

## Temporal Differences in Trait Self-Ascription: When the Self Is Seen as an Other

Emily Pronin  
Princeton University

Lee Ross  
Stanford University

Seven studies exploring people's tendency to make observer-like attributions about their past and future selves are presented. Studies 1 and 2 showed temporal differences in trait assessments that paralleled the classic actor–observer difference. Study 3 provided evidence against a motivational account of these differences. Studies 4–7 explored underlying mechanisms involving differences in the focus of attention of the sort linked to the classic actor–observer difference. In Study 4, people perceived past and future selves from a more observer-like perspective than present selves. In Studies 5 and 6, manipulating attention to internal states (vs. observable behavior) of past and future selves led people to ascribe fewer traits to those selves. Study 7 showed an inverse relationship for past and present selves between observer-like visual focus and salience of internal information.

*Keywords:* temporal distance, self-perception, actor–observer, visual perspective, introspection

Fare forward, travelers! not escaping from the past  
Into different lives, or into any future;  
You are not the same people who left that station  
Or who will arrive at any terminus

—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets: The Dry Salvages*

And in imagination he began to recall the best moments of his pleasant life. . . in childhood, there had been something really pleasant with which it would be possible to live if it could return. But the child who had experienced that happiness existed no longer, it was like a reminiscence of somebody else.

—Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

The subjective continuity of self has long been a matter of philosophical and literary concern. Arguments supporting the concept of a single, continuous self have generally relied on subjective appeals to introspective awareness, personal memory, and self consistency (e.g., Descartes, 1641; James, 1890; Locke, 1694; Perry, 1975). However, various theorists (e.g., Elster, 1984; Loewenstein, 2000; Schelling, 1984) have also recognized that the self at one point in time may regard the “future self” as if it were

another actor—an actor whose future motives, preferences, and priorities must be thwarted in the battle for “sovereignty.” Furthermore, although we generally derive personal meaning from our past actions and experiences, we also sometimes look back on our “past self” and marvel about what a “different person” we were then.

This article considers differences in the way that people perceive and make inferences about the present self versus the past and future selves. It also considers the differing sources of information that are relied upon in forming those perceptions. We propose that differences in the focus of attention when perceiving the present versus the past or future self can lead people to perceive themselves in the past and future in a way that is more observer-like than actor-like.

### Actor–Observer Differences in Attribution

Our examination of actor–observer differences in the perception of present versus past and future selves focuses specifically on attributions. The tendency for actors to make dispositional attributions about their peers that they resist making about themselves and to instead attribute their own behavior to situational demands and constraints is perhaps the best known and most studied of actor–observer differences. Research on this topic has been greatly influenced by Jones and Nisbett's (1972) classic article (see also Jones, 1979; Ross, 1977) that not only documented this difference but also cited factors that could account for it.

In their theoretical analysis, Jones and Nisbett (1972) emphasized that the actor–observer difference in attribution is rooted in differences in the information available or salient to actors versus observers. For one, observers' visual attention tends to focus on the actor in a given situation whereas actors' visual attention tends to focus on the circumstances attending that situation. This affects

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Emily Pronin, Department of Psychology, Princeton University; Lee Ross, Department of Psychology, Stanford University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emily Pronin, Department of Psychology, Green Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544. E-mail: epronin@princeton.edu

attributions. Observers watching a dyadic interaction from different seating positions tend to share the assessments of the actor whose visual perspective is closest to their own (Taylor & Fiske, 1975). Similarly, viewing a video of a conversation that was shot from the viewpoint of an observer with whom the actor was conversing leads the actor to make more observer-like attributions than viewing a video shot from that actor's original viewpoint (Storms, 1973). More observer-like perceptions have also been induced by the simple visual manipulation of having actors view themselves in a mirror (Duval & Wicklund, 1972).

Actors and observers also experience differences in the salience of information about internal states. Jones and Nisbett (1972) note that whereas observers' attention tends to focus on actors' behavior, the attention of actors tends to focus more on their internal reactions to "impinging stimuli" (p. 86). Although actors may lack privileged access to the processes that dictate their actions (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; also Bem, 1972), they do have more direct, and thus more readily available, access to the thoughts and feelings that accompany their actions. This can lead actors to focus more heavily than observers on such information in making inferences and forming predictions (Andersen, 1984; Andersen & Ross, 1984; Epley & Dunning, 2000; Kruger & Gilovich, 2004; Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky, & Ross, 2001). Again, to the extent that internal information yields evidence of situational demands, paying more attention to it may forestall simple trait attributions.

### Temporal Perspectives on the Self

Before turning to the details of our studies involving temporal differences in the self-ascription of traits, we review earlier work involving temporal effects on self-perception that bears on our predictions. Of particular relevance are prior studies involving the "dispositional shift," whereby individuals have been shown to make causal inferences about their past behaviors that are more dispositional than the inferences they make about their behaviors in the present (Moore, Sherrod, Liu, & Underwood, 1979; also Peterson, 1980; McKay, O'Farrell, Maisto, Connors, & Funder, 1989; cf. Miller & Porter, 1980). These studies have generally asked participants to look at their own (or another actor's) present (or past) behavior on a particular occasion and to indicate whether that behavior was caused by some property of the actor or by some external situational factor such as other individuals who were present.

Research by Nussbaum, Trope, and Liberman (2003) on "creeping dispositionism" suggests that a related shift in perceptions of the causes of behavior occurs for the *future* versus present self. In their studies, individuals perceived more distant future behaviors as determined by more fixed and less variable causes. On the basis of temporal construal theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003), they suggest that this shift derives from people's tendency to perceive future selves in more abstract terms than present selves.

Studies involving visual perspective in personal memory also are relevant to the present research. These studies have found that when people are asked to form images of past events at which they were present, they often claim to see those scenes from the perspective of an external observer (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; also see Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Frank & Gilovich, 1989; Libby & Eibach, 2002; Lorenz & Neisser, 1985). Especially relevant to our

present contentions are studies indicating that adopting a more actor-like visual perspective on past experiences tends to elicit increased salience of internal states attending those experiences (McIsaac & Eich, 2002), and, inversely, focusing on internal feelings during past experiences tends to elicit a more actor-like visual perspective on those experiences (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Finally, inducing people to take a more observer-like perspective on past experiences leads them to view their behavior during those experiences as more caused by dispositional factors (Frank & Gilovich, 1989).

### The Present Research

The theoretical approaches and experimental results reviewed thus far dovetail nicely with regard to the proposed phenomenon and underlying mechanisms suggested by our analysis. Our research aims to contribute to this existing literature by identifying a temporal difference in trait self-ascription that parallels the classic actor–observer difference. Beyond that, it seeks to identify sources of this difference in the two major differences in focus of attention that have been noted to distinguish actors and observers—that is, attention to "person" versus "situation" visual information and attention to internal thoughts versus observable behavior. It is worth noting that although Jones and Nisbett's (1972) actor–observer analysis treated these two attentional differences as separate from each other, in our analysis of temporal asymmetries, we treat them as intimately related. Observer-like visual focus should be more associated with attention to behavior, we suggest, whereas actor-like visual focus should be more associated with attention to situational demands and constraints—and to the responses an actor would feel toward those demands and constraints. Research involving memory of past selves supports this association (McIsaac & Eich, 2002, 2004; Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Our focus, of course, is not specifically on past selves but also on future selves and present selves. Although we are not the first investigators to suggest parallels between past and future selves (e.g., Albert, 1977; Johnson & Sherman, 1990; Trope & Liberman, 2003), the series of studies we describe are unique in attempting to test parallel hypotheses and use parallel research paradigms in exploring perceptions of these two selves.

We begin our research by testing the basic hypothesis that people make more observer-like attributions about their past and future selves than about their present selves (Studies 1–2). In Study 3, we explore an alternative (self-enhancement) interpretation for this temporal asymmetry before we attempt, in our final four studies, to link the asymmetry to differences in the focus of attention (of the sort that have already been linked to a parallel asymmetry in actors' vs. observers' trait attributions). In Study 4, we explore whether people tend to adopt an observer-like visual focus more frequently for events involving past and future selves than present selves. Studies 5 and 6 test the prediction that manipulations designed to increase attention to past or future internal information produce corresponding shifts toward actor-like attributions. Finally, in Study 7, we invite individuals to form images of an immediate versus past event, and we test the hypothesis that the more observer-like visual perspectives predicted to characterize past images are associated with decreased availability of attending internal information.

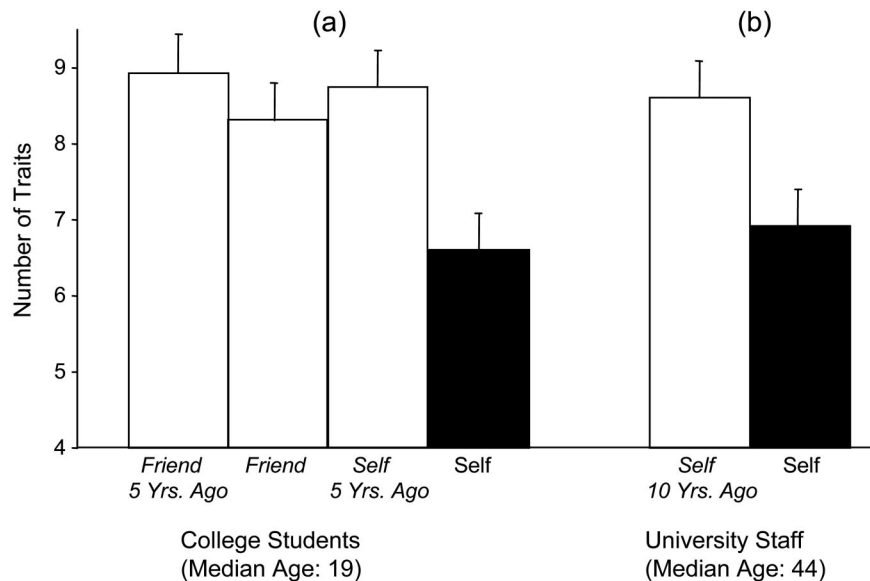


Figure 1. Number of traits attributed (Study 1). Panels show (a) college students considering themselves (and a friend) in the past versus in the present and (b) university employees considering themselves in the past versus in the present. Error bars indicate 1 standard error above the mean.

### Study 1: Making “Other” Attributions About One’s “Past Self”

In Study 1, we sought to test the hypothesis that attributions made about the past self resemble those made about other actors more than they resemble those made about the present self. Our study focused on simple trait ascriptions (Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, & Marecek, 1973; Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988). We compared the frequency with which questionnaire respondents were willing to ascribe common traits (rather than refer to situational variability) in characterizing their present selves, their past selves, and their longtime friends.

#### Method

**Participants.** Two respondent groups were used. One was a group of college undergraduates who participated to fulfill a course requirement ( $n = 123$ ; median age = 19). The other was a group of university staff working in various academic departments who responded to an e-mail asking them to volunteer their help in completing a Web-based questionnaire ( $n = 47$ ; median age = 44). Undergraduates did not indicate their gender;<sup>1</sup> the staff sample contained 65 women and 3 men.

**Procedure and dependent measure.** The undergraduate participants were randomly assigned to provide assessments regarding themselves “in the present,” themselves “5 years ago,” a friend in the present with whom they had been friends for at least 5 years, or a friend “5 years ago” with whom they had been friends for at least 5 years and with whom they were still friends. The assessments were made on a series of 11 scales developed by Nisbett et al. (1973) in an investigation of actor–observer differences in the attribution process.<sup>2</sup> Each scale featured two opposing character traits (i.e., *serious–carefree*, *subjective–analytic*, *energetic–relaxed*, *unassuming–self-asserting*, *lenient–firm*, *intense–calm*, *quiet–talkative*, *introverted–extroverted*, *steady–flexible*, *cautious–bold*, *cooperative–competitive*) to which participants responded by circling either one or the other of the two traits or by circling a third option—that is, *variable/depends on the situation*—indicating their reluctance to ascribe a stable personal attribute. The sample of

university staff responded to similar questionnaire items, except that they were asked to assess only themselves at present or themselves 10 years ago.

#### Results and Discussion

Each participant’s responses were first converted to a single score corresponding to the number of trait ascriptions that were made (rather than ascriptions to situational variability).

**Undergraduate sample.** Undergraduates’ trait ascriptions revealed an overall tendency to differ depending on the social and temporal distance of their judgment,  $F(3, 120) = 6.23$ ,  $p = .0006$ . Before examining ascriptions to the present versus the past self, we tested whether participants did indeed show an actor–observer difference in their ascriptions. Consistent with earlier research, participants rated themselves as currently exhibiting fewer traits ( $M = 6.61$ ), and, thus, as exhibiting more cross-situational variability, than their friends currently exhibited ( $M = 8.32$ ),  $F(1, 61) = 7.42$ ,  $p = .008$ .

More relevant to our present concerns, we also found a similar asymmetry in assessments made about the present self ( $M = 6.61$ ) versus the past self ( $M = 8.75$ ),  $F(1, 62) = 11.63$ ,  $p = .001$ . As Figure 1a illustrates, participants appeared to see their present selves as uniquely free of stable, cross-situational dispositions. This observation was supported by Tukey’s method of individual pairwise comparisons. Participants’ views of their present selves differed from their views of themselves in the past, their friend in the past, and their friend in the present ( $qs$  ranging from 8.03 to 10.90,  $ps < .05$ ). No other differences were apparent.

<sup>1</sup> The sample contained 66% women and 34% men.

<sup>2</sup> We are obliged to acknowledge an honors thesis by Margaret Campbell in which she used the Nisbett et al. measure to investigate present versus retrospective trait ascriptions. Unfortunately, those data are no longer available.

*University staff sample.* The data presented in Figure 1b suggest that our findings do not reflect the unique perspective of college students looking back on their less worldly, less flexible 14-year-old selves. Our sample of university staff, whose average age was 44, showed a similar asymmetry in indicating the number of traits they were willing to ascribe to their present selves ( $M = 6.92$ ) versus their selves of 10 years ago ( $M = 8.61$ ),  $F(1, 46) = 4.74$ ,  $p = .03$ . Thus, just as our 19-year-old participants reported that when they were 14 years old, they had nine traits but that now at 19 they had seven traits, our 44-year-olds reported that at 34 they had nine traits and it was only now, at age 44, that they had seven traits. In short, it was the contrast of present and past selves, not the contrast of two particular ages, that produced the relevant asymmetry.

In this study, participants made attributions about their past selves that more closely resembled the attributions they made about another person than the attributions they made about their present selves. In at least a metaphorical sense, our participants seemed to view themselves in the past through the eyes of an observer. The use of this metaphor suggests the interesting possibility that actors make observer-like attributions about their past selves because they are more likely to take an observer's perspective on their past selves. There is also the intriguing possibility that observing oneself from an external perspective could decrease the salience of the sorts of internal information that lead actors to form different attributions from observers.

If we are correct in emphasizing the role of differences in the salience of internal versus observable information about the present versus the past self, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that similar differences should characterize actors' views of the present versus the *future* self and that similar differences in trait ascription should also arise. We began to explore our theoretical account in Study 2 by examining whether our findings regarding trait ascription extend to the future self.

### Study 2: Making "Other" Attributions About One's Future "Self"

In this study, we predicted that people would be more inclined to ascribe stable dispositions to their future selves than to their present selves.

#### Method

A total of 40 undergraduates participated in exchange for course credit. They did not indicate their gender.<sup>3</sup> The procedure and measures resembled those of Study 1, except that participants were randomly assigned to provide assessments of themselves either 5 years into the future or of themselves in the present.

#### Results and Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, participants considering themselves 5 years into the future claimed that they would manifest more of the 11 possible traits ( $M = 8.17$ ) than did participants considering their current selves ( $M = 5.64$ ),  $F(1, 39) = 9.97$ ,  $p = .003$ . As can be seen in Figure 2, our participants' perceptions of their future versus present selves closely resembled our Study 1 participants' perceptions of their past versus present selves.

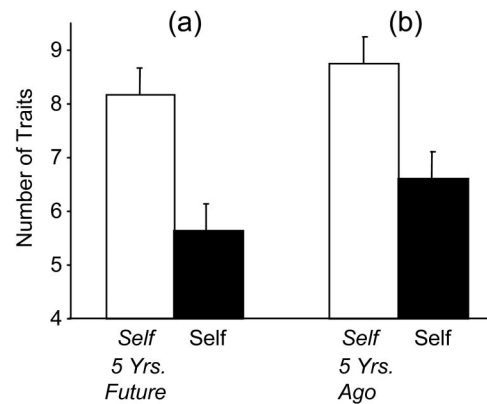


Figure 2. Number of traits attributed (Studies 1 and 2). Panels show college students assessing themselves (a) in the future versus in the present (Study 2) and (b) in the past versus in the present (Study 1). Error bars indicate 1 standard error above the mean.

Having found support for the hypothesis that people tend to make observer-like trait attributions about their past and future selves, we now turned our attention to possible sources of this phenomenon. We began this exploration of underlying mechanisms by considering a possible mechanism very different from those that we have discussed thus far—that is, the motive to self-enhance. The results of Study 2 suggest that temporal shifts in trait ascription do not reflect a motive on the part of actors to see themselves as becoming more flexible (i.e., less rigidly defined by traits) over time. However, participants' responses could still reflect a motive to see themselves as improving over time (M. Ross & Wilson, 2003; A. Wilson & M. Ross, 2001) if they described their past selves in terms of at least some negative traits, their present selves as more variable, and their future selves as more defined by positive traits. Study 3 tested this possibility.

### Study 3: Trait Valence and Present, Past, and Future Attributions

This study investigated the possibility that our earlier results regarding trait attributions reflected a motivation on the part of our participants to self-enhance by seeing themselves as improving over time. Participants were presented with trait pairs similar to those in our previous studies except that one trait in each pair was clearly positive and the other was clearly negative. The question of interest was whether participants would enhance their image of themselves by ascribing more positive traits to the future self than the present self (and more negative traits to the past self than the present self) or whether they would simply ascribe more traits—both positive and negative—to the future and past selves than the present self.

<sup>3</sup> The sample contained 64% women and 36% men.



**Method**

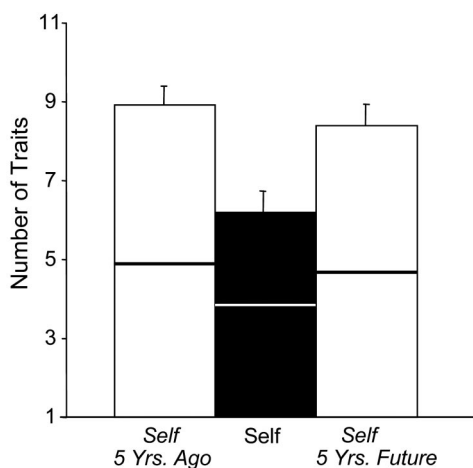
*Participants.* A total of 75 undergraduates (39 women, 35 men, and 1 participant who did not indicate gender<sup>4</sup>) participated in exchange for their choice of candy bars.

*Procedure and dependent measures.* Participants were randomly assigned to provide trait assessments of themselves in the present, 5 years ago, or 5 years from now. They provided their assessments on scales that were a variant of the Nisbett et al., (1973) scales used in Studies 1 and 2. The trait pairs were kept as faithful to their original meanings as possible but were modified so that each pair included one negatively toned trait (indicated below by an *N*) and one positively tone trait (indicated below by a *P*). The pairs thus became: *uptight (N)–easygoing (P)*, *fickle (N)–reasonable (P)*, *energetic (P)–lazy (N)*, *shy (N)–self-assured (P)*, *passive (N)–decisive (P)*, *frenzied (N)–cool-headed (P)*, *concise (P)–wordy (N)*, *reclusive (N)–sociable (P)*, *stubborn (N)–adaptable (P)*, *timid (N)–brave (P)*, *helpful (P)–selfish (N)*. (A research assistant unaware of our hypotheses and given a randomly ordered list of this entire set of traits rated each trait according to the predicted valence noted above.)

**Results and Discussion**

Consistent with the results of Studies 1 and 2, participants considering themselves in the present ascribed fewer traits to themselves ( $M = 6.20$ ) than did participants considering themselves 5 years into the future ( $M = 8.40$ ) or 5 years into the past ( $M = 8.92$ ),  $F(2, 73) = 10.55, p < .0001$ . These differences were significant for both present versus future attributions,  $F(1, 49) = 10.37, p = .002$ , and present versus past attributions,  $F(1, 49) = 16.82, p = .0002$ . Past and future attributions did not differ from each other,  $F < 1$ .

*Attribution of positive and negative traits.* We next examined whether participants showed any temporal differences in their tendency to ascribe positive versus negative traits (see Figure 3). To do this, we examined participants' ratios of the number of positive traits they selected to total traits selected. Participants generally attributed a favorable ratio of positive-to-negative traits to themselves,  $t(73) = 3.30, p = .0002$ , but this tendency did not



*Figure 3.* Number of positive and negative traits attributed to the self in the past, present, and future (Study 3). The number of positive traits is indicated by the space below the horizontal line on each bar, and the number of negative traits is indicated by the space above that line. Error bars indicate 1 standard error above the mean.

differ for attributions about present self (60% positive/40% negative), future self (57%/43%), and past self (55%/45%),  $F(2, 73) = .97, ns$ .

In this study, participants again attributed more traits to their past and future selves than to their present selves. Moreover, they did so at the expense of enhancing the present self, either by ascribing a wide range of positive traits to the present self or by claiming a pattern of self-improvement (by suggesting that the future self would have a more favorable ratio of positive to negative traits than the present self and that the present self already had a more favorable ratio than the past one). These results suggest that if enhancement motives affect trait ascription, they are not the source of the temporal differences that are the focus of this article. Accordingly, we now turn to a consideration of nonmotivational sources of those differences.

*Visual perspective and trait attributions.* As Jones and Nisbett (1972) and those who followed up on their research hypothesized, the experiential self in the present is generally focused heavily on the people and circumstances to whom one is responding. By contrast, we claim, the experience or at least the imagining of the self in the past (and, we predict, the imagining of the self in the future) is one in which the focus is on the self as an embodied actor, such that appearance and actions are salient. In Study 4, we tested this claim directly by examining the types of images that research participants reported regarding a past or future event involving themselves as opposed to a present one. We predicted that an observer-like visual focus would be more common for past or future events than for present ones.

**Study 4: Visual Perspectives on the Present Self Versus Past and Future Selves**

This study sought to examine the proposed tendency for people to imagine or visualize the past (or future) self from a more observer-like perspective than the present self. Although previous researchers have shown that such observer images often occur for *past* events (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; also Cohen & Gunz, 2002; Frank & Gilovich, 1989; Libby & Eibach, 2002; Lorenz & Neisser, 1985), no studies have compared the frequency of such images for past, present, and future events. In this study, participants were asked to form images of themselves at a meal in the distant past, the present, or the distant future. Our hypothesis was that participants' images of distant future meals and distant past meals alike, in contrast to their images of present meals (or even ones "yesterday" or "tomorrow"), would exhibit more observer-like perspectives.

**Method**

*Participants.* A total of 75 undergraduates participated in exchange for their choice of candy bars. They did not indicate their gender.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> There were no effects of gender in this study (on either number of traits selected or on positivity of traits selected).

<sup>5</sup> The sample contained 37% women and 63% men.

*Procedure and dependent measures.* Participants were approached in various campus dormitories and randomly assigned to one of five conditions in which they were instructed to take a moment to form an image of a specific meal that they either (a) remembered having had in their “childhood,” (b) remembered having had “yesterday,” (c) were having “right now” (these participants were queried while they were in dormitory dining halls), (d) could imagine having “tomorrow,” or (e) could imagine having in the distant future (i.e., when they were “over age 40”).<sup>6</sup> They were specifically told:

We’re interested in your image of this event. So, we would like you to take a moment to form a clear picture of it in your mind. First, *shut your eyes and visualize the situation*, and then be prepared to answer some questions about it.

Our primary dependent measure sought to determine whether the images participants formed were from an internal/actor’s perspective or an external/observer’s perspective. The two perspectives were described as follows (with order counterbalanced between participants), and participants were asked to select the description that “best described” the image they had formed.

- A. I saw the scene from my original point of view (not as an external observer would see it). I did not see myself in the image, since it was as though I was looking at the event through my own eyes. [Actor’s perspective]  
 B. I saw the scene as an observer might see it (not from my original point of view). I saw myself in the image, since it was as though I was looking at the event through the eyes of an observer. [Observer’s perspective]

Participants also responded to a continuous 7-point scale measure of their visual perspective (1 = *mostly A*, 4 = *mixture*, 7 = *mostly B*), as well as 7-point scale measures involving the clarity of their image “in general” and the clarity of their recalled “thoughts” and “feelings.” The continuous measure of perspective was coded such that low numbers indicated more actor-like images, and high numbers indicated more observer-like images.

## Results and Discussion

Our main prediction in this study was that the images participants formed about a meal they imagined in their distant future or one they recalled in their distant past would be more observer-like than those they formed about a meal in the present. Consistent with this prediction (see Figure 4), whereas 9 of 17 participants reported imagining the “over-40 meal” from an observer’s perspective and 8 of 15 characterized their “childhood meal” image in such terms, only 2 of 15 reported an observer-like perspective on the meal they were currently consuming. Furthermore, only 4 of the 15 forming images of “yesterday’s meal” and only 2 of 15 imagining “tomorrow’s meal” characterized their images as observer-like. Log-linear analysis of these frequencies revealed that the difference between percentage of observer images in the present (including yesterday and tomorrow) versus in the past and the future was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 75) = 9.84, p = .002$ . (These differences were also significant when comparisons were made between present and past only, or present and future only, and between immediate present and past or immediate present and future, all  $ps < .03$ ). There was no difference between the past and the future with respect to the frequency of observer images,  $\chi^2(1, N = 75) = 0$ .

The continuous measure of actor’s versus observer’s perspectives gave additional evidence of the relevant difference in visual perspectives. Participants saw their past and future selves from a

more observer-like perspective ( $M = 3.73, SD = 1.89$ ) than they saw their current selves ( $M = 2.53, SD = 1.71$ ),  $F(1, 70) = 8.12, p = .006$ . They did not exhibit any differences in the observer-like nature of their images of past selves ( $M = 3.73, SD = 1.94$ ) versus future selves ( $M = 3.73, SD = 1.91$ ),  $F = 0$ . Participants’ scale reports of their images, however, did not prove to be correlated with an index of our two items measuring clarity of recalled thoughts and emotions,  $r(73) = -.12, p = .31$  (this correlation was stronger, though still nonsignificant, when it instead involved our dichotomous measure of visual perspective,  $r = -.16, p = .18$ ).

The parallel between past and future images is worth noting in part because it shows that the tendency to form observer-like images of temporally distant events does not depend on the recollection of photographs. Obviously, our college-age participants could not rely on photos of their 40-year-old selves eating a meal. It is also worth considering the images that participants reported regarding their meal of the day before or the day to come. Most of these images were actor-like rather than observer-like. Whether this reflects participants’ sense of continuity regarding the self of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, or whether it reflects their ability to easily recall or imagine thoughts and feelings accompanying events in the immediate past and future, cannot be answered on the basis of these data.

The results of this study suggest a possible mechanism whereby one’s past and future selves might elicit attributions more like those made by an observer than by oneself in the present. We pursued this hypothesis in our next study by manipulating participants’ focus of attention to be either on the observable behavior or internal states of their past or future self. We predicted that inducing participants to focus more on internal information—information that typically would lack salience because it had been forgotten or was not being directly experienced—would lead them to make attributions about their past and future selves that more resembled those of an actor.

## Study 5: “Recalling” Past and Future Thoughts Versus Actions

When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this every one is to himself that which he calls self.

—John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

Participants were instructed to focus on actions versus on thoughts and feelings in imagining a specific past or future birthday. Our prediction was that focusing on internal thoughts and feelings (as an actor would), rather than on observable actions (as an observer would), would induce more actor-like attributions.

<sup>6</sup> An additional 15 participants were asked to form an image of themselves having dinner “right now” when, in fact, they were at that moment engaged in a *different* activity (such as socializing in their dormitory room). Of these participants, 40% (i.e., 6 participants) reported images from an observer’s perspective (9 reported images from an actor’s perspective). Because these participants were neither forming images of remembered past events, anticipated future events, or experienced ongoing events, their data are not included in the foregoing analyses.

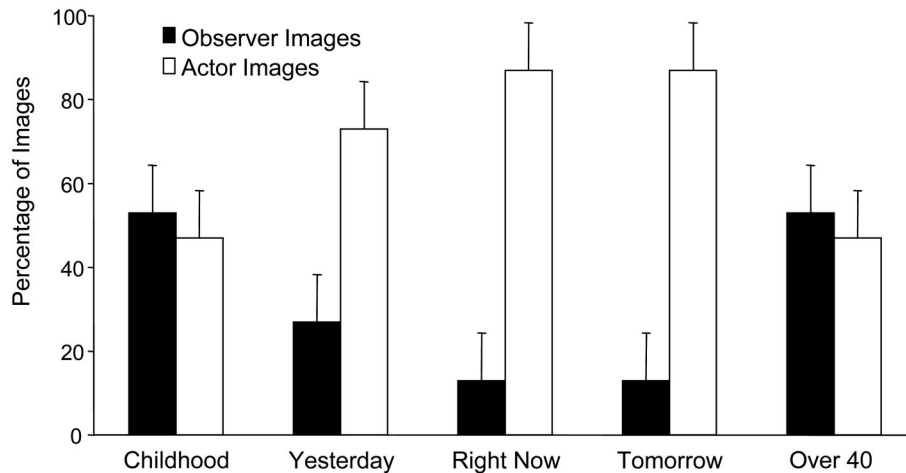


Figure 4. Percentage of actor versus observer images generated for meals in past, present, and future (Study 4). Error bars indicate 1 standard error above the mean.

## Method

**Participants.** A total of 86 undergraduates (33 men and 53 women) participated in exchange for their choice of candy bars.

**Procedure and dependent measure.** Participants were randomly assigned to focus on thoughts and feelings or on actions during a birthday 5 years into the future or 5 years in the past. In the future “thoughts and feelings” condition, they received the following instructions:

Please imagine a birthday that you will have about 5 years from now. It could be a dinner that you will have in celebration of your birthday, a party, or anything special that you can imagine doing on your birthday. (Please indicate how old you will be on this birthday, about 5 years from now: \_\_\_\_.)

Now that you have this birthday in mind, please take a moment to try to imagine what you will be *thinking and feeling* on that day. Use the lines below to jot down whatever thoughts and feelings come to mind.

In the future “actions” condition, the word “doing” was substituted for the words “thinking and feeling” in the above instructions. In the two past conditions, the instructions were identical except that the request was to “think back to a birthday that you had about 5 years ago.”

Participants were provided with six blank lines on which to write about actions or thoughts and feelings. Below these lines, participants were presented with the same trait versus situation attribution measure used in Studies 1 and 2. The specific instruction introducing the measure was: “Now, please rate yourself according to what you think you will be like at the age of the birthday which you just [imagined/recalled]. Complete each rating by circling one of the three options on each line that you feel provides the best description of yourself at that age.”

## Results and Discussion

Our primary prediction in this study was that focusing participants’ attention on past or future internal experiences would make them less likely to ascribe stable traits to those temporally distant selves than would focusing their attention on temporally distant actions. We analyzed these data using a 2 (Time: past or future)  $\times$  2 (Attentional Focus: thoughts/feelings or actions)  $\times$  2 (Gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA yielded a main effect of time, whereby thinking about past birthdays elicited more

trait attributions than thinking about future ones,  $F(1, 78) = 7.81$ ,  $p = .007$ , and it also yielded a main effect of gender, whereby men thinking about distant birthdays self-ascribed more traits than women thinking about these birthdays,  $F(1, 78) = 7.79$ ,  $p = .007$ . Of importance, there also was a single  $2 \times 2$  interaction effect, involving Time and Attentional Focus,  $F(1, 78) = 5.64$ ,  $p = .02$ . To examine this interaction more closely, we conducted separate analyses for participants reflecting on past birthdays versus future ones. With respect to future birthdays, our results were as predicted. Participants asked to imagine their thoughts and feelings during a future birthday celebration subsequently reported that they would have fewer traits ( $M = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ) than those asked to imagine their actions in that celebration ( $M = 8.05$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ),  $F(1, 40) = 5.47$ ,  $p = .02$ . However, no such between-condition difference was found among participants who were asked to recall a past birthday. That is, participants reported just as many traits after recalling past-birthday thoughts and feelings ( $M = 8.36$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ) as they did after recalling past-birthday actions ( $M = 8.32$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ),  $F < 1$ . This interaction effect suggests that inducing participants to focus on temporally distant thoughts and feelings was easier to do in the case of a future birthday than a past birthday—and that our modest manipulation may thus have been insufficient to produce differences in past visual perspectives.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, as can be seen in Table 1, the observed interaction effect between Time and Attentional Focus was qualified by a significant triple interaction involving Time, Attentional Focus, and Participant Gender,  $F(1, 78) = 4.53$ ,  $p = .04$ . In the case of participants considering future birthdays, Gender did not interact with Atten-

<sup>7</sup> It could be that past thoughts and feelings are often nuanced and difficult to recapture (as indicated, perhaps, by our participants’ frequent tendency to report either mixed emotions or difficulty remembering emotions for their past birthday), whereas future ones are often imagined to be unidimensional and are thus easy to “make up” (as indicated, perhaps, by our participants’ nearly uniform tendency to imagine they would feel happy and satisfied on their future birthday; see Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003, for a similar result).

Table 1  
Mean Number of Traits Attributed (and Standard Deviations)  
for Study 5

	Future		Past	
	Thoughts/ Feelings	Actions	Thoughts/ Feelings	Actions
Women				
<i>M</i>	6.40	7.42	7.14	7.92
( <i>SD</i> )	(2.61)	(2.27)	(2.11)	(2.23)
( <i>n</i> )	(15)	(12)	(14)	(12)
Men				
<i>M</i>	6.17	8.89	10.50	8.80
( <i>SD</i> )	(2.99)	(1.45)	(0.93)	(2.10)
( <i>n</i> )	(6)	(9)	(8)	(10)

tional Focus in influencing participants' trait attributions,  $F(1, 40) = 1.21, p = .28$ . However, such an interaction effect emerged for participants considering past birthdays,  $F(1, 42) = 11.97, p = .001$ . Male participants tended to attribute *more* traits to their past selves after being asked to recall past thoughts and feelings rather than past actions,  $F(1, 17) = 4.51, p = .05$ , whereas female participants seemed to show the opposite tendency, although not to a significant degree,  $F(1, 25) = .82, p = .37$ . This interaction effect involving gender could be consistent with our speculation that past thoughts and feelings may be more difficult to recall than future ones are to imagine. Men generally have more difficulty than women in recalling their past emotions and internal states (Bauer, Stennes, & Haight, 2003; Davis, 1999), and thus our manipulation may not have succeeded in inducing them to recall such states.

The present study provides evidence, in the case of the future self, that perceiving oneself from an actor's perspective by focusing on internal states (rather than perceiving oneself from an observer's perspective by focusing on observable behavior) induces more actor-like attributions. This finding provides further support for our proposed source of temporal differences in attribution. However, no effect of our experimental manipulation was apparent for attributions about the past self. In our next study, we sought to produce the postulated effect for the past self by using what we expected to be a more powerful and engaging manipulation, one designed by experts to increase actors' focus on past internal states.

#### Study 6: Getting into the Role of One's "Past Self"

The experimental manipulation featured in Study 6 was borrowed from the tradition of method acting, or the Stanislavski System, whereby actors seek to "discover the inner life of the man [or woman] they portray" (Moore, 1960/1984, p. 8). Rather than attempting simply to portray a character in a way that the audience accepts as authentic, the method actor seeks (in part by drawing on past personal experiences) to consciously experience the thoughts, feelings, and other subjective events of the character being portrayed. In a sense, standard acting involves taking an observer's perspective on one's character and imagining how it appears to an external audience, whereas method acting involves taking an actor's perspective on one's character and imagining how it feels to

have that character's internal experiences. Our hypothesis was that participants who "method-acted" their past selves would make attributions about those selves that were more akin to those of individuals assessing their current behavior than would participants who were portraying their past selves while focusing on their appearance and observable behavior.

#### Method

*Participants.* A total of 33 undergraduates (18 men and 15 women<sup>8</sup>) participated individually in exchange for course credit.

*Procedure and acting instructions.* Participants were randomly assigned to the "method-acting" or to the "standard-acting" condition. Upon arriving at the laboratory, they were met by a female experimenter who informed them that the investigators were "interested in acting, and want to study people's performances." They then were provided with some introductory instruction about the nature of either method acting (referred to as "experience acting") or standard acting (referred to as "play acting"). Method-acting participants were told that their acting style involved "getting into the part you are playing so that you feel like this is who you actually are. You focus on experiencing the sensory experiences of this person, so that you feel like you literally are this person," whereas standard-acting participants were told that their acting style involved "playing a part so that it appears that this is who you actually are. You focus on putting forth whatever characteristics and actions are necessary so that you come across like the person you are playing."

To help illustrate these instructions, the experimenter told the participants how one might either method act (or play act) the role of a person stranded in an extremely cold climate without protective clothing or shelter (see Governick, 2003). Finally, they were provided with a reminder to focus either on the idea that "you are experiencing reality, and you want to feel as though you are this other person" (method-acting condition) or on the idea that "you are putting on a performance, and you want to appear as though you are this other person" (standard-acting condition).

Participants were then told about the scene they would be enacting: "For your acting exercise today, we would like you to engage in a performance of yourself at a family dinner at age 14," and were told to imagine that their "parents, siblings, or whoever would normally be there are there and are seated at the table as well, and you are telling them about your day." They were given as much time as they required (typically 3–5 min) to prepare a 2-min monologue and were told to use this time to think about the day they would be recounting. Method-acting participants were reminded to focus on "being the person in this scene, by experiencing the sorts of sensations that you would be noticing and responding to," whereas standard-acting participants were reminded to focus on "appearing as though you are the person in the scene, by portraying the sorts of actions and gestures that you would be engaging in."

*Dependent measure.* Once the participant had concluded his or her monologue, the experimenter verbally presented our dependent variable measure, with the following preamble:

Now that you have had some practice in doing this sort of acting, I am going to make things a little more complicated. I would like to ask you some questions while you are *in* [method condition]/*playing* [standard condition] this role. I will ask you some questions about yourself, and I would like you to respond by [*being/playing*] yourself at age 14. So, just focus on [*being/playing*] yourself at age 14 and [*experiencing the situation you are in/appearing*] as though you are 14, when you answer these questions. For each question, you can choose one of two different characteristics, or you can choose the option that it "depends on the situation."

<sup>8</sup> There were no effects of gender in this study.



The experimenter then asked the participant about whether, on that day at age 14, the participant had various traits in the 11 pairs used by Nisbett et al. (1973). First, she asked: "Today are you going to be *serious* or *carefree*, or will it depend on the situation?" Second, she asked: "Today are you going to be *subjective* or *analytic*, or will it depend on the situation?" She then continued to pose this question for the remaining nine trait pairs. This concluded the experiment. The participant was thanked and debriefed.

### Results and Discussion

Our prediction in this study was that participants in the method-acting condition, instructed to concentrate on contemporaneous thoughts and feelings of their past self, would provide responses that were more actor-like and less observer-like than those in the standard-acting condition. This prediction was supported. Our newly trained "method actors" ascribed fewer of the 11 possible traits to their past selves ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ) than did our newly trained "standard actors" ( $M = 6.71$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ),  $F(1, 32) = 4.11$ ,  $p = .05$ .

Because our experimenter was not blind to experimental conditions, it is worth acknowledging the possibility that experimenter effects could have produced our results, while noting that the experimenter was not informed of our experimental hypotheses and thus had no reason to imagine that these hypotheses involved the number of trait versus situation responses participants offered (as opposed to the precise traits that they selected).

It is interesting that in this study, participants in both conditions ascribed fewer traits to their past selves than they had in our previous studies. Perhaps acting the part of one's past self increases awareness of past internal states or of past situational variability, relative to simply looking back on that past self in a more cursory way. This general tendency notwithstanding, participants in this study who were instructed to portray their past selves in a way that focused on making internal states more salient (rather than making an audience's or observer's perspective more salient) tended to see the behavior of their past selves as more reflective of situational demands and constraints.

#### Study 7: The Relationship Between Visual Perspective and Internal States

Thus far, we have shown a difference in trait ascriptions made about the present versus the past and future selves. We have examined two sources of this difference, both of which were suggested by Jones and Nisbett (1972) to account for the parallel actor–observer difference and both of which involve differences in the information attended to by actors versus observers (and, we suggest, by actors considering present selves vs. past or future selves). We have speculated that these two attentional differences—that is, differences in visual attention to the actor and differences in attention to internal states—may be related. The current study sought to examine the possibility that the differing visual perspectives associated with the past versus the present self might mediate the relationship between temporal distance and internal state salience.

In this study, individuals riding on stationary bicycles were asked to report the visual perspective they had on that activity—or on a past instance of that activity. They were also asked to report on the salience of internal information about the visualized event. We predicted that individuals would report more observer-like

perspectives and less salience of internal information for past than for present events and that this increase in observer perspectives would be associated with and mediate any effect of past versus present self on salience of internal states.

### Method

**Participants.** A total of 30 undergraduates completed a brief questionnaire while they were exercising on stationary bicycles at the university fitness center. Participants did not provide information about their gender.

**Procedure and dependent measures.** Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in which they were asked to form images of themselves "in the present" or "about one year ago." They were instructed to "take a moment and form an image of [the present time, right now/a time about one year ago] when you [are/were] riding the stationary bike." They then were told, "We're interested in your image of this event. So, we would like you to take a moment to form a clear picture of it in your mind. First, *shut your eyes and visualize the situation*, and then be prepared to answer some questions about it." They were subsequently asked to indicate whether their image had been from an observer's perspective or an actor's perspective by responding to the same descriptions used in Study 4.

Participants responded to a series of 7-point scales involving the nature of the image they had formed:

How vivid was this image? (*Not at all vivid–Extremely vivid*); How specific was this image? (*Not at all specific–Extremely specific*); How clearly do you remember your feelings in this situation? (*Not at all clearly–Extremely clearly*); Would you characterize these feelings as mostly negative or mostly positive? (*Mostly negative–Mostly positive*); How clearly do you remember your thoughts in this situation? (*Not at all clearly–Extremely clearly*).

### Results and Discussion

**Present versus past events and visual perspective.** We first sought to test whether participants had formed more observer-like images of a past stationary-biking experience than a present one. Consistent with this prediction, whereas only 1 of 15 participants (7%) reported an observer perspective on their current experience, 6 of 14 participants (43%) reported an observer perspective on their past experience, Fisher's exact test,  $p = .04$ . It is worth noting that this effect emerged even though all of our participants were riding exercise bikes during the experiment (in contrast to Study 4, in which participants describing meals in the immediate present, but not meals in the past or future, were having a meal at the time).

**Visual perspective and internal state salience.** We expected participants to report clearer memories of internal states for the present image of self than for the past image of self. However, one-way ANOVAs on the items involving clarity of thoughts and of feelings found no effects on these measures,  $F_s < 1$ ,  $p_s > .3$ . Lacking a temporal effect on salience of internal states, we could not assess the possibility that such effects, when they manifest, are mediated by visual perspective. However, we could still assess the relationship between visual perspective and the salience of internal information. As predicted, more observer-like visual perspectives were correlated with lower salience of internal thoughts,  $r(28) = -.59$ ,  $p = .0008$ , and with lower salience of internal feelings,  $r(28) = -.44$ ,  $p = .02$ .

We also tested whether participants' reports of the abstractness of the images that they formed were affected by temporal focus or were predictive of the salience of internal information. Our two

measures of abstractness (i.e., vividness and specificity) were not influenced by temporal focus, nor were they correlated with the salience of internal information, with the one exception that specificity was correlated with salient internal feelings ( $r = .49, p = .006$ ; other  $ps > .24$ ).

The results of our final study thus provide additional evidence for the proposed source of temporal differences in trait attributions. First, participants exercising on stationary bicycles were more likely to form observer-like images of past workouts than present ones. Second, participants who formed observer-like images reported lower salience of internal states than did participants who formed actor-like images.

### General Discussion

Participants in seven studies tended to make attributions about their past and future selves that were more like those of an “observer” than an “actor.” This tendency was apparent in the greater willingness of research participants to ascribe traits to the past self and the future self than to the present self (Studies 1 and 2). Moreover, this attributional asymmetry did not appear to serve familiar self-enhancement needs (Study 3). As predicted, however, it did prove to be associated with some of the same mechanisms involving focus of attention that have been linked to a parallel actor–observer asymmetry in trait attributions (Jones & Nisbett, 1972). Study 4 provided initial evidence of these underlying mechanisms by showing that images involving temporally distant selves tended to be focused on those selves as an embodied actor more than did images of temporally close selves (which tended to be focused on the scene surrounding the actor). Furthermore, directly manipulating participants’ attention to focus on information about past or future selves’ attending thoughts and feelings, rather than on observable behavior, led participants to make more actor-like attributions about those temporally distant selves (Studies 5 and 6). Finally, temporal distance affected the actor-versus-observer quality of participants’ visual focus, controlling for the activity participants were engaged in at the time they formed their images, and observer-like visual perspectives were negatively correlated with the salience of internal states (Study 7).

The mechanisms we have explored involve differences in the availability or salience of information to actors versus observers (and, we suggest, to actors perceiving their present selves vs. their past or future selves). Our results suggest that these differences, involving attention to actors’ observable behavior versus internal states, underlie the observed temporal difference in trait self-ascription. We have shown that manipulations of temporal distance affect visual attention to the relevant self’s behavior (vs. to the situation as seen through the eyes of that self). In addition, we have shown that manipulations of attention to the internal states of temporally distant selves (vs. to the observable behavior of those selves) affect subsequent trait attributions. We also have shown that, in the case of the present versus the past, focusing visual attention on the embodied self (rather than on the situation as seen by that self) is negatively associated with attention to internal states.

It is also worth noting, however, what our findings do not show. We did not show that manipulating visual focus directly affects trait attributions. Our method-acting study comes closest to doing this, in that participants were instructed to act the role of their past

self by either focusing on how that self appeared to others (standard condition) or by focusing on how that self perceived the world (method condition), but the instructions also called for a focus on either actions and behavior (standard condition) or on subjective experience (method condition), thus making it difficult to conclude whether a pure manipulation of visual attention would have produced differences. Previous studies dealing with the self in the present (Storms, 1973) and past (Frank & Gilovich, 1989) have shown that focusing visual attention on the self as an embodied actor leads people to make more dispositional causal attributions; those studies, however, did not examine attention to internal states. Finally, a second causal link that is not directly shown in our studies involves the link between temporal distance and the salience of internal states. Our results show that temporal distance affects visual perspective which, in turn, affects internal state salience, but our results do not show a direct link between these two factors.

The results of our research extend, and in some respects qualify, Jones and Nisbett’s classic work on the “divergent perspectives” of actors and observers. To the extent that the actor being perceived is a temporally distant self, the attributions that the present self is likely to make about that distant self are apt to resemble the types of attributions that actors characteristically make about observers. In other words, the generalization made by Jones and Nisbett about the attributions of actors versus observers begins to become less applicable as the self whom the actor and observer are contemplating becomes an object of memory or prediction. For better or worse, we do have the gift to “see ourselves as others see us” (as Robert Burns wished in *To a Louse*), once the unique visual perspective and attending thoughts and feelings that characterize our immediate experience of self are removed. At the same time, we can make the present self more attuned and sympathetic to the feelings and constraints of temporally distant selves by doing something akin to a little method acting.

### Availability and Access

Although Jones and Nisbett emphasized differences in availability or salience of information, they also noted differences in access to information, such as that “[t]ypically, the actor has more, and more precise, information than the observer about his own emotional states and his intentions” (p. 85). In many cases involving actors and observers, differences in access to and availability of internal information (as well as information about observable appearances) are likely to be confounded. Observers have less information than actors about internal states, and they also pay less attention to such information. Similarly, information about the internal states of temporally distant selves is likely to be lacking (because such information about distant selves depends on memory or imagination and surmise) in comparison with information about present internal states, and it is also likely to be less salient (because information about ongoing thoughts and feelings is likely to come to mind more easily than information about past or future ones).

The current research suggests that, notwithstanding this typical comingling of access and availability, making internal information about past or future selves more available leads to more actor-like attributions about those selves. This suggests a possible difference between perception of temporally distant selves versus perception

of other people. When we perceive others, we often devalue introspections even when they are made available to us—at least in assessing others' bias (Pronin, 2005; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004) and conformity (Pronin, Berger, & Molouki, 2005). This difference could merely reflect the use of different dependent measures (e.g., measures of traits vs. bias), but it could also reflect a tendency for people to feel more “empathy” for their own past or future thoughts, feelings, hopes, and intentions than for others' similar internal states.

#### *Other Possible Sources of the Temporal Difference*

We do not claim that the mechanisms we have explored are the only ones that could play a role in producing temporal differences in trait self-ascription. Some would surely assign a role to motivational factors, and we have no reason to deny that some aspects of the data we have described—particularly the tendency to see the present self as situationally responsive rather than temperamentally rigid—might contribute to a positive self-image. However, our results show that motives to see oneself as improving over time, or as simply possessing a more favorable ratio of positive to negative traits in the present, do not account for the differences we found.

Another obvious potential source of some of our findings is highlighted by Trope and Liberman's (2003) construal level theory, which suggests that social distance and temporal distance can have similar psychological effects by both inducing more abstract perceptions. In most of the studies we have reported, we did not directly measure abstractness of past and future versus present self-perceptions. (The lone exception was Study 7, in which an association was not found.) On a broader theoretical level, however, our present research makes evident that we share with Trope and Liberman a basic interest in the psychological similarity of judgments involving social and temporal distance. Indeed, it provides empirical support for one of the key claims of their theory because it shows that attributions made about temporally distant selves resemble the sorts of attributions made about socially distant selves.

A final possible mechanism is suggested by a consideration of “naïve realism” (Pronin, Gilovich & Ross, 2004; Ross & Ward, 1996). In contemplating a past self or an imagined future self, much as in contemplating another person, one may be considering an actor who does not share one's present preferences and priorities and accordingly makes choices *different* from one's own. In such circumstances, that actor may seem not to see matters as they “really are” or to act as the “situation demands.” Perceiving one's past self as different from one's present self can elicit an observer-like focus on that past self (Libby & Eibach, 2002). The results of the current research suggest that it might also lead to the attribution of more idiosyncratic dispositions to that past (or future) self. Along these lines, it would also be interesting to study whether people who are inclined to view themselves as capable of change rather than as defined by a stable essence (e.g., Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Heyman & Dweck, 1998) might, ironically, be especially prone to perceive their past and future selves in terms of stable traits.

#### *Past–Future Asymmetries*

Although the present research reveals an important symmetry in attributions regarding the future self and the past self, we are not arguing that past and future judgments are totally symmetric. In comparing present selves with past or future ones, people may see themselves as improving over time (e.g., Ross & Wilson, 2003). Similarly, people tend to imagine that the experiences of their future selves will be uniformly positive, even while they remember their pasts as a combination of highs and lows (Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003). The one past–future discrepancy found in the present research was that brief instructions to simulate thoughts and feelings for temporally distant selves (in Study 5) induced fewer trait attributions for future selves but not for past ones. Each of these three asymmetries, interestingly, may be rooted in a single fact: Relative to when we think about past selves, when we think about our future selves and our future actions and attainments, we are less constrained by actual outcomes and concrete memories, and we are more free to perceive our future selves in terms of our present aspirations, hopes, and plans (which are far more salient to us than the inevitable barriers and situational constraints that will prevent the good intentions of our future selves from being fully realized).

#### *Consequences of Observer-Like Attributions About Past and Future Selves*

Making observer-like attributions about one's past self could have meaningful personal and social consequences. There are times when it is important, both for the individual and the larger society, for actors to accept responsibility for past misdeeds and to offer restitution to those who have been harmed. Under these circumstances, actors' tendency to judge their past selves in terms of fixed traits, rather than in terms of situational variability, could lead them to take more responsibility for such actions if they attribute them to personal rather than situational causes. However, temporal distance may also lead people to judge themselves too harshly in the case of past failures or mistakes, as they forget the good intentions and heartfelt emotions that accompanied their missteps. On some of these occasions, people might benefit from not attributing stable traits to their past selves but rather from showing a measure of empathic generosity by finding ways to “reexperience” past thoughts and feelings.

Implications of observer-like attributions regarding the future self are more obvious. To the extent that we view our future selves as impervious to situational demands, we are likely to be overly optimistic in our planning (e.g., Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994) and in our expectations (e.g., Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003) regarding future outcomes. As we view our future selves from a distanced observer-like perspective and we neglect to consider the thoughts and feelings and the situational pressures that our future selves will face, we may spend money today rather than save for retirement, smoke rather than quit, or in general sacrifice future well-being for current satisfaction. However, a strategy of self-denial and sacrifice of today for tomorrow is not always the wisest. When we look back on the past, we experience regrets about opportunities for pleasure, personal growth and adventure, or nurturing of relationships that we did not seize (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). We can therefore anticipate that when we look back



from the vantage point of the future, when today becomes not the present but the past, we will experience similar thoughts and feelings. Our closing message is thus a simple one. Wise decision making involves appreciation of personal continuity—not only of using lessons from our past to guide our present, but also of seriously contemplating the thoughts and feelings that we are apt to have in the future as a guide to what we should and should not do today.

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