

Research Report

Picture Yourself at the Polls

Visual Perspective in Mental Imagery Affects Self-Perception and Behavior

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ABSTRACT—*The present research demonstrates that the visual perspective—own first-person versus observer's third-person—people use to picture themselves engaging in a potential future action affects their self-perceptions and subsequent behavior. On the eve of the 2004 U.S. presidential election, registered voters in Ohio were instructed to use either the first-person or the third-person perspective to picture themselves voting in the election. Picturing voting from the third-person perspective caused subjects to adopt a stronger pro-voting mind-set correspondent with the imagined behavior. Further, this effect on self-perception carried over to behavior, causing subjects who were instructed to picture voting from the third-person perspective to be significantly more likely to vote in the election. These findings extend previous research in autobiographical memory and social judgment linking the observer's perspective with dispositional attributions, and demonstrate the causal role of imagery in determining future behavior.*

Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will. George Bernard Shaw (1921, p. 9)

Everyone faces the challenge of following through on good intentions. There are many people who intend to donate to charity, exercise more, and vote in elections, but far fewer who actually do so (e.g., Sheeran, 2002). One bit of advice sometimes given to people who are trying to achieve a goal is to picture themselves achieving it. Indeed, imagining oneself engaging in behaviors can make one more likely to actually engage in those behaviors (e.g., Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982). Existing research

has not investigated the role of visual imagery in this process; however, some researchers have suggested that imagery is a crucial component of goal representations (Conway, Meares, & Standart, 2004). The present experiment investigated whether a qualitative difference in people's mental images of themselves engaging in a desired future action—namely, voting in the 2004 U.S. presidential election—would affect their likelihood of following through with that action.

One intriguing fact about the way people picture life events is that they do not always use their own *first-person* visual perspective; sometimes they use an observer's *third-person* visual perspective so that they see themselves in the image (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Research in autobiographical memory shows that the visual perspective people use to picture a past event affects their present emotions, self-judgments, and even behavior (Libby, Eibach, & Gilovich, 2005; McIsaac & Eich, 2002; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Given that memory and imagination rely on many of the same cognitive processes (Bartlett, 1932; Levine et al., 1998), the visual perspective people use when picturing potential future actions should also have important effects.

Shifting visual perspective in imagery may appear to be a minor manipulation: One is still thinking about the event, regardless of the visual perspective. However, the differential effect of adopting one's own versus an outsider's perspective is crucial to understanding a wide variety of phenomena across many domains of psychology (e.g., cognitive development: Piaget, 1932; neuroscience of self-awareness and agency: Decety & Grezes, 2006; self-concept: Baldwin & Holmes, 1987; self-control: Prencipe & Zelazo, 2005; clinical disorders: Clark & Wells, 1995; attitude change: Bem, 1972; social understanding: Barresi & Moore, 1996; empathy: Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997). The present experiment grew out of a well-established effect from social psychology: Perspective affects perceptions of the cause of behavior. Observers tend to understand behavior as a function of the actor's disposition, whereas actors tend to understand their behavior as a function of the situation (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). One reason for this effect is

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the different visual perspectives that observers and actors have on the behavior. The actor is visually focal for observers, whereas the situation is visually focal for actors, and people tend to attribute cause to focal factors (Storms, 1973).

Further research in autobiographical memory has investigated the impact of this perspective difference on people's explanations for their own past behavior. People see their past behavior as more caused by their disposition when they picture that behavior from the third-person perspective, rather than from the first-person perspective (Frank & Gilovich, 1989). This effect may contribute to people's tendency to think about themselves in more dispositional terms in the distant past than in the recent past (Moore, Sherrod, Liu, & Underwood, 1979), because older memories are more likely recalled from the third-person perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Other research suggests analogous effects when thinking about the distant versus near future: People are more likely to picture their distant future selves than their near future selves from the third-person perspective (D'Argembeau & Van der Linden, 2004) and are more likely to think about their distant future selves than their near future selves in dispositional terms (Pronin & Ross, 2006).

The present experiment built on previous findings to investigate how the visual perspective people use to picture themselves engaging in a desired future behavior—voting—affects their likelihood of following through with that behavior. Given that actions are seen more as a reflection of one's own character when pictured from the third-person than from the first-person perspective, we predicted that picturing oneself voting from the third-person perspective would cause people to attribute more pro-voting sentiments to themselves and would cause people to be more likely to actually vote. To test this prediction, we recruited registered voters to participate in an on-line experiment the night before the 2004 U.S. presidential election. We manipulated the perspective they used to picture themselves voting and measured the impact of this manipulation on their self-perceptions as voters. After the election, we followed up to determine whether they voted.

METHOD

Subjects

Two hundred fifty-six undergraduates (163 female) at The Ohio State University completed the preelection questionnaire on-line for course credit. Subjects who had already voted ($n = 95$), who were not registered to vote ($n = 1$), who did not indicate if they were registered ($n = 1$), or who did not indicate if they had already voted ($n = 6$) were excluded from analyses. Seven subjects (4 in the third-person condition) were excluded for failing the manipulation check (described later).

The final preelection sample consisted of 146 subjects (94 female), 69 in the first-person condition and 77 in the third-person condition. Their mean age was 19.3 years ($SD = 3.02$ years). Of this sample, 53.4% indicated that they would vote for

George W. Bush, 45.2% indicated that they would vote for John Kerry, and 1.4% indicated that they were undecided. Condition assignment was independent of candidate preference, and exclusion from analysis was independent of condition and candidate preference ($\chi^2_s < 2.90$, $ps > .30$).

Ninety-five subjects from the preelection sample (65%) responded to the postelection follow-up questionnaire in exchange for course credit or the chance to win a \$50 Amazon.com gift certificate. There were no significant differences in response rate according to condition or candidate preference ($\chi^2_s < .74$, $ps > .50$).

Materials and Procedure

Preelection

Subjects were recruited for an on-line study of imagination. Although it was specified that subjects must be registered voters to take part, no other connection to voting or the election was mentioned in recruitment. At 6:30 p.m. on November 1, 2004, subjects received an e-mail with a link to one of two versions of the questionnaire. Subjects were randomly assigned to these versions, which differed only in the instructions for the imagery perspective to be taken. Subjects completed the questionnaire on their own computers any time up until the polls opened on November 2, 2004, at 6:30 a.m.

After providing demographic information, subjects read that they would be asked to imagine themselves engaging in a particular action in the future and should follow instructions for how to picture the image. They received either first-person or third-person visualization instructions (third-person wording in brackets):

You should picture doing the action from a first-person [third-person] visual perspective. With the first-person [third-person] visual perspective you see the event from the visual perspective you [an observer] would have if the event were actually taking place. That is, you are looking out at your surroundings through your own eyes [you see yourself in the image, as well as your surroundings].

Subjects were then instructed to close their eyes and use the specified perspective to picture themselves “voting in the upcoming presidential election.” When they had the image in mind, they were to hold it there and respond “yes” or “no” to the following question, which varied by condition and served as the manipulation check (third-person wording in brackets):

As you're picturing it right now, do you see [yourself in] the scene from the visual perspective you [an observer] would have if the event were actually taking place?

A response of “no” constituted failure of the manipulation check.

Next, subjects used scales ranging from *not at all* (1) to *completely* (7) to rate how well five phrases described their image: “influencing the election,” “marking a ballot,” “fulfilling my duty as a citizen,” “making my opinions heard,” and “selecting my candidate’s name.”

Subjects went on to complete the main preelection dependent measures, which were designed to assess their self-perceptions as voters. While continuing to use the specified perspective to picture themselves voting, subjects used a 7-point scale, ranging from *extremely good* (+3) to *extremely bad* (−3) to indicate how good or bad it was to vote in the upcoming election. Then they used 5-point scales ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely or a great deal* (5) to indicate how personally important it was to vote in the election, how likely it was that they would vote, how much their vote would make a difference, how much regret they would experience if they did not vote and their candidate lost, and how satisfied they would be if they voted and their candidate won. Next, it was explained that sometimes people plan to vote but encounter problems. Subjects considered three potential deterrents they might face on Election Day: (a) “There is a 20-min wait in line in order to vote,” (b) “The candidate you support is definitely going to win in your state,” and (c) “You can’t find anyone to go to the polling place with you.” Subjects used a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely* (5) to indicate how likely they would be to vote if they encountered each deterrent.

Finally, subjects used 7-point scales ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely* (7) to indicate the extent to which they were feeling excited, scared, bored, happy, nervous, determined, inspired, sad, unmotivated, and hopeful.

The final page of the questionnaire thanked subjects for their time and presented links to information on voters’ rights, voter registration, and polling locations.

Postelection

On November 22, 2004, all subjects received an e-mail inviting them to respond to an on-line survey within the following 4 days. The questionnaire began with the following item, modeled on those used to assess voting behavior in the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey and the American National Election Studies:

In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren’t registered, they were sick, or they just didn’t have time. How about you—did you vote in the most recent presidential election?

Subjects responded by choosing “No, I didn’t vote” or “Yes, I voted.”¹

¹Using self-administered surveys (e.g., Internet questionnaires) rather than human interviewers significantly reduces social-desirability pressures on behavioral self-reports (voting: Holbrook & Krosnick, 2006; other behaviors: Tourangeau & Smith, 1996).

RESULTS

Building on the finding that picturing one’s own actions from the third-person perspective leads to a more dispositional interpretation of the visualized behavior than does picturing one’s actions from the first-person perspective, we predicted that subjects who pictured voting from the third-person perspective would adopt a stronger mind-set correspondent with voting behavior and thus would be more likely to vote in the election than would subjects who pictured voting from the first-person perspective.

Pro-Voting Mind-Set

To assess the effect of perspective on subjects’ self-perceptions as voters, we created a composite pro-voting index by standardizing and averaging responses on the main preelection dependent measures (attitude, importance, likelihood, vote impact, regret, satisfaction, and responses to the three problem scenarios; $\alpha = .82$). As predicted, picturing voting from the third-person perspective caused subjects to adopt a stronger pro-voting mind-set ($M = .10$, $SD = .58$) than did picturing voting from the first-person perspective ($M = -.11$, $SD = .69$), $t(144) = 2.07$, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .93$, $d = 0.33$.

Voting Behavior

The next question was whether the effect of perspective on pro-voting mind-set on Election Eve would carry over to behavior on Election Day. Indeed, it did. Picturing voting from the third-person perspective caused subjects to be more likely to vote, as indicated by their responses to the postelection questionnaire. A full 90% of respondents in the third-person condition voted, compared with 72% of those in the first-person condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 95) = 5.04$, $p < .03$, $p_{rep} = .94$. Further analysis (MacKinnon & Dwyer, 1993) suggested that pro-voting mind-set mediated the effect of perspective on voting behavior (see Fig. 1).

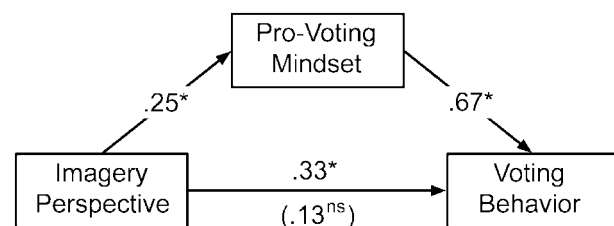


Fig. 1. Mediation analysis relating imagery perspective and pro-voting mind-set to voting behavior, Sobel $z = 1.85$, $p < .07$, $p_{rep} = .90$. Numbers on the paths are standardized regression coefficients. Imagery perspective was coded −1 for first-person and +1 for third-person. Voting behavior was coded 0 for nonvoting and 1 for voting. Asterisks indicate coefficients significantly different from zero, $*p < .05$, $p_{rep} > .93$. The number in parentheses is the standardized regression coefficient for imagery perspective when pro-voting mind-set was included in the equation.

DISCUSSION

Simply varying the visual perspective that individuals used to picture themselves engaging in a desirable future behavior affected their self-perceptions and their likelihood of following through with that behavior: Registered voters who were instructed to picture themselves voting from the third-person perspective subsequently adopted a stronger pro-voting mindset than those instructed to picture themselves voting from the first-person perspective, and were consequently more likely to vote. These results suggest an important implication of the fact that actions are perceived to be more a function of the actor's character when viewed from an observer's perspective than when viewed from the actor's perspective (Storms, 1973). Seeing oneself as the type of person who would engage in a desired behavior increases the likelihood of engaging in that behavior.

The present findings are particularly noteworthy given that the experiment was conducted in Ohio during the 2004 presidential election. That campaign focused on volatile issues of war, terrorism, and same-sex marriage and involved unprecedented efforts to mobilize voter turnout in Ohio, a crucial swing state (Dao, 2004). The fact that our manipulation affected voter turnout even in this complex field of motivational forces demonstrates the potential power of self-focused imagery. The success of this manipulation was likely due to its giving direction to a process—visual imagination—that people use naturally to plan future actions. Indeed, visual imagery of upcoming situations is quite common in everyday life (Singer & McCraven, 1961). The present findings demonstrate that with some guidance, this imagery can be harnessed to alter self-perceptions and behavior.

Specifically, we found that people are more likely to adjust their self-concepts to match a desired behavior if that behavior is imagined from a third-person, observer's perspective rather than a first-person, experienter's perspective. Subjects who imagined voting from the third-person perspective saw themselves as more likely to vote and more motivated to overcome obstacles to voting compared with those using first-person imagery. Third-person imagery also led subjects to anticipate feelings of regret and satisfaction consistent with internalizing voting as a personal norm (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). And subjects who imagined from the third-person perspective reported beliefs about the importance and impact of voting that were consistent with stronger self-identification as voters. Cumulatively, these effects on self-perceptions compelled persons in the third-person visualization condition to turn out in greater numbers on Election Day than did persons in the first-person condition. These findings suggest that self-focused imagery can affect meaningful behaviors by altering self-perceptions. Therefore, the injunction to "picture yourself" performing a desired behavior may, in fact, be an effective strategy for translating good intentions into practical actions.

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