Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 47 (2011) 1316–1319

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

FlashReport

I know you're me, but who am I? Perspective taking and seeing the other in the self☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 7 March 2011
Revised 3 May 2011
Available online 30 May 2011

Keywords:
Perspective-taking
Role-taking
Self-other overlap
Racial attitudes
Social cognition
Person perception

ABSTRACT

Research examining the consequences of perspective-taking on cognition suggests that through perceiver–target overlap, perspective-taking can lead to greater valuing of targets, greater helping of targets, and a reduction in stereotyping of targets and the groups to which they belong. Research has also begun to focus more closely on the ways perceivers come to think and act like targets. This research, however evocative, is not conclusive. The current studies set out to provide firmer support. Reported here, two studies found that perspective-taking influences perceiver–target overlap, which mediates changes in self-concept (ratings of the self on researcher-related attributes and beliefs after taking the perspective of a researcher in Study 1 and attitudes toward African Americans after taking the perspective of a racist in Study 2). In the same studies, overlap simultaneously mediated valuing of the targets (target ratings on positive attributes in Study 1 and liking for the target in Study 2).

A growing body of research has documented how perspective-taking leads to overlap (i.e., perceivers feeling psychologically "merged" with targets) between perceivers and targets, which can lead to greater helping of targets (Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Maner et al., 2002) or less stereotyping and more valuing of outgroups and outgroup members (e.g., Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Much of this research has suggested that as a consequence of perspective taking, the other becomes more self-like, leading to these positive outcomes.

Recently, researchers have begun to focus more closely on how perspective-taking and similarity (Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007) lead to changes in self-concept via overlap. Evidence for these effects, while certainly suggestive, has been somewhat indirect. For example, while several studies by Galinsky et al. (2008) showed that manipulated perspective-taking caused stereotypically target-like downstream behavior, the one study testing perceiver–target overlap as a mediator did not experimentally manipulate perspective-taking, raising issues of causality. Furthermore, the overlap measure used was participants' self-ratings of intelligence. Similarly, Goldstein and Cialdini (2007) found that manipulated perspective-taking and similarity caused perceivers to incorporate target-relevant attributes into their self-concept when they felt a merged identity with a target. Again, however, overlap was only implied by the incorporation of target-relevant traits.

Given that these overlap measures were indirect (i.e., participants were likely not meant to be aware of it), alternative explanations for the findings are at least possible. Still, we agree with these authors' conclusions. More precisely, we believe that incorporation of target-relevant attributes into the self is *driven by* perceptions of overlap — even if the incorporation itself does not directly constitute a measure of overlap.

The present research was conducted to address these potential limitations, showing that consciously-endorsed perceptions of overlap drive the incorporation of target-relevant attributes into the self. We also wanted to expand the generalizability of target-into-self effects following perspective-taking, showing how overlap can simultaneously affect perceptions of self and target.

To do this, we first used experimental designs so that causality could be established. Second, we used a direct measure of consciously-endorsed overlap which has been used in previous studies on perspective-taking (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1997; Maner et al., 2002). Third, we examined whether not only attributes but beliefs about the self (Study 1) and participants' attitudes toward an outgroup – consistent with a racist target's attitudes toward that group (Study 2) – would be influenced by perspective-taking via overlap. Importantly, we expected this attitude change to occur without any member of this group having served as a target. Last, we examined whether overlap would also simultaneously mediate valuing of the targets, using positive traits (Study 1) and items regarding friendship and liking (Study 2). This would provide initial direct evidence for how perspective-taking, through overlap, simultaneously affects perceptions of the self and of the target.

☆ Portions of this work were supported by a dissertation fellowship awarded to Sean M. Laurent by the Ford Foundation. The authors would also like to thank William Klein for serving as the target in Study 1.

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doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2011.05.018

Study 1: Taking the perspective of a researcher

In Study 1, we asked participants to take the perspective of a researcher and to rate themselves on researcher-related attributes and beliefs. Participants also rated the researcher on a set of researcher-irrelevant positive attributes. We hypothesized that perspective-taking would cause greater perceiver–target overlap, which would mediate self-ratings on target-relevant attributes and beliefs, and target-ratings on researcher-irrelevant positive attributes.

Method

Participants were 110 undergraduate students (75% female), who participated in partial fulfillment of course requirements. Measures and instructions were administered on computers at individual workstations. Before watching a seven-minute video of an actual researcher being interviewed about his job, participants were randomly assigned to either perspective-taking or objective-watching instructions (cf. Batson et al., 1997).

Next, participants rated agreement with two belief statements implied by the target in the interview but never explicitly stated ("Learning something new is a reward that keeps me motivated to work" "When I'm working on something important, it's OK with me if I don't have a clear sign of the progress I've made that day;" these statements were measured on 11-point scales and averaged; higher numbers indicate greater agreement; $r = .24$). Participants also rated themselves on 4 pretested "researcher attributes" (industrious, methodological, knowledgeable, deliberate; $\alpha = .71$) and rated the target on 4 researcher-irrelevant positive attributes (wholesome, relaxed, attractive, carefree; $\alpha = .55$; all attributes were rated on 9-point scales with higher numbers indicating greater agreement). Overlap was measured with the Inclusion of Others in the Self scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) and the extent to which the word "we" would describe their relationship with the target (cf. Cialdini et al., 1997; 7-point scales, higher numbers indicate greater overlap; $r = .57$).

Results and discussion

Shrout and Bolger (2002) recommend that "mediation analys[es] proceed on the basis of the strength of theoretical arguments rather than on the basis of the statistical test of X on Y" (p. 430). This was our approach, given that our hypotheses all involved overlap mediating effects between perspective-taking and downstream variables. Following Hayes' (2009) (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Shrout & Bolger, 2002) recommendations, we tested our hypotheses directly by conducting path analyses using AMOS 6.0 (Arbuckle, 2006). This allowed tests of indirect effects using bootstrapping (5000 replications) to calculate bias-corrected standard errors of the indirect paths. It also allowed simultaneous examination of each of the hypothesized relations within the same model.[1] We treated condition (perspective-taking = 0, control = 1) as an exogenous simultaneous predictor of overlap and all dependent variables (self-ratings on researcher attributes, agreement with researcher-related beliefs, target-ratings on positive attributes), with overlap also predicting all dependent variables within the same model (Fig. 1).

Results from this model are reported below. In the text, we report bias-corrected unstandardized coefficients (and 95% CIs) for variables involving condition, which represent interpretable measures of effect size given a dichotomous predictor (i.e., the mean difference between experimental groups; Hayes, 2009). Standardized (bias-corrected) coefficients are reported for relationships between overlap and dependent variables. We also report the squared multiple correlations for endogenous variables, representing variance explained in each variable by all effects, direct and indirect.

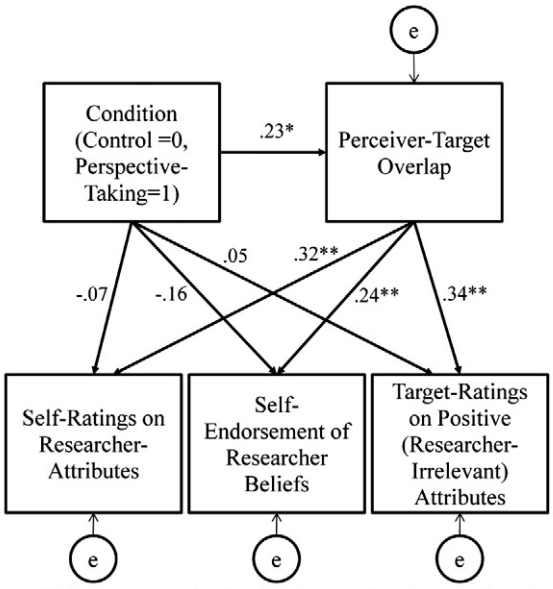

Fig. 1. Path model testing the indirect effects of perspective-taking via perceiver-target overlap on self-ratings on researcher attributes, self-endorsement of researcher beliefs, and target-ratings on researcher-irrelevant positive attributes.

Perspective-takers felt significantly more overlap with the target than control participants ($b = .47$, $CI_{.95} = .09/.86$, $R^2 = .05$, $p = .01$), but perspective-taking did not significantly (directly) predict any dependent variables. Greater overlap was significantly associated with higher self-ratings on researcher attributes ($\beta = .32$, $CI_{.95} = .13/.50$, $R^2 = .10$, $p = .002$), greater self-endorsement of researcher-related beliefs ($\beta = .24$, $CI_{.95} = .02/.43$, $R^2 = .07$, $p = .03$), and higher target-ratings on positive attributes ($\beta = .34$, $CI_{.95} = .16/.49$, $R^2 = .12$, $p = .0007$).

Full support was also found for our primary hypotheses. Through overlap, perspective-taking was associated (i.e., via indirect effects) with higher self-ratings on researcher-related attributes, greater agreement with statements that a researcher might make, and higher target-ratings on positive attributes unrelated to researcher stereotypes. Specifically, for researcher attributes, $b = .16$, $CI_{.95} = .03/.36$, $p = .009$; for beliefs, $b = .19$, $CI_{.95} = .02/.50$, $p = .03$; for positive attributes, $b = .18$, $CI_{.95} = .03/.40$, $p = .01$. In sum, through greater perceived overlap with the target, perspective-takers felt more like researchers and liked a researcher target more. This gives initial direct evidence that through overlap, perspective-takers incorporate elements of a target into the self, while overlap also influences their attitudes toward the target.

Study 2: Taking the perspective of a racist

In Study 2 we used a target described as a racist. Given that college students are aware of prejudice toward African Americans and feel pressure to avoid appearing prejudiced (Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002), and attitudes about stigmatized groups are difficult to change (Batson et al., 1997), if perspective-takers take on the target's negative intergroup beliefs/attitudes, this provides a strong test of our hypothesis that perspective taking (via overlap) leads to changes in self-concept. Furthermore, researchers have suggested that effects of perspective-taking do not generalize beyond targets or their groups (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Finding

[1] We also examined separate models, each using a different dependent variable as an outcome. Results of these models did not substantively differ from the effects reported, so we retained the single, more parsimonious, model. Participant gender was also examined but had no effect on any variables so is not discussed.

that overlap mediates attitude-change toward a group – even when no group member has served as a target – would suggest that this is not always the case, providing a novel finding and a provocative demonstration of overlap on attitudes.

The measure of overlap used in Study 1 was again used here. To generalize effects of perspective-taking beyond a single instruction set, we induced perspective-taking similarly to Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000). Participants wrote a "day-in-the-life" essay about a target (described as prejudiced against African Americans) as if they were the target or were simply asked to write about a day in his life[2] and completed three feeling thermometers — for African Americans, Latinos/Latinas, and homeless people. To further increase generalizability, valuing was assessed with questions about the target's friendship potential and related variables rather than positive attribute ratings. We expected perspective-taking to predict (via overlap) greater coolness toward African Americans and to increase valuing of the target, but not to affect attitude-change toward other groups about whom the target had no avowed attitudes.

Method

Participants were 115 undergraduate students (62% female) who participated in partial fulfillment of course requirements. Three participants self-identifying as African American were excluded from analyses.

Participants completed all measures on computers at individual work stations. All viewed the same photograph of a white male with a shaved head, described as someone who dislikes African Americans, avoids them whenever possible, and treats them with hostility and disrespect. Participants then took his perspective, writing about a day in his life as if they were him or without being given further instruction (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Next, participants completed the same overlap measure as in Study 1 ($r = .58$), and four items assessing liking of, caring about, wanting to spend time with, and viewing the target as someone who could be a friend (7-point scales with higher numbers indicating greater agreement; $\alpha = .76$). Finally, participants completed three feeling thermometers (for African Americans, Latinos/Latinas, and homeless people; 100-point scales coded so higher numbers indicated greater coolness toward these groups).

Results and discussion

Hypotheses were tested in the same way as Study 1. Condition (control = 0, perspective-taking = 1) was an exogenous predictor of overlap and all dependent variables (thermometers and valuing) in a single model where overlap also predicted all dependent variables (Fig. 2). For effects involving condition, bias-corrected unstandardized coefficients with 95% CIs are reported (bias-corrected standardized coefficients are reported for associations between overlap and dependent variables), along with squared multiple correlation coefficients for endogenous variables. No effects involving gender were significant, so it is not discussed.

Perspective-takers felt significantly greater perceived overlap than control ($b = .33$, $CI_{.95} = .07/.61$, $R^2 = .05$, $p = .02$).[3] Greater overlap was associated with more coolness toward African Americans ($\beta = .35$, $CI_{.95} = .18/.52$, $R^2 = .16$, $p = .0005$) and greater valuing of the target ($\beta = .51$, $CI_{.95} = .34/.66$, $R^2 = .29$, $p = .0006$). Neither condition nor overlap was significantly associated with any other variables.

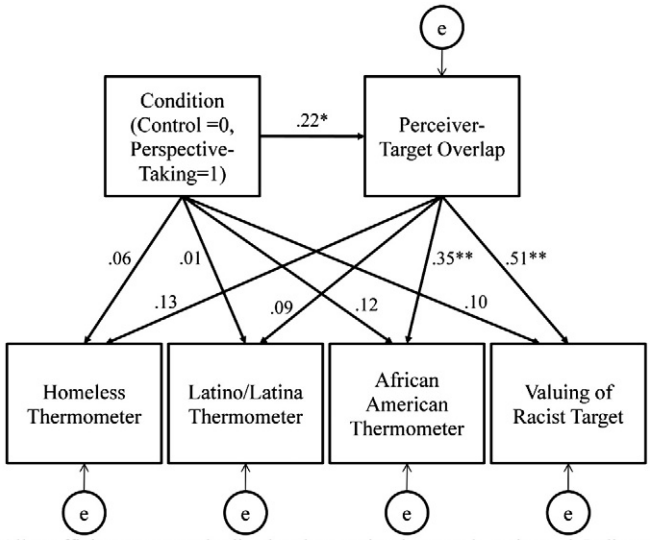

Fig. 2. Path model testing the indirect effects of perspective-taking via perceiver-target overlap on coolness toward African Americans, Latinos/Latinas, and homeless people, and valuing of a racist target.

Supporting our primary hypotheses, perspective-taking indirectly led via overlap to greater coolness toward African Americans ($b = 2.66$, $CI_{.95} = .75/5.94$, $p = .001$) and valuing of the target ($b = .20$, $CI_{.95} = .05/.40$, $p = .01$). No other indirect effects were significant. Put another way, after taking the perspective of a racist, perceivers' attitudes were more like a racist's, and they liked a racist target more, mediated by overlap.

Conclusions

In two studies, we showed that perspective-taking affects perceivers' self-concepts via perceptions of overlap with a target, using an overlap measure previously reported in the literature (Cialdini et al., 1997; Maner et al., 2002). At the same time, via the same mechanism, perspective-taking affected evaluations of the targets. Specifically, in Study 1 we showed that taking the perspective of a researcher led, through overlap, to higher ratings on researcher-related attributes and greater self-endorsement of beliefs a researcher might express about himself or herself. It also led to higher ratings for the target on positively-valenced (researcher-irrelevant) attributes. In Study 2, taking the perspective of a racist led indirectly to greater coolness toward African Americans (but not to other potentially stigmatized groups) and greater liking for the racist target.

These findings are consistent with previous work (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2008; Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007) showing changes in self-concept following perspective-taking through overlap. A difference, however, is that previously used measures of overlap were somewhat indirect. That is, measures of overlap used in these earlier studies were ratings on target-related attributes, which mediated behaviors or attitudes in target-related domains. Here, we showed that these attribute ratings themselves are mediated by consciously-endorsed overlap. Furthermore, we showed that overlap also mediates beliefs about the self, attitudes toward a group where no group member has served as a target, and valuing of targets.

These last three effects have not previously been reported in the literature, and have implications for how wide-ranging the effects of perspective-taking might be. For example, although the idea that

[2] We also manipulated the type of information participants were given about reasons for the target's attitudes (minimal versus explanatory). Since information had no effect on any of our hypotheses, it is not discussed here.

[3] It should be noted that overlap with and liking for the target was fairly low across conditions, so "greater overlap and liking" might be best interpreted as "less distancing and dislike."

perspective-taking does not generalize beyond targets and their groups has been advanced (e.g., Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; see also Dovidio, Allen, & Schroeder, 1990, for a similar discussion about specificity of effects in perspective-taking), the current research provides initial support that similar to priming effects found in the literature (e.g., Kawakami, Dovidio, & Dijksterhuis, 2003), this may not always be true. There may be unintended consequences of taking someone's perspective. When a target has salient prosocial attitudes, this may encourage attitude-change in a socially-desirable direction. When the target's attitudes are less savory, it may – as the current research shows – lead to unwanted effects.

In conclusion, we believe we have provided tentative evidence for the way perspective-taking operates through perceiver–target overlap to simultaneously influence perceptions of self and target. This adds to a growing literature on the effects of overlap, using a measure that is not target-specific but useful with any target. Finally, our research provides a cautionary note that resonates with other unintended psychological effects. While "getting inside someone's head" may often be a beneficial activity, it may also have a downside when one starts to think and act like the other. When the other is a saint, this may not pose a problem. When the other is not so beloved, perspective-taking may have unwanted consequences.

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