

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Construing Clinton and Trump: The Effects of Psychological Distance and Voter Preference

**A Thesis Submitted to the
University Honors Program
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree
With Upper Division Honors**

Department Of

Psychology

By

Clarissa R. Hinshaw

DeKalb, Illinois

May 2017

HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT
THESIS SUBMISSION FORM

AUTHOR: Clarissa R. Hinshaw

THESIS TITLE: Construing Clinton and Trump: The Effects of Psychological Distance
and Voter Preference

ADVISOR: Dr. Keith Millis

ADVISOR'S DEPARTMENT: Psychology

DISCIPLINE: Psychology

YEAR: 2017

PAGE LENGTH: 15

BIBLIOGRAPHY: yes

ILLUSTRATED: no

PUBLISHED (YES OR NO): no

LIST PUBLICATION: n/a

COPIES AVAILABLE (HARD COPY, MICROFILM, DISKETTE): hard copy

ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS): see next page

Abstract

People live in the here and now, although they can think about distal events, places and times. Thinking about distal time, places and people are referred to as psychological distance. Psychological distance is correlated with the level of construal. The level of construal refers to the level of abstractness and concreteness of the mental representation of an idea (e.g., goals, events, places, people, etc). The information that we have stored about the world can also vary on a dimension of concreteness and abstraction. The purpose of this study was to test whether psychological distance mediates the extent that we evaluate the information about the world as being more or less detailed. In the study, people performed a task that has been shown to instill different levels of psychological distance (Liberman & Trope, 1998). In the close condition, participants wrote about what they would do tomorrow. In the far condition, participants wrote about what they would do next year. In a control group, the participants described their favorite hobby. Then all groups rated Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's policy plans and long-term visions of America on measures of construal. People ranked the candidate they were voting for as having lower construal. Not supported was the prediction that psychological distance would affect the ratings of the candidates' visions for the future.

Construing Clinton and Trump:

The Effects of Psychological Distance and Voter Preference

People exist in the “here and now”. Although they are confined to the here and now, they have the ability to think about events, actions, object, goals, and people in other places and in other times. They may exist in the past or they may exist in the future. These events or actions can include other people or objects, but they can also include themselves. Besides the dimension of space and time, there is also social distance. Some people may be considered socially closer or distant from the self. In general, people tend to be egocentric in that their thoughts about other events and people are tied to how distant they are from themselves. For example, people tend to distort how large geographical areas are depending on the distance if the area to themselves (ref), in that they represent closer locations as being larger. This construct of something ranging from the self on the dimension of space, time, socialness, is called “psychological distance.”

In addition to psychological distance, people can represent actions, events, objects, social interactions at different levels of construal. Levels of construal refer to how concrete and detailed the object of thought is represented in the human mind. Levels of construal range from low construal, in which all available information is represented, to higher levels of construal in which only the most important aspects are represented. That is, lower level of construal is concrete whereas higher levels are abstract. For example, consider the representation of “computer.” In a lower-level of construal, the representation of computer would include type (laptop vs. desktop), size (small, large), mobility (desktop vs tablet), cost (cheap vs. expensive), brand (Mac, PC), and use (work, pleasure, surfing the web), etc. At a higher level of construal, only the most important and invariant information is represented, such as use and mobility. Of course, importance depends on the goal of the individual.

Trope and Liberman (2010) proposed a theory that links psychological distance and level of construal. In their theory, they summarize empirical work that shows a reliable relation between these two constructs. Central to their theory is that the level of construal for something decreases with psychological distance. For example, if someone was planning on buying a computer tomorrow, which would be psychologically close, they would represent the object at a lower level of construal. However, if they were thinking about buying a computer a year from now, they would represent it at a higher level of construal. They summarize research that indicates the dependency between the level of construal and psychological distance existing for different types of distance (temporal, spatial, social). Although they note that these dimensions are correlated, they do show similar dependencies.

There have been several studies and methodologies that researchers have used to examine the relationship between psychological distance and construal theory. For example, it has been shown that people who are asked to describe their reasoning for doing an action are more likely to use more abstract terms, or higher levels of construal than people asked to describe the way they would do a particular action. Liberman, Trope, McCrea, and Sherman (2007) conducted a study testing for different levels of temporal construal. In their first study, they examined how construal is affected with “why” tasks versus “how” tasks. This research is used to illustrate how the wording of a question or phrase affects the level of construal in a person’s description. In this study, participants were asked to describe “how” or “why” they would perform a task that was assigned to them. For example, a participant could be asked to describe opening a savings account. They would either be asked *how* they would open an account or *why* they would do such an action. They would also be asked to describe the amount of time someone would take before deciding to open an account. They predicted “why” questions would induce higher

construal and “how” questions would induce lower construal. That is, the participants would describe why a person would do something, such as open a bank account, in more abstract and vague terms, than when describing how an account would be opened. They also predicted that, when describing why an account would be opened, the participant would plan to open one at a later date than when describing how they would open it. The participants completed a fifteen-minute unrelated questionnaire and then were asked to describe how or why they would complete a particular action. They would then be asked when they planned to complete the action. The results supported their hypotheses: actions planned in the future were described at higher levels of construal than when planned in the near future.

Objects or events are commonly described in greater detail in the near future than in the distant future. Liberman, Sagristano, and Trope (2002) studied how people describe objects relating to an event with higher or lower construal when the event is happening in the near or distant future. For example, say a person is imagining themselves on a vacation. If the vacation is happening tomorrow, they are likely to have a more detailed image of the vacation. They may imagine themselves engaging in specific activities, eating at specific restaurants, finding specific places to shop, representing low construal. If the vacation is happening a year from now, they describe their image in vaguer terms such as relaxing, exploring, or seeing sights. This would represent higher level construal. They predicted that descriptions for events in the distant future would have higher construal or vaguer descriptions, and descriptions of events closer in the future would be more detailed and specific. This means that describing events in the distant future would represent higher levels of construal than describing events in the near future. Participants were told to imagine themselves in an event such as having a good day either tomorrow or a year from now. Their hypothesis was supported. This study is similar to the

current study, as participants were asked to use words to describe how they imagine thought tomorrow or a year from now.

This study will focus on how time relates to the level of construal in political policy claims and visions. This study predicts that subjects primed to think about life's events a year from now will see the 2016 presidential nominees Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton's policies and visions with a higher level of construal than when they are primed to think about events happening tomorrow. This extends prior research because the targets of thought were not actions or events but rather attitudes about items stored in declarative memory. One previous study which studied the level of construal for attitudes was Schimmel and Forster (2008) who found that people were more likely to judge unconventional art as "Art" when primed to think at a higher construal level. They argue that people think more abstractly when thinking at a higher level of construal, therefore, are more likely to include unconventional art as belonging to the category of art. Likewise, in this study, I hypothesized that priming a higher level of construal would affect the evaluation of policies.

Methods

Participants:

This study consisted of one hundred and four participants. The study was conducted online through Mechanical Turk. Participants were paid fifteen cents to complete the survey. Fifteen respondents were dropped because of evidence of either "yea-saying" or "nay-saying". Additionally, six respondents were dropped because they were not registered to vote. After these participants were dropped, 83 respondents remained. Thirty-two said they were voting for Trump and 35 said they were voting for Clinton. Sixteen indicated that they would either not vote ($n = 3$), or vote for Stein ($n = 4$), Johnson ($n = 7$), or "other person" ($n = 2$). Age of the participants

ranged from nineteen to seventy-four, with the average of 37 (SD = 11). Of the sample, 51 identified themselves as women and 32 identified as men. The data were collected one week before the election.

Design:

The primary design was a 3 (Level of Construal: control vs. Near vs. Far) by 2 (order of rating: Clinton-first, Clinton-second) \times 2 (Candidate: Trump vs. Clinton) mixed design. The level of Construal and order of rating was between subjects.

Procedure:

The participants were recruited through Mechanical Turk, an online website where “workers” can take surveys for a nominal fee. They were paid fifteen cents to participate in the study. They clicked an “I agree” box prior to the first page. On the first page, the participants were asked to describe “something” for four minutes. In the control group, the participants were asked to write about their favorite hobby. In the low construal or “near” condition, they were asked to write about the activities they were going to do tomorrow. In the high construal or “far” condition, they were asked to list the activities they planned to do a year from now. All of the participants then went to the next page. They were asked to rate Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton’s policy plans and long-term vision for the United States on the level of construal. For example, participants were asked to “Please rate Donald Trump on his POLICY POSITIONS (please ignore whether you agree with them)”. They were asked to rate them for being “detailed”, “abstract”, “general”, “concrete”, “vague”, and “specific” on a scale from zero to one hundred, with zero being “not at all” to one hundred being “extremely”. After answering these questions, participants rated how much political knowledge they had, reported their political party affiliation, said if they were registered to vote, and filled out their demographics.

Results

To verify that the rating scales reflected the level of construal, a factor analysis was run using the answers. I had predicted questions assessing the policies on abstractness, generality, and vagueness would load on one factor whereas the questions about concreteness, high level of detail, and specificity would load on another. These findings were supported by the factor analysis, and similar findings occurred for the questions assessing policy and visions of America.

Therefore, for each participant, scores to the questions about abstractness, generality, and vagueness were averaged and as well as the ratings of concreteness, the level of detail, and specificity. The former score was called the “High-Level Construal Score”, and the latter was called the “Low-Level Construal Score.” This was done for both the “policy” and “vision” questions separately. In order to simplify the analyses, we computed a “Level of Construal Score” (LOCS) by subtracting the Low-Level Construal Score from the High-Level Construal Score for both the policy and vision scores. To the extent that this score is above zero, then that would indicate a high level of construal. To the extent that this score resulted in negative values, it would indicate a low level of construal. If the LOCS is zero, it would indicate mid-level construal. Lastly, a LOCS was computed for each of the two primary candidates for each participant. That is, there was a LOCS for Donald Trump and one for Hillary Clinton.

There were significant correlations among the vision and policy construal scores for Trump ($r = .89$, $p < .001$) and Clinton ($r = .79$, $p < .001$). Because of the high correlations, it is likely that participants rated policies and visions very similarly. Consequently, we averaged over the vision and policy construal scores for Trump and Clinton, separately. Therefore, there was one LOCS for Trump and one for Clinton.

To determine whether participant's level of construal for both Clinton and Trump was affected by the level of construal manipulation (describe your hobby (control), describe actions tomorrow (low level of construal), describe actions a year from now (high level of construal)), The LOCS for each candidate was submitted to a mixed 3-way ANOVA with Level of Construal condition (control, low, high), candidate order (rate trump first, rate Clinton first), and Candidate (Trump, Clinton) as factors, with candidate as the repeated measures.

There was a main effect of candidate, $F(1, 77) = 4.90, p < .05$. The overall LOCS for Clinton and Trump was -3.33 ($SD = 29.3$) and 10.37 ($SD = 37.3$). Therefore, on the average, respondents think of Clinton at a lower level of construal than Trump. The Candidate X Order X Condition interaction approached significance, $F(2, 77) = 2.72, p = .07$. There were no other significant main effects or interactions.

Because the vast majority of the participants planned on voting for Trump or Clinton, we did an analysis by including the candidate that they would vote for as a factor. This would also test whether social distance would be related to the level of construal for their policies and visions. It is reasonable to assume that people feel socially closer to the candidate that they plan to vote for than for other candidate but it is unclear whether this type of social distance would be related to how they think about their policies. We omitted the respondents who indicated that they would vote for someone else besides Clinton or Trump, leaving 67 respondents. The LOCS was analyzed by a 2 (vote-for: Trump vs Clinton), 2 (candidate: Trump vs Clinton) X 3 (Condition: control, tomorrow, year) X 2 (Order: Trump first vs Trump second) mixed ANOVA with Candidate as the repeated measure.

As found previously, there was a main effect of Candidate $F(1, 55) = 8.67, p < .00$, but that effect was qualified by a Candidate X Vote-for interaction, $F(1, 55) = 48.65, p < .001$. The

pattern of means indicated that respondents gave lower LOCS for their preferred candidate. For Trump voters, they indicated lower LOCS for Trump ($M = -12.72$; $SD = 21.1$) than Clinton ($M = 10.53$; $SD = 29.2$), whereas for Clinton voters indicated lower LOCS for Clinton ($M = -23.82$; $SD = 22.4$) than for Trump ($M = 33.39$; $SD = 33.4$). However, this 2-way interaction was also qualified by a Candidate X Vote for X Candidate 3-way interaction, $F(1, 55) = 3.96$, $p < .05$. The interaction is shown in Figure 1. Simple main effects were conducted which compared the difference between the ratings for Trump and Clinton at each level of level of construal (control, near, far) and for Trump and Clinton voters. For Clinton voters, Clinton received lower ratings of construal which did not differ by the level of construal manipulation. However, for Trump voters, the control condition did not produce differences between the candidates on ratings, but the near and far conditions did so to the same extent. It is unclear as to the interpretation of this interaction.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to see if priming a person's level of construal would influence the level of construal of the policies and visions of presidential candidates. High construal means more abstract or vague, while low construal means detailed or specific. The hypothesis was that people would rate policies and visions with higher construal in the far condition than in the near condition.

The overall hypothesis that there would be higher construal scores in the far condition was not supported. Perhaps the manipulation was not strong enough to prime the participants out of their own political biases. This might be particularly true for online MTurk workers who filled out the questionnaire outside of controlled laboratory conditions. It is unknown whether the manipulation of construal would be effective in more controlled circumstances.

One difference between the current and prior studies is that in the current study, people directly rated the level of construal of the stimulus (e.g., policies) versus, in the prior study, people generated ideas or content and then had that information rated on the level of construal. For example, in a study by Liberman and Trope (1998) after giving the same manipulation that we used, the participants were given 2 choices for how they thought about various activities (e.g., reading a book) where they circled one of two answers that either was at a low level of construal (e.g., turning pages) or a high level of construal (e.g. gaining knowledge). In contrast, in the present study, participants directly rated the policies and visions on the level of construal rather than having them answer questions that would indicate their level of construal for that knowledge. It is possible that the anticipated differences would emerge if we had participants simply write out their thoughts about Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's policies.

The level of construal manipulation, however, interacted with who the participant would vote for and the candidate (see Figure 1.). The interaction indicates that for Trump voters, the differences between Trump and Clinton were larger in the near and far conditions compared to the control condition, as compared to Clinton voters. It is somewhat difficult to interpret the pattern of means. One would have expected to have lower construal scores in the far condition but that did not occur.

One interesting finding was the highly statistically significant candidate by a vote for interaction. People rated their preferred candidate as being lower on construal than the less-preferred candidate. The pattern of means indicated that this was particularly true for Clinton supporters, perhaps based on the news reporting at the time that suggests Clinton had more detailed policies than Trump. This finding is also consistent with data showing that construal increases with social distance. People tend to view people who are closer to them on lower

levels of construal, as indicated by less formal language (Trope, Liberman & Liberman, 2010).

Therefore, people who planned on voting for Trump felt socially closer to him than to Clinton, and likewise, people who planned on voting for Clinton felt closer to her than to him.

This study was conducted before the election, so many future directions could be taken. It would be interesting to conduct a study now with only President Trump to see if his construal scores have changed. One could predict Trump construal to drop as policy plans become clearer. One other idea for a future would be to compare construal levels of campaigning versus governing. Is it possible to keep campaign promises if there is a lack of governing? Does lack of governing hurt a president's chances of reelection? This could be done by asking respondents what a convincing campaign should include (high construal) versus how governmental negotiating should be done to pass congressional laws (low construal).

References

- Liberman, N., Sagristano, M. D., & Trope, Y. (2002). The effect of temporal distance on level of mental construal. *Journal of experimental social psychology, 38(6)*, 523-534.
- Liberman, N., Trope, Y., McCrea, S. M., & Sherman, S. J. (2007). The effect of level of construal on the temporal distance of activity enactment. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 43(1)*, 143-149.
- Schimmel, K. & Forster, J. (2008). How temporal distance changes novices' attitudes towards unconventional arts. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, 2*, 53-50.
- Stephan, E., Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (2010). Politeness and psychological distance: a construal level perspective. *Journal of personality and social psychology, 98(2)*, 268.
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review, 117(2)*, 440-463.

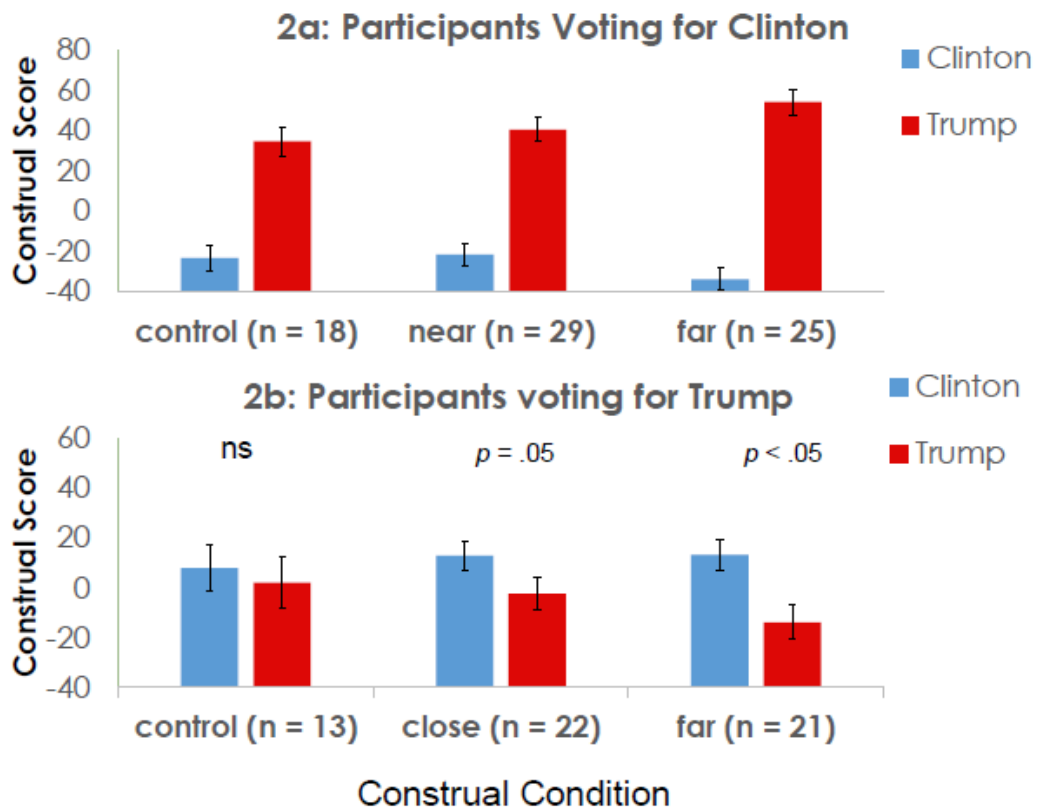


Figure 1. The level of Construal Scores as a Function of Construal Condition, Candidate, and Preferred Candidate.