

The effect of COVID-related quarantine on individuals' implicit space-time mappings on the front-back axis

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Do people conceptualise the future or past as in front? Which factors influence space-time embodiment? These unsolved questions continue to arouse attention and debate. The Temporal Focus Hypothesis (TFH) entails that individuals that value the past tend to conceptualise it in front of ego, while individuals that value the future tend to map the future in front of ego instead (de la Fuente et al. 2014). A central tenet of the TFH places emphasis on individual differences and short-term priming of attention as factors affecting implicit space-time mapping shifts. For instance, on the individual differences level, Buddhists who believe in the cause-effect of past activities on the future were likely to conceptualise the past in front, whereas Taoists who pursue immortality in future were likely to map the future in front (Li & Cao 2018). On the context of operation level, studies show that participants are more future-focused when tested in the morning than in the afternoon (Li 2018) or when primed with statements emphasizing the future (de la Fuente et al. 2014). This study attempts to extend this line of inquiry by testing a contextual factor, COVID-19 quarantine status, in Chinese participants. Results from a temporal attitudes task and a temporal orientation task show future-focused attitudes and future-in-front mappings, regardless of participants' quarantine status. However, unexpectedly, we also discovered that the temporal focus of individuals interacts with their attitudes towards COVID-19, as captured by a COVID attitudes questionnaire (Mecit, Shrum & Lowrey 2022). Specifically, those participants that displayed more precautionary behaviours towards COVID-19 also tended to be significantly more future-focused than participants who displayed lower precautionary attitudes towards COVID-19. These findings suggest that individual differences (such as attitudes towards COVID-19) may be stronger determinants of temporal focus than contextual factors (like quarantine status).

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