

WORKING PAPER · IRISP/2026/004

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Defining Shared Perceptions: A Conceptual Framework

Abstract

The concept at the centre of the institute's work — the shared perception — is used widely and defined rarely. This working paper proposes a working definition: a belief about a state of the world that is held in common across a social group, is treated by its holders as description rather than preference, and is capable of being compared with evidence.

The paper distinguishes shared perceptions from neighbouring concepts — opinion, attitude, value and sentiment — and argues that the distinction matters for measurement: a perception can be wrong in a way an opinion cannot, and the distance between a perception and the evidence is itself a measurable quantity.

As a working paper, this text is published to invite criticism. The definition it proposes will be revised in the light of responses and of the institute's first measurement round.

1 · The working definition

A shared perception, as the institute uses the term, is a belief about a state of the world that satisfies three conditions. It is held in common: measurably present across a social group rather than idiosyncratic to individuals. It is descriptive in the eyes of its holders: people treat it as a statement about how things are, not about how they would like them to be. And it is confrontable: at least in principle, evidence bears on it.

Each condition does work. The first separates the social fact from private belief and makes the group, not the individual, the unit of study. The second separates perception from preference — and explains why perceptions can be corrected, resisted, or exploited in ways preferences cannot. The third is what makes a perception measurable against the world, and it is the condition on which the institute's programme depends.

2 · Neighbouring concepts

Opinion is the broadest neighbour: it includes preferences and evaluations that no evidence could settle. Attitude adds an affective charge and a disposition to act. Value names what a person holds worthy, and sentiment the diffuse mood of a public. A shared perception can travel with any of these — a perception of rising crime may feed an attitude of fear and a punitive policy preference — but it is none of them, and it is the only one of them whose distance from the evidence can be measured.

3 · Why the distinction matters for measurement

An instrument that cannot tell perception from preference produces findings that cannot be compared with indicators, and a public debate that cannot be held to evidence. The practical test proposed here is the correction test: if a respondent, shown the best available indicator, would regard their answer as having been right or wrong, the question measured a perception; if the indicator would strike them as beside the point, it measured something else.

4 · Status of this paper

This is a working paper: its definition is proposed, not settled. Criticism is invited through the institute's correspondence channel, and the definition will be revisited after the first measurement round has tested it against practice.

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