

# The development and importance of shared reality in the domains of opinion, morality, and religion

Larisa Heiphetz

The importance of shared reality emerges early in human development. Infants and young children notice when others share their beliefs, and information about shared beliefs influences their social judgments. This article reviews recent research on the importance of shared beliefs in three domains that have been widely investigated over the past several years — opinions, moral views, and religious beliefs. I argue that shared religious beliefs appear especially influential and suggest several reasons why this might be the case, including the perceived link between religion and morality as well as the strong role that religious beliefs play in personal identity. Future research can further test these possibilities.

## Address

Department of Psychology, Columbia University, 1190 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10027, USA

Corresponding author: Heiphetz, Larisa ([lah2201@columbia.edu](mailto:lah2201@columbia.edu))

**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2018, **23**:1–5

This review comes from a themed issue on **Shared reality**

Edited by **Gerald Echterhoff** and **Tory Higgins**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.11.002>

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## Introduction

Shared beliefs form the backbone of much social behavior. Adults preferentially interact with people who share their views [1,2] and, in extreme cases, kill those who disagree with them [3]. Even infants and children attend to others' beliefs [4<sup>\*\*</sup>,5]. Although most work on children's understanding of others' minds focuses on shared *factual* beliefs, research on shared *social* information has burgeoned in the last several years. Below, I review three domains of shared belief that appear important across development — opinions, moral views, and religious beliefs — and explore why shared religious beliefs might be especially influential.

## Shared opinions

Children expect that their opinions will match others' evaluations. In one study [6], four-year-olds observed an experimenter choose an object from one of two boxes.

The selected box was then replaced by a new container. Subsequently, children preferred the object in the new box over the object in the box disfavored by the experimenter, suggesting that children expected to dislike an object disliked by someone else.

When their opinions do *not* match those of others, children respond with displeasure. Four- to six-year-olds report that they would rather befriend, and exhibit more generosity toward, individuals who share their opinions rather than individuals who disagree [7<sup>\*</sup>]. Younger children [8] and adolescents [9] respond similarly.

Even infants attend to shared opinions. They expect that people in the same social group will like the same foods as each other and that disgust will generalize universally [10]. Furthermore, infants' own evaluations are sensitive to shared opinions: they prefer individuals who like the same foods they do [11] as well as individuals who behave meanly toward puppets who like a food that infants themselves do not like [12].

From infancy, individuals prefer individuals who like what they like. Because opinions vary across individuals, one might expect shared reality to be particularly important in this domain. If most people see the world similarly, shared reality with any given individual along that dimension may be less important; if one individual does not share your views, it is easy to find another who does. However, shared reality is also important in a domain that typically elicits more societal agreement — morality.

## Shared moral views

Unlike opinions, many moral beliefs are shared across large groups. Children are sensitive to this difference, reporting that the same moral norms apply to all people across diverse contexts [13]. Thus, shared reality may be more common in the domain of morality versus opinion; it may be easier to find individuals who share one's moral views. It is therefore possible that individuals would not be especially sensitive to any one person's moral beliefs. However, it turns out that others' moral views and behaviors exert a strong influence on social judgment.

Children often behave in pro-social ways, and they also prefer pro-social over anti-social others. Infants and toddlers readily help others, share with others, and interfere when they see one person transgressing against another [14–18]. They also respond differently to pro-social versus anti-social actors. Infants and young children

prefer consistently pro-social actors [19,20]. These preferences emerge even when children must suffer a cost; in one study, five- and six-year-olds preferred to receive less generous offerings from neutral characters rather than more generous offerings from mean characters [21]. However, when the target had previously hindered someone's goal, infants preferred actors who treated the target meanly [22]. During the preschool years, children begin to sanction those who do not uphold moral norms; in one study, five-year-olds preferred, and distributed more resources to, individuals who enforced cooperative norms rather than individuals who did not enforce these norms [23]. Children themselves also prefer to help fair versus unfair individuals [24] and selectively distribute undesirable resources to anti-social individuals [25].

This literature could be viewed in light of work on shared reality. One interpretation is that children prefer individuals who adhere to the same pro-social norms as they themselves do. Indeed, work on norms outside of the domain of morality bolsters this interpretation by showing that children are quite sensitive to norm violations [26]. This is the case even when there is no broad social consensus regarding norms; for example, children censure individuals who sort objects by color when participants themselves had been taught to sort the objects by shape [27]. However, an alternative view of the literature on early-emerging moral cognition is possible. Rather than preferring those who are similar to them, children may prefer those who conform to broader cultural norms.

One way to disentangle these possibilities is to examine controversial moral issues. Harm is a prototypical moral issue, and many people agree that it is wrong to hurt others [28]. Nevertheless, moral issues related to harm can elicit controversy. For example, one person may argue that abortion harms children who are not yet born, while another person may argue that lack of access to abortion harms women who are currently alive. Abortion can, therefore, cause disagreement on moral grounds; people who are pro-life and pro-choice may both use moral values to inform their position but apply these values in different ways. Although no cultural consensus around abortion exists in the United States, American adults prefer individuals whom they perceive to share their views on such controversial topics [e.g., 29<sup>•</sup>,30,31]. These data suggest that adults' social preferences are sensitive to shared moral views.

The important role of shared morality in social judgment emerges relatively early in development. In one line of work [31], preschoolers and adults heard disagreements regarding widely shared moral beliefs (e.g., whether or not it is okay to hurt someone for no reason) and controversial moral beliefs (e.g., whether or not it is okay to hurt one person in order to save five people). Participants noted their own views, reported whether only one person

or both disagreeing people could be right, and indicated which of the two disagreeing characters they liked more. Both children and adults were more likely to report that only one person could be right in a disagreement about widely shared rather than controversial moral beliefs. Although they seemed to accept disagreement to some extent in the latter category, children and adults also preferred people who shared their own views. These studies further support the idea that social judgment varies according to shared moral beliefs, not solely based on whether individuals hold moral beliefs that are widely endorsed in their culture.

From infancy to adulthood, individuals show social preferences on the basis of others' moral beliefs and actions. These preferences appear to be at least partially driven by *shared* moral views rather than solely reflecting preferences for individuals who conform to the moral values of the broader culture. A sense of shared morality may also underlie the importance placed on shared reality in another domain — namely, religion.

### Shared religious beliefs

Morality is closely linked with religion. Adults readily associate atheists with moral transgressions [32<sup>•</sup>], and both children and adults evaluate those who share their own religious views more positively than religious out-group members [33,34].

These preferences may be driven partially by positive evaluations of culturally dominant groups. However, some evidence suggests that sharing specific religious views with another person also influences social judgment, even if the shared views are not culturally dominant. In one line of work [35<sup>••</sup>], elementary-school aged children reported their own beliefs in the domains of religion (e.g., whether or not God can do miracles), opinion (e.g., which color is the prettiest), and fact (e.g., which river is the longest). They then learned about pairs of characters; in each pair, one character shared the participant's belief while the other character held an opposing view. Across domains, children preferred individuals who shared their beliefs. However, only in the domain of religion did children selectively attribute pro-social behaviors to individuals who agreed with them. They preferred characters who shared their religious beliefs even when the contrasting characters had something else in common with participants, such as shared minimal group membership. Subsequent work demonstrated that shared religious views can even influence evaluations of actions that have already occurred. In this research [36], 5- to 10-year-olds and adults learned about characters who performed identical behaviors, such as helping someone, for religious or secular reasons. The youngest participants evaluated behaviors similarly regardless of the characters' motivations. However, with increasing age, non-religious participants more strongly

differentiated between the motivations. By adulthood, non-religious participants evaluated behaviors much more favorably when they were performed by secularly-motivated characters than when those same behaviors were performed by religiously-motivated characters. Shared religious beliefs appear to occupy such an important position in adults' minds that they are activated merely in the presence of someone who resembles a significant other who shares participants' religious views [37].

Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of shared religious beliefs for social evaluation. Indeed, religious views appear more powerful than some other forms of shared reality in shaping social judgments. Why might this be the case? At least two possibilities exist: religious views may be particularly powerful because they are linked with moral behaviors in people's minds and/or because religion, unlike some other mental states, constitutes a social identity. These possibilities are neither mutually exclusive nor comprehensive, and testing these ideas directly remains a fruitful avenue for future research.

First, religious views may influence social judgments especially strongly because individuals may believe that religious views determine how someone will treat them. Religious people may ground their ethics in religious beliefs, perceiving that their sense of right and wrong arises from religious teachings [38]. Within this framework, it makes sense to treat shared religious views as an indicator of trustworthiness and moral goodness. Indeed, adults sometimes view God as a 'supernatural watcher' who knows when someone is doing something wrong and punishes wrongdoers [39,40]. They may fail to see why someone who does *not* hold this view of God would behave morally, particularly when no one is watching. These ideas may be especially effective in explaining why shared religious beliefs influence the social judgments of religious people.

Second, religious views may play a large role in social perception because religion, unlike many other mental states, is often construed as an identity that influences many aspects of life [41\*]. People turn to religion to comfort them and help them understand the world [42–44]. As Hardin and Higgins [45] point out, shared reality 'creates meaning [ . . . ] by delineating the form and function of the external world' (p. 30), and sources of shared reality grounded in important social identities may perform this task particularly effectively [see also 46].

Everyday behaviors such as speech patterns can both reflect and reinforce a privileged status for religion. In English, noun labels commonly describe religious views or the lack thereof (e.g., Muslim, atheist) but not other mental states, such as opinions or factual beliefs — there

is no noun for someone who prefers blue over green or who thinks that the Nile is longer than the Amazon. Noun labels both mirror existing social reality and create new realities; they reflect the importance placed on a category, license inferences (e.g., about what kind of person belongs in the category and what behaviors that kind of person will perform), and influence people's actions [47–49]. Thus, the noun labels commonly used for religious groups highlight the privileged status of religious beliefs as compared with many other mental states.

## Conclusions

Early in development, children notice whether others share their beliefs, and shared beliefs influence social judgment across development. Children and adults prefer those who share their opinions, moral views, and religious beliefs, and shared religious beliefs appear to be more influential than several other sources of shared reality. For example, children selectively attribute moral behaviors to peers who share their religious beliefs but not their opinions, factual beliefs, or minimal group membership. Religion may hold this privileged status because it is intertwined with moral judgment and/or because it is experienced as an important social identity, and future research can further investigate these possibilities.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Nina Mandracchia and Redeatte Wolle for their assistance with this manuscript. Preparation of this manuscript was supported by Columbia University and by a grant to L Heiphetz from the Indiana University Lilly School of Philanthropy [grant number INDU CUI6-1919; re-granting program from the John Templeton Foundation]. Funders played no role in study design; in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data; in the writing of the report; and in the decision to submit the article for publication.

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