

Shared Reality: The Click Factor

Conventional wisdom says people are drawn together when they're most similar. But how you navigate the world together might actually be what ignites the spark.

Most of us have experienced it at least once: you meet someone, and within minutes you know you are going to be friends – or more. Often, discovering shared opinions sparks the connection; you might find you both love the paintings of Paula Rego, or that you had exactly the same reaction to today's headlines or that you both hate the music at this party.

Whatever it is, you strike up a conversation and within minutes you're exchanging recommendations, riffing off each other's jokes and making up stories together. Before you've even found out what the other person does for a living or where they're from, you've established a feeling of mutual connection. Your conversation partner just seems to get it – and get you. You've clicked.

But why, exactly? The secret to what makes our conversations with some people so magnetic and telling, while others fade in passing, may be not just with whom we're talking – but what we're talking about.

Many of our best conversations, whether with a new acquaintance or an old friend, are about the world around us rather than ourselves. They are also often the conversations that bring us closer to each other. Columbia University psychologist Maya Rossignac-Milon calls this "making sense of the world together". And she thinks it is the secret of good relationships.

Spaces like museums or art galleries provide the material you need to create a "shared reality" with another person, which is what helps you both click (Credit: Alamy)

Experiencing shared reality

In the field of relationship psychology, most research has focused, as you might expect, on how people feel about each other. What those studies often miss, says Rossignac-Milon, is the third partner in any relationship: shared reality.

Rossignac-Milon cites the writer CS Lewis, who remarked that, "What draws people to be friends is that they see the same truth. They share it." In a long-term relationship, she says that sense of shared reality can become like a single lens through which the partners filter the world around them; minds meet, synchronize and merge.

The third partner in any relationship is shared reality

Along with her co-researcher E Tory Higgins, [Rossignac-Milon developed a questionnaire](#) that measures the extent to which couples experience shared reality. A researcher asks each partner to rate their agreement or

disagreement with statements such as, “We frequently think of things at the exact same time” or “Through discussions we often arrive at a joint perspective”.

Using this method, Rossignac-Milon has found evidence that people who experience more shared reality with their partner also feel more committed to each other. Indeed, on the days when couples experience more of this cognitive merging, they also feel emotionally closer.

Here, Rossignac-Milon explored a hypothesis: when a couple feels like they have a strong sense of shared reality, and that sense is undermined in some way, they will feel an urge to restore it. She and her team invited couples into the laboratory, asked them to fill in the questionnaire on shared reality, and then presented each individual with the same sensory experiences: foods to taste, pictures to look at. The respondents rated their experiences. The couples were then given some false feedback on their answers: half were told that they experienced the sensory world in the same way as each other, while the other half were informed that they did so differently.

The couples were then given the opportunity to chat about some unrelated images, as the researchers observed them, coding their interactions. The couples who came into the lab with a strong sense of shared reality and then had it undermined made a tangible effort to reaffirm it, finishing each other’s sentences, making inside jokes and referencing trips that they had been on together. According to a computational analysis of their speech, they even converged linguistically, using certain words to express precisely the same meanings. “They were reasserting the fact that, despite that feedback, they actually do experience the world in the same way,” says Rossignac-Milon.

Experts say it's not enough to have common interests with a date or new friend to click – shared reality theory is thought to play a bigger role (Credit: Alamy)

Rossignac-Milon has also investigated the role that shared reality plays in drawing strangers to each other. She matched pairs of individuals who had not met before and connected them via an online platform. She asked each pair, or “dyad”, to discuss a series of ambiguous, [Rorschach-type](#) images. “We told them, try and make sense of these images together. Figure out what’s really going on.”

Afterward, the respondents filled out the shared reality questionnaire, adapted for strangers (“During our discussion, we...”). The dyads who felt a higher sense of shared reality with each other were the ones who had said the same things at the same time, used phrases like “I was just about to say that...”, and created playful shared narratives around the images, giving names to the imaginary people they saw in them.

They felt closer to the other person, and more confident in their own opinions about the world

Those dyads were more likely to say that they clicked with each other – that they had struck up a rapport with the person on the other side of the screen and would be quite happy to meet in real life. They also experienced more certainty in what they thought was going on in the images. So, they felt closer to the other person, and more confident in their own opinions about the world.

Rossignac-Milon's research challenges the conventional wisdom about new relationships: that we are mostly attracted to people who are similar to us. According to Paul Eastwick, a professor of psychology at the University of California at Davis who studies close relationships, "What is especially fascinating about Dr Rossignac-Milon's work on shared reality is that it serves as a reminder that similarity is often a thing that two people create or discover together in the moment. It wasn't 'there' on paper before the interaction took place."

Although we're encouraged to look for people who meet our preferences, shared reality theory suggests we may not know what our preferences are until we meet the other person. Many online dating sites are designed around the principle that if you can gather enough data on an individual, you figure out a perfect match. If a new relationship is an act of mutual creativity, however, the right match may be very hard to predict.

Diving deeper

Rossignac-Milon's work has implications for how we organize our interactions, personal and professional. If one way we form a social bond is to build a shared reality, then perhaps we can look to create opportunities for conversations about external stimuli.

Indeed, we do that already: lists of dating tips often suggest that a first date should include some kind of cultural activity, like a visit to an exhibition. Strolling around a gallery, talking about the art on display, can be a quicker route to rapport than a more direct conversation. It's also why workplace teams have away days; getting out of the office enables colleagues to make sense of a new environment together, cementing relationships in the process.

Of course, much of this is hard to do at the moment. Public spaces are shut; communal activities are restricted. In our professional and personal lives, we are substituting video calls for in-person meetings. While this is necessary for everyone's health and safety, it can have a detrimental effect on people's ability to construct shared realities. A video call has the effect of stripping out the external world – it's just you and your interlocutor or interlocutors, facing each other. No wonder that [people find them exhausting](#).

But as Rossignac-Milon showed in her online experiment, people can strike up a rapport in the most minimal of virtual environments. In essence, the theory of shared reality suggests that we are most likely to feel closer to each other when we turn our mutual attention to something beyond ourselves. That puts the onus on each of us to engage in the world, cultivating our curiosity and priming our awareness. That way, whether we're talking to a stranger, spouse or colleague, we'll always have something to talk about.