# Journal of Personality and Social Psychology

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## CITATION

Enestrom, M. C., Rossignac-Milon, M., Forest, A. L., & Lydon, J. E. (2024). Meaning-making with romantic partners: Shared reality promotes meaning in life by reducing uncertainty. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000472

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# Meaning-Making With Romantic Partners: Shared Reality Promotes Meaning in Life by Reducing Uncertainty

M. Catalina Enestrom<sup>1</sup>, Maya Rossignac-Milon<sup>1</sup>, Amanda L. Forest<sup>2</sup>, and John E. Lydon<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Managing People in Organizations, IESE Business School

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh

<sup>3</sup> Department of Psychology, McGill University

We propose that, although deeply personal, meaning is facilitated by interpersonal processes. Namely, we theorize that experiencing a sense of shared reality with a close partner (i.e., perceiving an overlap in inner states about the world in general) reduces uncertainty about one's environment, which in turn promotes meaning in work and life. In the current research, we test this hypothesis across five mixed-method studies (e.g., longitudinal, experimental). We find cross-sectional evidence for this association in a couples' study (Study 1: N = 103 romantic dyads) and in ecologically rich samples of people experiencing highly uncertain situations, specifically Black people consistently facing racism in the United States (Study 2: N = 190 participants) and frontline health care workers directly treating COVID-19 patients during the height of the pandemic (Study 3: N = 139 participants). Further, we provide causal evidence for this association in two experiments (Studies 4 and 5:  $N_4 = 364$  participants,  $N_5 = 389$  participants). Taken together, this work suggests that shared reality with close partners has real-world benefits, reducing uncertainty and promoting meaning. In addition, we show that experimentally heightening shared reality, by reducing uncertainty, can promote a greater sense of meaning in life.

Keywords: meaning, romantic relationships, shared reality, uncertainty

Construct systems can be considered a kind of scanning pattern which a person continually projects upon his world. As he sweeps back and forth across his perceptual field, he picks up blips of meaning. The more adequate his scanning pattern, the more meaningful his world becomes. The more in tune it is with the scanning patterns used by others, the more blips of meaning he can pick up from their projections.

-George Kelly (1955, p. 145)

People have a need for meaning to establish a sense of purpose and coherence in their lives (Baumeister, 1991; Cornwell et al., 2017;

Heine et al., 2006; Johnson, 1987; Ryff & Singer, 1998). As such, decades of research have explored the construct of meaning in life (e.g., George & Park, 2016; Steger et al., 2006; Yalom, 1980) and how people can obtain this sense of meaning through intrapersonal (e.g., goals; Baumeister, 1991; Emmons, 2003) and interpersonal means (e.g., belonging; Heine et al., 2006; Lambert et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2015). Traditional thinking on meaning focused primarily on intrapersonal processes, which are often exemplified in popular culture, whereby characters find meaning through embarking on a long and difficult journey (see Penn, 2007). By contrast, another stream of thought outlines how others allow people to achieve a sense of meaning. The purpose of the present research is to offer a new perspective to understand the interpersonal processes that promote meaning in life, exploring how people obtain meaning in their lives through the lens of shared reality theory in romantic relationships. This novel approach departs from prior work on the interpersonal processes that promote meaning in life by focusing on epistemic mechanisms-how relationship partners make sense of the world together-as opposed to purely relational mechanisms, such as belonging and support. In so doing, this work identifies specific aspects of relationships that drive their effects on meaning. Thus, this package of studies applies shared reality theory to bring to life George Kelly's (1955) notion that the more "in tune" people are with others' interpretations of the world, the more "blips of meaning" they can pick up from each other.

#### Meaning in Life

The literature has varied in its definition of meaning in life across the decades. For instance, meaning has been defined as perceiving one's life to be significant (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). By contrast, meaning has been conceptualized as living the "good

Grainne Fitzsimons served as action editor.

M. Catalina Enestrom D https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8739-3294

The preregistered analyses, materials, syntax, and deidentified data for all studies are publicly available on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/bsj49.

Amanda L. Forest received funding from the Central Research Development Fund at the University of Pittsburgh Grant 30526. John E. Lydon received funding from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Grant 245846.

M. Catalina Enestrom played a lead role in conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing. Maya Rossignac-Milon played a supporting role in data curation, investigation, and writing–review and editing. Amanda L. Forest played a supporting role in data curation, investigation, and writing–review and editing. John E. Lydon played a supporting role in conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, and writing–review and editing.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to M. Catalina Enestrom, Department of Managing People in Organizations, IESE Business School, Pearson Avenue 21, Barcelona 08034, Spain. Email: cenestrom@iese.edu

life" (Cornwell et al., 2017) or successfully pursuing one's goals (Emmons, 2003). However, as argued by Frankl (1965), there is no one sense of meaning for all human beings, and people experience meaning in different ways. As such, the current research draws from the literature broadly defining meaning as a sense of coherence and purpose in one's life (Battista & Almond, 1973; Reker & Wong, 1988; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger et al., 2006). Decades of research show that experiencing meaning in life is beneficial to one's well-being (Steger et al., 2006; Yu & Chang, 2021): Meaning in life increases proactive coping (Miao et al., 2017), happiness (Debats et al., 1993), and life satisfaction (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988) while also reducing distress (e.g., Debats et al., 1993; Harlow et al., 1986) and morbidity (Hooker et al., 2018). It also has positive interpersonal benefits, for instance, people who report higher meaning in life are rated more favorably after an interaction (Stillman et al., 2011).

Scholars have proposed several pathways to obtaining a sense of meaning in life. For example, Baumeister (1991) highlighted the meeting of four needs-purpose, value, efficacy, and selfworth-as a way to obtain meaning. In addition, people can live a meaningful life by achieving goals that are personally significant (Emmons, 2003). While these means have a more intrapersonal focus, other research also outline the centrality of interpersonal paths to obtaining meaning. For instance, there is substantial evidence to suggest that experiencing a sense of belonging gives people a sense of meaning (e.g., Chen et al., 2020; King & Hicks, 2021; Lambert et al., 2013; Prinzing et al., 2023; Sedikides & Wildschut, 2018). Indeed, people overwhelmingly list personal relationships as their primary source of meaning in life (Fave & Coppa, 2009). While this research suggests that interpersonal relationships are important for meaning in life, less is known about the specific aspects of relationships that drive the effect of relationships on meaning. We propose a novel pathway through which romantic partners create meaning in their lives: through coconstructing shared inner states about the world around them, that is, by creating a sense of shared reality.

## **Shared Reality Theory**

People rely on others to make sense of their experiences, often preferring to believe a reality that is socially constructed (Sherif, 1936), even when that reality is not objectively true (e.g., Asch, 1951). The current work considers this process as a pathway to meaning through the lens of shared reality theory (e.g., Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Shared reality is defined as the perception of sharing inner states (e.g., feelings, attitudes, beliefs) in common with another person about the world (Echterhoff et al., 2009). For example, if John watches a horror movie with his wife Sarah and perceives that he and Sarah both find it scary, John would experience a sense of shared reality with Sarah about the movie. While this example highlights a coexperienced situation where romantic partners establish a shared reality in the moment, it is also possible to establish shared reality after the fact and even about an event that only one partner initially experienced. For instance, upon describing a stressful experience she had with John, Sarah may perceive that John shares the same interpretation of her experience.

Shared reality differs conceptually from related constructs in several ways (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Higgins et al., 2021). First,

shared reality involves the perception of sharing inner states, such as attitudes, feelings, or opinions-thus, it differs from constructs like perceived personality similarity or perceived demographic similarity, which involve the perception of sharing the same traits or characteristics. Second, unlike actual similarity of inner states, shared reality involves the individual's subjective perception of sharing inner states-in our prior example, John would experience a shared reality with Sarah about the movie so long as he believes that they both find it scary, even if Sarah does not actually find it scary. Third, shared reality is about a target referent, like a third person, event, or idea. Thus, unlike emotion contagion or positivity resonance, in which someone might "catch" someone else's happiness without knowing what they were happy about, or emotional similarity, in which two people might feel happy about different things, shared reality involves the perception of sharing the same inner states *about* particular topics, like a movie.

As couples like John and Sarah come to accumulate shared reality experiences throughout their relationship, perceiving shared feelings, shared goals, and shared memories with their partner, they come to develop a sense of *generalized shared reality*—that is, the perception of sharing a set of inner states in common with another person about the world in general (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). In the present work, we examine this generalized form of shared reality between romantic partners.

Prior work has distinguished generalized shared reality in romantic relationships both conceptually and empirically from related relationship constructs, such as relationship satisfaction, perceived similarity, intimacy, closeness, liking, inclusion of the other in the self, and perceived partner responsiveness, among others (Elnakouri et al., 2023; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Conceptually, generalized shared reality can be distinguished from relationship constructs like perceived social support or perceived partner responsiveness, which involve the individual's perception of their partner (e.g., perceiving one's partner as supportive and caring or perceiving that "my partner gets me") as opposed to the individual's perception that they share inner states in common with their partner about the world, including the world external to the relationship (e.g., perceiving that "we get it"; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021).

Empirically, Rossignac-Milon et al. (2021) established the uniqueness of generalized shared reality as a relationship construct through factor analyses and experimental methods. For example, in an exploratory factor analysis with items from a dozen romantic relationship constructs, all generalized shared reality items loaded onto a unique factor separate from the "relationship goodness" factor (on which the items from relationship satisfaction, perceived partner responsiveness, intimacy, and social support loaded). Experimentally, baseline generalized shared reality (but none of the other relationship constructs measured) uniquely interacted with an experimental threat to romantic partners' sense of experiencing the sensory world in the same way: Couples with greater levels of baseline generalized shared reality engaged in more interaction behaviors like finishing each other's sentences and bringing up inside jokes to reaffirm their shared reality in the face of this threat. By contrast, baseline generalized shared reality did not interact with the threat manipulation to affect behavioral indices of relationship satisfaction (e.g., affection, positive tone)-suggesting that these dyads were specifically reaffirming their sense of shared reality. Building on this work, across several studies, Elnakouri et al. (2023) found that shared reality with instrumental others predicted both self-reported and behavioral goal success (e.g., grade point average) over and above interpersonal liking, closeness, and epistemic trust, suggesting that the effects of shared reality on goal success were not explained by these related relationship constructs. These findings offer compelling evidence that shared reality is both conceptually and empirically distinct from other relationship constructs, supporting the idea that shared reality captures something beyond "relationship goodness."

Research examining generalized shared reality in romantic relationships has often explored the perception of shared reality from each partner's perspective (e.g., Bar-Shachar & Bar-Kalifa, 2021; Enestrom & Lydon, 2021; Enestrom et al., 2023; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). However, shared reality is the result of a dyadic process—behaviors exhibited by each partner allow both partners to experience a sense of shared reality. Indeed, dyadic behaviors characteristic of shared reality observed by third-party raters (e.g., finishing each other's sentences, vocalizing agreement) were found to predict self-reports of shared reality (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Romantic partners' dyadic interaction patterns may therefore reflect their shared reality.

Shared reality is essential for fulfilling both one's relational needs, such as the need to belong, and epistemic needs, such as the need for certainty and truth (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Higgins et al., 2021). Much research has examined the relational benefits of shared reality: For example, frontline health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic who experienced greater shared reality with their nonhealth care romantic partners felt more supported and in turn experienced greater relationship satisfaction (Enestrom & Lydon, 2021) and romantic partners who report greater shared reality and who have more I-sharing experiences (i.e., an in-the-moment shared reality experience) experience greater relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment (Rivera et al., 2019; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). This effect has also been found within-person: When people report higher shared reality with a close other on a given day, they also experience greater relationship closeness (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). More generally, experiencing a shared reality with another person has been shown to promote personal benefits, such as memory goal satisfaction and psychological well-being (Boytos & Costabile, 2022) as well as self-efficacy and goal success (Elnakouri et al., 2023). Comparatively less work has examined the epistemic benefits of shared reality, and this work has focused primarily on newly acquainted dyads, finding that participants who experienced a shared reality when discussing ambiguous images with an online partner felt more certain of their impressions (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Less is known about the epistemic benefits of shared reality in established, close relationships. Because of its unique orientation to the world external to the relationship, shared reality should be especially relevant for how close partners making meaning of their everyday experiences.

## Shared Reality and Meaning in Life

Przybylinski and Andersen (2015) theorized that in close relationships, people construct shared meaning systems (e.g., shared values and political beliefs), which provide them with a greater sense of meaning. Supporting this idea, Przybylinski and Andersen (2015) found that people expected to have more meaningful conversations with a stranger who resembled their partner because this resemblance indirectly activated their shared meaning system.

Similarly, McLean and Pasupathi (2011) found that people were more likely to retain the meaning of a story they told their romantic partner when the meaning of the story was shared by both partners. Further, blocking participants from discussing their shared values with the stranger activated the goal to restore meaning (Przybylinski & Andersen, 2015). In a similar line of work, when romantic partners were given feedback threatening their shared reality, those high in baseline shared reality subsequently created more shared meaning with their partner linguistically (i.e., using words with the same meaning; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). This work suggests that people are motivated to restore their sense of shared meaning when their shared reality is threatened, indirectly supporting the idea that shared reality contributes to meaning.

Research conducted by Murray et al. (2017, 2018, 2021; Murray, McNulty, et al., 2023; Murray, Xia, et al., 2023) also supported the idea that close relationships promote meaning and coherence. Murray et al. (2021; Murray, McNulty, et al., 2023) introduced the "social-safety system," which proposes that people impose wellintentioned motivations on their romantic partner to reduce the anxiety experienced from the unexpected actions of sociopolitical figures. This effect also works in the opposite direction, where people reduce the anxiety brought on by the unexpected actions of people in their personal relational world (e.g., romantic partner) by imposing well-intentioned motivations on people in their sociopolitical world (e.g., president; Murray et al., 2021). Murray, Xia, et al. (2023) found similar processes in the context of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, whereby establishing a sense of connection with one's partner diminishes the need to reduce uncertainty about their views of the external world.

In the work that preceded this proposed social-safety system, Murray et al. (2017, 2018) discussed a broader meaning maintenance model in relationships. Across this broader line of research, when partners' sense of everyday coherence was threatened, they engaged in motivated reasoning to boost their sense of relationship satisfaction. Thus, unlike Przybylinski and Andersen (2015) and the present authors, Murray et al. (2017) theorized that participants boost their sense of relationship satisfaction in response to threats to coherence to experience a sense of consistency with the broader cultural shared expectation of being in a satisfying close relationship, that is, to experience a collective sense of shared reality with society at large, as described by Murray et al. (2018), and not a shared reality specifically with their partner. By contrast, our theory focuses on how people boost their sense of shared reality specifically with their romantic partner to address threats to coherence. Thus, our theorizing differs from that of Murray et al. in that we propose that it is creating a sense of shared reality with one's romantic partner about the world at large, and not a sense of shared reality with the world at large about the importance of being in a satisfying relationship, that increases meaning in life.

Second, our theorizing differs from that of Murray et al. in that we propose that romantic partners rely on their shared reality to *directly* reduce their uncertainty about their interpretations of the world (e.g., Sarah may rely on her shared reality with John to feel more certain about her interpretations of the pandemic). By contrast, Murray et al. theorized that romantic partners boost their relationship satisfaction as a way of *coping* with uncertainty—not necessarily as a way of *reducing* uncertainty (e.g., to cope with the threat of uncertainty posed by the pandemic, Sarah may reaffirm her relationship satisfaction with John to feel a more general sense of coherence from

being in a satisfying relationship and not necessarily greater certainty about the pandemic itself). Overall, the present research focuses on the effects of having created a shared reality with one's romantic partner on the experience of meaning in life and provides evidence for how this takes place above and beyond the satisfaction-related processes proposed by Murray and colleagues.

Cornwell et al. (2017) theorized that shared reality with close others promotes meaning in life by validating people's sense that their life is "going in the right direction." They approached this idea specifically from a goal-theory perspective, theorizing that people experience their lives as meaningful to the extent that others socially verify their goals as worthwhile. Although the present research also conceptualizes shared reality as a key contributor to meaning in life, we theorize that shared reality contributes to meaning by creating understanding out of the chaos in life and specifically out of the chaos in one's personal environment. Thus, the current research focuses on the epistemic function of shared reality in allowing people to develop a sense of coherence about their environment, which does not have to be specific to the importance of their goals.

Finally, there is recent empirical evidence that positivity resonance (i.e., coexperienced positive affect) promotes meaning in life by allowing people to build social resources, such as supportive relationships (Prinzing et al., 2023). Although the synchrony component of positive resonance (i.e., "Did you feel in sync with others?"; Prinzing et al., 2023) aligns with the component of shared reality involving synchronous inner states, positivity resonance can be conceptually distinguished from shared reality in that shared reality is about target referents in the world, whereas positivity resonance involves the coexperience of positive affect without reference to particular targets (e.g., someone could "catch" another person's positivity without knowing what made them feel positive affect). Critically, the authors focus on positivity resonance as promoting meaning in life through the relational mechanism of increasing social resources (e.g., belonging). Our theory centers around the epistemic mechanisms linking shared reality and meaning in life, specifically the reduction of uncertainty in one's environment.

Despite various theories and assumptions about the link between shared reality and meaning in life, and the research on relational constructs that promote meaning, the effect of shared reality on meaning in life has yet to be explicitly tested. The present work will explore this effect in romantic couples across various contexts. In addition to examining this direct link, this research will explore uncertainty reduction as a potential mechanism.

#### Uncertainty Reduction as a Mechanism

One potential mechanism explaining the association between shared reality and meaning is uncertainty. Specifically, researchers have theorized that uncertainty fosters the sense that life is meaningless (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009). Higgins (2013) argued that people have a truth motivation that drives them to find meaning in the objects and events in their lives and that people find this meaning by making sense of the world. As such, uncertainty should threaten this need for truth by interfering with people's ability to make sense of their environment (Higgins, 2013; Stevens & Fiske, 1995; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), thereby undermining their sense of meaning. This negative effect of uncertainty on meaning has also been theorized in much of King and Hicks' (2021) work, whereby comprehension and coherence are central features of meaning in life. Similar theoretical work argued that meaning essentially indicates whether a stimulus is seen as having underlying coherence (Hicks et al., 2010). Further theorizing by Murray et al. (2017, 2021; Murray, McNulty, et al., 2023; Murray, Xia, et al., 2023) also aligns with this notion that people need to deal with the unexpected in their environment to experience meaning.

Indeed, decades of research have provided evidence for a causal association between uncertainty and meaning. For instance, simply changing the order of the seasons before presenting them to participants—thereby presenting them in a *less coherent* way—led participants to report lower meaning in life (Heintzelman et al., 2013). Different manipulations reflecting the same process, such as manipulating the readability of the font used for the meaning in life measure, also reduced people's meaning in life (Trent et al., 2013). Overall, perceiving that one's life makes sense is theorized to comprise the cognitive component of meaning in life (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Given the necessity of making sense of one's life to find meaning, reducing uncertainty should boost meaning in life, and factors that reduce uncertainty, such as shared reality, should thus promote meaning.

Prior research suggests that shared reality reduces uncertainty: After discussing ambiguous images, dyad members who experienced a greater sense of shared reality with an interaction partner felt more certain about their interpretation of the images-a type of uncertainty reduction (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Similarly, conversational flow promotes feelings of shared reality, which is related to people feeling that their opinions have been validated (Koudenburg et al., 2013, 2017). People are also more likely to create a shared reality with their partner when they need to make sense of an event that is more uncertain (Bar-Shachar & Bar-Kalifa, 2021). By turning to one's close other who can validate one's interpretation of something in one's environment, like an event, people feel more sure that what they are experiencing is true and real (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). At its core, uncertainty reduction is a result of a person feeling like they "get it" (Hicks et al., 2010), a key component of shared reality (the feeling that "we get it" together; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021).

Thus, we propose that shared reality promotes greater meaning in life—and in important domains of people's lives—and that this is achieved by reducing uncertainty in their personal environment. For instance, imagine Sarah is a Black American presently living through the recent wave of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the murder of George Floyd. As she experiences the BLM movement, including attending protests and discussing racism with her partner John, the extent to which she feels that she and John have the same thoughts and feelings about various aspects of her environment—police violence, racism, community involvement the more certain she should feel about her interpretation of racism and the social–political climate (e.g., who was at fault, how to stand up for the cause). In turn, her romantic partner's validation helps her make sense of the movement and how to engage with it, allowing her to experience a greater sense of meaning in life.

In addition, shared reality may reduce uncertainty in important domains of people's lives, like their work, thereby promoting meaning in work. Imagine John recently took on a new, important project at work. As he navigates this project, the extent to which he feels that he and Sarah have the same thoughts and feelings about various aspects of his environment—coworker dynamics, his management style, and his career goals—the more certain he should feel about his interpretations of the project (e.g., how to approach the project or how to delegate different tasks). As a result, the validation John receives from Sarah helps him make sense of how he is managing the project, providing him with a greater sense of meaning in work.

#### **Overview of the Research Program**

The current research investigates the influence of shared reality on uncertainty in one's environment across various contexts (e.g., work, sociopolitical climate) and in turn on meaning in life and work. This article will be the first to directly examine the effect of shared reality on meaning in life. Thus, the research questions pursued in the present work are the following: (1) Does shared reality with one's romantic partner promote greater meaning in life and work? (2) Is this effect mediated by a reduction in people's uncertainty about the world around them?

As the first step, in Study 1, we examined the cross-sectional association between shared reality and meaning in life in a lab study of romantic dyads. In Study 2, we examined uncertainty as a mechanism driving this association in a unique, diverse, and ecologically valid sample. Specifically, we explored uncertainty with regard to racism and the sociopolitical climate for Black people in the United States. In doing so, we distinguished the effect of shared reality on meaning in life from that of a general "relationship goodness" effect. In Study 3, we tested the directionality of the association between shared reality and uncertainty using longitudinal data of frontline health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic and extended our meaning outcomes to include meaning at work. After providing correlational evidence for our proposed hypotheses, we conducted two experiments. Study 4 tested the effect of shared reality on uncertainty and meaning in romantically involved individuals using an online recall paradigm. Finally, Study 5 replicated these findings in a couples' perception study, allowing us to examine shared reality from a dyadic perspective.

#### Study 1

In Study 1, we examined the cross-sectional association between shared reality with one's romantic partner and meaning in life in a laboratory study of romantic dyads. We predicted that shared reality would be positively associated with meaning in life. These analyses were preregistered and can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/at6sx/.<sup>1</sup> As part of our exploratory analyses, we included relationship satisfaction as a covariate to show that the effects of shared reality on meaning in life are above and beyond one's overall positive view of the relationship. We were also interested in examining shared reality from a dyadic perspective to show that shared reality is a dyadic process rooted in behaviors between romantic partners. To do so, we analyzed the behavioral coding data from an interaction couples had in the lab and tested whether the coded shared reality behaviors predicted each partner's self-reported shared reality and meaning in life. We also included coded behaviors that we identified as being likely reflections of participants' relationship satisfaction (expressing love and affection for their partner, i.e., "relationship satisfaction

behaviors") as a covariate when testing this association. The materials, syntax, and aggregate-form data needed to replicate these analyses can be found on the OSF at https://osf.io/bsj49.

#### Method

#### **Participants**

In Study 1, we recruited romantic couples from an urban community to participate in a dyadic lab study. To be eligible for the study, both members of the couple had to be adults (more than 18 years old) involved in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months<sup>2</sup> and willing to participate. We collected data from a sample size of 103 couples (206 participants). However, data from one participant were not included in analyses due to attention issues during the lab session, resulting in a final sample size of 205 participants.<sup>3</sup> In our final sample, participants were on average 36 years old (SD = 17.07) and identified as White/Caucasian (68%), Black/African American (13%), Asian (10%), Hispanic (3%), biracial/multiracial (2%), or other/another identity (4%). Participants had been in their relationship for about 10 years (SD =13.61). Most of the sample was married (41%), followed by seriously dating (28%), cohabiting (18%), engaged (12%), and other/casually dating (2%). The sample consisted of 92 male-female couples, seven female-female couples, one male-male couple, and two nonbinary couples.

We conducted sensitivity analyses using Monte Carlo simulations (Lane & Hennes, 2018). Based on 1,000 Monte Carlo draws and a sample of N = 103 dyads, power was calculated to be 81%, indicating that there was sufficient power to detect the effect.<sup>4</sup>

## Procedure

Couples were recruited to participate in a study about communication in romantic relationships through a university research registry, a psychology department subject pool listing, ads in newspapers or on Craigslist, and flyers posted on campus and around the community. During the 90–120-min lab session, couples completed the baseline self-report measures and engaged in a conversation where one member of the couple (discloser) was asked to talk about the thing in the world that they were most afraid of. The partner (responder) was

<sup>3</sup> Video data from six couples were lost due to technological failure. Thus, analyses for the behavioral measures include data from 96 couples.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Data in Study 1 were collected as part of a larger investigation of couples' communication and relationship functioning. The larger study included an online follow-up survey, but all measures used in the present investigation are drawn from the initial lab session. We preregistered our hypotheses, exclusion criteria, and analytic plan after data collection but before beginning the analyses related to the present hypotheses. At present, the data set is used in two published articles (Elnakouri et al., 2023; Walsh & Forest, 2024). It is also being used in other articles in preparation or under revision/review. However, this is the first investigation involving this data set to examine relations between shared reality (either self-report or behavioral coding) and meaning in life.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Five couples indicated having a relationship length shorter than 6 months (M = 3.4 months; range = 2-5 months), while two couples did not report on their relationship length. We do not believe the research question being tested requires a minimum relationship length of 6 months and therefore included data from these couples in our analyses.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> We reran the sensitivity analyses with 102 dyads to account for the one dyad where we only had data for one member of the couple and the power calculated was consistent.

asked to respond naturally. Participants could earn course credit or up to \$30 each.

#### Measures

**Generalized Shared Reality.** We measured generalized shared reality (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021) with eight items such as "We typically share the same thoughts and feelings about things" and "Events feel more real when we experience them together" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) (M = 5.40, SD = 1.01,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Meaning in Life.** We used the Presence of Meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Scale (Steger et al., 2006), which includes five items such as "My life has a clear sense of purpose" (1 = *absolutely true*, 7 = *absolutely untrue*) (M = 5.33, SD = 1.32,  $\alpha = .93$ ). Given our focus on the role of shared reality and uncertainty in *obtaining* or *achieving* a sense of meaning, we did not include the Search for Meaning subscale, which captures the *motivation* to find meaning.

**Relationship Satisfaction.** We measured satisfaction with the satisfaction item in the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Scale (Fletcher et al., 2000): "How satisfied are you with your relationship?" (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely) (M = 6.16, SD = 1.08).

**Shared Reality Behaviors.** Three objective coders blind to self-report data viewed video recordings of the interaction and rated the frequency with which the responder engaged in each of three shared reality behaviors: (1 = not at all/never, 4 = occasionally/ somewhat, 7 = extremely/very frequently; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021): (a) shared the partner's (discloser's) thoughts and feelings about the feared object/event/concept, (b) vocalized thought similarity/agreements/shared feelings (e.g., "I was thinking the same thing"), and (c) finished the discloser's sentences or ideas. The coders' responses were averaged for each behavior, and a composite of the three behaviors was created (M = 3.23, SD = 1.31,  $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Relationship Satisfaction Behaviors.** Three new coders (different from the coders who had rated shared reality behaviors) rated the frequency with which the discloser engaged in each of several behaviors (on the same scale), including two relationship satisfaction behaviors: (a) "express love" and (b) "expressed affection for his/her partner verbally or nonverbally."<sup>5</sup> The coders' responses were averaged for each behavior, and a composite of the two behaviors was created (M = 3.77, SD = 1.51,  $\alpha = .94$ ).

## Analytic Approach

Because the data set consisted of participants nested within couples, we used multilevel modeling to conduct our analyses using the lme4 R package (Bates et al., 2015). Individual reports (Level 1) were nested within couples<sup>6</sup> (Level 2), and intercepts were allowed to vary randomly across individuals. Our main analysis involving links between self-reported shared reality and meaning in life was preregistered and can be found on the OSF at https://osf.io/at6sx. As an exploratory analysis, we controlled for relationship satisfaction. We also explored the links between shared reality behaviors and both self-reported shared reality<sup>7</sup> and self-reported meaning in life.

#### Results

In line with our preregistered hypothesis, self-reported shared reality was positively associated with meaning in life, b = 0.26, 95% CI [0.08, 0.43], t = 2.87, p = .005 (see Figure 1), and these results were slightly attenuated when controlling for relationship satisfaction, b = 0.17, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.37], t = 1.79, p = .082. When examining shared reality using responder behaviors coded during the dyadic interaction, shared reality behaviors were associated with self-reported shared reality, b = 0.19, 95% CI [0.07, 0.31], t = 3.13, p = .002. In addition, the effect of shared reality behaviors on self-reported shared reality held when controlling for satisfaction-related behaviors, b = 0.16, 95% CI [0.03, 0.29], t = 2.36, p = .020. Shared reality behaviors during the interaction were also associated with greater meaning in life, b = 0.18, 95% CI [0.02, 0.34], t = 2.26, p = .026, and these results held controlling for satisfaction-related behaviors, b = 0.20, 95% CI [0.03, 0.38], t = 2.28, p = .025.<sup>8</sup>

#### Discussion

Study 1 provides initial evidence that shared reality with one's romantic partner is positively associated with meaning in life. These findings suggest that to the extent that romantic dyads perceive that they have coconstructed a set of shared thoughts, beliefs, and concerns with their partner about the world, they find meaning and purpose within this coconstructed world. Critically, shared reality behaviors enacted during couples' naturalistic conversations about an emotional topic predicted self-reported shared reality. This finding suggests that shared reality is rooted in dyadic processes that are visible to objective raters. Although participants' perceptions of shared reality should ultimately matter most for meaning in life, Study 1 is important in linking couple members' self-reports of

<sup>8</sup> Because the shared reality behaviors were coded for the responder only, we explored whether role (discloser vs. responder) moderated the effect of shared reality behaviors on self-reported shared reality and on meaning in life. This allows us to test whether the effect of the responder's shared reality behaviors was stronger for their own or their partner's self-reported shared reality and meaning in life. We found that role did not moderate the effect of shared reality behaviors on self-reported shared reality, b = 0.09, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.29], t = 0.92, p = .36, but marginally moderated the effect of shared reality behaviors on meaning in life, b = -0.24, 95% CI [-0.004, 0.48], t =-1.93, p = .057. Simple effect analyses revealed that the effect of shared reality behaviors on meaning was driven by responders, b = 0.30, 95% CI [0.10, 0.50], t = 2.96, p = .003. We are hesitant to draw strong conclusions based on this result given the nonsignificant interaction, but it is unsurprising that the responder's shared reality behaviors are a better predictor of the responder's meaning than of the discloser's meaning: The person exhibiting the cues is the one whose meaning is most tightly linked to these cues. Regardless, the lack of an interaction effect for self-reported shared reality shows that these cues relate to both members' self-reported shared reality, providing evidence supporting the dyadic nature of shared reality.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> These items were used in a prior investigation assessing the effects of discloser positive expressivity on partner support (Walsh & Forest, 2024). However, the analyses we report here are distinct from those previously reported.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Note that for one of the couples, we did not have data for both members. <sup>7</sup> Self-reported shared reality was measured at the beginning of the lab session, before the interactions, whereas the shared reality behaviors were coded during the interactions. While ideally the outcome would be measured after the predictor, the behaviors that were coded are picking up on a variable that couples have formed well before the study—their sense of generalized shared reality with one another. Therefore, according to shared reality theory, these behaviors should predict people's self-reported shared reality.



**Figure 1** Cross-Sectional Association Between Shared Reality and Meaning in Life in Study 1

(perceived) shared reality to observable behaviors in a dyadic interaction context.

The results of self-reported shared reality on meaning in life were only slightly attenuated when controlling for relationship satisfaction. These findings indicate that the effects of shared reality are unlikely to be simply due to viewing one's relationship positively. However, given the attenuation that we did observe in this study, in our subsequent studies, we sought to demonstrate that the effects of shared reality on meaning persist when relationship satisfaction is controlled.

Further, shared reality behaviors, such as expressing agreement and finishing the other's sentences, were found to predict meaning in life above and beyond satisfaction-related behaviors, such as expressing affection toward one's partner verbally and nonverbally. It is rather impressive that behaviors exhibited during an interaction about a specific target (i.e., something the discloser feared) would relate to meaning in life, which is such a broad and stable construct (Hicks & King, 2008). Given the links between these coded behaviors and self-reported shared reality, we suspect that the behaviors coded in the interaction reflect broader patterns of behavior that couples exhibit as they go about their lives together. From this perspective, one could imagine why couples who engage in more frequent shared reality behaviors would perceive more shared reality and also more meaning.

Having established an initial link between shared reality and meaning in life, in Study 2, we aimed to (a) replicate the Study 1 findings in a unique sample of Black Americans with respect to their experiences of racism and the sociopolitical climate, which should be especially relevant to their sense of meaning in life, and (b) test the mechanism of uncertainty reduction.

## Study 2

Black people face racism daily around the world (Schuman et al., 1997). These stressful experiences have major consequences for society, as is often seen with race-related fatalities at the hands of the police. For instance, in the United States, the murder of George Floyd sparked global anti-Black racism protests. Such experiences that directly impact the core of one's identity can challenge one's experience of meaning in life (Thoits, 1983, 2012). As such, in Study 2, we collected data from a sample of romantically involved Black individuals within 1 year of the murder of George Floyd, during the protests that ensued and the BLM movement more generally. This allowed us to replicate the findings from Study 1 in a unique, diverse, and ecologically valid sample in which meaning in life may be especially relevant. In this study, we also explore uncertainty reduction about Black people's experiences of racism and the sociopolitical climate as a mechanism linking shared reality and meaning in life. Overall, the study aimed to understand whether developing a sense of shared reality can influence people's experience of complex and important real-world events, particularly how certain Black people feel about experiences of racism and, in turn, their sense of meaning in life.

In addition, we sought to provide further evidence that the effect of shared reality on meaning through uncertainty is not simply explained by a "relationship goodness" effect. We predicted that the mediation through reduced uncertainty would hold controlling for relationship satisfaction. These analyses were not preregistered; however, the materials, syntax, and deidentified data can be found on the OSF at https://osf.io/bsj49.

## Method

## **Participants**

In Study 2, we recruited participants from the crowdsourcing website Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for an online study between April and July of 2021. Participants were asked about their experiences related to the BLM movement and their romantic relationship over the previous year. To participate, participants had to be over 18 years old, must identify as Black or African American, and must be in an exclusive relationship for over 6 months with either a White, Black, or African American partner.<sup>9</sup> In total, we recruited 231 participants. Prior to data analysis, 33 participants were excluded due to providing suspicious or nonsensical responses. We ran additional analyses and detected eight additional careless responders that should be excluded from the data analysis, given the use of MTurk (Meade & Craig, 2012), resulting in a final sample size of 190 participants,<sup>10</sup> 118 in intraracial relationships (i.e., Black-Black) and 72 in interracial relationships (i.e., Black-White). In our final sample, participants were on average 35 years old (SD = 9.18) and had been in their relationship for about 5.5 years (SD = 6.46), and 90% identified as heterosexual. Couples were either married (53%), cohabiting (7%), or dating exclusively (40%), and 49% identified as male, 50% as female, and 1% as other. This sample provided us with 80% power to detect an effect as small as  $f^2 = .04$ ; as per Cohen's (1988) guidelines, .02 is defined as a small effect size, and .15 is defined as medium effect.

#### Procedure

Participants first completed demographic questions during a 3-min survey. If eligible, we invited them to complete a bonus 30-min survey for additional compensation, in which they answered questions about their experiences surrounding race, the recent wave of anti-Black racism protests, and their relationship.

#### Measures

**Generalized Shared Reality.** Shared reality was assessed using the same scale as in Study 1. However, participants were asked about their generalized shared reality since the onset of the recent wave of anti-Black racism protests in May 2020 (M = 5.32, SD = 0.90,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

**Meaning in Life.** Meaning in life was measured using the same scale as in the previous study (M = 5.55, SD = 1.21,  $\alpha = .87$ ).

**Uncertainty.** Uncertainty was assessed using three reversescored items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), adapted from Rossignac-Milon et al. (2021) such that participants rated their certainty "with respect to racism and the sociopolitical climate," such as "I am certain of what I think is really going on" (M = 2.42, SD = 1.08,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

**Relationship Satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured using two items averaged into a composite: an item from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Goodwin, 1992; adapted from Spanier, 1989) asking participants to rate their degree of happiness in their relationship (1 = very unhappy, 4 = happy, 7 = perfectly happy) and an item from the Quality of Marriage Index (i.e., "We have a good relationship"; Norton, 1983) rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; M = 6.13, SD = 1.10,  $\alpha = .86$ ).

### Analytic Approach

We conducted mediation analyses using the lavaan R package (Rosseel, 2012). To test our hypothesized mediation (see Figure 2 for model layout), we computed the confidence interval for our indirect effect using the bias-corrected bootstrap (MacKinnon et al., 2004). We tested relationship satisfaction as a covariate in the link between shared reality and uncertainty (Path A) and shared reality and meaning (Path C).

## Results

In support of our hypotheses, our findings revealed a pattern consistent with mediation whereby shared reality was associated with increased meaning in life through reduced uncertainty (see Figure 2). Specifically, experiencing shared reality since the onset of the anti-Black racism protests was associated with reduced uncertainty about racism and the sociopolitical climate, b = -0.43, 95% CI [-0.71, -0.21], z = -3.33, p = .001. In turn, this reduced uncertainty was associated with greater meaning in life, b = -0.37, 95% CI [-0.51, -0.18], z = -4.36, p < .001. The total effect of shared reality on meaning in life was positive and significant, b =0.61, 95% CI [0.39, 0.85], z = 5.05, p < .001, and was reduced when controlling for uncertainty, b = 0.45, 95% CI [0.24, 0.70], z = 3.79, p < .001. The indirect effect of shared reality to meaning in life through uncertainty was significant, ab = 0.16,95% CI [0.05, 0.33], z = 2.34, p = .019. In addition, the effect of shared reality on uncertainty remained significant when controlling for relationship satisfaction, b = -0.35,95% CI [-0.64, -0.10], z = -2.49, p = .013,as did the indirect effect, ab = 0.13, 95% CI [0.03, 0.28], z = 1.98, p = .048. When controlling for relationship satisfaction in the total effect of shared reality on meaning in life, the effect remained significant, b = 0.50, 95% CI [-0.63, -0.31], z = -6.02, p < .001. Of note, relationship satisfaction did not predict meaning in life when controlling for shared reality, b = 0.12, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.36], z = 1.03, p = .303, nor was it a reliable predictor of uncertainty, b =-0.17, 95% CI [-0.38, 0.03], z = -1.64, p = .101.

#### Discussion

Overall, these findings suggest that shared reality may allow people to reduce uncertainty about complex, real-world societal concerns outside of their relationship, ultimately predicting their sense of meaning in life. Beyond replicating the association between shared reality and meaning in life found in Study 1 in a real-word context that affects people's everyday lives, Study 2 also provides evidence for uncertainty reduction as a mechanism in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> We were originally interested in exploring the nonshared experience of racism between interracial (vs. intraracial) couples. As such, we chose a demographic that would be mostly likely to have extremely different experiences of racism (if any, as is likely the case with White Americans). However, our sample showed no differences in shared reality between interor intraracial couples, and relationship type did not moderate any of our paths of interest.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The results were significant when we tested our hypotheses using the full data set. Shared reality was associated with lower uncertainty (b = -0.46, p < .001). Lower uncertainty was associated with greater meaning (b = -0.40, p < .001). There was no total or direct effect of shared reality on meaning (C: b = 0.58, p < .001; C': b = 0.40, p < .001). Indirect effect (ab = 0.18, p = .003).

#### Figure 2

Shared Reality Promotes Meaning in Life Through Reduced Uncertainty Related to the Black Lives Matter Movement



*Note.* Pattern consistent with mediation whereby shared reality promotes meaning in life through reduced uncertainty about racism and the sociopolitical climate in Study 2. CI = confidence interval. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

this association. This study examined uncertainty and meaning in a critical setting, in which people may be especially uncertain and seeking a shared reality with their romantic partners (see Bar-Shachar & Bar-Kalifa, 2021) and in a context in which meaning in life may be especially relevant, given that negative experiences that challenge one's identity, such as one's racial identity, directly impact one's sense of meaning (Thoits, 2012). Further, unlike the majority of shared reality research, which has focused on examining shared inner states like attitudes and feelings (see Higgins et al., 2021, for a review), this context provided the opportunity to explore the shared inner state of concern about racism and the BLM movement. Taken together, although Black people struggle with racism everyday (Schuman et al., 1997), the consequences of which are significant for society as a whole, perceiving that a sense of shared reality with their romantic partner may help them find a sense of meaning in their lives by reducing the uncertainty of their feelings about their experiences of racism.

In addition, these findings held controlling for relationship satisfaction, suggesting that the effect is not driven by being satisfied in one's relationship. Recent research suggests that sentiment override tends to drive people's responses about their relationship (Joel et al., 2024). Partners often rely on their general feelings of their relationship when answering self-report measures about their partner's responsiveness, gratitude, or commitment, making it difficult to distinguish these constructs for relationship satisfaction. In light of this, our results are impressive in distinguishing the effects of shared reality from relationship satisfaction.

Although Study 2 provided initial evidence regarding uncertainty's mediating role in an important societal context, correlational designs limit causal conclusions. Thus, we next explored the longitudinal directionality of the association between shared reality and uncertainty in Study 3 before testing directionality experimentally in Studies 4 and 5. In the next study, we explored our hypotheses in a specific domain forming a significant part of people's lives: their work.

#### Study 3

People spend an average of 90,000 hr at work across their lifetime (Pryce-Jones, 2010). Unsurprisingly, work is the second most

common source of meaning, falling only behind family (Pew Research Center, 2021). Indeed, the study of work meaning has become increasingly important as people spend a lot of their time at work (Pryce-Jones, 2010) and associate a large part of their identity with their occupation (Kirpal, 2004). Meaning in life and meaning in work have been similarly defined and measured in the literature (Schnell et al., 2013) and often go hand in hand (Steger & Dik, 2009). In addition, data from the Kelly Global Workforce Index (2009) suggested that many people would be willing to accept a lesser role or lower wage in exchange for contributing something meaningful through their work. With regard to uncertainty, the pandemic shifted workplace norms and expectations (Vandecasteele et al., 2022), which may have increased workers' uncertainty around their workplace experiences.

Taken together, work is an especially important context in which to explore the processes of uncertainty reduction and meaning. As such, in Study 3, we collected data from health care workers on the frontlines during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the previous studies that explored meaning in life more generally, this study aims to replicate our earlier findings in a particularly salient life domain: one's work. In addition, while the pandemic was a period of great uncertainty for society as a whole, frontline health care workers were facing extreme circumstances as they directly treated patients who had been infected with the virus and experienced increased levels of stress and uncertainty (Shanafelt et al., 2020), largely stemming from an excessive workload, lack of personal protective equipment, and greater risk of infection (Cai et al., 2020). This study investigated these health care workers' experiences during the first two waves of the pandemic.

Prior research finds that positive relationship experiences between colleagues can promote work meaning (Colbert et al., 2016; Dutton & Ragins, 2017; Mao et al., 2012; Methot et al., 2016), especially shared reality between colleagues (Rossignac-Milon & Matz, 2023). However, no work to our knowledge has investigated whether people's relationships in their personal lives outside of work can affect their work experiences. Given that people can experience a sense of shared reality even if they did not coexperience an event, we investigated whether health care workers' shared reality at home with their romantic partners could reduce uncertainty about their work environment and in turn promote meaning in work.

Including longitudinal data across the first two waves of the pandemic in Eastern Canada allowed us to test directionality in the association between shared reality and uncertainty reduction. We expected to replicate our findings from the previous study and for the mediational pathway to hold controlling for relationship satisfaction. These analyses were not preregistered; however, the materials, syntax, and deidentified data can be found on the OSF at https://osf.io/bsj49.<sup>11</sup>

## Method

## **Participants**

We recruited frontline health care workers and their significant others through social media and health care associations across

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Data in Study 3 were collected as part of a larger investigation of health care workers' romantic relationships and work experiences during the pandemic. At present, the data set is used in one published article (Enestrom & Lydon, 2021). However, this is the first investigation involving this data set to examine relations between shared reality, work uncertainty, and meaning in work.

Canada and the United States between the ages of 21 and  $49^{12}$  and in an exclusive relationship for more than 6 months. One member of each couple was required to be a frontline health care worker either directly or indirectly exposed to COVID-19-positive patients, and their partner could not be a health care worker. For our purposes, we only analyzed data collected from the health care workers. Responses were collected from 155 frontline health care workers at Time 1, of whom 139 completed the Time 2 measures. Participants were residing in either Canada (81%) or the United States (19%). Of the 155 health care workers, 50% were doctors, 36% were nurses, and 11% held other health care occupations, including respiratory therapists and technicians. This sample provided us with 80% power to detect an effect as small as  $f^2 = .06$ .

#### Procedure

Couples were recruited through social media (e.g., Facebook groups) and health care associations (e.g., biweekly newsletters) across Canada and the United States in late April and early May of 2020 when regions like Quebec, Ontario, and New York had reached the height of daily confirmed COVID-19 cases from the first surge of the pandemic (Bergquist et al., 2020; Urrutia et al., 2021). Couples completed an eligibility survey about their relationship and occupation. Eligible participants were then invited to take part in an online survey in exchange for a \$5 gift card. Participants were then second survey in exchange for another \$5 gift card.

#### Measures

**Generalized Shared Reality.** We used the same measure as in the previous two studies, with modified instructions to rate their agreement with the items since the onset of the pandemic ( $M_{TI} = 5.26$ ,  $SD_{TI} = 0.83$ ,  $\alpha_{TI} = .92$ ).

**Work-Related Uncertainty.** We used the same measure as in the previous study, in this case with respect to their work environment  $(M_{TI} = 3.60, SD_{TI} = 1.29, \alpha_{TI} = .92; M_{T2} = 3.41, SD_{T2} = 1.30, \alpha_{T2} = .96).$ 

**Work-Related Meaning.** Meaning in work was measured using an adaptation of the Work and Meaning Inventory (Steger et al., 2012) rated on a 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 7 (*absolutely true*) scale. Specifically, we used one item from each subscale (i.e., positive meaning, contribution to meaning-making, and greater good motivation<sup>13</sup>) and added an additional face-valid measure: "My work is meaningful to me" ( $M_{TI} = 5.55$ ,  $SD_{TI} = 0.96$ ,  $\alpha_{TI} = .78$ ).

**Relationship Satisfaction.** Satisfaction was measured using the first of the two items used in Study 2 ( $M_{TI} = 5.05$ ,  $SD_{TI} = 1.39$ ).

#### Analytic Approach

The analyses conducted were in line with those in Study 2; the only difference was that Time 1 work uncertainty was included as a covariate in Path A. Therefore, Path A represents the effect of shared reality during the first wave of the pandemic on work-related uncertainty during the second wave of the pandemic, controlling for work-related uncertainty during the first wave. In other words, Path A now represents the extent to which shared reality at Time 1

predicted *decreases* in work-related uncertainty from Time 1 to Time 2.

## Results

In line with our hypotheses, shared reality predicted decreases in work-related uncertainty over time, b = -0.33, 95% CI [-0.58, -0.09], z = -2.70, p = .007 (see Figure 3), which was in turn associated with increases in work-related meaning over time, b =-0.33,95% CI [-0.48, -0.22], z = -5.25, p < .001. Of note, Time 1 work-related uncertainty was included as a covariate in Path A. In other words, the more frontline health care workers experienced a sense of shared reality at the onset of the pandemic, the less uncertain they felt about their work environment over time, and this in turn predicted a greater sense of meaning about their work 6 months later. Despite the lack of a total effect (Hayes, 2018; Shrout & Bolger, 2002), b = -0.008, 95% CI [-0.19, 0.18], z =-0.08, p = .94, the indirect effect from shared reality to meaning through a reduction in uncertainty was significant, ab = 0.11,95%CI [0.04, 0.25], z = 2.22, p = .027, suggesting that shared reality may promote work meaning to the extent that it reduces uncertainty about one's work environment. The results held controlling for relationship satisfaction in Path A: b = -0.28, 95% CI [-0.53, -0.05], z = 2.30, p = .022 (indirect effect: ab = 0.09, 95% CI [0.01, 0.19], z = 2.02, p = .043), suggesting that shared reality's effect on meaning via uncertainty is not attributable to a "relationship goodness" effect.

## Discussion

These findings provide additional evidence for the power of one's relationships in influencing important aspects of one's life. Specifically, the experience of shared reality with one's romantic partner was found to be strong enough to predict changes in frontline health care workers' experiences of life-threatening work conditions, even though the romantic partner was not a health care worker themselves. Despite frontline health care workers struggling with an unprecedented work crisis, to the extent that their sense of shared reality with their partner helped them feel more certain about their work environment, they experienced a greater sense of meaning at work. This finding adds to the literature on how relationship experiences with coworkers can promote work meaning (Colbert et al., 2016; Dutton & Ragins, 2017; Mao et al., 2012; Methot et al., 2016; Rossignac-Milon & Matz, 2023) by showing that relationship experiences with one's romantic partner also influence work meaning. In addition, the results held controlling for relationship satisfaction, adding additional evidence for the robustness of the effect of shared reality on uncertainty and meaning beyond "relationship goodness." Unfortunately, work-related meaning was not measured at Time 1, and we were therefore unable to explore the link between shared reality and changes in work-related meaning.

Overall, these findings suggest that the association between shared reality, uncertainty, and meaning extends beyond the broad

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Although these criteria may limit the generalizability of our result, we decided that these were ideal for testing our hypotheses during this time.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Although the name of greater good motivation subscale suggests that it captures the search for meaning, it captures the presence of meaning (the item we used was: "The work I do serves a greater purpose").

Shared Reality Promotes Meaning in Work Through Reduced Uncertainty Related to Frontline Health Care Workers' Work Environment



*Note.* Pattern consistent with mediation whereby shared reality promotes work-related meaning through reducing work-related uncertainty for frontline health care workers during the pandemic. Path A controls for Time 1 work-related uncertainty. CI = confidence interval; T = Time.\*\*p < .01.

construct of meaning in life to examine meaning in a specific life domain. This link was tested in a particularly unique sample of frontline health care workers during the pandemic, wherein workrelated uncertainty and meaning may be especially central to their lives. Finding meaning in unprecedented work situations may have downstream consequences for overall well-being, including reduced distress (e.g., Debats et al., 1993; Harlow et al., 1986). Beyond replicating earlier findings around meaning in life more generally, the present study also provides initial evidence of directionality between shared reality and uncertainty, whereby shared reality predicted decreases in uncertainty about health care workers' work environment between the first two waves of the pandemic.

#### Study 4

After providing support for the association between shared reality, uncertainty, and meaning through correlational and longitudinal designs, we sought causal evidence by experimentally manipulating shared reality. To do so, we used a recall manipulation, a well-established experimental paradigm and standard method used in the field (e.g., du Plessis et al., 2023; Fleischmann et al., 2021). Specifically, participants were asked to recall either a low or high shared reality experience with their partner. Afterward, they completed measures of state uncertainty related to the recalled experience (i.e., recall-target uncertainty) and state meaning in life. For example, in the low shared reality condition, Sarah might recall a recent experience where she watched a documentary with her partner John and they interpreted it in completely different ways. Sarah would rate her uncertainty in the moment she was completing the survey about her interpretation of the documentary; in other words, she was asked about her in-the-moment uncertainty about the target of the recalled experience. We predicted that those asked to recall a high (vs. low) shared reality experience would report lower uncertainty and in turn greater meaning in life. We also expected these results to hold controlling for state relationship satisfaction, participants' mood following the manipulation, and whether or not the experience was considered a conflict. We recruited couples who were exclusively dating or cohabiting, as we expected married

couples to be more committed and have been together for longer, making it more difficult for a recalled experience to shift their views of their relationship. These analyses were preregistered, and the materials, syntax, and deidentified data can be found on the OSF at https://osf.io/bsj49.

## Method

## **Participants**

Participants were recruited from the crowdsourcing website Prolific for an online study. To be eligible, participants had to be more than 18 years old, in an exclusive relationship for more than 6 months, and either exclusively dating or cohabiting, not married. In total, 400 participants took part in the online survey. In line with our preregistered exclusion criteria, prior to data analysis, 18 participants were excluded due to misunderstanding the prompt (e.g., recalling nonshared reality events, recalling a high shared reality event in the low shared reality condition). We also removed 12 careless responders (Meade & Craig, 2012) but did not have to remove any responders based on the attention check. We excluded data from an additional six participants due to glitches in the survey (i.e., the participant stated that no prompt appeared), resulting in a final sample size of 364 participants, 182 in the low shared reality condition and 182 in the high shared reality condition.<sup>14</sup> In our final sample, participants were on average 32.5 years old (SD =10.22 years), in their relationship for about 5 years (SD = 4.65years), and either exclusive (44%) or cohabiting (56%), and 37% identified as male, 62% as female, and 1% as other. Participants were mostly White (68%), with some also identifying as Asian (12%), mixed (10%), Black (7%), and other (3%).

We ran a priori power analyses to test the sample size needed to obtain 80% power in detecting the effect found in a previous study. The sample size required to detect the smallest sample size (Path B:  $f^2 = 0.03$ ) was 273 participants. We increased the sample size to 400 participants to allow room for preregistered data exclusions.

#### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions where they were either asked to recall a high (vs. low) shared reality experience with their partner [bold in original instructions for emphasis].

Both conditions:

Psychologists are often interested in how people engage with and perceive sensory experiences. This includes experiences of food, images, events, etc. We are particularly interested in how couples overlap in these sensory experiences and whether they experience the world in the same way. That is, whether couples feel that they are on the same "wavelength." Research has shown that couples can have experiences where they overlap while also having experiences where

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> The results were also significant when we tested our hypotheses using the full data set. Path A: Shared reality was associated with lower uncertainty (b = -0.36, p < .001). Path B: Lower uncertainty was associated with greater meaning (b = -0.42, p < .001). Path C/C': There was no total or direct effect of shared reality on meaning (C: b = 0.003, p = .985; C': b = -0.15, p = .309). Indirect effect: ab = 0.15, p = .005.

they see the world differently. Both experiences can have benefits for a relationship, and both are good.

High shared reality condition:

With this in mind, please recall a recent time in which you felt like you and your partner were on the same page, experiencing the world in the same way. For example, you and your partner may have watched a movie and shared in your opinion of how scary it was. Similarly, you and your partner might have heard a joke and had the same thought come to mind, exchanging a knowing glance. Most couples have these types of experiences from time to time and they are a normal part of romantic relationships.

Low shared reality condition:

With this in mind, please recall a recent time in which you felt like you and your partner **were not on the same page**, experiencing the world in a **different way**. For example, you and your partner may have watched a movie and had different opinions of how scary it was. Similarly, you and your partner might have heard a joke and had a different thought come to mind. Most couples have these types of experiences from time to time and they are a normal part of romantic relationships.

Participants were then asked to think about the event and visualize the recalled experience for 15 s, after which they described the experience in two to three sentences. Participants then completed a measure of their state uncertainty toward the target of the recalled experience and a measure of their state meaning in life. We also included a measure of whether the recalled experience was a conflict and a measure of positive affect following the manipulation to ensure that the effect of the manipulation was not due to participants recalling conflict experiences when in the low shared reality condition or due to its effect on participants' mood. As in the previous two studies, we also included a measure of relationship satisfaction following the manipulation.

#### Measures

**Manipulation Check.** To test the effect of our manipulation on shared reality, we used the interaction-specific version of the eightitem Generalized Shared Reality measure (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). The instructions were as follows: "In the scenario I recalled, with respect to me and my partner ...." Participants responded to items such as "... we thought of things at the exact same time" and "... we shared the same thoughts and feelings about things" (low shared reality: M = 3.39, SD = 1.04,  $\alpha = .82$ ; high shared reality: M = 6.06, SD = 0.63,  $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Recall-Target Uncertainty.** Uncertainty was measured using the same items as in the previous studies, modified to ask about the target of their recalled experience (e.g., their certainty of their impression of the movie). Specifically, participants were provided with the following prompt before being presented with the three items used in Studies 2 and 3. In addition, each item included the phrase "Right now" at the beginning to capture *state* uncertainty (low shared reality: M = 2.35, SD = 1.08,  $\alpha = .90$ ; high shared reality: M = 1.92, SD = 1.01,  $\alpha = .90$ ):

Please note that your responses should reflect your feelings **about the target** and not your feelings about the experience more generally.

**Meaning in Life.** Meaning was measured using the same scale as in Studies 1 and 2 (i.e., Steger et al., 2006), except each item began with the phrase "Right now" to capture state meaning in life (low shared reality: M = 4.56, SD = 1.63,  $\alpha = .96$ ; high shared reality: M = 4.54, SD = 1.53,  $\alpha = .95$ ).

**Relationship Satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured using Rusbult et al.'s (1998) scale, which includes five items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) such as the following: "I feel satisfied with my relationship." "My relationship is close to ideal." "Our relationship makes me very happy." As with the previous measures, participants were asked about their state relationship satisfaction (low shared reality: M = 5.51, SD = 1.60,  $\alpha = .96$ ; high shared reality: M = 5.82, SD = 1.19,  $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Positive Affect.** Positive affect was measured using 13 items from the Modified Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Watson et al., 1988), which measures positive affect from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they *typically* felt, for instance, "inspired" and "happy" (low shared reality: M = 4.05, SD = 1.30,  $\alpha = .93$ ; high shared reality: M = 4.30, SD = 1.26,  $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Conflict.** To control for conflict in the recalled experience, participants were asked "Could the recalled experience be considered a conflict between you and your partner?" (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; low shared reality: M = 4.30, SD = 2.28; high shared reality: M = 1.62, SD = 1.34).

#### Analytic Approach

As in the previous studies, we used lavaan to examine our mediation model. We created a dummy-coded variable to compare the low shared reality condition (0) with the high shared reality condition (1) in predicting both state recall-target uncertainty (Path A) and state meaning in life (Paths C and C').

As preregistered, if the effect of the shared reality condition on relationship satisfaction was significant, we planned to include relationship satisfaction as a covariate in the Paths A and C. In addition, to explore the robustness of the manipulation and its effect on uncertainty, we ran exploratory analyses examining the association between condition and uncertainty (Path A) controlling for positive affect and conflict.

#### Results

Before testing our hypothesized model, we first tested the effect of condition on the manipulation check using a one-way analysis of variance. As expected, those who recalled a high shared reality experience<sup>15</sup> reported greater shared reality than those who recalled a low shared reality experience, F(1, 362) = 885.7, p < .001. In line with the findings from the correlational and longitudinal studies, those who recalled a high (vs. low) shared reality experience also reported lower uncertainty about the target they recalled, b = -0.43, 95% CI [-0.63, -0.22], z = -4.03, p < .001 (see Figure 4). In turn, experiencing less uncertainty about the target of what they recalled was associated with greater meaning in life, b = -0.47, 95% CI

Please rate your agreement with the following items with respect to the **target (e.g., food, image, event)** of the experience that you recalled earlier. So, for instance, if you recalled an experience where you and your partner watched a movie together then the target is the movie you watched.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> See Appendix A for examples of experiences recalled by participants.



High vs. Low Shared Reality Condition Promotes Meaning in Life Through Reduced Recall-Target Uncertainty



*Note.* Pattern consistent with mediation whereby recalling a high vs. a low shared reality experience promotes meaning in life through reducing recall-target uncertainty in Study 4. SR = shared reality; CI = confidence interval; ns = not statistically significant. \*\*\*\*p < .001.

[-0.62, -0.33], z = -6.57, p < .001. There was no total effect of condition on meaning in life, b = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.35, 0.30], z = -1.02, p = .90. However, the indirect effect was significant, ab = 0.20, 95% CI [0.09, 0.33], z = 3.44, p < .001, providing evidence that experimentally manipulating shared reality has the potential to influence meaning in life by reducing uncertainty about the target of one's experience.

The effect of the manipulation on recall-target uncertainty remained significant when controlling for positive affect, Path A: b = -0.39, 95% CI [-0.59, -0.17], z = -3.63, p < .001; indirect effect: ab = 0.18, 95% CI [0.07, 0.30], z = 3.17, p = .002, and attenuated slightly when controlling for whether the experience represented a conflict, Path A: b = -0.25, 95% CI [-0.48, 0.02], z = -1.92, p = .055; indirect effect: ab = 0.12, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.24], z = 1.89, p = .059. In addition, because the effect of the shared reality condition on state relationship satisfaction was significant (t = 2.13, p = .034), we analyzed Path A controlling for state relationship satisfaction and found that the results held, Path A: b = -0.39, p < .001; indirect effect: ab = 0.18, 95% CI [0.08, 0.29], z = 3.35, p < .001.

#### Discussion

The present study found initial causal evidence to support the pattern of mediation found in Studies 2 and 3. By reducing people's uncertainty about an experience, experimentally heightening shared reality through a simple recall task can promote a greater sense of meaning in life. When participants recalled an experience where they felt on the same page as their partner, like reacting in the same way to an inside joke, they experienced less uncertainty about the joke they heard compared with those participants who recalled a low shared reality experience, like a time they laughed in response to a joke that their partner did not understand. The effect of the manipulation on uncertainty was not explained by participants simply experiencing more positive mood or recalling a conflict nor by a "relationship goodness" effect.

There was no total effect of condition on meaning in life, which is not in line with our earlier findings in Studies 1 and 2. This may be due to participants recalling relatively mundane experiences that were not powerful enough to significantly influence meaning directly. However, this lack of total effect does not indicate that there is no influence of the manipulation on meaning but rather that there may be other factors working against the effect that the manipulation may not overcome (i.e., unmeasured suppressors; MacKinnon et al., 2000; Rucker et al., 2011; Shrout & Bolger, 2002).

Overall, we found causal evidence that shared reality reduces uncertainty about the target of their recalled experience that, in turn, predicts meaning, and these results could not be explained by relationship satisfaction or positive affect. These findings suggest that shared reality is malleable and that even a small recall exercise might make a difference in uncertainty and, in turn, meaning. These results are especially promising given the difficulty of experimentally manipulating meaning in life.

## Study 5

In the final study, we aimed to address some of the limitations from Study 4 using a couples' perception paradigm with romantically involved individuals. Specifically, we sought to overcome the potential rebound effects of threatening people's own shared reality with their partner (Murray et al., 2015; Ogolsky et al., 2017; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021; Rusbult et al., 2001). We also sought to address social desirability bias and issues related to sentiment override (Joel et al., 2024). To overcome these issues, we chose a widely used experimental method in the field of social psychology (Givi & Kirk, 2024; Ziano & Wang, 2021), whereby we developed a vignette that manipulated shared reality about a hypothetical couple as a dyad. This paradigm is especially useful in overcoming sentiment override effects (Auger et al., 2024).

Participants read a scenario about a couple discussing a book they had just read. Participants were randomly assigned to a high shared reality condition, where the couple agreed about their interpretations of the book, exhibiting the behavioral signatures of high shared reality identified by Rossignac-Milon et al. (2021; e.g., finishing each other's sentences, saying the exact same thing at the same time), or a low shared reality condition, where they disagreed about their interpretations of the book, exhibiting behavior signatures of low shared reality.

We predicted that those in the high shared reality condition would perceive that the couple was less uncertain about the book and that the couple experienced greater meaning in their lives during the discussion as compared with those in the low shared reality condition. We also expected these results to hold controlling for participants' mood following the manipulation. To rule out the possibility that the effects were driven by relationship satisfaction, we held the couple's satisfaction constant and high across the two scenarios and tested whether the condition had an effect on participants' perception of the couple's relationship satisfaction. These hypotheses were preregistered and can be found on the OSF at https://osf.io/bsj49, together with the materials, syntax, and data.

#### Method

#### **Participants**

Participants were recruited via Prolific. To be eligible, participants had to be more than 18 years old and in an exclusive relationship

for more than 6 months. In total, 400 participants took part in the study. Prior to data analysis, 11 participants were excluded according to our preregistered exclusion criteria: nine participants were removed due to failing the attention check and eight participants for careless responding, resulting in a total sample size of 381 (188 in high shared reality condition, 193 in low shared reality condition).<sup>16</sup> Participants were on average 32 years old (SD = 10.13 years), in their relationship for 5 years on average (SD = 4.93 years), and either exclusive (47%) or cohabiting (53%). Moreover, 43% identified as male, 56% as female, and 1% as other. Participants were mostly White (72%), with some also identifying as Asian (10%), mixed (8%), Black (7%), or other (3%). The methods followed for the power analyses were consistent with those in Study 4.

#### Procedure

In the high shared reality condition, participants read about a couple exhibiting the behavioral signatures of high shared reality identified by Rossignac-Milon et al. (2021; e.g., finishing each other's sentences, saying the exact same thing at the same time). By contrast, in the low shared reality condition, the couple disagreed about their interpretations of the book, exhibiting behavioral signatures of low shared reality. To hold relationship satisfaction constant experimentally, in both conditions, the couple was described as smiling at each other, using a positive and enthusiastic tone, and clearly enjoying their conversation. See Appendix B for the full scenario. After reading the scenario, participants were asked about how much uncertainty they thought the couple felt about the book and how meaningful they thought the couple's lives were during the discussion.

#### Measures

**Manipulation Check.** To test the effect of our manipulation on shared reality, we adapted the shared reality measure used in the previous study. The instructions were as follows: "Based on the scenario you just read, answer the following questions about how you think the man and the woman in the scenario tend to interact ...." The items were the same as in the previous study but asking about "they" (i.e., the couple in the scenario) instead of "we" (i.e., the participant and their partner). For instance, "... they think of things at the exact same time" (low shared reality: M = 3.81, SD =0.92,  $\alpha = .81$ ; high shared reality: M = 5.77, SD = 0.76,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Uncertainty.** Uncertainty was measured using the same scale as in the previous studies, but on behalf of the couple and "with respect to the book the man and the woman were discussing." For instance, "The man and the woman ... were certain of what they thought was really going on with the book" (low shared reality: M = 2.24, SD = 0.85,  $\alpha = .85$ ; high shared reality: M = 1.94, SD = 0.83,  $\alpha = .78$ ).

**Meaning in Life.** Meaning in life was measured using the same scale as in the previous studies, but with regard to the couple's meaning in life during their discussion about the book. Items included "They understood their life's meaning" (low shared reality: M = 4.79, SD = 0.83,  $\alpha = .87$ ; high shared reality: M = 4.78, SD = 0.90,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Relationship Satisfaction.** Relationship satisfaction was measured using the same five items as in the prior study (Rusbult et al., 1998), asked about the couple in the scenario: "They feel satisfied

with their relationship," referring to the man and the woman (low shared reality: M = 5.62, SD = 0.79,  $\alpha = .86$ ; high shared reality: M = 5.66, SD = 0.88,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Positive Affect.** Positive affect was measured with the same scale as in the previous study (Modified Positive and Negative Affect Schedule; Watson et al., 1988). Participants were asked how they were feeling "right now" (low shared reality: M = 3.94, SD = 1.15,  $\alpha = .91$ ; high shared reality: M = 4.00, SD = 1.33,  $\alpha = .93$ ).

### Analytic Approach

The data analyses were consistent with those in Study 4, with the exception of including conflict as a covariate.

## Results

As in Study 4, we first tested whether the manipulation was effective by examining the effect of condition on the manipulation check using a one-way analysis of variance. Those in the high (vs. low) shared reality condition reported greater shared reality, F(1,(379) = 515.2, p < .001. In line with our preregistered hypotheses, those in the high (vs. low) shared reality condition reported that the couple felt less uncertainty about the book, b = -0.30, 95%CI [-0.47, -0.12], z = -3.50, p < .001 (see Figure 5). In turn, perceiving that the couple felt less uncertainty about the book was associated with perceiving that they had a greater sense of meaning in their lives during the discussion, b = -0.18, 95% CI [-0.31, -0.06], z = -2.75, p = .006. There was no total effect of condition on meaning in life, b = -0.01, 95% CI [-0.19, 0.16], z = -0.99, p =.89. However, the indirect effect was significant, ab = 0.05, 95%CI [0.01, 0.11], z = 2.26, p = .024, providing evidence that experimentally manipulating the perception of a dyad's shared reality has the potential to influence how uncertain they seem and, in turn, how much meaning they seem to experience in their lives. The effect of the manipulation on recall-target uncertainty remained significant controlling for positive affect, Path A: b = -0.29,95% CI [-0.46, -0.13], z = 3.44, p < .001; indirect effect: ab = 0.05, 95%CI [0.01, 0.10], z = 2.28, p = .023. The effect of the shared reality condition on state relationship satisfaction was not significant (t =0.47, p = .64).

#### Discussion

Overall, these findings provide additional causal evidence for the association between shared reality, uncertainty, and meaning in life using an experimental paradigm. Specifically, reading about a couple who exhibited shared reality behaviors led participants to perceive the couple to be less uncertain about the target of their discussion and consequently to have a greater sense of meaning in their lives during this discussion. These results held when controlling for possible alternative explanatory constructs that the manipulation could have influenced.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> The results were also significant when we tested our hypotheses using the full data set. Shared reality was associated with lower uncertainty (b = -0.32, p < .001). Lower uncertainty was associated with greater meaning (b = -0.20, p < .001). There was no total or direct effect of shared reality on meaning (C: b = -0.002, p = .981; C': b = -0.07, p = .417). Indirect effect: ab = 0.06, p = .006.

#### Figure 5

High vs. Low Shared Reality Condition Promotes Meaning in Life Through Reduced Uncertainty



*Note.* Pattern consistent with mediation whereby reading about a couple exhibiting high vs. low shared reality behaviors promoted participants' perceptions of the couple's meaning in life through perceiving that the couple experienced less uncertainty in Study 5. SR = shared reality; CI = confidence interval.

 $p < .01. \quad p < .001.$ 

Importantly, the manipulation did *not* have a significant effect on perceptions of the couple's relationship satisfaction, providing evidence that the condition effect is due to shared reality and not due to viewing a relationship in a positive light. This finding also highlights that the effects of shared reality on meaning in life occur through an epistemic process, that of uncertainty reduction, which takes place above and beyond the relational processes proposed in other research (e.g., Prinzing et al., 2023).

Finally, the manipulation further allowed us to investigate shared reality as a couple-level construct. In addition, this manipulation helps circumvent issues with self-report contamination and social desirability because participants were reporting on another couple.

#### **General Discussion**

People seek meaning in their lives and rely on a sense of purpose and coherence to thrive (e.g., to reduce distress; Debats et al., 1993; Harlow et al., 1986). However, it can be especially difficult to make sense of one's environment and establish meaning in the modern world. For instance, society has just faced a global pandemic that has upturned the social and economic order. Even as part of people's daily lives, they face roadblocks to meaning, as they struggle to make sense of social movements, like the BLM movement, that influence their racial identity and local community, or aspects of a dangerous work environment, like how to interact with COVID-19positive patients. Even simple instances, like making sense of situations in one's immediate environment, can influence a person's ability to experience meaning. However, human beings are a social species, and it is through social relationships that they can begin to make sense of the world and ultimately find meaning within it.

#### Meaning in Life

Across five studies with cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental designs, we found evidence to support the effect of shared reality on meaning. In Study 1, we provided cross-sectional evidence for this association in romantic couples using self-report and behavioral coding of shared reality. We then provided evidence for uncertainty reduction as a mechanism across two important contexts: that of the experience of racism for Black people (Study 2) and frontline health care workers during the pandemic (Study 3). Specifically, people who experienced greater shared reality with their partner experienced less uncertainty about their experience of racism and about their work environment on the front lines of a global pandemic, which in turn promoted meaning in life and in work. We also found evidence for the proposed model experimentally, using a recall paradigm (Study 4) and a couple perception paradigm with romantically involved individuals (Study 5).

Shared reality primarily increased meaning by reducing people's uncertainty in their personal environment. The significance of the indirect effect was consistent across all studies in which we tested mediation models (Studies 2-5), across the various contexts in which we explored shared reality, such as the BLM movement (Study 2), the pandemic (Study 3), or low-stakes manipulations of shared reality (Study 4). However, there was less consistency in the presence of the total effect of shared reality on meaning. In Study 4, the extent to which shared reality about a specific target reduced uncertainty about that target and in turn increased meaning in life may depend on the significance of the target for the individual's identity, values, or goals. At the same time, the cumulative effects of shared reality experiences about less significant targets may shift meaning over time. Both having a shared reality about significant targets or accumulating shared reality about insignificant targets over time could help explain why we see total effects of shared reality on meaning in life when we examine a more stable measure, such as in Study 1. Future research could explore *what* partners share a reality about to test whether target significance may impact shared reality's effect on meaning in life.

Regardless of the variations in the total effect, prior research suggests that the indirect effect is a more precise way to explain the relationships in the model, as compared with each of the individual paths including the total effect (Hayes, 2018; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Specifically, the individual paths in the model are components of the indirect path and therefore do not tell the whole story of the relationship between the variables in the model. As such, we focused on the indirect effect as the critical test of our hypothesis. Across all four diverse studies, we find remarkable consistency for the indirect effect of shared reality on meaning through reduced uncertainty. In light of this, the present research provides robust evidence that shared reality can increase meaning in life by reducing uncertainty in people's environment.

Across these five studies, this research program provides converging empirical evidence that people partly rely on a shared worldview with their romantic partners to find a sense of meaning in their lives. These findings stress the importance of social validation in perceiving one's life as meaningful. Specifically, the evidence provided in the current research suggests that one function of close relationships, specifically the shared reality that can be established within these relationships, is verifying one's worldview. This has been suggested by previous research on transference (Przybylinski & Andersen, 2015) and shared reality (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021) but never explicitly tested. By exploring and providing evidence for the link between shared reality and meaning in life, this program of research introduces a novel interpersonal pathway through which romantic partners can establish a sense of meaning in their lives. This is a critical contribution to the field of meaning in life, given that decades of research have focused on finding pathways to meaning, both intrapersonally (Baumeister, 1991; Emmons, 2003) and interpersonally (Heine et al., 2006; Lambert et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2015). By contrast to prior interpersonal research primarily focusing on relational mechanisms, the present work provides evidence of the epistemic function provided by close relationships and demonstrates how relationships can promote meaning above and beyond their relational function.

#### Meaning in Work

Shared reality with one's romantic partner was also found to influence an important life domain: one's work. Meaning in work has been defined and measured similarly to meaning in life (Schnell et al., 2013; Steger & Dik, 2009). In addition, people spend a large amount of time at work (Pryce-Jones, 2010) and care deeply about establishing a sense of meaning at work (Pew Research Center, 2021). Despite prior work showing that relationships with colleagues (Colbert et al., 2016; Dutton & Ragins, 2017; Mao et al., 2012; Methot et al., 2016), and shared reality with colleagues specifically (Rossignac-Milon & Matz, 2023), promote meaning in work, the present research provides evidence that shared reality with one's *romantic partner* is strong enough to shape how people engage with their work. Specifically, shared reality promotes meaning in work, even in an unprecedented and highly stressful work context, such as the frontlines of the pandemic. This finding has important implications for how employers help promote meaning in the workplace; for instance, employers could encourage their employees to discuss their work lives with their partners or organize social events so that their partners can be further integrated into the employees' work life. Further, this finding highlights the importance of employees considering their close relationships in the home context when thinking about their work context.

#### **Certainty and Epistemic Processes**

In using a novel lens through which to explore meaning in life, that of shared reality theory, our theoretical model is unique in its focus on uncertainty reduction in one's personal environment as a mechanism for promoting meaning. In doing so, it adds to previous literature that examines the epistemic benefits of close relationships (McLean & Pasupathi, 2011; Murray et al., 2017; Przybylinski & Andersen, 2015). Specifically, the present work shows that shared reality reduces uncertainty about important and relevant issues in one's environment, such as frontline health care workers' work situation and Black people's perceptions of racism and their sociopolitical climate. These effects were found to emerge above and beyond people's general positive views of their relationship, positive affect, and conflict with their partner.

Further, this work adds important findings to support the epistemic benefits of shared reality in romantic relationships, where the research has often focused on the relational benefits (e.g., Enestrom & Lydon, 2021; Rivera et al., 2019). Specifically, we show that the reduction of uncertainty that shared reality produces in turn predicts increased meaning. This demonstrates the positive effects that stem from the epistemic function of shared reality, which is central to this construct and not as often captured in other constructs or in relationship research more generally. This effect is in line with the idea that uncertainty indicates that life is meaningless

(Stillman & Baumeister, 2009; Van den Bos, 2009) by threatening people's need for truth and understanding (Higgins, 2013; Stevens & Fiske, 1995; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). By reducing uncertainty through the creation of a shared reality, partners are able to find meaning.

Taken together, our findings also help reduce concerns about shared reality simply being an indirect measure of how positively one views one's relationship. Across five studies, we provided compelling evidence that shared reality predicts and affects uncertainty and meaning above and beyond relationship satisfaction. First, covarying relationship satisfaction either did not attenuate (Studies 3–4) or barely attenuated (Studies 1–2) the effects of shared reality. Of note, the two studies in which the effect barely attenuated were crosssectional studies. Given that relationship satisfaction is a more global measure of a relationship and a downstream consequence of shared reality, it is unsurprising that the effect is slightly attenuated in these samples. In a clean manipulation of shared reality where relationship satisfaction was successfully experimentally controlled (Study 5), the effects proposed in our model emerged as significant.

### **Implications for Shared Reality Theory**

This research program shows the wide range of contexts in which the effect of shared reality on meaning through uncertainty can take place, such as that of Black people's experiences of racism and frontline health care workers' experience of their work environment during the pandemic. These studies provide evidence that even in extremely difficult and uncertain contexts, shared reality can provide people with a sense of meaning to the extent that it reduces their uncertainty about their interpretation of the environment. As highlighted by Goldring et al. (2022), even in the face of a stressful event, having someone validate one's appraisal of that event reduces both self-reported stress and physiological ratings of stress reactivity. Thus, despite the objective uncertainty of the context, having a close other's validation of one's interpretation is sufficient to reduce uncertainty. Future work might systematically vary the importance, stress, and uncertainty of the context to examine how these variables play into the effect of shared reality on uncertainty and meaning in life.

In addition, this work provides evidence that shared reality can be manipulated. These findings build on prior work examining threats to romantic partners' shared reality (Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021) by showing that even a simple recall paradigm (Study 4) can successfully influence participants' feelings of shared reality with their partner. In addition, the experimental paradigm used in Study 5 provides a novel approach to manipulate perceived dyad-level shared reality. This work highlights the possibility of promoting people's shared reality, allowing them to experience their world in a more certain and meaningful way. While the intention of our experiments was to create a momentary sense of higher versus lower shared reality in participants, future work could consider whether there are tasks that couple help couples find or develop areas of shared reality on their own.

Finally, the use of behavioral measures of shared reality allowed us to examine shared reality from a dyadic perspective. In doing so, we provide evidence that one partner's shared reality behaviors visible to third-party raters during a dyadic interaction predicted both partner's self-reported shared reality and that these behaviors also predicted meaning in life. Although we expect that the perceptions of shared reality are what drive the effect of shared reality on meaning, this finding is important in linking couple members' perceptions of shared reality to observable behaviors.

## **Future Directions**

This work highlights the power of shared reality with one's romantic partner in allowing partners to make sense of the world around them together, even in contexts where one partner is not present, like at work. While research indicates that other close relationships (e.g., friends, family members) tend to provide similar benefits to those of romantic relationships (e.g., responsiveness: Reis & Gable, 2015; accuracy: Connelly & Ones, 2010; capitalization: Reis et al., 2010), the latter might have a greater opportunity to create a shared understanding across more contexts (Biesanz et al., 2007; Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018). Therefore, future work could explore whether these findings replicate in other relationships, where the content of the shared reality might be more limited. Future work may also consider whether people tend to share reality more with chosen others (e.g., romantic partners, friends) compared with family or coworkers. It is possible that epistemic trust (Echterhoff et al., 2005; Wilson & Sperber, 2012) could play a role whereby, for instance, the observed effects of shared reality are present to the extent that the close other is perceived to be a credible source of information.

Future research may also explore boundary conditions for the effects of shared reality on uncertainty and meaning. For instance, while the present work shows that shared reality is beneficial for reducing uncertainty and promoting meaning, this may not be the case in certain contexts. One can imagine a context where not sharing a reality with another person about a specific target could be beneficial for meaning, for instance, a work situation where two colleagues have different perspectives on how to approach a project, which could create an optimal level of tension to allow for new ideas (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Beyond the workplace, initially experiencing a lack of shared reality could benefit people's daily lives, such as when a friend suggests trying out a new cuisine that one is unsure about. In deciding to trust a friend's opinion about this cuisine, one could be exposed to and enjoying a new cuisine. These examples illustrate the importance of exploring boundary conditions in future work exploring shared reality, uncertainty, and meaning.

In addition, the construct of shared reality in this research program was examined across various samples and contexts. It is important to consider how shared reality might represent a slightly different experience depending on the population and context. For instance, capturing participants' state versus trait-shared reality might be associated with differences in what people think about when they reflect on their shared reality with their partner. As an example, state-shared reality might rely on more recent evidence of shared reality, whereas trait-shared reality might rely on more valued aspects of one's reality. In addition, for different populations or contexts, particular components might carry more weight in forming one's sense of shared reality. For instance, having a shared reality about racism might make up a larger proportion of shared reality for Black people compared with people who do not experience racism on a regular basis. Taken together, shared reality can mean different things to different people, and by breaking this construct down into its components, future work could understand

the nuances of how shared reality reduces uncertainty and promotes meaning across populations and contexts.

Overall, people often face ambiguous situations, making it difficult to understand and control their environment. By turning to one's romantic partner as a way to feel more certain about the world, people can create understanding out of chaos and ultimately find purpose in the world they have coconstructed. This research program speaks to the power of shared reality with one's partner in transcending one's relationship, providing real-world positive outcomes for how people interact with the world beyond the relationship.

## Conclusion

Across five studies, the present research examined how romantic partners can obtain a sense of meaning by establishing a shared reality. We identified uncertainty reduction as a mechanism through which shared reality promoted meaning in life and meaning in work. Overall, we found robust evidence that shared reality promoted meaning by reducing uncertainty about one's personal environment. Moreover, we examined this association in diverse samples and socially important contexts, including frontline health care workers during the pandemic and Black people's experience of racism and the sociopolitical climate following the BLM movement. Taken together, the current work suggests that the more couples perceive that they are aligned in their interpretations of the world, the more they feel able to make sense of the world together and reduce their uncertainty and in turn experience more meaning within this coconstructed world.

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(Appendices follow)

ENESTROM, ROSSIGNAC-MILON, FOREST, AND LYDON

## Appendix A

## **Examples of Participants' Recalled Experiences From Study 4**

### **High Shared Reality Condition**

"We attended a talk by an author we both really enjoy. He was speaking about his personal experiences and world view. When we left we completely agreed about our opinions on his talk and felt very united."

"After dinner we both wanted dessert and there was none at home. We both then really wanted to go to the local ice cream place we hadn't been to in a while and realized we thought of the same thing at the same time. It was nice knowing we are often on the same page."

#### Low Shared Reality Condition

"We witnessed the same event, namely a hockey game in which our son was playing. We both significantly disagreed on his performance even though we were watching the same game. I focused on his positive achievements and she focused on his negative mistakes and/or errors. Naturally, we couldn't agree on which perception of reality was the correct one—or if they were both right in their own ways."

"I wanted [my partner] to buy some new clothing to add into his daily rotation because I think variety is important. He understood that new clothes are important, but didn't feel he needed more because his current clothes were still in good shape."

## Appendix B

## Vignettes Used in Study 5

Imagine that you are taking public transportation, which is where you often find yourself people watching. Seated right in front of you is a couple having a conversation.

Something about this couple draws you in, and you find yourself eavesdropping on their conversation. They are talking about the book that the man is holding, which the man has just closed with a sigh, giving the impression he has just finished reading the final page.

Woman: "So!? What did you think!?"

## Low Shared Reality Condition

He looks up at her, smiles, and starts to enthusiastically divulge all his thoughts on the book. The woman is shaking her head in disagreement, offering different interpretations of the main character, clearly not aligned with his views. They are smiling at each other, using a positive and enthusiastic tone, clearly enjoying the conversation.

You keep catching tidbits of what they are saying: the man telling her "I was actually thinking of it this way" and the woman saying to him "Oh, interesting!." At one point, he starts to describe what he thought of the ending and as he is finishing his sentence, saying "it was so … unexpected," she says "… predictable" at the exact same time!

They continue discussing the book, and at one point, the woman enthusiastically yells "WHAT!" in disagreement. It is clear that he enjoyed the book and she did not, and something tells you they seem to enjoy that aspect of their relationship.

#### **High Shared Reality Condition**

He looks up at her, smiles, and starts to enthusiastically divulge all his thoughts on the book. The woman is nodding her head in agreement, finishing his sentences about how he interpreted the main character, clearly aligned with her views. They are smiling at each other, using a positive and enthusiastic tone, clearly enjoying the conversation.

You keep catching tidbits of what they are saying: the man telling her "I was thinking the same thing" and the woman saying to him "Exactly!" At one point, he starts to describe what he thought of the ending, and as he is finishing his sentence, saying "it was so … unexpected," she says the same word at the exact same time!

They continue discussing the book, and at one point the woman enthusiastically yells "YES!" in agreement.

It is clear that they both enjoyed the book, and something tells you they seem to enjoy that aspect of their relationship.

> Received May 15, 2023 Revision received June 14, 2024 Accepted June 20, 2024

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