

Chapter 22

I-Sharing, the Problem of Existential Isolation, and Their Implications for Interpersonal and Intergroup Phenomena

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[It is impossible] that our senses can ever reveal to us the true nature and essence of the material world.

—JOHANNES MUELLER, *Elements of Physiology* (1834–1840/1912, p. 541)

When Mueller observed the impossibility of our senses ever revealing the true nature of reality, he did more than summarize the limits of human knowledge. He also identified the precursor to feelings of existential isolation, feelings that result from the realization that we cannot ever know phenomenologically how another person experiences the world (see Yalom, 1980). To experience any stimulus—simple or complex, significant or trivial, short-lived or enduring—we must filter that stimulus (consciously and preconsciously) through our own sense organs and higher-level perceptual apparatus and schemata. We cannot borrow people's optical or olfactory or auditory nerves to know what something looks like or smells like or sounds like to them, nor can we lend them ours for a peek at the world through our senses. We can turn to others for evidence that they share our experiences, but we cannot get inside their minds to know for sure, nor can they step inside ours.

These limitations in our ability to share our phenomenological experiences with others render us *existentially isolated*. Our experience of the world resides entirely within our-

selves, and we can never share those experiences directly with another person, nor can other people directly share their experiences with us. Yalom (1980) distinguished this form of isolation from two other psychologically significant forms: interpersonal and intrapersonal isolation. Interpersonal isolation results from literal separation from others, such as when a person has limited social contacts or does not receive an invitation to a broadly attended gathering (see also Case & Williams, Chapter 21, this volume). Although interpersonal isolation could certainly trigger feelings of existential isolation, people can feel existentially isolated even when surrounded by friends and family. Intrapersonal isolation—which results when people lose touch with their own private experiences (as sometimes occurs among victims of early childhood trauma)—also differs from existential isolation. After all, one can feel very alone in one's experiences without disassociating, and one can disassociate without feeling existentially alone.

Although we recognize that individual differences exist with regard to the frequency and salience of people's feelings of existential isolation, we propose that existential isolation factors into virtually everyone's life in the context of their dealings with others. Specifically, we propose that people like those who keep their feelings of existential isolation at bay and dislike those who stir up their feelings of existential isolation. Our reasoning comes from the observation that existential isolation makes it difficult for people to satisfy two fundamental needs: the need to know (Dechesne & Kruglanski, Chapter 16, this volume; Festinger, 1954; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, Chapter 2, this volume; Swann, 1996; Trope, 1983)¹ and the need for interpersonal connectedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Brewer, 1991; Florian, Mikulincer, & Hirschberger, 2002).²

Here we propose that the potential for existential isolation to thwart our needs to know and to feel connected to others underlies our tendency to gravitate toward people who make us feel existentially connected—*I-sharers*—and to steer clear of those who make us feel existentially isolated—*non-I-sharers*. To make our case, we begin with an introduction of the construct of I-sharing and follow this up with a review of recent findings that highlight the powerful role I-sharing plays in interpersonal and intergroup liking.

THE DUAL SELF

The term “I-sharing” comes from James's (1890/1918) partition of the self into two aspects: the Me and the I. The Me consists of our representation of ourselves, our self-concept. It includes anything pertaining to what we call ours, what we think of ourselves, how we feel about ourselves, what we know about our behaviors, our memories, etc. If we look in a mirror, the Me would represent the reflection we see in that mirror.

In contrast to the Me, the I refers to the agentic part of the self, or the self-as-subject. It represents that aspect of our self that, at any given moment perceives, reacts, interprets, in short, experiences. If we look in a mirror, the I represents the part of us that sees the reflection. Whereas the Me tends toward stability, changing only insofar as people add to their representations of self, the I takes on a fleeting nature; it changes from one moment to the next, and leaves what James dubbed a “stream of consciousness” in its wake.

Although research on the self—including the self as it pertains to relationships—has proliferated over the past few decades, the vast majority of this research concentrates on the Me. This emphasis on the Me stems, at least partly, from the difficulties associated with empirically studying the I. The fleeting nature of the I makes it difficult to capture with stan-

dard psychological measures (e.g., pencil-and-paper measures). Moreover, we cannot ask people to describe their I because, by definition, the I refers to the part of the self that *does* the describing.³ Considerations such as these led James to suggest that psychologists focus their attention on understanding the Me, leaving the I to the realm of philosophers and theologians, a bit of advice that the psychological community seems to have taken to heart.

If the nature of the I poses methodological challenges for researchers interested in the self, it also explains why people are vulnerable to feelings of existential isolation (Yalom, 1980). Because people can never get inside the minds of others, they are essentially alone when it comes to their experience of the world. We propose that the problem of existential isolation provides the major impetus behind people's desire to share their subjective world with others and explains why I-sharing moments can have such a profound effect on people's feelings toward others.

I-Sharing

Literally speaking, I-sharing refers to those moments when people feel as though their self-as-subject merges with that of at least one other person. When people I-share, they believe that they and at least one other person are having the same experience in a given moment. Whatever one person experiences at a given moment—whether it be the bitter taste of unsweetened chocolate or the mind-numbing challenge of a zen *koan*—the person whom she will come to consider an I-sharer is presumed to be experiencing as well.

We hasten to add that the impossibility of being able to experience the world as another subject means that conclusions about I-sharing could be wrong. For this reason, I-sharing refers to a subjective sense that one or more people have experienced a given moment identically; whether or not they actually have is another matter altogether and beyond the scope of this chapter. For our purposes here, we consider any time people perceive that they and at least one other person have an identical experience in a given moment as an instance of I-sharing, regardless of whether or not their experiences actually are the same. More important, we maintain that I-sharing experiences—whether objectively true or not—provide people with the closest approximation of existential connectedness possible. Although people may erroneously conclude that they experienced a given moment identically to another person, the perception of having I-shared eliminates the feeling of being alone in one's own experience of the world.⁴ In so doing, I-sharing eliminates the threat to the needs for belief validation and connectedness posed by feelings of existential isolation.

What causes people to believe that they have I-shared with another person (or several other people)? We argue that the most convincing evidence of I-sharing occurs when people perceive that someone else *simultaneously* reacts to some stimulus or event *identically* to the way they themselves are reacting. When two or more people simultaneously laugh in response to the same joke, cry in response to the same sad song, say the word "antidisestablishmentarianism" in response to a request for a word that starts with "a," or erupt into a frenzied polka upon receiving a reminder of the approach of Oktoberfest, they believe that they have experienced a moment identically, that they have I-shared.

As implied in the discussion so far, I-sharing can happen among more than two people. Large groups of people can I-share when they laugh at a comedian's antics, or when they sing their national anthem, when they combine forces to fight for a common cause, or when they undergo a tragedy that affects all of them. For ease of presentation, throughout the remainder of this chapter, when we discuss I-sharing, we typically refer to two-person I-

sharing. Nonetheless, we ask that the reader keep in mind that I-sharing experiences are not restricted to dyadic interactions.

Note that the recognition that one has or has not I-shared with one or more people necessarily comes after the fact, when one reflects on the moment. Several factors should moderate the extent to which one will reflect on the moment in this way. As we noted earlier, people no doubt vary with regard to their dispositional feelings of existential isolation and these individual differences should influence the extent to which people attend to I-sharing moments or do not. Similarly, certain situations (e.g., situations that make one feel like an outcast) make the fact of our existential isolation more salient than others; when in those existentially isolating situations, people will evince a greater tendency to look for I-sharing than when in more neutral situations (for a similar argument regarding reactions to ostracism, see Case & Williams, Chapter 21, this volume). In a related vein, people might feel more existentially isolated with regard to distinctive aspects of their I than with regard to less distinctive aspects. A person who has always recognized that her sensitivity to barometric pressure distinguishes her from other people will look for I-sharing on this dimension; someone who has never given barometric pressure a moment's thought will not. In short, although people can I-share about just about anything, their sensitivity to I-sharing experiences may depend on their dispositional level of existential isolation, the situation in which they find themselves, and the I-sharing dimension in question.

Although the most convincing evidence of I-sharing occurs when two people respond identically and simultaneously to the same stimulus, we argue that people have strong opinions about the extent to which they I-share with other individuals and that they arrive at these opinions on the basis of a diverse set of information. Most commonly, people tend to believe that people with whom they share important aspects of their Me (e.g., race, age, career aspirations, political ideology, and life experiences) will I-share with them at important moments. From this perspective, people like people who share their Me's because similarity of the Me serves as a proxy for similarity of the I. If so, then we would expect to see people favoring people with whom they share aspects of their Me over those with whom they do not, *unless* they receive more compelling evidence that they do not actually share I's with a Me-sharer. We tested this reasoning in several of our preliminary studies on the link between I-sharing and liking. Before discussing this research, however, we turn to a discussion of the power for I-sharing to satisfy the needs for belief validation and connectedness.

Existential Isolation, I-Sharing, and the Need for Belief Validation

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.

—PHILLIP K. DICK (1985, p. 4)

If all we can know is the state of our own nervous system (Mueller, 1834–1840/1912), and reality is that which doesn't go away when we stop believing in it, we can never really get at the "truth" of things. How can we determine what is real if we cannot get outside our own heads and verify that something exists outside our experience of it? Existential isolation renders us vulnerable to doubts about what is real and what is merely a product of our own creative minds. This state of affairs can serve as a great source of distress for members of a species with a strong drive to know the true nature of reality.

Given their existential isolation, how do people satisfactorily convince themselves that they can and do know anything at all? Previous researchers and theorists have proposed that

other people help us to accomplish this goal: to the extent that others agree with our conceptions of ourselves and the world around us, we feel certain of knowing (Festinger, 1954; Kelly, 1955; Swann, 1996). Following in this tradition, we propose that people seek out and gravitate toward evidence that others *subjectively* experience reality in the same way that they themselves do. Such information provides consensual validation for people's experiences, providing much-needed evidence that the world really is as they perceive it and that their more personal and subjective experiences make sense in a given context. Although existential isolation precludes us from arriving at this evidence through firsthand knowledge of another person's subjective experience, we feel like we *do* have this firsthand knowledge when we I-share with someone. When people I-share, they believe that the other person experiences reality identically to them; thus, although they cannot get inside the mind of the other person, they can presume to know what they would find out if they could. As such, I-sharing provides people with the best evidence they can find that the other person had the same experience that they did and therefore provides satisfaction for our need to know.

As some have noted before us, the identification of similar others can serve this same function. For example, when we find people who see us similarly to how we see ourselves, we gain confidence in the validity of our self-conceptions (Pinel & Constantino, 2003; Swann, 1996). Likewise, when we discover a group of individuals who all share our worldview or standards for behavior, we bask in the heightened sense that we understand reality as it "really is" and know the "right" way to live our lives (Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991; Solomon et al., Chapter 2, this volume). Although we agree that finding people who share our conceptions of ourselves and the world around us can satisfy our need to know, we maintain that these routes to feelings of knowing promote more powerful feelings of attraction to and communion with the other partly because such shared beliefs serve as a proxy for I-sharing.

Existential Isolation, I-Sharing, and Feelings of Connectedness

Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusted iron pole. Companion,
we thought the same thoughts of the soul.

—ALLEN GINSBERG, *The Sunflower Sutra* (1956, p. 35)

In addition to playing a key role in satisfying our need to know, we argue that I-sharing plays a key role in satisfying our need to feel interpersonally connected. Typically, when researchers talk about interpersonal connectedness, they concentrate on being liked or accepted by one or more individuals (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) or simply on being a member of a group (e.g., Brewer, 1991). We maintain that regardless of how many people claim to "accept us" and how many groups to which we belong, others can help satisfy our need for connectedness only insofar as we feel existentially connected to them. Indeed, being with several other people who make us feel existentially isolated could trigger greater feelings of loneliness than actually being alone (see Yalom, 1980).

As a case in point, consider the participants in Asch's (1951, 1956) conformity study. Recall that these participants indicated which of three lines most closely approximated the length of a target line. To create a situation replete with conformity pressures, Asch instructed confederates to give the (obviously) wrong answer trial after trial. Imagine how existentially isolated this procedure must have left participants feeling. Suddenly they found

themselves in an experiment in which everyone, save them, seemed to perceive reality identically. Although participants clearly had interpersonal contact with other people, this procedure must have left them feeling terribly alone. Perhaps for this reason, those participants in a version of the study in which one confederate answered identically to them exhibited palpable feelings of connection to that confederate.

In short, we propose that, in addition to threatening our need to know, existential isolation threatens our need to feel interpersonally connected. As such, just as I-sharing satisfies our need to know by bringing us as close as we can get to experiencing reality through the eyes of another person, so too does I-sharing satisfy our need for connectedness. When we sense that someone experiences a moment in the same way we do, we believe that person understands us at our core, at the level of how we experience the world. Such I-sharing experiences satisfy the need for interpersonal connectedness by creating feelings of existential connectedness. These feelings, in turn, foster a sense that the positive regard that people shower on us reflects genuine liking for us and not for some erroneous understanding or image of us. I-sharing also satisfies the need for interpersonal connectedness because when someone shares our "I", it turns that "I" into a "We" (Wegner, 1987).

Summary

We have argued that existential isolation threatens people's need to know and to feel connected, and that I-sharing satisfies these needs because it represents the closest we can get to feeling existentially connected to another person. It follows that people should seek out and like I-sharers—who make them feel existentially connected—and avoid and dislike non-I-sharers—who make them feel existentially isolated. We test this reasoning in the studies described in the next section.

I-SHARING AND LIKING: ESTABLISHING THE PHENOMENON

To date, we have conducted seven studies to establish the basic phenomenon that I-sharing contributes to liking for others. In designing these studies, we took special care to differentiate I-sharing from other forms of similarity, namely, similarity of the Me. A long tradition of social psychological research documents the contribution that perceived similarity makes to liking, and we want to clarify the distinction between predictions generated from this past research versus predictions generated from our current analysis of I-sharing. To this end, we begin this section with a brief review of this past research and how it fits in with the current analysis.

Similarity All Over Again?

Like seeks out like. We see this principle manifest itself on several different levels, but nowhere does this preference for similarity seem more ubiquitous than in the psychology of human interaction (for a review, see Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Indeed, it is a theme uniting seemingly distinct research traditions, such as work on similarity and attraction (Byrne, 1971; Newcomb, 1961), stereotyping and prejudice (Allport, 1954; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), balance (Heider, 1958), self-verification (Swann, 1996), and terror management (Greenberg et al., 1986; Solomon et al., 1991). Collectively, this work has shown that people prefer others who share their background (Newcomb, 1961), race and ethnicity (Allport, 1954),

friends (Heider, 1958), physical appearance and manner of dress (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971), values (Rokeach, 1960), and even bogus characteristics that they just learned describe them (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). In addition, people prefer people who share their viewpoints on a vast array of topics ranging from what movie should win the Oscar this year to what kind of person we are (Byrne, 1971; Swann, 1996). The relationship between similarity and liking works in the reverse direction as well; not only does similarity lead to liking, liking also leads to assumptions about similarity (e.g., Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002).

Unfortunately, this robust preference for similarity does not merely reflect an innocuous desire to surround ourselves with the familiar, it can also underlie long-standing intergroup rivalries, including ones that cost lives (e.g., Greenberg, Simon, Solomon, Chatel, & Pyszczynski, 1992; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). Thus it behooves us to identify the reasons we seem so enamored with similarity. Over the years, researchers and theorists have proffered a wide range of answers to this question. People who are similar to us are familiar (Allport, 1954; Zajonc, 1968); they like us back (Aronson & Worchel, 1966; Condon & Crano, 1988). They tend to be near us geographically, or they tend to be in the same groups as us and this proximity makes it more likely that we'll get to know them in the first place (Segal, 1974). They confirm our conceptions of ourselves (Swann, 1996) and the world around us (Greenberg et al., 1986); they are like us but better and therefore help us transform our ideal selves into reality (Wetzel & Insko, 1982).

Each of these explanations contributes to our understanding of the link between similarity and liking, and yet each and every one of them rests on the assumption that similarity with respect to one's self-as-object (or Me-sharing) drives similarity effects.⁵ According to this perspective, we like people who drive the same cars as us or who vote for the same candidates we vote for or who have the same color skin as us because they are similar to us with regard to these aspects of our Me. Such objective similarity—what we refer to as Me-sharing—implies that our objective traits, features, and characteristics are reasonable and desirable, at least to those who are similar to us on these dimensions, and thus provide a boost to our sense of self-esteem or personal value. This certainly constitutes an important part of why people like similar others; after all, people seem to care a great deal about their Me's. Consider the growing popularity in the United States of cosmetic plastic surgery; people will go into considerable debt and even risk their lives to undergo these procedures, presumably because people care so much about themselves as objects (see also Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Goldenberg & Roberts, Chapter 5, this volume). Trends toward consumerism lead us to a similar conclusion (Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

These examples notwithstanding, we also have good reason to believe that people consider themselves to be more than an amalgamation of what they look like, where they are from, to whom they are related, and the traits that describe them. Targets of widespread stereotypes file discrimination suits, immigrants reject the language of their homeland, and sons and daughters turn down the chance to inherit the family business, all because of the unease that results from being reduced to an object. Indeed, research from several different traditions points to the pitfalls of focusing too much on one's self as an object. Consider work on objective self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975) and the more recent self-objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Fredrickson et al., 1998; Goldenberg & Roberts, Chapter 5, this volume), the results of which indicate that focusing on oneself as an object can have deleterious consequences, both affective and cognitive. Similarly, research on consumerism indicates that equating one's possessions with one's self-worth can be bad for one's mental health and general well-being (Kasser &

Ahuvia, 2002). It also appears that people report being the happiest when they are not focusing on themselves as objects but instead are in a state of flow, completely immersed in a task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Although people clearly pursue the validation of their self-concept (or Me) and feel attracted to those who provide such validation, we suggest that the validation of people's subjective experience (or I) may serve as an even more powerful source of interpersonal attraction. Indeed, we propose that people like those who share their Me's, in part, because of what they assume similarity with respect to the Me says about similarity with respect to the I. From this perspective, we like people who share our taste in cars and political candidates and who have the same skin color as us, not because we care so much about cars, political candidates, and skin color, *per se*, but because we believe that people who share these things with us will also share our I's. If we have reason to believe otherwise, we suddenly do not like these people nearly as much.

With the foregoing reasoning in mind, we designed four studies to disentangle the contribution of Me-sharing and I-sharing to interpersonal liking. We describe these studies next.

Studies 1–3: First Impressions

Using a scenario-based methodology, Studies 1 through 3 examine whether I-sharing moderates people's liking for a Me-sharer versus someone who does not share his or her Me. We reasoned that if people infer I-sharing based on Me-sharing, their preference for Me-sharers would depend on whether or not they have reason to believe those Me-sharers also share their I's. Because we used the same basic design for each study, we will describe Study 1 in detail and then note where Studies 2 and 3 deviate from this basic design.

Participants read a description of a scenario with which college students have a lot of experience: the first day of class. Specifically, while reading the scenario, participants imagine that it is the first day of class and that the professor invites the students to introduce and say something about themselves. Participants receive information about two students: specifically, they learn that one student (of their gender) comes from their hometown and thus is a Me-sharer, and they learn that another student (also of their gender) comes from another country and thus is a non-Me-sharer. Participants also receive information about the extent to which these two students share their I. This variable gets manipulated next in the scenario, when participants read about a third student (of their same gender) who describes him- or herself as a fan of a band that the participants either love or hate. Participants go on to read that the facial expressions of the Me-sharer and non-Me-sharer indicate either that the Me-sharer loves the band and the non-Me-sharer hates the band or that the Me-sharer hates the band and the non-Me-sharer loves the band. Thus, when participants hate the band, whoever else hates the band constitutes the I-sharer and when participants love the band, whoever else loves the band constitutes the I-sharer. We next measured participants' liking for the Me-sharer and the non-Me-sharer. Thus, Study 1 employed a 2 (I-sharing dimension: love band, hate band) × 2 (I-sharer: Me-sharer, non-Me-sharer) × 2 (Liking: for Me-sharer, for non-Me-sharer) design. As expected, we observed an interaction between I-sharing and Liking. When the I-sharer was a Me-sharer, participants preferred the Me-sharer to the non-Me-sharer. However, when the I-sharer is a non-Me-sharer, participants preferred the non-Me-sharer to the Me-sharer. Put succinctly, participants liking for the people in the scenario depended on whether they I-shared with those people and not on whether they Me-shared with those people.

Importantly, these preferences for the I-sharer over the non-I-sharer emerged despite the tendency for participants to indicate that they place more importance on their hometown &

than on their taste in music. That is, in Study 1, in addition to measuring participants' liking for the target individuals, we asked participants to indicate the value they place on their hometown and their taste in music. Analysis of these importance ratings indicated that participants regarded their hometown as more important than their taste in music, suggesting that our findings did not stem from a tendency for people to place more importance on their taste in music than on their hometown. To explore the relation between our findings and perceived importance further, we calculated a difference score representing the relative importance participants placed on their taste in music versus their hometown and reran our analysis using this difference score as a covariate. If anything, the inclusion of this *increased* the effect of the I-sharer x liking interaction, again suggesting that a difference in the importance people place on their taste in music and their hometown did not mediate our effects. Finally, we also divided our participants into three groups—those who place more importance on their hometown than on music, those who equally weight their hometown and music, and those who place more importance on music than on their hometown—and we entered this new variable (called “relative importance”) into our analyses. Results indicated the same I-sharer x liking interaction described earlier, and relative importance did *not* moderate this effect. These findings make the critical point that importance of domain cannot account for the impact of I-sharing on interpersonal liking.

Of course, one might argue that the I-sharing dimension used in Study 1 implicates people's Me just as much as it implicates the I. Although one's taste in music provides information about how one might react to musical stimuli (and thus the I), it also can represent an important part of how people see themselves (as in “I am a Dylan fan”). If so, perhaps the results of Study 1 say more about the extent to which music tastes pervade both the Me and the I than they do about a preference for I-sharers over non-I-sharers.

To address this issue, we conducted a second study that focused on a more in-the-moment form of I-sharing: giggling (or not giggling) immediately upon hearing someone speak. As in Study 1, we asked participants to imagine the first day of class and, further, that a Me-sharer (i.e., someone from their hometown) and a non-Me-sharer (i.e., someone from another country) introduce themselves. Next, participants imagine that a third person introduces him- or herself in a voice that either does or does not make participants giggle. Sometimes the Me-sharer giggles at the same time as the participants; sometimes the non-Me-sharer does. Thus, when participants giggle, whoever giggles constitutes the I-sharer, but when participants do not giggle, whoever does *not* giggle in the scenario constitutes the I-sharer. In short, Study 2 employed a 2 (I-sharing dimension: giggle, no giggle) x 2 (I-sharer: Me-sharer, non-Me-sharer) x 2 (liking: for Me-sharer, for non-Me-sharer) design.

Results replicated the findings of Study 1. Specifically, we observed an I-sharer x liking interaction such that people liked the Me-sharer more when the Me-sharer shared his or her I but the non-Me-sharer more when the non-Me-sharer shared his or her I and the Me-sharer did *not*. Also, as in Study 1, the I-sharing dimension (in this case whether the participant giggled or did not giggle) did not moderate this effect. Finally, when we asked participants in Study 2 to report the extent to which their sense of humor and hometown reflect on their Me (i.e., their background, race/ethnicity, age, social class, and family structure) and their I (i.e., how they perceive, think about, react to, and interpret the world), participants said that their sense of humor said more about their I than their Me and that their hometown said more about their Me than their I. This latter finding adds to our confidence that our results reflect the role that I-sharing plays in people's liking for others.

A final scenario study that used the same methodology of Studies 1 and 2 explored the importance of context in the way I-sharing influences attraction. Specifically, we wondered

whether people's preference for I-sharers would depend on the normativeness of their subjective reactions to the social situation. To this end, we replicated Study 2 but added a manipulation of the normativeness of the participant's response context. Specifically, we told some participants to imagine that the rest of the class giggled in response to the third student's voice and others to imagine that the rest of the class did not giggle in response to the third student's voice. Thus, we conducted a 2 (I-sharing dimension: giggle, no giggle) x 2 (I-sharer: Me-sharer, non-Me-sharer) x 2 (liking: for Me-sharer, for non-Me-sharer) x 2 (normative response: to giggle giggling, not to giggle) design. Results indicated that this additional independent variable—the normativeness of the response—made no difference with regard to our results. As in Study 2, we observed a Me-sharer x I-sharer interaction such that people liked the Me-sharer more when the Me-sharer shared his or her I but the non-Me-sharer more when the non-Me-sharer shared his or her I and the Me-sharer did not. Whether or not participants viewed giggling or the absence of giggling as the norm made no difference in people's preferences for the targets.

Studies 4 and 5: The Role of Assumed I-sharing in Ingroup Bias

We have argued that people like others who share their Me's because of what Me-sharing implies about I-sharing. We get at this issue from a different angle in Studies 4 and 5 by exploring the extent to which assumptions about I-sharing underlie people's liking for members of their ingroup. Given the importance people place on their social identities (Brewer, 1979), as well as their willingness to favor their ingroup under even the most minimal circumstances (e.g., Tajfel et al., 1971), we reasoned that belonging to the same ingroup may constitute a particularly profound form of Me-sharing. We further reasoned that if Me-sharing serves as a proxy for I-sharing, and if I-sharing promotes liking, assumptions about I-sharing with ingroup members should underlie people's preferences for members of their ingroup.

To test this reasoning, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which their social identity (their race, in Study 4; their gender, in Study 5) represents an important part of their self-definition. In addition, participants indicated the extent to which they believed they share I's with members of their ingroup. Specifically, they rated the extent to which they and a member of their ingroup would feel hurt by the same remark, feel the same way about things, say the same thing at the same time, react similarly to music, like or dislike the same foods, and so on (we included a total of 15 such questions and averaged them to form a composite score; alpha's = .94, .93). Finally, participants indicated the extent to which they like and are friends with members of their ingroup.

Results indicated that as importance of one's social identity to one's self-definition increased, so too did one's preference for ingroup members. Importance of social identity to self-definition also predicted assumed I-sharing such that as importance of social identity increased, so did the perception that one I-shares with people with the same social identity. In addition, assumed I-sharing predicted liking for ingroup members such that the more people believed they I-shared with ingroup members, the more they liked ingroup members. Most important, mediational tests indicated that assumptions about I-sharing entirely mediated this effect. Specifically, when we entered assumptions about I-sharing into a regression equation along with importance of social identity, the link between social identity and liking disappeared (see Figures 22.1 and 22.2).

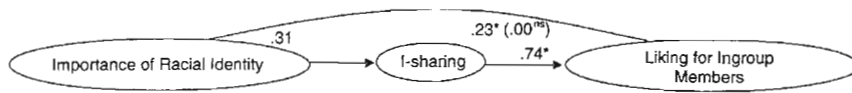


FIGURE 22.1. Mediation model illustrating how I-sharing mediates the relationship between the importance of race and liking for ingroup members. All values represent standardized beta weights; * $p < .05$.

Study 6: Online I-Sharing through Free Associations

Although the results of Studies 1 through 5 generally support our claim that I-sharing promotes liking, we wanted to test this idea in the context of a more involving, realistic “online” interaction with another person. In addition, we wanted to begin our exploration of the role that existential isolation—or personality variables related to existential isolation—plays in people’s preferences for I-sharers. To this end, we conducted a laboratory investigation in which participants interacted with an ostensible other at either the Me or I level. Prior to the interaction, we administered a measure of emotional reliance in order to assess its moderating effect on I-sharing and liking. Specifically, we hypothesized that people high in emotional reliance, as compared to those low in emotional reliance, have an insatiable thirst for interpersonal closeness, depend more on others for confirmation of their conception of reality, and thus feel less attracted to someone with a discrepant I and more attracted to an I-sharer.

After completing the measure of emotional reliance, participants began an interactive computer task described as part of a study of how people form relationships through e-mail, Internet chat rooms, and so on. While completing this task, participants believed that they and another participant (who, in reality, did not exist) would exchange information over the computer. Some participants provided and received Me-information; others provided and received I-information. In the Me-information condition, participants completed a series of “I am . . .” statements describing aspects of their selves. In the I-information condition, participants provided their free associations to a series of word-stem completions. We modeled this latter condition after the I-sharing experiences that occur when people simultaneously make the same pun, come up with the same nonintuitive answer to a question, or otherwise indicate that they are “on the same wavelength.”

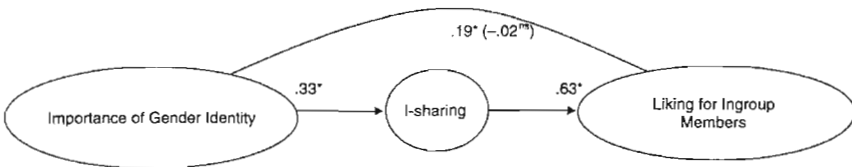


FIGURE 22.2. Mediation model illustrating how I-sharing mediates the relationship between the importance of gender and liking for ingroup members. All values represent standardized beta weights; * $p < .05$.

Almost immediately after completing each “I am . . .” statement or providing a word association, participants viewed the response that their partner ostensibly provided to the same exact item (generated, of course, by the program itself). Some participants discovered that their partner responded identically to them 70% of the time (similar condition); others discovered that their partner responded identically to them only 30% of the time (dissimilar condition). After receiving this information, participants indicated their liking for their communication partner.

The results revealed a significant three-way interaction between emotional reliance, type of information, and similarity (see Figure 22.3, panels *a* and *b*). The nature of this interaction was such that similarity and emotional reliance (ER) had no effect on liking among those who received Me-information. These people showed equal levels of liking across all conditions. Among those who received I-information, however, we observed an interaction between emotional reliance and similarity. When they had provided and received I-information, low-ER participants exhibited equal levels of liking for their partner across both similarity conditions. In contrast, when high ER participants had provided and received I-information, they liked the similar partner significantly more than the dissimilar one. Indeed, compared to all other groups, high-ER participants exposed to a partner who did *not* share their I exhibited the least amount of liking for their partner, suggesting that a lack of I-sharing proves especially distasteful to those especially likely to depend on others for feelings of closeness and for validation of their beliefs (i.e., those high in emotional reliance).

Study 7: Existential Isolation Increases the Appeal of I-Sharing

Our most recent study took a more direct approach to examining the role of existential isolation in producing attraction to those with whom we I-share. Specifically, we manipulated existential isolation by having participants engage in a “lucid memory” task that we described as an assessment of their ability to “mentally relive past experiences when you recall

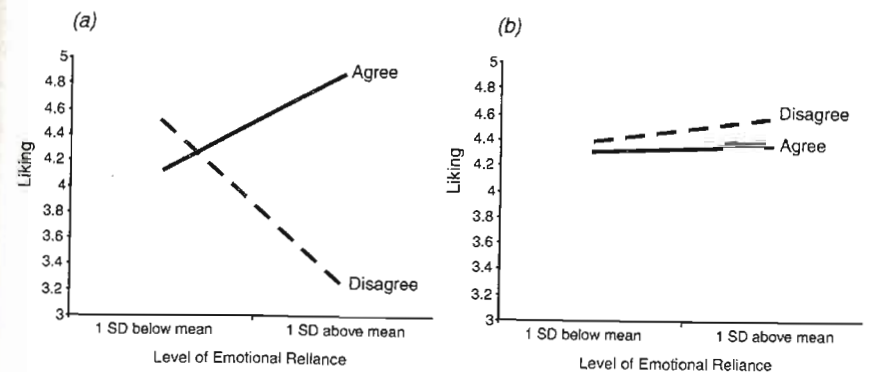


FIGURE 22.3. Liking for partner as a function of agreement and emotional reliance in (a) I-information condition, and (b) Me-information condition.

them.” While completing this task, participants attempted to recall vividly one of three types of memories: (1) a time when they felt out of touch with those around them or felt “alone in a crowd”; (2) a time when they felt bored; or (3) their morning routine. We had participants recall these three different types of memories to create an existential isolation condition, a negative control condition, and a neutral control condition respectively. After this lucid memory task, participants engaged in the same online communication task described earlier, in which they exchanged information with an ostensible partner about which traits describe them or the first word that comes to mind when they hear a particular word.

As may be seen in Figure 22.4, the data revealed that participants primed with feelings of existential isolation exhibited greater levels of liking for the I-sharer than for the Me-sharer. Importantly, participants in the remaining two priming conditions (those in the negative and neutral conditions) tended to prefer the Me-sharer over the I-sharer. Thus, taken together, the findings of Studies 6 and 7 show that both dispositional levels of emotional reliance and priming of memories of past instances of existential isolation make I-sharers particularly appealing. As such, these results support our contention that I-sharing leads to feelings of closeness to others because it relieves feelings of existential isolation.

DISCUSSION

Across seven separate studies we have seen how I-sharing factors into people’s liking for others. Consider the results of Studies 1 through 3, which suggest that assumptions about I-sharing may at least partially account for people’s preference for similar others (i.e., Me-sharers, according to our analysis). Specifically, when participants received information about

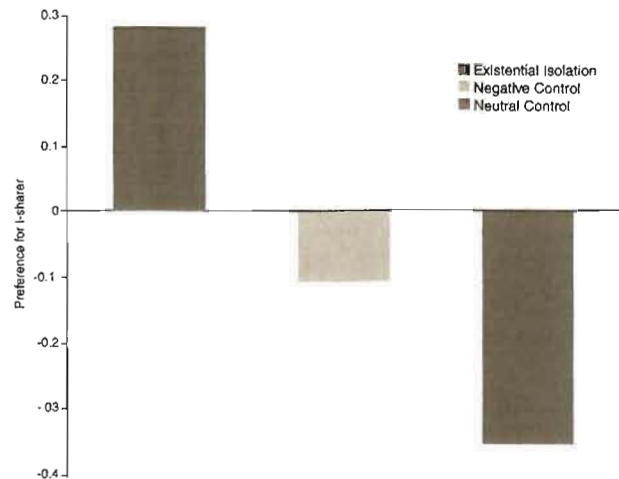


FIGURE 22.4. Preference for I-sharer as a function of feelings of existential isolation.

the extent to which someone from their hometown (i.e., a Me-sharer) or another country (i.e., a non-Me-sharer) also shared their I, they preferred the Me-sharer to the non-Me-sharer when the Me-sharer shared their I. This effect completely reversed itself under conditions when the non-Me-sharer turned out to share the participants’ I and suggests that Me-sharing may often serve as a proxy for I-sharing. Having established this basic effect, in Studies 4 and 5, we concentrated on the role of I-sharing in intergroup processes. The findings indicate that assumptions about I-sharing underlie people’s preference for people with whom they share important social identities (e.g., aspects of their Me). Study 6 looked at the relative effects of Me-sharing and I-sharing on liking in the context of online interactions. In addition, in Study 6 we looked at a potential moderator of I-sharing. The results indicate that whereas people low in emotional reliance show no preference for an I-sharer over a non-I-sharer, people high in emotional reliance favor people with whom they share I’s. Finally, Study 7 provides the strongest evidence to date of the proposed link between I-sharing and existential isolation by showing that priming participants with memories of past instances of existential isolation leads to increased attraction to an I-sharer.

Evidence that I-sharing fosters liking offers a new perspective from which to view seemingly distinct sets of research findings. As noted earlier, we suspect that assumptions about I-sharing can account for the robust tendency for people to prefer similar others. From our perspective, people prefer similar others largely because similarity with respect to the Me signals the potential for I-sharing. Once people learn that a Me-sharer does not experience a stimulus identically to them, however, this preference for the Me-sharer seems to disappear. Thus, when the sole female in an otherwise all male organization hears of a new, female hire, she might initially feel thrilled, thinking that finally someone will validate her perceptions of the discrimination that regularly occurs at work. Imagine her surprise when in the company of the new hire, she encounters what she perceives as discrimination and learns that the new hire disagrees! Such an experience should indicate to her that, despite sharing Me’s with the new hire (i.e., gender), she does not share I’s with this person. The consequence? All that initial excitement and liking for the new hire becomes a thing of the past.

The possibility that I-sharing underlies people’s preferences for similar others (i.e., Me-sharers) suggests new avenues for research on interpersonal and intergroup processes. Those interested in improving interpersonal and intergroup relationships could create situations that foster I-sharing experiences between people. Indeed, we believe that some previous attempts at reducing intergroup tension may have been successful precisely for this reason. Consider the Robbers Cave study (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961), in which Sherif and colleagues created and then attempted to undo intergroup rivalry among a group of young boys. These researchers noted that the only successful strategy for undoing the rivalry consisted of providing the boys with superordinate goals, goals that the boys could meet only with everyone’s cooperation. Aronson made a similar claim based on his research on the Jigsaw Classroom (Aronson, Blaney, Stephan, Sikes, & Snapp, 1978). We propose that superordinate goals can effectively ease intergroup tension precisely because goal sharing constitutes a form of I-sharing. Viewed from this perspective, Antoine de St. Exupery’s suggestion that “Love is not looking at one another, but looking out in the same direction” takes on a whole new meaning.

More generally, our work on I-sharing, however, suggests a very new and potentially important way in which our selves enter into our relationships with others, through a process of sharing our subjective experience of the world. Whereas previous work on the self and relationships has focused almost exclusively on people’s representations of self (i.e., the Me), the I-sharing perspective focuses on the role that the self-as-subject (i.e., the I) plays in

people's relationships. In so doing, the I-sharing perspective points to the importance of studying the self-as-subject more generally.

Not only could a newfound emphasis on the "I" add to the field's theoretical sophistication, it could also yield important insights in the applied realm. For example, existentially oriented clinical psychologists have long recognized the problem of existential isolation (Laing, 1971; Schneider & May, 1995; Yalom, 1980), and they view it as one of the major challenges that people have to confront in life. To the extent that I-sharing experiences provide an antidote to feelings of existential isolation, clinical psychologists might find value in developing ways to reach their clients at the level of subjective experience.

CONCLUSION

As if death, freedom, and meaninglessness were not enough, we humans also have to deal with the reality of our existential isolation. Here we identify one way in which existential isolation factors into our lives, through our interpersonal dealings with others. Because our existential isolation poses threats to our need to know and our need for interpersonal connectedness, we develop a special fondness for people whom we believe experience a moment in the same way that we do, for I-sharers. I-sharing has this effect because, although we can never really know phenomenologically how another person experiences reality, I-sharing gives us the sense that we can. We may never experience existential connectedness in a literal sense, but I-sharing brings us breathtakingly close.

NOTES

1. Some researchers have made a distinction between the motive to acquire information (e.g., the self-assessment motive; Trope, 1983) and the motive to confirm the validity of information that one has already acquired (e.g., the self-verification motive; Swann, 1996). Because we believe that these two motives stem from the same, overarching drive to know, we combine them in our analysis.
2. Although differences of opinion exist with regard to whether this need for connectedness constitutes a fundamental motive or is derived from more basic needs, few people would deny its existence.
3. In many ways, these characteristics of the "I" have a lot in common with *implicit* components of the self. Nonetheless, an important distinction exists between the I and the implicit self: Whereas people *can* describe their I after the fact, by definition, the implicit self refers to those aspects of the self that remain below conscious awareness.
4. It seems likely that certain hazards might be unique to the erroneous (as opposed to the accurate) belief that one I-shares with one or more people. For instance, when two people involved in a relationship erroneously believe that they I-share, they could neglect their partner out of a belief that they know him or her all too well. As such, they could make faulty decisions or arrive at faulty conclusions about their partner's preferences, wishes, and so on, and this could create problems for the relationship (see Buber, 1923/1958, Wicklund & Vida-Grim, Chapter 23, this volume).
5. To be sure, some of these explanations—such as those pertaining to belief-validation—pertain to aspects of the Me that presumably have close ties to the I. To our knowledge, however, no one has described these findings from an I-sharing perspective as of yet.

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