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Reports

Short-circuiting transference using implementation intentions

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ► Findings offer the first evidence that the habit of transference can be controlled.
- ► Neither the goal nor the intention to stop the transference effect is sufficient.
- ► Implementation intentions control habits automatically and do so for transference.
- ► Although transference can be problematic, until now prevention appeared unattainable.
- ► The data contribute to social cognition, goals, habit-regulation, and relationships.

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ABSTRACT

Prior relationships readily play out in present ones, often without awareness and even when problematic for an individual, and yet little is known about how individuals might be able to prevent this influence, if at all. The social-cognitive process of transference is a mechanism by which past relationships emerge in the present, i.e., through the relatively automatic use of significant-other (SO) representations in judging and remembering others. Two experiments tested the hypothesis that this process can be strategically regulated by the use of implementation intentions, which can automatize desired goal pursuit. Participants motivated to prevent transference learned about three individuals, one subtly resembling their own SO, and were provided either with no-additional strategy or with a goal intention to prevent transference, or crucially, with an implementation intention to prevent it. Across both experiments, the evidence strongly supported our hypothesis. Response latencies in a primed lexical decision task showed that, regardless of strategy, the SO representation was activated with the relevant new person, and yet, in terms of recognition memory, only those participants in the no-additional strategy and the goal-intention conditions showed the transference effect—i.e., the application of the knowledge that was activated by SO-resemblance. As predicted, those randomly assigned to the implementation-intention condition did not. In short, participants in the implementation-intention condition effectively prevented transference. The experiments provide the first evidence we know of that individuals can be trained to use a regulation strategy with which to effectively regulate transference, when needed, using a strategy that itself can be relatively automatic.

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Introduction

It is well known that people call upon prior relationships to make sense of present interpersonal encounters and that past relationships, for better or worse, influence both perceptions of and responses toward new people. Knowledge stored in memory about close others, when triggered and then applied to a new person, tends to color person perception with little effort or awareness. Indeed, encountering a new person who subtly resembles a significant other (SO) (whether a family member, romantic partner, or close friend) will activate knowledge about this other, which is then used to interpret and remember the new person (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chen & Andersen, 1999) in a process known as *transference*. By this mechanism, the past emerges in the present in unintended fashion when the SO is not present.

Transference processes rely on mental representations of SOs and shape everyday behavior in social interactions (e.g., Berk & Andersen, 2000), while also leading to shifts in how the self is experienced at the moment (Andersen & Chen, 2002; e.g., Hinkley & Andersen, 1996; Horberg & Chen, 2010; Kraus & Chen, 2009, 2010; Miranda, Andersen, & Edwards, 2011; Reznik & Andersen, 2007; see also Baldwin, 1994; Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990). They profoundly influence goal pursuit and self-regulation as well (Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000, 2008; see also Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008, 2009; Shah, 2003a,b). Such processes may be interpersonally useful, prompting individuals to give others the benefit of the doubt (e.g., Andersen et al., 1996; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and facilitating social interaction, but can

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also have deleterious consequences depending on the relationship evoked, if that relationship is troubled (e.g., Berenson & Andersen, 2006; Berk & Andersen, 2008; Reznik & Andersen, 2007). Nonetheless, little is known about the circumstances under which individuals may be able to short-circuit transference, if needed—the central question of this research.

Problematic consequences of transference

Contexts in which transference may be problematic include, for example, those involving a SO who is disliked or even detested (rather than liked or loved). A new person minimally resembling such a SO will also tend to be disliked (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994), seen as more rejecting (e.g., Andersen et al., 1996), and thus avoided (e.g., Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000). Self-fulfilling behaviors will also tend to be elicited in kind from naïve new persons based on transference (Berk & Andersen, 2000), validating the negative first impression.

Intriguingly, problematic consequences can also arise from transference of a loved SO, if the relationship is troubled. Each SO is linked to the self in memory (Andersen & Chen, 2002) by means of the relationship with that other; hence, the relationship and the sense of self experienced in it (*the relational self*) are both activated indirectly when the SO representation is activated (e.g., Hinkley & Andersen, 1996; Kraus & Chen, 2009; Miranda et al., 2011; Reznik & Andersen, 2007). If the relationship is problematic, then the transference will be as well.

For example, falling short of a SO's standards (Reznik & Andersen, 2007) or having chronically unsatisfied goals for affection with a SO (Berk & Andersen, 2008) can lead an individual experiencing a relevant transference to experience despair and dejection or to become inappropriately hostile and resentful. Physical abuse by a loved parent while growing up may similarly lead individuals to respond inappropriately toward a new person who resembles this SO. Such individuals respond especially positively in transference, as shown in immediate facial expressions of affect—even while self-reports explicitly show ambivalence (Berenson & Andersen, 2006). Indeed, resemblance to an abusive prior partner, denoted simply by apparent abusiveness in a new person, will similarly predict which personal ads a previously abused individual selects (Zayas & Shoda, 2007). Finally, suffering from chronic depression, rather than not, leads SO-resemblance in a new person (when that SO is loved and sometimes rejecting) to exacerbate depressive mood and emotion dysregulation, and to prompt thoughts of the self as rejected (Miranda et al., 2011).

In short, transference can lead to the perpetuation of personal problems and suffering originating in a prior SO relationship. Accordingly, it may be advantageous for individuals with troubled relationships to be able to strategically regulate transference.

The basic transference process

Transference occurs when the SO representation in memory is activated and then applied to understanding a new person—a process most commonly assessed using recognition memory. Participants who learn about a new person who is made to subtly resemble one of their (past or current) SOs, usually using descriptions of their SO they self-generated weeks earlier, tend to remember explicitly learning that this new person has qualities that were not actually presented but are characteristic of the SO. This standard measure of transference reflects application of the SO representation (and depends on prior activation of this SO). This transference effect occurs regardless of whether the SO is loved or disliked (e.g., Andersen & Baum, 1994; Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000), and despite the social role of the other (e.g., parents, siblings, friends, romantic partners, authority figures). It is also more robust than the comparable effect for social categories (e.g., stereotypes) individuals may use or for representations of nonsignificant others (Andersen & Cole, 1990; Andersen, Glassman, Chen, & Cole, 1995; Chen, Andersen, & Hinkley, 1999).

Transference is known to occur relatively automatically, i.e., to be evoked relatively implicitly, whether by pertinent descriptive cues (Andersen, Reznik, & Glassman, 2005) or facial features of a new person (Kraus & Chen, 2010), and also to arise even when the cues are presented subliminally (Glassman & Andersen, 1999). That is, it occurs largely without intention, effort, or awareness (see Andersen, Moskowitz, Blair, & Nosek, 2007), and as with other automatic effects, is more likely when individuals are physically depleted during circadian rhythm lows (Kruglanski & Pierro, 2008), are high in need for closure (Pierro & Kruglanski, 2008), or disinclined to engage in careful assessment (Pierro, Orehek, & Kruglanski, 2009).

This might imply that motivation and attentiveness are sufficient to prevent transference. However, even when people hear a careful explanation of transference, are told it is maladaptive and offered an incentive to avoid it, SO-resemblance in a new person still biases memory—participants continue to demonstrate the transference effect on memory for the new person (the SO representation was still applied; Liviatan & Andersen, 2008). Given the automatic nature of transference, and the challenges individuals may face in calibrating their responses, we argue that transference may best be regulated using a strategy that is highly specific and can itself be automatized. By planning an alternative response to SO-resemblance in a new person (mentally linking the alternative response to this specific cue), the individual should be able to automatically prevent the transference response when this cue is encountered.

In our view, then, the transference effect on judgments and memory – i.e., *application* of activated SO knowledge to a new person – should most readily be "short-circuited" by preventing application rather than by trying to prevent activation. Because SOs are chronically accessible (Andersen et al., 1995), they are particularly ready at baseline to be further activated by immediate cues. Hence, SO-resemblance in a new person is highly likely to activate the SO representation, even among individuals motivated to ignore such resemblance. Yet application of the representation in inferences and memory should be preventable under precise circumstances.

Indeed, the literature on social cognition has long distinguished application from activation (Higgins, 1996). For example, cues about a person (such as his/her race) can automatically activate (make accessible) an associated stereotype, even though the activated knowledge may not ultimately be *applied* in judgments and behavior, e.g., when the individual is pursuing accuracy goals (Kunda & Sinclair, 1999; Kunda & Spencer, 2003) or is not particularly busy cognitively (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991).

Regulating habitual responses using implementation intentions

Formulated in advance, implementation intentions, or *if–then* plans (Gollwitzer, 1999) enhance action control in the face of goal-conflicting automatic tendencies (e.g., Mendoza, Gollwitzer, & Amodio, 2010; Parks-Stamm, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2007; Stewart & Payne, 2008). Through planning, a future goal-relevant situational cue (the *if*) is identified and linked to a goal-directed response (the *then*). The response then occurs automatically when the cue is encountered. This formation is flexible in content and easily tailored—e.g., the cue can be an internal state, like feeling tired, or an external cue, like skin color (Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2008). The cue becomes more cognitively accessible, allowing individuals to more readily detect and automatically seize opportunities (Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998) to enact goal-relevant behavior without reinvesting consciousness in the moment. Accordingly, implementation intentions control the application of automatic activation because the cue reflexively triggers the alternative, automatic response (Gollwitzer, 1999; Lengfelder & Gollwitzer, 2001), combating unintended automaticity with "intentional automaticity."