



Remembering from any angle: The flexibility of visual perspective during retrieval

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ABSTRACT

When recalling autobiographical memories, individuals often experience visual images associated with the event. These images can be constructed from two different perspectives: first person, in which the event is visualized from the viewpoint experienced at encoding, or third person, in which the event is visualized from an external vantage point. Using a novel technique to measure visual perspective, we examined where the external vantage point is situated in third-person images. Individuals in two studies were asked to recall either 10 or 15 events from their lives and describe the perspectives they experienced. Wide variation in spatial locations was observed within third-person perspectives, with the location of these perspectives relating to the event being recalled. Results suggest remembering from an external viewpoint may be more common than previous studies have demonstrated.

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Individuals often re-experience visual images when remembering events (Brewer, 1988). For example, remembering a lecture given to a group of students, a person might visualize himself or herself lecturing from the students' perspective. Such images are thought to be integral to autobiographical memory retrieval; individuals with damage to visual cortex not only develop visual memory deficits, but also exhibit impaired recall of autobiographical memories (Greenberg & Rubin, 2003; Rubin & Greenberg, 1998). Visual imagery also predicts the degree to which individuals recollect previous events (Rubin, Schrauf, & Greenberg, 2003). Remembering visual details helps one judge if an event occurred rather than having been imagined (e.g., Johnson, 1988). Imagery also plays an important role in clinical disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (e.g., Holmes & Hackmann, 2004; Reynolds & Brewin, 1999). Visual imagery is not only critical to autobiographical retrieval processes, but can also influence behavior (e.g., Libby, Shaffer, Eibach, & Slemmer, 2007).

One salient aspect of these visual images is their perspective. The example above illustrates a third-person perspective in which the event is viewed from an external vantage point. In contrast, one could experience a first-person perspective in which the event is visualized from the viewpoint experienced at encoding. This distinction has a distinguished history (Freud, 1899/1953; Henri & Henri, 1896); however, few researchers examined the topic until it was revived by Nigro and Neisser (1983). Since then a growing literature has shown perspective can influence both the phenomenology, or conscious experience, and the content of recall (see Rice, 2010, for review). For instance, first-person perspective memories are rated as more emotionally intense than third-person perspective memories (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Using third-person perspective also leads the rememberer to generate more details related to one's appearance, actions, and the environmental context of an event, whereas using first-person perspective produces more feelings, sensations,

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and thoughts from the event (Mclsaac & Eich, 2002). Perspective has been associated with attributions of past behavior (Frank & Gilovich, 1989) and can influence assessments of self-change (Libby, Eibach, & Gilovich, 2005).

Given this, relatively little is actually known about third-person perspective. Consider the distinction between first-person and third-person perspectives provided by Nigro and Neisser (1983). First-person images are those in which “the scene appears from one’s own position... from roughly the field of view that was available during the original situation,” whereas in third-person images “one seems to have the position of an onlooker or observer, looking at the situation from an external vantage point” (pp. 467–468). Within this framework, the classification of third-person perspectives rests only on images not being first person. This leaves open the question of where the observer is located in third-person perspectives. Nigro and Neisser also raised this issue, asking participants to indicate “the position from which the scene [was] being observed” (p. 470), but did not report these data. The current study examined whether the location from which third-person perspectives are constructed varied across space or was limited to one particular viewpoint. Because this is the first study we are aware of that tries to provide an account of where the third person is in autobiographical memory, the initial analyses are often descriptive. There are no empirical findings from studies of memory to guide predictions; however, data and theory on visuospatial imagery can help.

Existing evidence suggests the construction of third-person perspectives may be flexible (i.e., constructed from varied locations). When instructed, individuals can construct different third-person images of a room in which they are currently sitting (Blackmore, 1987). Although these transformations do not require autobiographical memory, they suggest third-person perspectives are flexible. Studies of visuospatial imagery also demonstrate that individuals can adopt different viewpoints of an environment (see Zacks & Michelon, 2005 for review). These studies differ from autobiographical memory studies in several ways; yet, the ability to manipulate imagery to take different viewpoints suggests individuals may be able to construct a range of third-person perspectives.

Theoretical explanations of perspective use also support this hypothesis. Clark and Wells (1995) proposed that socially anxious individuals construct third-person images as a means of visualizing how they look to others. If true, perspective location may vary in concordance with the location of other individuals present during encoding, suggesting third-person perspectives should not be limited to a single location. Others have hypothesized that third-person images allow individuals to distance themselves from events, serving as a defense mechanism to prevent the re-experiencing of emotions (e.g., Berntsen, Willert, & Rubin, 2003; Mclsaac & Eich, 2004) or as a means of emotion-regulation (Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005). In other words, adding physical distance within the image from the person remembering (i.e., a third-person perspective) produces an emotional distance. It is possible that individuals use greater physical distances to produce greater emotional distance. This would require that the distance of images from an individual’s original location vary. Again, this would require third-person perspectives not be limited to a single location.

The data collected to date are silent on this issue. The focus of the current study was to characterize if and how third-person perspectives vary. Our first step then was to demonstrate clearly that third-person locations vary. Moreover, it was important to show systematic variations in location, to ensure more than random noise produces the variation. We used a sample of arbitrary, but distinct, situations (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). These events varied across two dimensions, emotional intensity and self-awareness. It was expected that these events would produce a range of third-person locations because the two hypotheses that locations may vary highlight the role of emotional intensity and self-awareness. Of primary interest was investigating the distribution of perspective locations and replicating differences in location across two samples using slightly different procedures. If variation is established, an entirely new set of questions will arise, such as why some locations are favored and if these locations have specific functions. However, before addressing such questions, we must demonstrate that variation occurs and can be measured in a consistent manner.

1. Study 1

A novel technique was used in which participants were asked to describe the perspective accompanying each memory rather than use a Likert-type scale, as in prior studies. Ten memories were cued with events adapted from Nigro and Neisser (1983). In addition, five memories were cued with time periods, different aspects of which are reported here and elsewhere (Rice & Rubin, 2009).

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants

Eighty-six Duke University undergraduates (51 females; mean age = 18.90) were tested individually or in small groups.

1.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed three temporally contiguous phases (Table 1). In Phase 1, participants were told they would be recalling events. The experimenter then read aloud a description of perspective to participants as they read along. The description provided concrete examples of perspectives one might use when recalling an event, including first-person and a few third-person perspectives. Participants were then given examples of how to describe the relative location of their perspective in relation to their original location during the event. For example, remembering giving a lecture from a students’

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