Epistemic companions: shared reality development in close relationships

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We propose a framework outlining the development of shared reality in close relationships. In this framework, we attempt to integrate disparate close relationship phenomena under the conceptual umbrella of shared reality. We argue that jointly satisfying epistemic needs — *making sense of the world together* — plays an important but under-appreciated role in establishing and maintaining close relationships. Specifically, we propose that dyads progress through four cumulative phases in which new forms of shared reality emerge. Relationships are often initiated when people discover Shared Feelings, which then facilitate the co-construction of dyad-specific Shared Practices. Partners then form an interdependent web of Shared Coordination and ultimately develop a Shared Identity. Each emergent form of shared reality continues to evolve throughout subsequent phases, and, if neglected, can engender relationship dissolution.

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"The reality of the world is sustained through conversation with significant others."

—Berger and Kellner (1964)

In this paper, we propose an integrative theoretical framework for organizing and interpreting close relationship phenomena, as recently called for by leaders in the field [1]. Specifically, we synthesize findings from disparate close relationship processes under a single conceptual umbrella: the development of shared reality. We argue that jointly satisfying epistemic needs — *making sense of*

the world together — bonds partners at various relationship phases. We assemble evidence that shared reality plays a critical but under-appreciated role throughout the establishment and maintenance of close relationships (for an expanded review, see [2]).

Overview

In order to make sense of the world around them, people turn to others to create a *shared reality:* a perceived commonality of inner states (e.g., feelings, beliefs, or concerns) about something [3,4]. Little work has explicitly examined shared reality in close relationships. Proceeding from Higgins' framework outlining shared reality in child development [5••], we propose that the adult dyad, as a unit, progresses through four cumulative phases in which distinct forms of shared reality appear: (1) Shared Feelings, (2) Shared Practices, (3) Shared Coordination, and (4) Shared Identity. Each emergent form of shared reality remains important and continues to evolve throughout subsequent phases (e.g., shared feelings remain important throughout the development of shared practices, and so on), and if neglected, can engender relationship dissolution. Though we see these phases as relevant to the progression of shared reality in *any* close relationship, the later phases may be especially applicable to romantic relationships.

Phase I. Shared feelings: relationship initiation

What makes people feel like they 'click' when they meet? As theorized by Hardin and Conley [6], relationships are often born when conversation partners discover *shared feelings* about something: when, for instance, they realize that they both love Dalí, abhor Broadway musicals, or are passionate about animal welfare. By 'feelings' we refer broadly to any *evaluative* experience (e.g., sentiments, interests, attitudes, values). Indeed, classic developmental models of close relationships [7,8] and myriad empirical studies have documented the importance of shared feelings in initially drawing people to each other. Perceiving greater attitudinal overlap (e.g., in music or values) increases closeness between strangers [9]. Consistent with shared reality theory, *perceived* and not actual similarity drives these effects [10,11]. Further, shared feelings foster liking more than do shared personality traits or characteristics [12•,13]. For example, shared humor and laughter are particularly powerful social connectors [14], specifically to the extent to which they serve as cues that interacting partners have shared feelings about the world [15]. Even perceiving that a stranger shares one's emotional response to an event disclosed

from one's own life increases initial liking and trust [16]. Thus, people tend to gravitate toward others with whom they have shared feelings.

Establishing these shared feelings serves the critical epistemic function of verifying one's evaluation of events and objects in the world ([3,17]; see also [8,18]), including whether an event or object is even deserving of attention (i.e., is relevant). Shared feelings about one's interests and attitudes that are uncommon or unique, and thus likely to be in greatest need of verification, may especially increase closeness. This validation effect may lead people to feel that they have found, in some sense, an epistemic collaborator: someone with whom they can make sense of the world. We argue that this 'epistemic glue' bonds people to each other.

Of course, this form of shared reality continues to evolve and remain crucial throughout subsequent phases. For instance, partners continue converging in their attitudes and emotional responding over time [19–21]. At any phase, the breakdown of shared feelings may even trigger relationship dissolution.

Once established, these shared feelings may spark the next phase of shared reality development: the co-construction of shared practices.

Phase II. Shared practices: co-construction of dyad-specific culture

What kinds of interactions transition dyads from acquaintances to close partners? Research has shown that joint activities and communication play a key role in this process. We argue that these interactions bond partners to each other by facilitating the co-construction of a relationship subculture composed of dyad-specific *shared practices* — ways of thinking, behaving, interacting, and talking that are unique and special to their relationship.

Joint activities

Despite the centrality of joint activities to close relationships [22], the field of close relationships has understudied phenomena in which the relational focus of attention is on the outside world [23]. Notable exceptions have found that engaging in such activities predicts relationship quality and underlies important close relationship processes [24,25]. We propose that these activities bond partners to each other by allowing them to create special dyad-specific cultural practices and traditions (e.g., 'We rock-climb together on Saturday's', 'We make curry together while listening to Alice Coltrane').

Engaging in novel shared activities also increases closeness [26,27]. We argue that by sharing these experiences, partners may be more certain that their interpretations reflect reality. For example, even without communication, novel images feel more real when viewed with a close partner (vs. alone or with a stranger) [28•]. This enhanced certainty during joint exploration may further strengthen the sense of epistemic collaboration and closeness.

Communication

We propose that partners co-construct their shared reality through conversations about their experiences, each other, and the world around them. As theorized by Berger and Kellner [29], communication is the primary mechanism underlying reality co-construction. Indeed, shared reality develops through communication: without conscious intent, people tune what they say, and subsequently what they *remember*, to fit with their conversation partner's attitudes [4]. Thus, through their discussions, partners constantly influence each other's cognitive representations of the world.

One central communication practice contributing to closeness is the gradual increase in the depth and breadth of self-disclosure [8,30,31], especially when reciprocated [7,32,33]. This reciprocation, we argue, offers a predicate for the construction of shared reality (e.g., 'I had a bad experience with that too'). Further, perceiving that a partner understands one's self-views strengthens closeness. For example, self-disclosure increases intimacy when disclosers perceive that their partner is responsive; i.e., understands, validates, and cares about their innermost self [34•]. This sense of understanding is so important that people are more committed to partners who share their self-views, even if those views are negative [35]. We argue that creating a shared reality with one's partner about the self satisfies epistemic motives by increasing certainty about one's true self.

Though the perception that 'my partner gets *me*' is important, so too may be the perception that, together, '*we* get it.' Ordinary conversations about the world outside of the relationship (e.g., about a political event or piece of music), though understudied, are also critical to relationship processes [23,25]. Through these discussions, partners may develop dyad-specific beliefs and ways of interpreting the world. Shared worldviews foster commitment and shared meaning systems [36•,37••], which further cement relationship bonds. In fact, protecting this shared worldview is one of the functions of close relationships [38].

During this phase, partners may also co-construct dyad-specific forms of communication — their own language, so to speak. They invent *idioms*: words and phrases (e.g., for objects, greetings, each other) with meanings unique to their relationship [39], a phenomenon strongly associated with closeness [40]. Further, partners match *how* they speak: language-style matching very early on predicts relationship longevity [41]. Partners may eventually communicate without words. For instance, through a single

exchanged glance, they may reference entire conversations or shared experiences, such as an inside joke or other dyad-specific idea that only they understand.

Through the evolution of these shared practices, partners may begin to intertwine their lives, entering the next phase of shared reality development: shared coordination of memory- and goal-systems.

Phase III. Shared coordination: co-construction of past and future

What processes allow relationship partners to become 'significant' others — so significant that partners begin to coordinate both their past and future? Over time, partners may become increasingly interdependent [42], forming a complex web of *coordinated memory- and goal-systems* [43•,44••]. We propose that shared reality is precisely what holds this web together.

Coordinated memory-systems

Partners turn to each other to make sense of the *past*. They develop shared memory systems and collaborate in the process of remembering events [44••,45]. They incorporate information from each other's memory reports into their own and can even consequently recall events they didn't experience [46]. Importantly, they co-construct a relationship narrative (e.g., by reminiscing), which fosters a sense of shared meaning [29,47]. As a joint unit, they reconstruct both shared and individual memories.

In the context of autobiographical memories, the implications of co-creating shared realities are profound: simply by recounting quotidian events to each other, partners incorporate each other's thoughts and attitudes into their daily episodic memories — even those experienced separately. Eventually, epistemic precedence may be given to memories that exist within this shared reality, further increasing the importance of this co-constructed past.

Coordinated goal-systems

Partners also create a shared reality about their *future*. Indeed, partners help shape each other's goal pursuit [43•]. For example, by treating their partners as idealized versions, people better enable their partners to gradually acquire these ideal traits and fulfill their expectations [48,49]. Through similar affirmation processes, partners help each other attain their personal goals [50]. We argue that through this process, partners establish shared realities about who they each want to *become*. These shared realities are crucial throughout the process of goal pursuit: for example, people are acutely sensitive to how enthusiastically their partner responds to their goal-progress [51]. Important during this phase is also the process of constructing a shared reality about relationship goals and goals that partners both share [29,43•].

By developing shared realities about both 'who *we were*' and 'who *we will become*,' partners may begin to think in terms of 'we', prompting the final shared reality phase: shared identity.

Phase IV. Shared identity: merged minds

What processes facilitate lasting closeness and commitment? In many relationship development models, close partners ultimately develop a *fused identity* [7,42]. Partners who include each other's perspectives, resources, and identities in their sense of self, and who think and speak in terms of 'we,' are more committed [52,53]. Further, identifying with one's relationship underlies crucial relationship–maintenance processes [54]. Despite the documented importance of this shared identity, its antecedents are not well understood. We propose that this shared identity is an emergent property of reality co-construction: accumulating shared feelings ('*we* feel this'), practices ('*we* do that'), and coordination ('*we* remember this; *we* are becoming that') can facilitate the development of thinking in terms of 'we'. Together, partners may come to make sense of who they are, as one being. Looking outwards together to jointly make sense of the external world may facilitate the very idea of identifying as a unit.

Importantly, through the development of shared feelings, practices, and coordination, partners may come to merge their cognitive representations of the world to such an extent that they experience the feeling of having 'merged minds' — of thinking in synchrony and being mentally locked in-step. Our recent work has shown that partners' scores on a *Shared Reality Questionnaire* (e.g., 'We often think of things at the exact same time,' 'We are more certain of our experiences when we are together') predict a sense of both shared identity and merged minds over and above established close relationship measures [55]. Thus, shared reality may explain an important phenomenological source of this identity convergence.

Parallels with shared reality development in childhood

The present framework for understanding shared reality development in close relationships proceeds from Higgins' framework outlining shared reality development during childhood [5••]. We propose that, as an emerging partnership, adult dyads experience developmental shifts in their shared reality that parallel the shared reality shifts that children experience in their development, analogous to the link between adult relationship processes and infant attachment patterns in the adult attachment literature [56]. Shared feelings can spark adult relationships, echoing the *shared feelings (Phase 1)* that infants first experience with their caregivers [5••]. Next, adult partners develop their own unique shared practices, replicating the establishment of cultural *shared practices (Phase 2)* that toddlers learn from their parents. Constructing shared coordination also parallels child development,

though in children this form of shared reality develops in two stages: *shared self-guides (Phase 3)*, which are aspirations and duties internalized from caregivers, and *shared coordinated roles (Phase 4)*, which are interdependently coordinated functions developed as team-members. Because adults typically influence each other's self-regulation interdependently [43•], without previously experiencing a period of dependency, we subsume both phases as part of shared coordination. Finally, in our framework, dyads develop a shared identity (the final stage of several relationship development models [7,42]), which parallels an important transformation that children undergo *during* Phase 4: forming a shared identity with peers [5••]. As theorized by Higgins [5••], each form of shared reality continuously evolves throughout subsequent phases.

Concluding comments
In this paper, we propose that shared reality plays a crucial role throughout relationships, from initiation to commitment. Specifically, relationships progress through four phases: Shared Feelings, Shared Practices, Shared Coordination, and Shared Identity. Further, each form of shared reality builds on the previous ones and continues to evolve throughout subsequent phases: for example, shared feelings take on a different quality during shared practices, and both shared feelings and practices evolve with the formation of shared coordination (see [2] for an expanded discussion). During any phase, neglecting a current or previously-emerged form of shared reality (e.g., neglecting shared feelings once shared practices have been established) may provoke relationship dissolution. Taking shared reality into account could help explain why losing an important romantic relationship is among the most distressing life events [57] and is associated with drastic decreases in self-concept clarity [58]. Unlike interdependence theory, shared reality theory predicts that in relationship dissolution, partners lose more than just valued outcomes from each other's contributions: they lose their shared reality, and this epistemic failure can make them feel that the world no longer makes sense or feels real.

In some sense, humans are truth-cartographers searching for epistemic companions with whom to map out the bounds of reality. Finding another person with whom one can intimately understand and makes sense of the world fosters a sense of epistemic glue, bonding partners to each other. This joint sense-making process underlies the creation of shared reality throughout the evolution of close relationships.

Conflict of interest statement
Nothing declared.

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