

Effects of a Self-Distancing Perspective on the Fundamental Attribution Error:

An Attempt at De-Biasing

by

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Abstract

This study aimed to attenuate the fundamental attribution error (FAE) by inducing a self-distanced perspective in participants. Participants' perspectives were manipulated by having them write an essay in either the third-person (self-distanced), the first-person (immersed), or with no instructions (control group 1). A second control group was used in which participants did not write at all. I hypothesized that priming a self-distanced perspective would reduce expression of the fundamental attribution error when rating the true opinions of authors who are directed to take a specific point of view on a controversial topic. A significant decrease in the expression of the FAE was found between the self-distanced groups on the one hand and the immersed, no instruction, and no-writing groups on the other for participants who read essays written by people directed to write essays supporting President Obama.

Keywords: self-distancing, fundamental attribution error, correspondence bias, attribution

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Over the years, psychologists have documented a wide range of biases in human cognition, such as the hindsight bias (Fischhoff, 1975), the confirmation bias (Wason, 1960), and the fundamental attribution error (Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977). This paper details a study that attempted to use self-distancing, as implemented by Kross, Ayduk, and Mischel (2005), to attenuate the fundamental attribution error. The first part of this paper will outline the processes underlying the fundamental attribution error and explain why self-distancing may help to attenuate it. The second part will present the study and discuss its future research implications.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

What is the fundamental attribution error?

The fundamental attribution error is traditionally defined as the tendency to attribute people's behavior to dispositional traits, disregarding the importance of other environmental factors (Ross, 1977). For example, when someone sees a man punch a wall in anger, she is more likely to make an internal attribution that he has a violent or angry temperament than to believe his actions were caused by a situational factor, such as receiving traumatic news. She attributes his actions to his temperament, though not necessarily correctly. This bias has been shown in numerous contexts ranging from participants' perceptions of authors who are told to write controversial essays with no choice about which side to support (Jones & Harris, 1967) to judgments about actors based on the television characters they portray (Nurit & Yael, 2007). One classic study paradigm uses two participants, with one assigned to ask questions and the other assigned to respond to them (Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Van Boven, Kamada, & Gilovich, 1999). In one such study, by Van Boven et al. (1999), the questioner is told to instruct the responder to

answer either altruistically or selfishly, depending on the condition, to a series of questions, and then afterwards to rate the responder on his level of altruism. Despite the fact that the questioners explicitly told the responders how to answer the questions, questioners still tended to rate responders told to give selfish answers as more selfish and responders told to give altruistic answers as more altruistic (Van Boven et al., 1999).

How does the FAE work?

Two mechanisms that are thought to underlie the FAE. The first involves *salience*. People can only attribute behaviors to causes that come to mind at the time of judgment. As a result, the likelihood that a particular cause will be attributed to a behavior will depend on how salient that cause is to the person making the judgment (Lassiter, Geers, Munhall, Ploutz-Snyder, & Breitenbecher, 2002; Robinson & McArthur, 1982; Smith & Miller, 1979). The role of this concept in the FAE is fairly straightforward; environments are essentially just backdrops upon which agents, such as people, act. It is then the actions of these agents that are most salient to a third person observer who is trying to determine the cause of a behavior she is seeing. The following study by McArthur and Post (1977) demonstrates the importance of salience. Participants watched a tape of a conversation between two people, one of whom was either brightly lit or wore a vibrant striped shirt, in order to make him or her more salient. When participants then made attributions about the people in the taped conversation, they made more trait attributions for the actions of the salient individual than they did for the non-salient individual (McArthur & Post, 1977).

Why is the FAE a problem?

The fundamental attribution error has far reaching implications for social interactions, not only on a personal level, but on a societal one as well. However, with regard to any individual or

group perceived as an 'other', people will attribute the behaviors of that individual or group to stable, dispositional traits. This is a clear avenue for the creation of stereotypes. For example, if an individual sees a representative member of an out-group cheating on a test, the individual is likely to attribute this behavior to the out-group member's dishonest personality, and may even form an attribution of the entire out-group as being dishonest, as with the related concept, the ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979) If the FAE does in fact play a role in the formation of stereotypes and the perpetuation of the ingroup-outgroup bias, then future research which might attenuate the FAE and its ensuing negative consequences is certainly merited.

Attenuating the FAE

There is reason to believe that self-distancing as implemented by Ayduk and Kross (2010) might serve to attenuate the fundamental attribution error. Self-distancing is a recently documented phenomenon, which refers to the use of a third person, or distanced, perspective when thinking about a situation (Ayduk & Kross, 2010). In the research by Ayduk and Kross (2010), the authors focus specifically on participants' memories of past events. When taking a self-distanced perspective, people see the situation unfold as a third party observer, watching their own interactions with other people from the perspective of an uninvolved bystander. In Ayduk and Kross's (2010) model, a self-distanced perspective is contrasted with a self-immersed perspective. An immersed perspective, in which an individual relives a memory through his own eyes, is hypothesized to be the default perspective of most people. Self-distancing, then, is a way to take a step back from a memory, and perhaps adopt a more adaptive perspective. The findings of Ayduk and Kross (2010) suggest that taking a self-distanced perspective leads participants to consider their memories with decreased emotional reactivity, suggesting that self-distancing may modulate rumination.

Recounting vs. Reconstructing. An important distinction within the concept of self-distancing is the notion of recounting versus reconstructing. Recounting a remembered event refers to an individual simply stating what happened and how he felt. The authors predict that this process leads to increased rumination (Ayduk & Kross, 2010), as it merely serves to bring past negative emotions to the surface without doing anything to adaptively change these emotions. Rumination has many negative effects on people, including delayed physiological recovery from (Gerin, Davidson, Christenfeld, Goyal, & Schwartz, 2006) and subsequent increased threat of cardiovascular disease (McEwen, 1998). Reconstructing, on the other hand, involves seeing a remembered event in a new light, and forming new interpretations about it that are often adaptive and promote closure (Ayduk & Kross, 2010). Self-distanced individuals were more likely to reconstruct their memories and less likely to recount them, a difference which mediated the effect of self-distancing on lowered emotional reactivity (Ayduk & Kross, 2010).

Self-Distancing and Construal Level Theory

Construal level theory (CLT) refers to the way people process information. The theory postulates that the world can be construed at varying levels of abstraction. People employing a high construal level will represent things in an abstract, holistic manner, whereas low construal levels are characterized by a concrete and detail-oriented thought process (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Numerous studies on CLT have found that higher levels of construal are used when the target of construal is perceived as more distant, either temporally, spatially, probabilistically, or socially (Trope & Liberman, 2003; Pronin, Olivola, & Kennedy, 2008), or when positive affect is high. Likewise, lower levels of construal are used when the target of construal is close or when negative affect is high (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Self-distance may facilitate a higher construal level by increasing perceived distance from the target of construal.

Self-Distancing and the Fundamental Attribution Error

If the FAE is indeed influenced by the information found salient by the then self-distancing may be a way to reduce the FAE by affecting what is salient.

Addressing the problem of salience. The effect of salience on the FAE is that an observer will simply not attend to a factor that he does not consider salient, even if that factor truly plays the largest role in influencing the observed behavior. Self-distancing is proposed to reduce or remove this effect of the differential salience of actors and their environments by leading people to take a broader perspective. If self-distancing does promote a higher construal level, then the more abstract and holistic view that self-distanced individuals would have of their environment would make them more likely to attend to situational factors contributing to the behaviors of an 'other'. Just by attending to situational factors, the problem of salience is already diminished, because whether or not these situational factors receive their proper weight, they will at least have been factored into the attribution process.

Our prediction is that self-distancing will reduce the effect of the FAE because it works to solve the issue of lack of salience of situational factors. By promoting a high construal level, self-distancing is expected to broaden the scope of what participants see as salient.

Present Study

The present study aimed to use self-distancing to reduce the strength of the FAE. The basic procedure was similar to that used in the essay writer paradigm for researching the FAE (Jones & Harris, 1967). Participants were asked to read a pro-Obama essay. They were further informed that the writers of the essay had been told explicitly to write an essay supporting Obama, and had not been given a choice. Participants were then asked to estimate the author's true position toward Obama. Before they made this judgment, two groups of participants were

induced to take either a self-distanced perspective or an immersed perspective by writing an essay either in the third person or the first person respectively. We hypothesized that when participants took a distanced perspective, they would show a reduction in expression of the FAE. Two additional control groups were included. Participants in one control group wrote an essay but were not given any instructions regarding perspective (the neutral essay condition), and participants in the other control group did not write an essay at all.

Method

Participants

106 participants (33 male and 73 female) were recruited for this study using Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Among its other uses, MTurk is an online tool that allows researchers to collect survey data quickly and efficiently (see Kurzban, Dukes, & Weeden, in press, for an example). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 68, with the majority of participants (62.3%) aged 30 or under. The average age was 31.4 ($SD=11.74$). The sample was 80% White, 10.4% Asian, 4.7% Hispanic, and 3.8% Black, with 0.9% reporting other ethnicities. Participant's responses on a 7-point scale (1 = *very liberal* to 7 = *very conservative*) had a mean of 3.61 ($SD = 1.53$), indicating that the sample was slightly more liberal than conservative. There was only one participant that did not complete high school, and 48.1% of the sample graduated from college with a bachelor's degree or higher. Median household income was \$25,000-\$49,000. All participants were compensated \$1 for their time. All methods were approved by the University of Michigan institutional review board.

Procedure

Before we could implement the study, we had to create the stimulus essay. To do this, we recruited student volunteers and assigned them to write pro-Obama essays. A final essay was

selected because it clearly favored Obama but was written so that it could be interpreted either as an essay that reflects the author's true feelings or an essay with which the author does not agree but was nevertheless assigned to write (see appendix A).

The study was administered in the form of an online survey. Participants were told that the study concerned perspectives, judgments, and the different ways people think. The experiment began by showing the participant the pro-Obama essay after informing the participants that this essay topic had been assigned, and the authors had not been given a choice to write anything else. Once participants read the essay, they were told that they would soon be asked to rate the writer of the essay on his or her actual position on Obama, but that first the researchers were interested in learning about how people think from various perspectives. Therefore, they would be asked to write about their thoughts regarding the essay and their rating of its author from a particular perspective for five minutes. In the main experimental group, participants were told to write in the third person, which has been shown in past research to induce self-distancing (Burson & Kross, 2011, unpublished data). Participants in the first person writing condition were told to write an essay in the first person, while participants in a neutral writing control condition were told to write an essay but given no other instructions. The results for these latter two conditions were not expected to differ, which would confirm our assumption that people's spontaneous thoughts are generally in the first person.

After writing this essay, participants were asked to rate the author's actual position on Obama. Participants in the no essay control condition did not write an essay, and instead rated the author's position on Obama immediately after reading the Obama essay. This condition was included to control for the possibility that simply being asked to write would affect the

participants' responses on the rating question. We hypothesized that it would not and that both of the control conditions as well as the immersed condition would not differ from each other.

Essay rater paradigm. The study itself used the classic essay rater paradigm from Jones and Harris' 1967 article on the fundamental attribution error. This method involves presenting the participant with an essay on a controversial topic. The essays in Jones and Harris' study were written to either favor or oppose Fidel Castro. In the present study, we chose a more current topic by making the essay about President Barack Obama, another fairly controversial figure in the American political arena right now. Jones and Harris found that people who read pro-Castro essays were much more likely to think that the author was pro-Castro than anti-Castro. Likewise, participants who read anti-Castro essays were more likely to rate the author as anti-Castro than pro-Castro (Jones & Harris, 1967).

Independent variable. Within this essay rater paradigm, the present research sought to reduce expression of the fundamental attribution error, as measured by participants' ratings of the authors' true positions on President Obama. To that end, we added another facet to the experiment. The main independent variable of focus was the thought essay the participant was instructed to write before rating the Obama essay author's position on Obama. The study uses a four condition (participant essay- 3rd person, 1st person, neutral, or no writing) between subjects design. In each condition except the no writing condition, participants wrote an essay regarding their thoughts and opinions about the writer of the Obama essay, looking specifically at the author's actual position on Obama. Specifically, third-person and first-person perspective was manipulated by asking the participants to use either the pronouns he or she as well as their name (third-person), or the pronoun I (first-person) as much as possible while they wrote their essay.

Dependent measures. The dependent measure for the present study is susceptibility to the fundamental attribution error, as measured by participants' ratings of the author of the Obama essay on his or her actual position on Obama. Ratings were made on a 9-point scale ranging from -4 (the author is strongly anti-Obama) to 4 (the author is strongly pro-Obama). In accordance with the findings of Jones and Harris (1967) we expect that the general trend will be for participants to rate the Obama essay authors as being more heavily in favor of Obama. However, we predict that the participant writing conditions will attenuate this effect, so that participants in the third-person writing condition will rate the Obama essay authors as being less pro-Obama than participants in the other conditions, demonstrating an attenuation of the FAE.

Instructional manipulation check. Because this experiment was conducted online and not in a controlled setting, we included an instructional manipulation check (Davidenko, Oppenheimer, & Meyvis, 2009) to identify participants who were not actually reading the instructions they were given. The way we did this was by including a long question about the participants' interests in sports. At the end of the instructions for the question, participants were told to select only cricket and badminton from a list of sports that followed (see appendix B). Individuals who did not fully read through the instructions would therefore select sports based on their true interests, while it could be reasonably assumed that participants who responded cricket and badminton (an unlikely combination of interests) had read the directions.

Results

Before any tests were run, a total of 23 responses were eliminated from the analyses. Four responses had to be eliminated because two individuals took the test twice. Responses from 19 participants were removed because these participants failed the instructional manipulation check. After these responses were eliminated, I was left with the 106 participants described above.

Ratings of Authors' positions on Obama

A priori we expected the third person writing condition to show a lessened tendency to attribute the position of the essay to the author's true opinion when compared to the other three conditions, and for those latter three conditions not to differ from each other. To test this, we ran a planned contrast comparing the third-person essay condition to the no essay condition, the first-person, and the no instruction essay condition, as well as contrasts comparing the latter three conditions to each other. As expected, we did find that the third-person writing condition differed significantly from all three other conditions combined $t(102) = 2.302, p < .05$ in the predicted direction (see figure 1). These results support our prediction that a self-distanced perspective can attenuate the FAE.

Discussion

The results of our study provide support for the hypothesis that the use of self-distancing techniques can be effective in attenuating the FAE. When participants were made to take a self-distanced perspective by writing an essay in the third-person, their bias on a classic and robust measure of the FAE was reduced.

Our explanation for this finding is that self-distancing activates a higher level of construal, which leads to a broader perspective. This is also the explanation used by Ayduk and Kross (2010). There is, however, an alternative explanation, namely that writing with a distanced perspective could have cued an avoidance response, much like the effect Cacioppo, Priester, and Bernston obtained by having participants push down against a table (Caccioppo et al., 1993). This avoidance reaction is associated both with an increase in negative affect (Elliot & Thrash, 2002) and a lower, more detail-oriented level of construal (Schwarz & Clore, 2007).

It is highly plausible that a broader perspective would allow people to be more attentive to situational factors that could provide alternate explanations for observed behavior, thereby reducing the effect of the fundamental attribution error. On the other hand, negative affect is associated with reduced susceptibility to a range of biases, such as stereotyping and halo effects, all of which are mediated by the low level, detail-oriented processing style that negative behavior fosters (Schwarz, 2002). Thus we have two explanations for the same finding, each focusing on processing styles in direct opposition with one another. Self-distancing cannot simultaneously promote high and low levels of construal.

As one possible solution, it may be the case that self-distancing does lead to a higher construal level, but that it bears no relationship to the concepts of approach and avoidance. This would be consistent with the findings of Ayduk and Kross (2010) that self-distancing reduces emotional reactivity. Avoidance responses are associated with increased negative affect, in that they are a response to negative affect cued by a perceived threat, so a reduction in negative affect as a result of self-distancing would suggest that self-distancing and avoidance reactions are unrelated. Conceptually, as well, there is a big difference in meaning between pushing something away and simply taking a step back from it. Both of these activities increase the distance between subject and target, but the manner in which they do so is different, both physically, and psychologically. Pushing something away is motivated by a goal of separation, whereas mentally taking a step back could have any number of motivations, including the desire to get a wider view of things. Phrased this way, it is plainly obvious that not all types of distance are identical, otherwise people taking a step back from a piece of art in a museum would suddenly become wary of the painting at a subconscious level and take a narrower focus, anticipating possible threats. This is clearly not the case, as people who step back from paintings do so not to avoid,

but to get a different view of the work. The experiment required to confirm this explanation is relatively simple. To test whether or not self-distancing triggers an avoidance reaction, future distancing studies would include a measure of avoidance as a dependent variable. If there is a significant difference in avoidance behavior between conditions, then not only will it indicate the existence of a deeper connection between CLT and the self-distancing, but it will also suggest the direction of this relationship, which would provide great insight into how these two theories truly interact.

Another possible explanation for the finding is that the task of taking a distanced perspective is not necessarily easy for most subjects, and so it is possible that the increased cognitive difficulty of the task will make them more likely to avoid bias simply because it will require them to think more. For example, most people, when asked how many of each species of animal Moses brought on the ark will say two, failing to recognize that it was in fact Noah, and not Moses, that brought animals onto the ark (Song & Schwarz, 2008). It is not that all of these people are unaware that Moses was not on the ark, they simply did not pay close enough attention to the question. Manipulating how easy the question is to read, however, as by putting it into a hard-to-read font, drastically reduces the proportion of people who incorrectly say ‘two’ as the answer (Song & Schwartz, 2008). This happens because the increased difficulty of the task forces people to think more about it, suggesting to them that their initial answer may not be the correct one. In terms of the distancing experiment, if subjects see the distancing task as difficult, they may be more likely to doubt their initial, biased response, and arrive at a less biased conclusion. While this proposal itself is not very complicated, testing it would be slightly more so. The first step would be to determine how difficult subjects find the distancing task. The subjects’ own subjective reports are ideal for this measure, because it is those same subjective

judgments that would be influencing them during the study. If subjects find the distancing task difficult, then there is a chance that this difficulty would at the very least be one contributing factor to the expected attenuation of the fundamental attribution error.

Ultimately, even though the results of the present study found a significant relationship between self-distancing and the FAE, more research will be necessary before all the complexities of the relationship between the FAE and self-distancing are fully understood, especially with regard to the role of CLT and processing style. It seems highly likely that a connection between construal level theory and self-distancing exists, even if the exact nature of this relationship is difficult to sort out. Self-distancing bears a rough resemblance to avoidance behavior, and the broad, abstract perspective consistent with high levels of construal is comparable to the broader, more realistic perspective that is observed in distanced subjects. The problem is that the theories do not line up neatly, and research into each area has turned up results that would seem to put the two concepts into direct conflict. One of these apparent conflicts, that avoidant behavior and self-distancing seem to have opposite effects on perspective, is easily explained when both processes are viewed as distinct. Even though the both lead to an increase in distance to a target, avoidance behaviors are exhibited if the individual has a negative affective response to the target, while self-distancing works in the absence of negative affect, and even reduces it.

For future research in this area, the first step would be to replicate the findings of the present study using other FAE paradigms, such as the quiz-bowl (questioner and answerer) paradigm, mentioned before in the context of the studies where one participant asked another participant a series of questions with either an altruistic or selfish answer (Van Boven, et al., 1999; Gilbert & Jones, 1986). Research is also proceeding on identifying other areas where humans are prone to bias that may be attenuated by taking a self-distanced perspective. The

results of the present study are an exciting, but preliminary, finding, and more work needs to be done to establish exactly how self-distancing attenuates the FAE, and how self-distancing fits in with CLT and other, more established theories in the psychological literature.

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Author note

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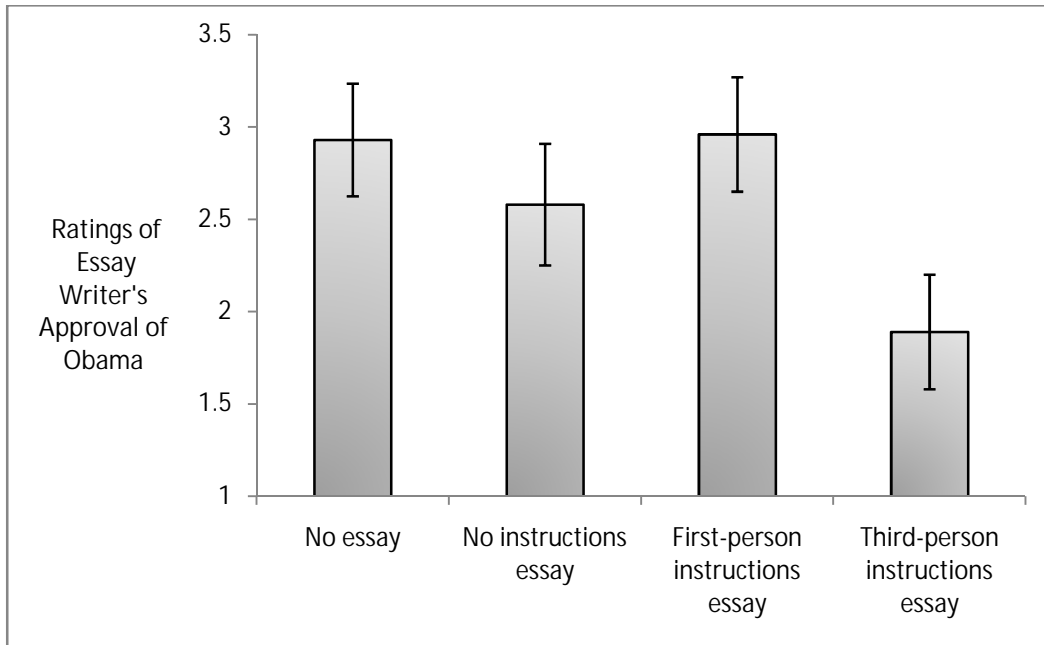


Figure 1. Effects of self-distancing through third person writing on the extremity of the fundamental attribution error (FAE). Higher scores mean that participants thought that the essay writer was more strongly pro-Obama on the basis of the pro-Obama essay that the writer was directed to compose. Capped vertical bars denote 1 SE.

Appendix A

Pro-Obama Essay

This country is in a bad situation, and there is no denying it. It can definitely be said that President Obama puts a lot of effort into the things he believes in. When he was elected president, our country was in economic turmoil and we were in the middle of a war. Among his first acts in office was bailing out American corporations on the verge of bankruptcy in the hopes of stimulating the economy, and making a promise to remove troops from Iraq, which he seems to be sticking to.

He may have made some mistakes in his presidency, but Obama seems to truly care about his people. In the two years President Barack Obama has been in office, he has already kept several of his campaign promises. First, he passed the health care reform bill. Even though this bill is very controversial, it is an example of President Obama keeping his word. Obama also kept his promise to cut taxes. Already, he has passed laws giving tax cuts to 95% of Americans. One sign of a good leader is the ability to fuel the hopes of one's people, and Obama certainly shows his charisma in every speech he gives.

Appendix B

Instructional Manipulation Check

Sports Participation

Most modern theories of decision-making recognize the fact that decisions do not take place in a vacuum. Individual preferences and knowledge, along with situational variables can greatly impact the decision process. In order to facilitate our research on decision-making, we are interested in knowing certain factors about you, the decision-maker. Specifically we are interested in whether you actually take the time to read the directions: if not, then some of our manipulations that rely on changes in the instructions will be ineffective. In order to demonstrate that you have read these instructions, please select cricket and badminton below and no other answer choices. Thank you very much.

Which of these activities do you engage in regularly?
(Click on all that apply)

- Skiing
- Soccer
- Snowboarding
- Running
- Hockey
- Football
- Cricket
- Tennis
- Basketball
- Cycling
- Swimming
- Badminton