



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Consciousness and Cognition

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/concog

It wasn't me: The role of perspective in self-perceptions of responsibility

 Brittany M. Tausen^{a,*}, Lynden K. Miles^b, Louisa Lawrie^b, C. Neil Macrae^b
^a Seattle Pacific University, United States^b University of Aberdeen, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Perspective
Agency
Personal responsibility
Self-perception

ABSTRACT

Perceiving oneself as agentic is dependent upon the integration of conscious intention, a corresponding outcome, and body-congruent sensorimotor information. Altering these critical cues, such as the vantage point from which an event is viewed, can have a notable impact on one's sense of agency, including an increased sense of ownership over another person's actions or a reduced sense of responsibility (or control) over one's own actions. In three studies, we investigated whether mentally simulated and written perspectives could have similar effects. Participants were asked to consider ambiguous actions from either a first-person or a third-person perspective. Results revealed that third-person perspectives reduced judgments of personal responsibility for positive and negative actions. Perceptions of personal action execution as well as the perceived overlap between one's real and imagined self were identified as mediators of the reduced sense of responsibility that characterized negative, but not positive, events constructed from a third-person perspective.

1. Introduction

While the reality of free will is widely debated, research scientists generally agree that people have, at the very least, the illusion of conscious will (Wegner, 2003). That is, people perceive themselves to be self-governing agents with the power to control their actions and, in so doing, intentionally affect change in the environment (Haggard & Tsakiris, 2009). Along with this sense of agency comes a perception of personal responsibility. Aside from the obvious, "I cannot be responsible for something I did not do," great value is placed upon the role of intent and free will when assigning blame or determining responsibility both for oneself and other people. One need not look no further than the process of adjudication to see that the most punishable crimes are those committed with premeditated intent and no evidence of coercion. So too with self judgments, the extent to which an individual takes ownership for an action is, in large part, dependent upon the experience of being a self-governing and willful agent. While undeniably an incredibly complex phenomenon, intentions, body-congruent sensorimotor cues, and corresponding outcomes are thought to be crucial components of the perception of agency (David, Newen, & Vogeley, 2005; Frith, Blakemore & Wolper, 2000; Haggard & Tsakiris, 2009; Wegner, 2003). If a mental thought (e.g., I should trip him) precedes corresponding sensorimotor information (e.g., extending one's foot) and a timely consequence (e.g., an adversary crashing to the ground), then one is likely to presume that one was the cause of the man's stumble. When intention, sensorimotor activity, and/or consequences are misaligned, however, individuals are less likely to experience a sense of agency or responsibility associated with an outcome (Frith et al., 2000; Wegner, 2003).

In order to maintain the integrity of one's self-concept, it is essential to be able to differentiate between what the self and others

* Corresponding author at: Seattle Pacific University, 3307 Third Ave West, Marston 123, Seattle, WA 98119, United States.

E-mail address: tausen@spu.edu (B.M. Tausen).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2018.06.013>

Received 7 February 2018; Received in revised form 19 May 2018; Accepted 19 June 2018

Available online 30 June 2018

1053-8100/ © 2018 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

have done. At face value, then, the core components of perceived agency provide a clear and convenient distinction between actions executed by the self as opposed to another person. For example, self-generated actions are often characterized by the experience of a conscious intention that appears to precede action. When observing others, the process of inferring intention tends to happen after a behavior is witnessed (if at all). Even when we are aware of someone's specific intention or have a similar and co-occurring intention, however, we are unlikely to assume personal responsibility for the other's behavior unless there is correspondence between the intention and one's own sensorimotor experience. To this end, [Wegner and Wheatley \(1999\)](#) demonstrated that participants experienced a sense of responsibility for the movements of a cursor (actually being moved by a confederate) if they had recently heard information corresponding to its future location and their hands were on the cursor. In this experiment, somatosensory information and intention were aligned giving rise to the illusion of will.

The role of sensorimotor information in one's sense of agency as well as distinguishing between self and other can be further understood through the lens of social neuroscience. When imagining another individual's experience, too little overlap with the neural and cognitive activities that support perception/action can impede social-cognitive functions such as empathy ([Decety & Jackson, 2006](#); [Uddin et al., 2008](#)). At the same time, however, neural and behavioral distinctions between targets are necessary to maintain a sense of agency as well as the functional integrity of a mental simulation ([Decety & Jackson, 2006](#)). Consistent with these prerequisites, when participants imagine themselves performing a simple action, there is greater activity in brain areas that underlie actual performance than when imagining another person (e.g., the experimenter) executing the same movements ([Ruby & Decety, 2001](#)). This activity, thought to be indicative of agentic motor planning, suggests that heightened sensorimotor responsivity accompanies self vs. other generated actions. Similarly, it has been demonstrated that voluntary and involuntary movements in patients with Alien Hand Syndrome are accompanied by unique neural activity associated with proprioception and somatosensory processing ([Assal, Schwartz, & Vuilleumier, 2007](#)). Together, these studies corroborate the notion that sensorimotor activity is a key component associated with a sense of self, agency, and responsibility for real and imagined actions.

Even in the absence of specific target information, viewing actions (e.g., hand and foot flexion) from a body-congruent, first-person perspective elicits greater activity in the sensorimotor cortex compared to watching them from an incongruent, third-person orientation ([Jackson, Meltzoff, & Decety, 2006](#)). The infamous rubber hand illusion ([Costantini & Haggard, 2007](#)) also demonstrates the importance of visual and sensory information. If we *see* a fake arm being stimulated at the same time that we *feel* our own arm being stimulated, we are likely to develop a sense of ownership over the rubber hand. Interestingly, placing the rubber arm in a third-person orientation (either 90° or 180° from the participant) breaks the illusion ([Ehrsson, Spence, & Passingham, 2004](#); [Tsakiris & Haggard, 2005](#)). Beyond body ownership, myriad studies have shown that it is possible to give rise to a false sense of agency by fabricating a first-person visual experience ([Ehrsson et al., 2004](#); [Pavani, Spence, & Driver, 2000](#); [Wegner & Wheatley, 1999](#)). In an ingenious experiment, [Wegner, Sparrow, and Winerman \(2004\)](#) demonstrated that participants experienced a vicarious sense of agency for arm movements that were not their own when the arms of another person were placed in a congruent body alignment. That participants experienced a sense of agency over the movements of another, even in the absence of direct sensorimotor information, suggests that vantage point may serve as a particularly strong cue for perceptions of agency. Together, this body of work demonstrates the tenuous nature one's sense of agency, such that it is possible to make people 'feel' responsible for actions that are not their own by fostering a body-congruent, first-person perspective.

Outside of laboratory trickery, we are rarely (if ever) privy to a first-person perspective of another individual's experience. Instead, when watching another person, we are relegated to a third-person or outside perspective, whereas our personal actions are experienced from a first-person perspective. As such, perspective has often been conflated with target (see [Haggard & Tsakiris, 2009](#) for discussion). To isolate the role of perspective it has thus been necessary to vary perspective while holding target constant. When contemplating a personal action visually or verbally, it is possible to adopt either a first-person perspective (1PP) or a third-person perspective (3PP) of oneself ([Christian, Miles, Parkinson, & Macrae, 2013](#); [Libby & Eibach, 2011](#); [Nigro & Neisser, 1983](#)). Whether the perspective that characterizes an event is spontaneously occurring or instructed, a growing body of research has established that each has distinct characteristics, including the neural and sensorimotor activation that accompanies mental simulation ([Christian, Parkinson, Miles, Macrae, & Wheatley, 2015](#); [Miles, Christian, Masilamani, Volpi, & Macrae, 2014](#)), as well as influential behavioral consequences ([Christian, Miles, Kenyeri, Mattscheck, & Macrae, 2016](#); [Libby & Eibach, 2011](#); [Libby, Shaffer, Eibach, & Slemmer, 2007](#)). Particularly relevant to the current inquiry, previous work has demonstrated that the way an event is conceptualized is dependent upon the perspective from which it is portrayed. Actions depicted from a 3PP are described in abstract terms that focus less on the components of action execution, whereas actions depicted from a 1PP are associated with more concrete and action-oriented terms ([Libby & Eibach, 2011](#); [Libby, Shaffer, & Eibach, 2009](#)). Despite consequences for action construal as well as the sensorimotor activity that accompanies event simulation, research has yet to investigate the role of perspective on a sense of agency as it manifests in perceptions of personal responsibility.

In the current manuscript, we explored the power of perspective to impact self-perceptions of responsibility. Often referred to as actor (1PP) and observer (3PP) vantage points, we hypothesized that the sense of self-responsibility would be stronger when people adopt a first-person (vs. third-person) perspective. Experiment 1 employed a written manipulation of perspective for both positive and negative situations that were characterized by ambiguity (it was unclear who was responsible for the outcome). Experiment 2 sought to replicate the effect utilizing an imagined visual perspective manipulation and explored a potential mediator (perceptions of personal action execution). Experiment 3 extended these findings by investigating the influence of perspective on self-perceptions of responsibility in a non-ambiguous scenario as well as the mediating role of perceived overlap between one's real and written-about self.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7287772>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7287772>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)