1

A Relational Approach to Cognition:
Shared Experience and Relationship Affirmation in Social Cognition

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Social psychology is poised to realize the synthesis envisioned in the "The Sovereignty of Social Cognition" by the late Thomas Ostrom (1984), who defined *social cognition* as "the struggle to understand the interdependence between cognition and social behavior." In so doing, Ostrom broke from contemporary definitions of social cognition, which in the 1960s and 1970s was defined as the study of cognition about social objects and since the early 1980s has been defined as the study of the cognitive bases of social perception and behavior (cf. Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Heider, 1958; Higgins & Sorrentino, 1981; Kelley, 1968; Wyer & Srull, 1995). Although Ostrom celebrated the identification of cognitive foundations of social behavior, he lamented the lack of research on social foundations of cognition. However, it can no longer be said that the social bases of cognition have been ignored. Indeed the recent decade has witnessed a blossoming interest in how social relationships affect even very basic information processing (e.g., Andersen, 1996; Baldwin, 1992; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Higgins, 1992; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Leary, 1995; Markus & Kitayama 1991; Schwarz, 1994; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Tice, 1995).

We argue that theoretical integrations of cognitive and social activity will yield important new insights into many of the hallmark issues of social psychology, including attitudes, social perception, the self-concept, and stereotyping. To do so, we first identify in the history of social cognition research two fundamental human requirements – social connectedness and cognitive understanding – and argue that a full understanding of social-cognitive interdependence requires a renewed focus on how social interaction structures basic information processing. We propose that shared reality theory provides one such synthesis from its postulate that both relational and epistemic requirements are served by the interpersonal realization of shared experience (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Moreover, research demonstrating the role of shared reality processes in the regulation of interpersonal behavior and individual cognition provides tentative promise for Ostrom's prescriptive charge for the social cognition endeavor.

FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL COGNITION: RELATIONSHIPS AND EPISTEMICS

Twisting through the history of research on social cognition, like the frayed strands of a double helix, is the observation of two great forces driving human behavior: One is the requirement to establish, affirm, and protect social relationships, and the other is the requirement to understand the self and its environments (*inter alia.*, Asch, 1952; Festinger, 1954a; Freud, 1922/19xx; Heider, 1958; Higgins, 1981a; James, 1890/1950; Kruglanski, 1992; Lewin, 1931; Mead, 1934; Newcomb, 1953; Schachter, 1959; Sherif, 1936; Sullivan, 1953). Interestingly, for the most part, the contemporary literatures on the pursuit and consequences of the relational and epistemic needs have evolved independently. For example, contemporary social cognition research has been characterized by a near exclusive focus on epistemics (see Thompson, Naccarato, Parker, & Moskowitz, chap. 2, this volume, for a review) – that is, how the cognitive system enables individuals to understand and thereby adaptively navigate an informationally complex world (e.g., Bargh, 1996; Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Kruglanski, 1992; Markus & Wurf, 1986; Stangor & Lange, 1996; Swann, 1990; Trope, 1986; Wyer & Srull, 1995). Meanwhile, research on the negotiation and maintenance of social relationships has occurred on the self-described margins of mainstream social psychology (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bradbury & Karney, 1995; Collins, 1997; Fletcher & Fitness, 1996; Hazan & Shaver, 1986; Murray & Holmes, 1997). This was not always the case, however: The American psychological tradition arose out of the modern conception of human nature, including the assumption that individual thought

is a product of social activity (e.g., Dewey, 1922/1930; Freud, 1922/19xx; James, 1890/1950; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970; Wittgenstein, 1962). Indeed, with the benefit of hindsight, it appears that the theoretical alienation between the social and cognitive is a relatively recent (and temporary) development. An expressed focus on their interdependence characterizes classical social-psychological theory, and contemporary theorists have reaffirmed an interest in social-cognitive interdependence.

Epistemics and Relationships in Classical Psychology

At its genesis, American psychology accepted as axiomatic the proposition that cognition and social activity are fundamentally interdependent. For example, William James argued that human knowledge – including veridical knowledge – is not an individual end, but an ongoing process of adaptive, cooperative, social activity (e.g., James, 1890/1950, 1907/1992, 1909). Indeed, James' postulate that good thinking is a collective activity (rather than a solitary activity) is one of the defining elements of the pragmatic philosophical tradition (e.g., Dewey, 1922/1930; Mead, 1929; Rorty, 1976). In so doing, James broke radically from classical philosophy by identifying the search and validation of "truth" in practical, social terms rather than in the ephemera of platonic ideals:

> *True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we can not. ...*Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs 'pass,' so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no cash-basis whatever. You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other's truth. But beliefs verified concretely by *somebody* are the posts of the whole superstructure. (James, 1907, pp. 100-101, italics in original)

The social behaviorists built on James' insight with descriptions of ways in which the individual's cognitive world is constructed and regulated by social structure and interpersonal interaction (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Cooley, 1902/1983; Dewey, 1922/1930; Mead, 1934; Stryker & Statham, 1985). In this tradition, the social-cognitive synthesis was realized by taking as axiomatic the necessity of social relationships for human survival and postulating that adaptive cognitive structure emerges from the internalization of social organization.

For example, Cooley (1902) made a foil the atomistic solipsism of Emerson and others to emphasize instead that individual understanding is predicated on the internalization of the social world:

> A castaway who should be unable to retain his imaginative hold upon human society might conceivably live the life of an intelligent animal, exercising his mind upon the natural conditions about him, but his distinctively human faculties would certainly be lost, or in abeyance.

George Herbert Mead articulated a mechanism by which society might be internalized, and in so doing argued that human cognition reflects an ever dynamic interplay among socially shared perspectives (Mead, 1930, 1932, 1934, 1938, 1956). Mead emphasized in particular the role of ongoing cooperative social interaction in the creation and maintenance of meaning. Mead's synthesis of self and society was also predicated on the necessity of human relationships for survival, but through a mechanism of organized exchange of social gestures and concomitant perspective taking. Mead likened everyday social interaction to rule-governed play in organized games like baseball, in which each participant must continually take the various perspectives of each of the other participants to understand its place, responsibilities, and plans for action. For example, a catcher in baseball must take the perspectives of the batter, shortstop, outfielder, and pitcher (among others) to understand itself and the ever-evolving reality of the game.

Central to Mead's theory is the concept of the *significant symbol*, on which rests the human capacity for language and cognitive representation. The significant symbol is realized when an individual evokes in itself, by its gesture, the functionally identical response the gesture evokes in others. According to Mead, it is only through significant symbols realized in ongoing social interaction that people are able to remember the past, anticipate the future, and experience the present. From this perspective, mind cannot be separated from cooperative social action, but instead arises out of it. Notably, Mead's objective relativism broke radically from the introspectionists and phenomenologists – and, indeed, from many varieties of subjective relativism popular among poststructural theorists of today – by postulating that the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with the capacity to share experiences. The social expression and validation of an idea is essential for both its clarity and objectivity, ultimately relieving individual experience of mere subjectivity. One of the most important implications of Mead's theory is that, through significant symbols, many objects are literally constructed, existing only

in relation to the organized social activities that support them, thereby creating meanings and categorizations out of what would otherwise be an undifferentiated flux of events (cf. Whorf, 1956; Wittgenstein, 1962). Yet because such cognitions are assumed to be linked directly to the shared perspectives of real people in actual social exchange, Mead's social-cognitive theory is a thoroughly material account of mind, and hence congenial to the scientific endeavor (Jost & Hardin, 1997).

While theorists in the Jamesian tradition articulated a social-cognitive synthesis in which epistemics was the primary adaptive consequence of organized social interaction, a complementary synthesis was being articulated in the tradition of psychoanalysis in which social connectedness – and concommitant psychic integrity – was the primary adaptive outcome. Freud and his students postulated that psychological structure is not only grounded in family dynamics, but ultimately motivated by the human need to feel connected with significant others (e.g., Bettelheim, 1952; Erikson, 1959; Freud, 1922/19xx; Horney, 1945; Jung, 1934; Sullivan, 1953). Like the American pragmatists, Freud (1922/19xx) grounded his theory in the necessity of society for survival, identifying separation anxiety as the most primitive human fear. For Freud, the primacy of social relationships renders connectedness an essential human motivation achieved through social identification, in which one attempts to take on the characteristics, desires, and behaviors of the object of identification. The primary means by which identification occurs is the attempt to understand others by taking their perspectives as well as attempting to elicit understanding from them. Hence, Freud proposed that social identification is the process by which humans regulate all important social attachments – a notion central to all his theorizing. For example, in discussing his theory of psychological structure, Freud (1933/1965) wrote:

> The basis of this process is what is called an "identification" – that is to say, the assimilation of one ego to another one, as a result of which the first ego behaves like the second in certain respects, imitates it and in a sense takes it up into itself. ...It is a very important form of attachment to someone else (p. 56).

Although Freud was the first to emphasize the primacy of social identification in cognition, his students translated the insight into a language that may have better communicated the social character of healthy individual cognition. For example, each of Erikson's (1963) stages of human development involve social validation of one kind or another for successful resolution. Jung (1934) emphasized the necessity of individual consciousness to

find resolution with shared cultural values. Bowlby (1969) wrote that "the young child's hunger for his mother's love and presence is as great as his hunger for food." Indeed, Sullivan's (1953) interpersonal theory of psychiatry articulated psychodynamic theory in a way that resonates unmistakably with Mead's (1934) emphasis on perspective taking in cognition:

> By the end of childhood, the pressure toward socialization has almost invariably fixed a big premium on carefully sorting out that which is capable of being agreed to by the authority figure. This is the first very vivid manifestation in life of the role of consensual validation, by which I mean that a consensus can be established with someone else. (Sullivan, 1953, p. 224)

Hence, two great traditions of classical psychology – Jamesian social behaviorism and Freudian psychodynamics – not only emphasized the interdependence of social and cognitive activity, but converged on a similar social-cognitive synthesis. Yet their respective syntheses had distinct flavors. Although both emphasized the essential role of perspective taking in cognition, the social behaviorists focused most on its epistemic functions, whereas the psychodynamic theorists focused most on its relational, social-identification functions.[1] As discussed later, shared reality theory represents an attempt to integrate these two motivations within a single social cognitive framework.

Relationships and Epistemics in Classical Social Psychology

Early social-psychological theorists also began from an assumption of the interdependence between social and cognitive activities, but did so from a perspective borne of a world ravaged by revolution, war, and genocide (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Asch, 1952; Heider, 1958; Le Bon, 1896; Lewin, 1935; Sherif, 1936). Although the epoch produced a social psychology defined by an interest in the social foundations of knowledge, it represented a kind of neo-rationalism in which the power of society to structure individual thought was not merely acknowledged but conceived as a threat to individual rationality (cf. DeCartes, 1647/1970; Russell, 1912). Hence, both the relational and epistemic motivational strands of social cognition dominant in classical psychology survived, although most American social-psychological theorists viewed the dual motivations as largely binary and competing (for critiques, see Baumeister, 1987; Geertz, 1974; Fiske et al., 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Sampson, 1985; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis,

1995; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherall, 1987). With few exceptions since, social psychologists have assumed that cognitive integrity is defined by the degree to which individuals are able to resist social influence, whether it be interpersonal, group based, or imputed through more broadly societal or cultural means. Consequently, social psychologists have studied social influence in terms of its power to delude the individual, as evidenced, for example, by the pejorative labels used to characterize it, including conformity (e.g., Milgrim, 1961), groupthink (e.g., Janis, 1965), deindividualization (Zimbardo, 1962), and social loafing (e.g., Latane & Darley, 1969) – and, indeed, by the fact that the preeminent journal of the fledgling discipline was entitled *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology.*

Contemporary theorists have criticized this perspective as peculiarly Western (e.g., Fiske et al., 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995), characterizing it as an individualistic conception of personhood arising from cultural prescriptions for people to be unique, free, and unbounded by social relationships. However, we find it interesting to note that proponents of intellectual individualism expressly assumed that their prescriptions were neither endorsed nor practiced by people in general (e.g., Descartes, 1647/1970; Nietzche, 1954/1977; Russell, 1912; Sartre, 1933). Moreover, intellectual individualism appears to resonate with the broader ideology of the Judeo-Christian canon, which views individual resistance to worldly social influence as virtually impossible but laudable (e.g., Bloom, 1992). From our perspective, it is notable that resistance to worldly influence in the Judeo-Christian tradition does not occur in a social vacuum, but rather is enacted to affirm one's relationship with God as well as the earthly community of believers. Finally, although social psychology is fairly characterized as subscribing to a paradigm in which the otherwise rational individual is pitted against irrational social influences, this perspective has produced with more clarity than any system preceding it demonstrations that people value social connection more than anything else – except, perhaps, air to breath, food to eat, and shelter from the elements (e.g., Bowlby, 1969).

Nevertheless, in some instances, social-psychological theorists expressly recognized the adaptive interdependence between social influence and individual cognition by investigating the role of relationship concerns in the basic structure of thought. For example, Vygotsky (1962, 1978) turned Piagetian theory on its head in research demonstrating the social foundations of cognitive development. Lewin (1931, 1938) proposed that social influences form the forces at the very founda-

tion of stable psychological structure and the psychological situation. Sherif (1936) assumed the generally adaptive function of the social motivation in cognition by demonstrating the role of group dynamics in the construction of coherent perception out of ambiguous sensation. Moreover, Sherif recognized that social interaction not only formed the basis for individual understanding, but also that shared understandings have social regulatory functions: "Established social values are standardized fixations which the individual incorporates in himself and which henceforth have a great deal to do with regulating his likes and dislikes, his closeness to or remoteness from other individuals, and his activities in satisfying his basic needs" (p. 125).

Asch's (1951, 1955, 1956) research demonstrated that otherwise simple and unmistakable judgments created severe discomfort and even uncertainty among individuals faced with the incorrect but unanimous judgments of others. Although ironically Asch's work has been assimilated within the rubric of conformity, which is where in contemporary textbooks one now invariably finds discussions of his famous line experiments, he rejected the rationalist paradigm pitting social influence against adaptive cognitive functioning. Instead, Asch concluded that adaptive human understanding is predicated on social influence and shared experience:

> If we were unable to come to agreement about [our] surroundings, sensible interaction would lack all foundation. To the extent that we do so and to the extent that we can make known our experiences, the relations of identity or similarity of our perceptions become the condition for mutual action. These facts become also the intelligible basis for relations of difference in our experiences. ...For this reason I am able to enter into relations with others. (Asch, 1950, pp. 128-129)

Asch (1950, p. 577-578) not only recognized the epistemic functions of socially shared cognition, but, like Sherif, emphasized its role in regulating relationships:

> That attitudes have such social roots and implications has consequences for their cognitive and emotional functioning, for the conditions of their growth and change. Their content and their persistence and change must be seen as an expression of the need to maintain viable group-relations. Only in this way can we fully understand the pull of social conditions in the formation and modification of attitudes and the fact that they vary lawfully with group membership. ...For a Southerner to deny the prevailing views about Negroes requires a drastic intellectual reorientation and a serious snapping of social bonds. It would be tantamount to questioning the perceptions and cherished values of those nearest to him and of casting himself out of the group.

Follow-up research employing Asch's (1951) line paradigm supported both the epistemic and relational functions of social consensus by demonstrating that conformity increases with the difficulty and ambiguity of the judgment task (e.g., Asch, 1951; Coleman, Blake, & Mouton, 1958; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), as well as by group attractiveness, cohesiveness, and interdependence (e.g., Back, 1951; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Gerard, 1954; Jones, Wells, & Torrey, 1958; Thibaut & Strickland, 1956).

The repeated observation of the potency of epistemic and relational needs eventually elicited theoretical integrations. For example, inspired by Gestalt principles of perceptual coherence, Heider's (1946, 1958) balance theory described the social consequences of intrapersonal and interpersonal belief symmetry and asymmetry, postulating synthesis through the mechanism of cognitive consistency. According to balance theory, if attitudes and/or others are perceived to belong together in unit relation, then there is a pressure toward symmetry within the unit relation. For example, people have more stable relationships with others who like their friends and dislike their enemies (e.g., Aronson & Cope, 1968). Unbalanced states are unstable because they are met with attempts to restore balance either by (a) changing one's own attitude or the attitude of one's relationship partner, (b) misapprehending the attitude of oneself or one's partner, or (c) changing one's attitude about one's partner (e.g., Monsour, Betty, & Kurzwiel, 1993).

Festinger's (1954a) social comparison theory provided yet another synthesis of relational and epistemic needs in a framework that continues to be influential today (e.g., Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Social comparison theory postulates that human gregariousness serves epistemic needs by facilitating the use of social standards in (self-) understanding. According to the theory, social comparison processes afford understanding of both "what is real" and "what is good," each having different implications for social motivation and action. The goal of understanding what is real is facilitated by social comparisons with similar others because they are in a better position to provide consensual validation that one's opinions are accurate. Hence, particularly in the case of opinions, group members will attempt to reduce discrepancies to the extent that they exist, thereby increasing uniformity within the group. However, particularly in the case of abilities, people attempt to acquire more and more of what is good, which motivates movement upward (and away) from the group norm.

By the end of the 1950s, then, social-psychological research was rife with demonstrations of the power of the society to constrain beliefs and attitudes, particularly

through attempts to establish, protect, affirm, and maintain social relationships. Yet Schachter's (1959) review of this literature led him to conclude:

> Despite the importance of the study of affiliative needs, almost nothing is known of the variables and conditions affecting these needs. We have no precise idea of the circumstances that drive men either to seek one another out or to crave privacy, and we have only the vaguest and most obvious sort of suggestions concerning the kinds of satisfaction that men seek in company. (p. 1)

Although Schachter did not forward a theory of affiliation, he identified some conditions likely to produce affiliative behavior. Affiliation with others of similar experience is more likely under conditions of uncertainty and anxiety (e.g., Schachter, 1951, 1959) as well as with ingroup members when group beliefs are attacked (e.g., Festinger, Reiken, & Schachter, 1956). Moreover, when affiliation is delayed or precluded, individuals may even exhibit symptoms of insanity (e.g., Faris, 1934). Indeed, Schachter (1959) reported his own attempt to study the psychological effects of social isolation, but aborted the research when he found in a preliminary study that just three of five participants exhibited severe symptomology in 3 days, concluding that such research was economically impractical because it would require 10 to 12 days to reliably produce psychotic symptoms.

In summary, classical social psychological research not only proceeded on the assumption of social-cognitive interdependence, but repeatedly demonstrated the operation of epistemic and relational motivations. The era produced at least two attempts to synthesize them within single theoretical frameworks, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954a) and balance theory (Heider, 1958). After briefly outlining the presence of these themes in contemporary social cognition research, we describe our attempt to integrate them within the rubric of shared reality theory.

Relationships and Epistemics in Contemporary Social Psychology

Although the cognitive side of social cognition has dominated research for several decades – culminating in the 1980s definition of *social cognition* as the study of the cognitive bases of social behavior (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1984, 1992; Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Higgins & Sorrentino, 1981) – recent years have witnessed a decided resurgence in research on relational needs as well (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, 1995; Murray & Holmes, 1997). This emerging interest bridges the classical interest in relational demands to the contem-

porary emphasis on epistemics in ways that afford syntheses in the language of contemporary social cognition theory.

In short, research shows that relationships are pursued with unusual purpose, and have profound emotional and cognitive consequences. For example, it is now well accepted that forming social relationships is easy and breaking them is difficult. Social attachments are formed in infancy (e.g., Bowlby, 1969) as well as under conditions in which history, interdependence, or instrumental interests are absent (e.g., Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1970). Mere proximity can produce stable social attachment (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950) under both positive conditions (e.g., Clark & Watson, 1988; May & Hamilton, 1980) and even extremely negative conditions (e.g., Elder & Clipp, 1988; Kendrick & Johnson, 1979; Latane, Eckman, & Joy, 1966). A review of this kind of research suggests that shared emotions are crucial to the development of interpersonal relationships (Moreland, 1987). Moreover, research suggests that, once formed, social relationships are difficult to escape. Even participants in temporary groups deny that relationships within the group will end when the group does (e.g., Lacoursiere, 1980; Lieberman, Yalom, Miles, 1973). Remarkably, people have difficulty escaping abusive relationships (e.g., Roy, 1977; Strube, 1988).

Relationship status has substantial emotional consequences. For example, young children exhibit extreme distress when separated from their caregivers (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Recollection of social rejection elicits anxiety (Tambor & Leary, 1993), and imagining social rejection increases physiological arousal (Craighead, Kimball, & Rehak, 1979). People feel happier, better off, and less depressed when they are in a network of close relationships than when they are socially isolated (e.g., Argyle, 1987; McAdams & Bryant, 1987; Myers, 1992). Indeed, the prospect of losing important relationships elicits anxiety and depression, and severed relationships elicit loneliness and grief (e.g., Leary, 1990; Tambor & Leary, 1993). Interestingly, loneliness is more related to lack of intimate social relationships than lack of social contact per se (Reis, 1990; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983; Williams & Solano, 1983). Although severe anxiety is elicited by social exclusion, anxiety is relieved by social inclusion (Barden, Garber, Leiman, Ford, & Masters, 1985). A review of this literature led Baumeister and Tice (1990) to conclude that social exclusion is the single most important cause of anxiety.

Finally, research suggests that the pursuit of social relationships has important cognitive consequences. For example, compared with standard attributional categories

of *locus, stability*, and *controllability*, S. M. Anderson (1991) found evidence that the strongest attributional dimension was *interpersonalness*, reflecting the degree to which participants attributed causes of their behavior to their relationship status (e.g., "Because I'm married"). People attribute more positive characteristics and fewer negative characteristics to ingroup members than outgroup members (e.g., Forsyth & Schlenker, 1977; Howard & Rothbart, 1980; Leary & Forsyth, 1987; Zander, 1971). Partner-serving biases are as strong as self-serving attributional biases among members of happy marriages but not among those in unhappy marriages (e.g., Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987; Murray & Holmes, 1997). Moreover, research suggests that relationship orientation appears to affect self-representation. For example, social relationships have been implicated in self-evaluation (Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990), including vulnerability to negative stereotypes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Close relationships appear to be bound up with self-representations (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Hardin & Higgins, 1996).

In summary, contemporary social-psychological research has not only made progress in identifying social consequences of basic information processing, but has corroborated the importance of relational pursuits identified in classical research. Moreover, the emerging identification of information-processing consequences of affiliation make the time ripe for new attempts to provide theoretical syntheses of epistemic and relational aspects of social cognition.

SHARED REALITY THEORY: RELATIONSHIP AFFIRMATION IN COGNITION

We have drawn liberally on the insights of the social cognition tradition by taking as axiomatic human epistemic and relational needs and integrating them in the context of contemporary communication theory. In particular, shared reality theory synthesizes epistemic and relational needs through a single social-psychological mechanism: the perceived achievement of mutual understanding, working intersubjectivity, or what we term *shared reality* (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Put simply, shared experience links specific interpersonal relationships to specific cognitions, thereby simultaneously binding social relationships and maintaining the individual's grasp of a dynamic world.

Predicated on the assumption that epistemic and relational needs are realized through the achievement of mutual perceptions of shared experience, shared reality theory postulates two fundamental axioms from which

several useful predictions may be derived (illustrated in Fig. 1.). In short, people share reality both to connect with others and to know. First, as represented in Axiom I, social relationships are established and maintained to the degree that participants in the relationship achieve specific, mutually shared understandings of themselves or the world about them. Conversation creates friendship when conversants discover common experiences. With the birth of a child, for example, new parents find themselves sudden inhabitants of a society in which the shared joy and heartbreak of parenthood connects them to other parents, including a remarkable number of strangers in restaurants, grocery stores, and gas stations. By the same token, shared reality theory postulates that establishing and maintaining social relationships is impossible without the achievement of shared reality within the relationship. Conversation fails friendship when conversants discover no common experience. Second, according to the theory, cognition is as dependent on shared reality as relationships are. As represented in Axiom II, cognitions are established and maintained to the degree that they are recognized, validated, and shared with others. For example, it is difficult to sustain belief in a revolutionary new childrearing technique if, when communicated in ecstatic enthusiasm, one is met with dull stares or disapproval.

Although few would argue that these postulates are principally impossible, the skeptic may find the heart of shared reality theory implausible. After all, why should human capacities as fundamental and ubiquitous as social connection and cognitive representation be dependent on something as slippery – or worse, banal – as mutual perceptions of shared reality? We believe the communication literatures provide some answers. As reviewed elsewhere (Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins, 1981a, 1992), it is now well accepted that communication (a) involves shared, rule-governed conventions concerning social roles and behavior (e.g., Austin, 1962; Cushman & Whiting, 1972; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Peirce, 1940; Rommetveit, 1974; Ruesch & Bateson, 1968; Searle, 1969; Watzlawick et al., 1967); (b) requires cooperative coorientation and mutual perspective taking (e.g., Cushman & Whiting, 1972; Delia, 1976; Grice, 1971; Mead, 1934; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Rommetveit, 1974); (c) functions not only to transmit information, but also to create and define social relationships (e.g., Blumer, 1962; Bolinger, 1975; Garfinkel, 1967; Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Hawes, 1973; Watzlawick et al., 1967); and (d) is a socially interdependent process in which the purpose and meaning of the interchange is collaboratively determined (e.g., Blumer, 1962; Burke, 1962; Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1959; Hawes, 1973; Krauss

Figure 1: Shared reality theory

Axiom I: The establishment and maintenance of social relationships requires shared reality.

> *Axiom IA*: Relationships are established and maintained to the degree that shared reality is achieved and maintained among relationship participants.

> *Axiom IB*: Relationships are abandoned to the degree that shared reality is not achieved and maintained among relationship participants.

Axiom II: The establishment and maintenance of individual experience requires shared reality.

> *Axiom IIA*: Beliefs are established and maintained to the degree that they are socially shared.

> *Axiom IIB*: Beliefs are abandoned to the degree that they are unshared.

& Fussell, 1998; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Rommetveit, 1974; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Communication is not only central to the construction of meaning, but requires at every turn the establishment and maintenance of common ground (i.e., the mutual perception that communicative participants are talking about the same thing and share conversationally germane knowledge; for reviews, see Clark & Clark, 1983; Krauss & Fussell, 1998; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). The literature not only documents the innumerable strategies employed to achieve, verify, and sustain accrued common ground in everyday conversation, but also the severe social and psychological disruption engendered when common ground is ecologically or experimentally subverted (reviewed in Krauss & Fussell, 1998). One can demonstrate this for oneself by observing the consequences of suppressing the usual head nods, mmms, and uh-huhs elicited in everyday conversation. However, we suggest aborting the experiment quickly if you wish to remain on friendly terms with your partner or, indeed, if you want the conversation to continue. In short, we are convinced that the fundamental role of cooperative, interdependent, meaning-making activity is

not only the foundation of common conversation, but also the foundation of meaningful social relationships and cognitive representation.

Thus, *shared reality* is defined as interpersonally achieved perceptions of common experience. Shared reality includes explicit agreement and consensus, although it is not limited to them. Shared reality may be expressed or tacit, newly negotiated or long assumed. Shared reality processes may operate either consciously or unconsciously, achieved through effortful deliberation or automatic information processing. Shared reality is assumed to be a perceptual state, that may correspond to objectively accurate mutual understandings to a greater or lesser degree. Defined as such, shared reality is closely related to notions of perspective taking, intersubjectivity, and common ground, thereby fitting well within the social-psychological tradition, which has long observed that people act on the assumption that they inhabit the same world as others who perceive it as they do (Asch, 1952; Heider, 1958; James, 1890). Indeed, virtually all theories of cognitive development assume that children learn to regulate themselves in relation to the desires and demands of the significant others in their lives (e.g., Case, 1985, 1988; Damon & Hart, 1986; Fischer, 1980; Selman, 1980; Sullivan, 1953), leading some to argue that the only means by which the child can establish an understanding of the outside world is as it is objectified through perspective taking (e.g., P. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1982; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).

Yet the capacity to see the world as others see it is not easy. Full-fledged perspective taking is said to not occur until relatively late in human development, perhaps as late as between ages 4 and 6 years (e.g., Case, 1985; Feffer, 1970; Fischer, 1980; Huttenlocher & Higgins, 1978; Piaget, 1965; Shantz, 1983). Moreover, despite the ubiquitous assumption that people are capable of perspective taking, the issue has proved thorny for psychologists and philosophers of mind, because it is no small feat to describe plausible mechanisms by which inherently discrepant subjectivities may be fully shared (e.g., Bakhtin, 1986; Rommetveit, 1974; Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Wittgenstein, 1962). Many of these difficulties are avoided by our conception of shared reality as the mutual perception of intersubjectivity rather than objective intersubjectivity. Hence, from our perspective, the ecological relationship between perceived and objective shared reality is an empirical question. However, like common ground, we conceive shared reality in pragmatic terms, as objectively accurate as necessary to be sustained given the goals, communication status, and knowledge of participants in a given interaction (Clark & Clark, 1983; Krauss & Fussell, 1998). In short, shared reality is a "working intersubjectivity" that may well dissolve if objective conditions preclude the perception of mutual understanding.[2]

The Phenomenology of Shared Reality

Shared reality (or lack thereof) is often felt reality. The experience of mutual understanding can be as sweet as the experience of misunderstanding can be sour. Anecdotally, few will deny the frustration elicited when others do not recognize the validity of their beliefs. Nor will many deny the charm of discovering that a new acquaintance experiences a poem or sunset in just the way that they do. Indeed, the delight engendered by the realization of shared reality is evidenced by modal constructions of humor. Jokes often involve the dramatic delay of an already shared understanding of the world, which is realized with a bang in the punch line. From this perspective, it makes sense that so much comedy trades on common stereotypes and prejudices, which provide culturally prefabricated shared realities. Systematic research also suggests that, in general, phenomenology is pleasant when experience is shared (e.g., Newcomb, 1961), and that an inability to achieve shared understandings is disagreeable and unpleasant (e.g., Orive, 1988). One of the most striking discoveries of Asch (1952) was the agitation and visceral discomfort exhibited by participants who found themselves at odds with a unanimous majority who did not share their experience of the length of lines. More recently, Schachinger (1996) found that an unobtrusive measure of the degree to which people believed significant others viewed them the way they viewed themselves was negatively related to anxiety, loneliness, confusion, and anomie.

Although the experience of shared reality may be pleasant in many circumstances, it is important to note that shared reality theory does not invoke valence as a parameter in the model. Indeed, little reflection is necessary to think of everyday examples in which distinctly distasteful experiences may be shared. On the one hand, it may be useful or even pleasant to discover that others share the experience of, say, political subjugation, which may explain in part the power and utility of consciousness-raising activities (e.g., MacKinnon, 1987). Alas, however, shared reality processes are not limited to progressive situations designed for healthy self-actualization. They are at least as likely to be operative in the service of everyday interpersonal and institutional subjugation (e.g., Jackman, 1990; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Marx, 1846; Sidanius, 1999). In the case of the shared beliefs forming the ideological justification institutional economic classism, for example, felt shared reality may

well be more pleasant for the haves than the have-nots. Moreover, it is likely that situations that allow one to break free of burdensome or otherwise distasteful shared realities about the self engender positive feelings (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995). Thus, shared reality theory does not postulate that either shared reality or relational connections are inherently pleasant, but rather that shared reality is required to bind social relationships (whether positive or negative) and objectify cognitions (whether positive or negative).

NEW EVIDENCE SUPPORTING SHARED REALITY THEORY

As reviewed elsewhere, we believe that evidence gleaned from a broad variety of extant literatures provides support for the basic axioms of shared reality theory (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). However, good theory not only provides a parsimonious grasp of extant facts, but also must prove useful in generating new research programs and empirical insights (e.g., McGuire, 1998). Hence, we now turn to a summary of new research generated from the perspective of shared reality theory in which we have focused on the role of relationship management and motivation in social cognition. In particular, we find evidence that relationship-specific shared realities not only regulate cognition but also social relationships.

Shared Reality in Social Cognition

Nisbett and Ross (1988) wrote that the single most important lesson of social psychology is the degree to which individual thought and behavior is determined by the immediate situation. Contemporary social-cognition models of representation, including schema theories, connectionist, and construct accessibility theories (e.g., Bargh, 1995; Higgins, 1995; Smith, 1992; Stangor & Lange, 1988), are congruent with demonstrations of malleability and stability in social judgment. Shared reality theory complements these approaches by postulating a social-cognitive mechanism regulating when and for what purposes representations are established, maintained, and changed.

Perhaps the most fundamental implication of shared reality theory is that particular cognitions are attached to the particular social relationships in which they are shared. Across a variety of research paradigms, we have found evidence for this in the context of the self-concept and social judgment. As suggested by the axioms illustrated in Fig. 1., evidence for the fundamental postulate of shared reality theory may take two broad forms. On the one hand, cognitions should change as a function of relationship activation along lines that implicate particular shared realities germane to the relationships. On the other hand, relationships should change as a function of belief activation along lines that implicate shared reality processes. Moreover, this implies that cognitive malleability and stability should mirror relationship malleability and stability. That is, to the degree that particular cognitions are attached to the particular relationships in which they are shared, and to the degree that different shared realities are achieved from relationship to relationship, cognitions should vary lawfully as a function of which relationships and concomitant shared realities are activated. We have termed this the *relationship-specificity conjecture* (Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2000).

Social Identities and Significant Others in Self-Stereotyping

Several programs of research have examined various ways in which self- and social judgment are subject to the demands of social relationships along lines laid down by shared reality theory. In one program of research, we investigated how common stereotypes affect the self-concept (Sinclair, Hardin, & Lowery, 1999). To the degree that ethnic and gender stereotypes represent broadly shared cultural beliefs (e.g., Allport, 1954), shared reality theory implies that the self-concept should (a) reflect the stereotypes of one's gender and ethnicity, (b) change along stereotyped dimensions as a function of social identity activation, and (c) reflect stereotypes to the degree that one believes that significant others stereotype the self. It is worth noting that although the first two hypotheses can also be derived from self-categorization theory, the third hypothesis cannot.

To investigate these hypotheses, participants evaluated their math and verbal abilities after either their ethnic or gender identity had been made salient across several experiments. To explore relationships among self-evaluation and reflected social appraisal, participants also indicated their perceptions of how people in general as well as important others viewed their math and verbal abilities. Pilot research indicated that the perceived views of people in general reflected participants' sense of broadly held stereotypes, and that the perceived views of important others reflected participants' sense of the views of significant others, including family, close friends, and favorite teachers. The social identity manipulation was simple and unobtrusive. On the top, right-hand corner of the questionnaire, participants indicated their age and either their gender or ethnicity.

Experiments involving participants from three

different ethnic groups demonstrated that the social identity salience manipulation affected self-evaluations and the perceived evaluations of others along stereotype-consistent lines. Moreover, evidence suggested that participants were vulnerable to self-stereotyping to the degree that they believed that significant others endorsed the stereotypes as applicable to them. For example, Asian American women's self-evaluations of math ability were greater when their ethnicity was salient than when their gender was salient, but their self-evaluations of verbal ability were greater when their gender was salient than when their ethnicity was salient, consistent with stereotypes about Asians and women, respectively. Overall, self-evaluations were highly correlated with perceived evaluations of others, and effects of the identity salience manipulation on the perceived evaluations of others were identical to those found on self-evaluations. However, congruent with the mechanism specified by shared reality theory, results indicate that the relationship between self-evaluations and the perceived evaluations of people in general (i.e., stereotyped expectancies) was mediated by the perceived evaluations of significant others. In particular, although the relationship between self-evaluations and perceived evaluations of people in general was eliminated after statistically controlling for the perceived evaluations of significant others, the relationship between self-evaluations and perceptions of significant others remained strong after controlling for the perceived evaluations of people in general.

An analogous, stereotype-consistent pattern was found in an experiment utilizing a sample of European Americans, for whom the particular gender and ethnic stereotypes are different. Here again correlations among self-evaluations and perceived evaluations of others were strong and affected identically by the social identity manipulation. Moreover, as with Asian American women, results indicate that the relationship between stereotypes and self-evaluation were mediated by the perceived evaluations of significant others.

Although yielding a different pattern of results, an experiment utilizing African-American participants provided converging evidence of the role of shared reality negotiated in relationships with significant others in self-stereotyping. Given evidence that African Americans are particularly likely to cultivate close relationships in which racist stereotypes are collaboratively challenged (e.g., Ogbu, 1986; Phinney, 1988), we anticipated that, although African Americans would be aware of stereotyped social expectancies, this knowledge would not translate into corresponding self-stereotyping effects. This is what we found. In particular, we found that African Americans perceived the evaluations of people in general (i.e., stereotyped expectancies) as more negative about their academic abilities when their ethnicity was salient than when their gender was salient, consistent with prevailing stereotypes. Yet no such effects of social identity salience were found on either the perceived evaluations of significant others or self-evaluations. However, the mediational analysis revealed that the pattern of judgments of social expectancies and self-evaluation observed among African Americans was explained by the same mechanism characterizing the self-stereotyping we observed among Asian and European Americans. Correlations among self-evaluations and perceived evaluations of others were high, and the relationship between self-evaluation and perceived evaluations of people in general was mediated by perceived evaluations of significant others. Hence, the mechanism postulated by shared reality theory integrates both the findings of substantial self-stereotyping among Asian Americans and European Americans as well as the lack of self-stereotyping among African Americans.

Relationship Motivation in Self-Stereotyping

Shared reality theory postulates that it is the activity of establishing and maintaining social relationships that gives life and resonance to beliefs, including stereotyped beliefs about the self. In particular, to the degree that shared realities serve relational functions as shared reality theory postulates, then effects of social appraisal on the self should occur to the degree that one is motivated to achieve or maintain the relationship. We have pursued this issue in a research program that directly investigated the role of relationship motivation in self-stereotyping by examining the degree to which participants assimilate the likely views of others into the self-concept (Sinclair & Hardin, 2000).

In a series of experiments, women completed self-concept measures in the context of imagined or actual interactions with others they knew to value traditional versus nontraditional gender roles. For example, in one experiment, we found that women judged themselves as more feminine after imagining a conversation with Barbara Bush than Hillary Clinton. In another experiment, women completed self-concept measures after imagining either a positive or negative interaction with a famous woman characterized as either gender traditional (Barbara Bush, Martha Stewart) or nontraditional (Hillary Clinton, Madelaine Albright). Although the social self-tuning effect was replicated under conditions in which participants imagined a positive interaction, the effect was eliminated under conditions in which participants imagined a negative interaction, demonstrating the

role of relationship motivation in the achievement of shared reality concerning the self.

In follow-up experiments, social self-tuning was examined as a function of actual interactions with male confederates who ostensibly held gender traditional or nontraditional attitudes about women. Results suggest that women assimilated their self-views toward the confederate under conditions of high relationship motivation, but if anything contrasted their self-views away from the confederate under conditions of low relationship motivation. For example, women judged themselves as more feminine after interacting with a confederate with traditional (versus nontraditional) views under instructions to attempt to "get along as much as possible," but judged themselves as less feminine after interacting with a confederate with traditional views under instructions to attempt to "evaluate his personality as accurately as possible." These experiments not only demonstrate that shared reality about the self is achieved on highly valued dimensions when relationship motivation is high, but also that shared reality may be actively subverted when relationship motivation is low.

Hence, this research extends previous demonstrations of social tuning effects on attitudes about others (e.g., Higgins & Rholes, 1978) to attitudes about the self. More important, it directly demonstrates the role of relationship motivation in the negotiation of shared reality about the self, converging with demonstrations that individual differences in relationship motivation moderate the degree to which shared reality may be achieved about judgments of others (Higgins & McCann, 1984; McCann & Hancock, 1983). Finally, this research is consistent with shared reality theory's postulate that shared reality functions in part to establish and maintain the social relationships in which it is achieved.

Relationship Relevance and Automatic Prejudice

The communication literature documents the ubiquity with which people seek common ground with others in everyday conversation (e.g., Clark & Clark, 1983). However, shared reality theory goes an important step further by postulating that common relationship demands change more than the mere expression of beliefs. To further test the power of everyday relationship demands in information processing, we investigated social tuning in the context of automatic prejudice (Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2000). We examined the hypothesis that even automatic cognitions would assimilate toward the likely beliefs of others and would do so along relationship-relevant dimensions, as implied by shared reality theory. In particular, we assessed automatic prejudice under

conditions in which the experimenter was more or less likely to be prejudiced.

Across three experiments utilizing two different measures of automatic association, we found social tuning effects on automatic anti-Black prejudice, but only for participants whose ethnicity makes prejudice relevant to the new relationship. In particular, we found that the anti-Black prejudice exhibited by European Americans was greater when the experimenter was White than when the experimenter was Black. Pilot research indicated that participants in the experiments assumed that the experimenter was much less likely to be prejudiced against Blacks when he or she was Black than White. Furthermore, consistent with shared reality theory's prediction that social tuning effects should occur on relationship-relevant dimensions alone, we found that, although anti-Black attitudes of European Americans were affected by experimenter race, the anti-Black attitudes of Asian Americans – whose relationship with blacks is not characterized nearly as much by concern about prejudice – were not affected by experimenter race. This research not only provides support for the relationship specificity conjecture of shared reality theory, but demonstrates that even automatic cognition is dynamically regulated according to prevailing social relationship contingencies. Notably, these experiments directly pit automatic social tuning against simple stereotype priming, which would be indicated by the opposite pattern of results.

In summary, our research suggests that broadly shared cultural stereotypes may be dynamically utilized in self- and social perception, but that this occurs according to the parameters described by shared reality theory. Research on social identity-related self-stereotyping suggests that stereotypes are incorporated into the self-concept to the degree that they are shared with significant others (Sinclair, Hardin, & Lowery, 1999). Research directly examining relationship motivation in self-stereotyping demonstrates that the shared realities achieved in even new relationships may have pronounced effects on the self-concept, but do so only to the degree that one is highly motivated to establish the relationship (Sinclair & Hardin, 1999). Research on automatic prejudice demonstrates that automatic social tuning occurs along dimensions chronically relevant to particular intergroup relationships.

Shared Reality in Self-Regulation

Shared reality theory not only postulates a role for the collaborative construction of self-views and social attitudes, but implies that these shared realities, in turn, affect the course of subsequent social relationships. In

one research program, we have found that self-verification behavior is moderated by the degree to which self-beliefs are perceived to be shared with significant others (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Self-verification is the set of processes in which people go to great lengths to elicit confirmation for the beliefs they have of themselves (e.g., Swann, 1990). This literature demonstrates that, regardless of whether self-beliefs are positive or negative, people privilege self-consistent versus self-inconsistent as assessed by (a) time (Swann & Read, 1981a), (b) diagnosticity ratings (Swann & Read, 1981b), (c) confidence in feedback (Swann, Griffin, Predmore, & Gaines, 1987), and (d) solicitation of feedback (Swann & Read, 1981b; Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992). Remarkably, the pattern extends to people's social interaction choices. People choose temporary interaction partners whose evaluations are consistent with their self-views, whether positive or negative (Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992), and they are more committed to their marriages when the view of their spouses matches their self-concept (Swann, Hixon, & De La Ronde, 1992). Self-verification theory explains these findings in terms of the epistemic benefits of cognitive consistency (e.g., Swann, 1990).

We have argued that self-verification effects may be explained instead in terms of relationship motivation (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Shared reality theory postulates that (shared) self-views are not only worth defending on epistemic grounds, but function in part to maintain valued social relationships. To test this hypothesis, we examined self-verification behavior along dimensions of the self-concept perceived to be more or less shared with significant others; assessing self-verification in one experiment with an information-seeking paradigm and in another experiment with a partner choice paradigm. In a pretesting session, participants listed traits they believed characterized themselves as well as traits they believed significant others thought were true of them. These trait listings allowed us to ideographically identify self-views that were perceived to be shared with at least one significant other versus self-views perceived to be unshared with significant others. We chose shared and unshared traits that were matched on certainty (cf. Pelham, 1991). In one experiment, participants were contacted several weeks after pretesting by telephone, ostensibly to be recruited for a computerized evaluation of their personality. Participants were presented with choices of aspects of themselves they would be most interested in learning about. Replicating the basic self-verification finding, participants expressed more interest in learning about aspects that were self-consistent than self-inconsistent, whether the attributes were positive or negative. More-

over, self-verification was shown to be affected by the degree to which participants perceived the self-views to be shared with significant others. Participants were more interested in learning about self-consistent attributes if pretesting indicated that they were shared with significant others. A second experiment replicated this pattern of results when self-verification was assessed by partner choice. Participants preferred to meet new acquaintances they believed had impressions of them that were self-consistent; moreover, they preferred to meet new acquaintances whose self-consistent impressions were shared with significant others.

A follow-up experiment demonstrated that self-concepts shared with significant others regulate self-descriptions shared with new acquaintances as well as the course of social interaction. To do so, we observed the cognitive and social consequences of activating a self-concept shared with a significant other by manipulating the ostensible characteristics of a new acquaintance in a procedure developed by Andersen and Cole (1986). Previously unacquainted women were recruited in pairs for a study on getting to know others from a sample who had completed a pretesting series of questionnaires in which they had listed self-descriptive attributes as well as the attributes they believed significant others thought characteristic of them. Additionally, participants had listed attributes they believed characterized several significant others including their mothers. In the focal experiment conducted several weeks later, each participant first read a brief psychological profile of her partner, which was based on the attributes describing either her own mother or a yoked participant's mother. Immediately before the meeting, each participant wrote a brief self-description and completed several questions about expectations of the upcoming interaction. After a 10 minute unstructured conversation with their partners, participants completed a parallel questionnaire about the interaction.

Results were striking in two respects. First, self-descriptions included more self-attributes perceived to be shared with mothers when participants anticipated meeting a partner who had been described like their own mother than a yoked participant's mother. More important, the partner manipulation had no effect on plausible alternatives, including self-attributes in general, attributes about the self perceived to be held by participants' mothers, or attributes about the self perceived to be held by other significant others. Instead, the effect of anticipating an interaction with someone who resembled participants' mothers affected self-descriptions only on the traits that participants perceived were shared between them and their mothers. Second, the manipulation

affected both the anticipation of the interaction as well as post-interaction impressions. Participants anticipated liking more, getting along better, and being more interested in their partners when they had been described in terms resembling their own mother than a yoked participant's mother. Although predictably weaker, these effects held after the actual interaction.

In another line of research, we have investigated how the dynamics of relationship motivation mediate self-improvement motivation (Pham & Hardin, 1999). From the perspective of shared reality theory, ambivalence about self-improvement is less about managing hedonistic impulses and social norms and more about managing mutually incompatible shared realities found in different social relationships. To examine this process, we utilized a standard social comparison paradigm to investigate motivation to self-improve in the context of academics. According to shared reality theory, the positive self-improvement effects on academic motivation as a function of exposure to a lazy target should be moderated by the degree to which participants disidentify with the lazy target. Two experiments demonstrated that participants viewed themselves as less lazy, intended to work harder in the future, and exhibited increased self-esteem after exposure to a lazy (versus non-lazy) social target. The effect was most pronounced for people who most valued hard work – as assessed by a self-discrepancy measure and thereby likely to be based in shared realities with significant others (e.g., Higgins, 1989a). Most important, however, results indicate that the effect of negative social perception elicited self-improvement motivation to the degree that participants socially distanced themselves from the lazy target, as indicated by expressions of dislike and disinterest in meeting him. In short, the effect of social comparison was modulated by a kind of relationship management, in which the value of hard work had to be sacrificed to the degree participants were interested in connecting with the lazy target.

Shared Reality in Interpersonal Interaction

In research extending the shared reality analysis to the regulation of interethnic relationships, we have investigated effects of beliefs about the O.J. Simpson trial on interpersonal perceptions and behavior among African and European Americans. Due to the overwhelming amount of publicity surrounding the differences in white and black attitudes about the trial, we assumed that the Simpson trial represents different interethnic shared realities, and hence hypothesized that making the Simpson case cognitively salient would affect interpersonal relationships differently as a function of their ethnic composition.

In one experiment, mixed-ethnicity and same-ethnicity participant pairs completed a cooperative task after subliminal exposure to images of O.J. Simpson, Bill Cosby, or the participant university icons. After completing the task, participants independently rated the quality of consensus achieved in the interaction as well as the extent to which they liked and felt similar to their partners. Results indicate that exposure to O.J. Simpson had opposite effects depending on the ethnic composition of the pairs in a manner consistent with the predictions of shared reality theory. As predicted by several theories, participants in the mixed-ethnicity pairs liked their partners less, felt less similar to their partners, and judged the consensus achieved in the interaction as poorer after exposure to Simpson's face than Cosby's face. In contrast, however, as predicted by shared reality theory alone, participants in the same-ethnicity pairs like their partners more, felt more similar to their partners, and judged the consensus achieved in the interaction as better after exposure to Simpson's face than Cosby's face. In both cases, liking, similarity, and consensus judgments were intermediate after exposure to university icons.

This pattern of results was replicated in two additional experiments that extended the effects on interpersonal perception to cooperative performance in a game of Pictionary, in which participants take turns attempting to communicate a target word to their partners through nonverbal drawings. Although participants in mixed-ethnicity pairs performed substantially worse after thinking about the Simpson trial than after thinking about the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, participants in the same-ethnicity pairs performed substantially better.

In summary, this research demonstrates the role of achieving shared reality about the self with significant others in regulating both the dynamics of self-understanding as well as relationship motivation. Self-verification appears to be predicated in part on the degree to which aspects of the self-concept are perceived to be shared with significant others. Moreover, the self is presented to new acquaintances along lines already laid down in significant relationships, thereby affecting the course of the new relationship. Moreover, beliefs assumed to be differentially shared among different ethnic groups can regulate the course of interpersonal perception and behavior along lines directly implied by shared reality theory.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the study of social cognition should involve more than the identification of the cognitive

foundations of social behavior, but instead should focus on the interdependence of cognition and social relationships. We believe that renewed attention to social-cognitive interdependence will not only reconnect the two great thematic strands represented in the history of social psychology, but promise substantive advances in our understanding of how humans work.

We have argued that shared reality theory provides one such synthesis. Although simple, the formulation is generative. In addition to the predictions directly implied by the axioms of shared reality theory, the postulate that epistemic and relational functions are linked through the shared reality mechanism affords the derivation of several empirical corollaries worth future investigation. One concerns the specificity of experience implied by shared reality theory. To the degree that shared realities are bound to the particular relationships in which they are maintained, and to the degree that individuals have different clusters of personal experience, individual experience should vary to greater and lesser extent from relationship to relationship and situation to situation. For example, one's experience as an academic, shared and realized at school with students and colleagues, may operate relatively independently of one's experience as a member of the Sierra Club or PTA. Following the same logic, relationship motivation should also vary situationally as a function of the salience of relationship-relevant experiences.

A further implication of the relationship-specificity conjecture is that human cognition has the capacity to be quite plastic, at least to the degree that one's social world is complex and compartmentalized. Hence, shared reality theory suggests a mechanism well suited to the repeated demonstrations in the social-psychological literature of cognitive malleability. By the same token, however, shared reality theory also postulates a mechanism for cognitive stability. Just as cognitive malleability may be explained in terms of relationship structure and motivation, so might cognitive stability. Stable social institutions create stable interpersonal relationship dynamics, which, in turn, produce stable cognitions. In short, shared reality theory offers a single mechanism compatible with observations of both stability and malleability.

The assumption that shared reality is relationship specific also implies that the proximal mode of self-categorization is interpersonal, although this does not in principle preclude self-categorization according to abstract group identities. However, shared reality theory's implication that social identification has psychological resonance because it is modulated by specific interpersonal relationships provides an empirically useful point of departure from self-categorization theory (cf. Turner,

1984; Turner et al., 1986).

Several other implications follow from shared reality theory, particularly as they involve relationship affirmation motives. For example, to the degree that shared reality binds social relationships, the motivation to achieve shared reality should be especially high under conditions of relationship threat or social anxiety. For example, not only do jilted partners in intimate relationships seek shared reality among friends, but it is not uncommon for them to attempt to get even former partners to understand their plight, sometimes even at the cost of personal dignity. However, to the degree that shared reality objectifies experience, motivation to achieve shared reality should be especially high under conditions of uncertainty. This may explain in part why graduate school classmates often become lifetime friends.

To the degree that shared realities are realized in the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, they will be defended because a threat to a given shared reality represents a threat to the relationship on which the shared reality is grounded. For example, the realization that a new acquaintance does not appreciate one's political view is not problematic for its inconsistency per se, but rather because it represents a tacit threat to the relationships in which the political view is shared. Hence, from the perspective of shared reality theory, the psychological conflict borne of both intra- and interpersonal attitude discrepancies is viewed in relational terms as relationship-specific conflicting shared realities.

When potential shared realities are incompatible, which one prevails? As implied by shared reality theory, the half-life of a given shared reality is positively related to the degree that it is grounded in multiple relationships and to the degree that the relationships on which it is grounded are stable, either through institutional imperatives or conditions in which relational motivation is high. For example, the relative permanence of family relationships makes them particularly potent social foundations of self-understanding, lending shared realities maintained in them more strength in the face of attack than a competing shared reality achieved, for example, with some guy once met at a party. Alternatively, asymmetrical relationship status may render one participant more motivated to affirm the relationship than another participant. In such cases, this corollary implies that movement necessary to achieve shared reality will occur more for the person more motivated to affirm or maintain the relationship.

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ENDNOTES

1. Interestingly, for both Mead (1934) and Freud (1933/1965), the impetus for their theories was the problem of self-consciousness (i.e., how the self makes itself an object of its own perception or, put another way, what in the self is observing the self). Although their formulations were different, the root mechanism was the same: perspective taking. For Mead, self-consciousness is the product of a repository of others' perspectives on the self, motivated by epistemic interests (i.e., the generalized other). For Freud, self-consciousness is the product of significant others' perspectives on the self, motivated by social identification (i.e., the super-ego).

2. Hence, the achievement of intersubjectivity is hardly foolproof; moreover, significant slippage is likely to occur (Rommetveit, 1974). However, intersubjective slippage may not necessarily be maladaptive. It would not only afford an overestimation of shared reality within valued relationships, but also underestimate shared reality between contested relationships.