

Effect of Memory Perspective on Retrospective Causal Attributions

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Two studies examined whether people's retrospective causal attributions might be mediated by the visual perspective from which events are recalled. In Study 1, pairs of Ss participated in "get-acquainted" conversations and made a series of attribution ratings for their performance. They returned 3 weeks later to rerate their performance on the same attribution scales and to indicate the perspective from which they remembered their earlier conversation. Ss reported either "observer" memories in which they could "see" themselves from the outside or "field" memories in which their field of view matched that of the original situation. Study 2 was identical to Study 1 with the exception that Ss' memory perspectives were manipulated via verbal instructions. In both experiments, conversations that were recalled from an observer's perspective were attributed more dispositionally. These results suggest that the different perspectives from which events can be recalled function much like the divergent visual perspectives available to actors and observers in immediate, everyday experience. Discussion of these results focuses on how they further understanding of the contradictory findings reported in the literature on temporal shifts in attributions.

You are young, my son, and, as the years go by, time will change and even reverse many of your present opinions.

—Plato, *The Republic*

Plato's advice is frequently given by parents to children, by teachers to students, and, more generally, by the wise to the innocent. His assertion is an empirical fact of human experience, a fact that stems mainly from the tendency to acquire new information and change values as one grows older. This new information or change of values provides a radically different perspective from which old events, opinions, and beliefs are viewed. There is little wonder, then, that events can look much different after the passage of time. But what about the effect of the passage of time itself? Can the mere passing of time, without the addition of new information or a change of values, affect one's assessments of events?

Recent research indicates that it can, at least with respect to causal attributions. Several investigators have shown that people tend to attribute their behavior more to dispositional factors with the passage of time (Moore, Sherrod, Liu, & Underwood, 1979; Peterson, 1980). In one study, subjects were asked to describe themselves into a tape recorder. Half of them then made attributions for their talkativeness, nervousness, friendliness, and assertiveness immediately afterwards; the remaining subjects delayed making these attributions until 3 weeks later. It

was found that for three of the four behaviors mentioned, subjects in the delayed attribution condition gave significantly more dispositional attributions for their behavior. A follow-up study using a within-subjects, repeated measures design obtained the same dispositional shift (Moore et al., 1979, Experiment 2).

A more naturalistic study examined people's attributions about more significant events in their everyday lives: their first day of elementary school, a day in college, and so forth. The participants' comments about these events were coded for dispositional and situational attributions, and it was found that more dispositional attributions were made for events that occurred in the more distant past than for more recent events (Peterson, 1980).

Thus, people's attributions tend to become more dispositional with the passage of time (however, see Miller & Porter, 1980, for an exception that is discussed in more detail later). What is the mechanism that produces this shift? It has been suggested that this phenomenon could be accounted for by a transformation or distortion of "visual perspective" as people's memories get older. Moore et al. (1979, p. 555) proposed that "recalling one's past behavior may be analogous to watching oneself from an observer's perspective." Thus, although memories of recent events may be "viewed" from one's original perspective, they may shift to an observer's perspective as the memory becomes older. Such a shift in memory perspective would have predictable and profound effects on attributions.

Research on the actor-observer difference in causal attribution has documented the impact of visual perspective on the attributions made by actors and observers. Actors tend to make situational attributions for their own behavior, in part because it is the situation that is salient to them; observers, in contrast, make dispositional attributions for these same actors' behaviors because it is the actor that stands out in their visual field (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Watson, 1982; see also McArthur & Post, 1977; Taylor & Fiske, 1978). Moreover, when the visual perspective of actors is reversed by showing them a videotape of them-

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selves, they tend to make more dispositional attributions for their own behavior, just as an observer would (Storms, 1973). Studies of objective self-awareness have also manipulated the perspective from which subjects view themselves by using the strategic placement of mirrors. These studies have reported more dispositional self-attributions associated with this higher self-awareness (Buss & Scheier, 1976; Duval & Wicklund, 1973). Thus, if there is any reason to believe that people's visual images of remembered events become more observerlike with the passage of time, then it is reasonable to expect their attributions for those events to become more dispositional as well.¹

Convergent support for this thesis can be found in recent research indicating that people do indeed remember events from different visual perspectives (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). People seem to have "observer memories," in which they see themselves in the memory from the point of view of an observer, as well as "field memories," in which they view the event from the original perspective from which it was experienced (i.e., through their own eyes). Moreover, many people report the ability to manipulate or shift their memory perspective at will. Most important for our purposes, however, this research indicates that people are more likely to adopt an observer perspective when recalling events that occurred further in the past, a finding that dovetails nicely with the attribution findings of Moore et al. (1979).

We decided to examine the effect of memory perspective on causal attributions directly. In our first study, we asked pairs of subjects to have a get-acquainted conversation with each other and then to answer a series of attribution questions. Three weeks later we had them fill out the same attribution questionnaire, and after this procedure we assessed their memory perspectives. In the second study we used a similar paradigm, but this time we manipulated subjects' memory perspective with verbal instructions. Our analysis suggests that subjects who remember an event from an observer's perspective should make relatively more dispositional attributions for their behavior as compared with their initial attributions. A less definitive prediction could be made about subjects who remember an event from a field perspective: These subjects might show no appreciable change in their ratings because their recall perspective matches that of their original experience. Alternatively, these subjects might nevertheless make more situational attributions because they may focus more exclusively on that perspective during the recall session.

Study 1

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 26 male and 54 female undergraduate volunteers recruited from various psychology courses at Cornell University.

Procedure. Same-sex pairs of subjects were recruited by phone to participate in a study of person perception. If the 2 subjects knew each other, then one or both of them were rescheduled.

When subjects arrived at the lab, they were told that they would be having a get-acquainted conversation with another subject. In particular, they were told the following:

What we would like you to do is to get acquainted with another subject; you may want to begin by introducing yourselves and then discussing anything you want—your major, the university, why you

came here, etc. The conversation will last approximately 4 minutes, and at that time you will be interrupted and given a questionnaire concerning this experience. As soon as I leave, you may begin.

When the 4 min were up, the experimenter gave the subjects a brief attributional questionnaire. The subjects were then informed that they would be contacted again in 3 weeks to complete another brief questionnaire. At this second session, subjects were instructed to "Think back to the conversation you had with the other subject 3 weeks ago. Now please fill out the following questionnaire." Subjects then filled out a questionnaire identical to the one they had filled out in the first session, and, after doing so, they were presented with an additional page that explained the different memory perspectives (i.e., field and observer). Subjects were asked to indicate the perspective from which they had viewed the memory. When the subjects had finished, they were fully debriefed.

Materials. In the first session, subjects completed a four-page attributional questionnaire adapted from previous research (cf. Storms, 1973). This questionnaire asked subjects about four different behaviors: friendliness, dominance, nervousness, and talkativeness. The first question on each page asked subjects to indicate, on a 9-point scale, how much they exhibited the characteristic in question, that is, how friendly, dominant, nervous, or talkative they were during the get-acquainted conversation. The second question was a 9-point dispositional assessment: "How important were personal characteristics about you—your personality, traits, character, personal style, attitudes, mood, and so on—in causing you to behave that way?" Finally, the third question was a 9-point situational attribution assessment: "How important were characteristics of the situation—such as being in an experiment, the 'getting-acquainted' situation, the topic of conversation, the way the other participant behaved, etc.—in causing you to behave that way?"

In the second session, subjects were given the exact same questionnaire, but with one page added to assess the perspective from which they remembered the get-acquainted conversation. The instructions read as follows (adapted from Nigro & Neisser, 1983): "Previous research indicates that individuals report that they can visualize different memories from different 'points of view.' Using the categories listed below, when you remembered the get-acquainted conversation, how did you see it?"

The subjects then checked the description that most closely matched their memory of the get-acquainted conversation: (a) for an observer memory, "In your memory, you imagined the scene as an observer might see it. As an observer, you would see yourself as well as other aspects of the situation"; (b) for a field memory, "In your memory, you imagined the scene from your original point of view; that is, not as an external observer would see it"; and (c) if neither perspective applied, "Neither of the above perspectives describes the way you remembered the situation."

We predicted that the subjects who remembered their get-acquainted conversation from an observer's perspective would make relatively more

¹ The attribution literature contains one apparent exception to this widely cited link between visual perspective and causal attributions. Fiske, Taylor, Etcovf, and Laufer (1979) reported several studies in which they manipulated the perspective their subjects adopted when reading hypothetical accounts of other people's actions. Although their manipulations had a significant impact on the information their subjects could recall, it had no effect on their attributions. The hypothetical nature of their materials may have been the key to this anomalous finding. As Fiske et al. stated (p. 369), "Perceptual engulfment or salience effects are amply demonstrated elsewhere for actual situations (see Taylor & Fiske, 1978), but are not supported here for imaged scenarios. It seems probable, then, that salience effects on attribution are confined to real-life rather than imaginary scenes." The concern of this article, it should be clear, is with people's attributions about their own, real-life experiences.

dispositional attributions for their behavior compared with their initial attributions, whereas those who recalled their conversation from a field perspective either would show no appreciable change in their ratings or would shift to more situational attributions.

Results

Because 5 subjects could not be scheduled for the second session, their data were removed from all analyses. The results of this study are thus based on the responses of 75 subjects. Of these, 22 subjects remembered the get-acquainted conversation from an observer's perspective and 53 remembered it from a field perspective.²

To simplify the analysis and presentation of our data, the 9-point dispositional and situational attribution scales were summed across the four dimensions of dominance, friendliness, nervousness, and talkativeness, producing a composite dispositional attribution score and a composite situational attribution score. We analyzed these composite scores by using a 2 (memory perspective) \times 2 (time) \times 2 (attribution type) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on the last two variables. This analysis produced a significant main effect of attribution type, $F(1, 73) = 4.98, p < .05$, with subjects assigning more causal responsibility to personal dispositions ($M = 26.0$) than to situational factors ($M = 24.4$). More importantly, this analysis produced a significant three-way interaction between memory perspective, time, and attribution type, $F(1, 73) = 16.27, p < .001$. This finding indicates that, as expected, the interaction between memory perspective and time was different for subjects' dispositional and situational ratings. This can be seen more clearly by considering the two attribution scores separately.

As an examination of subjects' dispositional ratings makes clear (top half of Table 1), the attributions of those subjects who remembered the get-acquainted conversation from an observer's perspective tended to become more dispositional from Session 1 to Session 2 (mean change = 1.2); the attributions of those who recalled the event from a field perspective, in contrast, tended to become less dispositional (mean change = -1.2). Together, these results produced a significant two-way interaction between time and memory perspective in subjects' dispositional attributions, $F(1, 73) = 4.76, p < .04$.

Turning to subjects' situational attribution ratings (bottom half of Table 1), it is clear that the attributions of those subjects who recalled the event from an observer's perspective tended to become less situational with the passage of time (mean change = -2.3); the attributions of those subjects who recalled the event from a field perspective, in contrast, tended to become more situational (mean change = 1.7). Together, these results produced a significant two-way interaction between time and memory perspective in subjects' situational attributions, $F(1, 73) = 10.85, p < .002$.

Discussion

The results of this study provide clear support for our hypothesis. The attributions of those subjects who remembered a get-acquainted conversation from an observer's perspective tended to become more dispositional and less situational with the passage of time as compared with those subjects who recalled the

Table 1
Dispositional and Situational Attributions for Subjects Who Reported Either an Observer or a Field Memory

Memory perspective	Time 1	Time 2
Mean dispositional attributions		
Observer ($n = 22$)	26.2	27.4
Field ($n = 53$)	25.8	24.6
Mean situational attributions		
Observer ($n = 22$)	26.2	23.9
Field ($n = 53$)	22.9	24.6

conversation from a field perspective. Of course, these data only demonstrate that there is a link between memory perspective and causal attribution; they do not speak to the question of whether memory perspective *causes* the attributional shift. A manipulation of memory perspective is required to address this issue. We examined the effect of such a manipulation in Study 2.

Study 2

Method

Subjects. A total of 108 undergraduate volunteers were recruited from various psychology courses at Cornell University.

Procedure. The procedure for the first session of this experiment was identical to that of Study 1. Three weeks later, in the second session, we randomly assigned subjects to either the observer or the field condition. The manipulation of memory perspective was induced by reading subjects the following instructions (for the observer perspective):

Think back to the conversation you had with the other subject 3 weeks ago. What I would like you to do is to remember that conversation from an observer's perspective. This means you can see yourself as well as other aspects of the situation—much like an outside observer would see you. Can you do this? You may take a few minutes if you wish. Now that you have that picture in your mind, keep it there and answer the questionnaire—all the while keeping that observer's perspective in your mind's eye.

To elicit field memories, the other half of the subjects were given the following instructions:

Think back to the conversation you had with the other subject 3 weeks ago. What I would like you to do is to remember that conversation from your original perspective. This means you can see the conversation just the way you originally saw it—through your own eyes. Can you do this? You may take a few minutes if you wish. Now that you have that picture in your mind, keep it there and answer the questionnaire—all the while keeping your original perspective in your mind's eye.

² In light of Nigro and Neisser's (1983) finding that the observer perspective is more common for older memories, it is not surprising that we elicited a minority of observer memories after an interval of only 3 weeks. We considered using a longer interval in both studies reported here, but ultimately decided against doing so because of the increased difficulty of getting subjects to return for a second session after a longer interval.

Table 2
*Dispositional and Situational Attributions for Subjects
 Whose Memory Perspectives Were Manipulated
 to Either an Observer or Field Perspective*

Memory perspective	Time 1	Time 2
Mean dispositional attributions		
Observer ($n = 50$)	26.5	27.3
Field ($n = 53$)	26.9	25.9
Mean situational attributions		
Observer ($n = 50$)	20.9	20.8
Field ($n = 53$)	20.8	22.4

Subjects were then asked to fill out the same attributional questionnaire as in the first session and were then fully debriefed.

Results

Five subjects failed to report for the second session, leaving us with 103 subjects altogether: 50 in the observer memory condition and 53 in the field memory condition.

As in the first study, we summed across the dimensions of dominance, friendliness, nervousness, and talkativeness to create composite dispositional and situational attribution scores. We then analyzed these data by using a 2 (memory perspective) \times 2 (time) \times 2 (attribution type) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last two variables. As in Study 1, this analysis produced a significant main effect of attribution type, $F(1, 101) = 47.31, p < .0001$, and a significant three-way interaction between memory perspective, time, and attribution type, $F(1, 101) = 7.06, p < .01$. The main effect of attribution type indicates that subjects made higher dispositional ratings ($M = 26.6$) than situational ratings ($M = 21.2$). More importantly, the significant three-way interaction indicates that, as expected, the relationship between memory perspective and time was different for subjects' dispositional and situational ratings. This can be seen more clearly by considering the two attribution scores separately.

As an examination of subjects' dispositional ratings makes clear (top half of Table 2), the attributions of subjects in the observer condition became more dispositional from Session 1 to Session 2 (mean composite change = 0.8); the attributions of those in the field condition, in contrast, became less dispositional (mean change = -1.0). Together, these results produced a significant two-way interaction between time and memory perspective in subjects' dispositional attribution ratings, $F(1, 101) = 7.39, p < .01$. These results exactly parallel those obtained in Study 1. Unlike Study 1, however, there was no significant two-way interaction observed in subjects' situational attributions (shown in the lower half of Table 2).

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that a manipulation of subjects' memory perspective has a systematic effect on their attributions for a past event. When subjects were induced to remember a get-acquainted conversation from an observer's perspective,

they tended to make more dispositional attributions for their behavior than they had made initially. When subjects were led to remember the event from a field perspective, they tended to attribute their behavior less dispositionally. It thus appears that memory perspective functions in much the same way as other methods of varying visual perspective, such as altering videotape perspective (cf. Storms, 1973) or inducing self-awareness through the strategic placement of mirrors (cf. Buss & Scheier, 1976; Duval & Wicklund, 1973). All these manipulations serve to make actors more aware of themselves and their actions and thus also lead them to attribute their behavior more dispositionally.

General Discussion

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that people's retrospective causal attributions are significantly influenced by memory perspective. When subjects remembered a get-acquainted conversation from an observer's perspective, they made more dispositional attributions, much as an observer would. When subjects recalled the conversation from a field perspective, they made more situational attributions. These effects, moreover, occurred regardless of whether memory perspective was assessed or manipulated.

We began this research with a clear prediction about the attributional consequences of recalling an event from an observer's perspective: attributions should (and did) become more dispositional. We were less certain about the effect of remembering an event from a field perspective. Recalling an event from this perspective might leave a person's original attributions unchanged because the delayed perspective presumably matches that of the person's original experience (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Storms, 1973). However, it also seemed possible that recalling events from a field perspective would lead subjects to attribute the events less dispositionally because they might focus more exclusively on this one (and only one) visual perspective during the recall session, particularly those subjects in Study 2 who were encouraged to adopt the field perspective. Moreover, a person's immediate attributions are no doubt influenced by a host of factors beyond visual perspective, such as the person's immediate thoughts and feelings. As time passes and many of these initial thoughts and feelings fade from memory, visual perspective may become a more powerful determinant of a person's attributions. Delayed attributions, in other words, may generally be more malleable by visual perspective or by other factors as well.

It is clear from our research that the perspective a person adopts in remembering an event is a significant determinant of the attributions he or she makes for that event. But can our results account for the dispositional shift in attributions with the passage of time that has been obtained in previous research (Moore et al., 1979; Peterson, 1980)? Our data, along with those of Nigro and Neisser (1983), certainly imply such a result because together they indicate that, as more and more time passes, the likelihood of recalling an event from an observer's perspective increases, as does the dispositional slant to one's attributions. At present, however, this connection must remain tentative in light of a subsidiary finding from Study 1. Recall that in that study, only 30% of our subjects spontaneously recalled the get-acquainted conversation from an observer's perspective,

and, as a consequence, only a minority of our subjects exhibited a dispositional shift in attributions. Of course, we would have expected to have elicited more observer memories had we simply waited a longer period of time between the two experimental sessions (see Footnote 1). Nevertheless, Moore et al. obtained a dispositional shift while using exactly the same interval between sessions. We believe that this apparent conflict stems from the one important difference between the two experimental procedures. Specifically, Moore et al. had their subjects describe themselves into a tape recorder, whereas our subjects participated in a get-acquainted conversation with another person. Because another individual is a much more compelling stimulus than a tape recorder, we would expect the external environment (i.e., the other person) to have a stronger "pull" on subjects' recollections for a longer time in our study. It would be informative to investigate this issue directly in subsequent research.

Perhaps most importantly, however, this examination of the link between memory perspective and attribution shifts may also shed some light on the contradictory results in this area that were mentioned earlier (see Moore et al., 1979, and Peterson, 1980, for the dispositional shift; Miller & Porter, 1980, for the situational shift). Nigro and Neisser (1983) reported that their subjects' field memories were associated with strong emotions. The task used by Moore et al.—that of describing oneself into a tape recorder—was clearly not one that induced much affect. Thus, as the results of Nigro and Neisser's study suggest, the subjects in the Moore et al. experiment may have been more likely to remember their task from an observer's perspective, and, in line with our results, may have come to view their actions as more dispositionally caused. Miller and Porter (1980), in contrast, asked their subjects to recall rather affect-laden events such as scoring miserably on a test or arguing with their parents. The emotions surrounding such events may have encouraged subjects to adopt a field perspective in recall and thus may have led them to make less dispositional attributions. Future research should examine more explicitly the mediating role of affect in determining the direction of attribution shifts with the passage of time.³

Another avenue for further research would be to search for individual differences in memory perspective. Do some people chronically recall events from an observer's perspective and others from a field perspective? Nigro and Neisser's (1983) research indicates that this may be the case. More importantly, are these individual differences associated with general differences in how people perceive themselves and others? Do those who tend to recall events from an observer's perspective tend to see themselves as the primary cause or origin (deCharms, 1968) of their actions? Do these people, in turn, tend to see themselves as having a great many stable personality traits, thus reversing the tendency for people to think of other people, rather than themselves, as possessing stable dispositions (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973)? We are currently examining these questions.

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³ There is another study in the literature on attribution shifts (Funder & Van Ness, 1983) that does not fit as neatly into this integration. The events examined in that study were not particularly evocative of emotion, yet a situational shift similar to that observed by Miller and Porter was obtained. Funder and Van Ness argued on the basis of their experiment and prior research that situational shifts are generally obtained in between-subjects experimental designs, and either no effect or a dispositional shift is obtained in within-subjects designs. However, in light of the fact that Moore et al. (1979) obtained significant dispositional shifts using both types of design, this interpretation does not seem compelling.