

## I-Sharing on the Couch: On the Clinical Implications of Shared Subjective Experience

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When 2 or more people believe that they are having an identical subjective experience, they believe that they “I-share.” I-sharing fosters connectedness (Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, & Pyszczynski, 2006), overcomes group boundaries (Pinel & Long, 2012), and facilitates prosocial behaviors (Huneke & Pinel, 2015; Johnson, Pinel, & Long, 2014). After reviewing the construct of I-sharing, the related construct of existential isolation, and the pertinent data, we highlight applications of this work to the clinical realm. In particular, we consider the potential for I-sharing to improve the therapeutic alliance, extratherapeutic relationships, and treatment outcomes.

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Regardless of one’s theoretical orientation, psychotherapy is an inherently relational endeavor. Psychotherapy researchers have viewed the relationship between client and therapist both as a facilitator of change and as a potentially curative force in itself, with much research focused on illuminating the most effective ways of leveraging that relationship (e.g., Norcross, 2011). In addition to the therapy relationship’s centrality as a tool for change, extratherapeutic relationships are a common focus of treatment (Seligman, 1995). Thus, basic theory and research on relationship processes have substantial implications for psychotherapy. Here, we review social psychological work on shared subjective experience—the I-sharing perspective on interpersonal connectedness—and some related work on existential isolation (Pinel & Long, 2012; Pinel, Long, & Crimin, 2010; Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, & Pyszczynski, 2006; Pinel,

Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Pinel, Long, Murdoch, Johnson, & Helm, 2014). We focus on how this work offers new ways of thinking about relevant psychotherapy research as well as on how one could directly apply it to the practice of psychotherapy.

### The Construct of I-Sharing

I-sharing gets its name from the distinction that psychologist William James (1950) and others made between the objective self (the “Me”) and the subjective self (the “I”). The objective self (Me) consists of our representation of ourselves—our self-concept. It includes anything we can describe about ourselves such as our background, family life, hobbies, values, memories, social identities, and so on. If someone implored us to tell them every detail of our lives, then everything that we would tell that person—from the moment of our conception to the present moment and everything in between—would constitute an aspect of our Me. For example, one’s Me might include being a grandmother, knowing German, or having broken one’s arm as a child.

In contrast to the objective self, the subjective self (I) has no content. It refers to a person’s current, in-the-moment experience, or state of consciousness. When James described the I, he

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