



Goal projection and giving help[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Goal projection is the assumption that another person shares one's goals.
- Goal projection in a cooperative context increases quantity and quality of help.
- Goal projection strengthens associative links between projected goal and target person.
- Manipulation of goal strength verified that goals were projected and not other concepts.

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ABSTRACT

Goal projection is the assumption that other persons share goals that we are currently pursuing. Hypothesizing that the projection of one's goal onto another person should affect actual behavior, we observed that goal projection in a situation where help is called for increased both the quantity and the quality of help given (Studies 1 and 2). An implicit measure of goal projection (i.e., a primed lexical decision task) suggested that participants' goals were indeed projected to the target person (Study 2). Varying goal strength via failure versus success feedback verified that goals rather than other concepts (e.g., personal attributes such as traits or self-concepts) were projected (Study 3). The findings imply that goal projection by feigning that the other person has a similar goal affects actual behavior in line with contextual demands.

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Imagine that you have a doctor's appointment and you entered the main lobby of the building. As you scan the directions to Dr. X's office, you notice another person standing close by staring at the same set of directions. Assuming that she also wants to see your doctor, you cordially give her a tip: "Dr. X's office is this way." Goal projection led you to give help to the lost person in line with your own goal. But how did you know that the helped person really intended to see your doctor?

In the absence of substantial information about others, as in the example above, we tend to project our own inclinations, tendencies, and preferences (Krueger, 2000, 2007; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Projection occurs because we have selective exposure to our own mental states so we recall our own inclinations, tendencies, and

preferences first, as these are cognitively available and easily accessible when inferring other people's mental states (Ames, 2004a, 2004b; Dawes, 1990; Kelley & Jacoby, 1996; Krueger, 2007; Ross et al., 1977). Constructs that are easily accessible tend to be applied when judging others (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Higgins, King, & Mavin, 1982; Marks & Miller, 1987; Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985) and thus they can also be projected onto others (Bornstein, 1993; Erdelyi, 1985; Newman, Duff, & Baumeister, 1997).

The present research examined the interpersonal consequences of the projection of goals, which is assuming that others hold a similar goal as one is currently pursuing (Kawada, Oettingen, Gollwitzer, & Bargh, 2004). Specifically, we hypothesized that in settings where providing help is called for, goal projection should promote helping behavior in support of the target person's presumed goal pursuit. Put another way, when people project their goals in settings where helping behavior is the default response (what Lewin, 1935, 1997, referred to as the "potency of the situation"), we hypothesized that they should give more help to the other person.

Consider once again the example of the doctor's office: The person assuming that she and the other person in the hallway shared the same goal offered a tip, because the "potency of the situation" prompted

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supportive behavior. In other words, supportive behavior is the default response when someone is lost and I know my way.

Projection: theory and research

Compared to the classic Freudian conceptualization of projection (defined as ascribing one's personal attributes onto others) as a defense mechanism (Freud, 1915/1953), projection research today has a broader scope. According to D. S. Holmes (1978), "[projection] is the process by which persons attribute personality traits, characteristics, or motivations to other persons as a function of their own personality traits, characteristics, or motivations" (p. 677). This definition has provided a broad conceptual umbrella for the findings of current social projection¹ research. For example, research on the false consensus effect demonstrated that people overestimate the degree to which others think as they do based on their own attitudes and beliefs (Ross et al., 1977). Or, findings on the egocentric bias, referred to as the "spotlight" effect, showed that people overestimate the extent that others notice their actions (review by Dunning, 2003). Research on assumed similarity between partners in relationships showed that significant others believe their partners share similar attitudes and beliefs as they do (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002). Finally, research on groups found that people project more favorable traits and values to in-group than out-group members (Krueger, 1998; review by Krueger, 2000; Krueger & Zeiger, 1993; Robbins & Krueger, 2005).

What has been less emphasized in social projection research is whether people also project their motivational states onto others. Kawada et al. (2004) investigated goal projection as a distinct phenomenon within social projection, where people project both implicitly activated and explicitly set goals. The present research builds on the work by Kawada et al. (2004). However, rather than showing that goal projection exists which was the focus of the research conducted by Kawada et al., the present paper focuses on the behavioral consequences of goal projection. Specifically, we hypothesize that people who project their goal onto a target person will behave towards the target person as if they knew what the target person's goal is (i.e., the same as theirs), leading them to act in line with what seems opportune for the other person to do in the current situation. For example, we investigate whether a person with an achievement goal would help the target person to achieve well in a context where helping the target person is called for.

Goal projection

In three studies, Kawada et al. (2004) demonstrated the existence of goal projection. In a first study, participants were pre-selected as embracing an entity or incremental theory (i.e., intelligence is stable vs. malleable; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Dweck, 1999; Rattan, Good, & Dweck, 2012). Entity versus incremental theories are known to facilitate the activation of performance versus learning goals, respectively, once an achievement situation is encountered. Accordingly, Kawada et al. observed that people holding entity versus incremental theories projected performance versus learning goals onto fictitious characters. Specifically, participants had to predict the behaviors of fictitious characters described in three different achievement-related scenarios. For example, in one scenario, a character named Glenn received feedback from his teacher that he did very poorly on a project counting towards his course grade, but was given the option of improving his grade either by turning in an entirely new project or by revising his original project. Participants then indicated the degree to which they thought Glenn would turn in a new project (thereby projecting a performance goal) or revise his old project (thereby projecting a learning goal). Incremental theorists

more than entity theorists, thought that Glenn would want to revise his old project.

In a second study, Kawada et al. (2004) tested whether both implicit goals (goals activated outside of awareness) and explicit goals are projected on others. In this study, participants were placed in one of three goal conditions. In the implicit goal condition, participants were primed with the goal to compete by a scrambled sentences task. In the explicit goal condition, participants received verbal directions that instructed them to compete. And in the no goal condition, participants received a scrambled sentences task of neutral content. In a subsequent supposedly unrelated task, participants had to predict the moves of two fictitious characters engaged in a prisoner's dilemma game. Both the implicit and explicit goal participants projected more competitive moves onto these characters than those in the no goal condition.

Finally, in a third study, Kawada et al. (2004) assessed whether goal projection involves the projection of a goal rather than a trait. Participants were again placed in one of three goal conditions. In order to test whether a goal was projected, the strength of the goal was manipulated. Research on both striving for identity goals (e.g., Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996; Ledgerwood, Liviatan, & Carnevale, 2007; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) and research on regulatory fit (e.g., Förster, Liberman, & Higgins, 2005) suggests that goals decrease in strength when positive feedback is encountered but maintain their intensity when met with negative feedback. Thus, before being presented with the prisoner's dilemma game, all participants engaged in a separate goal-relevant (i.e., competitive) task against a hypothetical partner. Half of the participants received positive feedback, indicating that they outperformed their partner, thereby weakening the strength of the goal. The other half of the participants received negative feedback, indicating that their partner outperformed them, thereby maintaining the strength of the goal. As it turned out, only negative feedback participants in the implicit and explicit goal conditions but not positive feedback participants showed goal projection effects (i.e., participants predicted that people engaged in the prisoner's dilemma game behaved competitively). The pattern of results was in line with the claim that goals rather than traits, attitudes, or beliefs were projected because the projection of traits, attitudes, or beliefs should not be affected by respective goal completion.

The present research

Kawada et al. (2004) confirmed that goals are projected onto others, whether the projector is aware of pursuing the projected goal or not. But how does projecting one's goals affect subsequent behavior towards the target person? It should depend on the situation. For instance, assuming a shared goal in settings where competitive behavior is called for should spur assertive and competitive behavior towards the other person. To the contrary, assuming a shared goal in settings where supportive behavior is called for should spur help and supportive behavior towards the target person. The current research focuses on the latter setting.

Specifically, we established a context that calls for support to the target person, proposing that projecting a goal in that context would lead participants to help the target person. We were more interested in whether projecting participants tried to help, rather than whether their help was effective. Because the goal of the person who is the target of projection is in fact unknown, the help that a projecting person provides might prove less effective than intended. Going back to the initial example, pointing out the way to one's doctor's office might even be counterproductive for the person in the hallway. Maybe she came to the building to see her lawyer—rather than being on her way to the doctor.

In the present three studies, we first established a specific goal (i.e., to be creative in Study 1, to achieve in Studies 2 and 3) or no goal. We provided the goals either explicitly (Study 1) or implicitly (Studies 2 and 3). Then, to establish a context which calls for help, we gave participants a description of a person who could use some help

¹ Social projection serves as an umbrella term for the various forms of perceived consensus of traits, attitudes, beliefs, and characteristics (Krueger, 1998, 2000; Krueger, 2008).

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