

The effect of level of construal on the temporal distance of activity enactment

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Abstract

A series of four studies demonstrates that, across different operationalizations of level of construal, different types of activities, and for both the self and another person as targets, construing activities in high-level terms fosters perception of the more distal future as appropriate for their enactment. Specifically, the studies show that thinking about superordinate “why” (rather than subordinate “how”) aspects of actions, about the implications of actions for one’s personality (rather than the objects that would be used in performing the action), and about abstract (rather than concrete) aspects of actions leads people to expect the actions to be performed in the more distant future. These results suggest that the association of level of construal and time perspective is bi-directional, in that time perspective affects level of construal and, in addition, level of construal affects time perspective.

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Construal Level Theory (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2005; Trope & Liberman, 2003) suggests that people form more abstract representations, or higher level construals, of psychologically distal objects than psychologically proximal objects. Because time is one dimension of psychological distance, CLT predicts that the greater the temporal distance from a future event, the more likely is the event to be represented schematically in terms of few abstract features that convey the perceived essence of the events, rather than in terms of concrete and more incidental details of the event. Distant future activities will be described in terms of superordinate goals, whereas near future activities will be described in terms of subordinate goals. Distant future events will be classified into a few broad categories, whereas near future events will be classi-

fied into a relatively large number of narrow categories. A simpler, more coherent structure should thus underlie people’s responses to distant future events than to near future events.

Several studies have demonstrated the temporal construal principle. For example, it has been shown that people use higher level, superordinate goals to represent distant future actions than near future actions (Liberman & Trope, 1998), broader categories to represent objects that pertain to distant future situations than to near future situations (Liberman et al., 2002), more abstract dispositions to explain distant future behaviors than near future behaviors (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003), and more abstract moral principles to judge distant future situations than near future situations (Sagristano, Eyal, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2005). The present research examines the reverse direction of influence, from level of construal to temporal distance. That is, instead of examining the effects of temporal distance on level of construal, we examine the effect of level of construal on perceived temporal distance.

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Why would a higher level construal of an object foster greater perceived temporal distance from that object? It has been proposed, within the framework of CLT, that temporal construal is a generalized heuristic that has evolved as a result of differences in what people typically know about near and distant future situations. Ordinarily, details about concrete, secondary aspects of future events, the context in which they occur, and alternative scenarios and courses of action become available only as one gets close in time to the events. In addition, people are often free to postpone their learning about the specifics of a situation until they get close in time to that future situation. They may therefore start thinking about a future situation in terms of their general knowledge and goals, and postpone thinking about the more specific, secondary aspects of the situation until later. An association may thus be formed between temporal distance and level of construal. This association may be generalized, leading people to continue using high-level construals for distant future events and low-level construals for near future events even when the information about the near future and distant future events is the same and the decision is irreversible at both points in time.

One implication of the generalized association of high-level of construal and distal time is that it would be bi-directional: not only would more distant future events be construed in higher level terms, but also events that are construed in higher level terms would be perceived as pertaining to the more distant future. That is, the psychological temporal distance would be greater as an event is described in abstract rather than concrete terms. This hypothesis is consistent with past research relating the likelihood of events to the way they are represented. For example, Sherman, Zehner, Johnson, and Hirt (1983, see also Sherman, Cialdini, Schwartzman, & Reynolds, 1985) showed that the concreteness of an imagined event was associated with increased subjective evaluations of its likelihood. Gollwitzer and Brandstadter (1997, for a review see Gollwitzer, 1999) found that forming “implementation intentions”—a concrete plan as to how, when, and where to perform an activity—enhances the likelihood of actually undertaking the activity relative to having more abstract, general intentions to perform the same actions. Although these lines of research examined the likelihood rather than the temporal proximity of actions and events, it is possible that a similar mechanism underlies judgments of both likelihood and temporal distance. Is it the case, then, that high-level, abstract construals of an event will prompt estimates of greater temporal distance from the event than will low-level, concrete construals of the same event? Four studies addressed this question using different manipulations of level of construal and examining enactment times (i.e., perceived temporal distance) of both one’s own actions and actions of other social targets.

Study 1. “Why” versus “How” construal of activities performed by others

In Study 1, participants first indicated either why or how a person would perform an activity (e.g., “Ron is consider-

ing opening a bank account. Why (how) would Ron do that?”), and then estimated how much time in the future the person would do the activity. We predicted that more distant enactment times would be indicated after a high-level, “why” construal than after a low-level, “how” construal.

Method

Participants

Forty-eight undergraduate students from Columbia University (27 women) were paid participants. Two participants were excluded from the analyses because of missing data. There were no gender differences in any of the results reported in this or other studies.

Procedure

Participants did the study individually, and completed unrelated questionnaires for about 15 min. before being introduced to the present study. Participants received a questionnaire entitled “construction of narratives,” the front page of which stated “The following questionnaire is a pretest for a study on construction of narratives, which examines how people interpret different events they read about and what general impressions are created by different narratives. In other words, we are interested in how people imagine actions and events they read about. Following is a list of short descriptions of different actions that people might consider doing. Please simply read each description, imagine that the person is actually considering doing the action, and answer the questions that follow.” On the next two pages of the questionnaires, the following six sentences were presented, always in the same order: “Ron is considering opening a bank account,” “Heidi is considering enrolling in a fitness program,” “Chris is considering going to a driving school,” “Angela is considering subscribing to a newspaper,” “Jason is considering learning to play the piano,” and “Laura is considering buying a computer.” Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. In the high-level construal condition, each activity was followed by a why question (e.g., “Please describe why you think Ron would do that”), three blank lines and a “when” question (e.g., “Please try to estimate how much time from now would Ron do that.”) In the low-level construal condition, the why question was replaced with a how question (e.g., “Please describe how you think Ron would do that”).

The estimates of how much time from now the activity would be performed were first translated into days. For example (“2 weeks” was coded as 14, 3 h was coded as 3/24 or 0.125). Most of the responses (81%) were numeric. Other responses (11%) were easily translatable into numeric values, according to the following convention: “couple” was coded as 2 (e.g., couple of days was coded as 2, couple of months was coded as 60); “few” and “a number of” were coded as 3 (e.g., “a few hours was coded as 3/24 or 0.125); ranges were coded as the median value (e.g., 2–4 h was coded as 3/24 or 0.125). Also transformed into numbers

were the following responses, which comprised 3% of the responses: “many” was coded as maximum value within this time unit (e.g., “many days” was coded as 45 days, because 45 was the maximum number used together with the “days” unit, “many hours” was coded as 3 days, because 72 was the maximum number used with the “hours” unit); “now”, “immediately”, and “ASAP”, that were assigned the value of the minimum response within the data set; “long time from now” was assigned the maximum value within the data set. Finally, the response “never” as well as missing and illegible responses (5%) were treated as missing data. This coding scheme was used also in all the subsequent studies. In each study, a coder was first trained on a subset of the data to achieve 100% agreement with the first author, and then proceeded to code the rest of the responses in the data set.

Results and discussion

The estimates of time were positively skewed and were log-transformed to achieve homogeneity of error variance, normalized, and added to form a single index of temporal distance ($\alpha = .76$). Table 1 presents the scores for each activity before normalization. A univariate ANOVA on the temporal distance measure revealed a significant effect of construal level, $F(46) = 21.16$, $p < .0001$, indicating more distant enactment times after a high-level, “why” construal ($M = .35$, $SD = .62$) than after a low-level, “how” construal ($M = -.35$, $SD = .43$).

Study 1 thus supported our prediction. Study 2 was designed to extend these findings to activities performed by oneself rather than by another person. Would judged delay in enactment time for one’s own activities be affected by the way these activities are construed?

Study 2. “Why” versus “How” construal of one’s own goals

Participants listed three goals they plan to attain within the next few months, and then described either why or how they would like to attain these goals. As in Study 1, we used how questions to induce a low construal level of the goals and why questions to induce a high construal level of the goals. We predicted, correspondingly, that more distal times would be indicated after “why” construals than after “how” construals.

Table 1
Temporal distance of enactment as a function of level of construal (Log of the indicated number of days, Study 1)

	How	Why
Open a bank account	-.08 (2.60)*	1.72 (2.87)
Enroll in a fitness program	.88 (2.03)*	2.27 (1.48)
Go to a driving school	.53 (2.63)*	2.75 (1.41)
Subscribe to a newspaper	-.54 (2.48)*	1.03 (2.50)
Learn to play the piano	2.24 (1.52)	3.02 (2.76)
Buy a computer	1.25 (2.14)	2.43 (2.05)

* A significant difference, $p < .05$, between the “how” and the “why” conditions.

Method

Participants

Fifty-six undergraduate students from Tel Aviv University (41 women) participated in exchange for course credit.

Procedure

After performing unrelated tasks for 15 min, participants received a booklet, the first page of which asked them to list three goals that they would like to attain within the next few months but they have not yet attained. Three blank lines, numbered 1–3 followed, on which participants wrote their goals. The second page of the booklet introduced and explained the “how vs. why” experimental manipulation, adapted from Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope (2004). Note that in this procedure, participants list the goals before the experimental manipulation is introduced, which prevents any effect of the manipulation on the selection of goals. Participants in the “why” condition received the following example on page 2:

Suppose you indicate “taking a vacation” as one of your goals. Please write the goal in the uppermost square. Then, think why you would like to go on vacation, and write your answer in the square underneath. Suppose that you write “in order to rest.” Now, please think why you would like to rest, and write your answer in the third square. Suppose that you write “in order to renew your energy.” Finally, write in the last square why you would like to renew your energy.

Participants in the “how” condition received a comparable example, leading them through three stages of successive how questions. Page 3 presented four blank squares, connected with downward-pointing arrows. It asked participants to list in the first square the first goal they indicated on the first page, and use the next three squares to answer three successive why (how) questions in a way comparable to the example on page 2. Participants were then asked how much time from now they would start working toward the goal. This was the main dependent measure of our study. Pages 4 and 5 of the booklet repeated the same procedure for the second and third goals, respectively. Finally, the last part of the booklet asked participants to list the goals again and to indicate, for each of the goals, how difficult, important, and pleasant it is to attain the goal and how frequently they pursued the goal on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much/extremely).

Results and discussion

We converted the times that participants indicated into days in the same way as in Study 1, and log-transformed them to achieve homogeneity of error variance. We averaged, for each participant, the times she or he indicated for the three goals. As predicted, the enactment times were more distant in the high-level, “why” condition ($M = 3.22$)

than in the low-level, “how” condition ($M=2.44$), $F(1,52)=4.44$, $p=.04$. Analysis of the rated difficulty, importance, pleasantness, and frequency of the goals showed that only goal importance was affected by the construal level manipulation. Specifically, the rated importance of goals was higher in the high-level, “why” condition ($M=6.01$) than in the low-level, “how” condition ($M=5.57$), $F(1,52)=3.73$, $p=.06$ (all other $F_s < 1.75$, $p_s > .19$). This result is not surprising in view of action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987, 1989), according to which high-level, “why” construals carry more meaning and importance than low-level, “how” construals. It is noteworthy that goal importance was not related to enactment time, $r(52)=.01$, ns, and therefore could not have mediated the effect of construal level on enactment time.

This study demonstrates that high-level construals of one’s own goals, as compared to low-level construals, makes one think of starting to pursue these goals in the more distant future. It would be interesting to examine, in further research, whether level of construal could also affect the time of actual enactment of goals, rather than only the time of planned enactment. For example, does construing “writing a seminar paper” in high-level terms make one start writing it later as compared to construing the same action in lower level terms? Such findings, if obtained, would indicate the relevance of construal level to procrastination, namely, that people may tend to procrastinate more when they form high-level construals than low-level construals of their goals. This research, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Studies 1 and 2 used “how vs. why” questions to manipulate level of construal. Although there is good evidence in support of the notion that the “how vs. why” distinction is closely related to level of construal (Freitas et al., 2004; Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2005; Liberman & Trope, 1998, Study 1; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), the possibility remains that some aspects other than level of construal were also affected by this manipulation. For example, it could be that thinking about why one would do an activity makes one doubt the need to perform it, resulting in delaying its performance to the more distant future. Thus, it is essential for our argument to show that similar effects on enactment time may be obtained with a different manipulation of level of construal. Studies 3 and 4 address this issue.

Study 3. “Objects” versus “Traits” construal of activities

In Study 3, participants described either what objects they would use in performing an activity (low-level construal condition) or what personality traits are implied by the activity (high-level construal condition) and then indicated how much time from now they or another person would do an activity. As before, more distal enactment times were expected to follow high-level, “trait” construals, than low-level, “object” construals.

Method

Participants

One hundred ninety-five undergraduate students from Indiana University (127 women) participated in return for course credit.

Procedure

The questionnaire was the same as in Study 1, except that a different manipulation of level of construal was employed, different activities were used, and both self and another person were used as targets. Instead of the how and why questions used in Study 1, in the low-level construal condition, each activity was followed by the question “which objects would you (or the person mentioned in the activity, e.g., “Ron”) use in performing that action.” In the high-level construal condition, each activity was followed by the question “which personality traits are implied by that action.” The activities were: “write in a journal,” “call a high school friend,” “exercising,” “cleaning the apartment,” and “doing laundry.” After completing the enactment time questions on all the activities, participants answered how difficult, how important, and how enjoyable each of the activities was on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Participants participated in large groups of 20–60 persons in which they first filled out unrelated questionnaires for about 20 min.

Results and discussion

As in Study 1, the temporal distances of performing the activities were converted into days, log-transformed, and then normalized and indexed together for each participant ($\alpha=.79$). Table 2 presents the mean enactment times for each activity after the log-transformation but before normalization. The indexed temporal distance scores were submitted to a 2(target; self vs. other) \times 2(construal level: high vs. low) between subjects ANOVA. A significant effect for target, $F(1,190)=14.04$, $p<.001$, indicated sooner enactment times for the other person ($M=-.17$, $SD=.69$) than for oneself ($M=.18$, $SD=.70$). Most importantly, the predicted effect for level of construal was obtained, $F(1,190)=15.04$, $p<.0001$, indicating more distant enactment times following a high-level, “traits” construal

Table 2

Temporal distance of enactment as a function of level of construal and target (Log of the indicated number of hours, Study 3)

	Other		Self	
	Objects	Traits	Objects	Traits
Write in a journal	.20 (3.20)*	2.85 (3.98)	1.87 (3.71)*	4.20 (4.15)
Call a high school friend	-.65 (2.62)*	1.72 (3.22)	1.04 (3.02)*	2.19 (3.00)
Exercising	.62 (2.12)*	2.15 (3.07)	1.61 (2.08)	1.89 (2.87)
Cleaning the apartment	.15 (1.81)	.92 (2.88)	1.94 (3.21)	2.38 (2.97)
Doing laundry	3.75 (2.05)	4.16 (2.91)	4.91 (3.02)	5.89 (3.75)

* A significant difference, $p < .05$, between the objects and the traits condition within target.

($M = .19$, $SD = .76$) than a low-level, “objects” construal ($M = -.18$, $SD = .63$). There was no level by target interaction, $F(1, 190) = 1.03$, ns. We also examined whether the rated difficulty, enjoyment, and importance of the activities were affected by level of construal, target, or their interaction. We found only effects of target, indicating that activities were judged as less difficult, $F(1, 190) = 8.36$, $p = .005$, and as more enjoyable $F(1, 190) = 9.84$, $p = .002$, in the self condition ($M = 2.76$ and $M = 4.58$, respectively) than in the other condition ($M = 3.12$ and $M = 4.14$, respectively). No other main effect or interaction reached significance, all $ps > .10$.

The present study extends Studies 1 and 2 by showing that a different manipulation of level of construal produces an effect similar to the “how vs. why” manipulation. Furthermore, the effect of level was obtained for both the self and the other person as targets. The next study attempted to extend the previous results by using yet another manipulation of concrete vs. abstract levels of construal and another set of activities. For that end, we asked participants when a target person would perform an activity that was described in either abstract or concrete terms.

Study 4. “Concrete” versus “Abstract” construal of activities

In Study 4, participants imagined either themselves or another person doing an activity that was described either in concrete, low-level terms (“check the paper for spelling and typing errors”) or more abstract, high-level terms (e.g., “proofread the paper”). We predicted, as before, that more distant enactment times would be indicated after an abstract, high-level construal than after a concrete, low-level construal.

Method

Participants

One hundred ninety-one undergraduate students from Indiana University (114 women) participated in return for course credit.

Procedure

The procedure and the introduction to the questionnaire were the same as in Study 3, but the questions were changed. Specifically, participants first imagined themselves or another person doing each activity and then indicated

how much time from now they thought they or the person mentioned in the sentence would do the activity.

Materials

Two descriptions of the same activity were used. The activities were chosen such that the abstract and the concrete descriptions would differ only in abstractness, without conveying different information about the activity in question. The abstract (concrete) descriptions of the activities were: proofread a paper (check the paper for spelling and typing errors), pay the electricity bill (send a check to the electric company), inquire about the status of an application (call and ask if the application was received and processed), call a high school friend (dial the number of a high school friend), and consult the professor about a course paper (ask the professor about a course paper).

In some questionnaires, two activities were described abstractly and three were described concretely, whereas in other questionnaires, three activities were described abstractly and two were described concretely. Activities were counterbalanced across questionnaires. Thus, level of construal was manipulated within subjects with different activities.

Results and discussion

Enactment times

The enactment times were log-transformed and standardized in the same way as in Studies 1 and 3. The transformed and normalized means are presented in Table 3. For each participant, the low-level, concretely described activities were averaged into a single index of concrete activities, and the high-level, abstractly described activities were averaged into a single index of abstract activities. A two-way ANOVA on this measure, with Level as a within-subjects factor and Target as a between-subjects factor revealed a significant main effect for target, $F(1, 166) = 24.67$, $p < .001$, showing, as in Study 3, sooner enactment times for the other person ($M = -.24$, $SD = .60$) than for the self ($M = .28$, $SD = .74$). The effect for level of construal was highly significant, $F(1, 166) = 64.94$, $p < .0001$, indicating, as predicted, more distant enactment times for abstractly construed activities ($M = .18$, $SD = .74$) than for concretely construed activities ($M = -.18$, $SD = .81$). A marginal Target \times Level interaction, $F(1, 166) = 3.44$, $p = .06$ indicated that, although the effect of level of construal was highly significant in both target condi-

Table 3

Temporal distance of enactment as a function of level of construal and target (Log of the indicated number of hours, Study 4)

	Other		Self	
	Conc.	Abst.	Conc.	Abst.
Proofread a paper/check the paper for spelling and typing errors	-.60	-.01*	.30	.34
Pay the electricity bill/send a check to the electric company	-.32	-.10	-.09	.59*
Inquire about the status of an application/call and ask if the application was received and processed	-.41	-.19	.35	.33
Call a high school friend/dial the number of a high school friend	-.59	.18*	.05	.47*
Consult the professor about a course paper/ask the professor about a course paper	-.41	.00*	.22	.21

* A significant difference, $p < .05$, between the concrete and the abstract conditions within target.

tions, it was stronger in the other condition, $t(88)=7.30$, $p<.0001$, than in the self condition $t(76)=4.04$, $p<.0001$. The present study extends the previous studies by showing that yet another manipulation of level of construal produced an effect similar to the “how vs. why” and “objects vs. traits” manipulations.

Studies 3 and 4 examined activities performed by both oneself and another target person, and found later enactment times for oneself than for another person. Possibly, the reason for that is that participants tended to see more constraints on their own plans than on the plans of other people. One might think, for example, that if Ron is planning to open a bank account, or to proofread his paper, then nothing should prevent him from doing so as soon as possible. When thinking of themselves, however, people might be more painfully aware of other planned activities that might prevent them from acting on their plans with due promptness.

General discussion

Four studies demonstrate that, across different operationalizations of level of construal, different types of activities, and with both the self and another person as targets, construing activities in high-level terms fosters perception of the more distal future as appropriate for their enactment. Specifically, our studies show that thinking about superordinate “why” (rather than subordinate “how”) aspects of future actions (Studies 1 and 2), about the implications of actions for one’s personality (rather than the objects that would be used in performing the action, Study 3), and about abstract (rather than concrete) aspects of actions (Study 4) leads people to expect the actions to be performed in the more distant future.

Importantly, Studies 2 and 3 included questions about the difficulty, the importance, and the pleasantness of the activities in the questionnaires. They found that these were not affected by the manipulation of level of construal (all three measures in Study 3), or, if affected by the manipulation, did not mediate its effect on enactment time (the importance measure in Study 2). Thus, it seems that a higher level of construal does not lengthen perceived enactment time by changing the perceived desirability or the perceived difficulty of the activities.

Together with earlier studies showing that temporal distance affects level of construal (Liberman et al., 2002), these results suggest that the association of level of construal and time perspective is bi-directional, in that time perspective affects level of construal and, in addition, level of construal affects time perspective. A recent series of studies (Bar-Anan, Liberman, & Trope, 2006) examines more directly the notion of association between psychological distance and construal. Using the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998; Greenwald et al., 2002) it has been shown that people associate words that are related to high-level of construal (e.g., abstract, general) with temporally distal entities (year, eternity) more than with proximal

entities (moment, near), whereas the reverse was true for words that are related to low-level of construal (e.g., specific, concrete). Importantly, similar relations were found between construal level and other psychological distances—spatial distance, social distance, and hypotheticality.

Past research has found that imagining events enhances their perceived likelihood (Sherman et al., 1983, 1985; see Koehler, 1991, for a review). There is also research showing that the same behavior is seen as more probable, whether or not the actor possesses the corresponding disposition, when the behavior is described in concrete detail than when the behavior is described more abstractly (Trope & Burnstein, 1975). The present studies extend these lines of research by showing that level of construal also affects perceived enactment time. Both findings concerning behavior probability are consistent with Construal Level Theory (Liberman et al., 2005; Trope & Liberman, 2003), as this theory assumes that both temporal distance and probability are dimensions of psychological distance and that higher construal levels foster perceptions of greater psychological distance on any of those dimensions (i.e., temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and hypotheticality).

The present results are also related to Gollwitzer’s (1990, 1999) findings that forming implementation intentions, namely concrete plans as to how, when, and in what context to execute a planned activity, increases the likelihood of actually enacting those intentions. Because implementation intentions involve a low-level, “how” construal of activities, the present results are consistent with those of Gollwitzer. Importantly, the present results extend earlier research on implementation intentions in several ways: first, we demonstrate that concrete, low-level construals affect not only the likelihood of performing an action, but also the temporal distance to its enactment. Second, we obtain the same effects with another person as the target, which suggests that the effect is not limited to personal plans, but rather reflects a more general cognitive tendency. Third, we obtain the effects not only with the “how vs. why” manipulation of level of construal, but also with other manipulations that involve concrete vs. abstract descriptions of actions (e.g., proofread a paper vs. check the paper for spelling and typing errors).

It is interesting to examine the implications of the present findings for procrastination. It might seem reasonable to predict that thinking about activities in low-level, concrete terms (e.g., as we did in four studies) would reduce procrastination relative to a high-level, abstract construal of the same activity (e.g., extending the theory to a new domain). We think, however, that procrastination is a more complex, multifaceted phenomenon that is related to many diverse causes in the situation, the characteristics of the task, and the actor’s personality (see Ferrari, Johnson, & McCown, 1995; Milgram, Marshevsky, & Sadeh, 1995; Van Eerde, 2000). As noted before, we suggest that the present findings are explained by a generalized association of high-level construal with temporal distance. This association, however, might be only partly relevant to decisions about actual goal pursuit. It is possible that more complex predictions regarding procrastination

may be derived also from the logic of CLT. For example, it is possible that activities that are more attractive on the high-level of construal than on the low-level of construal (e.g., “having guests stay over a weekend at your place”; Trope & Liberman, 2000, Study 1) would be put off, because they would seem more attractive with increased temporal distance. A high-level construal of other activities, however, should not engender procrastination. For example, to the extent that watching a videotape of a reality TV show is more attractive on the low-level of construal than on the high-level of construal, CLT predicts that it would be seen as less attractive with increasing delay, and thus people would not procrastinate in watching the videotape. Future research will have to examine these as well as other implications of CLT for procrastination.

Our findings suggest a number of other questions and directions for future research. Would a high-level rather than low-level description of an object lead us to expect it to occur in a spatially distant rather than a near location? Initial supportive evidence has been recently obtained by Fujita et al. (2005), who showed that increasing the level of detail in a narrative reduced the perceived spatial distance of its location. The effect of level of construal on social distance has also received empirical support. Stephan (2004) has shown that communicating with another person in high-level, abstract terms rather than low-level, concrete terms fosters perception of that person as socially distant rather than close.

At a more general level, the present research suggests that high-level construals facilitate thinking of events as occurring under circumstances that are different from those that are presently experienced. Such construal may enable individuals to make predictions, evaluations, and plans for distant times, locations, and persons. For example, inferring another person’s high-level goals or attitudes enables one to predict and plan for the other person’s behavior in psychologically distant situations. In this sense, high-level construals expand one’s perspective. Whereas low-level construals focus individuals on the “here and now,” high-level construals may enable individuals to transcend the “here and now” and broaden the scope of one’s temporal, spatial, and social perspective. Importantly, the present research further suggests that the breadth of one’s perspective is not a fixed quality. Instead, it appears that momentary manipulations of level of construal can considerably expand and shrink one’s perspective. Investigating the role of momentary and more chronic accessibility of construal levels in determining the scope of one’s perspective is an interesting direction for future research.

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