## Observations

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## What I Was Doing Versus What I Did

If you want to perform at your peak, you should carefully consider how you discuss your past actions. In a new study in *Psychological Science*, William Hart of the University of Florida and Dolores Albarracan from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign reveal that the way a statement is phrased (and specifically, how the verbs are used) affects our memory of an event being described and may also influence our behavior. In these experiments, a group of volunteers were interrupted prior to finishing a word game and were then asked to describe their behavior using the imperfective (e.g., I was solving word puzzles) or perfective (e.g., I solved word puzzles) aspect. The volunteers then completed a memory test (for the word game) or a word game that was similar to the first one they had worked on. It turns out, the volunteers who had described their behavior using the imperfective aspect were able to recall more specific details of their experience than did volunteers who had described their behavior in the perfective aspect. The volunteers writing in the imperfective aspect also performed better on the second word game and were more willing to complete the task than did volunteers who used the perfective to describe their experience. The authors surmise that when we think about our past behavior in the imperfective (e.g. what we were doing), we tend to imagine that behavior as ongoing (and not completed yet). This enables us to easily think about what went into that behavior and may help us improve performance on similar tasks in the future.

Coverage of "What I was doing versus what I did: Verb aspect influences memory and future actions" in Psychological Science (W. Hart and D. Albarracin, Volume 20(2), 238-244).

## Is That Your Final Answer?

Herd mentality. Angry mob. Mass hysteria. Clearly, we are not always confident that a large group of people will come up with the smartest decisions. But, numerous studies have shown that crowds usually gives more accurate responses to questions than does a mere individual. Averaging the responses provided from a group increases accuracy by canceling out a number of errors made across the board. But, what happens when we are on our own? Stefan M. Herzog and Ralph Hertwig from the University of Basel wanted to know if individuals could come up with better answers using a technique they designed and called "dialectical bootstrapping," a method by which an individual mind averages its' own conflicting opinions, thus simulating the "wisdom of the crowd." In other words, dialectical bootstrapping enables different opinions to be created and combined in the same mind. The results, reported in *Psychological Science*, reveal that the average of the participants' first answer with the second answer was much closer to the correct answer, than were the original answers on their own. In addition, the dialectical bootstrapping method (that is, thinking about why your own answer might be incorrect and then averaging across estimates) resulted in more accurate answers than simply making a second guess without considering why the first answer may be wrong. These findings suggest that dialectical bootstrapping may be an effective strategy in helping us find better answers to many types of

problems. The researchers conclude, "Once taught about the tool, people could make use of it to boost accuracy of their estimates across a wide range of domains."

Coverage of "The wisdom of many in one mind: Improving individual judgments with dialectical bootstrapping" in Psychological Science (S.M. Herzog, R. Hertwig, Volume 20(2), 231-237).

Picky Preschoolers

When we are faced with a decision, and we're not sure what to do, usually we'll just go with the majority opinion (and rightly so, according to the previous story). When do we begin adopting this strategy? In a new report in Psychological Science, Kathleen H. Corriveau, Maria Fusaro, and Paul L. Harris of Harvard University describe experiments suggesting this tendency starts as early as preschool. In this study, three- and four-year-old children watched a small group of people name a novel object. The majority of group members would use the same name for the object; a lone dissenter would pick a different name. The children were then asked what they thought the object was called. The results revealed that majority rules when it comes to the opinion of preschoolers. The children in the study would consistently select the name that was used by the majority of the group members. And even more interesting, in a follow-up experiment in which only two members (someone from the majority group and the dissenter) remained in the room and named a different object, the children would still go with name that was provided by the majority group member. These results indicate that children as young as age three are able to recognize and trust a consensus. In addition, young children are good at remembering who was and was not a part of the majority group. The authors note that children are not always faced with agreement during interactions with people and these "findings provide initial evidence that young children navigate that social variation with the help of a simple but powerful strategy."

Coverage of "Going with the flow: preschoolers prefer nondissenters as informants" in Psychological Science (K.H. Corriveau, M. Fusaro, P.L. Harris, Volume 20(3), 372-377).