

## FLEXIBILITY AND CONSISTENCY IN EVALUATIVE RESPONDING: THE FUNCTION OF CONSTRUAL LEVEL

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### Abstract

This chapter explores the issue of evaluative consistency and context-dependence by considering when stability or flexibility in evaluative responding would be most useful for the social organism. We propose that cues about distance functionally shape evaluations to flexibly incorporate information from their current context when individuals are acting on proximal stimuli, but to

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transcend these immediate details when acting on distal stimuli. In this chapter, we review research within and beyond the attitude domain that has helped to shed light on issues of evaluative consistency, and then build on this research to describe the proposed link between distance and evaluative consistency in more detail. We suggest that construal level provides a cognitive mechanism by which distance can regulate evaluative consistency, and describe both past research that can be reinterpreted in this light as well as more recent research that provides some direct support for our approach. We conclude by discussing implications for shared reality and social influence.

The question of whether or when people's evaluative responses will be more or less consistent across contexts has surfaced in a number of related domains. Attitude researchers have searched for and identified a number of factors that moderate the extent to which attitudinal responses appear stable or context-specific across time points (see, e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Fazio, 2007, for reviews). Likewise, theorists have long sought to understand the conditions under which an attitude measured in one context will predict a behavior measured in another (e.g., Fazio & Towles-Schwen, 1999; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974). Meanwhile, political psychologists debate whether ideology can be meaningfully said to guide voting behavior (e.g., Converse, 1964; Jost, 2006), and research on values yields conflicting evidence about the extent to which people's preferences reflect their central values (e.g., Feather, 1995; Kristiansen & Hotte, 1996; Tetlock, 1986).

This chapter explores this issue by considering when context-dependence or consistency would be most useful for the social organism. Building on the widely shared assumption that evaluations function first and foremost to guide action (Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Wilson et al., 2000), we propose that individuals must be able to regulate their behavior not only for the here and now, but also for the there and then. This approach suggests that whereas evaluations should flexibly adapt to the current context when guiding imminent action, they should more consistently reflect what is invariant about an attitude object when guiding behavior in the distance. We therefore suspect that cues about psychological distance will influence the extent to which evaluative responses fluctuate or remain consistent across different social contexts.

We begin this chapter by briefly reviewing some of the ways that different domains have shed light on our understanding of evaluative consistency. Next, we describe in more detail the notion that cues about distance should regulate the extent to which evaluations immerse an individual within the present context, thereby promoting evaluative flexibility, or help transcend the particularities of the specific situation to enable evaluative consistency. We propose that construal level provides a cognitive mechanism by which psychological distance can regulate evaluative consistency, and describe both past research that can be reinterpreted

in this light, as well as more recent research that provides more direct support for our hypotheses. After summarizing this work, we discuss implications for related domains including social influence and shared reality.

## 1. EVALUATIVE CONSISTENCY AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENCE

Ideas about evaluative consistency and context-dependence have permeated the assumptions and theories of the attitude domain since its inception. Historically, attitudes were long conceptualized as intrinsically stable, dispositional evaluative tendencies that remain relatively consistent across contexts in the absence of a successful persuasive appeal (e.g., Ajzen, 1988; Allport, 1935; Campbell, 1950; Krech & Crutchfield, 1948; Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988). More recently, some conceptualizations have posited that attitudes might be intrinsically malleable, constructed anew in each judgmental context from information that happens to be accessible in that particular situation (e.g., Schwarz, 2007; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001). Regardless of where they fall between these two extremes, theories of attitudes have to grapple with the question of when and why evaluative responses—including attitudes, intentions, and approach/avoidance behaviors—will be more or less consistent across contexts (see, e.g., Fazio, 2007; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2007; Schwarz, 2007; Smith & Conrey, 2007).

For instance, the assumption that attitudes are intrinsically stable led many researchers to search for sources of measurement error (e.g., mood shifts or question ambiguity) that could explain inconsistency in measured evaluative responses (e.g., Converse, 1964, 1970; Kendall, 1954; Schuman & Presser, 1981). The assumption that attitudes are intrinsically malleable directs attention instead to the question of why they would ever appear stable; theorists have suggested that consistency arises when evaluative inputs are the same across different situations, or when the evaluative implications of different inputs are the same (for instance, when evaluative information made salient in two different contexts both suggest an equally positive response; Ferguson & Bargh, 2007; Lord et al., 2004; Sia et al., 1997; Smith & Conrey, 2007). Meanwhile, other researchers have addressed this issue by demonstrating that some attitudes tend to be more stable while others tend to be more context-dependent (e.g., Pomerantz et al., 1995; see, e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1998; Krosnick & Petty, 1995, for reviews). For instance, Fazio (Fazio, 2007; Fazio et al., 1986) has suggested that the strength of the association between an object and an evaluation influences the extent to which the evaluation will be consistent across contexts. Because a strong object–evaluation association is activated automatically upon encountering an attitude object, strong

associations should produce relatively consistent evaluative responses; in contrast, weak or not yet formed associations should produce context-dependent evaluations that are constructed in a more online fashion.

Despite differences in their conceptualizations of attitudes, most theorists would likely agree that the consistency of evaluative responding across contexts will depend not just on the intrinsic nature of attitudes (e.g., stored vs. constructed, strong vs. weak), but also on the attitude object itself. For instance, in response to the wave of criticism over low attitude–behavior correlations in the 1960s (see, e.g., DeFleur & Westie, 1958; McGuire, 1969; Wicker, 1969), Fishbein & Ajzen (1974) adopted a psychometric approach in order to shed light on issues of measurement that could be obscuring a stronger relation between attitudes and behavior. Importantly, these researchers proposed that attitudes and behaviors can be more or less strongly correlated depending on the extent to which an attitude object is specified during measurement. This suggested that researchers could increase the consistency of participants' evaluative responses from one measurement to another if they defined the attitude object in the same way across contexts.

More recently, theorists have increasingly begun to emphasize the notion that inconsistency in evaluative responding can stem from differences in the *subjective* representation of an attitude object, as well as differences in its objective specification (e.g., Ferguson & Bargh, 2007; Lord & Lepper, 1999; Lord et al., 1984; Schwarz, 2007)—a point that harkens back to Asch's (1940) distinction between “a change in the object of judgment, rather than in the judgment of the object” (p. 458). For instance, Lord and Lepper's (1999) attitude representation theory suggests that an individual's evaluation of a given attitude object will depend on their subjective representation of that object, and that inconsistency in evaluative responding will arise when a person's subjective representations differ between contexts. Thus, a person's evaluation of the same social category (e.g., politicians) can shift when different category exemplars are activated (e.g., a liked vs. disliked politician; Sia et al., 1997; see also Asch, 1948; Bodenhausen et al., 1995).

In a somewhat similar vein, constructionist accounts suggest that attitudes can be best understood as spontaneous integrations across relevant and activated evaluative information (e.g., Ferguson & Bargh, 2007; Schwarz, 2007; Smith & Conrey, 2007). From this perspective, evaluative responses depend on momentarily activated patterns of information in response to a set of inputs, which can vary depending on the immediate context. This notion led Ferguson and Bargh (2007) to suggest that attitudes might best be conceptualized as evaluations of “object-based contexts” (p. 232) in order to explicitly acknowledge that a person's subjective representation of a given object includes the context in which that object is encountered. Thus, variations in the context will change the target of evaluation. By this logic, people evaluate a glass of water in a desert or a glass

of water in a cool café, rather than a glass of water in isolation (see also Fazio, 2007). Here again, inconsistency in evaluative responding should arise when the subjective construal of the attitude object changes (in this case, because it includes the context). Thus, understanding the way in which an attitude object is mentally represented can help shed light on evaluative consistency.

Similar questions about consistency and context-dependence have arisen in other domains as well. For instance, whereas some studies have identified a fairly high degree of consistency between values and behavioral intentions (e.g., Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Feather, 1995; Kinder & Sears, 1981), others have found that values only weakly predict behaviors (e.g., Kristiansen & Hotte, 1996). Likewise, researchers have long debated the extent to which individuals' political behaviors are guided by overarching ideological values (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Feldman, 2003; Jost, 2006; McGuire, 1985, for reviews). Whereas some scholars have argued that ideological principles often guide evaluative responses to social and political issues, and can display considerable consistency across time and contexts (e.g., Jost, 2006; Judd & Milburn, 1980; Judd et al., 1981; Kerlinger, 1984; Stern et al., 1995), others question whether ideologies can be meaningfully said to exist for the majority of the population, citing evidence suggesting that most people's attitudes toward specific policy issues show considerable fluctuation over time and rarely seem to consistently reflect core ideological values (Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964; Tedin, 1987; Zaller, 1992).



## 2. EVALUATIONS THAT IMMERSE OR TRANSCEND

Thus, questions about the extent to which evaluative responses are consistent or context-dependent have been the focus of considerable theory and research across multiple domains. Here, we build on this work to suggest that evaluative responses can indeed vary in their degree of consistency, and that this variability in consistency may be highly functional (see also Ledgerwood & Trope, 2010; Ledgerwood et al., in press). Certainly, it seems plausible that both context-dependent and context-independent evaluative responses can be useful in certain situations. At times, flexible evaluative responses that immerse people in the particularities of the current situation and help them adapt to the demands of their immediate social environment should help facilitate appropriate approach or avoidance behavior (see, e.g., Schwarz, 2007). Different contexts call for different responses: For instance, a person might reach toward a thumb tack when attempting to hang a poster, but recoil upon seeing one face-up on the sidewalk and almost underfoot. In addition, flexible evaluative responses can facilitate the creation of socially shared realities, which provide a critical

foundation for communication, relationships, and the regulation of social action (see Brennan & Clark, 1996; Clark, 1996; Festinger, 1950; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Isaacs & Clark, 1987; Rokeach & Mezei, 1966; Turner, 1991). Thus, evaluations that immerse people in the present by flexibly incorporating local aspects of the current situation could often be optimal for guiding action.

At other times, however, local information would be irrelevant for evaluative responding. If someone is voting for a future president, for example, it does not seem particularly functional for the current cloudiness of the weather or the slogan on a passerby's sweatshirt to influence her evaluative responses toward the candidates. Consistent evaluative responses could also serve an important social function by facilitating the maintenance of existing shared perspectives with important relationship partners or groups (see, e.g., Asch, 1952; Hardin & Conley, 2001; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Ledgerwood & Liviatan, 2010; McGuire, 1969). For example, if a group of friends all prefer a particular presidential candidate, consistency in their evaluative responses across contexts will help protect the shared view of reality that has been formed within the group. Thus, certain actions may be optimally guided by evaluations that help transcend the particularities of the current context by summarizing the extent to which an object is globally positive or negative across situations and time points.

These considerations prompt the question: When would it be most functional for evaluations to immerse people within the immediate context, or help them to transcend it? We suggest that in the here and now, people need to flexibly adapt their actions to serve their immediate goals, coordinate with others around them, and interact effectively with their current social environment. Local evaluations that are sensitive to specific contextual information could therefore appropriately facilitate approach/avoidance responding within the current situation. On the other hand, humans are also able to transcend their immediate situation to plan for the future, coordinate action at a distance, predict other people's behavior, and generate counterfactual alternatives. Thus, they must be able to regulate their behavior not only for the here and now, but also for the there and then. Global evaluations that screen out specific contextual information in favor of information that is consistent across contexts could serve as appropriate guides for action outside of the immediate situation.

In other words, it seems functionally sensible that the extent to which an attitude object is removed from the here and now should guide the degree to which evaluations incorporate context-specific versus context-independent information. More specifically, we propose that variations in psychological distance (here-and-now vs. there-and-then) should shape the extent to which evaluations are relatively local, in that they tune to the present context, or more global, in that they tune to what is invariant across contexts. Furthermore, we suggest that the manner in

which an individual subjectively represents a given attitude object provides a key mechanism by which distance may influence evaluative responding to be more or less context-dependent. We turn now to examine the theoretical rationale that underlies this claim.

### 3. MENTALLY REPRESENTING THE ATTITUDE OBJECT

In order to understand how distance and evaluative consistency might be linked, we build on the notion that flexibility in evaluative responding can sometimes be traced to variability in the subjective mental representation of an attitude object, as discussed above (see, e.g., Asch, 1940; Ferguson & Bargh, 2007; Lord & Lepper, 1999; Schwarz, 2007). Factors that influence the extent to which subjective mental representations fluctuate across contexts should therefore affect the degree to which evaluative responses are consistent or context-dependent. Importantly, psychological distance has been shown to affect whether the mental representation of an object focuses more on its abstract, essential, and superordinate characteristics (which tend to be context-independent), or more on its concrete, subordinate, and peripheral features (which tend to be context-specific; see Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2003, for reviews). Thus, theory and research on the relation between distance and mental construal can provide a critical mechanism for the distance–evaluation link proposed here.

#### 3.1. Psychological distance and level of construal

Psychological distance refers to any dimension along which an object or event can be distanced from me, here, and now. For instance, an object can be removed from us in time (the future or the past) as well as space, social distance (e.g., others vs. ourselves, them vs. us), and hypotheticality (e.g., a counterfactual alternative vs. reality, a distant chance vs. a near certainty). According to construal level theory, these different dimensions of distance converge in their effects on mental representation (e.g., Fujita et al., 2006a; Liviatan et al., 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2000; Wakslak et al., 2006; see Liberman & Trope, 2008, for a review). As an object or event grows increasingly distant, we tend to mentally represent it in terms of its core, essential features. These “high-level construals” are abstract and structured; they extract gist information and leave out irrelevant details that could vary without changing the core meaning we have assigned to the object. In contrast, we tend to subjectively represent psychologically proximal objects in terms of their detailed, subordinate, and contextualized features. These “low-level construals” are more concrete, and lack a clear structure separating important from peripheral and irrelevant features.

Consider, for example, the influence of psychological distance on perception. Research has shown that participants were better able to visually abstract the big picture from a set of fragments in the Gestalt Completion Test when they imagined working on the task in the distant future (next year) versus near future (tomorrow), or when the task was psychologically distant in probability (i.e., when participants thought they were unlikely vs. likely to actually complete the task in a later session; Forster et al., 2004, Study 3; Wakslak et al., 2006, Study 5). Other studies have demonstrated that distance similarly influences cognition. For example, individuals grouped objects into fewer, broader categories when they imagined using the objects in the distant (vs. near) future, and they predicted that people's behaviors would be more dispositionally driven (and less susceptible to situational variation) at a temporally distant versus proximal time point (Nussbaum et al., 2003). In another study, participants who viewed a cartoon film depicting a scene at a summer camp located in a spatially distant (vs. near) location perceived the film as being composed of a few large behavioral chunks, rather than many small ones, presumably because they formed more abstract representations of the behaviors rather than focusing on each specific action (Henderson et al., 2006, Study 1). Likewise, psychological distance increases the extent to which people focus on abstract ends versus concrete means: When an activity was expected to occur in the distant (vs. near) future or in a spatially remote (vs. close) location, participants were more likely to describe it in terms of its general purpose rather than emphasizing the specific means by which the activity was performed (Fujita et al., 2006a, Study 1; Liberman & Trope, 1998, Study 1).

### 3.2. Distance and evaluative consistency

The impact of psychological distance on level of construal suggests a key mechanism by which distance could influence evaluative consistency. Specifically, we suggest that psychological distance triggers high-level construals, which focus on the central and enduring features of an attitude object while screening out incidental and peripheral details. These high-level construals enable global evaluations that summarize what is consistent about an attitude object across multiple contexts, allowing individuals to move beyond the particularities of the present situation. In other words, high-level construals allow people to transcend their current state in order to effectively respond to remote objects and events. Conversely, psychological proximity triggers low-level construals, which include the concrete and contextualized aspects of an attitude object. These in turn enable local evaluations that summarize unique details of the present situation, allowing individuals to flexibly tune to the demands of their immediate environment.

In other words, low-level construals allow people to use the here and now to effectively respond to proximal objects and imminent events.

Importantly, the impact of psychological distance on level of construal is not object-specific, but rather a well-learned and potentially overgeneralized association (see, e.g., Trope et al., 2007). Research shows that the impact of psychological distance on mental representation tends to generalize beyond the specific object or event whose proximity is manipulated. For instance, Forster et al. (2004, Study 5) found that asking participants to imagine their lives a year from now (distant future) or tomorrow (near future) improved their ability to creatively generate abstract solutions on an unrelated task. In fact, simply priming words associated with distance (vs. closeness) can impact construal: Wakslak et al. (2006, Study 7) found that this manipulation increased participants' relative preferences for describing activities in terms of abstract ends rather than concrete means (see also Smith & Trope, 2006, Study 2). Thus, we suspect that cues about distance—or more generally, any variable that leads individuals to adopt a more abstract mental representation of an attitude object—should tend to increase evaluative consistency, whereas cues about proximity (or concrete representations more generally) should tend to promote context-dependence.

## 4. INDIRECT EVIDENCE

The global–local perspective on evaluation just outlined appears to both complement and extend past findings in different domains. Here, we review research on attitude–behavior correspondence and past work on ideology that each provide some indirect support for our approach.

### 4.1. Attitude–behavior correspondence

In one of the early classic studies on attitude–behavior correspondence, LaPiere (1934) found that whereas over 90% of a sample of restaurants and hotels around the United States stated they would refuse to serve Chinese patrons when mailed a questionnaire, only one of these establishments actually refused to serve a Chinese couple who visited their establishment in person. A number of explanations have been offered for this disconnect (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; LaPiere, 1934; Lord et al., 1984), and our approach suggests one more. Specifically, it suggests that when people are mailed a questionnaire from spatially remote researchers and asked a hypothetical question, these distance cues elicit global evaluations that integrate central and context-independent information about the attitude object, such as core values and normative beliefs that are consensually shared across contexts. In contrast, when acting in the here and now, proximity

cues elicit local evaluations that integrate peripheral and context-specific information about the attitude object. In LaPiere's study, then, it makes sense that distance cues led to evaluations that were consistent with overarching social norms, whereas proximity cues led to evaluations that were more immersed in the particularities of the present situation.

The current perspective also seems consistent with later research in this same domain. As briefly noted earlier, Fishbein and Ajzen (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977) importantly observed that inconsistency in evaluative responses can be traced to inconsistencies in the way that an attitude object is specified by a researcher. More specifically, they proposed that objects can be specified (or not) in terms of action, target, context, and time, and that low correlations between attitudes and behaviors frequently arise because an attitude toward a general (i.e., relatively unspecified) object is used to predict a highly specified behavior. For example, a person's attitude toward recycling (unspecified in terms of target, context, and time) might be used to predict a highly specified behavior, such as whether she recycles (action) her soda can (target) in the lunch room (context) today (time). Fishbein and Ajzen suggest that such a highly specified behavior is best predicted by measuring a person's attitude toward an equally specified attitude object, whereas an attitude toward a more general attitude object will better predict an index comprised of many different specific behaviors.

This *compatibility principle* (Ajzen, 1988) provided key insight into the problem of how to increase attitude–behavior correlations by highlighting the importance of measurement techniques and mapping out when different attitude or behavior criteria would be most appropriate. In this sense, it represents an important theory of measurement, rather than a theory of psychological process: It does not speak to how or why a more specified attitude now better predicts a highly specified behavior later (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, pp. 165–166, for a similar observation). Because the perspective proposed in this chapter is concerned with process, it could potentially help to refine and extend the principle of compatibility in several ways.

First, our model suggests that an attitude object is not only objectively defined by the researcher, but subjectively construed by the participant (see also Lord & Lepper, 1999). Thus, even the same, equally specified attitude object can be mentally represented in different ways, and the level of this subjective mental construal enables either a local or a global evaluation of the attitude object. To return to our previous example, a person might represent the highly specified attitude object “recycling a soda can in the lunchroom today” in terms of its abstract ends and value-related qualities (e.g., promoting environmentalism) or in terms of its concrete means (e.g., walking across the lunchroom to the recycling bin), and this subjective representation should determine whether the individual uses a more global or more local evaluation to guide behavior.

This analysis suggests that measuring attitudes toward a highly specified attitude object tends to improve prediction of later specific behaviors because a specified attitude object will often include dimensions of distance that influence level of construal, as well as important contextual features that can be incorporated into a local evaluation. Consider a researcher who measures participants' attitudes toward recycling a soda can in the lunch room today. The specified near point in time (today) should lead participants to construe the attitude object concretely, and their response should therefore reflect a local evaluation that incorporates available contextual information (such as the presumed attitude of a coworker who will be eating lunch in the same room). Because people often focus on the here and now, they are likely to also construe the attitude object concretely later that day when they actually enter the lunch room, and thus will also use a local evaluation (which draws on the same contextual details that influenced the previously measured attitude) to guide their recycling behavior.

However, our perspective also suggests situations in which the principle of compatibility might not apply. For instance, a researcher might measure participants' attitudes toward voting for a particular political candidate in next year's election. The specified distant point in time (next year) should lead participants to construe the attitude object abstractly, and their response should therefore reflect a global evaluation of the political candidate. When people are actually voting in the here and now, however, they may construe the political candidate far more concretely and vote based on a local, contextualized evaluation that does not match their previously reported global evaluation. Conversely, a researcher might measure participants' attitudes in a way that elicits a concrete construal and local evaluation of the candidate (e.g., by specifying a proximal context: participants will vote in the nearby polling station down the street), but aspects of the actual voting situation may elicit an abstract construal and global evaluation (e.g., perhaps it is particularly salient that the candidate's term will start at a point that seems relatively distant in time). Here again, an incongruity between measurements with respect to the level at which an attitude object is subjectively construed, rather than the extent to which an attitude object is objectively specified, could lead to inconsistencies between the measured attitudes and behaviors.

We would also suggest that inconsistency in evaluative responding is not simply an issue of compatibility in the objective specification of the attitude object, or even in a person's subjective level of construal, because local evaluations of an attitude object tend to shift in response to incidental details of the immediate social context. The current approach therefore makes predictions about susceptibility to incidental social influence that lie beyond the scope of even a broadly interpreted compatibility principle. An evaluation of a highly specified and concretely construed attitude object in one situation may differ substantially from an evaluation of the same specific and

concretely construed object in another situation. For example, participants' evaluations of the same recycling behavior in two different contexts might differ even when the measures are compatible in degree of specificity and when the participants adopt the same concrete level of construal, if their local evaluations in the two contexts incorporate incidental details with different evaluative implications.

## 4.2. Ideology and political behavior

The notion that distance cues regulate evaluative responding in a way that enables individuals to either immerse themselves within or transcend the present context can be applied to the political domain as well, and may help to shed light on the much-debated question in that literature of whether or when individuals behave in ideologically consistent ways (see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Jost, 2006). Our perspective suggests that distance should regulate the extent to which evaluative responses are guided by broad and general ideologies, or rather by peripheral and incidental features of a particular issue and the current context. Thus, voting behavior may tend to more strongly reflect people's ideological values when a policy or issue is psychologically distant rather than proximal (e.g., when a policy will be implemented next year rather than next week, or when someone is voting by absentee ballot from a spatially distant location, rather than in person at the voting booth). Such a notion would be consistent with past research (e.g., Converse, 1964) suggesting that individuals' here-and-now evaluations of particular political policies may often bear little relation to their ideological values. On the other hand, it would suggest that in the distance (or more generally, when a person is thinking abstractly), ideology may guide evaluative responding in a predictable and meaningful way.

Interestingly, such a link between abstraction and ideological consistency to some extent echoes Converse's (1964) classification of voters into five categories reflecting their "level of conceptualization" of politics, ranging from those at lowest level who reported no knowledge of issue content or policy significance, to those at the highest level whose political attitudes reflected "a relatively abstract and far reaching conceptual dimension" (p. 216). Although Converse viewed differences in abstraction as a between-persons variable, the current perspective in some ways simply extends his analysis to consider the possibility that the same individual may view a given issue at varying levels of abstraction. Thus, ideological consistency may vary not only from person to person, but also for the same person across different situations, depending on the level at which he or she subjectively construes an attitude object at that particular moment.



## 5. EMPIRICAL SUPPORT

Past research is therefore consistent with the idea that distance and abstraction may play a key role in determining evaluative consistency across contexts. We turn now to review multiple lines of recent work that provide more direct empirical support for our perspective by investigating when evaluative responses enable individuals to immerse themselves within or to transcend the particularities of the immediate situation. Together, these studies converge on the conclusion that psychological closeness and concrete thinking increase the extent to which people's evaluative responses reflect their current context, the object's context, and peripheral features of the attitude object, whereas psychological distance and abstract thinking increase the extent to which individuals' responses are consistent with their central values, morals, and ideologies.

### 5.1. Incidental social influence

One especially intriguing aspect of the current context that can have important effects on evaluative responding is the presence of another individual. As guides to action and interaction in the current situation, local evaluations should flexibly adapt to the immediate social context. Therefore, one hypothesis that derives from this model is that evaluations of psychologically close (vs. distant) attitude objects should be more likely to incorporate the attitudes of an incidentally encountered stranger. To test this notion, Ledgerwood et al. (in press) adapted an anticipated interaction paradigm used in past research (e.g., Chen et al., 1996), in which participants expect to discuss a proposed social or political policy with another person in the study.

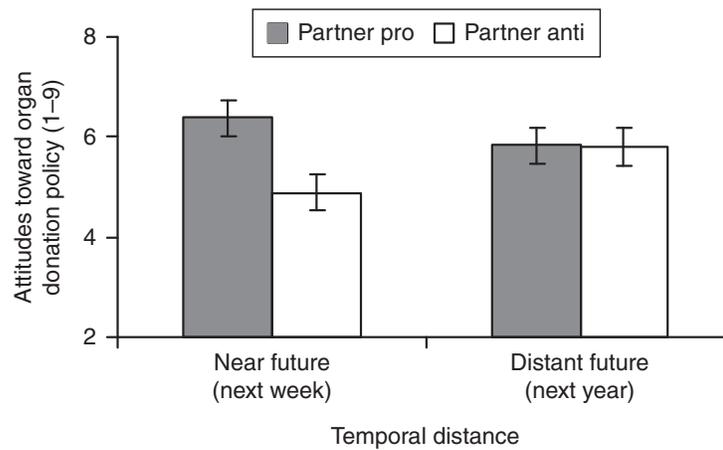
Upon arrival in the lab, participants were informed that they would be paired with another person who was participating in a separate experimental session, and assigned to discuss a randomly selected social or political issue. Participants then saw a description of the issue, which asked them to imagine that a policy had been proposed that would institute assumed consent for organ donation. In other words, consent for organ donation would become the default, and people could opt out if they wished not to donate. According to the description, this policy would start either "one week from today" (in the temporally near condition), or "one year from today" (in the temporally distant condition). Distance to the partner and the length of time until the ostensible conversation were always held constant across conditions; the only difference between conditions was therefore whether the attitude object itself was close or distant in time.

In order to subtly manipulate the ostensible discussion partner's opinion, participants were given the opportunity to exchange some general background information with their partner that included basic demographic questions about gender, age, year, major, and hometown. At the end of this form, a general question from the researchers asked "Is there anything else you think we should know?" In response, the partner appeared to have spontaneously written either "I'm actually really in favor of assumed consent for organ donation" or "I'm actually really against assumed consent for organ donation." This comment served as our manipulation of incidental social influence.

Next, participants privately reported their attitudes toward the proposed policy on a form that they knew would not be shared with their partner. They were asked to rate their agreement with a series of seven statements (e.g., "I am in favor of the proposed policy, which would implement assumed consent for organ donation starting one week [one year] from today," and reverse coded: "Assuming consent for organ donation will create more problems than it will solve"). Responses were averaged to form an index of attitudes toward the policy, which provided our key-dependent variable.

In addition, given that temporal distance could plausibly influence other variables in addition to level of construal, participants were asked to respond to several other items measuring mood, interest, and desire to avoid conflict. The latter construct was measured with items used in previous research (e.g., "There's nothing wrong with going along with what others say in order to get along with them" and "I think it is desirable to go along with the opinions of others when confronted with a controversial issue"; see DeWall et al., 2006) as well as additional items designed specifically for the expected interaction context (e.g., "It is important to me to come to an agreement with my partner about the issue we are going to discuss" and "My goal for the upcoming discussion is to have a smooth and pleasant interaction"). Participants were then informed that no discussion would actually take place and carefully probed for suspicion using a funnel debriefing technique.

Consistent with our hypotheses, the results revealed a significant interaction between psychological distance and partner attitude (see Fig. 6.1). Participants' evaluations aligned with those of their interaction partner when the policy would be implemented in the near future: Their private evaluations of the policy were more favorable when the partner supported it rather than opposed it. In contrast, participants were unaffected by their partners' views when the policy was going to be implemented in the distant future. Moreover, these findings were obtained despite participants in the two conditions reporting equal motivation to get along with their discussion partner, suggesting that the distance manipulation was not simply changing the extent to which they were focused on agreeing with other people. This is consistent with our suggestion that although local and global evaluations may be particularly useful for facilitating certain types of social



**Figure 6.1** Participants' attitudes toward a policy on assumed consent for organ donation as a function of temporal distance and partner attitude (Ledgerwood et al., in press, Study 1). Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

coordination, they arise in response to cues about distance rather than only in response to explicit goals to reach agreement or avoid conflict. Likewise, there was no effect of temporal distance on mood or interest-related variables in this or in later studies.<sup>1</sup> These findings therefore provided intriguing initial support for the idea that responses to near attitude objects are guided by a local evaluative summary that integrates information from the current social context, whereas responses to distant attitude objects are guided by a global summary that is less context-dependent.

Subsequent studies sought to zero in on the mechanism hypothesized to underlie the distance–evaluation link observed in these initial findings. Instead of indirectly manipulating level of construal by varying the temporal distance of the attitude object, we directly induced participants to adopt an abstract or concrete processing orientation using a procedural priming technique (e.g., Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita et al., 2006b). For instance, one way that construal levels differ is in the extent to which they emphasize broad categories versus specific exemplars. Consistent with this notion, past research has shown that

<sup>1</sup> It is also important to distinguish between the manipulation of temporal distance used in this research and one of the classic manipulations of involvement used in persuasion research. Time has of course often been used in conjunction with a carefully selected issue to manipulate involvement by changing whether a participant will be personally affected by the issue (e.g., whether a university policy change will be instituted next year, while participants are still attending the university, or 10 years from now, after participants have graduated; Liberman & Chaiken, 1996; Petty et al., 1981). However, in many cases—as with the national policies used in the studies described here—the applicability of a policy to a particular individual does not change over time, and thus manipulating the date of a policy's implementation should not change the extent to which people are motivated to think about it. This theoretical and methodological point has been confirmed empirically: Data collected in our lab show that whereas a manipulation of involvement increased the number of thoughts participants listed and the amount of time they spent elaborating on a political policy, our manipulation of temporal distance had no such effect (Ledgerwood et al., in press).

abstract construals can be procedurally primed by asking participants to repeatedly generate category labels, whereas concrete construals can be procedurally primed by asking participants to generate a series of exemplars (Fujita & Han, 2009; Fujita et al., 2006b). In one study, therefore, we presented participants with a series of words (e.g., *shoe*, *lunch*) and led them to think abstractly by asking them to think of a category label to which each word could belong (e.g., shoe is an example of *clothing*, and lunch is an example of a *meal*). Other participants were presented with the same word list, but led to think concretely by generating a specific example of each word (e.g., an example of a shoe is a *loafer*; an example of lunch is a *sandwich*).

Of course, levels of construal differ in other ways as well, such as in the extent to which they focus on the superordinate, goal-related aspects of activities as opposed to the more subordinate, concrete means. Abstract construals can therefore also be procedurally primed by asking participants to generate more and more superordinate goals, whereas concrete construals can be primed by leading participants to generate more and more subordinate means (e.g., Freitas et al., 2004). In another study, we presented participants with the activity “Do well in school” and led them to think abstractly by asking them to move up a ladder of four boxes, each connected with an upward-pointing arrow labeled “Why?”. Thus, participants in this condition first answered the question of why they would do well in school, and wrote their response in the next-highest box (e.g., “Get a good job”). Next, they named a reason why they would engage in each subsequent activity that they listed (e.g., one might get a good job in order to “Achieve success,” and one might achieve success in order to “Attain life happiness”). Participants in this condition therefore tended to finish the ladder by generating very superordinate, abstract goals.

In the concrete construal condition, participants were asked to start with the same activity of “Do well in school,” but to move down a ladder of four boxes, each connected with a downward-pointing arrow labeled “How?”. Participants in this condition therefore first answered the question of how they would do well in school, and wrote this in the next-lowest box (e.g., “Study a lot”). They continued to move down the ladder, generating increasingly subordinate means for how they would accomplish each subsequent activity (e.g., one could study a lot by “reading the textbook” and one could read the textbook by “Turning each page”). Participants in this condition therefore tended to finish the ladder by naming very concrete, specific means.

After completing the abstract or concrete procedural priming task from one of these two manipulations of construal level, participants again engaged in an anticipated interaction paradigm. They learned that their partner was either in favor of or against a political issue (euthanasia), and then privately reported their attitudes toward the issue as a whole (e.g., “In general, how do you feel about physician-assisted suicide?” and “Should a terminally ill patient be able to choose to ‘pull the plug?’”). We reasoned that insofar as the effect

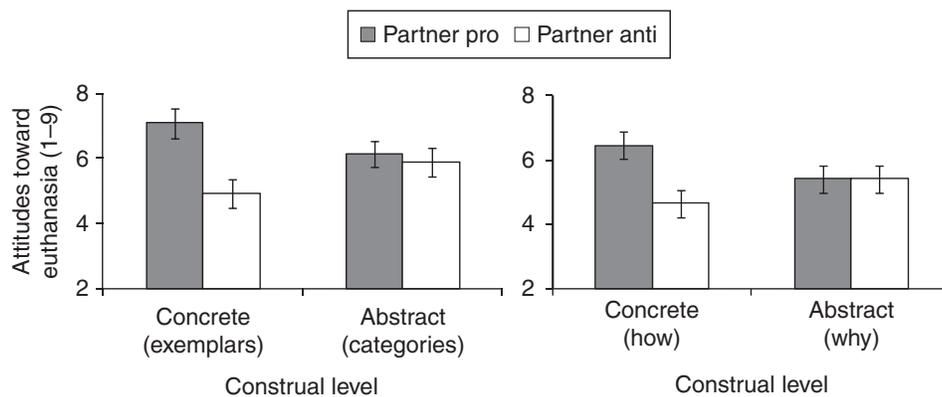
of psychological distance on attitude alignment in the first study was due to differences in level of construal, these diverse, direct manipulations of construal level should produce results that mirrored those of our first experiment.

The results of both studies revealed just such an effect: Participants' attitudes aligned with those of their partner when they had been led to think concretely (after generating concrete exemplars or low-level means), but not when they had been led to think abstractly (after generating abstract categories or high-level goals; see Fig. 6.2). These findings therefore provided initial evidence for the process hypothesized to underlie the effect of psychological distance on evaluative flexibility, by suggesting that the level at which an attitude object is represented influences the extent to which evaluative responses incorporate local aspects of the evaluator's current social context.

This same line of reasoning could be extended to other aspects of the incidental social context to make predictions about when people's evaluations and judgments will incorporate these contextual elements to a greater or lesser degree. For instance, conformity to an incidental group standard should decrease as psychological distance increases. Thus, if participants in Asch's (1955) conformity paradigm were asked to judge the physical length of a line projected on a distant versus near wall, we would predict that their judgments would be less likely to conform to those of an incidental and incorrect group of strangers.

## 5.2. Ideological consistency

Importantly, our perspective predicts not only that local evaluations will tune to a particular situation, but also that global evaluations will show consistency across time and contexts. Although the studies summarized above are consistent with our hypotheses, it is unclear whether the lack of



**Figure 6.2** Participants' attitudes toward euthanasia as a function of procedural prime condition and partner attitude (Ledgerwood et al., in press, Studies 2a and 2b). Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

a social alignment effect in the distant future or abstract construal conditions truly reflects evaluative consistency (as opposed to, e.g., apathy engendered by time discounting; see, e.g., Green & Myerson, 2004). If evaluative responding at a distance is truly informed by a global summary of context-independent information, then temporal distance should decrease the extent to which a contextual but *not* a central factor predicts evaluation of an attitude object. In other words, responses to psychologically distant attitude objects should still be predicted by factors that relate to the central, enduring features of an attitude object, such as people's overarching, decontextualized ideological principles. After all, ideological principles represent general beliefs that relate to the core features of attitude objects regardless of contextual variation, and that tend to be consensually shared with long-term significant others and groups (e.g., Conover & Feldman, 1981; Jost et al., 2008; Kitt & Gleicher, 1950; Rokeach, 1968; Stillman et al., 1960; see also Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). They should therefore predict global evaluations at least as well as they predict local evaluations.

To test this hypothesis, we assessed participants' ideological support for the societal status quo, which is considered to represent one of two key elements of left-right ideologies (see, e.g., Jost et al., 2003, 2004), as a potential predictor of evaluation that should relate to the central features of a number of different political issues (Ledgerwood et al., in press, Studies 3 and 4). As part of a mass-testing session at the beginning of the semester, participants completed an eight-item scale of system support adapted from past research (Kay & Jost, 2003) that asked them to rate their agreement with items such as "In general, the American political system operates as it should" and "American society needs to be radically restructured" (reverse-coded).

Several weeks later, participants came into the lab and learned that an expected discussion partner favored or opposed a political issue. In one study, we manipulated the temporal distance of a proposed policy on deporting illegal immigrants and asked participants how likely they would be to vote for the policy if they were voting now. In another study, we directly manipulated level of construal using a procedural priming manipulation, and measured participants' voting intentions as well as their overall attitudes toward universal healthcare.<sup>2</sup> We reasoned that insofar as an influx of illegal immigrants and a radical change to the healthcare system (at the time) both threaten to disrupt the societal status quo, the extent to which people value preserving the status quo should predict their evaluations of such policies.

<sup>2</sup> We chose to use universal healthcare as the political issue in this study, which was conducted in the Fall of 2007, in part because pilot testing showed that it was an issue toward which the majority of our student population expressed favorable attitudes; they also reported that they were relatively certain about their attitude toward universal healthcare and that it was relatively important to them. This allowed us to ensure that the pattern of results we had observed in previous studies was not limited to issues toward which participants might feel neutral or uncertain, but would in fact generalize to issues about which individuals could express a definite, valenced attitude.

As expected, both distance and abstraction attenuated the impact of a contextual but not a central factor on evaluative responding. When participants considered a temporally close policy or were led to think concretely, their evaluations were predicted by their partner's attitude, but not by their previously reported ideological principles. In these conditions, individuals' evaluative responses toward a political policy were more positive when their partner was in favor of rather than against the policy, regardless of their previously reported ideologies. However, when considering a temporally distal policy or after being led to think abstractly, participants' attitudes were predicted by their ideological principles rather than by their partners' views. For instance, in one study, the greater participants' ideological support for protecting the status quo, the more they opposed radically revamping the existing healthcare system, whereas the opinions of an incidental stranger had no effect on their evaluative responses (see Table 6.1).

Taken together, then, these findings provide considerable initial support for a link between psychological distance and evaluative consistency. When participants construed an attitude object concretely, whether because it was close to them in time or because they had been procedurally primed to think concretely, their attitudes fluidly incorporated the opinions of an incidental stranger with whom they expected to have a fleeting interaction. However, when participants construed that same object more abstractly, because it was distant in time or because they had been led to think abstractly, their attitudes were less susceptible to incidental social influence. Instead, these global evaluations incorporated elements of participants' previously reported ideological principles that related to the central and defining features of the attitude object.

**Table 6.1** Linear regression of participants' voting intentions toward a university healthcare policy on ideological support for the status quo (central factor) and partner attitude (contextual factor), conducted separately for each procedural prime condition (Ledgerwood et al., in press, Study 4)

	Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Concrete	Ideological values	-0.31	0.27	-0.16	0.03
	Partner attitude	2.63 <sup>a</sup>	0.75	0.50	0.25
Abstract	Ideological values	-0.58 <sup>a</sup>	0.23	-0.42	0.17
	Partner attitude	-0.27	0.62	-0.07	0.01

Note: *B*, unstandardized regression coefficient; SE, standard error;  $\beta$ , standardized regression coefficient;  $\Delta R^2$ , proportion of unique variance accounted for by each predictor (adjusting for the other).

<sup>a</sup>  $p < 0.05$ .

### 5.3. Value–behavior consistency

Just as evaluations of distant objects reflect broad ideological principles, they should also incorporate other evaluative information that relates to an object across multiple contexts. In a series of studies, Eyal et al. (2010) examined the extent to which participants' values predicted their intentions to engage in related behaviors in the near or distant future. Values were measured using Schwartz's (1992) value inventory, which asks participants to rate the degree to which each of 56 value items represents a guiding principle in their lives. Responses to items tapping the same value type were averaged to form an index of endorsement for that broad value. For instance, the value items *forgiving*, *helpful*, and *loyal* all tap the broad value of benevolence, whereas the items *ambitious*, *influential*, and *successful* all tap the broad value of achievement.

Endorsement of these broad value types were used to predict related behavioral intentions in the near versus distant future. For instance, in one study, participants rated the likelihood of engaging in 30 behaviors either next week, in the relatively near future, or next year, in the relatively distant future. Each behavior related to one of the 10 broad values from the Schwarz (1992) value inventory: For example, the behavior "use environmentally friendly products" relates to a value of universalism (see Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). Intentions to engage in actions expressing the same value were averaged to form measures of value-relevant behavioral intentions.

If cues about distance promote global evaluations that integrate information relevant for responding to an attitude object across multiple contexts, then broad values and expressed behavioral intentions should be more consistent when behaviors are planned for the distant (vs. near) future. Consistent with this notion, the results showed that participants' values more strongly predicted relevant behavioral intentions for next year (average correlation = 0.40) than for next week (average correlation = 0.25; Eyal et al., 2009, Study 2).

A subsequent study demonstrated that whereas distance increases the extent to which behavioral intentions reflect a person's values, proximity increases the extent to which intentions reflect low-level feasibility concerns that relate to the particular context in which a behavior will be performed (Study 3). In this experiment, the degree to which participants endorsed a value of benevolence was used to predict the amount of time they were willing to volunteer to help a graduate student with her dissertation experiments. In addition, the feasibility of this behavior was varied by manipulating whether the experiments would take place in the early morning (low feasibility) or in the afternoon (high feasibility). As expected, benevolence predicted willingness to help the graduate student in a few months (distant future), but not in a few days (near future). In contrast, feasibility predicted participants' willingness to help in the near future, but not in the distant future. In other words, participants' distant future intentions reflected broad, context-independent values that allowed them to

transcend the particularities of any one situation; in contrast, near future intentions reflected concrete feasibility concerns that helped to immerse participants in the details of the behavior's context.

Recent research has also begun to shed some light on the processes by which distance and construal level might shape evaluative consistency. New findings suggest that distance in fact changes the perceived relevance of high-level (vs. low-level) evaluative information (Eyal et al., 2010). In one study, participants' endorsement of achievement and benevolence values were measured using items from Schwartz's (1992) value inventory. In a separate part of the same session, participants imagined that they were trying to choose between working extra hours in order to increase their chances for a promotion at work, and helping a friend who had asked for their help. Half the participants imagined this choice taking place in the near future (next week) and half imagined it taking place in the distant future (during a week in a year from now). Participants were asked to rate the relevance of items tapping achievement and benevolence considerations (e.g., personal success and achievement vs. friendship and loyalty). Items relating to achievement and items relating to benevolence were averaged to form two scales of value relevance.

Eyal and colleagues predicted that participants' value structure (i.e., the relative importance of benevolence vs. achievement values) would predict the perceived relevance of these values for distant future behavior more than for near future behavior. As expected, participants perceived the more personally important value to be more relevant for a distant (vs. near) future decision, insofar as they felt this value was highly important compared to the other potentially applicable value. Thus, important values may guide distant behaviors more strongly than near behaviors in part because they are perceived as more relevant for distant versus near behaviors. These results are consistent with the idea that cues about distance promote the integration of high-level, global information that can relate to an object regardless of its specific context.

#### 5.4. Morality

Other research has demonstrated that distance moderates the extent to which broad moral principles or context-specific details guide evaluations of others' behaviors. In one study, Eyal et al. (2008, Study 2) examined Israeli participants' judgments of harmless but potentially offensive moral transgressions that were imagined to occur in the near future (tomorrow) or distant future (next year). For instance, one scenario described a woman who finds an old Israeli flag that she does not want anymore, and so cuts it up to use for rags to clean the house. In a second scenario, a family's pet dog is struck by a car, and they decide to cook it and eat it; the third described two siblings who engaged in sexual intercourse with no chance of

reproduction (see also Haidt, 2001; Haidt et al., 1993). Participants were then asked to evaluate how wrong they felt each behavior to be. As predicted, participants judged the behaviors described in these scenarios more harshly when they imagined the transgression occurring in the distant rather than near future.

A subsequent study extended these findings to another dimension of psychological distance by manipulating whether participants judged the transgressions from their own perspective (low social distance) or from a third person perspective (high social distance; Eyal et al., 2008, Study 3). Like temporal distance, social distance increases abstraction (e.g., Libby et al., 2005; Liviatan et al., 2008; Nigro & Neisser, 1983), and should therefore comparably influence the extent to which evaluative responding consistently reflects overarching moral principles. In this study, participants again read a series of scenarios that described harmless moral transgressions as well as harmful ones (e.g., a girl who pushes another child off of a swing; see Haidt et al., 1993). Participants in the low social distance condition were asked to focus on their own thoughts and feelings as they read the scenario, whereas participants in the high social distance condition were asked to think about a specific other person they knew (e.g., a neighbor or family member) and to focus on the thoughts and feelings that this person would have while reading about the event. Participants then rated how acceptable each transgression was, either from their own perspective or from the perspective of the other person. Again, participants judged the transgressions more harshly from a psychologically distant perspective (the third person) than from a psychologically proximal one (the first person).

If broad moral principles are more likely to influence evaluative responding at a distance, then not only should people judge more distant transgressions more harshly, but they should also judge distant virtuous acts more positively. To test this prediction, Eyal et al. (2008, Study 4) asked participants to read a series of three scenarios that described potentially virtuous actions (e.g., a young couple decides to adopt a disabled child with the knowledge that the government will provide extra monetary support). Participants imagined the scenarios occurring in either the near future (tomorrow) or the distant future (a year from now), and evaluated how virtuous the described behaviors were. As predicted, participants evaluated the potentially virtuous actions more positively when they imagined them occurring next year, compared to when they imagined the same behaviors occurring tomorrow.

Subsequent research documented that these effects extend to emotional responses as well. Agerström and Björklund (2009, Studies 1 and 2) asked Swedish undergraduates to imagine a series of three scenarios taking place in the near future (today) or in the distant future (in 30 years). Each scenario described a situation that threatened human welfare, and described the harm that had been done to a specific victim. For example, one scenario set in

Africa read: “Life in Darfur is difficult. In a small village in the outskirts of Darfur lives a woman, Rokia, with her family. On several occasions when she walks home from school, she gets raped and beaten by the Janjaweed militia” (p. 59). Each scenario was followed by a description of an action that could be taken to ameliorate the situation. For instance, the Darfur scenario was followed by a suggestion that providing a monetary donation would help. Likewise, the second scenario described an Ebola outbreak that led to a need for blood donations to Swedish hospitals, and a third described a problem with dangerous country roads in Sweden that could be helped by signing a petition to improve road safety.

After reading each scenario, participants were asked to indicate how wrong they thought it would be for another Swedish citizen *not* to take the proposed prosocial action given that they had the means to do so. Next, they were asked how angry they would feel if the target person failed to engage in the prosocial action. The results revealed that participants judged these moral failures to be more wrong, and reacted to the behavior with more anger, when they imagined the moral failure occurring in the distant versus near future.

In a second study, Agerstrom and Björklund also assessed participants’ predictions of their own prosocial behavior, in order to test whether the heightened reliance on broad moral principles in the distant future condition would generalize to individuals’ self-perceptions. After imagining the three scenarios described above taking place in the near or distant future, participants were asked to indicate how much they would contribute to help improve the situation in Darfur, how likely they would be to donate blood to help in the Ebola crisis, and how likely they would be to sign a petition to help improve road conditions. As expected, participants were more likely to express prosocial behavioral intentions themselves when imagining the scenario in the more distant future.

In summary, these studies demonstrate that multiple manipulations of temporal and social distance increase the perceived wrongness of actions and inactions that violate moral standards, amplify the perceived virtuosity of actions that align with moral standards, and heighten individuals’ own intentions to behave in moral ways. Taken together, these findings suggest that psychological distance increases the extent to which individuals’ evaluative responses at a range of levels—including judgments, emotions, and behavioral intentions—are informed by broad moral considerations rather than specific details of the context in which a behavior occurs.

## 5.5. Persuasion

More broadly, our perspective suggests that high-level construals enable evaluative responses that focus on the key, invariant features of an attitude object, whereas low-level construals enable evaluations to

incorporate peripheral features and incidental details unique to one instantiation of an attitude object. If this is the case, then evaluations of distant attitude objects should be more likely to take into account information that relates to an object's central and enduring characteristics, whereas evaluations of proximal objects should be more likely to incorporate information related to the object's peripheral details. Consistent with this logic, research suggests that distance increases the impact of persuasive appeals that relate to high-level, central features of an attitude object that transcend here-and-now concerns, rather than low-level, peripheral features particular to the current context (Fujita et al., 2008).

In one study, for instance, Fujita and colleagues examined whether temporal distance would moderate the persuasive impact of high-level versus low-level persuasive arguments. New York University students were asked to take part in a pilot program ostensibly designed by the Psychology Department to examine the effectiveness of a new format for presenting course information to undergraduates (Fujita et al., 2008, Study 1). They were given course descriptions for social, developmental, cognitive, and abnormal psychology classes, and were informed that these courses would be offered in either the relatively near future (next semester) or the relatively distant future (next academic year). Each description was followed by six favorable statements, ostensibly written by students who had previously taken the class, that either addressed mostly high-level, goal-relevant concerns about the new course or low-level, goal-irrelevant concerns.

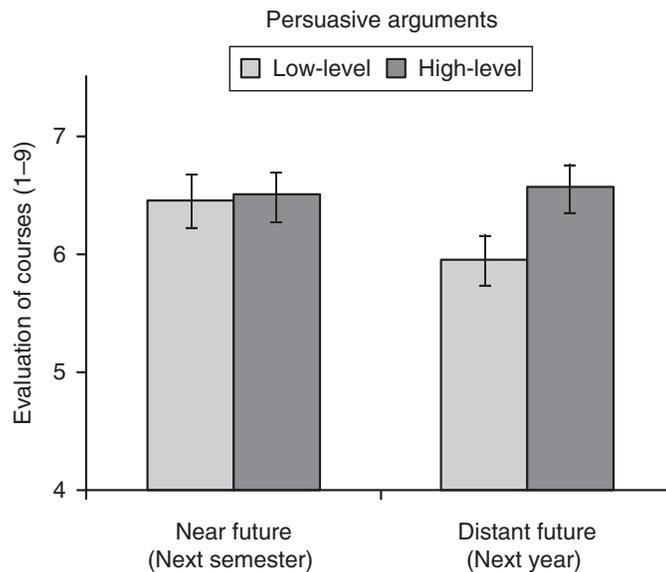
These statements were selected on the basis of pilot testing to determine what characteristics NYU students considered to be high or low in importance when deciding whether to enroll in a course. Participants rated a series of 28 characteristics on the extent to which each should be an important factor in choosing between courses. Based on the results of this pilot, six high-importance characteristics (e.g., clarity of the lectures, fairness of the grading) and six low-importance characteristics (e.g., quality of the lecture hall, frequent use of audiovisuals) were chosen as the basis for the stimulus materials. Next, two positive statements were created for each of the chosen characteristics. For example, one positive statement about the fairness of the grading read: "The professors and the TA's do a really good job of grading in this class. It's always fair and you're never surprised by what you get. My grades always reflected what I knew and had learned" (p. 565). From this pool of positive statements, the researchers created four sets of six arguments (one for each of the four class descriptions). Half the sets contained two high-level and four low-level statements, whereas the other half contained four high-level and two low-level statements. Order of the statements, order of the classes, and which class was paired with which statement were all counterbalanced across participants.

Thus, each participant considered both courses that were positively described by predominantly high-level arguments and courses that were

positively described by predominantly low-level arguments. The temporal distance of the courses was varied as a between-subjects factor. Participants were then asked to rate the extent to which they would like to take the course, how appealing the class was, and their level of interest in taking the course. These items were averaged to form an index of positivity toward each course.

As predicted, there was a significant interaction between temporal distance of the courses and level of persuasive argumentation (see Fig. 6.3). Whereas participants evaluating courses for the next academic year were more persuaded by statements that emphasized high-level, goal-relevant aspects of the course (vs. low-level, goal-irrelevant aspects), participants evaluating courses for next semester were not.

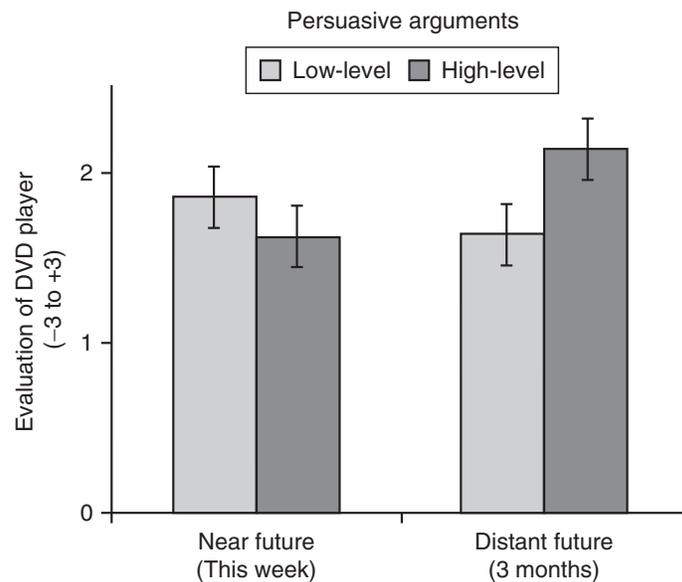
In a second study, Fujita and colleagues examined the effect of psychological distance on the persuasive impact of arguments that stress high-level desirability features of an object, which are invariant across contexts, versus low-level feasibility features that relate to a particular context. Participants imagined coming across an online sale for DVD players that was going to occur in the near future (this week) or distant future (3 months from now). The participants then saw seven arguments in favor of purchasing one particular DVD player. The first argument either addressed a high-level desirability feature of the DVD player (pointing out that the player is made of environmentally friendly materials) or a low-level feasibility feature (suggesting that the manual, which one would presumably consult in



**Figure 6.3** Participants' evaluations of courses as a function of time until course is scheduled and level of persuasive argumentation (Fujita et al., 2008, Study 1). Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

order to set up the DVD player initially, is easy to use). The remaining six arguments were held constant across conditions and contained a mixture of desirability and feasibility arguments, such as noting that the player has a high-quality digital sound system and that it comes with two free DVDs. After reading the seven arguments, participants were asked to rate their evaluation of the product.

The results paralleled those of the first study. Whereas participants who imagined the distant-future sale were more persuaded by an argument that emphasized a high-level desirability feature rather than a low-level feasibility feature, participants who imagined the sale occurring in the near future were not (see Fig. 6.4). Importantly, these results were not due to a difference between temporal distance conditions in the apparent relevance of the attitudinal issue: In both studies, care was taken to ensure that the decision would always seem personally relevant to participants (for instance, in the first study, only first through third year students were recruited to ensure that everyone would perceive a decision about what courses to take next year as personally relevant). Instead, temporal distance presumably led participants to construe the attitude object more abstractly, which increased the persuasiveness of arguments emphasizing invariant versus context-specific features of the attitude object.



**Figure 6.4** Participants' evaluations of a DVD player as a function of time until sale and level of persuasive argumentation (Fujita et al., 2008, Study 2). Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

## 5.6. Aggregate and individualized information

If distance functionally regulates the extent to which evaluations tend to incorporate global versus local information, then it should influence the extent to which individuals seek out and attend to global information that aggregates across multiple encounters with an attitude object versus local information about a single experience with that object. For instance, people are often exposed to aggregated information about other people's experiences with an object, such as statistics about a medication's average effectiveness across a large number of clinical trials, or an average customer review that generalizes across many individuals' particular experiences with a product. At the same time, individuals often encounter individualized information about these same objects, such as a casual acquaintance's own particular experience with the medication, or a single customer's rating of an online product. According to the present perspective, distance should regulate the extent to which individuals attend to and use these two types of social information.

Consistent with this logic, Ledgerwood et al. (2010) found that temporal distance increased the relative weight placed on aggregate information versus individualized information when participants were asked to choose between two novel medications. In one study, for instance, participants were asked to imagine a scenario taking place in either the near future (one day from today) or the distant future (one year from today). The scenario was described as follows:

Imagine that it's one day from today [one year from today]. You've been getting migraine headaches, and you've been thinking of trying a new headache medication because your regular pain relievers don't seem to help. You've heard that there are two relatively new medications that don't have the negative side effects of some other pain relievers, and you decide to learn a bit more about them.

Another version of the study described a similar choice between two sleeping pills. The scenarios went on to describe two types of information about each drug: Aggregate research findings based on a large number of people's experiences with the drugs, and individualized information based on an acquaintance's single experience with the drugs. Drug X was clearly favored by aggregate information: Research showed that it was effective for a high percentage of people who had tried it (e.g., 90%), compared to a much lower effectiveness rate for Drug Y (e.g., 60%). Drug Y, in contrast, was clearly favored by individualized information: A casual acquaintance who had tried both medications said that Drug Y worked for her, whereas Drug X had not.<sup>3</sup> Participants then indicated how interested, happy, and optimistic they would be about trying each drug. These ratings were

<sup>3</sup> Neither the order in which this information was presented (aggregate vs. individualized first) nor the name of the drugs (X vs. Y) had any impact on the results.

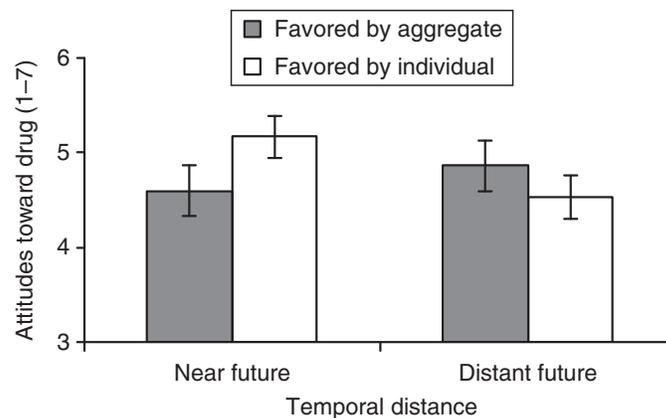
averaged to form overall evaluation scores toward the aggregate-favored and individual-favored drugs.

Consistent with our perspective, temporal distance to the scenario increased the relative weight placed on aggregate versus individualized information about other people's experiences with the medications (see Fig. 6.5). Whereas participants preferred the drug favored by a single acquaintance (vs. aggregated research findings) in the near future, this preference disappeared and even slightly reversed for the distant future condition.

A second study sought to extend these results to a domain in which participants generally trust and utilize aggregated data, in order to test whether temporal distance would not only decrease a preference for individualized information but also increase a preference for aggregate information. Both patterns are consistent with the perspective proposed here, but whereas the first could potentially be explained by time discounting (see, e.g., Frederick et al., 2002; Green & Myerson, 2004), the second could not.

In this study, we therefore chose a more familiar and relevant setting for our participants: that of a typical online shopping situation in which consumers often encounter and consider both average customer reviews and single reviews written by particular customers. We expected that in this setting, participants would generally trust the average review more than a single review. However, we still expected that temporal distance would increase the relative weight placed on aggregate information that summarized multiple people's experiences with the attitude object versus individualized information reflecting a single person's experience with that object.

Participants were again asked to imagine a scenario taking place in either the near future (one week from today) or distant future (one year from today).

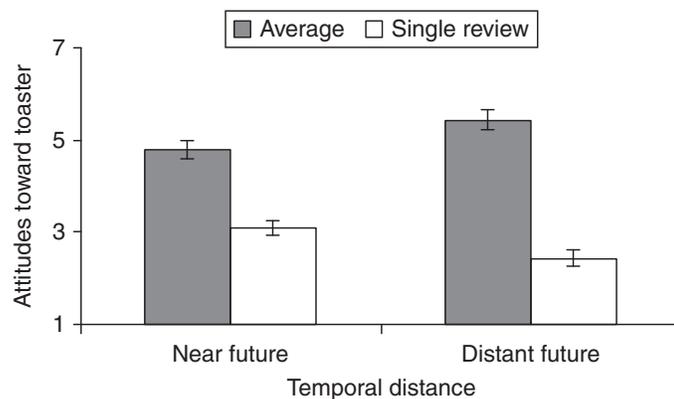


**Figure 6.5** Attitudes toward the migraine medication favored by aggregate information and the medication favored by individualized information as a function of temporal distance condition (Ledgerwood et al., 2010, Study 1b). Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

In the scenario, they woke up one morning to find that their toaster was no longer working, and went online to Amazon.com in order to find a new one. They came across two possibilities. Toaster A (favored by aggregate information) had a high average rating of 4.5 out of 5 stars across a large number of customer reviews. However, the first review that appeared for Toaster A happened to be negative: It stated that the “toaster does not work very well and is not recommended.” In contrast, Toaster B (favored by individualized information) had a low average rating of 2.5 out of 5 stars across a large number of reviews. On the other hand, its first review happened to be positive, stating that the “toaster works as advertised and is a wonderful addition to the kitchen.” No further information about the two toasters was provided.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to indicate how interested, likely, confident, and happy they would be about buying each toaster, as well as how they felt in general about each toaster. These ratings were averaged to form an overall evaluation score for the aggregate-favored and individual-favored toasters. Next, participants reported how much they would be willing to pay for each toaster in dollars and cents. They were also asked to choose which of the two toasters they would buy if both were the same price.

The results confirmed the anticipated main effect of information type: In general, participants in this setting preferred the toaster favored by the average (vs. individual) customer review. More importantly, temporal distance again increased the relative weight placed on aggregate versus individualized information (see Fig. 6.6). Participants in the near future condition showed some preference for the toaster favored by the average customer review over the one favored by the individual review, but those



**Figure 6.6** Attitudes toward the toaster favored by aggregate information and the toaster favored by individualized information as a function of temporal distance condition (Ledgerwood et al., 2010, Study 2). Error bars indicate one standard error above and below the mean.

in the distant future condition were even more positive about the aggregate-favored toaster, and more negative toward the individual-favored toaster. This pattern extended to participants' willingness to pay for the toasters: In the near future, participants were willing to pay an average of \$5.73 more for the toaster favored by the customer average (vs. the single review), whereas in the distant future, this price difference almost doubled to \$10.79. Similarly, participants were significantly more likely to choose the average-favored toaster for the more distant future scenario.

Across these different scenarios, then, temporal distance influenced the extent to which participants' evaluative responses reflected global or local social information. In the distance, evaluations were relatively more influenced by aggregate information that averaged over multiple individuals' experiences with an attitude object, across the range of those individuals' particular contexts. With increasing proximity, evaluations were relatively more influenced by individualized information that reflected one person's experience with the attitude object in one particular context.

## 6. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The research summarized in the present chapter suggests that psychological distance plays a critical role in shaping evaluative consistency and context-dependence. Across several lines of research, evaluative responses toward psychologically remote or abstractly construed objects appear to reflect global information that can relate to the object across multiple instantiations and contexts, whereas responses toward more psychologically proximal or concretely construed objects tend to reflect local information specific to a single context. Together, these studies demonstrate that distance tends to increase the extent to which evaluative responses incorporate a person's ideological and moral values, as well as arguments about an attitude object's central and goal-relevant features, and information that aggregates across a range of other people's experiences with the object. Because this global information is not specific to any one particular context, evaluative responses that incorporate primarily global information should tend to look relatively consistent across different situations. We have proposed that by prompting global evaluations, cues about distance therefore allow individuals to regulate their actions in ways that transcend the particularities of the here and now.

In contrast, proximity appears to increase the extent to which evaluative responses are shaped by the incidental opinions of a stranger, context-specific feasibility concerns, situational constraints on behavior, goal-irrelevant features particular to a single instantiation of an attitude object, and individualized information that reflects a single other person's experience with the

object. Because such local information reflects the unique details of a person's and the object's current context, evaluative responses that incorporate primarily local information will fluctuate as details of the current context change. By prompting local evaluations, proximity cues allow people to flexibly respond to the details and demands of the present situation, and thereby appropriately regulate their actions for what is imminent.

A global–local perspective on evaluation could have interesting implications for understanding how individuals regulate their social relationships both within and across contexts. According to shared reality theory (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; see also Festinger, 1950; Hardin & Conley, 2001; Turner, 1991), individuals are chronically motivated to establish and maintain a shared view of the world with other people. These shared realities can help facilitate common ground, conversation, and coordination between strangers in a particular situation (see, e.g., Clark & Brennan, 1991; Krauss & Fussell, 1996); likewise, they can help build and maintain strong relationships between individuals and their significant others, or with important social groups (see, e.g., Davis & Rusbult, 2001; Levine et al., 1993). Consistent with this notion, numerous studies have demonstrated that people often align their self-perceptions, attitudes, and even memories with the viewpoints of incidental strangers (e.g., Echterhoff et al., 2005; Lowery et al., 2001; Sinclair et al., 2005b). Similarly, individuals tend to adopt and defend attitudes and beliefs that are shared within important relationships or groups (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Haslam et al., 1996; Ledgerwood & Chaiken, 2007; Sinclair et al., 2005a; Stangor et al., 2001; see Levine et al., 1993; Mackie & Queller, 2000, for reviews). These literatures therefore suggest that people tend both to establish new shared realities within novel or even inconsequential social situations, and to maintain preexisting views of the world that are shared with significant others or groups. However, research has yet to directly address whether these types of shared realities are equivalent, or how potential conflicts between multiple shared realities might be resolved (Hardin & Higgins, 1996).

If evaluative responses are assumed to be an important component of shared realities, our approach could provide one way of addressing this issue. Specifically, it may be that local evaluations are particularly functional for facilitating shared reality within the current conversational setting or situation, whereas global evaluations function to facilitate shared reality within ongoing and important social relationships. For instance, we reviewed research suggesting that local evaluations flexibly shift in response to changes in an incidental conversation partner's attitude, whereas global evaluations tend to reflect people's ideological values (Ledgerwood et al., *in press*). Notably, prior research suggests that ideological values are often shared with important relationship partners or groups (see Jost et al., 2008, for a review); evaluations that tune toward these values would therefore seem to be functional for maintaining these ongoing relationships. It is also

possible that changes to a particular situation versus an ongoing relationship may differentially impact local and global evaluations. Thus, global evaluations may shift as the attitudes expressed by a long-term relationship partner or an important ingroup shift over time, or when a person moves from one relationship or ingroup to another. Future research might fruitfully explore when and how evaluations of psychologically distal objects change in response to global social influences that a person encounters across multiple contexts.

## 7. CONCLUSION

We conclude by reiterating once more the functionality of both local and global evaluations for the social organism. On the one hand, people's ability to immerse themselves within the current context allows them to flexibly tune their behaviors to adapt to the particular demands of the here and now. Such flexibility can have important positive consequences, such as creating and improving social bonds with other people in the present situation. For instance, research has shown that behavioral mimicry—which can be viewed as a form of local tuning—can facilitate interpersonal relationships by improving liking and rapport (e.g., Bernieri, 1988; Lakin & Chartrand, 2003; see Chartrand & Van Baaren, 2009, for a review). Indeed, one might argue that a multitude of context effects, including automatic effects of the context on attitudes and behavior as well as situationally activated goals, represent key components of an important and adaptive local self-regulatory process that allows individuals to automatically adjust their behavior to the specific requirements and affordances of the immediate social situation (see, e.g., Aarts et al., 2004; Bargh, 1997; Cesario et al., 2006; Fishbach et al., 2003; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Kay et al., 2004; Ledgerwood & Chaiken, 2007; Shah, 2003; Sinclair et al., 2005c).

At the same time, humans have the remarkable capacity to transcend the particularities of the immediate context to contemplate the past and future, coordinate action at a distance, generate counterfactuals, and imagine the world from others' perspectives. To do so, people must be able to screen out the details of their current context and respond instead to the context-invariant aspects of psychologically distant objects and events. This ability to move beyond direct experience allows people to control local impulses to behave in line with long-term, global concerns, to communicate and coordinate action with socially distant others by perspective taking, and to imagine alternative worlds and strive to change what is to what could be (e.g., Ainslie, 1975; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Epstude & Roese, 2008; Fujita et al., 2006b; Isaacs & Clark, 1987; Liberman & Trope, 2008; Maratsos, 1973; Mischel et al., 1989). The research

summarized in this chapter suggests that cues about distance can functionally shape evaluative responding to either immerse people within the current context, or help them transcend it.

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