelings, beliefs, or evaluations of something. The experience of having such inner states in common with others fosters the perceived truth of those inner states. Humans are profoundly motivated to create shared realities with others, and in so doing they fulfill their needs to have valid beliefs about the world and to connect with others.

Humans are profoundly motivated to create shared realities with others [1], and our world is virtually brimming with opportunities for doing so. For instance, when people meet a new employee at their workplace, they tend to form their impressions of the newcomer jointly with their colleagues, and they feel more confident in their impressions when others agree. People take into account the views of others, especially significant others [2], to appraise experiences and events, and to construct or verify views about various types of issues [3]. Shared reality creation allows us to evaluate other people or groups; to form political, moral, or religious convictions; and even to develop and maintain a sense of who we are and what we want [4,5]. And shared-reality creation comes with another immense benefit for members of an ‘ultrasocial’ species [6,7]: When we create a shared reality with others, we connect with them, we establish or strengthen our social relationships, and thus fulfill our fundamental need for belonging [8].

It comes as no surprise, then, that the absence or privation of social sharing can have detrimental effects on people’s sense of confidence and feelings of connectedness. These effects can be seen both for short-term, situated interactions and for long-term social relations. When current interaction partners withhold an expected shared reality, such as in the classical social influence studies by Asch [9], people are left uncertain, uncomfortable, even physically agitated. When a close or intimate relationship dissolves, individuals lose an important source of shared reality, which previously allowed them to validate their judgments, feelings, opinions, and even their self-concept [10]. Such consequences explain why the breakdown of a romantic relationship constitutes a highly distressing life event [11]. Similarly, exclusion from a group threatens the excluded member’s needs for belongingness, meaning, and self-esteem [12].

People often communicate with others when they want to create a shared reality about something. Such interpersonal communication has been examined to capture the antecedents, processes, and consequences of shared reality (for reviews, see [13–16]). Communicators typically tailor, or ‘tune,’ their message on a topic to their audience’s beliefs or attitudes on that topic, such as describing a target person in more negative terms when they know the person they are talking to (the audience) doesn’t like the target person [15]. Audience tuning not only affects message formulation, but it also has consequences for communicators’ own subsequent cognition, including biasing their memory for the original information on the topic toward their tuned message [17,15]; see also [18]. This ‘saying-is-believing’ effect [17] occurs to the extent that communicators have the goal of creating a shared

reality with their audience, thereby making it a ‘sharing-is-believing’ effect [1].

Accounts emphasizing the social nature of our representations of reality have been around for decades in psychology and the social sciences (e.g. [19–36]). Compared to this long history, explicit theorizing about shared reality per se is relatively young. While the conceptual framework has been developed mainly in the 1990s [3,15,37], empirical work informed by the theory started to be published ten years later (for reviews, see [13,14]).

How do people determine whether their perceptions and knowledge of something are real? In contrast to perspectives that consider low-level cognitive monitoring of people’s perceptions and inferences [38–40], shared reality theory considers processes at a higher level of analysis that concerns relationships among people. For instance, when members of a work team (the oldtimers) meet a new colleague (a newcomer), they work together to figure out what kind of person she is, whether she is outgoing, trustworthy, committed, or open-minded, which would allow them to predict her actions and regulate their future interactions with her. The oldtimers discuss what she is like to verify or create common opinions about her. Thus, the question is not whether the observed events (the newcomer’s behaviors) are real, that is, whether the oldtimers trust their perception and memory of the newcomer’s behaviors, but whether their opinions about her as a person are real (versus imaginary). If the oldtimers’ opinions are socially verified or co-constructed, then they shift from being subjective to being objective [3]. It is this *social* process that is central to *shared* reality theory and research. Next, we discuss more fully the concept of shared reality and the assumptions regarding the conditions for its occurrence.

Shared reality: definition and mechanisms

Shared reality is defined as the experience of having in common with others inner states about the world [13,14]. Inner states include the perceived relevance of something [1], as well as feelings, beliefs, or evaluations of something. The experience of having such inner states in common with others fosters the perceived truth of those inner states. In creating shared realities with others, humans fulfill their needs to have valid beliefs about the world and to connect with others. The fulfilment of these needs from shared reality creation is often intertwined. For instance, by creating a shared reality about a newcomer’s abilities at their workplace, oldtimers both fulfill their epistemic need for a confident judgment about the newcomer and strengthen their own mutual relationship.

In shared reality, the inner states are about something. This is because *reality* refers to the referents of knowledge; that is, to phenomena that are experienced by observers as being part of the world, such as a fellow

employee [41], a work supervisor [42], suspects in an incident [43], one’s own romantic relationship [11], intergroup attitudes and relations [44,45], or political issues [46]. Having corresponding inner states without a reference object, such as one person being ‘infected’ with another’s bad mood, does not qualify as a shared reality. Thus, shared reality goes beyond simply duplicating or ‘catching’ another person’s inner state, as is the case in mood contagion [47]. Shared reality, then, requires mechanisms that allow people to infer the target referent of their partner’s inner state — what is the inner state about? Eye gaze and pointing are two such mechanisms, as when a child is looking at something on a tree branch, looks over at the caretaker and points to the branch; the caretaker now looks at the same thing, and they both smile — which illustrates shared relevance and shared feelings [48–51] in identifying the referent of interest or attention.

Shared-reality creation also requires mechanisms for inferring someone else’s inner state (e.g. [52,53]). Mechanisms used to infer others’ mental states, such as others’ beliefs and attitudes, include conscious reasoning, unconscious simulation, and theory of mind [54]; causal theories and schemata (e.g. [24,55]); and projection of one’s own inner states (e.g. [56,57]); for neuroscientific research on such inferences, see [58,59].

In sum, this conceptualization of shared reality provides a distinctive definition of the phenomenon and implies several building-block mechanisms. This formulation affords distinctions between shared reality and related concepts such as common ground, informational social influence, alignment with norms, empathy, perspective-taking, and socially distributed knowledge [13,14]. To give one example: Common ground involves shared background knowledge about what is the topic of the conversation, which permits or at least facilitates communication [60]. However, common ground, as it is typically used in the literature, does not require that the communication partners experience matching inner states (feelings or judgments) about the topic of the conversation — just the topic itself. For instance, there can be common ground between an employer and employees, in the sense of a shared reference, regarding a new business plan for reducing labor costs. They all know that the business plan is the topic of the communication. However, this would not necessarily mean that the employers and employees agree in their judgments or feelings about the plan. Indeed, they might not even have shared relevance, because the employers may think the business plan is very important but the employees do not.

To conclude, the creation of shared reality involves fundamental cognitive, motivational and social mechanisms that contribute to achieving confident feelings, beliefs and evaluations (inner states) about the world. As demonstrated by the contributions to the present

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