

Effects of subliminal priming of self and God on self-attribution of authorship for events [☆]

Ap Dijksterhuis ^{a,*}, Jesse Preston ^b, Daniel M. Wegner ^c, Henk Aarts ^d

^a *Social Psychology Program, Radboud University Nijmegen, PO Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, The Netherlands*

^b *University of Western Ontario, Ont., Canada*

^c *Harvard University*

^d *Utrecht University*

Received 16 March 2006; revised 5 January 2007

Available online 19 January 2007

Communicated by Jeff Stone

Abstract

Three studies investigated how subliminally primed thoughts of an agent prior to action can affect ascriptions of authorship for that action. Participants competed against a computer program to remove words from a computer screen. Participants reported greater feelings of authorship when primed with first person singular pronouns, and lower feelings of authorship when primed with “computer.” We also investigated whether authorship feelings could be affected by priming subjects with a supernatural agent (i.e., God). Feelings of authorship decreased when participants were primed with God, but only among believers.

© 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Subliminal priming; Agency; Attribution; Self

When you do something, how do you know you're the one who did it? Normally, this doesn't seem like much of a mystery, because you can feel yourself doing things and appreciate the operation of your physical body. But what happens when the self is not the only agent that might be responsible for the body's actions? At times, agents other than the self are very plausible causes for actions, such as when your computer crashes and it is not clear whether you pressed an inappropriate key or whether the computer is to blame. In addition, at least for some people, there may be non-self agents present in a mere psychological sense, potential causal forces that are believed to exist and guide action—agents such as spirits, angels, Satan, God, or even

the inner voices that accompany delusional states. How do people sort out the causes of their own actions when they believe in such agents? These studies explored the idea that the attribution of authorship for action to self might be influenced by the subliminal priming of particular agents, and that the influence of such priming might depend on the person's beliefs in the agent.

Attribution of authorship

The feeling that the self is the author of an action is derived in part from basic physiological systems of the body. One knows one is doing something by virtue of interoceptive sensations of the body's movement (Craig, 2003) that occur both before action (Frith, Blakemore, & Wolpert, 2000) and after action (Gandevia & Burke, 1992). Such bodily feedforward and feedback systems are supplemented by visual and auditory feedback, as we can often see and hear ourselves act. However, these sensory indicators of authorship for action are often overridden by a

[☆] This research was funded in part by NWO-Grant 016.025.030 (“Vernieuwingsimpuls”) and in part by NIMH Grant MH-49127. We thank Ricardo Alanis, Michael Berkovits, Femi Giwa, and Job van der Schalk for assistance in conducting these studies.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: a.dijksterhuis@psych.ru.nl (A. Dijksterhuis).

variety of social and contextual variables that can drive attributions quite independently of direct sensation (Wegner, 2002; Wegner & Sparrow, 2004). In the case of actions that do not have obvious bodily sensations, or that are so distant from their bodily wellsprings as to be difficult to trace, the experience of authoring the action may depend not on sensation, but on processing causal information and arriving at an attribution judgment (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1972; Jones & Davis, 1965; Gilbert, 1997).

An early theory of such attribution proposed by Ziehen (1899) held that thinking of self before action yields the experience of own agency. He remarked that "...we finally come to regard the ego-idea as the cause of our actions because of its very frequent appearance in the series of ideas preceding each action. It is almost always represented several times among the ideas preceding the final movement. But the idea of the relation of causality is an empirical element that always appears when two successive ideas are very closely associated" (Ziehen, 1899, p. 296). The hypothesis that thoughts of self may incline people to interpret actions as their own was later noted by Michotte (1963), and was developed yet more fully in the objective self awareness theory of responsibility attribution (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Duval & Silvia, 2001).

Research on attention and causal attribution has shown that people who are led to attend to themselves become more likely to attribute responsibility to self for causally ambiguous events (Duval, Duval, & Neely, 1979; Duval & Wicklund, 1973), although not always in the case of negative events (Federoff & Harvey, 1976). More generally, when attention is drawn to any social entity—self, other, or group—that entity becomes likely to draw attributions of causation and responsibility (Arkin & Duval, 1975; Lassiter, Geers, Munhall, Ploutz-Snyder, & Breitenbecher, 2002; McArthur & Post, 1977; Storms, 1972; Taylor & Fiske, 1978; Wegner & Giuliano, 1982). This view of attribution suggests why actors more often view their behavior as caused by situations, whereas observers of those actors view the same behavior as caused by the actors' dispositions—the difference may occur in part because actors are attending to situations and observers are attending to the actor (Jones & Nisbett, 1972).

The attentional view of causal attribution also solves an important problem in how agency judgments are made. The attention theory suggests that prior thought about an agent or cause creates a frame for cause perception, a general tendency for agency to be ascribed to the attended agent. Such a frame or set can explain why it is that attributions of agency to self are often very fluid and perfunctory (e.g., Aarts, Custers, & Wegner, 2005), occurring with a rapidity that suggests automatic processing (e.g., Taylor & Fiske, 1978) rather than a thorough information search (e.g., Kelley, 1967). If every event in the world required a full analysis of possible agents, after all, quick judgments of own agency would seem unlikely. For example, the simple act of going the kitchen for a midnight snack could throw a person into an attributional crisis if one had to consider the

multiple possibilities that self is doing this, or that others present are eliciting the action, or perhaps even that absent others or supernatural agents such as God are prompting the action. The person would seldom figure out who did it before the snack was all gone. Because people also make rapid authorship judgments not only for actions but for their own thoughts—and thoughts are only misattributed to non-self agents in psychopathology or in unusual circumstances (Frith et al., 2000; Graham & Stephens, 1994)—it seems there must be a mental system that regularly guides attributions of agency toward a current default agent.

Past research on causal attribution for own actions has focused on situational variables that influence attention, such as point of view (e.g., Storms, 1972; Taylor & Fiske, 1978). The default agent for own action must be determined, however, by mental processes that operate without such sensory guidance—or we would be mystified about who is doing our thinking and behaving each time we awake in the dark of night. The system of mind underlying the experience of authorship for our own actions seems likely to operate through a cognitive process that "keeps in mind" a current likely agent for action. This process should be susceptible to associative priming of information that serves to remind the person of a particular agent. Such priming could even ensue from subliminal sources, as conscious attention can be guided readily by unconscious primes (e.g., Dijksterhuis, 2004; Strahan, Spencer, & Zanna, 2002). Self-attributions of authorship may be driven, in short, by an unconscious *authorship processing* system (Wegner & Sparrow, 2004) that can be biased regarding attributions to particular default agents by associative priming.

Such automatic, associative priming will generally have direct effects on perceived authorship, in that increased accessibility of an agent will lead to enhanced attribution to that agent. If the self is more accessible, the possibility that an action is ascribed to self increases. Likewise, if another external agent is accessible, attributions to the self become less likely. For instance, if the concept of "computer" is primed, a sudden computer failure during a routine maintenance would likely be attributed to the computer itself, rather than to the technician working it. Both the attention/attribution model and our authorship processing view are able to explain such direct effects.

However, an important virtue of the authorship processing view is that it makes predictions that do not follow easily from a simple attention/attribution model. The attention/attribution model predicts inflexibly that increased attention to or priming of any agent would enhance attribution to that agent, whereas the authorship processing view opens a second possibility based on the assumption that people always keep in mind a default agent (often the self): a person might think of another agent alternatively as a rival for authorship, leading to less attributed agency to the default agent. For example, priming the concept of "God" may decrease experienced authorship for

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/948302>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/948302>

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