Construal Levels and Psychological Distance

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Introduction

Construal level theory is an account of how psychological distance influences thoughts and behavior of an individual. The theory assumes that people mentally construct objects on a low level, detailed and with contextualized features if those objects are psychologically near. If the objects are at a distance, they are constructed as high level, abstract and with stable characteristics. These constructions affect behavior and guide prediction and evaluation.

Construal level theory suggests that psychological distance is an important determinant of wether primary, or secondary characteristics are used as the basis of evaluation.

Level of construal

According to Construal level theory concrete, low-level construals are used to represent near events and abstract, high level construals are used to represent distant events. A high level construal disregards the unique features of the event and involves an implicit decision about which features are central. Given a different context or goal, the event could be represented in a different high-level manner. The decontextualization links the activity with a more general set of events. This brings in new meaning and definition that is not included in the low-level representation.

An event will be represented at higher levels of abstraction as it is more psychologically distant. An event is psychologically distant whenever it is not part of one's direct experience. As much as there are multiple dimensions along which an event can be removed from direct experience, there are multiple dimensions of psychological distance. The greater the temporal, spatial, hypothetical or social distance from an event, the more distant it appears and the more abstractly we would expect it to be represented. Construal level theory assumes that an association forms between psychological distance and abstraction and this is overgeneralized so that even in situations where there is the same information about near and distant events, the representation is influenced.

Distance and mental representation

Distance and mental representation: Time

Distant future activities are more likely to be identified in high-level than in low-level terms. Event pairs with abstract, high level commonalities are seen as more similar than event pairs with low-level procedural commonalities when the actions are described as occurring in the distant future. In the near future condition, this difference is significantly minimized. Temporal distance facilitates abstract processing.

Distance and mental representation: Space

More abstract when more distant.

Distance and mental representation: Social distance

The less similar someone is to oneself, the more socially distant they typically seem. Actions of dissimilar persons are described on a more abstract level than actions of similar people.

Elevated power increases the psychological distance one feels from others.

Distance and mental representation: Probability

An event is removed from one's direct experience when it could have happened, but has not actually happened or when it is possible but not certain. The lower the probability of the event, the greater its psychological distance.

The effect of probability on performance is dependent on the nature of the task: when abstraction facilitates performance, thinking of something as unlikely leads to better performance and vice versa.

Pictoral vs. Verbal representations

Because a word is an abstract representation that carries the essence of the referent object whereas a

picture is a concrete representation that carries the properties of the referent object in full detail, processing of pictures should be facilitated when they are psychologically near and processing of words should be facilitated when they are psychologically distant. Responses are faster when the psychological distance of an object was compatible with its medium of representation.

Abstraction and Distance Judgements

Manipulations of construal should affect distance perceptions in the same way as the distance of an event influences its construal. Thinking about the why of an activity is part of a high level construal, thinking about the how of an activity is part of a low level construal. So if you have to respond to a why question, you should indicate more distant enactment (beleving, inleving) times than if you have to respond to a how question.

These findings can be extended to spacial distance. The perceived spacial distance between objects is greater when the event is described in high-level terms.

The same associations can be found between construal and probability judgements.

Distance and Prediction

According to construal level theory, predictions about a distant future event should be based on implications of high-level rather than low-level construals. Theories are a high level construal of an experiment. Thus people should be more certain about a theory-based prediction, if its a distant future experiment rather than a near future experiment.

Temporal distance increases confidence only when provided with a theoretical rationale for the predictions. When confidence was derived from a high-level construct, temporal distance enhanced confidence.

Same for spacial distance. People in spatially distant condition are more likely to base their predictions on general trends than on deviations form general trends. People in a spatially near condition do not make this distinction.

Distance and Evaluation

Evaluations made about distant future events should be based to a larger degree on high-level construal aspects of the situation than evaluations made about near future events.

Primary vs Secondary Features

People thinking about a purchase in the distant future express more satisfaction when the central feature is good and the and the secondary one is poor than when the central feature is poor and the secondary one is good. Near future evaluations don't differ between these two conditions.

Desirability vs Feasibility

Desirability: why Feasibility: how
High-level construals should emphasize desirability concerns, low-level construals should emphasize feasibility concerns. Desirability concerns should receive greater weight over feasibility concerns as psychological distance increases. The effect of desirability increases over time, the effect of feasibility decreases over time. When outcomes are desirable but hard to obtain, attractiveness increases over time, when outcomes are less desirable but easy to obtain, attractiveness decreases over time.

Variations in probability have a similar effect on the desirability and feasibility. Under low probability, people prefer a high desirability/low feasibility option. Under high probability people prefer a low desirability/high feasibility option.

Feasibility related information has a greater influence on purchase intentions for the near future. Desirability information should increase purchase intentions for the distant future. Temporal distance augments the effects of desirability information, but discounts the effects of feasibility information.

People are willing to pay more for a distant future option when the choice is framed to make desirability rather than feasibility more important.

Pros vs. Cons

When deciding wether or not to undertake an action, cons are secondary aspects to pros. The importance of pros does not depend on the existence of cons, whereas cons are only important when pros are present. Pros should become more important as temporal distance from the action increases. An increase in temporal distance should make it easier to generate pros and more difficult to generate cons.

Idealistic Values vs. Pragmatic concerns

Pragmatic concerns are secondary to people's idealistic values. A distant perspective encourages the expression of an idealistic self. This increases the value of identity related concerns. A close time perspective encourages the expression of a pragmatic self. This

increases the value placed on instrumental concerns.

Alignable vs. Nonalignable Attributes

When choosing between alternatives, people primarily rely on alignable differences rather than nonalignable differences. The comparability of options increases when their attributes are thought about abstractly, so decisions that have distant future consequences will involve an increased consideration of nonalignable attributes.

Distance and behavior

Behavior should be increasingly based on high-level construal aspects as psychological distance increases.

Predicting behavioral intentions from attitudes and values

Values and general attitudes are part of high-level construals. These construals are to be applied to psychologically distant situations.

It's also possible to distinguish between one's central values and secondary values. In a psychologically distant sitiation, it's expected that the primary values would be more dominant. A person's near future plans will reflect the distinction between the primary and secondary values less well.

Logrolling in negotiation

Negotiators try to give in on secondary issues and get what they want on high priority issues (=logrolling). Thus it's expected to see more logrolling agreements in a distant future than near future context.

Self-control

Self control is acting in line with one's primary, central objective. Activating a high-level construal orientation should lead to greater self control.

Reverse self control: sometimes people must exert self control in order to indulge in luxuries that they wouldn't normally allow themselves. People are more likely to choose a luxury promotion as opposed to a more functional one as temporal distance increases. The same effect occurs when the probability of winning the prize is reduced.

Sunk-cost Bias

Sunk-cost bias is to continue to commit resources to a failing course of action. Increased psychological distance should reduce the tendency to make this error because a "don't waste" heuristic is secondary to the primary goal of making a good investment.

Risk perceptions and Temporal frames

Distance related factors can be used to manipulate the concreteness of a risk communication and thereby influence the risk perception. Risks presented in a day frame are perceived closer in time, more concrete and more probable than those presented in a year frame.

Consumer Impatience

Consumers have a preference for smaller, sooner benefits over later, larger ones. As the time horizon gets longer, this impatience decreases.

summary

When forming predictions, evaluations and behavioral intentions for distant events, people rely on high-level construals. When making these assessments for near events, low-level construal information is increasingly incorporated.

Toward a theory of psychological distance

The different kinds of psychological distances (temporal, spacial, social, hypotheticallity) are interrelated. There is an automatic association of the distance dimensions. People react faster when responding to distant congruent stimuli rather than incongruent ones.

Conclusions

Psychological distance is important in the psychology of consumer decision-making.

Events that are distant are represented in a schematic, abstract manner that emphasizes central and primary features. Proximal events are represented in a concrete, less schematic manner that includes incidental and secondary features.