



# Distant determination and near determinism: The role of temporal distance in prospective attributions to will☆☆☆



Elena Stephan<sup>a,\*</sup>, Daniella Shidlovski<sup>a</sup>, Daniel Heller<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

<sup>b</sup> Collier School of Management, Tel Aviv University, Israel

## HIGHLIGHTS

- *The will* implies acting in accordance to one's goals despite of constraints.
- We examine attributions to will of near and distant future outcomes.
- We suggested that consideration of superordinate goals enhances attributions to will.
- Attributions to will increased over temporal distance for self/other outcomes.
- Construal in terms of goals was associated with greater attributions to will.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 21 May 2015

Revised 15 June 2016

Accepted 23 June 2016

Available online 25 June 2016

### Keywords:

Temporal distance

Construal Level Theory

Attributions to will

## ABSTRACT

People hold different beliefs about the causal role of will in shaping future life outcomes. We examine how temporal distance from a predicted event influences such beliefs, or attributions to will. Laypersons conceptualize will as acting according to one's goals, being free from constraints. We reasoned that construal of a future event or action in terms of individual's superordinate goals (rather than in terms of concrete aspects of the situation) would be associated with enhanced attributions to will. Drawing from Construal Level Theory, we proposed that predictions about temporally distant events rely more on high-level aspects (e.g., superordinate goals) than low-level aspects (e.g., contextual factors) and thus will result in greater attributions to will compared to predictions about near events. We show that an increase in temporal distance enhances beliefs in the causal impact of will in shaping outcomes of the self (Study 1) and others (Study 3). We also show that the individual tendency to construe actions in terms of goals (as assessed by the Behavior Identification Form) is associated with greater attributions to will (Study 2). We conclude that construal of an event in terms of superordinate goals (due to the manipulation of psychological distance or to individual differences) enhances attributions to will.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Our conscious experience generally provides us with the sense that our actions and their outcomes originate in our will (e.g., Pronin & Kugler, 2010; Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005). We have

the impression that we control our actions and cause events (e.g., Ent & Baumeister, 2014). Although the scholastic debate on the actual role of will in determining actions and life outcomes goes on for centuries (e.g., Baumeister, 2008; Bargh & Morsella, 2008), laypersons perceive "will" as making choices based on one's own desires and long-term personal goals, being free from constraints (Monroe & Malle, 2010; Stillman, Baumeister, & Mele, 2011). Thus, *the will* can be broadly referred to as a faculty that allows a person to stick with his or her goals and persist in face of barriers or pressures (Helzer & Gilovich, 2012; Locke & Kristoff, 1996; Alquist, Ainsworth, & Baumeister, 2013). Beliefs about the role of will serve an important cultural function in understanding personal responsibility and accountability and are intertwined with moral, legal, and interpersonal processes (Shariff et al., 2014).

☆ We would like to thank Yaacov Trope for his valuable comments on our findings and Anna Gerasimenko for her assistance with data collection.

☆☆ This research was partially supported by grants from the Israel Science Foundation (grant No. 766/13, to Elena Stephan), and by the Henry Crown Institute of Business Research in Israel (Daniel Heller) (grant No. 01060100).

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 5290002, Israel.

E-mail address: [elena\\_stephan@hotmail.com](mailto:elena_stephan@hotmail.com) (E. Stephan).

Research on beliefs about will has demonstrated several asymmetries in how will applies to different social targets. In particular, people believe their own futures are more driven by intentions and desires than that of others (Pronin & Kugler, 2010). This is consistent with research on attributions regarding past behavior that shows greater attribution to variant factors when judging the self, as compared to the use of dispositions when judging others (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Beliefs about will are also sensitive to temporal frames in that people believe that will is a more potent determinant of future events than past events (Helzer & Gilovich, 2012). Thus, although future thinking may enhance beliefs about the causal role of will for both self and others, such inferences or *attributions to will* may be stronger for the self than for others (Pronin & Kugler, 2010). Note that although the term “attribution” frequently refers to explanations of observed actions in the past or present (e.g., Moskowitz, 2005; Carlston, 2010), we adopted the term “attribution to will” from earlier work by Helzer and Gilovich (2012) to address inferences about the causal role of individual's will in the process of prospection (consideration of possible future events; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007).

The present article targets attributions to will in prediction of future events at various points in time. We examine how thinking about the same event (that involves the self or another person) in the near or the distant future influences the inferences about the causal role of will in the outcome. Drawing from research on regularities in representation of future events, we argue that attributions to will may be augmented by the factors that contribute to consideration of individual's goals. This reasoning relies on extant literature regarding lay beliefs about will that imply the ability to overcome situational barriers as well as internal constraints and to choose *what one wants, to act accordingly to one's preferences* (Pronin & Kugler, 2010; Watson, 1982). According to Baumeister (2008), with respect to oneself, individuals perceive will in sustained pursuit of (enlightened, culturally appropriate) self-interest. A person's will was viewed as a critical ingredient in transforming intentions into actions, enabling behavioral commitment to one's goals (Mischel, 1996). Moreover, thinking in terms of goals activates perception of personal agency and willful action (e.g., Vallacher & Wegner, 2012) and may therefore enhance prospective attributions to will.

We propose that in future events (that involve the self and other people), attributions to will may be augmented by the factors that contribute to representation in terms of individual's goals and to the underweighting of the potential constraints (e.g., temporal distance and abstract construal; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Research on the nature of representational systems underlying prospection suggests that *goals play a key role in structuring imagined events* in broader event sequences, especially when distant future is considered (D'Argembeau & Demblon, 2012). We argue that an increase in temporal distance from a future event may enhance the role of goals (defined as end-states that the individual has not yet attained, desires to attain and is committed to approach or avoid) more than factors that set limits on the outcome such as dispositions (that are fixed, enduring and invariant qualities; Moskowitz & Olcaysoy Okten, 2015) or contextual influences. Consistent with this notion, earlier research have shown that distant representations frequently involve a meaningful goal (the desirable end state, associated with consideration of arguments in favor of action), whereas near future representations reflect constraining factors that may influence behavior and its outcome (feasibility of action, consideration of arguments against action; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004). Such attenuated consideration of constraining factors when distant (rather than near) future is considered may also imply that distant representations are guided by less chronic self-aspects (e.g., goals rather than dispositions). Earlier research suggests prospective reliance on goals rather than on constraining dispositions or contextual influences may be especially prominent in self-prospection (Pronin & Kugler, 2010).

We focus on the role of temporal distance and construal tendencies in attributions to will in events that involve either the self (Studies 1, 2)

or other persons (Study 3). We predict that temporal distance and the associated tendency to represent events in terms of individual's goals, enhances attributions to the causal force of will in shaping life outcomes. That is, thinking in terms of superordinate goals (e.g., succeeding in the exam) makes limited reference to potential constraints imposed by the actor (e.g., ability in the domain) or situational factors (e.g., difficulty of questions), leading to an overemphasis on the causal role of will (e.g., how much ones strives to succeed in the exam). To set the stage for our prediction we review the literature that points to the effects of temporal distance on prospection and elaborate on the role of goals and will inferences.

### 1.1. The effects of temporal distance on prospection

People strive effortfully to anticipate the future, but their forecasts tend to be far from perfect and sometimes prove dramatically wrong (see Dunning, 2007, for a review). First, predictions are overly optimistic (the tendency to over-predict the occurrence of positive actions; e.g., Epley & Dunning, 2000). Second, people tend to be overly confident that those predictions will prove right (e.g., Lichtenstein, Fischhoff, & Phillips, 1982). To reach a prediction, people rely on a scenario building strategy. To the extent that scenarios of an event are simple, easy to construct, plausible and numerous, people conclude that the event is more likely to happen (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). However, the scenarios people build tend to be narrow and incomplete, as these are based, for example, on only a few abstract features (i.e., high-level construal) of events. We reasoned that the construal level of the predicted events would influence attributions to will.

One important determinant of prediction is psychological distance from the considered event. The effects of psychological distance have been extensively addressed within the framework of Construal Level Theory (CLT; Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007). According to CLT, moving away from “the actual experience” (hypotheticality) of “the self” (social distance) “here” (spatial distance) and “now” (temporal distance) is associated with a more abstract mental construal of a stimulus. That is, distancing results in more meaningful, schematic, (i.e., higher-level) construal rather than contextual, specific (i.e., low-level) construal. According to CLT, increasing psychological distance from a future situation will make it more likely that predictions rely on stable simplified and coherent (higher-level) constructs (e.g., individual's superordinate goals and dispositions) rather than contextual aspects (for reviews see Liberman et al., 2007; Wakslak, Trope, & Liberman, 2012). Consistent with this notion, it was shown that predictions and plans for the distant future (as compared to the near future) are guided by superordinate goals and values (Fujita, Eyal, Chaiken, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009) and by personal dispositions (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003; Wakslak, Nussbaum, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). For example, participants described an action (“studying”) using more abstract goal-related terms (“doing well at school”) rather than technical terms (“reading a textbook”) when the action was more distant in time (Liberman & Trope, 1998). However, the relative prominence of goals versus dispositions in the process of prospection was not previously addressed. In line with the growing understanding of the central role of individual's goals in explanations of past behavior (Moskowitz & Olcaysoy Okten, 2015), we argue that goals may play a unique role in prospection and contribute to attributions to will. Note that as goals range on abstractness (hierarchy/subordination of goals, e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), we currently use the term “goals” to refer to *superordinate goals* that serve relatively stable trans-situational behavioral guides rather than more contextualized goals or intentions (Moskowitz & Olcaysoy Okten, 2015).

### 1.2. Goals and will inferences in prospection

Advancing earlier research within the CLT framework, our work makes an initial attempt to address the influence of the future

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7324371>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7324371>

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