The Effects of Perspective Switching on Retelling Stories

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This study examined the effects of perspective switching on retelling stories. Fifty-eight vocational school students were asked to carefully examine a copy of a story, as if they experienced those events themselves. They were divided into two conditions: field perspective retelling condition and observer perspective retelling condition. The participants in the field perspective retelling condition were asked to narrate the events of the story from their own viewpoint. On the other hand, the participants in the observer perspective retelling condition were asked to narrate the events of the story from the third-person perspective. After a week, they were asked to recall as much of the original story as they could. The results revealed that the participants’ memories of the story were subjectively altered in the field perspective retelling condition.

Key words: memory, biased retelling, perspective switching

People recall their personal past experiences from either the first person (also called “field”) or third person (also called “observer”) perspective (Libby & Eibach, 2002; Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). When individuals recollect events from the field perspective, they re-experience the event from their own viewpoint. In contrast, when individuals recollect events from the observer perspective, they see themselves as actors in the remembered scene, as if they were an observer watching the remembered event. Nigro and Neisser (1983) also suggested that individuals usually recollect events from the field perspective. They also indicated that recalling events from the observer perspective is positively related to a number of factors such as the passage of time, low levels of emotion, and self-awareness or self-evaluation in relation to the remembered event.

McIsaac and Eich (2002) showed that participants’ recollection of events, the details of those events, and their emotional responses were considerably altered. In their experiment, participants were asked to perform a series of physical tasks for about 10 minutes. After performing the tasks, they were asked to verbally recall their experiences of those tasks from either the field or observer perspective. Following recall, the participants completed a six-item questionnaire, which included items such as the particulars of the memories of the events or the emotions involved in those memories. In analyzing the content of the participants’ memories, it was found that the field perspective contained information primarily related to the emotional, physical, and psychological states of the participants, whereas the observer perspective contained information primarily related to objective circumstances. The memories of the participants, who

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narrated the story from the field perspective, were rated as being more detailed and emotional. McLsaac and Eich (2004) replicated these findings in a study on traumatic memories among patients with posttraumatic stress disorder.

However, when people talk about personal past experiences, they tend to intentionally alter the content of the events. When recalling events from memory, people sometimes adopt the field perspective and at other times, the observer perspective. Such a phenomenon is referred to as "biased retelling" that alters the perspective of the original memories (Beike & Wirth-Beaumont, 2005; Marsh & Tversky, 2004; Tversky & Marsh, 2000). How does perspective switching affect the memories of personal past experiences?

Robinson and Swanson (1993) investigated whether perspective switching affected the emotional value of a past experience. In their experiment (experiment 2), participants were asked to recall autobiographical events in their lives. The recollections of the participants classified each event based either on the field or observer memory. Participants were also asked to rate their original and current state of emotional intensity of their memories. One week later, the participants recalled the same events either from the original perspective or from the alternative perspective, and again rated their past and present state of emotional intensity. The results showed that participants who switched perspectives from field to observer produced a marked decrease in both original and current states of emotional intensity. These findings were replicated by Berntsen and Rubin (2006).

Thus, these findings revealed that perspective switching affects the emotional intensity of memories. However, the question that arises is whether perspective switching affects the detail and accuracy of the original memories. In this study, we examine the effects of biased retelling based on perspective switching, which results in the alteration of the original memories of autobiographical events. High emotional intensity leads individuals to adopt the field perspective (McLsaac & Eich, 2002; Talarico, LaBar, & Rubin, 2004). Thus, we factored emotions in our study, including the similarity of relatively positive and negative events. Additionally, the story that the participants were asked to read contained recent events; they were also asked to read the story that they experienced in the past, because the long gap of time between the actual occurrence of the event and the recollection of that event elicits the observer perspective (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Robinson & Swanson, 1993).

In this experiment, the learning and retelling phases were conducted on the first day. The recalling phase was conducted after a week. Participants in the field perspective retelling condition were asked to narrate the events of a story from their own viewpoint. On the other hand, the participants in the observer perspective retelling condition were asked to narrate the events of the story from the third-person perspective.

**Method**

*Participants and Design*

Fifty-eight vocational school students (32 male and 26 female; mean age = 19.8; SD = 0.58) took part in the experiment. Twenty-nine participants (16 male and 13 female) were asked
to recall the events of a story from the field perspective, and the other 29 participants (16 male and 13 female) retold events from the observer perspective.

Materials

All the participants were asked to read the story that addressed them as “you.” The story described a series of interpersonal events between the central character and his/her classmate who had some social skills problem during their high school years (This story is based on Tversky and Marsh (2000)). In each scene, the classmate performed an annoying activity or a positive social activity, and the central character rated his or her emotions and opinions of the classmate’s activity. The story is written in Japanese and comprises five-hundred forty words.

Procedure

Study phase. The participants were informed that the experiment purported to investigate whether people empathized with the emotional intensity of another person; the researchers measured this by asking participants to recall an event experienced by another person; in other words, the participants were asked switch perspectives. Following this, the participants were given three minutes to read and examine a story carefully, as if they experienced those events themselves. If they finished reading, they were asked to read the story again.

Retelling phase. In the retelling phase, the participants were divided into two conditions: the field perspective retelling condition and the observer perspective retelling condition. In the field perspective retelling condition, the participants were asked to repeatedly narrate the events of the story from their own viewpoint. In contrast, participants in the observer perspective retelling condition were asked to narrate the events of the story from the third-person perspective. The following instructions were given to the participants in each condition.

The field perspective retelling condition: You are going to re-experience the story events as central character in the story repeatedly. Please visualize the events of the story from the perspective of the central character. You have to remember the events from the viewpoint of a high school student. Please try to make the image in your memory as detailed as possible; we emphasize this in order to ensure that you empathize with the emotions of the central character. You will be given ten minutes to write these events.

The observer perspective retelling condition: You have to recall the events of a story and have to write down your recollection of these events. Please visualize the events from the perspective of a journalist. The story character and you have no association. Your task is to write an article on the lives of high school students. You are not required to empathize with the story character’s feelings. You will be given ten minutes to write these events.

Following this, the participants were asked to rate the extent to which they got involved in the story situation by using the following four empathy measures (Braun, Ellis, & Loofus, 2002): (1) “I felt I was part of the story, experiencing the situation again”; (2) “I really got involved with the feelings provoked by the story”; (3) “While reading the story, I could easily place myself in the situation”; and (4) “While reading the story, I felt that the events were happening to me.” They rated the four items on a scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 9 = “strongly agree.” In addition, the participants rated their emotional intensity based on six items (i.e., “happy,” “sad,” “angry,” “fear,” “joy,” and “amazing”) on a scale ranging from 1 to 9.
Memory phase. After a week, the purpose of the experiment was explained to each participant at the end of the session and the recall test was administered. Participants were asked to recall the images in as much detail as possible in two minutes. They also had to recall as much of the original story as they could in ten minutes.

Results

Retelling Phase

Rating emotional words and empathy measures. A one way ANOVA of the retelling conditions (field perspective or observer perspective) was carried out based on each average rating of the emotional intensity (Table 1). However, there were no significant main effects or interactions. A one way ANOVA of the retelling conditions was conducted based on the average of the four items of the empathy scale, which showed an internal consistency with a coefficient alpha of .82 (Table 1). The results—a significant main effect of the retelling type, $F(1, 56) = 8.09$, $p < .01$—indicated that the participants in the field perspective retelling condition felt greater empathy toward the story as compared to the participants in the observer perspective retelling condition.

Table 1 Mean Rating of the Emotional Words and Empathy Measures in the retelling phase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Field perspective</th>
<th>Observer perspective</th>
<th>$F(1, 56)$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rating of the emotional words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>3.62 (1.73)</td>
<td>3.35 (1.71)</td>
<td>0.306</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amazing</td>
<td>4.27 (2.07)</td>
<td>4.15 (2.20)</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>5.81 (1.55)</td>
<td>5.08 (2.13)</td>
<td>1.930</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>4.69 (2.05)</td>
<td>4.85 (1.98)</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>3.62 (2.27)</td>
<td>3.59 (2.10)</td>
<td>0.139</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>3.62 (1.82)</td>
<td>3.51 (1.73)</td>
<td>0.376</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean rating of the empathy measures</td>
<td>5.62 (1.38)</td>
<td>4.43 (1.56)</td>
<td>8.093</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The content in each retelling condition. The number of descriptions of the central character or classmate was computed. To eliminate the effects of the word count of the recall task, all the descriptions were divided by the word count of the recall task that were expressed in Japanese. A 2(retelling type) × 2(story character: the central character or classmate) ANOVA was conducted on the mean score of the descriptions (Figure 1). The results showed that there was a significant retelling condition × story character interaction ($F(1, 56) = 13.58$, $p < .01$), revealing that the participants in the field perspective retelling condition used the central character’s description more often than the participants in the observer perspective retelling condition ($p < .05$). On the other hand, participants in the observer perspective retelling condition used the classmate’s description more often than the participants in the field perspective retelling condition ($p < .01$). Moreover, in the field perspective retelling condition, participants included the central character’s description more often than the classmate’s
description (p < .01). In contrast, in the observer perspective retelling condition, participants included the classmate’s description more often than the central character’s description (p < .05).

![Figure 1](image-url)  
**Figure 1.** The mean number of the description related to the story character in the retelling phase. The average shows the proportion of these descriptions per 100 words. The error bar indicated the standard deviation.

![Figure 2](image-url)  
**Figure 2.** The mean number of correct descriptions related to the story character in the recalling phase. The average shows the proportion of these descriptions per 100 words. The error bar indicated the standard deviation.

**Recalling phase**

*The accuracy of the recalled memories in each retelling condition.* The number of descriptions of the central character or classmate was computed. Additionally, the descriptions that corresponded with the original story were classified as accurate information. In contrast, the descriptions that did not correspond with the original story were classified as error information.
A 2(retelling type) × 2(story character) ANOVA was conducted on the mean score of the accurate information. The results showed that there was a significant main effect of story character, $F(1, 56) = 5.28, p < .05$; the information of the central character’s descriptions was correctly recalled more often ($M = 1.91, SD = 1.02$, per 100 words) than the classmate’s descriptions ($M = 1.5, SD = 0.84$, per 100 words).

The results also showed that there was a significant retelling condition × story character interaction ($F(1, 56) = 5.58, p < .05$), revealing that participants in the field perspective retelling condition recalled the central character’s description more accurately than the participants in the observer perspective retelling condition ($p < .05$). Moreover, in the field perspective retelling condition, participants included a more accurate description of the central character than that of the classmate’s description ($p < .01$).

Additionally, a 2(retelling condition) × 2(story character) ANOVA was conducted on the mean of the error information. The results showed that there was a significant main effect of the story character, $F(1, 56) = 22.55, p < .01$; a greater number of error description of the classmate ($M = 1.49, SD = 0.95$, per 100 words) was recalled as compared to that of the central character ($M = 0.74, SD = 0.74$, per 100 words).

**Discussion**

In this study, we investigated the effects of perspective switching from the field perspective to the observer perspective on retelling stories. In the retelling phase, there was no statistically significant difference in the rating of emotional intensity. This means that there were no differences in the emotions generated by the participants in both the retelling conditions. However, the participants in the field perspective retelling condition recalled the story from the perspective of the central character. On the other hand, the participants in the observer perspective retelling condition recalled the story from the third-person perspective. Thus, the participants’ recall of the stories corresponded to the retelling conditions.

In the recalling phase, the field perspective retelling enhanced the accurate information related to the central character of the story rather than that related to the classmate. This enhanced the participants’ recall of the story because their memories related to the central character were associated with themselves in the retelling phase. This result supports the fact that the memory retrieval strategy that people use when associating the self with events (Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977) induces an elaboration and organization of self-related information (Symons & Johnson, 1997). Moreover, it suggested that the unrelated information to the current self was selectively forgotten (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). Further, the results also suggest that the participants in the field perspective condition forgot selective details of the information related to the classmate in the story, and thus incorrectly recalled the story. Thus, the participant’s memories were subjectively altered in the field perspective retelling condition.

In the observer retelling condition, there was no difference in the accuracy of information between the central character and the classmate. The perspective switching from field to observer augmented the disassociation between the story and the self, thus abstracting the memories of the
story. Additionally, the abstract information elicited a broad interpretation of the memories and emphasized the importance of those memories (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). In this experiment, the classmate was the key person in the story. Thus, the participants in the observer perspective condition abstracted the classmate’s information. Therefore, the memory related to the classmate altered the detailed information by broadly organizing these memories.

There are some issues that can be resolved in future research. The alteration of the original memories in this experiment was a result of the effect of perspective switching; however, other factors could also have induced the memory change. Some participants might have perhaps used the observer perspective when learning the events of the story. It is thus necessary to improve the strategy in the experiment and reaffirm the effect of perspective switching.

Reference


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