Shared Reality in the Self-system: The Social Nature of Self-regulation

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ABSTRACT

How others respond to us communicates about the nature of the world around us and our place in it. By accepting these messages about who we are in the world, we create a shared reality with the significant others in our lives that becomes the basis for self-regulation. This shared reality includes the message that the world either has accomplishments to be promoted, inducing a promotion focus, or has dangers and mistakes to be prevented, inducing a prevention focus. Evidence is presented that these different types of regulatory focus influence both people's memory for different life events and their emotional responses to them. Evidence is also presented that: (a) self-regulatory confusion occurs when shared reality with different significant others about desired selves is in conflict; (b) alienation is produced when there is a lack of shared reality with others about one's actual self; and (c) people prefer information about their actual selves that is shared with significant others as compared to equally self-relevant but unshared information. In these ways, shared reality shapes the world that we experience.

Lacking Shared Reality with Significant Others on the Actual Self: Alienation

The implications of shared reality in the self-system concern the actual self, or self-concept, in addition to self-guides. Individuals can share or not share with others their beliefs about what kind of person they are. The literature suggests that a lack of shared reality with others about one's actual self would produce feelings of being separate from others, feelings of being out of touch with others about one's essential nature, which would be related to feelings of "alienation" (see Fromm, 1955; Horney, 1939; Seeman, 1959, 1972).

A recent study by Schachinger (1995) examined the relation between lacking shared reality with others about one's actual self and feelings of alienation. Undergraduates listed the actual self attributes that they believed they possessed and the actual self attributes they believed that each of a set of other people thought they possessed: mother, father, best friend, and people in general. Participants' own belief about their actual self was compared with each of the others' belief about their actual self. For each "own"/"other" comparison, an attribute in the "own" list was considered to be "shared" when it appeared in the "other" list (as the same attribute or as a synonym), and it was considered to be "unshared" when it did not appear at all in the "other" list or appeared as an antonym. For each "own"/"other" comparison, a ratio was calculated of the unshared attributes divided by the total shared and unshared attributes; i.e., the percentage of "own" attributes that were unshared. The overall measure of the magnitude of unshared "own" attributes was the average across all of these "own"/"other" comparisons.

Schachinger (1995) found that there was a reliable relation between the magnitude of unshared actual self attributes and feelings of alienation and loneliness. Because there was a significant positive correlation between magnitude of unshared actual self attributes and actual/ideal discrepancies, and actual/ideal discrepancies also predict feelings of loneliness (see Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985), the relation between the magnitude of unshared actual self attributes and feelings of alienation and loneliness were recalculated, partialling out the effects of actual/ideal discrepancies. The relation between unshared actual self attributes and feelings of alienation and loneliness remained significant.

The finding that individuals whose actual self beliefs are not shared with others are vulnerable to feeling alienated and alone could be interpreted in a rather uninteresting way. What if these individuals had a positive or even inflated view of themselves that they thought others did not share? If so, it

would not be surprising that they would feel isolated and rejected by others. However, the significant positive correlation between magnitude of unshared actual self attributes and actual/ideal discrepancies indicates that the trend, if anything, is quite the opposite.

The individuals whose actual self beliefs were not shared with others tended to have negative views of themselves that they thought others did not share. For example, one of the participants who wanted ideally to be emotionally stable believed that he was actually unstable emotionally but others did not share this belief, and another participant who wanted ideally to be a magnetic personality believed that she was actually an uninteresting person but others did not share this belief. In such cases, individuals feel alienated because others do not agree with them about what they perceive as their personal weaknesses or shortcomings. It should be emphasized, however, that the obtained relation between unshared actual self attributes and feelings of alienation and loneliness found in this study cannot be explained solely in terms of such cases, because the relation remains even when the discrepancy between actual self attributes and personal ideals are controlled for statistically. Thus, the key to individuals feeling alienated is their sense that others do not share their beliefs about their essential nature.

Schachinger, H. (1995). Alienation from a lack of shared reality. Paper presentation at Social Psychology Graduate Seminar, Columbia University.