

In January of this year, I wrote an installment for this blog called “This is Your Brain on the Bat Signal.” The study I covered in that blog explored how people behaved on a subway car if one of the other passengers was dressed in a Batman costume. That was a fun one! Wouldn’t you know it, I recently came across another study featuring the caped crusader and I knew a sequel was in order.

This month I cover a study about the effects of “self-distancing” which is a self-control strategy in which people adopt the view or the persona of another while attempting to complete a task.¹ The study involved 180 four- and six-year-olds, divided into three equal groups, and asked to complete a fairly boring task. Each child in each group was told the boring task they were given to perform was nevertheless “important” and “helpful” and that they would need to work hard to complete it. However, each child in each group was also told that they could take a break from the activity by playing an age-appropriate video game on a nearby tablet. We’re dealing with very young kids here. So, yes, they all eventually quit the boring task in favor of playing the video game. The question tested was which experimental group would quit the hard work first when faced with the temptation of a more pleasurable game.²

In the control group, the children “reflected on the task from the first-person point of view.”³ There was a sticker at their workstation with the word “I” displayed. There was an audio prompt that looped at intervals prompting the children with, “Am I working hard?” Children were told to use the word “I” in reference to themselves. In the second experimental group, the sticker at the workstation was the child’s own name and children were prompted, instead, with the third-person use of their name: “Is [child’s name] working hard?” Children here were told to refer to themselves by their own name, in the third person. In the final group, the children were given four characters they could choose to impersonate during the completion of the boring task. Yes, Batman. But also available to them were Bob the Builder, Dora the Explorer, and Rapunzel from the movie “Tangled.” Whichever character they chose, they were given some piece of garb to wear during the completion of the boring task representing the character of their choice.⁴ So, we can already see the “self-distancing” in the two experimental groups. The third-person group only slightly detached the children from themselves. However, the character group invited the children to become someone other than themselves.

Perhaps without surprise, the character group worked longer on the task before giving into temptation.⁵ The third-person group even outlasted the personal “I” control group.⁶ The most interesting question is why the experimental groups persevered longer with increasing personal detachment. The study authors posited three possibilities while admitting further experiments were necessary. The first theory is that any personal detachment disengages a child from their own experience and that helps with temptation management. The second theory is that children in the character group might have “identified with powerful features of the characters they chose to impersonate...” and were presumably more motivated by that feeling.⁷ The last theory is that role playing is just a fun activity and the pleasure of role-play itself aided their ability to resist the temptation of some other pleasure.⁸

¹ Rachel E. White et al., *The “Batman Effect”: Improving Perseverance in Young Children*, 88 CHILD DEV. 1563, 1563 (2017).

² *Id.* at 1564-65.

³ *Id.* at 1564.

⁴ *Id.* at 1564-1566.

⁵ *Id.* at 1568.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

Yes, it's true the study involves people far younger than us and far younger than any students we might coach or have in our advocacy classes. There seems to me an unstated assumption in the article that children possess unique powers of imagination that die off somewhere between youth and adulthood and which, therefore, separate us from them in this respect. Perhaps that's just me reading too much into it. It's tough to say. Nevertheless, I still find myself baselessly assured that this same self-distancing could work in any moot court practice I preside over or in any advocacy simulation I can dream up in class. Think about it. Isn't there a similar "self-distancing" inherent in a part of our methodological assumptions for conducting a dress rehearsal before a tournament? Have you ever preemptively said to a team before a practice, "*Imagine that this whole thing is real. You're a lawyer and your team member sitting next to you is actually Sam Jones—your client—trying to put the pieces of his life back together*"? Why not try it, right? What harm could a little bit of adult imagination do if we are also as equally human as the children we once were?