Seeing the Links Among the Personal Past, Present, and Future: How Imagery Perspective in Mental Simulation Functions in Defining the Temporally Extended Self

Lisa K. Libby and Richard P. Eibach

INTRODUCTION

Joan Didion's autobiographical play, The Year of Magical Thinking, is based on her memoir of the same title and depicts the events from a period in her life that included both the unexpected death of her husband and the prolonged illness and eventual death of her only child. Describing the process of adapting the story for the Broadway stage, Didion commented:

I never thought of the character who would appear onstage in this play as me, I thought of her as “the speaker,” or “she.” I thought of myself as the witness, the watcher, the auditor, the audience. .... It would be logical to assume that I adopted this distance to protect myself. It would also be wrong. The idea that whoever appeared onstage would play not me but a character was central to imagining how to make the narrative: I would need to see myself from outside. (2007, p. 87)

Didion's remarks suggest that reflecting on life experiences from an outside perspective facilitates the process of making sense of those events and constructing a coherent story. Few of us will ever write a formal autobiography, let alone see our life events played out by an actor on the Broadway stage. However, in the process of developing a self-concept, people do tend to integrate their life experiences into a coherent framework that follows a narrative structure (McAdams, 2001; Singer, 2004), and when thinking about life events people do often see those events played out with imagery in their mind's eye (Atance & O'Neill, 2001; Pillemer, 1998). Further, in this mental imagery people sometimes use an observer's visual perspective so that they see themselves from the outside (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Does the visual perspective people use to picture life events play a role in the process of integrating those events into a broader framework, as Didion's remarks suggest? If so, what are the consequences for the self-concept, self-judgment, and behavior?
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Any given life event is characterized by a particular experience in and of itself but also has the potential to take on broader meaning when considered in the context of one’s life as a whole (McAdams, 2001; Pillemer, 1998). The expressions above suggest that a person’s visual perspective on an event is related to whether the person focuses on the immediate experience of an event or reflects on what it means in a broader context. For example, when a student is bogged down in the immediate challenges of writing a dissertation we might encourage her to revel in the broader significance of her efforts, saying, “Look at yourself—you’re earning a Ph.D.!” Or, when a friend is enjoying that second piece of cake, we might warn him of the implications for his waistline, saying, “Look at yourself, you’re throwing away your diet!” When we use such expressions we do not expect a person to literally step outside themselves and take a look, but research on imagery perspective in mental simulations of past and future events suggests that there is literal truth to the metaphor underlying these figures of speech. Specifically, picturing an event from a first-person visual perspective is related to adopting an experiential mindset in which people attend to the specific actions, sensory information, and thoughts and feelings that characterize their response to the event in and of itself. On the other hand, picturing an event from a third-person visual perspective is related to adopting a reflective mindset in which people integrate the pictured event with other events or self-knowledge, drawing broad conclusions about personal traits, goals, or life themes (Libby & Eibach, 2008).

For example, research investigating the emotional experience that accompanies the mental simulation of events from the personal past shows that there is a bidirectional relationship between imagery perspective and the reliving of past emotion: Focusing on reliving past emotional reactions causes people to picture events from the first-person perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983), and deliberately switching from first-person to third-person imagery can reduce reliving of past emotion (Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Other research has investigated the causal influences people make about their own past behavior, depending on the perspective they use to picture it. Using the third-person as opposed to first-person perspective when recalling a social interaction caused individuals to interpret their own past behavior as more a function of their personal dispositions (Frank & Gilovich, 1989). Dispositional inferences suggest a focus on the broader significance of an event: If behavior is caused by an individual’s disposition, it implies something about that individual that transcends the specific situation in which the behavior occurred.

In our own research, we have shown that imagery perspective affects not only the perceived cause of actions but the very definition of what those actions are and has an effect not only on inferences regarding traits but on inferences regarding goals as well (Libby, Shaeffer, & Eibach, 2008). Any action (e.g., locking a door) can be defined in many different ways, and these descriptions can be ordered on a continuum from concrete to abstract. Concrete construals (e.g., turning a key) describe a behavior in terms of discrete actions, whereas abstract construals ascribe a broader meaning, often suggesting something about the superordinate goals or traits of the actor (e.g., securing the house, being responsible). In a test of whether imagery perspective affects construal level, participants were assigned to use either the first-person or third-person perspective to picture themselves doing a range of common everyday actions such as locking a door and were asked to choose between concrete and abstract construals of those actions. Results showed that participants were more likely to choose abstract construals when they pictured actions from the third-person than from the first-person perspective. This effect held both for items for which abstract construals referred to traits (e.g., being responsible) and items for which abstract construals referred to superordinate goals (e.g., securing the house) (Libby, Shaeffer, & Eibach, 2008). As do traits, superordinate goals highlight the reasons and consequences for actions rather than the concrete details of the action itself (Valicher & Wegner, 1985), and thus the results support the idea that third-person imagery leads people to reflect on the broader meaning of actions.

Analogous effects emerge with regard to the way people describe actual events from their lives. For example, in one study participants were assigned to picture an event from either the first-person or third-person perspective and later describe what went through their minds while picturing the event (Kross et al., 2005). Analysis of these responses revealed that participants who were assigned

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FIGURE 2.41 Proportion of participants who placed their graduation from the third-person perspective depending on whether the event was in the past, the future, and whether they were undergraduate or university graduates. (After event, participants were more likely to use the first-person perspective than the third-person perspective. On the other hand, third-person perspective was more likely to be used after event, participants were more likely to use the first-person perspective than the third-person perspective. On the other hand, third-person perspective was more likely to be used after event.)

Looking into the Past: Imagery, Perspective, and Perceptions of Change in the Self

Kim Bokards, EN (Gao, 2007, P. 13)

Handbook of Imagination and Mental Simulation

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Woman changed by feminist movement (Goodman, 1979, p. 69)

These examples highlight the phenomenological differences associated with recalling events, depending on whether one still identifies with a past self. When the nurse recalls her first time in the delivery room—an event central to her present identity—she focuses on the experience of the event in and of itself, reliving it in the present as if she were her past self again. On the other hand, the woman changed by the feminist movement adopts a reflective stance on her past, noting the inconsistencies that emerge when that past is placed in relation to the present. This woman's remark that her past self seems like a different person is not uncommon among people who have experienced a major life change (e.g., Bierenz, 1986; Matheson & Stamm, 1995). In light of the research we have just reviewed, these anecdotal observations raise the question of whether self-change prompts people to picture past selves from a third-person perspective and whether a shift in focus from the experience of an event to its broader meaning might contribute to such an effect. Further, given that people often seek to change themselves in desirable ways by overcoming negative past selves, would deliberately adopting one perspective or the other when recalling a past self have any impact on perceived or actual self-improvement?

How Self-Change Affects Imagery Perspective

We have found that self-change is indeed associated with a tendency to picture past selves from the third-person perspective. For example, in one study undergraduates recalled five memories from high school related to an aspect of themselves that had since changed and five memories from the same time period but related to an aspect that had remained stable up to the present. Participants' reports of memory perspective showed that they used the third-person perspective for 60% of their memories related to changed aspects of themselves but for only 33% of their memories related to stable aspects (Libby & Eibach, 2002). Why does self-change produce this tendency to view one's past self from an outside perspective?

When people think about changes in themselves, they tend to focus on changes for the better because improvement reflects positively on the present self (Perunovic & Wilson, Chapter 23, this volume; Ross & Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2000). Thus, it is possible that one reason people tend to picture prechange selves from the third-person perspective is to separate their present self from an undesirable past. Such an effect would be consistent with research showing that people manage subjective perceptions of temporal distance in the service of protecting the present self from undesirable past selves: People report feeling as if their past faults and foibles occurred longer ago in time than did their past successes, even when the objective distance is the same (Ross & Wilson, 2002). On the other hand, the anecdotal examples we have cited so far in this chapter suggest that imagery perspective could function differently with regard to the self-concept than subjective temporal distance does. In the opening quotation of the chapter, Dideron (2007) claimed that she adopted a distanced observer perspective on her past experiences not to protect herself but rather to facilitate the process of fitting her experiences into a coherent narrative. The quotations at the beginning of this section suggest that self-change may affect whether a person focuses on the experience of a past event when recalling it or on how that event relates to broader patterns in their life. Perhaps it is this shift in mental focus, rather than a motivation to protect the present self, that explains the shift in imagery perspective that occurs when people change.

To test the viability of these two accounts, we again conducted a study in which undergraduates recalled high school memories (Libby & Eibach, 2008, Study 1). This time, however, we not only specified that those memories either be related to changed or stable aspects of the self but also whether the changed aspects should represent improvements or decline and whether the stable aspects should be positive or negative. Thus, across four conditions in the experiment participants recalled memories of positive or negative past selves that were either consistent or inconsistent with the present self. To the extent that the tendency to use third-person imagery when recalling prechange events is driven by a motivation to separate the present self from undesirable past selves, the relationship between self-change and third-person imagery should depend on the valence of the past self. Specifically, people should experience less third-person imagery when they recall events related to ways their past selves were inferior to the present and more third-person imagery when they recall events related to enduring negative qualities of the self. Participants' reports of memory perspective provided no support for such a conclusion, however. Participants experienced more third-person imagery when their past selves were inconsistent with their present selves than when they were consistent, regardless of whether those past selves were perceived to be negative or positive (see Figure 24.2). Thus, the tendency to recall prechange selves from the third-person perspective does not appear to be motivated by a desire to separate the present self from negative past selves.

Further research suggests that, instead, the effect of self-change on imagery perspective is a function of how self-change influences people's focus on the experience of past events versus their meaning in a broader context. People are motivated to maintain a coherent sense of self over time (McAdams, 1997; Vinicky-Seroussi, 1998). When people change, their past selves are no longer consistent with their present self. Such inconsistency creates a threat to coherence, but people can successfully resolve the threat by generating an explanation for the past self's behavior that links it to their current personality (Ross & McFarland, 1988). For example, they may frame a discrepant past event as a turning point or as a stage in the evolution of their present self (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). Doing so involves thinking about the event in terms of its relation to broader themes in one's life rather than focusing on the concrete experience, and it is this shift in mental focus that appears to be responsible for the effect of self-change on imagery perspective.

Supporting this account, when consistency between past and present selves is experimentally manipulated, inconsistency causes people to picture past selves from a third-person perspective (Libby & Eibach, 2002, Studies 2 and 3). Furthermore, inconsistency between past and present selves encourages a focus on the meaning of an event in relation to one's life as a whole (Libby & Eibach, 2007, Study 2). To test whether these effects explain the relationship between self-change and imagery perspective, we asked participants to recall an event related either to a dimension of themselves that had since changed or a dimension that had remained the same up to the present. In addition to reporting the visual perspective of the images they experienced when picturing the event, participants also described the event in writing and completed a checklist measuring the
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have important consequences for well-being (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Carver & Scheier, 1990; Hsee & Abelson, 1991) and success at self-improvement (Rothman, 2000), we wondered whether imagery perspective could be deliberately controlled to influence perceptions of change in the self since an event occurred. If the third-person perspective eases people to think about the meaning of an event as it relates to broader patterns in their life, the third-person perspective should accentuate perceived change when people consider an event to be a part of a trajectory of change but should accentuate perceived continuity when people consider an event to be related to an enduring aspect of the self, and this could have important consequences for self-judgments and behavior in the present.

No doubt, one determinant of people’s beliefs about change in the self over time is how much they have actually changed. However, perceptions of change and stability are also influenced by subjective and contextual factors. One such factor is whether the past self is positive or negative. People are generally motivated to see themselves developing over time in a way that maintains a positive view of the present self (Perunovic & Wilson, Chapter 23, this volume; Ross & Wilson, 2000). This is not to say that people will not acknowledge enduring negative aspects of themselves or ways they may have declined over time (in fact, a study we described earlier provides an example of just such awareness, Libby & Eibach, 2008); however, to the extent there is any ambiguity about change or stability in the self, people appear to give themselves the benefit of the doubt. Third-person imagery causes people to try to integrate an event into their life as a whole. If people tend to give themselves the benefit of the doubt, then all else being equal, the process of integrating an event into one’s life should highlight themes of continuity when a past self is positive but themes of change when the past self is negative. Thus, the third-person perspective should tend to accentuate perceived stability in the self when people recall positive past selves but perceived change when they recall evaluative past selves.

For example, returning to one’s alma mater for a college reunion might trigger memories of events—good and bad—that occurred during one’s college years. All else being equal, when one reflects from the third-person perspective on how a positive past moment, such as winning an award, fits into one’s life as a whole one is likely to think about a chain of similar achievements in the course of one’s life, thus accentuating continuity in the self over time. However, when one reflects from the third-person perspective on a less-flattering college moment, such as a night spent partying when one should have been hitting the books, one is likely to think about the ways one has matured and grown over time, thus accentuating change in the self. Consistent with this line of reasoning, we have found that picturing a proud past moment from the third-person perspective causes people to believe they have changed less since the event occurred than when they picture it from the first-person perspective, but that picturing a past social blunder from the third-person perspective causes them to believe they have changed more since the event occurred than when they picture it from the first-person perspective (Libby, Eibach, & Gilovich, 2005).

Such subjective perceptions of change can even have effects on observable behavior. In the study in which people recalled a social blunder they not only said they changed more after picturing the event from the third-person perspective, they also acted as if they had changed more by demonstrating greater social skill in a social interaction following the memory task. Additional data support the idea that the pattern of results observed when people recalled positive and negative past selves is a function of the differential theories of change that are invoked when people consider positive versus negative events in the broader context of their life as a whole and not a function of the positivity or negativity of the events per se. A similar pattern of results emerges—with third-person imagery accentuating the influence of default assumptions about continuity or change in the self over time—regardless of whether these default assumptions are a function of goals, experimental instructions, or individual differences (Libby et al., 2005).

The fact that third-person imagery appears to accentuate the subjective meaning of life events, influencing beliefs about the self, and even behavior, suggests that third-person imagery should lead people to draw more extreme conclusions in line with their broad theories not just regarding continuity and change but other dimensions as well. Preliminary results from our lab, investigating
the role of individual difference variables such as self-esteem and attachment style in moderating the effect of perspective on related judgments and emotion, provide support for this idea. Overall, our research suggests that when people step outside of themselves and picture past events from an external perspective, they do not adopt a dispassionate, objective view but rather tend to see an exaggerated image of who they think they are. Given that the temporally extended self includes both past and potential future events, the findings we have described involving imagery perspective in memory raise the question of whether imagery perspective also plays a role in integrating potential future actions with the temporally extended self. Before concluding, we describe the beginnings of a new line of research that investigates this question.

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE: IMAGERY PERSPECTIVE AND FOLLOWING THROUGH ON GOOD INTENTIONS

Relative to first-person imagery, third-person imagery makes people more likely to integrate a specific event with broader knowledge and beliefs about the self. Specifically, our own research demonstrates that people are more likely to construe imagined actions in relation to goals and identities when picturing those actions from the third-person perspective. For these reasons, the perspective people use to picture the future has the potential to affect the self-concept—including goals and personal strivings—with important implications for present behavior. In an initial investigation of these possibilities, we focused on the question of how imagery perspective might influence people’s abilities to follow through with good intentions.

George Bernard Shaw (1921, p. 9) suggested the power of imagination in helping people follow through with their goals: “Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will.” Indeed, there is evidence that imagining one’s self engaging in actions makes one more likely to actually engage in those actions (Gregory, Ciardini, & Carpenter, 1982). However, despite intuitive notions about the role of imagery in goal pursuit when people have an important goal they are often given the advice to “picture” themselves achieving it—there is relatively little work that directly investigates the process (cf. Conway, Meares, & Standart, 2004; Kosslyn & Moulton, Chapter 3, this volume; Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1969; Schultheiss & Brunstein, 1999). We were interested in whether the visual perspective that people adopt when picturing desired future actions would affect the inferences they drew about themselves and thus their likelihood of following through with the imagined actions. We chose to address this question in the context of the 2004 U.S. presidential election.

There are many Americans who register to vote, presumably with the goal of being a voting citizen, but then never make it to the polls on election day. We were interested in whether the visual perspective that registered voters used to picture themselves voting in an upcoming election would influence their likelihood of following through with their goal to vote. Given that people tend to think about specific actions in terms of broader life themes, including goals and identities, when they picture those actions from the third-person than from the first-person perspective, we predicted that picturing voting from the third-person as opposed to the first-person perspective would highlight registered voters’ identities as voters and make them more likely to behave in line with this goal come election day.

To test this hypothesis, we recruited registered voters in Ohio to take part in an online study the night before the 2004 U.S. presidential election (Libby, Shaeffer, Elbich, & Slemmer, 2007). Participants were randomly assigned to use the first-person or third-person perspective to picture themselves voting the next day and then completed measures designed to tap into their self-perceptions as voters (e.g., importance of voting, how much their vote made a difference). After the election, we followed up with participants to find out whether they voted. Results revealed that not only did third-person imagery cause registered voters to express stronger identities as voters the night before the election, but as a result, it also caused them to be more likely to turn out to the polls on election day: 90% of participants in the third-person condition voted compared with 72% in the first-per-

son condition. Another pair of studies provided converging evidence that third-person imagery of desired future actions can facilitate goal pursuit by enhancing motivation relative to first-person imagery (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007).

These findings suggest that because third-person imagery leads people to think about specific actions in relation to broader themes in their lives such as goals and identities, the visual perspective people use to imagine desirable future behavior can have important consequences for their ability to follow through on good intentions. Other research demonstrates that framing specific actions in relation to broader goals and identities has a range of implications for the process of goal pursuit (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006). Thus, we expect that our ongoing investigations will reveal further ways in which imagery perspective is a useful tool for successful goal completion. More generally, the present results provide reason to believe that third-person imagery functions to integrate the self across time, not only looking into the past, but also looking into the future.

CONCLUSION

The visual perspective people use to picture life events is related to the mental focus people adopt when simulating those events. Reflecting on how a specific event relates to broader themes in one’s life prompts people to picture that event from the third-person perspective. Moreover, adopting this perspective facilitates the process, causing people’s reactions to be driven more by the broad meaning of those events in their lives when they picture those events from the third-person than from the first-person perspective. Consistent with the intuitions Dillon (2007) expressed in the opening quotation of this chapter, the research we have reviewed here suggests that third-person imagery serves as a phenomenological equivalent of narrative, linking specific events with life themes and general beliefs about the self. Through this mechanism, imagery perspective functions in defining the temporally extended self-concept, influencing self-judgment and shaping behavior. Thus, when people look into the past and the future from a third-person perspective they see the self across time, and this has important implications for who they are in the present moment.

NOTES

1. People experience mental imagery in both visual and nonvisual sensory domains (Neisser, 1967), and perspective can be defined on various dimensions, including visual point of view, conceptual knowledge, and emotion. In the present chapter, we focus specifically on visual point of view in mental images. Thus, for ease of presentation, unless otherwise indicated we use the term imagery perspective to refer specifically to the visual point of view in artificially generated mental images.

2. Previous work suggests that temporal self-comparisons result in assimilation when a past self is included in the present self but contrast when the past self is excluded from the present self (Markman & McMillen, 2003; Schwarz & Bless, 1992). Although it could be hypothesized that imagery perspective would serve as a direct cue to include (first person) or exclude (third person) the past self in the present, the pattern of results described here, which is representative of the pattern observed across multiple experiments (Libby et al., 2005; Libby, Pfaut, Valent, & Elbich, 2008; Marigold, Libby, Ross, & Holmes, 2008), contradicts this hypothesis. Rather than functioning as a direct cue for inclusion/exclusion, imagery perspective affects mindset (experiential or reflective), and a reflective mindset can accentuate the impact of inclusion and exclusion on self-judgment. That imagery perspective is related to mindset and not inclusion/exclusion is also supported by results we described showing that third-person imagery is not a direct result of self-change but rather a result of the fact that self-change shifts people from an experiential to reflective mindset.

REFERENCES


