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The Role of Shared Reality at Home and at Work

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Abstract

The field of organizational behavior has increasingly recognized the role of interpersonal relationships at home in influencing people’s experiences at work. Taking advantage of this overlap, research in work-family enrichment seeks to enhance the positive spillover that takes place between processes at home and at work. This chapter explores the processes by which this spillover takes place through the lens of shared reality theory in romantic relationships. In doing so, this chapter also touches on novel research examining parallels in shared reality between colleagues.

Shared Reality Theory

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). This novel construct differs from other interpersonal constructs both conceptually and empirically in a number of ways (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Rossignac-Milon et al., 2021). Conceptually, shared reality involves the perception of sharing inner states, such as attitudes, feelings, or opinions—thus, it differs from constructs like perceived similarity, which tend to involve the perception of sharing the same traits or characteristics (e.g., personality, demographics). Second, unlike actual similarity of inner states, shared reality involves the individual’s subjective perception of sharing inner states. As such, two people do not need to actually be sharing the same inner state to experience a shared reality. Third, shared reality is about a target referent, like a third person, event, or idea. Thus, unlike emotional similarity, in which two people might feel nervous about different things, shared reality involves the perception of sharing the same inner states about particular topics. Similarly, shared reality can be distinguished from interpersonal 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 loving and supportive, 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 (e.g., perceiving that “we get it”). This orientation to the world external to the relationship makes shared reality especially relevant for fulfilling people’s relational and epistemic needs at home and at work. Thus, by better understanding shared reality processes, researchers and practitioners interested in work-family enrichment can use this insight to nurture healthy relationships in a way that has positive implications for people’s lives both in their personal and professional spheres.

To better understand the impact of shared reality, imagine Sam, who recently took on a new project at work. As he navigates his capabilities on the project, he might turn to the person he is closest to, his romantic partner Phoebe. Sam and Phoebe often align on many different aspects of Sam’s life, including his work, such as the dynamics between him and his teammates and his goals for his career. Aligning on these aspects of his work environment with Phoebe has implications for how Sam experiences his work: This alignment provides him with more certainty about how he’s approaching the new project and allows him to experience a greater sense of meaning in his work. This chapter will discuss the outcomes associated with shared reality and their implications for home and work life.

Full Paper awaiting publication