

## **Shared Values, Interests, and Desires**

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Marsella Effertz was born on an early February morning in 1908 in Sawyer, North Dakota (Population 318); Oscar Johnson was born near sunset on that same day, just a few hundred yards away. They were married twenty-one years later, and they moved onto the Johnson family homestead to raise cattle, hogs, poultry, and eventually, four children. With each passing year, they grew fonder of telling friends that they had shared a birthday, a doctor, a farm, a family, and a life. While Maresella and Oscar's story is distinctive in what they shared, it's less notable for the fact that they shared aspects of their lives with someone else. We humans are highly social animals, who share many significant (and less significant) aspects of our lives with others. Customers who have never met can share a desire for speedier service. Spouses can share more robust values that help them satisfy their interest in spending the remainder of their lives together. Across numerous domains, people share values, interests, and desires; and understanding this fact can yield insights regarding the thoughts and behaviors of group members.

Yet everyday claims about what people share are often ambiguous and imprecise. When someone notes that the U.S. Army embodies the values of "Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage", they may be speaking of values that service members typically adopt, or of values possessed by the Army itself. Similarly, when someone claims that the Teamsters have an interest in maintaining craft seniority, this might be a claim about the interests of individual Teamsters, or about how these Teamsters understand the aims of their joint activities. Finally, when someone argues that the Zapatistas desire creating a world in which many worlds fit (*Un mundo en que quepan muchos mundo*), they might be speaking of a motivation that's essential to the shared activities of Zapatistas, or of desires that individuals typically form *qua* Zapatistas. The grammar of these claims does not reveal their ontological significance; and a close examination of patterns of group behavior is often necessary to understand what is shared, and how it is shared.

Our aim is to examine some of the ways in which values, interests, and desires are shared. We hold that a methodological individualist can account for many forms of sharing without revision to their theory, but we also aim to motivate reflection on the possibility that some kinds of joint-activity complicate this ontological minimalism. Sometimes, joint-activities do more than provide the social scaffolding that makes individual values, interests, and desires possible; sometimes, joint-activities generate new loci for values and interests, and new ways of valuing.

### **1. Common values, interests, and desires**

Relatively passive forms of sharing can sustain a broad class of phenomena that we call *common values, interests, and desires*. Like many people who inhabit North Dakota, Marsella and Oscar valued wide-open spaces, hills, and buttes. Each cultivated these values early in life, and this fostered the desires that led them to take up farming; without these values, they would have been less likely to develop an interest in raising children and livestock together on the plains of North Dakota. The common value that people often place on the spaces they inhabit can impact choices about how to structure the world, especially when such values are prevalent within a population. Someone who lacks an understanding of these values will have difficulties

accounting for anyone's decision to live in North Dakota (or New York City, or Austin, Texas); and understanding the prevalence of these values within a particular demographic is often necessary to develop viable public policies.

Many inhabitants of Washington DC, for example, value the European character of that city's classic row-houses, and desire the preservation of that character. Failing to take these values and desires into consideration has led to recent construction decisions that have evoked outrage and distress among many Washingtonians (Shapira 2015). Yet these values and desires only exist as attitudes of individual Washingtonians. They share much in common with the attitudes of strangers who are simultaneously running toward a rain shelter (Searle 1983, 3-4): each wants to stay dry, but these desires do not involve the desires of the others; each would continue to have the same desire even if they were running alone; and if one of them wanted to play in the rain, this would have little influence on the desires of the others. Understanding the importance of such desires requires attending to the attitudes of individuals, the contexts in which they guide individual action, and the prevalence of these attitudes within a particular population. But since these attitudes are not implicated in the production of intentionally organized collective behavior, they are best understood as commonly held, and not shared in any ontologically significant sense.

Still, where common values, interests, and desires are prevalent within a population, normatively significant effects can emerge as a result of their aggregation. Consider three recent disputes over land-use in Yellowstone National Park and the surrounding areas (*The Economist* 2015). People who desire to raise cattle have argued with people who desire to restore the ecological stability of Yellowstone by reintroducing gray wolves as an apex predator. Parallel disputes have developed because the interest of cattle ranchers in preventing the spread of brucellosis conflicts with the values environmentalists place on preserving the roaming rights of the surviving members of the once vast herds of American bison. Finally, snowmobilers have defended their interest and desire in using public roads against environmentalists who argue that these uses are at odds with environmental values—because of the effects of noise and exhaust pollution on wildlife.

Explaining the actions of ranchers, snowmobilers, and environmentalists requires understanding what the members of these groups typically value, what they are typically interested in, and what they typically desire. These disputes arise in part because different values are common within these three demographics (Farrell 2015). The environmentalists value ecological diversity and stability, and have an interest in fostering this value even when it conflicts with the economic interests of cattle ranchers, or the interest that snowmobilers have in access to public space. The ranchers and the snowmobilers tend to value liberty, property rights, and access to public lands; and they are often suspicious of interventions by the federal government and by environmentalists who are seen as outsiders trying to impose their desires from the outside. A more accurate understanding of these attitudes could foster increased empathy in political debates, and more successful political concessions from each demographic. But individual attitudes remain central to these explanations; and the attitudes of most individuals would be unaffected by the attitudes of an environmentalist rancher whose values, interests, and desires were at odds with their broader demographic. Put much too simply, the values, interests, and desires that are common within these demographics guide socially significant forms of action without requiring a group that acts together.

Similar effects can, however, arise in well-organized groups, so long as the relevant attitudes are not essential to the ongoing behavior of those groups. Consider a philosophy

department whose members all value the subtle techniques required to produce excellent coffee. At different points during the day, each desires coffee, and each has an interest in being caffeinated. Each researches different beans and roasters; each discusses brewing techniques with local baristas; and each attends carefully whenever a new café opens. But no matter how central this value is to their life, a member of this department can regard their views about coffee as a private matter; and discussions in the hallway about coffee will have little impact on the department's ongoing activity, beyond cultivating a sense of collegiality and calibrating individual coffee preferences. Moreover, while the members of this department might find ambivalence about coffee perplexing, or even disturbing, it would be problematic to sanction a new colleague (in her role as a faculty member) for such ambivalence. Finally, a new faculty member who learned that everyone in her department happened to value excellent coffee would gain no more reason to desire drinking it than she would gain by learning that many of her friends happened to have a similar value.

Still, a visitor who didn't understand the value these faculty members placed on excellent coffee would miss a real pattern, and this could make some behaviors seem mysterious or even irrational. It might seem surprising when most of the faculty members are late to a departmental colloquium, because a new café has just opened near campus; and it might seem odd when every question is organized around facts about the farming, production, or distribution of coffee. But, even in these cases, the practical importance of this common value would derive from its role in guiding individual actions; and an adequate explanation of the resulting behaviors could appeal only to the values, interests, and desires of individual faculty members, as well as the prevalence of these attitudes within this group.

## **2. Shared values, interest, and desires**

Values, interests, and desires are not always shared so passively. We often work to sustain shared values, interests, and desires because of their role in the formation and stability of our interpersonal connections. We often rely on them to strengthen mutual bonds and to further our pursuit of collaborative activities. And they often play a crucial role in structuring the values, interests, and desires we adopt as group members. When values, interests, and desires are intimately tied to ends that we seek together, they often become *shared* attitudes, and not just attitudes that common among us.

Over the course of their lives together, Marcella and Oscar cultivated shared values that allowed them to successfully raise children and livestock on their North Dakota farm. They each valued hard work, cooperation, and companionship, among many other things, and they valued these things in the context of their relationship. Unlike the values they happened to hold in common, these were subjects of active avowal that played an important and ongoing role in their decisions about how to organize the division of labor on the farm, and in their ability to plan for the future. Marcella and Oscar also cultivated shared interests in successfully raising crops, livestock, and children. These values and interests fostered shared desires, directed upon shared ends, including a desire to keep their family happy. In all likelihood, their collaborative activities would have been less successful without these values, interests, and desires; and they would have faced far more substantial difficulties in coordinating their behavior as the world changed around them, were these attitudes not in place.

Similarly, the members of less intimate groups often rely on shared values, interests, and desires to organize their joint-activities. Returning to our imagined philosophy department,

suppose each faculty member values curricular diversity as much as they value excellent coffee. They research different cultural and philosophical traditions; they develop their own strategies to make their courses more inclusive and less colonialist; and they each discuss these strategies with people trained in other traditions. Valuing curricular diversity might ground individual practices of syllabus design and the development of novel teaching strategies. But this value could also influence, and be influenced by, department-relevant desires and interests. For example, these practices might underwrite a shared interest in hiring in particular areas, and shared desires to offer new kinds of courses; this in turn might heighten or enrich the value that each individual places on curricular diversity. The impact of this value could also stretch beyond the current members of the department. For example, a job candidate who learned of this shared value would need to evaluate her willingness to adopt such a value, to treat it as a reason for acting, and to give up conflicting values that she may have. More significantly, it would be reasonable for members of this department to sanction a new faculty member who failed to adopt this shared value, and who failed to act in ways that were consistent with this value. Simplifying, we might then say that shared values can play a significant role in guiding the behavior of individuals *qua* group members, and group members who deviate from these values can reasonably be criticized for acting in ways that are inconsistent with the values of the group.

But how should such cases be characterized from the perspective of social ontology? This is a difficult question, and in the remainder of this section we address two possibilities that vary in the robustness of their ontological commitments.

### *2.1 Sharing values, interests, and desires qua group members*

The first possibility turns on the interplay between individual-level and group-level processes, and the resulting effects on the self-understanding of group members. In the cases we have just discussed, individuals have taken up shared values, desires, and interests as part of their understanding of what it means to be a group member or a partner. The internalization of shared attitudes plays an important role in increasing the likelihood of success in joint-activities, as shared attitudes put pressure on individuals to preserve interpersonal consistency and to sustain forms of means-end coherence structured around shared interests and desires (cf., Bratman 2014; Pacherie 2012). Put differently, shared values, interests, and desires can become the normative standards against which individuals calibrate their behavior: they can shape individual desires and interests, bringing individuals into alignment with larger groups.

Shared values, interests, and desires can also organize collective decision-making by structuring the normative spaces within which group members make decisions. Recent research in the philosophy of science suggests that shared values play a variety of roles in guiding individual and collective decisions about which problems to address, which alternatives to explore, which criteria to use in evaluating these alternatives, and how much consensus is required to reach a decision (Biddle 2007; Douglas 2009; Wilholt 2009). Often, such values play a critical role in the moment-to-moment decisions of individual scientists, making it difficult to separate the role of these values from the scientific products they underwrite. In part, this is because an individual's understanding of what they are doing *qua* scientist is shaped by the values of her lab, her discipline, her funding sources, and her colleagues—as a result, their decisions are laden with shared values at every point in the scientific process, from hypothesis construction to hypothesis acceptance (Kukla 2012).

Research in psychology has converged on a similar conclusion, suggesting that shared values, interests, and desires can play an important role in guiding the strategies of self-regulation that people adopt *qua* group members (Sassenberg & Woltin 2009). Group members who identify strongly with a shared goal—because they value it, have an interest in achieving it, or desire to bring it about—can sometimes mitigate various types of failures that arise in attempting to carry out a joint-activity. For example, the members of groups that distribute cognitive labor to pursue a desired end often have difficulties initiating group-relevant action, staying motivated in the face of obstacles, and budgeting sufficient cognitive resources to the pursuit of that end (Wieber et al 2012). But when group members pre-commit to a determinate plan of action, at least where they strongly identify with a shared goal, this can help them recognize opportunities to act toward collective goals, and lead them to initiate the required actions in ways that are strategically appropriate and triggered automatically (Thürmer et al 2014). Importantly, it doesn't matter whether these precommitments are framed in terms of what I will do, or what we do, the psychological effect is the same (Wieber et al 2012, 285). And this suggests that individual action guidance is often driven by the attitudes that individuals have *qua* group members (either in the sense that these attitudes are tied to an individual's role in a group, are held in virtue of thinking of themselves as group members, or are otherwise conceptually tied to the activities that the group carries out).

We contend that shared values, interests, and desires often constitute a form of social scaffolding, which makes particular forms of valuing and desiring possible for individuals. Valuing the collective pursuit of truth, having an interest in preserving methodological transparency, and desiring the replication of significant results, for example, may be essential to membership in the modern scientific community (Anderson 2004; Kitcher 2001). Much as it is only possible to understand an action as a withdrawal given a background context of institutions like banks (Mandlebaum 1955), it is only possible to value the collective pursuit of truth, the replication of significant results, and the preservation of methodological transparency given a background context of a scientific community that shares these values. Without such a community, an individual might be able to value the pursuit of truth; they might desire to bring about a world where they pursue the truth with others; and they might long for a time when they were collectively pursuing the truth with a community that no longer exists. But unless they are embedded in the relevant community, their value will lack the social scaffolding that is necessary to share a value. In such cases, a proper analysis of individual behavior must appeal to shared values, interests, and desires, the prevalence of these attitudes in a group, and the networks of social practice that make the relevant individual attitudes possible. Social ontology should thus strive to explain the values, interests, and desires that individuals have *qua* group members (cf., Phelan et al 2012). This will be especially important where shared values foster forms of joint action-guidance in light of shared values or interests, and where the unique contours of individual attitudes depend on their role in a collective action.

Importantly, the values and desires we adopt *qua* group members can change the deontic status of the actions we engage in, either individually or collectively. While some of us might wish this weren't true, members of modern Western philosophy departments often suppose, without much criticism "that philosophy will indefinitely revolve within the scope of the problems and systems that two thousand years of European history have bequeathed to us" (Dewey 1930, 27). However, if a member of our imagined department made this same supposition, her colleagues would be right to criticize her for deviating from the shared value of curricular diversity. Both because of the role this value plays in structuring departmental

decisions, and because of the expectations people have regarding members of this department. For her, rejecting this value requires being able to justify this decision to other members of the department. Of course, the fact that something is valued by a group to which one belongs doesn't imply that the value is un-revisable, nor does it imply that challenges to it are off the table; but as a group member, challenges to shared values tend to be the exception rather than the rule (Graham 2002, 123ff). In part, this is because shared values, even when they are the values of individuals *qua* group members, are more than common expectations, and more than shared understandings of joint activities; they are the normative grounding that allows group members to treat particular activities, entities, and practices as worthwhile or as essential to what they do together.

There are cases where analogous claims might seem to be misguided. For example, a Klansman who becomes disaffected with white supremacy is making the right decision, all things considered; and they deserve praise for abandoning their bigotry (to the extent that they have). However, the disaffected racist can be criticized by their fellow Klansmen for deviating from shared values; and these criticisms will be intelligible, though misguided to the extent that they are directed at him *qua* Klansman, and to the extent that they are criticizing the disaffected racist for undermining his status *qua* participant in a shared endeavor. And this will be true even though they lack all things considered standing to criticize the abandonment of racist values.<sup>1</sup>

## *2.2 Robustly sharing values and interests*

The interests and values people share *qua* group members can sometimes conflict with the values and interests that guide joint-activities. Often, individuals simply give way, adjusting their attitudes to conform with other group members. But when we act together to satisfy shared interests or to pursue shared values, we can also reflect upon our shared attitudes, consider how they relate to other individual, common, and shared attitudes, and change our mind about what we should do, and what we should care about. At times, we can privilege joint-activities, yielding *robustly shared values and interests* that are grounded in our interpersonal relationships. And this can allow us to revise or re-prioritize conflicting values and interests, organizing them to guide collective action in accordance with the values and interests of the groups to which we belong.

Suppose the members of our imagined philosophy faculty frequently meet to discuss projects that will foster curricular diversity. They agree to pursue projects that foster this value; they alter their course of action where their joint-activities are unlikely to satisfy this value; and they revise their plans to improve their chances of fostering this value. These processes of updating and revising allow this robustly shared value to play a similar normative role in guiding collective action to the one that individual values play in guiding individual actions. It serves as an organizing principle for recruitment and hiring; it structures collective decisions about who to invite for the department speaker series; and it has a significant impact on the courses people are assigned to teach, as well as the courses people are not allowed to teach. More importantly, someone who understood the role of this value could provide reliable and voluminous predictions and explanations of the behavior of this department. Since such predictions would be counterfactually robust, and would allow for generalizations beyond the current and previous behavior of this department, understanding the role of this value in the department's behavior would allow for the adoption of an intentional stance toward this group (Clark 1994; Dennett 1989). Not only does this value structure individual behavior in collaboratively meaningful ways,

it also influences collective behavior in ways that allow for behavioral generalizations about the department itself.

Philosophers with methodological individualist predilections might think it obvious that the values arising in philosophy departments are chosen and adopted by department members, but similar kinds of robustly shared values can also be instilled and managed from the top-down. The US military values effective strategy, and this drives decisions about recruitment, retention, promotion, and training. This value also plays a critical role in shaping the decisions individuals make on a wide range of socially momentous issues. But it would not be sufficient for the individual members of the military to value good strategy—even if every member does so *qua* member of the military. Valuing good strategy requires that strategies adopted by different individuals mesh, both with one another, and with the ends of the military as such. If they didn't, the strategies of one commander, which could be appropriate if executed in isolation, could easily conflict with the strategies of another, which also would be appropriate if executed in isolation. This is not merely an academic point: current U.S. military doctrine includes structural mechanisms to ensure that the strategies of individual commanders are effective both in isolation and in the aggregate (Joint Publication 1). Military practice relies on these mechanisms to integrate strategy at multiple levels of organizational hierarchy, not merely from the top-down, but also across compartmentalized organizations. As a result, there are patterns of behavior that are best predicted and explained by appeal to the values of the U.S. military, as such.

Likewise, robustly shared interests can guide collective deliberation and structure patterns of collective action that are stable and predictable from the intentional stance. Consider the Teamster's interest in maintaining craft seniority during the merger between US Airways and American Airlines. Many Teamsters may have had this interest *qua* Union members. But craft seniority is also a core Teamster value, and as an organization the Teamsters aim to "honestly, fairly, and aggressively fight to protect craft seniority for every member" (The Teamsters 2013), in accordance with legislative, contractual, and rank-and-file constraints. Success in this regard requires mechanisms to integrate interests at multiple levels of organizational hierarchy, and from multiple kinds of groups. While satisfying these interests requires the cooperation of union members, the shared interest in craft seniority can conflict with the interests of individual employees. And where it does, the Teamsters may retain such an interest, even if it happens to contravene the interests of the individual members (cf., Gilbert 1996). Indeed, collective deliberation in accordance with robustly shared interests can, and often does proceed without direct recourse to the individual interests on which they depend; and doing so leads to patterns of collective behavior that are in accordance with broader institutional values. These kinds of patterns are neither rare nor surprising—they often stem from the needs and limitations of bureaucratic structures (Raz 1986). And this allows such interests to play a significant role in interpretation of group behavior, paralleling the role of interests in guiding individual deliberations and individual actions.

Nonetheless, we wish to remain agnostic about the ontological status of robustly shared values and interests. We have avoided calling these 'collective values and interests' in hopes of sidestepping the debates commonly found in the literature on collective intentionality. Regardless of one's position with respect to those debates, we contend that the analysis above gives us reason to place robustly shared values and interests on the same ontological footing as collective actions. If the intentional actions attributable to groups are best explained by appeal to complex interactions of individuals-and-their-relations, then similar interactions should be posited to explain robustly shared values and interests. If, however, some collective behavior can

only be explained by appeal to facts about collectives themselves, be they the intentions of plural subjects (Gilbert 1996), the decision-making of collective agents (List and Pettit 2013), or a group-level cognitive processes (Huebner 2014; Tollefsen 2015), then robustly shared values and interests ought to receive a similar ontological treatment.

### 3. The significance of robustly shared values and interests

We often care deeply about robustly shared values and interests, a fact that can take on a particular significance for groups of our own. As participants in joint-activities, things happen to *us*; it's *our* interests that can be furthered or set back; and it's *our* values that can be fostered or diminished. While the significance of sharing a birthday or a doctor can be fully captured by appealing to its significance for each individual, explaining what it means to share a family or a life requires a deeper understanding of the relationships between the values and interests of individuals *qua* participants and the values and interests of the groups to which they belong. We contend that an individual's values and interests *qua* group member, and the values and interests of the groups to which they belong, can sometimes stand in a relationship of constitutive, bidirectional, counterfactual dependence. Where this happens, individual values and interests are not just furthered by collective action, the individual values and interests are partially constituted by these robustly shared values and interests. A committed methodological individualist might have a hard time accepting this possibility. But we contend that if values are robustly shared, then the dissolution of a group will entail the dissolution of any *shared* values that have emerge in the context of shared activities. An individual might still desire to reconstruct a network of shared values; and they might still strive to reconnect with a community that shares those values are shared. But robustly shared values guide the unfolding of shared activities; so while such an individual might maintain a vestigial remnant of values that were once shared, the values will not continue to exist unless they are re-connected to shared activities.

Returning to our first example, Marsella and Oscar cultivated shared values and interests that fostered their desire to keep their family happy. Each of them had their own conception of what that meant in practice; and each had an interest in taking the necessary steps to make sure that the other's interests were furthered in that regard. But, as often happens with people who work together to achieve shared ends, the things Marsella cared about had a significant impact on the things Oscar cared about (and vice-versa); over time this led them to cultivate meshing and overlapping values and interests, which were integrated with their shared desire to keep their family happy. Because of the structure of their relationship, Marsella's interests gave Oscar a reason to modify some of his interests to suit hers; and Oscar's interests gave Marsella reason to modify some of her interests. Partnerships often yield interests that have the ability to influence, both constitutively and causally, the interests of comrades. This integration of interest is part of what allows us to maintain our joint endeavors even as our individual interests evolve.

But individual values and interests cannot simply be subsumed under shared values and interests. People often continue to disagree even *qua* group members about what is best for the groups to which they belong. Yet when the interests of group members conflict, we do not look to outsider interests to resolve these conflicts. Even in these cases—perhaps even particularly in these cases—the shared values and interests that help to constitute a group's common identity offer the possibility to distinguish participants in joint-activities from a mere conglomeration, whose values and interests are aggregated mechanically. By integrating our interests with the

interests of a group, we gain a further interest in the flourishing of that group; and this remains true, even when the interests of a group conflict with our individual interests *qua* participants.

This integration of individual and group interests can have a significant effect on group behavior, as we see in the decision-making practices among the Zapatistas of Chiapas. These practices are facilitated by members who, *qua* Zapatistas, value listening to whatever others say, so joint-activities have been designed to foster this value. All community-relevant decisions require consensus in community assemblies; and deliberative practices have been designed to foster egalitarian attitudes within these assemblies, and to provide alternatives to hierarchical systems with centralized power. Indeed, it is a core Zapatista value that everyone should take part in democratic decision making as a way of demystifying the nature of politics. But in many cases, the forward-looking values of this group have outstripped the values of individual Zapatistas. And at many points, it has been necessary to create new forms of participatory dialogue to foster autonomy and dignity, as well as new forms of network-based organization to foster forms of cooperation that are locally salient, dynamic, and sensitive to everyone's needs and interests. There is an ongoing commitment to creating "the power to solve their own problems and to do so democratically" (Starr et al., 2011, 102-3). And success in this regard requires more than individuals who value listening, and more than individuals who value democratic engagements. It requires a shared willingness to take responsibility for the structural mechanisms that organize joint-activities, a shared willingness to adopt new values where they are revealed through these deliberative processes, and a shared willingness to reform those processes if they come into conflict with values that are revealed through further deliberation.

With these cases in mind, we would like to close by noting two points that warrant further consideration. First, we have not considered the possibility of robustly shared desires. Doing so would require explaining the possibility of shared connotative states—something that is not required for robustly shared interests or values. While such states could exist, it is not immediately evident how to establish that fact. Perhaps this limitation reveals a deep fact about connotative states, or perhaps it reveals little more than a failure of imagination. In either case, this limitation points towards another point that seems worthy of further reflection. While robustly shared values and interests may play an integral role in some of most normatively significant relationships that humans can achieve, it may prove difficult to create the structural mechanisms required to sustain the bi-directional feedback necessary for such values and interests. In other words, we believe that values and interests can become deeply integrated into patterns of ongoing collective activity. Borrowing a phrase from Rawls (1999, 452), we would even go so far as to say that it is only as partners, collaborators, and participants in collective practices governed by robustly shared values and interests that we "cease to be mere fragments". But the world we currently inhabit too often fosters atomization and separation. And that means, perhaps tragically, that our current social world may be poorly suited to fostering such values and interests. So while it is quite possible to create and maintain values and interests that are fully ours, rather than simply mine and thine, in our current fragmented and fractured world, such robustly shared values and interests may prove to be quite rare.

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**Related Topics:** Interpersonal Obligations in Joint Action; Joint commitment; Shared emotions

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Kirk Ludwig for asking us to clarify this point; for a detailed discussion of such issues, see Gilbert (2014).