

It's All About the Self: When Perspective Taking Backfires

Claudia Sassenrath^{1,2}, Sara D. Hodges³, and Stefan Pfattheicher²

¹Institute of Psychology and Education, Ulm University; ²Knowledge Media Research Center, Tübingen, Germany; and ³Department of Psychology, University of Oregon

Abstract

Although abundant research has documented positive interpersonal outcomes of perspective taking, a growing body of evidence indicates that perspective taking can also induce negative interpersonal outcomes—in other words, it backfires. We aim at integrating these seemingly contradictory findings, suggesting that perspective taking backfires when it causes the perspective-taking individual to feel threatened. Threat can emerge from the very act of perspective taking if the target of perspective taking is perceived as too different from the self or if adopting another's perspective creates the potential for negative self-evaluation. Furthermore, threat may emerge if perspective taking successfully creates perceptions of self-other overlap, but the overlapping characteristics accentuate potentially threatening characteristics of the target. Our theoretical model affords predictions for other conditions in which perspective taking is linked to self-threat and may backfire.

Keywords

perspective taking, self-other overlap, self-threat, interpersonal outcomes

Instructions and attempts to take another person's perspective have been shown to yield numerous positive interpersonal outcomes. Specifically, perspective taking is related to reduced stereotyping and prejudice (e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Todd & Burgmer, 2013), successful negotiations (e.g., Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008), and satisfying relationships (e.g., Blatt, LeLacheur, Galinsky, Simmens, & Greenberg, 2010). Also, perspective taking heightens affective responses to another person's experience (see Batson & Shaw, 1991, for an overview). Perspective taking—the active and intentional attempt to imagine another's perspective—additionally represents a pivotal component in the many conceptualizations of empathy (e.g., Batson, 2009; Decety & Jackson, 2006; Zaki & Ochsner, 2012).

However, a smaller yet growing body of findings indicates that perspective taking, under certain circumstances, can yield a variety of negative interpersonal outcomes, such as stereotypic or negative attitudes and behavior (e.g., Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008; Ku, Wang, & Galinsky, 2015; Skorinko & Sinclair, 2013; Tarrant, Calitri, & Weston, 2012; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). Accordingly, the present article aims at providing an integrative review

to reconcile the seemingly contradictory findings regarding perspective taking's consequences. We propose that whether perspective taking promotes prosocial outcomes or whether it backfires, producing negative social consequences, mainly depends on the self—specifically, whether the self is threatened or not. This threat can be in the form of self-threat when favorable views about the self are questioned or contradicted (cf. Campbell & Sedikides, 1999), especially in self-relevant domains (Park & Maner, 2009), or it may be the result of threatened self-interests. When perspective taking evokes threat, one key way its positive consequences may be hindered is through self-other overlap (cf. Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), which plays a prominent role driving many of the positive interpersonal effects of taking another's perspective (e.g., Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2005).

Corresponding Author:

Claudia Sassenrath, Ulm University, Albert-Einstein-Allee 47, 89069 Ulm, Germany
E-mail: claudia.sassenrath@uni-ulm.de

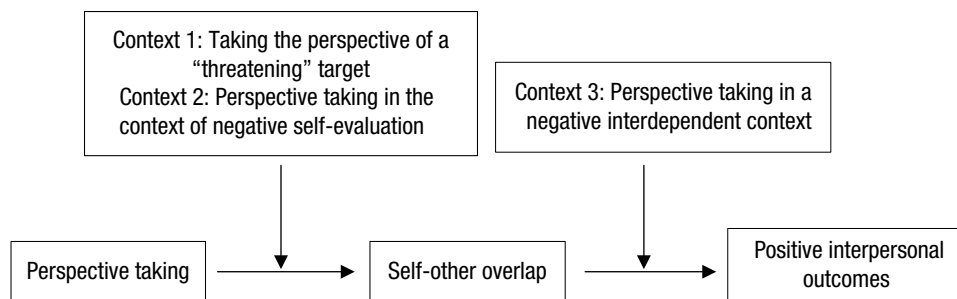


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of the different ways that perceptions of threat moderate perspective-taking effects on interpersonal outcomes.

Perspective Taking and Self-Other Overlap

Past research has identified several mechanisms driving the positive effects of perspective taking on interpersonal outcomes. The ability to cognitively understand others' motives and strategies, for example, may be particularly beneficial in negotiation contexts (e.g., Galinsky, Maddux, et al., 2008; Gilin, Maddux, Carpenter, & Galinsky, 2013); perspective takers appear to be better able to detect underlying interests that allow them to create efficient solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems (cf. Galinsky, Maddux, et al., 2008). When it comes to the beneficial effects of perspective taking on intergroup evaluation outcomes, such as reduced stereotyping, the key may be greater perceived overlap between the self and the person whose perspective is taken—that is, self-other overlap (sometimes also labeled “self-anchoring”; Todd & Burgmer, 2013). Seeing more of oneself in others should lead one to react more kindly to them and thus make stereotypic representations of the group to which they belong less likely to be activated (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Galinsky et al., 2005; Wang, Ku, Tai, & Galinsky, 2013). Specifically, when perceiving another person's characteristics or experiences as overlapping with one's own, one perceives the other person in ways that resemble how one perceives oneself. This means extending the privileged perceptions that give rise to self-serving and self-favoring biases to the other person, along with attributing a greater number of shared characteristics to the self and the other (cf. Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991).

Accordingly, Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000) showed that reduced stereotyping as a result of perspective taking was related to perspective takers' using more of the same traits to describe themselves and their targets than non-perspective takers. Likewise Vescio, Sechrist, and Paolucci (2003) showed that instructing non-African American participants to take the perspective of an African American target person decreased their prejudice against African Americans. Results indicated that this

reduction in prejudice was mediated by an increase in the extent to which participants attributed negative outcomes to factors beyond the target's control—an attributional pattern associated with self-attributions (Malle, 2006). Hence, perspective taking not only induces an overlap of cognitive representations; the overlap also appears to extend to using processing strategies usually associated with maintaining a favorable view of the self.

However, if another person is perceived to overlap with a negatively evaluated self, the positive effects of perspective taking on prejudice reduction can be undermined. Findings by Galinsky and Ku (2004) suggest that self-esteem moderates the effects of perspective taking on intergroup evaluation. Perspective taking reduced prejudice only if individuals had positive self-esteem (i.e., felt positively about themselves). Furthermore, Todd and Burgmer (2013) showed that the positive effects of perspective taking on prejudice can be attenuated by deliberately manipulating individuals to feel bad about themselves.

More generally, we postulate that whenever perspective taking is attempted by a threatened self, it is likely that it will backfire in terms of social outcomes. Specifically, we postulate that threat may emerge when the perspective-taking target represents a threat to the self (because the target is too dissimilar to the self; Context 1), when taking a target's perspective implies the potential for negative self-evaluation (e.g., because it activates negative meta-stereotypes; Context 2), and when perspective taking happens in contexts that highlight potential threats to the perspective taker's goals (e.g., in negative interdependent contexts; Context 3). As Figure 1 illustrates, self-threat emerging under Contexts 1 and 2 should undermine self-other overlap and consequentially hinder positive outcomes of perspective taking. Self-threat under these contexts is likely to be evoked by mere attempts at perspective taking, whereas threat in Context 3 may be evoked by more explicit appraisal processes. This distinction also explains why we believe that threat described under Context 3 exerts its influence at a later stage of the perspective-taking process than does

the self-threat subsumed under Contexts 1 and 2. Notably, some of the proposed links in our theoretical model are drawn in the absence of direct empirical evidence, but with an eye toward guiding future research that may help resolve current empirical inconsistencies across perspective-taking studies.

Context 1: Taking the perspective of a “threatening” target

A favorable self-view is threatened when one takes the perspective of a specific target whose beliefs, values, behaviors, or characteristics challenge favorable self-views in self-relevant domains. Specifically, taking the perspective of a person with different worldviews may threaten important values or self-relevant abilities of the perspective taker (cf. Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). One consequence of taking such a target’s perspective is that the self-threat experienced by the perspective taker hinders his or her “coming closer” to the target (i.e., overlap). Experiencing self-threat fosters avoidance tendencies (cf. Eriksen, 1952), which, in the context of perspective taking, translates into *not* overlapping (or overlapping less) with the target of perspective taking. Moreover, experiencing threat concerning other individuals fosters negative evaluations and attitudes toward those individuals (Stephan et al., 2002), further impeding prosocial outcomes commonly associated with perspective taking. Hence, self-threat can induce avoidance and may have the cognitive consequence of hindering perceptions of overlap between the perspective taker and the target.

To illustrate, highly in-group-identified individuals judge out-group members less favorably after perspective taking than do less in-group-identified individuals (Tarrant et al., 2012). The more one identifies with the in-group, the more “foreign” the out-group’s characteristics will seem, and the more difficult it will be to perceive overlap with out-group members. Likewise, perspective taking reduces stereotyping for ambiguously stereotypic targets but not for clearly stereotype-consistent targets (Skorinko & Sinclair, 2013). Ambiguously stereotypic targets presumably are more easily perceived as overlapping with the self than unambiguous ones. However, targets of perspective taking do not have to possess characteristics that are *a priori* threatening to impede self-other overlap. When the gap between perspective takers and their targets is very wide, perspective taking can lead to contrast rather than assimilation. Trying to overlap with a target who is “too” different from the self is threatening in that so much assimilation would irreparably change the self, making it no longer recognizable as the previous self, thus potentially creating an unbridgeable gap. Unbridgeable gaps may be the result of well-learned differences (i.e., when taking the perspective of out-group members who are stereotyped as being very different from

in-group members), but they may also result from single powerful experiences. For example, Silverman, Gwinn, and Van Boven (2015) found that participants who experienced simulated blindness evaluated (truly) blind individuals as less capable, likely as a result of how the simulation highlighted the initial challenges and failure experiences associated with *becoming* disabled—not the adaptations and competencies associated with *being* disabled. The temporary and novel experience of blindness created a very potent form of perspective taking, forcing simulators to confront a perspective that challenged a pivotal self-relevant ability—that is, the ability to independently and competently carry out mundane tasks of living (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1975). Hence, simulating the everyday actions of blind individuals made participants believe that the blind must really differ from themselves. This is likely an erroneous conclusion, given that people who are permanently blind adapt in many ways. However, it created an unbridgeable gap. To cognitively assimilate this seemingly “helpless” self into one’s able, sighted self was too great a challenge. Furthermore, contemplating the possibility of devastating limitations on one’s personal efficacy no doubt evoked motivational resistance to assimilating these experiences into the self as well.

Okimoto and Wenzel (2011) neatly demonstrated the shift from bridgeable to unbridgeable gaps. In their study, the more traditional prosocial outcomes of perspective taking emerged when participants took the perspective of a (fictitious) lab partner engaged in a behavior that was potentially, but ambiguously, unfair to the perspective takers. However, when the lab partner whose perspective was taken was *unambiguously* inconsiderate, perspective taking not only failed to make perspective takers more forgiving, it actually made them more vengeful. (Notably, this interaction was found only among participants who scored high on a measure of interdependence.)

Thus, although bridging the gap between the self and another person via perspective taking may generally produce positive social outcomes, some gaps are just too big and some people are just too different, making the task of perceiving the target as overlapping with the self almost impossible. Notably, these unbridgeable gaps may represent both motivational and cognitive forces working to create the self-threat that hinders self-other overlap and the associated positive consequences of perspective taking.

Context 2: Perspective taking in the context of negative self-evaluation

Another context in which the self can be threatened by perspective taking is when one adopts another perspective that implies the potential for negative self-evaluation—for example, by evoking negative meta-stereotypes

of one's in-group (e.g., Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009, 2012, 2014). Researchers conducting experimental perspective-taking studies often instruct participants to take the perspective of a fictional other (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2004; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Todd & Burgmer, 2013). However, in real-life interactions, taking the perspective of other people may incite perspective takers to draw inferences about how those other people evaluatively view them. When individuals interact with others who do not possess much information about them but who might form evaluative judgments about them, those individuals tend to draw inferences (meta-stereotypes) about how they themselves are perceived by those others (cf. Vorauer & Sucharyna, 2013).

Furthermore, individuals intuitively understand that others' views of them are likely less positive than their own self-views, and thus they anticipate somewhat negative judgments about themselves (e.g., Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001), particularly if the perspective taking takes place between groups that have historically clashed (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2009). Attention to potentially negative evaluations requires cognitive resources (e.g., Schmader & Johns, 2003), which may interfere with perspective taking because it is also cognitively taxing (e.g., Epley, Keysar, Van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004). If perspective taking—which in turn drives perceptions of self-other overlap between the perspective taker and the target—is impeded, then overlap may thus also be reduced under cognitive load. Thus, perspective taking and the positive interpersonal outcomes associated with it are both likely short-circuited by the cognitive effects of self-threat in this context. Notably, in contrast to findings indicating that self-esteem moderates the effects of perspective taking on intergroup evaluation (e.g., Todd & Burgmer, 2013), the moderating effects described here stem from the assumed possibility of negative evaluations by others.

Context 3: Perspective taking in negative interdependent contexts

Perspective taking may backfire even when it successfully leads to self-other overlap—specifically, when the overlapping characteristics highlight potentially threatening characteristics of the target of perspective taking. In competitive situations, people who take the perspective of their competitor behave more unethically than non-perspective takers (e.g., Epley, Caruso, & Bazerman, 2006; Pierce, Kilduff, Galinsky, & Sivanathan, 2013). Epley and colleagues (2006) have argued that perspective taking reduces egocentric biases in judgments, as it makes others' thoughts and perspectives more easily accessible. By inferring others' perspectives, individuals can see more of themselves in others. However, this self-other

overlap makes what the authors term “reactive egoism” more probable. Individuals overestimate the extent to which others' behaviors are guided by self-interests, compared to the extent to which their own self-interests guide their behavior in those situations. Hence, in this context, threat exerts its influence after self-other overlap has taken place, because the perspective-taking-induced self-other overlap makes the other person's self-interest more salient. With this salience comes the insight that the other person's interests compete with one's own interests in the context of negative interdependence. As a result of this explicit appraisal process, perception of threat to self-interests develops in the perspective taker. Correspondingly, Pierce and colleagues (2013) argued and showed that perspective taking highlights how the other person (just like oneself) is in the game to win—but is playing on the opposing side! This realization increases the likelihood of reactive, antagonistic behavior on the part of the perspective taker.

Discussion and Conclusion

Existing evidence on the positive and negative effects of perspective taking suggests that perspective taking backfires whenever the perspective-taking individual feels threatened. As depicted in Figure 1, we assume self-threat emerges when one takes the perspective of a “threatening” target (i.e., a target too dissimilar to the self on self-relevant dimensions; Context 1), which impedes self-other overlap and positive outcomes of perspective taking. Furthermore, when perspective taking happens in a context of potential negative self-evaluation, the possibility of negative judgments requires resources from the perspective taker, again hindering self-other overlap and thus impeding the positive consequences of perspective taking (Context 2).

Finally, threat takes a different path in some contexts (Context 3), emerging later as a result of perspective-taking-induced self-other overlap. In negative interdependent contexts, threat does not interrupt self-other overlap but instead emerges after perspective takers have successfully perceived overlap with their target—when they realize that those overlapping characteristics indicate that the target (or the target's likely behavior) is a threat to their self-interest. The desire to reduce threat due to competing interests should motivate behavior that thwarts the competitor's interests in favor of the successful pursuit of one's own interests, which may prompt the self to behave immorally. Notably, this path relies on a threat to self-interests but may also operate via threat to favorable self-views. Realizing that “I'd cheat the other guy” not only makes one realize that the other person may cheat oneself but also challenges positive self-views about one's integrity.

Much of our theorizing above is not based on empirical investigations that were directly designed to test our model but rather synthesizes findings from existing studies. Thus, future research is needed to test our theoretical claims, including studies with direct manipulations designed to attenuate threats in order to look for corresponding reductions in negative outcomes associated with perspective taking. Among other directions, further research is needed to address the balance of cognitive and motivational elements in the three paths from threats to backfiring that we have proposed, as well as the extent to which the three paths co-occur. Another important direction would be to investigate how context affects who is perceived as a threat and whether a perspective gap is perceived as unbridgeable or not. Nevertheless, our theorizing provides an important step to reconciling what might otherwise be perceived as contradictory findings on the positive and negative consequences of perspective taking. Furthermore, tests of our model may have valuable applications in real-world settings, where interventions that involve asking people to take another's perspective (e.g., in legal or educational contexts) may need to be reconsidered in light of how perceived threat may cause perspective taking to backfire.

Recommended Reading

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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