Why a Frying Pan Is Better Than Flowers: a Construal Level Approach to Gift Exchange

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How does one decide on the perfect gift? Givers conceptualize gifts abstractly, and therefore choose gifts higher on desirability attributes over gifts higher on feasibility attributes. Recipients, in contrast, conceptualize gifts more concretely, and care more about feasibility attributes. Support emerges in studies examining mindsets, evaluations and reciprocity judgments.

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Would Others be Gaga for Lady Gaga? When Experience and Perspective Lead to (Mis)Predictions of Others’ Preferences
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Paper #1: Why a Frying Pan is Better than Flowers: A Construal Level Approach to Gift Exchange
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Paper #2: Too Much Experience: Predicting Others’ Emotive Reactions and Making Recommendations after Repeated Exposure
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Paper #3: From Personal Choices to Perceived Popularity: The Impact of Choice Difficulty on Estimated Consensus
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Eldar Shafir, Princeton University, USA

Paper #4: When My Pain is (Not) Your Pain: Self, Similarity, and Embodied Cognition in Social Predictions
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SESSION OVERVIEW

accurately predicting how and when consumers, peers, colleagues, and citizens will react to content (advertisements, gifts), share items (e.g. word of mouth), feel in situations (e.g. thirst, physical pain), and make decisions (e.g. investments, purchases) is a fundamental requirement for some of the most important consumer, social, and policy decisions. The research presented in these four papers demonstrates that often a person’s state (e.g. experiences, construal) can threaten the accuracy of the social cognitions necessary for these important decisions.

In this special session we identify factors that influence when people are likely and unlikely to use their own perspectives and metacognitions to inform their predictions of others’ preferences and reactions. Importantly, we also identify when reliance on these perspectives and metacognitions will facilitate accurate predictions and when the same reliance will lead to costly mispredictions. In addition to these theoretical contributions on choices and predictions for others, metacognition, and psychological distance, the session makes a substantial contribution to the topics of word of mouth, gift giving, and investing, and demonstrates how a few popular lay beliefs (e.g. indulgent items are better gifts and more experience leads to wiser predictions) can lead consumers astray. In summary, each paper tells a piece of a larger narrative about how and when consumers (inaccurately) rely on their own perspectives and feelings when making predictions for similar and dissimilar others.

In the first paper, Baskin and colleagues examine a construal level (Trope & Liberman, 2010) mismatch between gift givers and gift receivers. The authors find that gift givers tend to conceptualize their gift choices abstractly due to their high distance from the consumption experience. Therefore, givers choose gifts higher on desirability attributes to the detriment of gifts higher on feasibility attributes. Gift recipients, in contrast, conceptualize received gifts more concretely, and care more about feasibility attributes (how easy a game is to learn versus the quality of the game). This difference leads gift givers to mispredict how much a receiver will enjoy certain gifts and to mistakenly overpay for desirable items. Further, gift givers mistakenly expect giving an item high on desirability will increase social bonds with the receiver and will result in more social reciprocity. The findings of this paper contradict the popular lay belief that the best gift for someone is an indulgent, highly desirable gift. Instead the results suggest that givers may save a lot of money and trouble by putting themselves in the shoes of the receivers and that marketers who are motivated to encourage successful gift giving should try to bring gift givers down to a lower construal level.

One potential way to improve predictions of others’ reactions to content is to acquire concrete experience with the content or to ask someone who has had a lot of concrete experience. However in the second paper, Campbell and colleagues find people can quickly gain too much experience. Individuals can rapidly become desensitized (Dijksterhuis & Smith, 2002) to content after repeated or extended exposure such that their current tastes and sensitivities to emotive content become vastly different from people who have not been as thoroughly exposed to the content. Importantly, the authors find that people are largely unaware of the effect that repeated exposure has had on their personal emotive reactions, even when prompted to consider the influence. Accordingly, they overweight their own current dulled sensitivities in their predictions for others’ emotive reactions and preferences (e.g. for comedy, art, sports photography, painful noises). This leads consumers to mispredict others’ reactions and at times to choose to share bad content that others will not enjoy. Finally, the authors find that when consumers are searching for quality emotive experiences, they tend to seek out a person who has had more versus less repeated experience. The authors experimentally demonstrate how this behavior can doom consumers to receive inappropriate recommendations and ultimately can lead consumers to have worse experiences.

Similarly to Campbell et al., Steffel and Shafir investigate how people use their own feelings to infer others’ preferences. Specifically, the researchers examine how the metacognitive feeling of choice difficulty impacts estimated consensus. They find that participants’ estimates of the proportion of other people who shared their preferences in a series of choices were correlated with their subjective ratings of choice difficulty. Further, they find in an initial study that subjective difficulty was a valid cue of actual consensus. However, even though choice difficulty can serve as a valid cue for consensus, the authors found that when choice difficulty is manipulated in a manner that does not actually influence consensus (e.g. font readability), reliance on choice difficulty can lead to systematic mispredictions of consensus. Similarly to Campbell et al. focus on repeated experience, Steffel and Shafir find that the common experience of repeated exposure to a choice can reduce the metacognitive feeling of difficulty and lead to increased predictions of consensus. In a final study, the authors identify a boundary condition to this phenomenon such that when one is dissimilar to the target population, one does not use subjective difficulty to judge consensus in the target population.

In the first three studies, the authors examined how people’s experiences and perspectives influenced their judgments. In the last paper, similarly to the final study in Steffel et al., O’Brien and col-
leagues examine when people are likely to rely on their own state, particularly their metacognitive feelings, when making predictions for others. A wealth of research suggests that people use their own visceral states to inform their social judgments, such as predicting others are thirstier when oneself is dehydrated (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). The authors find that these typical egocentric influences on social predictions (replicated in the prior papers in this session) are at times undermined by incidental knowledge of the target. Cold and thirsty participants judged others as more sensitive to cold and thirst, but only when those in question shared their ideological values (e.g. same stance on same sex marriage). This suggests that internal cues in general may simply be less (or not) influential when predicting the responses of dissimilar others. For instance, while at a hot baseball game one might not use their own feeling of thirst to determine whether a dissimilar other would enjoy a cold drink. In general, this is one of the first studies to find identify a boundary in embodied cognition.

Across four papers and 17 studies, this session investigates when people are likely to rely on their own states to predict others’ preferences, and when reliance on their own states is likely to benefit or bias their predictions of others’ preferences. Data has been collected for all reported studies and all papers are very advanced or complete. This session relates to the theme of “appreciating” diversity as it tells a narrative of consumer interaction interwoven between theoretical perspectives. The session should appeal to a wide audience including those with theoretical interests in choosing for others, metacognition, embodied cognition, perspective taking, psychological distance, outgroup perception, and social cognition in general. Additionally, the session will appeal to those with substantive interests in word of mouth, gift giving, and investment. This session also directly relates to the theme of “appreciating diversity” as all four papers deal with how people predict others’ responses, and the latter three papers specifically examine how people predict the reactions of others who have explicitly different beliefs or have had explicitly different experiences. Full references for articles cited in this submission are available upon request.

**Why a Frying Pan is Better than Flowers: A Construal Level Approach to Gift Exchange**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The tradition of gift giving is as old as culture itself. From the circular gift exchange formed by the Trobriand islanders (Malinowski, 1922) to today’s frenzied holiday shopping, gift-giving rituals have played a central cultural role. Indeed, evolutionary psychologists have suggested that gifts are a natural way to establish, create and maintain order in a group of social beings (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). Additionally, anthropologists have focused on the role of gift exchange in building and maintaining social bonds (Gouldner, 1960; Mauss, 1925). Thus, due to the importance of gifts, givers have a large stake in making sure their gifts are well received and then reciprocated in order to ensure the continuity of their social relationships.

The importance of gift-giving raises the question of how one decides on the perfect gift. In this research, we look at differences in giver/receiver gift evaluation using construal level theory (CLT) as a framework (Trope & Liberman, 2010). We propose that givers conceptualize their choices abstractly due to their high distance from the receiver and the eventual use of the gift. Therefore, they choose gifts higher on desirability attributes to the detriment of attributes higher on feasibility dimensions. Gift recipients, in contrast, conceptualize received gifts more concretely, and care more about feasibility aspects (e.g., how easy is the gift to use?). This difference in construal between givers and receivers creates an important asymmetry between what givers care about and what recipients care about that leads to a mismatch in the kinds of gifts the two parties prefer to give/receive and reciprocate. Our findings also stand in contrast to the typical folk wisdom that givers should always seek to maximize gifts’ desirability.

We explored this asymmetry in a series of studies. In Study 1a, we asked participants to assume a gift giving or receiving mode by respectively writing about a time they gave or received a gift. Those in giving mode scored higher on the Behavioral Identification Form (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), a measure of abstract orientation. This study establishes that a giving mode activates a more abstract orientation than a receiving mode. Study 1b corroborates the link to construal by showing that gift givers can be induced to give more feasible gifts by giving gifts to people in nearby locations while receivers show no effect based on distance from givers. This suggests that givers are imagining the receiver using the gift such that the psychological distance from the consumption experience decreases with the spatial distance. However, receivers imagine their own consumption, so they are unaffected by these changes in spatial distance.

Studies 2a and 2b examined tradeoffs people make when giving gifts. By using items that require tradeoffs between abstract/desirability and concrete/feasibility dimensions (e.g., a high resolution 3D videogame that takes 10 hours to learn vs. a poor looking videogame that one can pick up and play), we show that givers evaluated high desirability gifts as better than high feasibility gifts. However, receivers do not exhibit this preference. We assigned participants to either the giver or the receiver role and asked them to evaluate gifts in a variety of domains (e.g. restaurant gift certificates, newspaper subscriptions, etc.). Participants evaluated gifts using a scale consisting of the following questions: “How much did you like the item as a gift?”, “How good is this gift?”, “How appropriate is this gift?” and “How positive is this gift?”. Study 2b extended these finding by eliciting participants’ willingness to pay (WTP). Givers reported their WTP for the gift while receivers reported their WTP as if they were buying the item for themselves. While receivers were willing to pay significantly more for desirable gifts than feasible gifts, givers had a significantly higher WTP difference than receivers between high desirability and high feasibility gifts. From this study, we show that there is a mismatch in willingness to pay for desirable goods in that givers are willing to pay a comparatively higher price than receivers for highly desirable gifts. The results of Studies 2a and 2b combined show that givers place more value on desirability attributes over and above that placed by receivers, and literally pay for this error.

Study 3 examined implications of these differences for social bonds between exchange partners. Participants were told about two different movie offers, one of which was more desirable, but relatively inconvenient (access to view Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (HP7): Part 2 online during an inconvenient five-hour window) and the other less desirable, but more convenient (access to view the less novel and widely available HP7: Part 1 online during a convenient 30-day window). Participants believed they were either giving a gift to, or had received a gift from, another participant in the study. As predicted, givers preferred to give other participants in the study the more desirable/less convenient HP7: Part 2, but receivers preferred to receive the less desirable/more convenient HP7: Part 1. More importantly, givers thought that if they picked HP7: Part 2, receivers would be more likely to reciprocate their gift in the future. Receivers, on the other hand, were willing to reciprocate both gifts equally suggesting that their opinions of the giver were not affected.
by the choice of gift. Instead, givers are mistaken in their prediction that desirable gifts will increase social bonds.

Since gift giving is primarily about relationships, we are conducting future research to examine how various gifts change the relationship between gift givers and gift receivers and how people’s awareness of biases in selecting gifts may improve their relationship with the other person. Overall, the results of this current research suggest that givers may save a lot of trouble and at times money by putting themselves in the shoes of the receivers and think about the kind of gift they would prefer to receive. The findings further suggest that the conventional wisdom of always maximizing gift desirability, rather than other gift features, may be incorrect since givers generally underweight concrete/feasibility aspects of the gift as compared to receivers.

**Too Much Experience:**
**Predicting Others’ Emotive Reactions and Making Recommendations after Repeated Exposure**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

People often seek out individuals who are distinguished by their repeated experience with emotive content (e.g., art, comedy, freeway noise). Consumers seek out these individuals for recommendations, corporations hire these individuals to design products for the public, and governments employ these individuals to craft policy for the public. Additionally, when trying to predict others’ reactions to emotive content, people often make an effort to become a well exposed person. For instance, a person may deliberately watch a YouTube video multiple times to decide whether it is funny or appropriate enough for sharing. Both lay intuition and empirical research suggest this gaining experience can help people predict others’ emotive reactions by closing empathy gaps (Nordgren, McDonnell, & Loewenstein, 2011).

However, individuals can quickly gain too much experience and become desensitized to content after repeated or extended experiences (Dijksterhuis & Smith, 2002). Although much research has examined how desensitization affects judgments of one’s own tastes and preferences (e.g., Loewenstein, O’Donoghue, & Rabin, 2003; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003), we examined downstream consequences for prediction of others’ judgments.

We hypothesized that people will not only desensitize to an emotive experience after repeated exposure, but also incorrectly use their desensitized sensitivities to make predictions of how someone else would react to an emotive experience. Our framework is rooted in the dual judgment model of emotional perspective taking (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2005). This model posits people predict others’ emotions by first considering their own (simulated) emotions and often fail to adequately adjust for differences between self and other. Thus, rather than realizing that one’s own current state (e.g., subjective desensitization) may be different from someone else who lacks a high level of exposure, people who desensitize to an emotive experience might falsely assume that the experience is less arousing for others. This should lead them to mispredict others’ preferences and emotive reactions and lead them to error when they recommend and share content with others. We tested this desensitization bias in social judgment hypothesis across six studies using various emotive content ranging in valence, complexity, and repeated exposure method.

In the first study, we exposed participants to twenty images of a dramatic style of astrological art called “Digital Blasphemy.” After the exposures, we asked participants to remember from a written description the first and last images they had seen and to indicate which image would be better for publically consumed Space Art media. We counterbalanced the first and last picture between subjects, and found that participants showed a bias to select the image that was presented at the start of the exposure (before they became desensitized) rather than the image at the end.

In study 2, after viewing a slideshow of motorcycle tricks, we presented participants with two images, each featuring a different thrilling stunt performed on a motorcycle. Participants were asked to select which image would be more impressive as a single promotional image to people viewing motorcycle stunts for the first time in their lives. We found that participants were more likely to choose the image of a specific stunt type if that stunt type had been featured less often in a slideshow that preceded the choice.

In study 3, people were repeatedly exposed to one of two shocking pictures of Lady Gaga.

We found participants were more likely to predict others previously unexposed to both images would be less shocked by the image participants themselves were repeatedly exposed to compared to the image participants were not repeatedly exposed to.

Additionally, a variety of indirect and direct probes in studies 2 and 3 found that participants were largely unaware of the desensitization bias and unable to retrospectively correct for the bias. In sum, the breadth of the first three studies distinguishes the desensitization bias as a unique phenomenon separate from related phenomena such as primacy effects (Carpenter & Nakamoto, 1989) and peak-end biases (Kahneman et al., 1993).

In studies 4 and 5, we tested the underlying process and potential downstream consequences. In study 4, we found that repeated exposure to a joke (writing it five versus one time) lead participants to find the joke personally less humorous, predict the joke would be less humorous to others, and report lower likelihood to share the joke. As predicted, we found the effect of repeated exposure on one’s own feelings fully mediated the effect of repeated exposure on predictions of others’ feelings and likelihood to share. In study 5, we found that after extended versus shorter exposure to a painful noise, participants predicted an additional very short sound burst would be less painful for themselves, predicted it would be less painful for others never exposed to the sound, and reported they would feel less guilty using the sound burst to punish other participants in a game. Similar to study 4, the effect of exposure on the latter two other-regarding variables was fully mediated by predictions of how painful a short noise burst would be for oneself.

In the final study, we tested whether this desensitization-bias could lead high-exposure consumers to make very poor recommendations for unexposed others. Participants were given an objectively better joke and an objectively worse joke (based on pre-test ratings). We found that participants who were repeatedly exposed to the good joke (writing it down five times) were about 3x less likely to choose to share it with someone else compared to participants who were not repeatedly exposed (presumably because the extra exposure desensitized them to its funniness). Moreover, we described the study to a separate group of participants and asked them who they would rely on to choose the funnier joke: a person in the control condition or a person in the repeated exposure condition? A majority chose the person in the repeated exposure condition, thus dooming themselves to a worse experience.

These studies suggest that repeated exposure can dramatically and negatively influence sharing, recommendations, and social behavior. The lay intuition to seek out those with more exposure and to acquire more exposure to better predict others’ reactions may often steer consumers in the wrong direction. At times, high-exposure “ex-
erts” might be in the worst position to connect with someone who lacks any exposure at all.

From Personal Choices to Perceived Popularity: The Impact of Choice Difficulty On Estimated Consensus

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Effective decision-making often depends on accurately gauging others’ preferences. Manufacturers try to forecast consumer preferences, politicians try to gauge public opinion, and most people try to anticipate how their peers will react to what they say and do. Incorrect predictions of others’ preferences can lead to detrimental behaviors, like investing in a product that fails to generate interest, or campaigning on an issue that triggers unexpected reactions.

Although psychologists have well documented the impact of choices – conceived as binary outcomes – on predictions of others’ preferences (e.g., Ross, Greene, and House 1977), relatively little is known about the impact of the metacognitive experiences that accompany those choices. This research explores how the feeling of choice difficulty impacts people’s predictions of others’ preferences and how it impacts judgmental accuracy.

We hypothesize that people perceive greater consensus when choice feels easy than when it feels difficult. In a pretest, participants’ estimates of the proportion of other people who shared their preferences in a series of choices between monetary lotteries were correlated with their subjective ratings of choice difficulty, (b = -0.91, t = 8.88, p < .001). Further, in these initial situations, subjective choice difficulty served as a valid cue for predicting consensus, as it was highly correlated with consensus (β = -0.77, t = 4.91, p < .001). Thus, at least in some cases, the metacognitive feeling of choice difficulty can guide people to correct estimates of consensus.

However, there are many cases in which choice difficulty may be misleading. Many factors that are not indicative of actual consensus can influence subjective choice difficulty. For example, factors such as font readability, mere exposure, reason listing, and brow furrowing, can all increase perceptions of choice difficulty (Alter and Oppenheimer 2009). We show that, when choice difficulty is manipulated independently from the relative attractiveness of the choice alternatives, reliance on choice difficulty can lead to systematic mispredictions of consensus.

We first tested when holding actual consensus constant, would manipulating choice difficulty influence estimated consensus? Participants were presented with a hypothetical choice about whether or not to tip a waitress who provided fast service (easy condition) or slow service (difficult condition). Although participants were equally likely to tip the waitress across conditions, participants estimated greater consensus in the easy condition (M = 81%) than in the hard condition (M = 74%; t(156) = 2.84, p = .005). Choice difficulty fully mediated the relationship between the manipulation and estimated consensus, (95% CI: 7.85 to 2.62).

Study 2 sought to isolate the feeling of choice difficulty as the mechanism underlying consensus estimates by holding constant the content of the choice options and manipulating choice difficulty via fluency. In this study, a target lottery was presented either several times (fluent condition) or only once (disfluent condition; for a review of repetition as a form of fluency, see Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009). As predicted, estimated consensus was greater when the choice was repeated (M = 62%) than when the choice was novel (M = 53%; t(123) = 4.28, p < .001), regardless of which option was chosen. Choice difficulty served as a significant partial mediator of the relationship between the fluency manipulation and estimated consensus, (95% CI: -4.90 to -.83). Within the repeated condition, there was a linear trend such that participants estimated greater consensus with increased repetition (first presentation: M = 59%; second presentation: M = 60%; third presentation: M = 62%; F(1, 67) = 5.44, p = .02). The difference in choice difficulty between the first and final presentation mediated this effect, (β = -4.17, SE = .54, t = -7.78, p < .001).

An additional aim of study 2 was to illustrate a consequence of relying on choice difficulty to predict consensus: since estimated consensus should increase with repetition regardless of which lottery is chosen, then false consensus (as measured by the sum of estimated consensus for the lottery chosen by the majority and the lottery chosen by the minority) is more likely to emerge when choices are repeated than when choices are novel. Indeed, false consensus was 125.3% when the choice was repeated and 105.2% when the choice was novel. Within the repeated condition, the sum of estimated consensus for the lottery chosen by the majority and the lottery chosen by the minority increased with repetition (first presentation: 117%; second presentation: 120%; third presentation: 125%).

Study 3 explored whether perceived similarity moderates the extent to which people rely on choice difficulty to gauge consensus by priming participants to think of ways in which they were similar to or different from the target population. Indeed, there was a significant interaction between the priming condition and choice difficulty, (β = -0.20, t = 2.35, p = .02), such that participants who were primed to think of similarities relied on choice difficulty to predict consensus (β = -0.39, t = 4.51, p < .001) but those primed to think of dissimilarities did not (β = -0.11, t = 1.18, p = .24).

People gauge consensus, not just based on their own choices, but also based on the metacognitive experiences that accompany choosing. People infer greater consensus when choice feels easy than when it feels difficult. Although subjective choice difficulty can sometimes serve as a valid indicator of consensus, many factors that are not indicative of consensus can affect choice difficulty and lead to systematic mispredictions. We will discuss implications for real-world decisions: for example, an investor who has had greater exposure to the stocks in his portfolio may expect greater buy-in from other investors than is borne out in the stock market, or a politician who repeatedly reevaluates his platform may expect more unified support from his constituents than is borne out in the actual election. We will also discuss moderators of reliance on choice difficulty – e.g., perceived dissimilarity to the target population and attributions for choice difficulty – and directions for future research.

When My Pain is (Not) Your Pain: Self, Similarity, and Embodied Cognition in Social Predictions

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Predictions of others’ thoughts, feelings, and preferences do not occur in a bubble. Rather, people predict the internal states of others differently depending on whether those in question are perceived as similar or dissimilar to them on the surface.

People typically judge similar others egocentrically – they put themselves in the others’ shoes by first thinking, “How would I feel in their situation?” (Dunning & Hayes, 1996; Epley et al., 2004). Thus, one’s own states are often projected onto similar others. Obama-supporting Democrats might overconfidently assume that Obama likes the same wine that they do.

However, people are less likely to use their own experience as an anchor when judging others who seem very different from them (Ames, 2004; Robbins & Krueger, 2005). In these cases, the self becomes a poor proxy to figure out very dissimilar people. Obama-
supporting Democrats might have little reason to assume Sarah Palin shares their wine preference.

In our experiments, we examined how far the effect of dissimilarity extends. We focused on the influence of one’s visceral states on how people perceive similar versus dissimilar others’ feelings and preferences.

Visceral states refer to strong transient states of arousal (e.g., hunger, threat). These feelings are typically so strong that they assimilate with perceptions of others who may not even be experiencing the same state. For example, when people are dehydrated they perceive others as thirsty (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003), and when people are frightened they perceive others as afraid (Van Boven, Loewenstein, & Dunning, 2005). Might the effect of even these powerful states dissipate when judging others who seem very different?

In Experiment 1, we explored this question by assigning participants to read a story about a hiker who gets lost with no food, no water, and no extra clothes (adapted from Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). Participants rated the hiker’s feelings and their own feelings. To manipulate similarity, the hiker was described as either a left-wing, pro-gay rights Democrat or a right-wing, anti-gay rights Republican, who went hiking on a break from a political campaign (a strong dissimilarity manipulation: Mitchell, Macrae, & Banaji, 2006). At the end of the study, participants answered a forced-choice item about whether they were similar or dissimilar to the hiker, confirmed by their own political values. We used this forced-choice to group participants into “similar” or “dissimilar” conditions. To manipulate visceral experience, all participants were recruited during winter in Michigan (M temp =6° Fahrenheit). We tested people who were indoors in the university library (“warm” condition) or outdoors at a nearby bus stop (“cold” condition).

Did being in the freezing cold influence social judgment? Yes – but only when judging similar others. When asked whether hunger, thirst, or cold was most unpleasant for the hiker, a significant interaction was obtained between similarity and location (β=−2.75, p=.005). Participants who perceived the hiker as similar were more likely to choose “cold” when they were outdoors (94%) than indoors (57%), replicating standard assimilation effects. However, judgments of dissimilar hikers were uninfluenced by location (55% outdoors, 63% indoors). The same interactions were obtained for whether the hiker most regretted not packing food, water, or extra clothes (β=−2.05, p<.01), and for how cold the hiker felt on a continuous scale (β=2.21, p<.001). These patterns were further reflected by regression-based mediation: participants’ coldness mediated judgments of how cold similar others felt (β=−0.71, p=.004)—but not how cold dissimilar others felt (β=0.06, p=.86).

In Experiment 2, participants were induced to feel thirsty by eating salty snacks either with or without water. The same patterns from Experiment 1 were observed. When asked whether hunger, thirst, or cold was most unpleasant for the hiker, a significant interaction was obtained between similarity and thirst (β=−1.81, p<.02). Participants who perceived the hiker as similar were more likely to choose “thirsty” when they were thirsty (71%) versus quenched (20%); judgments of dissimilar hikers were uninfluenced by participants’ own thirst (37% thirsty, 26% quenched). The same interactions were obtained for whether the hiker most regretted not packing food, extra clothes, or water (β=−1.88, p<.03), and for how thirsty the hiker felt on a continuous scale (β=1.72, p<.01). Again, participants’ thirstiness mediated judgments of how thirsty similar others felt (β=0.54, p=.02) – but not how dissimilar others felt (β=0.04, p=.89).

Although physical feelings powerfully shape our predictions of others’ thoughts, feelings, and preferences, these findings suggest that their influence is eliminated when judging dissimilar others. This observation may have far-reaching consequences. In other studies, for example, people who held a warm cup of coffee judged a target person as more socially “warm” (Williams & Bargh, 2008), and those who held a resume on a heavy clipboard thought it was more “weighty” and “important” (Ackerman, Nocera, & Bargh, 2010). These embodiment effects may be inhibited by dissimilar targets: liberal undergraduates holding a warm drink may not think Republicans are nicer.

More importantly, predicting how others feel is vital for everyday interactions between bosses and employees, relationship partners, and sellers and consumers. One way to more accurately understand others’ situations is to find one’s self in their shoes. For example, actually catching a sickness or feeling pain can help people better empathize with others’ needs (Loewenstein, 2005). But the success of this strategy might be inhibited if one perceives others as different, even on a superficial level. For instance, while shopping for Christmas gifts on a cold New York City night, a woman may be inspired by her own cold feelings to purchase a winter jacket if she was shopping for a close cousin, but not if she were shopping for a distant mother in-law.

In sum: egocentric processes underlying how people make predictions of others’ states are undermined by incidental knowledge about those in question. Such knowledge appears to prevent environmental stimuli (e.g. a hot coffee cup, the weather, hunger) from influencing social predictions, which at times may inhibit people’s ability to make optimal predictions of others’ needs and preferences.