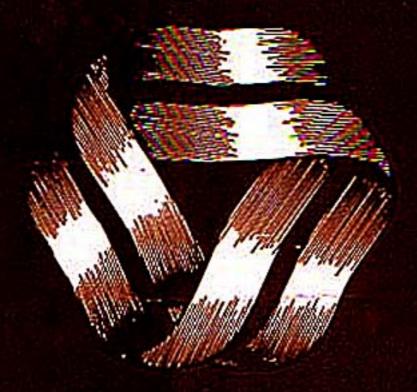# HANDBOOK OF

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Shared Reality
How Social Verification
Makes the Subjective Objective

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Shared Realities about the Self Are Utilized in Social Regulation

The hypothesis of shared reality implies that information about the self will be preferred to the extent that it is shared with others. That is, the more a given aspect of self has been recognized in the social verification process, the more "reality" it achieves, and the more likely it is that it will be maintained and defended. The preference for shared reality should hold for both positive and negative information, because the functions of shared reality are assumed to be principally independent of evaluative valence. Hence, the hypothesis of shared reality provides a useful complement to self-verification theory (e.g., Swann, 1990) in understanding the role of self-understanding in social regulation. In addition to providing an account of how self-understanding develops, shared reality subsumes some predictions of self-verification theory and makes additional predictions about which self-enhancement and self-verification theories are silent.

We explored these hypotheses in two experiments employing a preference paradigm (Hardin, Higgins, & Schachinger, 1995). In Experiment 1, subjects indicated whom they would prefer to meet in an upcoming study on the basis of impressions their potential partners supposedly held of them. In Experiment 2, subjects indicated which aspects of themselves they would prefer to learn more about from a supposedly newly developed computer program designed to make personality assessments. In both experiments, the attributes of self on which subjects made their choices were idiographically constructed from their responses to a questionnaire administered several weeks previously in an ostensibly unrelated psychological battery. In it, subjects had listed attributes they believed were characteristic of themselves, as well as attributes they believed significant others thought were characteristic of them. In the experiments, preference judgments were made between (1) attributes that were self-descriptive versus their opposites, and (2) self-descriptive attributes that were shared with significant others versus those that were not. Hence, the design allowed a replication of the basic self-verification finding, in which subjects prefer information about themselves that is consistent rather than inconsistent with the self-concept. In addition, the design allowed a test of the prediction unique to the shared-reality hypothesis—in particular, that subjects would prefer information about themselves that was shared with significant others to unshared self-relevant information.

As part of a battery of tasks administered near the beginning of the term, each subject listed attributes characteristic of the self, as well as attributes believed about the subject by (1) the subject's mother, (2) the subject's father, (3) the subject's best friend, (4) people in general, and (5) a typical new acquaintance.[3] In addition, subjects rated the degree of certainty with which they believed each attribute they listed was truly self-descriptive. Subjects' responses were utilized in the idiographic construction of individualized attribute sets on which the preference judgments were made. A self-attribute was defined as "shared" if subjects believed at least one other thought the attribute characteristic of them, and "unshared" if the attribute was listed as self-descriptive only by the subject.[4] The shared and unshared attributes later given to subjects for their preference judgments were matched on certainty. Hence, any preferences for shared self-attributes over unshared self-attributes could not be attributed to differences in certainty. Finally, in both experiments, subjects made preference judgments on attributes that they had listed as self-descriptive, as well as attributes that another "yoked" subject had listed as self-descriptive. This procedure provided experimental control for any effects of the content of the attributes.

EXPERIMENT 1   Subjects were contacted by telephone, ostensibly to be recruited for an upcoming study concerning "how people get acquainted." Subjects were asked to choose among several potential interaction partners they would prefer to meet who had supposedly formed impressions of them on the basis of the psychology inventory they had completed earlier that term. In a two-phase procedure, subjects were asked to consider the various impressions of them held by those who had examined their responses, and to choose whom they would prefer to meet in the upcoming study. In the first decision phase, each attribute and its opposite were presented for a preference judgment. For example: "One person thought you seemed *opinionated*, but another person thought you seemed *not opinionated*. Which person would you prefer to meet?" Alternatively: "One person thought you seemed *gullible*, but another person thought you seemed *not gullible*. Which person would you prefer to meet?" Subjects were given at least three attributes and their opposites they had listed earlier as self-descriptive, as well as at least three yoked control attributes and their opposites. In the second decision phase, subjects chose between partners who held impressions that were "shared" versus "unshared." Each impression pair consisted of either positive attributes or negative attributes. For example: "One person thought you seemed *lazy*, but another person thought you seemed *depressed*. Which person would you prefer to meet?" Here too, subjects indicated their preferences on both self-descriptive attributes and yoked control attributes. In all, subjects made no more than 12 and no fewer than 8 choices across both decision phases.

From the perspective of shared reality, subjects were predicted to choose to interact with partners whose impressions were (1) consistent rather than inconsistent with their self-concepts, even if the impressions were negative; and (2) "shared" versus "unshared" attributes, whether positive or negative. As predicted by both self-verification theory and the shared-reality hypothesis, subjects chose reliably more partners who held self-consistent rather than inconsistent impressions of them. Not only was the overall relationship reliable, but it remained reliable when choices were broken down by trait valence: Subjects chose partners whose impressions were consistent rather than inconsistent, whether the impressions were positive or negative. The preference for confirming over disconfirming partners was not found on the yoked attributes.

Strong support for the unique prediction of shared reality was also found. Subjects chose reliably more partners whose confirmatory impressions of them were "shared" rather than "unshared." Again the relationship held whether the impressions were positive or negative, suggesting that shared reality is not moderated by valence. And, again, the preference for impressions that were shared versus unshared was not found for the yoked attributes.

EXPERIMENT 2   The procedure of Experiment 2 essentially replicated that of Experiment 1. Subjects were contacted by telephone, ostensibly to be recruited for an upcoming study concerning "the development of a new computer program designed to make personality assessments." Subjects were told that an initial run of the program had utilized data from the psychological inventory they had completed earlier in the term to generate a series of attributes describing them. Subjects were asked to choose the self-attributes they were most interested in learning more about in an upcoming study in which the computer program would generate a more detailed analysis. Subjects indicated their preferences in a two-phase procedure that mimicked Experiment 1. For example, "One attribute generated about you was *unfocused*, but another was *excitable*. Which would you prefer to learn more about?" In all, each subject made 12 choices across both decision phases.

Again, the hypothesis of shared reality predicted that subjects would prefer to learn more information about aspects of the self that were (1) consistent versus inconsistent with their self-concepts, and (2) "shared" versus "unshared." Replicating Experiment 1, subjects preferred reliably more information that was consistent rather than inconsistent with their self-concepts whether it was positive or negative.

Support for the unique prediction of shared reality was also found, replicating Experiment 1. Subjects preferred to learn more about reliably more self-consistent attributes that were "shared" rather than "unshared" with significant others, whether the attributes were positive or negative, suggesting that shared reality is not moderated by valence. Importantly, the preference for attributes that were shared versus unshared was not found for the yoked attributes.

In sum, research from existing literatures as well as from our own laboratory suggests that shared reality is a promising theoretical strategy with which to integrate understanding of the development and maintenance of self-understanding. Shared reality is implicated in research demonstrating the role of immediate ongoing interaction in the construction of experience of self, as well as in research demonstrating that well-established self-concepts may be defended in new situations that offer alternative understandings of the self. The analysis is corroborated by direct evidence from our own laboratory, which suggests that extant self-concepts are defended through the regulation of future social interaction to the extent that they are currently shared with significant others. Hence shared reality provides one synthesis of the decades-old debate concerning whether the self-concept is relatively fixed or fluid. In particular, self-understanding emerges from what is recognized and verified in ongoing social interaction, and this self-understanding may acquire some stability to the extent that aspects of self are grounded in a network of regular social verification. Finally, however, the perspective of shared reality implies that even highly valued, long-held beliefs about the self will not survive indefinitely if they cease to be verified by others or if competing aspects of self are newly recognized and regularly established in social interaction. The peculiarities of the degree to which self-concepts that are not supported by ongoing social verification can be maintained awaits direct research. However, current assumptions of cognitive theory suggest that the answer to this question may involve the frequency and recency with which particular existing aspects of self have been shared, in combination with what realities are newly established through social interaction.

Hardin, C., Higgins, E. T., & Schachinger, H. E. (1995). *Shared reality: The role of social verification in self-verification.* Unpublished manuscript, Columbia University.