Mental Traveling Along Social and Temporal Distances: the Influence of Cultural Syndromes on Construal Level

Vincent Chi Wong, Lingnan University, China
Robert S. Wyer Jr., Chinese University of Hong Kong, China

We provide an integrated framework in examining the antecedents of construal level that implies interactive effects of general cultural orientations (e.g., individualism/collectivism and short/long-term orientation) and psychological distance on construal level. The present research reconciles the mixed findings of previous research on the effects of cultural orientation on construal level.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1022525/volumes/v44/NA-44

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A formulation of the way people construe the implications of events is provided by Troke and Liberman (2010). This formulation, known as construal level theory, specifies the manner in which an event’s psychological distance (which can be temporal, social, spatial, or uncertainty) affects the abstractness of the constructs that are typically applied to it. People are assumed to construe the world from an egocentric reference point that includes oneself and one’s immediate surroundings and to perceive the distance of objects and events in relation to this point. Thus, psychologically distal events and objects are represented in terms of more general features, whereas psychologically proximal stimuli are construed in terms of more concrete, situation-specific features.

However, the impact of cultural orientation on the nature of these construals has seldom been investigated and moreover has had inconsistent implications. Some studies suggest that individualists (Westerners) think more abstractly than collectivists (Easterners) (e.g., Cousins 1989), whereas others suggest the opposite (e.g., Spassova and Lee 2013).

We provide an integrated framework in examining the antecedents of construal level that implies interactive effects of general cultural orientations (e.g., individualism/collectivism and short/long-term orientation) and psychological distance on construal level.

People are mental travelers along social and temporal distance, and can imagine themselves at different points along these dimensions (e.g., Kross and Grossmann 2012). Specifically, it is possible that when estimating egocentric distance, people actually mentally travel away from themselves in the here and now and stop when they feel that they have reached far enough (Liberman and Forster 2009). Individual differences, however, in the flexibility of perspective shifting may exist.

When making decisions for others or predicting others’ decisions (a socially distant situation), persons may construe the decision-related events more concretely if they shift flexibly into the others’ positions (thus perceiving them as socially closer) than if they are less flexible to shift perspective. When making decisions for selves, however, flexible persons traveling into others’ positions may view themselves from a distance and construe the decision-related events more abstractly than persons without this disposition.

Individual differences of flexibility of shifting can also exist along a temporal dimension. People who shift flexibly in to the future context should construe future events more concretely than inflexible individuals. Also, flexible people who shift to a future time point may view present events from a temporal distance and construe them more abstractly than those who view present events from the perspective of the present (i.e., inflexible travelers).

Previous research has examined how cultural orientation shapes individuals’ tendency to shift perspective along social and temporal dimensions (Lastovicka et al. 1999; Oyserman, Coon and Kemmelmeier 2002). Specifically, members of a collectivist culture may tend to adopt the perspective of another in order to understand social environment and maintain interpersonal harmony, and thus, cultivate a tendency to shift to others’ positions. Individualists, on the other hand, are more likely to take a self-centered perspective, and thus, travel inflexibly to others’ positions. Moreover, representatives of a long-term orientation (LTO) culture may be disposed to project themselves into the future when making decisions, developing a flexible shifting along temporal dimension. Comparatively, members of a short-term orientation (STO) culture may attach more importance to here and now, and shift inflexibly when projecting themselves into future (Bearden, Money, and Nevins 2006).

These considerations suggest that collectivists will construe events more concretely than individualists do when the events pertain to others, but will construe them more abstractly than individualists do when the events concern themselves. Similarly, persons with a long-term temporal orientation should construe events more concretely than those with a short-term orientation when the events occur in the future but more abstractly than the latter individuals when the events occur in the present.

Experiment 1 investigated the interactive effects of individuals’ temporal orientation (short- or long-term orientation) and temporal distance. We first primed short- vs. long-term orientation by a writing task in which they wrote either experience that focused on treasuring here and now (short-term orientation condition), or planning for the future (long-term orientation condition; Kopalle, Lehmann, and Farley 2010). We then described an apartment with desirable abstract but negative concrete features and asked participants either to report intention to move into it now or 1 year later. As expected, long-term orientation participants evaluated the apartment more favorably than short-term orientation participants when they made decision for immediate, but less favorably than short-term orientation participants for moving intention of future.

Experiment 2 investigated the interactive effects of individuals’ social orientation (individualism/collectivism) and social distance. We first primed individualism/collectivism following Gardner, Gabriel and Lee’s (1999) Pronouns Circle Task. We then described the same apartment as in experiment 1 and asked participants either to evaluate it for themselves or to predict a stranger’s reactions to it. As expected, collectivists evaluated the apartment more favorably than individualists when they made decision for themselves, but less favorably than individualists when they predicted the reactions of a stranger.

The effects of temporal and social orientations on construal level that I observed in Studies 1 and 2 were specific to the dimension to which these orientations directly pertained. According to my conceptualization, however both social orientation and temporal orientation influence determine the flexibility of perspective taking along dimensions to which they are not directly related. That is, temporal orientation should influence the abstractness of concepts applied along a social dimension in much the same way it influences concepts applied along a temporal dimension. Correspondingly, social orientation should also influence the abstractness of constructs along both social and temporal dimensions. Studies 3 and 4 investigated these possibilities, and the results echoed to our conceptualization and results of study 1 and 2. Across the four studies, bootstrapping analyses were performed using process model 14 (Hayes 2009) confirmed the mediation role of perspective flexibility.

The present research reconciles the mixed findings of previous research on the effects of cultural orientation on construal level. Moreover, it provides preliminary evidence that CLT may not be universal across cultures.
REFERENCES


