
Long Ago It Was Meant to Be: The Interplay Between Time, Construal, and Fate Beliefs

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Fate means that an event was meant to be, that is, predetermined by prior unseen forces. Most people believe in fate, which seems at odds with similarly pervasive beliefs that alternative past actions would have brought about different circumstances (i.e., counterfactual beliefs). Two experiments revealed that construal level accounts for the relative plausibility of fate versus counterfactual explanations. Construal was manipulated in Experiment 1, such that goal pursuits framed in abstract (“why?”) as opposed to concrete (“how?”) terms heightened fate but not counterfactual attributions. Extending this finding, Experiment 2 showed that fate judgments were higher for temporally distant than recent past events, an effect mediated by construal perceptions. Neither counterfactual nor luck judgments varied with temporal distance. These findings help to explain how individuals explain complicated yet meaningful life events while extending the reach of Trope and Liberman’s (2003) construal-level theory.

Keywords: *fate; counterfactual; construal; luck; time; temporal focus*

Imagine life as a boulder dropped from a tall building. A boulder is heavy. How many possible paths might that boulder take to reach its ultimate destination? How strong must be the gale that changes its path? Now imagine a feather falling from that same building. A feather is light. How many possible paths might it take to reach its ultimate resting place? How insignificant must be the breeze that cannot change its path?

In his popular novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera (1984) assumed that some people see life as all heaviness, whereas others see it as all lightness. Heaviness represents the belief in fate—that the past is fixed—predetermined by forces of a theistic, cosmic, or otherwise obscure nature. Lightness, on the other hand, involves counterfactual possibility, that is, that the past could easily have been different. To Kundera,

you can believe in one or the other but not both, for heaviness imbues life with meaning, whereas lightness potentially robs it of meaning, as conveyed by the following counterfactual utterance from the novel: “If I hadn’t met you, I’d certainly have fallen in love with him” (p. 34). True love is only true if it was meant to be, or so Kundera, and perhaps more than a few poets and novelists, suggests.

But is this an accurate portrait of how people actually think about fate and counterfactuals? In a pilot study, we asked University of Illinois undergraduate students to tell us about their beliefs in fate and counterfactual possibility. Most (75%) did indeed believe in fate, but contrary to Kundera’s view, 85% further believed it possible for events to be determined jointly by both fate and individual action. The present research begins with the presumption, contrary to the personality-based explanation of Kundera, that beliefs in fate and counterfactuals may vary within individuals throughout time and circumstance, thus raising the key question of what moderates this variation. In other words, what dictates whether fate versus counterfactuals rise to salience when interpreting personal events? Our research reveals that construal level—the degree to which an event is perceived to be abstract versus concrete (Trope & Liberman, 2003)—is one such moderator. As events are construed more abstractly, fate becomes a more plausible explanation.

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Fate and Counterfactuals

Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus (1999) defines fate as "the force or power held to predetermine events." Fate means that an outcome was meant to be so, dictated by unseen forces before it came to pass. More specifically, fate specifies a belief that forces outside of the individual played a role in determining an outcome, that there was no other way that the outcome could have turned out (Young & Morris, 2004). Across cultures and mythologies, fate plays a special role in human belief systems. People can derive comfort from the belief that some events, particularly those of a tragic nature, were "meant to be" (e.g., Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2002). Fate beliefs also may come about through nonmotivated errors of misattribution (e.g., Gilbert, Brown, Pinel, & Wilson, 2000). The present focus aims not at such "why" questions but rather at the more modest question of "when," to which we return in the next section.

Predicated on theoretical work by Rotter (1954, 1966), past research has juxtaposed fate against perceptions of personal control, which maps onto the widely used dimension in attribution theory that ranges between external and internal locus of causation (e.g., Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1986). Although this dimension is meaningful, we suggest that another dimension maps more closely onto the typical layperson's beliefs; this dimension involves perceived mutability, or the extent to which a past event is believed to have been fixed (i.e., fated) versus alterable (i.e., could have happened differently). The term that captures beliefs in the mutability of past events is *counterfactual thinking* (Mandel, Hilton, & Catellani, 2005; Roese, 1997), and by importing some insights from the counterfactual literature, new light may be shed on the nature of fate beliefs. Much previous research has shown that people routinely engage in counterfactual thinking and that these thoughts center mainly on how personal acts could have been performed differently to produce different outcomes (Giroto, Legrenzi, & Rizzo, 1991; Mandel & Lehman, 1996; Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1995). Of importance, counterfactual thinking itself increases beliefs in personal control: Simply realizing that one could have acted differently underscores the notion that one could have made a difference, that one could have altered events for the better (McMullen, Markman, & Gavanski, 1995; Nasco & Marsh, 1999). Thus, counterfactual thinking and beliefs in personal control are closely related; hence, our empirical strategy was to compare counterfactual beliefs involving personal control (e.g., what I might have done differently to have altered an event) to fate beliefs (e.g., what was predetermined by external forces).

For the most part, people tend to emphasize how alternative actions might have brought about better outcomes

or desired personal goals (i.e., upward counterfactuals). According to Kundera's perspective, those who think counterfactually live in a very "light" world in that the perceived expanse of life is juxtaposed against a wide array of alternative possibilities. However, research has shown counterfactual thinking to be disciplined and constrained by reality: Individuals tend to generate only one or two alternatives to a given outcome, and these are nearly always plausible suppositions that might well have occurred if some personal action had not been altered (Kahneman & Miller, 1986; Seelau, Seelau, Wells, & Windschitl, 1995; Turnbull, 1981).

An important clue that fate and counterfactual possibility might be compatible comes from research on the link between counterfactual thinking and the hindsight bias. Sometimes discussed in terms of "creeping determinism," hindsight bias involves an exaggerated confidence in the ability to have predicted an outcome once the outcome is known (Fischhoff, 1975). As such, hindsight bias seems a cousin of fate in that the determinism that creeps in after facts become known might sometimes emphasize the role of fate. Roese and Olson (1996) argued that the sort of determinism that perceivers routinely embrace is a "contingent" sort that allows easily for consideration of alternatives. For example, sports fans may evince hindsight bias in that they "knew all along" that their team would win the game, but they will in the same breath emphasize the contingency of this belief: their team might have lost if key coaching decisions, key plays, or unexpected injuries had been different (Roese & Maniar, 1997).

Although it was previously thought that thinking about alternative outcomes would decrease the hindsight bias, thinking counterfactually may actually lead to an increase in the hindsight bias for two reasons (see Roese, 2004). First, the explanatory clarity gained through counterfactual thinking can increase hindsight bias (e.g., Roese & Olson, 1996). Second, the experience of trying to think of counterfactual outcomes may increase the hindsight bias if it is perceived as difficult (Sanna, Schwarz, & Small, 2002). For example, generating 10 counterfactual outcomes is perceived as more difficult than generating only 2 counterfactual outcomes. Thus, whereas thinking of 2 counterfactual outcomes decreases the hindsight bias, thinking of 10 counterfactual outcomes leads to an increase in the hindsight bias (Sanna, Schwarz, & Stocker, 2002). These two lines of evidence thus reveal how counterfactuals and hindsight bias may sometimes be compatible rather than mutually exclusive.

Construal

We propose that construal-level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003; see also Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) offers a general framework that can account for the rela-

tive occurrence of fate versus counterfactual beliefs. According to this theory, perceptions of many things in life, from persons to objects to events, range along a continuum anchored by abstractions, generalities, and the decontextualized “big picture” versus concrete specifics and contextualized small details. Although construal-level theory has focused for the most part on the temporal dependence of construal level (i.e., temporally distant events are construed at a higher level than temporally proximate events), the conceptualization is generic in that construal level may be linked to a variety of perceptions. Of importance, high-level construals are theorized to be imbued with deeper meaning: A change in an aspect of a high-level construal produces changes in the overall meaning of the event (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002). Fate, which is based on conceptions of final destiny and ultimate meaning, seems very much to embody just such a high-level construal. By contrast, changes in the features of low-level construal events usually produce only small alterations in event perceptions. Past research has shown that counterfactual thoughts very often center on personal goals, specifying how particular actions might have brought about preferred outcomes (e.g., Nasco & Marsh, 1999; Page & Colby, 2003). Nevertheless, other research has certainly shown that counterfactual musings can center on life as a whole (e.g., how different marital and career choices might have changed life outcomes; e.g., Galinsky, Liljenquist, Kray, & Roese, 2005; Jokisaari, 2003; Landman & Manis, 1992), and so it is possible that counterfactual thoughts are spread across the whole spectrum of construal level.

An important insight from previous research is that the same objective outcome may be framed at varying construal levels, that is, the same behavior aimed at achieving a specific goal can be construed as high level or low level, where a high level focuses on “why” a person wants to achieve a goal and a low level focuses on “how” that person can achieve it (Trope & Liberman, 2000; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). For example, a college student may construe a particular behavior at either a high level (“I want to earn a degree”) or a low level (“I need to attend classes”). In Experiment 1, we tested whether construal level influences situational variation in fate beliefs. Given the widely replicated finding that temporal distance influences construal (Liberman et al., 2002; Trope & Liberman, 2003), Experiment 2 was designed to test whether events of the distant past, as opposed to more recent past, more powerfully invite fate explanations and whether this pattern is mediated by construal perceptions.

An alternative interpretation of any construal–fate linkage is that the term *fate* simply maps onto beliefs regarding luck, a construct that has already been the focus of much research, particularly in its relation to counterfactual thinking (e.g., Teigen, 1995, 1996, 1997;

Teigen, Evensen, & Samoilow, 1999). On the surface, luck beliefs seem similar to fate beliefs in that both emphasize causes that are external, unstable, yet also vague and mysterious (Teigen, 1996). This raises the important question of whether luck is, from a semantic standpoint, essentially the same construct as fate, operating identically in terms of its relation both to construal and temporal distance. To rule out this possibility, as well as to situate this research within the context of Teigen’s findings, Experiment 2 assessed luck beliefs along with fate and counterfactual beliefs.

EXPERIMENT 1: CONSTRUAL

The goal of this experiment was to test the impact of construal on both fate and counterfactual judgments. Participants were asked to record some details about a past accomplishment from their own life. The between-participant construal framing manipulation took the form of having participants respond to three questions emphasizing either abstract, superordinate (“why”) or concrete, subordinate (“how”) features. Beliefs in fate and counterfactual possibility regarding this accomplishment were assessed with Likert ratings. Given past demonstrations of the relation between belief in personal control and counterfactual thinking, for both experiments reported in this article we measured belief in counterfactual possibility by having participants estimate the extent to which their personal actions were responsible for the outcome.

Method

Participants. Forty (23 women, 17 men) University of Illinois undergraduate students participated for course credit. Three participants were removed from the analysis because of failure to follow instructions (i.e., answer the three framing questions with relevant responses), leaving a final sample of 37.¹

Materials and procedure. Each participant was asked to think about a specific goal that they had achieved and then to write it down in the space provided. The construal-level framing manipulation was similar to that used in previous research (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2000). Participants were asked three questions designed to manipulate the framing (on a between-participant basis) of their goal as abstract (superordinate) or concrete (subordinate). The abstract questions were as follows: (a) “Why did you want to achieve this goal?” (b) “What good came out of you achieving this goal?” and (c) “What does achieving this goal mean for your life?” The concrete questions were as follows: (a) “What kinds of tasks did you have to perform in completing this goal?” (b) “What techniques did you use in completing this

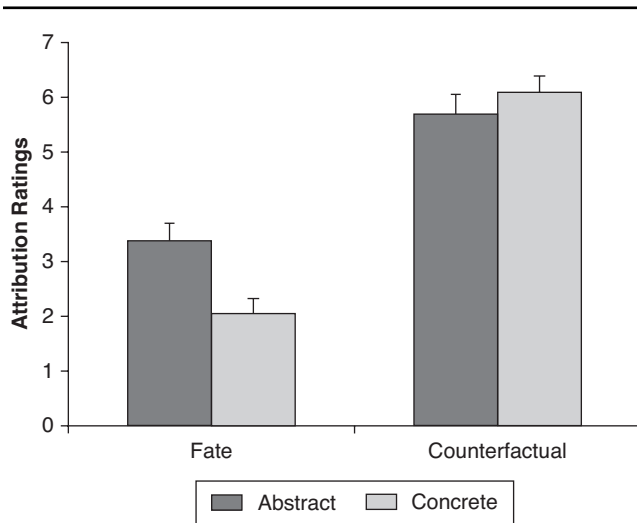


Figure 1 Attributions to fate and counterfactual possibility as a function of construal-level manipulation (Experiment 1).

goal?” and (c) “What ‘rules of thumb’ did you use in completing this goal?”

Participants then responded to the following Likert questions, which were designed to assess fate beliefs: “How much of the goal was determined by you and how much was determined by fate?” (answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 [*all determined by me*] to 4 [*me and fate equally*] to 7 [*all determined by fate*]) and “Looking back on it now, how much do you think your personal actions could have changed the goal?” (counterfactual beliefs, answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 [*not at all*] to 7 [*a lot*]).

Results and Discussion

Attribution to fate was negatively related to counterfactual beliefs, $r(37) = -.32$, $p = .043$. Thus, the more that a goal was attributed to fate, the less it was attributed to personal control.

We conducted a 2 (construal framing: abstract vs. concrete) \times 2 (attribution rating: fate vs. counterfactual) mixed ANOVA, the latter being a within-participant variable. The interaction was significant, $F(1, 35) = 4.93$, $p = .03$, $d = .75$, and it indicated that the manipulation influenced fate but not counterfactuals. As Figure 1 reveals, those in the abstract construal condition attributed more of the event to fate ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.38$) than did those in the concrete construal condition ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(35) = 3.07$, $p = .004$, $d = 1.01$. However, counterfactual judgments did not differ as a function of the construal manipulation ($M_s = 5.68$ vs. 6.06 ; $SD_s = 1.64$, 1.47), $t(35) = .72$, $p = .47$, $d = .24$. Overall, participants attributed greater impact to counterfactual possibility

($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.45$) than to fate ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.45$), $F(1, 35) = 77.6$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.09$.

This finding reveals an intriguing dissociation between fate and counterfactual possibility. Although construal level appears to influence whether individuals focus on fate (high-level construal elicits greater emphasis on fate), construal level does not influence perceptions of counterfactual possibility. In other words, people are as likely to engage in counterfactual thinking for concrete details (“I should have studied harder last night”) as for broad life goals (“I should have been a dentist”).

EXPERIMENT 2: TEMPORAL DISTANCE

Experiment 1 revealed construal to be an important moderator of the extent to which individuals see fate versus counterfactual possibility as elements of the events in their lives. Fate beliefs, but not counterfactual beliefs, were intensified by framing an event as abstract rather than concrete. Given the range of recent findings indicating that temporal distance affects construal (Liberman et al., 2002; Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2003), the most obvious implication of Experiment 1 is that fate beliefs intensify with the passage of time, an effect likely mediated by construal beliefs. Therefore, in Experiment 2, we manipulated temporal distance by having participants think of an event from their lives that occurred either long ago or recently. As in Experiment 1, beliefs regarding fate and counterfactual actions were assessed using Likert ratings. To test for mediation, construal level was measured using a new scale developed specifically for this purpose.

As noted in the introduction, it might be argued that fate beliefs are essentially the same as luck beliefs, which have already received much research attention (e.g., Teigen, 1995). By measuring luck beliefs and testing whether they are correlated with fate beliefs, and also whether they are temporally dependent, we can determine whether fate is a construct that stands apart from, or is subsumed by, perceptions of luck.

Method

Participants. One hundred and seventy University of Illinois undergraduates (99 women, 71 men) participated in the experiment on a volunteer basis. One of several experimenters recruited participants door-to-door as part of a class project.

Materials and procedure. Each participant was asked to think about an event from his or her own life and to write a few sentences about it. We manipulated temporal distance by asking half of the participants to think of an event that occurred less than 1 month ago (recent

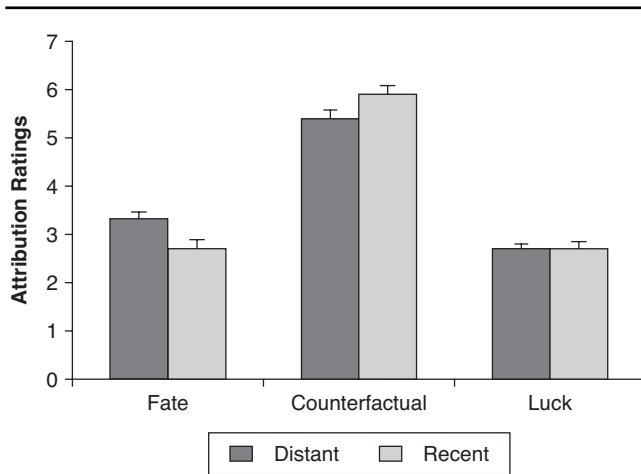


Figure 2 Attributions to fate, luck, and counterfactual possibility as a function of temporal focus manipulation (Experiment 2).

condition) and the other half to think of an event that occurred more than 5 years ago (distant condition).

After writing about the event, participants first answered a fate question, “How much of this event was determined by fate?” answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all determined by fate*) to 7 (*all determined by fate*). Next, participants answered a luck question, “How much of this event was determined by luck?” answered on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all determined by luck*) to 7 (*all determined by luck*). Finally, participants answered a question designed to measure their belief that the event could have been different, “Looking back on it now, how much do you think your personal actions could have changed the event?” This question also was answered using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a lot*).

To measure the construal level of the event, participants rated the event using nine semantic differential items: meaningful–meaningless, important–not important, big picture–small picture, high priority–low priority, simple–complicated, focuses on “why” something gets done–focuses on “how” something gets done, long-term goal–short-term goal, influences overall path of life–influences minor detours in life, central to my life as a whole–side issue for my life as a whole. Items were presented on 11-point scales ranging from –5 to +5; negative numbers indicated high-level construal and positive numbers indicated low-level construal (three items were reverse-scored).

Results and Discussion

We created the construal measure by summing the nine semantic differential items (after appropriate reverse-scoring) such that higher numbers indicated more abstract construal ($\alpha = .76$). Replicating past

research (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2003), participants in the distant condition did indeed construe events at a more abstract level ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.76$) than did participants in the recent condition ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(168) = 3.22$, $p = .002$, $d = .49$.

The three main dependent measures (fate, counterfactual, and luck beliefs) appeared to be relatively distinct constructs. Of particular interest, fate and luck were only modestly related, $r(169) = .20$, $p = .01$, although this test reached statistical significance with the large sample size employed. Weaker relations were observed between fate and counterfactuals, $r(169) = -.13$, $p = .09$, and between luck and counterfactuals, $r(170) = -.09$, $p = .27$.

The main hypothesis centered on the impact of temporal distance on the three dependent measures, tested using a 2 (temporal distance: distant vs. recent) \times 3 (rating: fate, counterfactual, luck) mixed ANOVA, the latter being a within-participant variable. A significant interaction effect was evident, $F(2, 167) = 4.13$, $p = .02$. As Figure 2 shows, the impact of temporal distance was larger for fate than for counterfactuals or luck. Those in the distant condition attributed the event more to fate ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.78$) than did those in the recent condition ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.81$), $t(167) = 2.23$, $p = .03$, $d = .34$. By contrast, the effect of temporal distance on counterfactual beliefs was weaker (distant $M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.98$ vs. recent $M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.80$), $t(168) = 1.83$, $p = .07$, $d = .28$ (this effect size is almost identical to that, $d = .24$, observed in Experiment 1). Temporal distance had no effect on luck beliefs because those in the distant condition did not differ in their luck beliefs ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.58$) from those in the recent condition ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.88$), $t(168) = 0$, $d = 0$.

We tested whether construal mediated the effect of temporal distance on fate beliefs using procedures established by Baron and Kenny (1986). As can be seen in Figure 3, temporal distance significantly predicted both the proposed mediator (construal) and the dependent variable (fate). Specifically, those in the distant temporal focus condition construed events at a more abstract level and also attribute these events more to fate than did those in the recent temporal focus condition. Furthermore, the proposed mediator (construal) significantly predicted the independent variable (fate). In other words, those who construed the event more abstractly tended to attribute the event more to fate than those who construed the event more concretely. A Sobel (1982) test revealed that construal level partially mediated the relation between temporal focus and attribution to fate (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2001). That is, the influence of temporal focus on attribution to fate was significantly reduced when construal level was taken into account, $Z = 2.04$, $p < .05$.

As in Experiment 1, participants attributed greater impact overall to counterfactuals ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.91$)

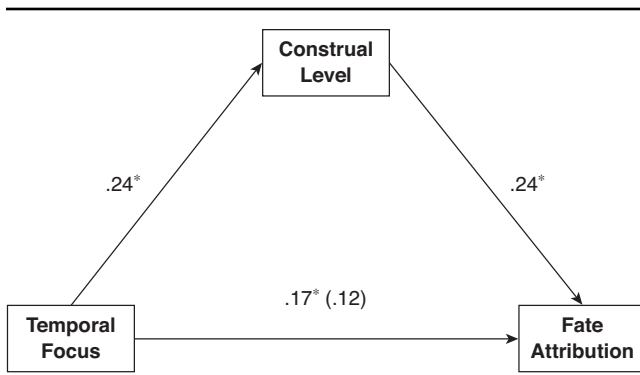


Figure 3 Mediation of temporal focus and fate attribution by construal level (Experiment 2).

NOTE: Numbers represent standardized β s. The number in parentheses represents the standardized β holding constant the proposed mediator. * $p < .05$.

than to fate ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.82$), $t(168) = 12.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.41$, and also than to luck ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.73$), $t(169) = 14.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.62$. Fate and luck did not differ significantly, $t(168) = 1.81$, $p = .07$, $d = .18$.

This experiment revealed a new insight about fate, that it is a judgment applied more to events of the distant than recent past. Although there may be many theoretical reasons for this, one such reason was construal, that is, the level of abstraction with which the event in question is viewed. Construal level also shifts with time (Trope & Liberman, 2003), and the discovery in this experiment that construal mediated the effect of temporal distance on fate judgments shows construal to be an important psychological component of beliefs in fate. This experiment further benchmarked these new insights about fate by showing that they do not extend to perceptions of luck, that is, luck beliefs were unaffected by the temporal distance manipulation and were uncorrelated with construal level ($r = -.06$).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We began this research with a puzzle. Milan Kundera, and perhaps many other observers of human nature, assumed that fate (the belief that an event was fixed and "meant to be") and counterfactuals (the belief that personal action might have produced a different outcome) are mutually exclusive beliefs. Kundera's popular novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* not only advocated this mutual exclusivity but placed it on a between-persons level, such that some people believe only in fate and others believe only in counterfactual possibility. Challenging this notion, however, was a pilot study conducted in our lab in which we discovered that nearly 85% of participants

endorsed the idea that fate and counterfactuals intertwine, that is, that both can contribute to important personal events. If fate and counterfactuals sometimes go hand-in-hand, an appropriate analytic approach then is to assume that such beliefs vary across situations (and hence within individuals over time) and to seek out situational moderators of the relative appearance of each. The present research highlighted the utility of applying Trope and Liberman's (2003) construal-level theory to analyses of the fate construct. Whether events are construed at an abstract versus concrete level goes a long way toward explaining when fate beliefs arise.

In Experiment 1, a manipulation of construal level influenced fate, in that framing real past events as more abstract than concrete made participants more likely to interpret those events in terms of fate. In other words, those participants who had been required to think about *why* they wanted to achieve a goal attributed it more to fate than those who were induced to think about *how* they achieved the goal. This construal manipulation had no effect on counterfactual beliefs that past personal action could have produced a different outcome. That is, participants' beliefs in their ability to have acted differently in the past were equivalently high for both abstract and concrete construals.

Experiment 2 broadened this finding by revealing an effect of temporal distance on fate beliefs. With greater passage of time, fate beliefs intensified. Of importance, this effect was mediated by construal, such that greater temporal distance made construals more abstract, which in turn heightened fate beliefs. This finding helps to explain where in life people see fate at work: as painful accidents or joyous celebrations fade more distantly to memory, and as those memories themselves become more abstract, simplistic, or schematic, attribution to fate (itself a rather nebulous concept) becomes more likely. Moreover, fate seems unique in its temporal dependence because there was no evidence for similar temporal dependence of two other, closely related attributional beliefs, those reflecting counterfactuals and luck.

Turning first to counterfactuals, we found that participants were as likely to affirm their ability to have acted differently in the past for recent as for long-ago events. This finding, although not previously tested, does dovetail with previous research showing that certain counterfactual beliefs differentially vary with temporal distance, that is, whether counterfactuals focus on inaction versus action (what should have been done vs. should NOT have been done) varies with temporal distance (inaction hurts more over the long term, action hurts more in the short term but dissipates rapidly; see Gilovich & Medvec, 1995), but from our research it seems that intensity of counterfactual thoughts averaged across this distinction do not vary with temporal distance.

Turning next to luck, this sort of belief also did not vary with temporal distance. Luck might, at a surface level, be taken to be highly similar to fate. Both beliefs reflect a vague attribution to unseen forces outside the individual's personal control. Teigen (1995, 1996, 1997; Teigen et al., 1999), in a systematic and varied program of research, has shown that luck beliefs reflect a specific combination of counterfactuals, event valence, and likelihood beliefs, such that luck is typically attributed to unlikely positive events that nearly turned out much worse. In Experiment 2, we found that fate was indeed weakly correlated to luck attributions. Of importance, however, the temporal distance manipulation had no effect on luck. Thus, participants were as likely to see luck at play in events that were recent as in those far-gone. To reiterate, Fate seems to be unique because parallel ratings of counterfactuals and luck were unaffected by the temporal distance manipulation of Experiment 2.

To elaborate further on the interplay between fate and counterfactuals, it seems clear from this research that the two beliefs are less likely to go in hand in hand for recent events that are construed in more concrete terms. In such cases, people may easily see how they might have acted differently to have forestalled grief or achieved betterment, with fate playing little role. But as life events recede into memory, or as they become broader, more important, and more deeply connected to other life concerns, fate-based explanations become increasingly salient. It is under these circumstances that fate and counterfactuals are likely to blend and interconnect. For big events and events of long ago, people may be especially likely to glimpse fate at work but see also how fate might have been modified or harnessed by particular personal actions, such as ritual or prayer. For example, for deeply tragic events such as the death of a child, parents may generate thoughts about what they personally might have done differently so as to have avoided the tragedy, even while at the same time ascribing causation to numerous external factors, fate among them (cf. Davis & Lehman, 1995; Davis, Lehman, Wortman, Silver, & Thompson, 1995).

The relation of fate to counterfactuals builds on Rotter's (1954, 1966) theorizing on locus of control. He argued that those with an internal locus of control develop this orientation because they come to expect that their behaviors will bring related reinforcements, whereas those with an external locus of control expect that their behaviors will bring little reinforcement. Internal locus of control may thus be characterized in terms of high freedom of movement, whereas external locus of control involves low freedom of movement (Rotter, 1954; Stroessner & Green, 1990). This distinction does map roughly onto the fate/counterfactual distinction in the

sense that temporally distant events may be interpreted in terms of reduced freedom of movement relative to temporally recent events, even though in objective terms "what's done is done" for all past events. This connection suggests an alternative interpretation, such that perceived control or opportunity (i.e., freedom of movement) accounts for our findings more adequately than construal level. However, two points from the present research argue against the viability of this locus of control explanation. First, in Experiment 1, we manipulated construal level directly by having participants think of "why" versus "how" they achieved a goal, and with both conditions emphasizing goal striving, the distinction is very likely independent of perceived control. Second, if the locus of control explanation were valid, luck beliefs would be expected to increase with temporal distance because decreasing perceived control would seem to imply more of an emphasis on any sort of external attribution, luck included. Because luck beliefs did not vary as a function of temporal distance, the locus of control explanation is less persuasive. Rather, we conclude that it is the construal of the meaningfulness of an event, not how the event invokes a certain locus of control orientation, that influences attribution to fate and counterfactual possibility.

Moreover, in focusing on counterfactual beliefs, the present research explored the distinction between perceptions of an immutable (i.e., fate) versus changeable (i.e., counterfactual) past. This operationalization is consistent with past research showing a deep connection between counterfactuals and perceptions of personal control (e.g. Davis et al., 1995; Giroto et al., 1991; Mandel & Lehman, 1996; Markman et al., 1995; McMullen et al., 1995; Nasco & Marsh, 1999). When people think about what might have been, they typically focus on what they personally could have done differently. Although this means that the dimension of mutability is naturally confounded with the dimension of locus of causation (most individuals see internal events to be more mutable than external events), we suggest that mutability best captures the most typical lay meaning of fate: The past was in some way fixed and hence inalterable. Future research may focus, however, on the relation between fate beliefs and those counterfactual thoughts that do not center on personal action. For example, one may imagine how God could have done something differently to influence an event. Deity-focused counterfactual thoughts may be more strongly related to fate attribution than the personal-control counterfactuals studied in the present research, and this possibility remains for further research to explore (cf. Young & Morris, 2004).

With regard to more recent theoretical work on motivation, the present research implies a connection to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998), which draws a

distinction between motivational orientations aimed at either promotion goals (i.e., involving advancement, accomplishment, and realization of desired end states) or prevention goals (i.e., security, protection, and maintenance of the status quo). Recent research revealed a connection between construal and regulatory focus (Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005), such that manipulation of promotion versus prevention focus prompted individuals to generate more abstract versus concrete linguistic descriptions of goal pursuit. Furthermore, Pennington and Roese (2003) found that temporal distance (focus on events near or far in the future or past) influenced regulatory focus, such that more temporally distant events were framed more in terms of promotion than prevention. However, in Study 3 of Pennington and Roese, the temporal focus manipulation affected both regulatory focus and construal ratings, but importantly, no consistent pattern of association between regulatory focus and construal was observed. We suspect that although fate beliefs intensify with temporal distance (as shown in our Experiment 2), they likely do so without any systematic association to regulatory focus. Thus, a missed romantic opportunity (a promotion failure) or a tragic car accident (a prevention failure) may evoke similar attributions to fate with sufficient passage of time. These ideas are only speculative, but we hope future research will examine directly the interplay between fate, construal, and regulatory focus.

In summary, the connection between attribution to fate and attribution to counterfactual possibility for an event seems to be a function of the level at which that event is construed. Although we began this article with the hauntingly beautiful writings of Milan Kundera, our research is perhaps more compatible with much older ideas conveyed by Shakespeare, who hinted that for deeply meaningful events, both fate and personal initiative intertwine. In *Julius Caesar*, the conspirator Cassius (while planning the murder of Caesar) attempts to impel Brutus into action by telling him that one individual can indeed change the fate of all Rome:

Men at some time are masters of their fates:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,

But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

—Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene II

NOTE

1. We checked to see whether participants responded to each framing question with a relevant (as opposed to flippant or blank) response. The high-level and low-level conditions produced means of 3.00 and 2.78 relevant responses each (corresponding to 100% and 93% of possible responses, respectively). Analyses that included the 3 participants who answered with flippant or blank responses revealed the same pattern of results as those reported.

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