

'Collective mind' bridges societal divides: Research explores how watching the same thing can bring people together

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Paying attention to the same thing strengthens bonds between observers. Credit: [Carlos David Gomez/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA](#)

[Only about 1 in 4 Americans](#) said that they had trust in the nation's institutions in 2023—with big business (1 in 7), television news (1 in 7) and Congress (1 in 12) scraping the very bottom.

While institutional trust is decreasing, political polarization is increasing.

The majority of Republicans (72%) and Democrats (64%) think of each other as more immoral than other Americans—[a nearly 30% rise from 2016 to 2022](#). When compared with similar democracies, the United States has exhibited the [largest increase in animus](#) toward the opposing political party over the past 40 years.

When [public trust](#) and political consensus disappear, what remains? This [question has occupied my research](#) for the past 20 years, both as a scholar trained in social anthropology, organizational science and [social cognition](#) and as a professor of psychology.

Researchers don't have all the answers, but it seems that even in the absence of public trust and agreement, people can share experiences. Whether watching a spelling bee or a football game, "we" still exist if "we" can witness it together.

My colleagues and I call this [human capacity](#) to take a collective perspective [theory of collective mind](#). The foundation of collective mind, and what we study in the lab, is shared attention, instances when people experience the world with others.

Shared attention amplifies experiences

Experiments in the laboratory with adults show that shared experiences amplify psychological and behavioral reactions to the world.

My colleagues and I find that compared with attending to the world alone, or at different times than others, synchronous attention with others yields [stronger memories, deeper emotions and firmer motivations](#). Studies show that seeing words together [renders them more memorable](#), watching sad movies together [makes them sadder](#), and focusing together on shared goals [increases efforts toward their pursuit](#). Sharing attention to the behavior of others [yields more imitation of that](#)

[behavior](#).

Critically, those experiencing something with you need not be physically present. Although in some experiments participants sit side by side, in other studies participants believe they are attending together from different lab rooms or even across the nation. Irrespective of the location, the sense that "we are attending" to something together at the same time—as compared with in solitude or on your own schedule—amplifies the experience.

Laboratories in the [United States](#), [Australia](#), [Hungary](#), [Germany](#) and [Denmark](#) have found similar results. Notably, some studies have found that people want to have more [shared experiences](#), even when they don't actually enjoy them more than solitary experiences.

What's behind these observations? As a social species that survives through joint action, human beings in general need a common baseline from which to act. When shared experiences amplify what we know together, it can guide subsequent behavior, rendering that behavior more understandable and useful to the collective.

Sharing attention builds relationships

Shared attention happens within the bounds of our cherished relationships and groups, like when friends go to a movie together, but also [outside of them](#).

Research suggests that shared attention on a common subjective experience can build [relationships across the political divide](#) and strengthen [cooperation among strangers](#).

For instance, when people co-witness that they have the same gut reaction to an unfamiliar piece of music or a meaningless inkblot, they

like each other more, even if they have opposing political leanings. Critically, relational benefits are more likely when such subjective experiences are shared simultaneously—instances when people are most likely to sense [a shared mind](#).

People can be attending next to one another or thousands of miles apart, in groups of two or 200, and the results are the same—shared attention [amplifies experiences](#), [creates social bonds](#) and even [synchronizes individuals' heartbeats and breaths](#).

[Scientists studying kids](#) find that interest in attending with others begins in the first year of human life, predating the development of language and preceding any notion of shared beliefs by several years. Human relationships don't begin with sharing values; sharing attention comes first.

The role of shared attention in society

Before the advent of the internet, Americans shared attention broadly—they watched the same nightly news together, even if they did not always agree whether it was good or bad. Today, with people's attention divided into media silos, there are more obstacles than ever to sharing attention with those with whom you disagree.

And yet, even when we can no longer agree on what "we" believe, sharing attention to the basic sights and sounds of our world connects us. These moments can be relatively small, like watching a movie in the theater, or large, like watching the Super Bowl. However, remembering that we are sharing such experiences with Americans of all political persuasions is important.

Consider the Federal Communications Commission's [fairness doctrine](#), a policy that controversial issues of public importance should receive

balanced coverage, exposing audiences to differing views. In effect, it created episodes of shared attention across social, political and economic differences.

Institutional trust is now [almost two-fold lower than it was in 1987](#), the year the fairness doctrine was repealed. It is possible that the end of the fairness doctrine [helped create a hyperpolarized media](#), where the norm is sharing attention with those who are ideologically similar.

Of course, sharing attention on divisive issues can be painful. Yet, I believe it may also push us beyond our national fracture and toward a revitalization of public trust.

Why? When we share awareness of the world with others, no matter how distinct our beliefs, we form a community of minds. We are no longer alone. If we are to restore public trust and national ideals, sharing attention across societal divides looks like a way forward.

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