



Up and down regulation of a highly automatic process: Implementation intentions can both increase and decrease social projection



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Projection, assuming that other people share one's attitudes, is highly automatic.
- Implementation intentions create a link between a cue and a goal-directed response.
- The goal-directed response is automatically activated when encountering the cue.
- Implementation intentions can decrease as well as increase projection.
- Implementation intentions can be used to alter automatic processes.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 March 2016

Revised 9 December 2016

Accepted 16 December 2016

Available online 28 December 2016

Keywords:

Implementation intentions

Projection

Automaticity

Self-regulation

False consensus

ABSTRACT

Two studies examined whether implementation intentions, self-regulatory “if-then” plans, can alter social projection – people's tendency to automatically assume that other people share their attitudes. In Study 1 ($N = 120$), participants provided their attitudes on twenty items (e.g., “I like mechanics magazines”), and then formed either (1) a goal intention directed at reducing projection: “I will remember that other people are different!”, (2) the same goal intention followed by an implementation intention: “If I'm asked to estimate what percent of other people agree with me, then I will remember that other people are different!”, or (3) did not adopt any strategy (no-treatment control). Participants who formed an implementation intention were less likely to estimate that other people share their attitudes than did participants in the goal intention and control conditions. Study 2 ($N = 268$) replicated these results and additionally demonstrated that if-then plans can also increase projection. Overall, these findings indicate that if-then plans can be used to both decrease and increase social projection. Importantly, the latter finding is the first demonstration that implementation intentions can be used to *intensify* an existing automatic process. Thus, by forming implementation intentions, individuals can exercise dynamic control over nonconscious processes, that is, they can down-regulate as well as up-regulate such processes.

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I like coffee. Does that mean that you like coffee too? As social beings, people are often required to make predictions about the attitudes of others. One source that informs these predictions are our own attitudes: We commonly assume that others share our likes and dislikes (Murstein, 1957; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Such projection can manifest itself, for example, in the belief that since I like coffee, others like coffee as well.

1. Social projection

Projection has been found to occur across a variety of different domains and constructs, including in individuals, close relationships, and groups with respect to beliefs, attitudes, emotions, and goals (Clement & Krueger, 2002; Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007; Kawada, Oettingen, Gollwitzer, & Bargh, 2004; Robbins & Krueger, 2005; Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003; Oettingen, Ahn, Gollwitzer, Kappes, & Kawada, 2014; Ahn, Oettingen, & Gollwitzer, 2015). A meta-analysis conducted 30 years ago, had already recorded 115 different instances in which projection of attitudes occurred (Mullen et al., 1985; $d = 0.496$).

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In some cases, projecting one's attitudes onto others can have negative consequences. Regarding smoking, for instance, Sherman, Presson, Chassin, Corty, and Olshavsky (1983) found that adolescent smokers believe that more adolescents smoke than non-smokers do, likely discouraging smoking cessation. With respect to behavior change interventions, studies have also demonstrated that projection causes apathy towards statistics and intervention programs that utilize statistical information (Bauman & Geher, 2002). Projection can also have positive consequences however. For example, projection increases predictive accuracy of others' attitudes when people projected their attitudes onto their specific group of friends (Hoch, 1987). Further, participants report higher relationship satisfaction when they assume that their friend or spouse is more similar to them (Morry, 2005; Lemay et al., 2007).

Various studies have investigated whether individuals can alter the effect of projection. For example, Krueger and Clement (1994) illustrated the rigidity of consensus judgments by showing that participants failed to update their consensus estimates even when (1) they were educated about consensus bias and provided with feedback of actual consensus information, and (2) when they were made aware of self-other differences in consensus estimates. That providing such information did not help participants to alter projection suggests that projection is not easily controllable. Indeed, Krueger (2007) has argued that projection occurs automatically as it exhibits features of automaticity, that is, it occurs without awareness, with little effort or intention, and cannot be reduced at will (Bargh, 1994).

Research examining the projection of implicit goals supports the assumption that projection occurs outside of awareness. Kawada et al. (2004) found that participants with the implicit goal to compete perceived others as striving for competitive goals more than control participants. As these participants were nonconsciously primed to be competitive – participants were unaware of their competitive goal – they likely nonconsciously projected their competitive goal onto others. That projection occurs without effort or intention is suggested by experimental studies showing that projection continues to occur even under high cognitive load (Krueger & Stanke, 2001), and projection has actually been found to increase when participants are under time pressure (Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004).

Krueger (2007) concluded that projection is a highly automatic process: “social projection is a perceptual primitive that emerges with minimal cognitive contribution” (p. 2). However, Krueger also points out that while *highly* automatic, projection may not be *entirely* automatic. Such high automaticity is in line with viewing automaticity as continuous (Bargh, 1994). In other words, processes should not be classified as either automatic or not, instead the *level* of automaticity should be focused on. This can be done by looking at the features of automaticity: controllability, efficiency, and occurring outside of awareness. Projection, for instance, is difficult but not impossible to control, thus indicating that projection is not completely but highly automatic.

Stifling or reducing projection requires special circumstances: Epley et al. (2004) were able to reduce projection in the form of judging others' attitudes by offering participants monetary incentives. These findings suggest that projection can be decreased when people are given incentives that lead them to effortfully correct their judgments. In contrast, in the present research, we examine whether projection can be altered by a strategy that itself operates automatically, and thus does not require effortful thought: implementation intentions (if-then plans). We chose to examine if-then plans because consciously formed if-then plans have been found to automatically trigger goal-directed responses (Gollwitzer, 1999). Accordingly, if people form if-then plans with the goal intention to alter projection, they could perhaps be effective at modulating the extent to which they engage in projection.

2. Implementation intentions as a self-regulation strategy

People often have good intentions, such as exercising regularly, eating healthier, getting better grades in school, and reducing stereotypical

biases. Unfortunately, such goals have a major downside – people often fail to act on them (Sheeran, 2002). Implementation intentions are a self-regulation strategy introduced by Gollwitzer (1993, 1999) that can be used to help achieve such goals. In other words, if-then plans can be used to close the intention-behavior gap. Specifically, implementation intentions direct people to specify when, where, and how they plan to implement their goals. As a result of deciding how to act in a certain situation using an if-then format – linking a goal-directed response to a specified situational cue – implementation intentions achieve swift and efficient execution of a goal-directed action while protecting goal pursuit from tempting distractions, bad habits, or competing goals (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

Gollwitzer (1999, 2014) argued that the strong associative link between the cue (the “if”-part) and goal-directed response (the “then”-part) of if-then plans leads to automatic action initiation once the cue is encountered. The automaticity of such action initiation is expressed in its immediacy, efficiency, and the absence of conscious involvement. Awareness is not required to act in the critical moment (i.e., when encountering the cue); implementation intention effects were observed even when the specified critical cue was presented subliminally (e.g., Bayer, Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Moskowitz, 2009). Effort is also not required for a cue to activate action initiation; people who form if-then plans are found to act more quickly regardless of cognitive load compared to people who only form goal intentions (Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997; Brandstätter, Lengfelder, & Gollwitzer, 2001). In other words, action control by if-then plans is highly efficient.

Implementation intentions should be differentiated from mere goal intentions. Goal intentions have the structure, “I will perform y!” Implementation intentions, in contrast, have the structure, “If situation x arises, then I will perform response y!” thus linking a stimulus cue with a goal-directed response. Because goal intentions lack an if-then structure and therefore a cue-response link, they do not trigger automatic action initiation and thus should fail to stop highly automatic processes such as projection. Support for this hypothesis comes from an fMRI study reported by Gilbert, Gollwitzer, Cohen, Oettingen, and Burgess (2009) in which participants performed a prospective memory task on the basis of either goal or implementation intention instructions. Acting on the basis of mere goal intentions was associated with lateral rostral prefrontal cortex brain activity, an area that is known to be related to top-down (goal) control of action. Acting on implementation intentions on the other hand was associated with activity in the medial rostral prefrontal cortex, an area related to bottom-up (stimulus) control of action (Burgess, Dumontheil, & Gilbert, 2007).

3. The present research

Past research supports the idea that implementation intentions can be used to effectively regulate social projection, a highly automatic process. If-then plans have been shown to effectively control other automatic judgment processes, such as social-cognitive transference (Przybylinski & Andersen, 2013), stereotyping (Mendoza, Gollwitzer, & Amodio, 2010; Stewart & Payne, 2008), and behavioral mimicry (Wieber, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2014). The applied and theoretical significance of such effects can be illustrated by considering the following metaphor of how the nonconscious and conscious interact. Imagine that a car represents the nonconscious and its driver represents the conscious mind (Baumeister, 2005). Overall, the nonconscious and the conscious work together. Similar to how a driver directs the orientation of a car (using the steering wheel), people's goals direct their nonconscious processes. Further, similar to how a driver can hit the brake to slow down the car, people can aim to stifle their automatic processes. Implementation intentions are an effective tool by which a driver can successfully and without great effort brake the car, that is, directly attenuate their nonconscious processes. In other words, if-then plans allow people to easily down-regulate nonconscious processes from the conscious.

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