When and Why Temporal Distance Matters: the Role of Elaboration and Confidence

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - The Construal Level Theory posits that temporal distance systematically changes the way people construe future events, thereby influencing their evaluations and decisions regarding those events (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2000; Liberman et al. 2002). Specifically, the theory postulates that people use more high-level construals to represent distant future events whereas they depend more on low-level construals to represent near future events. High-level construals include more abstract, schematic, and goal-relevant representation of events, whereas low-level construals include more concrete, nonschematic, incidental, and goal-irrelevant representation of events. As such, in goal-directed activities, the Construal Level Theory hypothesizes that goal-relevant features are more influential for distant future events than goal-irrelevant features and that goal irrelevant features are more influential for near future events than goal-relevant features. The Construal Level Theory, however, is silent regarding the boundary conditions under which its explanation works. In this paper, we investigate the question of when the effects predicted by the theory occur. We also intend to investigate psychological process that underlies the effects of temporal distance.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Construal Level Theory posits that temporal distance systematically changes the way people construe future events, thereby influencing their evaluations and decisions regarding those events (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2000; Liberman et al. 2002). Specifically, the theory postulates that people use more high-level construals to represent distant future events whereas they depend more on low-level construals to represent near future events. High-level construals include more abstract, schematic, and goal-relevant representation of events, whereas low-level construals include more concrete, non-schematic, incidental, and goal-irrelevant representation of events. As such, in goal-directed activities, the Construal Level Theory hypothesizes that goal-relevant features are more influential for distant future events than goal-irrelevant features and that goal irrelevant features are more influential for near future events than goal-relevant features. The Construal Level Theory, however, is silent regarding the boundary conditions under which its explanation works. In this paper, we investigate the question of when the effects predicted by the theory occur. We also intend to investigate psychological process that underlies the effects of temporal distance.

First, we address the question of when temporal distance influences evaluation, comparing two alternative hypotheses: non-thoughtful hypothesis and thoughtful hypothesis. By introducing the construct of elaboration as a moderator, we test which of the two competing hypotheses emerge. The non-thoughtful hypothesis suggests that the findings predicted by the Construal Level Theory should hold under conditions of low rather than high elaboration and the thoughtful hypothesis suggests that the findings predicted by the Construal Level Theory should hold under conditions of high rather than low elaboration.

We conduct the first experiment to test these hypotheses. This experiment is a replication of Trope and Liberman (2000, Study 2), except that we introduce elaboration as another independent variable. In this study, we examine the effect of temporal distance on the preference of work-study options. Participants evaluate work-study options that they may take in the near or distant future. One option offers an amusing job and boring training, whereas the other offers boring job and amusing training. A job is presumed to be high-level construal and training is to be low-level construal. Trope and Liberman (2000) found that the preference for the former is evaluated more favorably in the distant future than in the near future, whereas the latter is evaluated more favorably in the near future than in the distant future. We test how the effect of temporal distance emerges differentially under conditions of high vs. low elaboration. We measure the degree of elaboration on the Need for Cognition scale (e.g., Cacioppo et al. 1996).

As predicted by the thoughtful hypothesis, a three-way interaction of Time X Option X Motivation emerges as significant. Follow-up analyses show that, under conditions of high elaboration, two-way interaction of Time X Option (i.e., the replication of the Construal Level Theory) is significant, indicating that the preference for the amusing job over the boring job is more pronounced in the distant future, compared to the near future. This result is compatible with the explanation of the Construal Level Theory. In contrast, under low motivation condition, the two-way interaction of Time X Option is not significant.

We conduct the second experiment to test the hypothesis that confidence mediates the effect of temporal distance only under conditions of high elaboration. We examine evaluation of a new digital camera in this experiment. Participants are asked to imagine that they are searching for either an easy-to-use digital camera (ease-of-use goal) or a digital camera that enables to produce high-quality pictures (picture quality goal). They are also asked to imagine that they are about to buy a camera soon but will start using the camera right next week (near future) or several months from now (distant future). Then exposure accuracy, lens quality, and resolution are presented as positive attributes in the scenario, whereas battery life, interface convenience, and uploading convenience are presented as negative attributes. Thus, all the positive (negative) attributes are high-level (low-level) construals under ease-of-use goal and all the positive (negative) attributes are low-level (high-level) construal under picture quality goals.

The results of this experiment replicate the moderating effect of elaboration: we find a significant two-way interaction of Goal X Time only under conditions of high elaboration. More importantly, the results show that confidence participants place in their evaluation mediates the effect of temporal distance. Under conditions of high elaboration, temporal distance increases the level of confidence, thus resulting in more extreme evaluations.

This study both provides a first moderator (elaboration) to the Construal Level Theory, and suggests psychological process that underlies the effects predicted by the theory under conditions of high elaboration. This research offers important managerial implications and also raises theoretical questions for further study.