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Construal Level Theory and Consumer Behavior

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The three commentaries on our paper "Construal Levels and Psychological Distance: Effects on Representation, Prediction, Evaluation, and Behavior" offer insightful theoretical extensions and practical applications of construal level theory (CLT). We were inspired and challenged by the commentaries to elaborate on a number of issues, although our elaboration more often raises questions and speculations than provides definite answers. Owing to space limitations, however, we could discuss only some of the issues raised in the commentaries. The first set of issues concerns our theoretical framework, namely, similarities and differences among distance dimensions, the question of additional distances, the nature of the interaction among distances, and the relationship between psychological distance and construct of stimulus information sampling. The second set of issues concerns applications of CLT to consumer choice, namely, how to make better decisions, the nature of regret, and how people construct and process choice sets.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE?

Similarities and Differences among the Dimensions of Psychological Distance

As both we and the commentaries suggest, the various dimensions of psychological distance upon which we have focused (temporal distance, social distance, hypotheticality, and spatial distance) each seems independently relevant to consumer choice. The dimension of future temporal distance raises the questions of saving, investing in durable goods, buying things for future use, and taking actions for future goals (i.e., self control). The dimension of past temporal distance raises the question of regret. Social distance raises the questions of how people advise others, how they decide for others, and how they buy presents. Probability raises, of course, the question of gambling, but also questions about uncertain outcomes (e.g., launching a new product) and about counterfactual reasoning. Spatial distance raises, perhaps, the question of internet shopping. At first glance, then, each of these distance dimensions seems to pertain to a different domain with distinct questions and solutions. An intriguing idea that the commentaries raise is that the communalities among the dimensions of psychological distance may allow us to import questions and solutions from one domain to the other. For example, Lynch and Zauberman mention the finding that people save more if they precommit to save distant future raises in salary than without such precommitment. Would they also save more when the raises are less likely? Would they decide on saving others' incomes more than their own? As another example, consider the finding that in more distant future gambles, amounts are weighted more and probabilities are weighted less (Sagristano, Trope, & Liberman, 2002). Would that also be true for unlikely gambles, when gambling for other people, when gambling over the internet rather than in a real casino? Also consider the finding that temporal distance increases the weight of desirability relative to feasibility. In buying presents, would people underweight feasibility and overweight desirability? And would giving a feasibility-centered gift create a sense of interpersonal closeness?

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Although construal level theory (CLT) points to similarities across the dimensions of psychological distance, there are also important differences among the dimensions, as noted by Lynch and Zauberman as well as by Fiedler. Time is unidimensional and uncontrolled. We incessantly travel from the past to the future and have no control over time. Spatial distance has three dimensions and it may be controlled by moving closer or farther away from things at wish. Social distance is somewhat controllable as are probabilities. Another important difference among the distances is their relation to valence. Whereas social distance reduces positivity (e.g., ingroups are perceived as more positive than outgroups), temporal distance typically enhances positivity (people are more positive about the more distant future). Further, Lynch and Zauberman point out that there is less within person variation (and thus, correspondingly, less opportunity for intrapersonal preference reversals) for the dimensions of social and spatial distance then for the dimensions of temporal distance and uncertainty. Do these differences in controllability, unidimensionality, positivity and intrapersonal variation matter for consumer judgment and decision making? We think the answer is positive and definitely worth exploring in future research.

On a methodological level, the differences between distance dimensions may be used to unconfound effects of distance from other variables. For example, if one suspects that an effect of temporal distancing is actually due to positivity (e.g., that overcommitment increases with temporal distance because of future optimism), one may wish to examine the effects of social distancing and hypotheticality. If similar effects are found with these other dimensions of distance, then future optimism becomes a less plausible explanation.

How Do Distance Dimensions Interact?

Fiedler raises the question of how the different dimensions interact. It is important to note that distances cannot be easily compared to each other. For example, it is impossible to provide a general estimate of how much spatial distance is equivalent to the difference between today and next week. This may depend on the context. A related question is whether distances typically combine in an additive or a nonadditive way. For example, does temporal distance have a similar effect on one's own decision as on the decisions of another person? Does it have a similar effect on likely events as on less likely events? The general psychophysical principle of diminishing sensitivity with magnitude together with CLT's assumption of interchangeability of distance dimensions predict that the impact of distance on one dimension would be reduced when combined with distance on another dimension. Thus, temporal distance would have less impact on the advice given to another person than on one's own decisions, and on hypothetical events than on real events. This prediction, however, awaits empirical corroboration.

Are There Other Dimensions of Distance?

We rush to say that various dimensions of distance other than time, space hypotheticality, and social distance may, of course, be found. Nevertheless, we hesitate to identify correlates of distance with distance. For example, amount of knowledge, emotional intensity, and involvement are likely outcomes of proximity. However, unlike Fielder, we do not define these as distance dimensions. Importantly, we conceptualize level of construal as a type of mental representation that is invoked by distance rather than as a distance dimension in its own right. Thus, we prefer, for theoretical reasons, to use the term distance to refer to dimensions that may be defined objectively, such as time, space, probability, and social agents. Referring to the construal of objects and the motivational and emotional responses to those objects as distances invites circularity. For example, by using the term affective distance one could predict, of course, that affect would be less intense with increasing distance, but this would be tautological. Likewise, if level of construal is defined as a distance dimension, then the contention that distal things are construed more abstractly becomes tautological.

Construal or Information Sampling?

Fiedler proposes to view the issue of psychological distance from the perspective of ecological psychology, suggesting that the effect of distance on construal may be explained by sampling spaces. Specifically, he suggests that for proximal inputs, participants use larger and more enriched sampling spaces than for distal stimuli. This represents a different approach than the constructivist approach that is at the core of CLT. We think that several aspects of our research findings are hard to explain in terms of sampling-spaces theory. A sampling-spaces approach would predict, for example, that more effort would be invested in processing proximal stimuli than in processing distal stimuli. Several studies that examined this question did not find such effect. For example, when presented with sets of alternatives that comprise feature by alternative matrices, participants searched a similar number of cells when making decision for the distant future as for the near future (Borovoi, Liberman, & Trope, 2006). Near and distant future searches differed, however, in their patterns. Whereas distant future searches were within dimensions, near future searches were within alternatives. We think that it is difficult to account for this result by claiming that near future sets were processed as a larger sampling space than distant future sets. Similarly, participants describing a video that was filmed in a spatially distant location used more abstract language than those describing a video filmed in a spatially near location; participants did not, however, differ in the number of predicates or total words that they used in their video description (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). A

sampling-space approach would suggest that they would use more words in the near than the distant condition. More generally, we do not think that the results obtained within CLT can be easily reduced to amount of processing or amount of knowledge. In fact, sometimes high-level construals require no less and even more elaboration than low-level construals. The difference between these two modes lies in quality of processing rather than in quantity.

CLT AND DECISION MAKING

Quality of Decisions

Is it better to make decision from a distant or a proximal perspective? For example, who is more likely to be correct, the advisor (with the distanced perspective) or the advisee (with the proximal perspective)? The answer is, not surprisingly, "it depends" and the challenge is to specify the factors upon which it is dependent. The commentaries offer interesting insights in response to this challenge. Fiedler suggests that the effect of distance on decision quality depends on whether utility derives from low-level feasibility features or from high-level desirability features. Indeed, it would be interesting to classify products in that way. For example, it is typically found that people tend to derive more utility than they initially expect from an apartment's closeness to work, and derive less utility than they expect from its spaciousness. Inasmuch as the former is a lower level aspect than the latter, it would be more reasonable to make the decision about renting an apartment from closer temporal, geographical, and social perspectives. Similarly, Lynch and Zauberman offer the example of consumers' tendency to choose options based on rebates that they never actually redeem. Because the weight of feasibility decreases with temporal distance (and the rebate redemption is generally framed in the distant future), consumers would be better off considering the decision they would make if the rebate had to be redeemed that day. Of course, it is often the high-level feature that is generally neglected in favor of the low-level feature. For example, in decisions in which people tend to be risk averse or oversensitive to risk (e.g., in investing in stocks vs. bonds; in buying insurance) it would be useful to make decisions from a distance, because risk is a low-level feature that will be attenuated by distancing.

Fiedler further suggests that when satisfaction with a product is determined by a single central feature, a distal perspective might be optimal, because the central feature would be singled out and would not be diluted with lower level, more peripheral considerations. For example, past performance oftentimes is the best predictor of future performance. It is possible that predictions for the more distant future would put more weight on this predictor and be less diluted with other, less informative considerations. When a more nuanced view is commendable, then a close perspective would yield a more optimal decision.

Another observation made by Fiedler is that estimates of contingencies may depend on the unit of analysis. For example, the correlation between crime rate and race is higher at the aggregate level of cities than at the level of individuals. Since according to CLT unit of analysis would be coarser with distance, distance should enhance judgments of contingencies at the aggregate level. Whether aggregation is more correct, however, has to do with the purpose of assessing contingency. For example, if one considers general policies (e.g., allocation of police force to towns) then the aggregate level is more accurate, and a distal perspective would yield a better decision. If, however, one considers individuals (whether or not an individual is guilty of a crime) then the individual level is more appropriate and a close perspective will yield a better decision.

There are other predictions that may be derived from CLT with respect to decision quality. CLT predicts that people would be more satisfied and make better decisions when distance matches the type of decision problem. For example, making feasibility-related decisions regarding the near future and desirability-related decisions about the distance future should be more satisfactory and yield better outcomes than making desirability-related decisions about the near future and feasibility-related decisions about the distant future. In fact, Agrawal, Trope, and Liberman (2006) found that people prefer distant choices that are based on desirability and near choices that are based on feasibility than the other way around. In this context it is interesting to invoke Fiedler's intriguing suggestion that pricing induces a distal perspective whereas choice induces a proximal perspective. Is it possible that with increased distance people would be better at (and more satisfied with) pricing relative to choosing? Would they be better at pricing than choosing when doing it for other people but not for themselves or when buying over the internet than when shopping in a real store?

The notion of congruency between distance and the decision problem is closely related to persuasion (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004). As noted by Dhar and Kim, CLT suggests that to enhance persuasiveness, a message has to emphasize higher level aspects and de-emphasize lower level aspects if it is refers to decisions about more distal entities—future times, other people, other places, and hypothetical events.

Regret

Directly related to the issue of decision quality is the question of regret—the feeling of decision makers that they might have made a wrong decision. Regret is dynamic. What we regret first is not necessarily what we regret later. As Dhar and Kim point out, CLT predicts that the distant future and the distant past offer somewhat similar and

high-level perspectives on an issue than near future and recent past, which are bound to a low level of construing a situation. This suggests that when we precommit to something a long time in advance, we might regret it as its time of implementation approaches and shortly after that, but then come to appreciate the precommitment choice. For example, when the time of a conference approaches, we might regret committing ourselves to organizing a symposium there, but after the conference is over, we might gradually come to appreciate the precommitment. It is possible that in a similar way we first regret but later appreciate decisions that are made for us by others (e.g., prearranged marriages). CLT also predicts that a similar difference in regret would be found across social distances. What we regret ourselves is not what we expect others to regret.

Construction of Sets of Alternatives

All three commentaries note the potential importance of studying the effect of distance on the construction of sets of alternatives. Like the question of decision quality, this is a complicated and multifaceted issue to which CLT does not offer a simple answer. We discuss three issues that the commentators raised: How many (if any) alternatives people consider, how remote are the alternatives that are considered from each other (or from a focal alternative), and what are the dimensions on which alternatives are generated.

How Many (If Any) Alternatives are Considered?

Fielder proposes that proximity helps to unpack the focal alternative and make the other alternatives seem less likely or less desirable. Similarly, Lynch and Zauberman suggest that proximity reduces consideration of alternatives. We agree that this is sometimes the case, but we think that the situation is complicated by the fact that proximity may increase sensitivity to context, as noted by Dhar and Kim. Therefore, if alternatives come from the context, proximity might enhance consideration of alternatives. It seems to us, then, that distance would enhance consideration of alternatives that are generated in a "top-down" manner, by abstract categories, but reduce consideration of alternatives that are generated in a "bottom-up" manner, by the context of the decision. For example, when buying an insurance plan, proximity may reduce the likelihood of considering conceptual alternatives, such as saving, but may enhance the number of insurance plans one is willing to examine.

How Remote are the Alternatives that One Considers?

In line with Fiedler's notion that distance broadens the width of construed intervals, we can predict that if alternatives are generated on a given dimension, distance would increase the range (and thus also the number) of the alternatives one considers. For example, if a person is asked about the price range of the alternative insurance plans he or she would consider, a wider price range will be indicated in a distal perspective compared to a proximal perspective. We may also predict that if the alternatives are remote, more alternatives will be considered or generated with increasing distance, whereas the reverse would be true for close alternatives.

What are the Dimensions on which Alternatives are Generated?

Lynch and Zauberman suggest the intriguing prediction that distance would enhance generation of alternatives on the desirability dimension and reduce generation of alternatives on the feasibility dimension. More generally, there are different dimensions on which a focal option may be substituted by an alternative. For example, instead of reading a book one may consider conducting research (an alternative way to broaden one's horizons) or read a magazine (an alternative way to get entertained), depending on the way he or she construes reading. Depending on whether the dimension to which alternatives pertain is high or low, distance would enhance or reduce generation of alternatives, respectively.

Processing a Set of Alternatives

After a set of alternatives is constructed, one has to decide on one alternative within this set (see Lynch & Zauberman and Dhar & Kim commentaries). How does distance affect the way people process a set of alternatives in order to arrive at a decision? Our paper reviews a large body of research on how distance changes the weights assigned to high- vs. low-level attributes, which we will not repeat here. However, there are other predictions that may be derived from CLT with respect to the choice process. For example, Dhar and Kim make the intriguing prediction that decisions are made from a closer perspective than set construction, and thus are based on more concrete, low-level aspects than the constructions of sets.

In a related vein, as noted earlier, we found perspective-dependent differences in the way choice sets are searched (Borovoi et al., 2006). We reasoned that attributes are abstracted from alternatives whereas alternatives are real. That is, people directly experience alternatives but not attributes. We thus predicted that when presented with a matrix of alternatives by attributes, in which each cell represents an alternative's standing on one of the attributes, participants' mode of search would depend on temporal distance from the decision. Specifically, we expected distance to enhance the tendency to search within attributes and reduce the tendency to search within alternatives. Our findings confirmed this prediction. Importantly, the overall

depth of search (i.e., the overall number of cells searched) did not differ between the distance conditions.

CONCLUSION

In addition to those discussed above, the commentaries present many other intriguing ideas and lines of research that have not been addressed in the present reply. These include Dhar and Kim's research showing that people are more likely to construe the attainment of a subgoal as commitment to a higher superordinate goal when the subgoal is temporally distant than near, Fiedler's work linking descriptive vs. experiential modes of learning probability information to psychological distance, and Lynch and Zauberman's conceptualization of newness in terms of psychological distance. We are impressed and humbled by the richness and novelty of the many research hypotheses and conceptual linkages offered by the three commentaries. Most important, the commentaries strengthen our conviction that consumer behavior provides a fertile ground for theoretical amplification and practical application of psychological theories, in general, and construal level theory, in particular.

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