



Temporal self-appraisal and attributional focus

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Abstract

Temporal self-appraisal theory (Ross & Wilson, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2001) states that individuals evaluate their past selves in a way that makes them feel good about their current self. The present studies tested the degree to which differences in attributional focus influence feelings of closeness to positive life events. In Study 1, participants recalled a recent positive life event before thinking about how either they personally or others were responsible for the event's occurrence. As expected, participants felt temporally closer to the event when they had thought about internal attributions. In Study 2, after recalling a recent positive life event, participants recalled one (or six) reasons describing how they personally (or others) produced the event. The results revealed that participants used the content of retrieved attributions in deriving their temporal judgment. The implications of the findings for tenets of temporal self-appraisal theory are discussed.

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“Time is on my side, yes it is”—Norman Meade (recorded by the Rolling Stones)

“We must use time as a tool, not as a crutch”—John F. Kennedy

Social psychologists have devoted considerable attention to uncovering the strategies that people use to maintain or enhance a positive self-concept (see Baumeister, 1998). For example, we often compare ourselves to worse off others (Wood, 1989), affiliate ourselves with others who are attractive and popular (Berscheid & Reis, 1998), and highlight our affiliation with winning sports teams (Cialdini et al., 1976). People can also engage in self-enhancement strategies that do not require references to other individuals. Ross and Wilson (2000, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2000, 2001) recently proposed that individuals can feel positively about their current self by evoking favorable comparisons to past selves. In a series of experiments derived from their *temporal self-appraisal theory*, Ross and Wilson have provided evidence that individuals both derogate their former selves and report feeling farther from (closer to) past selves and events with negative (positive) outcomes. Thus, adapting a

metaphor, derogating our past and distancing our failures might be conceptualized as “motivational tools” that individuals use in order to maintain and/or enhance a positive self-regard (cf. Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994).

In this paper, I discuss two studies designed to explicate whether differences in attributional focus influence the degree to which individuals temporally distance themselves from past successes. Does focusing on internal (versus external) attributions for a positive event make it feel more or less temporally close? Does manipulating the available content of internal and external attributions for a positive life event influence feelings of temporal closeness? These were the types of questions addressed in the current research.

Temporal self-appraisal theory

Temporal self-appraisal theory postulates that “people tend to evaluate their past selves in a manner that makes them feel good about themselves now” (Wilson & Ross, 2001, p. 573). Incorporating findings from social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and Tesser's (1988) self-evaluation maintenance model, Ross and Wilson

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assert that individuals are motivated to construct or exaggerate negative past selves in order to feel positively about their current status. Because autobiographical memory is a constructive process (Ross, 1989; Ross & Wilson, 2000), individuals can achieve a positive current self by altering their past.

Research testing the primary tenets of temporal self-appraisal theory has produced a number of supporting findings. For example, Wilson and Ross (2001) found that individuals do indeed derogate past selves. In one demonstration (Wilson & Ross, 2001; Study 3), students initially evaluated themselves at the beginning of the academic year. Approximately two months later, they retrospectively evaluated themselves as they were at the beginning of the academic year, as well as evaluating their current self. The results revealed that individuals' retrospective evaluation of their past self was significantly more negative than their original evaluation. Importantly, this retrospective self-derogation occurred in the absence of any actual improvement.

More recently, Ross and Wilson (2002) investigated another strategy that individuals might use in order to maintain a positive self-concept. Since temporal self-appraisal theory conceptualizes time as a psychological variable, Ross and Wilson examined whether people temporally distance themselves from personal failures and feel temporally closer to personal successes. In one study testing this proposal, Ross and Wilson (2002; Study 1) asked undergraduates to evaluate their social success in high school prior to indicating the subjective temporal distance of their past self. As predicted by temporal self-appraisal theory, participants felt closer to socially successful than unsuccessful past selves.

Notwithstanding the important and interesting effects, Ross and Wilson (2002) have stated that additional research is required to investigate other variables that should be associated with temporal biasing. These include the effects of motivational manipulations (e.g., self-affirmation), differences in perceived responsibility for event outcomes, and whether temporal self-appraisal theory can account for individuals' beliefs about the timing of future events. The present studies investigated the role of *attributional focus* in judgments of temporal biasing. Manipulating an individual's perceptions of personal responsibility for an event is likely to play an important role in temporal biasing, as it is known to influence the types of inferences individuals make about themselves and their behavior (see Gilbert, 1998). To examine the role of attributional focus on temporal biasing, Study 1 tested whether asking participants to focus upon either internal or external attributions for a past success would produce differences in temporal biasing. Study 2 included manipulations of the type and number of attributions individuals retrieved for a per-

sonal success, to determine how manipulating the availability of internal versus external attributions would impact temporal biasing.

Study 1

Decades of research has informed us about how individuals attribute the causes of behavior (see Gilbert, 1998; Ross & Fletcher, 1985). In reviewing the extant literature, Ross and Fletcher (1985, p. 104), concluded that there is strong evidence for self-serving biases in attributions, such that "people take more responsibility for their successes than for their failures." Furthermore, they suggested that individuals are motivated to engage in these attributional contrivances in order to maintain or enhance their self-esteem.

Such attributional shifts are clearly associated with temporal biasing. Adapting an example described by Ross and Wilson (2002), imagine two students who recently passed their final examination in statistics. While Ian and Edward both achieved a grade of 80%, they attribute their success to different underlying causes. Ian attributes his success to internal reasons (his diligence and devotion to completing statistics problems), whereas Edward attributes his success to external reasons (the exam was easy). Who is most likely to perceive the exam as more temporally recent? In the same way that people feel closer to personal successes than failures, it follows that they should also feel closer to successes for which they believe they were personally responsible.

Consistent with this possibility, Wilson and Ross (2001; Study 4) asked participants to rate themselves or an acquaintance on their current and past standing on a number of attributes. The results revealed that while participants judged themselves more positively in the present compared to the past, such temporal biasing was not found when participants made judgments about an acquaintance. In the context of the present research, just as people temporally bias for themselves and not others, individuals should also perceive a positive event as closer when they have thought about how they were personally responsible for the event's occurrence.

Study 1 tested whether asking people to think about different types of attributions for a past success would evoke differences in temporal biasing. After first recalling a positive event, one group of participants thought about how they were personally responsible for the event's occurrence, while a second group thought about how external factors were responsible for the event's occurrence. It was expected that individuals would feel temporally closer to a success for which they felt personally responsible.

Method

Participants

Seventy-two undergraduate students (14 males, 58 females) took part in return for course credit. One participant did not complete the dependent variable. There were no gender effects, so the data were collapsed across this variable.

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in a study on life events. After obtaining written consent, participants' first task was to write down a positive event that had happened to them within the past three months. Once they performed this task they considered additional details about the event. Participants in the *self-responsible* (e.g., internal attribution) condition spent a few minutes thinking about how they personally made the positive event happen. Participants in the *others-responsible* (e.g., external attribution) condition spent a few minutes thinking about how other people and external factors made the positive event happen. Upon completing this task, participants estimated how long ago it was since the event took place. This response was given in days.

Results

To ensure that the events in each condition were equally positive, two raters judged the positivity of each respondent's event. Because these ratings were correlated ($r = .73$), they were averaged to form a single score. This mean positivity rating did not differ between conditions, suggesting that any difference in temporal biasing across conditions was not due to the extremity of the recalled event.

As predicted by temporal self-appraisal theory, individuals in the self-responsible condition indicated that the event felt more temporally recent ($M = 30.6$ days) than participants in the others-responsible condition ($M = 45.8$ days), $t(70) = 2.60$, $p = .01$.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 revealed that participants who focused on how they were personally responsible for a positive event viewed it as more recent than participants who focused on external attributions. Several aspects of this result merit discussion. First, note that participants recalled the event before being asked to think about one of two (randomly assigned) types of explanations. Accordingly, it is unlikely that

individuals in the self-responsible condition selected events that had actually occurred more recently. In addition, there was no difference across conditions in the extremity of the recalled event. Also, the dependent variable used in this study was somewhat different to those used in previous studies. Rather than asking whether a self felt near or distant, participants in Study 1 indicated when they judged the event to have occurred. This type of measure, which one might consider to be more concrete, was still able to reveal differences in temporal biasing (cf. Ross & Wilson, 2002). All of these points run counter to possible alternative explanations of the results.

Study 2

On the basis of the findings of Study 1, the next study explored whether manipulating the number of explanations describing how one's self (versus others) was responsible for a recent success would be associated with differences in temporal biasing. This is important because the process of retrieval renders available two distinct types of information: the *content* (e.g., amount) of retrieved information and the *subjective ease* (or difficulty) with which the information is recalled (Schwarz, 1998). Reliance on one or the other of these two types of information can lead to opposite effects on judgment. As an example, consider two individuals who have been asked to recall instances of Scottish footballing successes. Neil has been asked to provide two instances, while Colin has been asked to provide ten. If subsequently asked "How proficient is Scotland in football?", who is more likely to be convinced about the Scots' prowess? Two competing predictions can be made. If they were to rely upon the amount of recalled information, Colin would be more convinced about Scotland's ability, as he has retrieved more instances of success. However, if they were to rely upon the subjective ease or difficulty associated with the recall task, one would make the opposite prediction. The tasks given to our Caledonian friends are likely to have differed in terms of their mental demands, such that Neil's was presumably easier than Colin's. Indeed, Colin is likely to have experienced a very difficult time completing the task. Accordingly, when asked to evaluate Scotland's prowess, he might think to himself "I had a difficult time retrieving Scottish footballing successes, they must not be very good!" In this scenario, the ease with which information was retrieved, rather than the amount, affects the judgment.

Considerable research has considered how available information affects human judgment. In a study designed to clarify the process underlying the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), Schwarz et al. (1991; Study 1) had participants retrieve 6 or 12 in-

stances in which they behaved in a way that was assertive (for some participants) or unassertive (for other participants). Upon completing this task, participants rated their own level of assertiveness. The results revealed that participants' judgments reflected the ease with which information was accessed from memory: Higher assertiveness was associated with experiencing an easy time recalling instances of assertive behavior or a difficult time recalling instances of unassertive behavior. Subsequent research has demonstrated how ease of retrieval affects other types of judgments (e.g., attitude strength, health perceptions, judgments of stereotypicality) (see Schwarz, 1998; Schwarz & Vaughan, 2002; for reviews).

Investigators have sought to determine the circumstances under which individuals rely upon content versus ease when making social judgments. One variable that has found to affect the type of information drawn upon is an individual's *processing motivation* (see Schwarz, 1998). Reliance upon the ease with which information comes to mind is considered a heuristic strategy, thus increased motivation should lead individuals to be more systematic in their processing, and become more reliant upon the contents of retrieval. Indeed, as noted by Schwarz (1998, p. 94), "the more self-relevant and involving the task is, the more likely (people) are to adopt a systematic processing strategy, paying attention to the specific implications of the information that comes to mind." Thus, when processing motivation is low, individuals are expected to rely upon ease of retrieval experiences. However, when motivation is high, individuals are expected to rely upon accessible content.

In research testing this proposal, Rothman and Schwarz (1998) first asked men with or without a history of family heart disease to recall either three (an easy task) or eight (a difficult task) behaviors that increased (or decreased) their personal risk of heart disease. After completing this task, participants evaluated their own vulnerability to heart problems. It was expected that the recall task would be more relevant for those participants with a family history of heart problems, who would, as a consequence, adopt a systematic processing style and rely upon the content of recalled information when judging their own vulnerability. Conversely, the recall task was expected to be less relevant for individuals without a family history of heart problems, leading them to be less motivated, and, as a result, use their subjective experience of ease or difficulty as a heuristic in judging their own vulnerability. The results confirmed Rothman and Schwarz's predictions—men with a family history relied upon the content of the behavioral information they recalled, whereas individuals without a family history relied upon the ease with which information was retrieved from memory.

Study 2 adopted this paradigm to assess whether temporal biasing would be affected by the content of

available information. Recall that temporal biasing is postulated to be driven by a motivation to self-enhance. Accordingly, this level of processing motivation suggests that temporal biasing should be influenced by the content of available information (and not ease of retrieval). In Study 2, participants were first asked to think about a positive life event that had occurred within the past three months. Subsequently, they provided either one or six reasons explaining the event's occurrence. Half of the participants generated reasons for how they were personally responsible for the event having occurred (the self-responsible group), while the others generated reasons for how external factors or other individuals were responsible for the event having occurred (the other-responsible group). Having completed the reasons task, participants then indicated how long ago it felt since the event had taken place. Consistent with a motivational explanation of temporal self-appraisal, it was predicted that there would be a significant interaction between the number and type of retrieved explanations. In the self-responsible group, it was predicted that the event would feel more recent by those participants who had generated six (rather than one) reasons. Conversely, in the others-responsible group, it was predicted that the event would feel more distant by those participants who had generated six (rather than one) reasons.

Method

Participants

Eighty-seven participants (18 males, 69 females; mean age = 20.2 years) took part in return for course credit. Three participants did not complete the task and were excluded from the analyses. There were no gender effects, so the data were collapsed across this variable.

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in a study on life events. After obtaining written consent, participants were handed a booklet with the experimental materials. On the first page, they listed a positive event that had happened to them within the past three months. Once they had performed that task, they turned the page and provided additional details about the event. Participants in the self-responsible condition were asked to list reasons describing how they "personally made this positive event happen." Within this condition, some participants were asked to list one reason, while others were asked to list six reasons.¹ Participants in the others-responsible

¹ These values were selected on the basis of a pilot study with a different sample of participants.

condition were asked to list reasons explaining how “other people and external factors made this positive event happen”. Within this condition, some participants were asked to list one reason, while others were asked to list six reasons. Upon completing the recall task, participants indicated how long ago it felt since the event took place. Participants placed an “x” along a 10-cm line that was accompanied by the verbal labels “it feels like it happened yesterday” and “it feels like it happened a long time ago.” Participants also indicated how difficult it was to complete the retrieval task (1 = “not at all difficult”; 9 = “very difficult”).

Results

Manipulation checks

To ensure that the events in the internal and external conditions were equally positive, two raters judged the positivity of each respondent’s event. Because these ratings were correlated ($r = .69$), they were averaged to form a single index. This mean rating of positivity did not differ across conditions ($t < 1$).

A 2 (type of reason: Internal versus external) \times 2 (amount of reasons: One versus six) ANOVA was conducted on the difficulty ratings. The results revealed a significant main effect of the amount of recalled reasons. As expected, participants found it easier to recall one reason ($M = 4.2$) than to recall six reasons ($M = 5.5$), $F(1, 82) = 6.87$, $p = .01$. No other effects approached significance.²

Temporal distance ratings

To test the hypothesis, a 2 (type of reason) \times 2 (amount of reasons) ANOVA was carried out on temporal bias ratings. For ease of presentation, this measure was standardized, with negative scores representing greater temporal recency and positive scores representing greater temporal distancing. As expected, there was a significant interaction, $F(1, 83) = 6.61$, $p = .01$. As can be seen in Fig. 1, individuals who explained how they were personally responsible for the event perceived it as more recent after having generated six reasons ($M = -.30$) as compared to one reason ($M = .29$), $F(1, 83) = 4.08$, $p < .05$. In contrast, participants who explained how others were responsible for the event tended to perceive it as more recent after having generated one reason ($M = -.20$) as compared to six reasons ($M = .27$), $F(1, 83) = 3.13$, $p = .08$.

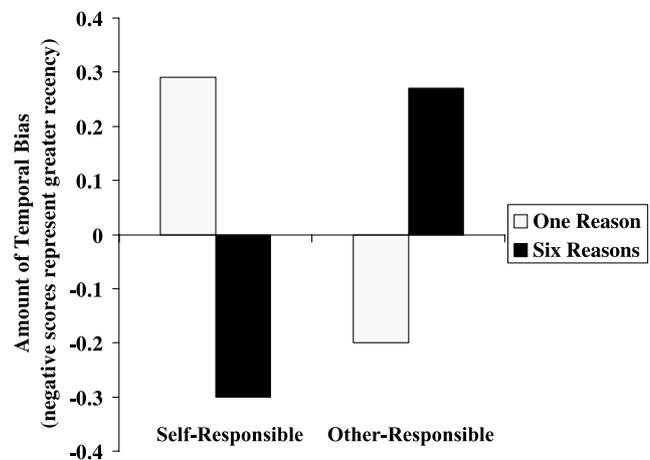


Fig. 1. Study 2: Temporal biasing as a function of the type and amount of retrieved reasons.

Discussion

The aim of Study 2 was to assess how varying the available content of internal versus external attributions for a positive life event would influence temporal biasing. Adapting a procedure that allows for the unconfounding of content and ease of retrieval, the results of the study indicated that individuals’ perceptions of temporal recency were influenced by the content (i.e., amount) of recalled information. When individuals provided more reasons for how they were personally responsible for a positive life event, they more they perceived the event to feel temporally recent. Conversely, when individuals provided more reasons for how others individuals (or external factors) were responsible for a positive life event, it was perceived to be more temporally distant.

It is worth noting that there was no significant main effect of attribution type on temporal biasing. How should this be interpreted in light of the findings of Study 1? A procedural difference between the studies is likely to account for the results. In Study 1, participants spent a few minutes thinking about how they (or others) were responsible for the nominated event. Within that time, it is highly likely that participants thought of a number of attributions. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the procedure of Study 1 has greater resemblance to the six explanation conditions of Study 2. Indeed, the pattern of means in the six explanation conditions in Study 2 is the same as that obtained in Study 1.³ In both studies, internal attributions produced

² Differences in degrees of freedom across analyses are due to missing data.

³ When participants retrieved one attribution, there was no difference between the internal and external reason conditions ($p > .15$). When participants retrieved six reasons, participants in the internal attribution perceived the event as temporally closer than participants who retrieved six reasons ($p = .01$).

temporal recency, whereas external attributions produced temporal distancing.

General discussion

Temporal self-appraisal theory (Ross & Wilson, 2000, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2000, 2001) postulates that, in trying to maintain or enhance a positive self-view, individuals engage in strategies such as derogating past selves and feeling closer to (distant from) past events or selves with positive (negative) implications. While evidence in support of the theory is impressive, a number of important questions pertaining to the model require attention (see Ross & Wilson, 2002). The present research sought to determine the impact of personal responsibility on temporal biasing for positive events. In Study 1, participants recalled a recent positive life event before thinking about how either they personally or others were responsible for the event's occurrence. It was found that participants felt closer to events for which they felt personally responsible. In Study 2, participants provided one or six reasons describing how either they personally or others were responsible for a positive event. The results revealed that the content of available information was associated with the direction of temporal biasing.

Overall, to what degree are the results of the current studies consistent with temporal self-appraisal theory? With respect to Study 1, the theory suggests that increased personal responsibility for a positive life event should lead to temporal recency. If an individual perceives themselves to be the primary cause of a positive outcome, a favorable self-concept can be achieved by feeling that the event is very recent. The results of Study 1 supported this prediction. Study 2 examined whether manipulating the number of available internal versus external attributions would influence temporal biasing. Given past research indicating that individuals rely upon the content of retrieved information under conditions of high personal relevance (e.g., Rothman & Schwarz, 1998), it was predicted (and found) that individuals would rely upon the content of available information when judging the temporal recency of a positive event. As such, the results of Study 2 are consistent with temporal self-appraisal theory, although they imply that the role of personal responsibility depends critically on the amount of information supporting the attributional focus. Taken together, the results of the two studies help specify the conditions that produce feelings of temporal distance.

The current research also contributes to discussions regarding the mechanism(s) underlying temporal biasing. While the research was not intended to provide definitive evidence of process, the results of the present studies are generally consistent with a motivational

explanation of temporal biasing effects. In both experiments, participants' temporal judgments followed from predictions generated by a motivation-based explanation. That said, a non-motivational explanation is also plausible. It is conceivable that when asked to provide internal attributions, participants might retrieve reasons that lead them to conclude that such events frequently occur. However, if asked to provide external attributions, participants might retrieve reasons that lead them to conclude that such events occur are somewhat infrequent. It should be noted that in Study 2, an analysis of participants' generated reasons did not demonstrate findings consistent with this possibility. Nonetheless, future research could further test the viability of this alternative account by manipulating the typicality of participants' responsibility attributions.⁴

Temporal self-appraisal theory should also be studied in relation to other research that has examined how individuals conceptualize time. Two separate research programs are particularly worthy of discussion. First, Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) have explored whether there are individual differences in how beliefs and preferences are temporally based. In work derived from Lewin's (1951) life space model, Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) introduced a self-report measure assessing individual differences in time perspectives. They proposed five factors relevant to how individuals adapt time, of which two are most pertinent to temporal self-appraisal. A *past-negative* factor reflects a negative view of the past, with individuals scoring high on this dimension being those who ruminate about negative past events. Conversely, a second factor described by Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) as *past-positive* reflects a "warm, sentimental attitude toward the past" (p. 1275). Future research might link Zimbardo and Boyd's (1999) work and temporal self-appraisal theory. Individual differences in the extent to which people are past-positive versus past-negative might moderate the degree to which people derogate past selves and distance themselves from past failures. Individuals who are past-negative might feel temporally closer to past failures, whereas individuals who are past-positive might feel temporally closer to past successes (cf. Ross & Wilson, 2002).

Temporal self-appraisal theory is also relevant to research that has explored how individuals make retrospective time judgments. In typical studies, participants process multiple pieces of information during a specific, short amount of time. Once the time has elapsed, participants retrospectively estimate the time they had to perform the task. Studies using this paradigm have produced evidence consistent with temporal self-ap-

⁴ I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

praisal theory. For example, Ryder and Macrae (2001) gave participants 90 s to encode either high- or low-frequency words. Once the encoding period had elapsed, participants estimated how long they felt they had to perform the task. Temporal self-appraisal theory would predict shorter time duration estimates among individuals who had encoded low-frequency words. Because low-frequency words are more difficult to encode, individuals could justify their task difficulty by estimating that they had little time to perform it. Indeed, the results of a number of studies by Ryder and Macrae are consistent with this perspective. Thus, temporal self-appraisal processes can also be incorporated to situations where retrospective time judgments involve short amounts of time.

Conclusion

Ross and Wilson (2000, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2000, 2001) developed temporal self-appraisal theory as a framework for understanding how individuals reconstruct their past to maintain a positive current self-view. Despite its recent formulation, evidence in support of the model is numerous. The present studies contribute to the development of the model by demonstrating that attributional focus influences temporal biasing, providing further evidence that individuals indeed perceive time as on their side, using it as a self-enhancement tool.

While writing this paper I have been reminded of something from my own past. The story is as follows. I was playing a round of golf and everything was going right. My drives hit the fairway, my approach shots hit the green, and my putting was much more accurate than normal. While recounting my round with friends, they were amazed by the detailed specificity with which I could recount every shot. I was unfazed by their amazement, because, in my mind, the round felt very recent. Unfortunately, the sad truth was brought home to me the following day, when I came across my golf clubs in my garage, only to discover that a large family of spiders had long ago turned my golf bag into an elaborate living quarter. Oh well—there is still the one-hitter I pitched during a Little League baseball game. That wasn't too long ago . . .

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