



# Narrative perspective shift at retrieval: The psychological-distance-mediated-effect on emotional intensity of positive and negative autobiographical memory <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The present study manipulated participants' narrative perspectives (1st-personal pronoun "I" and 3rd-personal pronoun "He/She") to vary their field and observer visual perspectives that they took to retrieve autobiographical events and examine how the shifts in narrative perspective could influence the self-rated emotional intensity of autobiographical memory. Results showed that when narrative perspectives effectively shifted participants' visual perspectives from field to observer, they felt attenuated emotional intensities of positive and negative autobiographical memories. However, this did not occur when narrative perspectives effectively shifted the visual perspectives from observer to field. Multiple mediator models further showed that the changes in psychological distance and imagery vividness (a distance-related construct) of autobiographical memory mediated the relationship between the narrative perspective shift from the 1st- to 3rd-person and the reduction in the intensities of negative and positive emotion. This provides support for the role of psychological distancing in reducing the emotional intensity of autobiographical memory.

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## 1. Introduction

Visual perspective during retrieval plays an important role in autobiographical memory, influencing its phenomenology, conscious experience, and content (see [Eich, Handy, Holmes, Lerner, & Mclsaac, 2012](#); [Rice, 2010](#), for reviews). Autobiographical memory can be retrieved from a field visual perspective or an observer visual perspective ([Nigro & Neisser, 1983](#)). When recalling memories from the field, the 1st-person visual perspective, people relive the memories that have originally been seen and experienced through their own eyes. In contrast, when recalling memories from the observer, the 3rd-person visual perspective, people see themselves in the memory, as if they were observers of their own memories. Similarly, narrative perspectives elicited by different personal pronouns (e.g., I, You, and He/She) present the perspectives that people use to refer to the self when they narrate their personal past. When people express their memories in the 1st-personal pronoun "I", they adopt the 1st-person narrative perspective. When they express their memories in the

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3rd-personal pronoun “He/She”, they adopt the 3rd-person narrative perspective. In the present study, we manipulated narrative perspective to alter visual perspective that participants used to retrieve autobiographical memories and examined how a shift in narrative perspective would influence participants’ self-rated emotional intensities of positive and negative autobiographical memories.

### 1.1. Narrative perspective shift and emotional intensity of autobiographical memory

People are able to switch between the 1st- and 3rd-person narrative perspectives, which affects the narrator’s emotion in diary writing (e.g., Chang, Huang, & Lin, 2013; Jin, 2005; Jin, 2010; Seih, Lin, Huang, Peng, & Huang, 2008). By analyzing the diaries written by adults, Jin (2010) found that diary writers tended to disclose personal feelings in the contents expressed in the 1st-personal pronoun (i.e., I). When they used the 2nd-personal pronoun (i.e., You), the diaries looked like the inner dialogues between the writers and their supportive partners. When they used the 3rd-personal pronoun (i.e., He/She), the diaries were characterized by objective and rational tones. Jin (2005, 2010) developed the Psychological Displacement Paradigm in Diary-writing, in which participants are instructed to write about their daily events using a fixed sequence to shift personal pronouns (i.e., 1st to 2nd to 3rd), to systematically examine the effect of shifting personal pronouns in diary writing.

Similar to the narrative perspectives, field and observer visual perspectives can flexibly be switched to one another (e.g., Kross, 2009; Rice & Rubin, 2009). Shifting visual perspective from field to observer or from observer to field exerts different effects on the emotional intensity of autobiographical memory. Participants’ emotional responses at retrieval were reduced when they switched their visual perspectives from field to observer, but not when they switched their visual perspectives from observer to field or when their visual perspectives remained constant (e.g., Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Sekiguchi and Nonaka (2013) investigated the long-term effect of visual perspective shift and found a reduction in the emotional intensity of the recalled events when participants changed the perspective from field to observer, but this effect of perspective shift did not occur when participants changed the perspective from observer to field. Overall, these findings suggest an asymmetric effect of visual perspective shift on emotional intensity of autobiographical memory.

Despite the consistent findings that switching visual perspective from field to observer reduced the emotional intensity of autobiographical memory, evidences for the effect of switching personal pronouns on emotion regulation have been mixed. Based on Jin’s (2010) Psychological Displacement Paradigm in Diary-writing, the order to switch the personal pronouns is fixed and only the 1st-to-2nd-to-3rd personal pronoun shift would reduce negative emotion and help writers to gain emotional benefits (Chang et al., 2013; Jin, 2010; Seih et al., 2008). However, some studies showed that flexibility in the use of personal pronouns to describe autobiographical memory could improve emotion-related health (e.g., Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003). Seih, Chuang, and Pennebaker (2011) failed to find any greater benefit over other orders of writing when participants switched the personal pronouns from 1st to 2nd to 3rd, in the order as proposed by the Psychological Displacement Paradigm in Diary-writing.

Although there are substantial parallels in research between narrative perspective (1st-personal pronoun, “I” vs. 3rd-personal pronoun, “He/She”) and visual perspective (field vs. observer), the possible association between narrative perspective and visual perspective during retrieval has not been fully explored. To fill in this gap, we had three goals in the present study. First, we connected narrative perspective with visual perspective in the field of autobiographical memory and examined whether the manipulated 1st- and 3rd-person narrative perspectives were associated with field and observer visual perspectives, respectively, and whether narrative perspective shifts between 1st- and 3rd-person were associated with visual perspective changes. Second, to investigate the effect of narrative perspective shift on emotion regulation, we examined the order of narrative perspective shift, either from 1st- to 3rd-person or from 3rd- to 1st-person, and its consequences on changes in the self-rated emotional intensities of positive and negative autobiographical memories.

### 1.2. Psychological-distance-mediated-effect

The third goal of the present study was to examine the mechanism underlying the effect of narrative perspective shift on emotional intensity of autobiographical memory. We proposed that psychological distance of autobiographical memory would mediate this effect. Psychological distance is defined as people’s subjective experiences of how long ago and how far away autobiographical memories are from the current self (e.g., Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Ross & Wilson, 2002; Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, & Dale, 2010). The psychological distance of an autobiographical memory may be associated with (a) mental image when people retrieve and visually see the memory in one’s mind’s eye, and (b) memory age that reflects the objective temporal distance of the memory from the current self. For example, those who experienced more vivid images of the memories during retrieval would estimate the memories to be psychologically closer to them than those who experienced less vivid images. Thus, in addition to examining the mediating effect of psychological distance, we explored whether the distance-related constructs, imagery vividness and memory age, could mediate the relationship between narrative perspective shift and the change in emotional intensity.

Based on a naturalistic view on the association between distance and emotional response, the first line of evidence supporting the psychological-distance-mediated-effect argues that a reduction in physical distance is associated with an increase in emotional activity (e.g., Frijda, 1992). When participants saw a negative emotion-eliciting scene zoom-in on

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