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Construal Level Theory: Psychological Distance, Abstraction, and Applications in Communication

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ABSTRACT

Construal Level Theory (CLT) proposes that people mentally represent objects and events at varying levels of abstraction and that perceived psychological distance—temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical—systematically shifts these "levels of construal." This review synthesizes core CLT propositions and tracks the theory's evolution from temporal construal to a general account of psychological distance. We organize the literature along three questions: (a) how distance shapes construal (and vice versa), (b) how distance dimensions covary and sometimes dissociate, and (c) when construal-level shifts change judgment, emotion, and behavior. We then map applications in persuasion, consumer and health behavior, prosocial decisions, and sustainability communication, highlighting robust effects (e.g., desirability vs. feasibility, abstract vs. concrete language) and emerging debates (e.g., partial failures to replicate cross-dimension interchangeability). We close by outlining methodological recommendations (multi-method distance manipulations, preregistered replications), conceptual clarifications (distinguishing distance from uncertainty and arousal), and integrative opportunities with affect regulation and self-regulation frameworks. Taken together, CLT remains a compact and generative framework for explaining preference change, self–other asymmetries, and intervention design across communication contexts.

Keywords: *Construal Level Theory, Psychological distance, Abstraction, Consumer behavior, Health communication.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Construal Level Theory (CLT), initiated by Trope and Liberman (2003, 2010), posits that people's mental representations of targets differ in their degree of abstraction—that is, their construal level—and that psychological distance is the core factor shaping this level. The greater the psychological distance between an individual and the object of cognition, the higher the level of construal applied; the converse also holds. This is the core premise of CLT. The theory further indicates that individuals can modify how they implement actions simply by changing the level of abstraction at which they construe and imagine those actions. Since Liberman and Trope's foundational work, CLT has become a central account of how people "transcend the here and now" through abstraction.

2. THEORETICAL ORIGINS: TEMPORAL CONSTRUAL THEORY

Construal Level Theory (CLT) originated in Temporal Construal Theory (TCT) (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Time plays a vital role in people's everyday judgments and decisions, yet prior to the proposal of TCT, research on the psychological impact of temporal distance primarily focused on its effects on value judgments and expectations. Because people's acts of decision making and the realization of decision outcomes typically do not occur simultaneously in time, individuals must evaluate and forecast the future and use those assessments as a basis for choice. When planning for the future, people often schedule too many tasks and end up unable to complete them; they tend to imagine future goals in overly idealized terms that are infeasible in practice; and when confronted with

a potentially large future payoff, they may nonetheless opt for a much smaller, immediate reward. Do these everyday experiences share a common cause? Might there be a psychological mechanism concerning time that drives them? With these questions in mind, Liberman and Trope (1998) hypothesized that a general mechanism underlies the temporal effects observed in people's judgments and decisions.

2.1 *Emergence of Temporal Construal Theory*

If earlier research on temporal discounting, overconfidence, and the planning fallacy sufficed to demonstrate that temporal distance affects decision making, Action Identification Theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) offered Liberman and Trope an additional lens on temporal distance. Action Identification Theory explains how people connect their thoughts about a current action to the action itself, proposing that individuals can represent any given target at varying levels of abstraction. This perspective clearly inspired Liberman and Trope's (1998) proposal of Temporal Construal Theory: people's predictions about the future depend on their mental representations of future circumstances. Individuals tend to represent distant-future events using more abstract, general, core, and decontextualized features—a mode of mental representation that Temporal Construal Theory defines as high-level construal. Conversely, when considering near-future events, people rely on more concrete, incidental, detailed, and contextualized features—a mode defined as low-level construal. Temporal Construal Theory thus explains that temporal distance exerts its influence on judgments, expectations, and behavior through these corresponding mental representations.

2.2 *Construal Level as Mental Representation*

As a social-cognitive theory, Construal Level Theory (CLT) holds that people's responses to social events depend on their mental representations of those events, and that such representations are hierarchical—varying in their degree of abstraction (Liberman & Trope, 1998). When observers have direct experience with a target, they can access more extensive, detailed, and contextualized information. As the psychological distance between observer and target increases, the amount of target-relevant information decreases; representing the target mentally therefore requires a certain degree of abstraction—i.e., a higher construal level (Liberman & Förster, 2009; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Accordingly, CLT simplifies people's modes of interpreting the world into high-level and low-level construal.

Although the idea of construal level is straightforward, its attributes vary widely across real-world settings, encompassing construal of objects, persons, and actions (Bar-Anan et al., 2007; Fiedler et al., 2012), which calls for distinct operationalizations. At the object level, detail corresponds to low-level construal, whereas the whole or gist corresponds to high-level construal (Gasper & Clore, 2002); a local perspective indicates low-level construal, whereas a panoramic perspective indicates high-level construal (Huntsinger et al., 2010). At the person level, concrete behaviors reflect low-level construal, whereas traits and attributes reflect high-level construal (Bullard et al., 2019); situational contexts index low-level construal, whereas dispositions and intentions index high-level construal. At the action level, desirability (what makes an end state valuable) reflects high-level construal, whereas feasibility (how an action can be executed) reflects low-level construal (Liberman & Trope, 1998); the "how" of implementing behavior indicates low-level construal, whereas the "why" or reasons for implementation indicate high-level construal (Sagristano et al., 2002). "Table 1" summarizes recent definitions and operationalizations of construal level in the literature; these conceptualizations have all received support from experimental evidence (Adler & Sarstedt, 2020).

Table 1. Operationalizations of construal level

Target	Low-Level Construal		High-Level Construal	Key References
Objects	Details; local figures	narrow	Gestalts; global figures	Gasper and Clore (2002); Huntsinger et al. (2010)
	Examples; segmentation		Categories; broad segmentation	Krüger et al. (2014); Liberman et al. (2002); Maglio and Trope (2011); Smith and Trope (2006)
	Pictures		Words	Amit et al. (2013); Yan et al. (2016)
	Color imagery		Black and white imagery	H. Lee et al. (2014, 2016)
	secondary features		Primary features	Bullard et al. (2019); H. Lee et al. (2014);

Target	Low-Level Construal	High-Level Construal	Key References
			Trope and Liberman (2000)
Persons	Behaviors; situations	Traits; dispositions	Bullard et al. (2019); Eyal et al. (2009); Wakslak et al. (2008)
	Individuation	Group identity; stereotypes	Hess et al. (2018); McCrea et al. (2012)
Actions	Feasibility concerns: How an action is performed	Desirability concerns: Why an action is performed	Liberman and Trope (1998); Sagristano et al. (2002)
	Situational considerations/ demands	Goals, values	Fujita and Carnevale (2012); Henderson and Wakslak (2010); Rees et al. (2018)
	Concrete words (e.g., action verbs)	Abstract words (e.g., adjectives)	Orvell et al. (2019); Semin and Fiedler (1988)

3. THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT: CONSTRUAL LEVEL THEORY

In the formative stage of the theory, researchers hypothesized that people's psychological perception of temporal distance shapes their level of construal and, by developing operational definitions of construal, repeatedly tested this hypothesis—thereby establishing Temporal Construal Theory. This naturally raised further questions: Do the core principles of Temporal Construal Theory generalize to other distance dimensions? And might construal level, in turn, influence people's psychological perception of distance? Driven by the impulse to answer these questions, inquiry into Temporal Construal Theory was progressively extended and eventually developed into Construal Level Theory.

3.1 From Temporal Distance to Psychological Distance

As evidence accumulated for the effect of temporal distance on construal level, researchers quickly realized that temporal distance, social distance, spatial distance, and other potential distance types could be incorporated within a unified framework of psychological distance, and that the same principles of construal would apply across these distinct dimensions (Liberman et al., 2002; Nussbaum et al., 2003; Trope & Liberman, 2003). Subsequent studies corroborated these conjectures.

Fujita and colleagues demonstrated that spatial distance affects construal level through mechanisms analogous to those observed for temporal distance: representations of more distant objects or events are associated with higher-level construals, whereas representations of proximal objects or events are associated with lower-level construals (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). Across two experiments, they found that when an event is located at a greater spatial remove, people are more inclined to identify it in terms of ends/outcomes (high-level construal) rather than means (low-level construal) and to describe it in more abstract language. Follow-up work repeatedly verified this mechanism. For example, when behavior occurs farther away in space, people attribute it more to dispositional (high-level) rather than situational (low-level) factors; when events occur at greater spatial distance, people categorize them at a broader level (high-level construal; Henderson et al., 2006). The relationship between spatial distance and construal level closely mirrors that between temporal distance and construal level, implying a general mechanism underlying both spatial and temporal construal—one that likewise extends to social distance and hypotheticality.

Compared with temporal and spatial distance, social distance is often more subjective, which is one reason the link between social distance and abstraction drew early attention. Classic findings such as the actor–observer asymmetry provide relevant evidence (Fiedler, Semin, Finkenauer, & Berkel, 1995): people tend to explain others' behavior in terms of traits (high-level construal) but explain their own behavior in terms of situational factors (low-level construal). Other studies similarly show that people construe others more abstractly than the self and strangers more abstractly than friends (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Idson & Mischel, 2001; Prentice, 1990). Ebert further examined how social distance shapes judgment (Ebert, 2005). In her study, participants first listed the long-term benefits (high-level) and short-term costs (low-level) of a given behavior. Half then rated the importance of these aspects for themselves, and half rated them for a friend. The results showed that people prioritized short-term costs when judging for themselves but prioritized long-term benefits when judging for a friend. This pattern substantiates that social distance—e.g., self vs. other, in-group vs. out-

group, friend vs. stranger—functions as a form of psychological distance: as social distance increases, mental representations shift toward higher-level construal; as social distance decreases, construal shifts toward lower-level (Xiaoli Nan, 2007).

Researchers also broadened the taxonomy of distance and established that probability (hypotheticality) is a dimension of psychological distance (Wakslak et al., 2006). Their findings indicate that as the probability of an event decreases, people increasingly represent it using core, abstract, and general attributes (high-level construal) and rely less on external, concrete, and specific attributes (low-level construal). Todorov and colleagues reported a similar mechanism: when an outcome is unlikely, features related to the end state (high-level) exert greater influence than features related to the means (low-level); as the likelihood of the outcome increases, the importance of means-related, secondary features rises and can even surpass that of outcome-related features. Collectively, this body of work shows that high probability is associated with low-level construal, whereas low probability is associated with high-level construal.

As the parallel mechanisms linking temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical distance to construal level were repeatedly corroborated, the influence of psychological distance on construal became clearer and crystallized into Construal Level Theory: people tend to represent distant targets with high-level construals and proximal targets with low-level construals. This prompted further questions: Does construal level, in turn, shape perceived psychological distance? And do the dimensions of psychological distance influence one another?

3.2 Deepening Construal Level Theory

Construal level is not only influenced by psychological distance; it also, in turn, influences perceived psychological distance. In everyday life, we can indeed sense that more abstract representations travel farther across space and time and generalize to broader social audiences. For example, “study diligently” is clearly more abstract (high-level construal) than “get a high score on the exam,” and thus more readily spans wider spatial ranges, longer time frames, and more diverse populations. Conversely, when a target is represented more concretely (low-level construal), people experience it as psychologically closer. Liberman and colleagues found that when events are represented at a high level (e.g., describing an action in terms of why rather than how), people feel that the event ought to be implemented in the more distant future (McCrea, Liberman, Trope, & Sherman, 2008). Other work shows that when interviewers use more abstract formulations in questions, interviewees are more likely to feel the interaction is less harmonious—signaling an increase in social distance (Rubini & Kruglanski, 1997).

In fact, the mutual influence between psychological distance and construal level is direct and robust, to the point that it can operate at the level of mental associations independently of changes in objective features. The Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) has been repeatedly used to examine the linkage between psychological distance and construal (Bar-Anan, Liberman, & Trope, 2006), demonstrating a tight, automatic association. In other words, people spontaneously construe psychologically distant targets at a high level even when the targets’ details do not change with distance; likewise, exposure to high-level construal cues automatically elicits a sense of greater distance, even when the target itself is not objectively far.

The dimensions of psychological distance also influence one another. Using a Stroop-type paradigm, Bar-Anan and colleagues tested the automatic associations among distance dimensions (Bar-Anan, Liberman, Trope, & Algom, 2007) and found that temporal, spatial, and social distances are interrelated. In a set of eight experiments, Elena and colleagues further showed that temporal distance, like spatial and social distance, can shape the level of politeness people use; in turn, politeness affects perceived temporal and spatial distance, just as it perceived social distance (Elena, Liberman, & Trope, 2010). These findings jointly indicate reciprocal influences among temporal, spatial, and social distance within the broader construct of psychological distance.

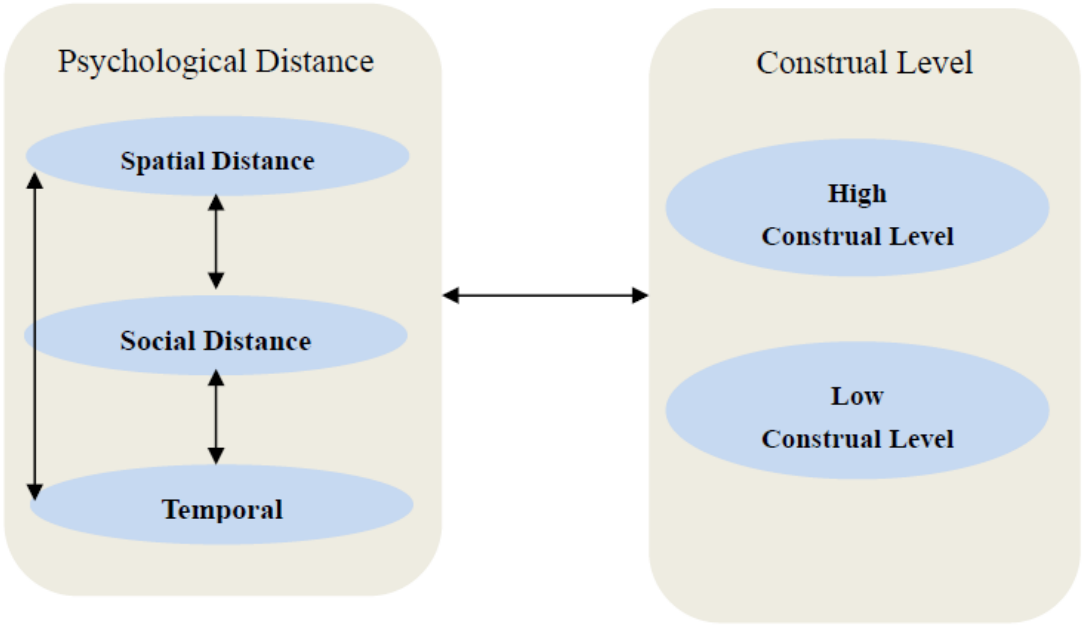

Figure 1 Mechanism of Construal Level Theory (CLT).

4. APPLICATIONS AND PROSPECTS OF CONSTRUAL LEVEL THEORY

Pioneered by Trope and Liberman (2003, 2010), Construal Level Theory (CLT) links the degree of representational abstraction (i.e., construal level) to psychological distance, offering a valuable framework for explaining people's evaluation, prediction, and behavioral mechanisms. Over the past two decades, research output on CLT has increased year by year. Scholars have conducted rich empirical studies that refine the interaction between psychological distance and construal level and apply the theory to broader social contexts, thereby expanding its application boundary and rendering the model increasingly mature.

4.1 Applications of CLT

In recent years, CLT has been applied with growing frequency to advertising persuasion, word-of-mouth communication, consumer behavior, health behavior, climate change, and sustainable consumption. These applications demonstrate its strong explanatory and predictive power and provide a concise yet powerful framework for understanding social behavior and cognition.

Hernandez et al. (2014) applied CLT to advertising persuasion and found that when purchase is planned for the more distant future—or when construal level is higher—benefits appeals outperform attribute appeals. When purchase is imminent or construal level is lower, the persuasive effects of benefits and attribute appeals are comparable. However, when participants are experimentally induced to adopt a lower construal level, attribute appeals become more persuasive than benefits appeals. This study not only elucidates distinct persuasive pathways for near- versus long-term consumption but also shows that psychological distance and construal level operate via parallel persuasive mechanisms, further corroborating their automatic association.

Sun-Young Park et al. (2014) integrated CLT with framing theory in the context of anti–binge drinking advertising. They found that social distance influences message acceptance. When evaluating the drinking behavior of socially distant others (e.g., strangers), promotion-framed messages (e.g., encouraging abstinence or highlighting the benefits of quitting) are more persuasive than prevention-framed messages (e.g., warning drinkers or emphasizing adverse consequences), and also foster a more responsible attitude toward drinking. By contrast, when evaluating the drinking behavior of socially close others (e.g., friends), the persuasive effects of promotion- and prevention-framed messages do not differ. This work probes the moderating role of psychological distance in the acceptance of health behaviors and extends CLT accordingly.

4.2 Prospects for Construal Level Theory

Construal Level Theory (CLT) has introduced psychological distance and level of construal into the study of social cognition and judgment, and a large body of research has repeatedly confirmed their bidirectional, automatic linkage and their systematic influence on human decision making and evaluation. In recent years, both the depth and breadth of CLT have expanded rapidly.

On the one hand, CLT's focus on individual cognitive processes continues to deepen. Scholars have not only refined the dimensions of psychological distance and their mechanisms of influence, but have also enriched accounts of representational levels and their relations to behavior and language (Adler & Sarstedt, 2021). Through experiments and meta-analytic evidence, Han (2018) and colleagues show that controllability shapes perceived distance to positive and negative targets: when controllability is high, people perceive positive objects as spatially and temporally closer than when controllability is low, thereby extending the mechanism of psychological distance. Some scholars have also questioned the interchangeability among distance dimensions. Although earlier work documented automatic associations among the dimensions of psychological distance (Bar-Anan, Liberman, Trope, & Algom, 2007), replication attempts by Calderon (2020) and Maglio (2020) did not fully reproduce those findings, with cross-dimension interchange manipulations not always succeeding. Accordingly, these researchers argue for emphasizing the distinctiveness of each distance dimension and for conducting clearer tests of substitutability across dimensions. At the same time, fueled by accumulating empirical evidence, CLT is extending into neurocognitive domains. Gilead et al. (2020) argue that cognitive prospection is grounded in the capacity for abstraction, and propose a representational hierarchy from concrete to abstract, offering theoretical guidance for systematic CLT research. A growing number of experimental studies are linking neural processes with observable behavior; for example, Herz et al. (2020) suggest that shifts in mental state are governed by a balance between inductive and deductive reasoning. Such work integrates abstraction with behavioral research and provides a foundation for observing, understanding, and predicting behavior and cognition from a CLT perspective.

On the other hand, because CLT effectively explains and predicts preference change and behavioral paradoxes, it is often integrated with other theories to account for diverse social phenomena. The combination of CLT with self-regulation has yielded rich insights. For instance, transcending (high-level) motivational accounts posit that people influence motivational processes by emphasizing personal awareness and agency (Fujita et al., 2019; Scholer et al., 2018), and Trope et al. (2020) examine how switches between low- and high-level construal produce corresponding changes in cognitive processes and outcomes. CLT has thus become an important lens for research on health behavior, conflicts between individual and collective interests, and behavioral interventions; as a result, applications in climate change and health communication have grown rapidly in recent years. Researchers have also integrated CLT with emotion theories, applying it to well-being (Bruehlman-Senecal & Ayduk, 2015) and prosocial behavior (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). Williams et al. (2014) find that increasing psychological distance attenuates the intensity of affective reactions involved in judgments and choices—for example, dampening empathy in charitable giving or lowering baseline satisfaction in product evaluations. Chan and Maglio (2019) similarly report that greater psychological distance is associated with more objective evaluations and lower emotional intensity.

5. CONCLUSION

CLT offers a compact grammar for reasoning about when people privilege "why" over "how," values over logistics, and gist over detail. The theory's reach now spans temporal forecasting, interpersonal judgment, persuasion, health, and sustainability. Two priorities emerge. The first is measurement and manipulation: it is to combine convergent indicators of distance (self-report, behavioral, linguistic) with preregistered, multi-method designs to test cross-dimension interchangeability and rule out confounds (e.g., uncertainty, arousal, controllability). The second is integration: it is to embed CLT with affect-regulation and self-regulation models to clarify when abstraction facilitates adaptive control vs. blunts necessary emotional engagement (e.g., in prosocial appeals). With these refinements, CLT remains a generative framework for both explanation and intervention in media, marketing, and health communication.

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