



Evaluations in Their Social Context: Distance Regulates Consistency and Context Dependence

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Abstract

When and why do people's likes and dislikes flexibly tune to the current context, and when do they remain consistent? Ideas about flexibility and consistency have permeated the attitude literature throughout its history. Building on the notion that both flexibility and consistency in evaluative responding can be highly functional as well as highly social, this paper considers the role of distance in guiding people's evaluations to incorporate specific and individualized information that helps immerse them in their current social environment, versus broad and general information that helps them reach beyond their current context and relate to things outside of it. Next, the paper reviews research supporting this perspective, focusing on its implications for understanding how people's evaluations help them tune into different aspects of their social environment — those that tend to be specific to a particular context, and those that tend to be consistently encountered across contexts. The described studies suggest that distance regulates susceptibility to specific and general social influences, as well as the extent to which people's evaluations reflect broad and socially shared morals, values, and ideological principles.

We often think of our attitudes as enduring and consistent aspects of ourselves — whether those attitudes include a deep and abiding love of chocolate, a moral conviction about a social policy, or heartfelt agreement with a political group's positions. Yet considerable research suggests that our evaluations can also shift quite fluidly in response to the immediate situation (e.g., Ledgerwood & Chaiken, 2007; Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001; Mitchell, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003; Sia, Lord, Blessum, Ratcliff, & Lepper, 1997; see also Converse, 1964). This paper takes up the issue of evaluative flexibility and consistency by considering when and why people's evaluative responses will incorporate specific information that helps immerse them in their current social environment, or general information that helps them reach beyond their current context and relate to things outside of it.

Consistency and Context Dependence in Evaluative Responding

Ideas about consistency and context dependence have permeated the assumptions and theories in the attitude literature since it began. An attitude can be defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity [the attitude object] with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 1) — a definition that focuses on an attitude's evaluative nature rather than assumptions of stability or flexibility (see also Eagly & Chaiken, 2010). Historically, however, attitudes have often been considered relatively stable individual differences that remain consistent across time and across contexts, unless an overt persuasion attempt is encountered that changes the initial attitude to a new one (Ajzen, 1988; Allport, 1935; Campbell, 1950; Krech & Crutchfield, 1948; see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, for a review). At the other end of the spectrum, some more recent theories have suggested that attitudes should really be conceptualized as intrinsically malleable constructions that are formed anew from whatever information happens to be accessible in the current context (Schwarz, 2007; Schwarz & Bohner, 2001; Zaller & Feldman,

1992). Many current theoretical perspectives fall somewhere in between (e.g., Fazio, 2007; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011; Smith & Conrey, 2007). Yet importantly, any theory of attitudes must grapple with the question of when and why evaluations will sometimes be more consistent and sometimes less consistent across contexts.

Interestingly, theoretical arguments for both consistency and context dependence often invoke functionality. Researchers have argued that it seems only logical that an organism would save what it has learned from past experiences and apply it to a new experience (e.g., Fazio, 2007). Consistency, in other words, is functional: It allows people to take what they have learned from one context and use it to inform their responses in another one. Meanwhile, other researchers have pointed to the functional importance of flexibility, arguing that only evaluations that are sensitive to an individual's current context and current goals can adaptively guide behavior (e.g., Ferguson & Bargh, 2004; Schwarz, 2007). For instance, a person's evaluation of a knife should be sensitive to whether it is lying next to an unsliced cake (positive) or falling toward their foot (negative); a consistent evaluation across these different contexts would lead to either a wounded appendage or a tragic absence of dessert.

This article builds on the notion that both consistency and flexibility can be functional. At times, flexible evaluative responses that immerse people in the specific details of their current situation and help them adapt to the demands of their immediate social environment would be ideal for guiding appropriate action. Such flexible evaluations would also facilitate the creation of socially shared realities within the current context, thereby providing an important foundation for communication and coordination (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Festinger, 1950; Hardin & Higgins, 1996).

At other times, however, local information is irrelevant, and consistent evaluations seem better suited for guiding appropriate action. If someone is voting for a future president, for example, it does not seem particularly functional for her evaluations of the candidates to be influenced by the campaign button worn by a passing stranger. Consistent evaluations could also serve an important social function by facilitating the maintenance of shared perspectives with important relationship partners or groups (Hardin & Conley, 2001; Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008; McGuire, 1969). For instance, if a group of friends all prefer a particular presidential candidate, consistency in their evaluations across contexts will help to protect the shared reality that has been formed within the group. Thus, certain actions may be optimally guided by evaluations that help people transcend the particularities of the immediate context by summarizing the extent to which an object is globally positive or negative across situations.

Distance Regulates Evaluative Responding

Taken together, these considerations suggest that instead of asking *whether* evaluations are inherently consistent or context dependent, it might be more fruitful to ask *when* it would be most functional for evaluations to flexibly immerse people within their current context versus help them transcend it. Guided by this question, my colleagues and I have proposed that the distance of an attitude object should play a key role in shaping evaluative flexibility (Ledgerwood & Callahan, 2012; Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010; Ledgerwood, Trope, & Liberman, 2010). In the here and now, people need to flexibly adapt their actions for their present circumstances in order to regulate their behavior toward their immediate goals, coordinate with others around them, and interact effectively with their local environment. Evaluations that are sensitive to specific details could therefore appropriately facilitate approach and avoidance responding within the current situation. At the same time, however, humans are also able to transcend their immediate situation to plan for the future, coordinate action at a distance, predict other people's behavior, and imagine hypothetical situations. Thus, they must be able to

regulate their behavior not only for the here and now but also for the there and then. Evaluations that screen out specific details in favor of more general information that tends to be consistent across contexts could serve as appropriate guides for action outside of the immediate situation.

Thus, it seems functionally sensible that the extent to which an attitude object is removed from the here and now should govern evaluative flexibility and consistency by changing the type of information that gets incorporated into an evaluative response. As an object grows more psychologically distant from a person's immediate experience, evaluations should move from summarizing specific information (which is often context dependent) to summarizing general information (which is often invariant across contexts). In other words, a person's evaluation of the same attitude object should incorporate different types of information depending on how far away the object happens to be (in time, space, social distance, etc.).

Representing the attitude object

How might the mind support such a link between the psychological distance of an object and the extent to which evaluations summarize specific or general information? One plausible mechanism is the subjective construal of an attitude object — that is, the way that a person thinks about or mentally represents the object in question (Ledgerwood & Trope, 2010). Indeed, attitude researchers have long underscored the key role that mental representation can play in shaping evaluative flexibility (Asch, 1940; Ferguson & Bargh, 2007; Lord, Lepper, & Mackie, 1984). For instance, a person might evaluate the group “politicians” quite differently depending on whether she happens to be thinking of politicians as meaning people like Abraham Lincoln or people like current members of an unpopular Congress (Asch, 1940; Sia et al., 1997). In a nutshell, then, the way that we think about or mentally label an object can influence the way that we evaluate it.

Meanwhile, research also suggests that psychological distance can systematically influence the way people mentally represent the world around them. According to construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), we think about an object differently as it moves further away from our direct experience — that is, as it becomes more distant from me, here, and now. When an object is psychologically close to our direct experience, we think about it concretely: Our mental representation of it is detailed and contextualized and includes many specific features. As an object grows increasingly distant, however, our mental representations tend to become more coherent and structured; they extract gist information and leave out irrelevant details. Such abstract representations focus on an object's central, general, and superordinate features.

Thus, the way that an attitude object is mentally represented could play an important role in linking distance and evaluative flexibility by prompting evaluations that summarize specific and detailed versus broad and general information. This idea — that evaluative flexibility or consistency may stem from changes in the subjective representation of an attitude object — can be related to and distinguished from other sources of fluctuation in evaluative responding. For instance, the literature on attitude strength focuses on identifying features of an attitude itself that can promote evaluative consistency across contexts. Research in this area suggests that aspects of an attitude's structure, such as the internal consistency of the attitude, the attitude's connection to other beliefs and values, and the strength of the association between the attitude object and an evaluation can all increase the degree of evaluative consistency that a person displays toward a given attitude object across different contexts (Chaiken, Pomerantz, & Giner-Sorolla, 1995; Fazio, 2007).

Importantly, however, evaluative consistency depends not only on the intrinsic nature or structure of an attitude but also on the attitude object itself. Indeed, Fishbein and Ajzen (1974) highlighted this point in response to the wave of criticism in the 1960s over low attitude–behavior correlations (McGuire, 1969). Their *compatibility principle* helped focus the field’s attention on measurement errors that could be obscuring the true strength of the relation between attitudes and behaviors by suggesting that the consistency between attitudes and behaviors will depend on the way a researcher specifies an attitude object during measurement (Ajzen, 1988). Inconsistency increases when researchers specify an attitude object in mismatching ways — for instance, when they try to use a general attitude (e.g., attitudes toward animals) to predict a specific behavior (e.g., adopting a particular rescue dog tomorrow).

The present perspective moves beyond this measurement principle by building on the idea that inconsistency in evaluative responding can stem not only from changes in the objective specification of an object but also from changes in its subjective representation.¹ Connecting evaluative consistency to how a person subjectively represents the attitude object dates back to Asch’s (1940) distinction between “a change in the object of judgment, rather than in the judgment of the object” (p. 458) and has been elaborated in more recent work on evaluative flexibility, as noted earlier (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Lord & Lepper, 1999; Schwarz, 2007). At their core, these perspectives converge on the notion that evaluative flexibility or consistency depends critically on how the attitude object is subjectively construed. The current paper focuses on the possibility that the *level* of this subjective representation — whether it is more concrete or more abstract — can prompt evaluations that incorporate different kinds of information.

Summary

The theoretical rationale described above suggests that by changing the mental representation of an attitude object, distance can modulate evaluative flexibility by guiding the extent to which evaluations summarize low-level, subordinate, and specific information versus high-level, superordinate, and general information. Whereas evaluations of psychologically proximal-objects should summarize low-level information that tends to be specific to a particular context — such as the opinion of an incidentally encountered stranger — evaluations of more distant objects should reflect high-level information that tends to be consistent across contexts — such as the norms of an important social group. The remainder of this paper reviews research supporting this perspective, focusing on its implications for understanding evaluations in their social context. In particular, the studies described below suggest that distance can regulate susceptibility to different kinds of social influence, as well as the extent to which people’s evaluations reflect socially shared morals, values, and ideological principles.

Distance and Susceptibility to Social Influences

Our theoretical framework suggests that when attitude objects are psychologically close, people’s evaluations should help them tune to the particularities of their immediate social environment by summarizing specific and low-level social information.² Supporting this notion, research has shown that when people need to respond to a psychologically proximal issue (e.g., social or political policy that will take effect in the relatively near future), their evaluations of the issue are more susceptible to specific and incidental social influences, such as the opinion of a single stranger or acquaintance. For instance, Ledgerwood, Trope, and Chaiken (2010, Studies 1 and 3) varied the temporal distance of a policy (e.g., a national proposal to more strongly enforce the deportation of illegal immigrants) by informing participants that the policy would take effect either next week, in the relatively near future, or next year, in the more distant future. Participants also learned that a stranger with whom they expected to

have a brief conversation either supported or opposed the issue. Finally, they were asked to privately report their own evaluations of the policy on a form that they knew would not be shared with their conversation partner. As predicted, participants' own evaluations of the policy aligned with those of the incidental conversation partner when the policy was going to take effect in the relatively near future: They liked the policy significantly more when the other person supported it, compared to when the other person opposed it. In contrast, participants' evaluations were unaffected by the other person's views when the policy was going to be implemented in the more distant future. In other words, proximity increased the extent to which participants' evaluations incorporated the specific social influence of an incidental conversation partner's opinion.

Meanwhile, when people need to respond to a psychologically distant issue, their evaluations tend to more strongly reflect general social influences, such as what most people in their group think about the issue. For instance, participants in one study showed greater conformity to a perceived group norm when evaluating a law that was set to take effect next year, in the more distant future, compared to when the law would take effect next month, in the relatively near future (Ledgerwood & Callahan, 2012, Study 1). Thus, as distance increases, people's evaluations seem to more strongly reflect high-level, general social influences.

Conflicting social influences

Interestingly, then, the current framework can shed light on what will happen when different sources of social influence conflict by suggesting that distance helps regulate the type of social influence people tune into. In research designed to test the role of distance in this context, student participants at UC Davis read that the university's Academic Advisory Board was considering a proposal that would require all students to complete a new interactive online course on diversity and inclusion, in the wake of an incident involving bias-driven vandalism on campus (Ledgerwood & Callahan, 2014). Students learned that if the proposal was accepted, the new requirement would take effect either the next academic quarter (relatively near future) or the next academic year (relatively distant future).³

All participants then read an ostensible news article that reported two types of social information: the results of a recent poll of UC Davis undergraduates and a quote from an individual student who happened to be interviewed for the article. In one condition, the poll results showed that 80% of students supported the new requirement, but the student quote said: "I think requiring this course is a terrible idea." In the other condition, the poll results suggested that 80% of students opposed the requirement, whereas the individual student said: "I think requiring this course is a wonderful idea." Participants then reported their own attitudes toward the new course requirement. As hypothesized, distance modulated participants' susceptibility to the general (versus individual) social influence, increasing the extent to which participants aligned their evaluations with those of the group rather than those of the individual student (Figure 1). Interestingly, then, in contrast to variables that increase or decrease susceptibility to social influences in general (such as similarity, accountability, or the strength of accuracy or affiliation goals; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Wood, 2000), distance appears to have unique and opposing effects on different levels of social influence.

Subsequent studies sought to zero in on abstraction in mental representation as a possible mechanism for such effects. If the extent to which evaluations reflect general or specific social influences depends on how an attitude object is mentally represented, then leading participants to mentally represent the world around them in a more abstract or more concrete way should moderate the effects of social influence on evaluation. Supporting this notion, when participants were procedurally primed to adopt a more concrete mindset (e.g., by asking them to focus on subordinate, concrete means rather than superordinate, abstract goals; Freitas, Gollwitzer, &

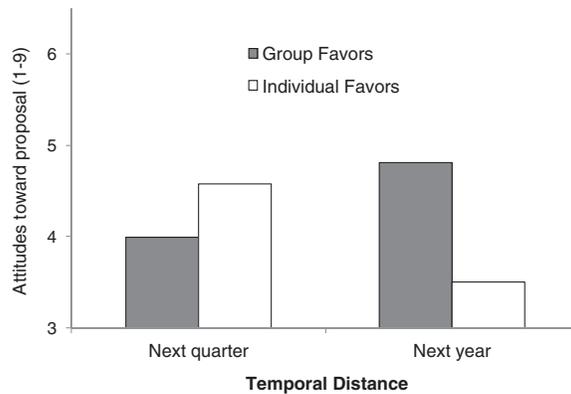


Figure 1. Student attitudes toward a proposal for a new required diversity course as a function of temporal distance and social influence information.

Trope, 2004), their evaluations of a policy were more strongly affected by the opinion of a single stranger (Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010, Studies 2 and 4). In contrast, priming participants to adopt a more abstract (versus concrete) mindset led to greater correspondence between participants' evaluations and their group's opinion (Ledgerwood & Callahan, 2012, Study 2).

Of course, just as we can be exposed to conflicting sources of social influence at different levels — for instance, a group that supports a policy and an individual who opposes it — so too can we be exposed to conflicting sources of social influence within the same level. We belong to many different groups, and the normative opinions of those groups may sometimes conflict. Likewise, we are often exposed to conflicting opinions from individual strangers and acquaintances — the barista making your morning cappuccino may be thrilled about a new minimum wage requirement, while your neighbor down the street keeps grumbling about it.

Although the current theoretical perspective does not speak to how these within-level (rather than between-level) conflicts are resolved, recent research sheds light on this issue by underscoring the importance of considering the salience of a given social influence in addition to distance or abstraction. In two studies, Luguri and Napier (2013) procedurally primed liberal and conservative participants to adopt an abstract or concrete mindset and then made either their political group identity or their national group identity salient before asking them to report their attitudes toward a variety of political issues. As predicted, leading participants to think more abstractly (versus concretely) increased the extent to which their evaluations reflected those of the salient group. When participants' political group identity was salient, abstraction increased the alignment between their evaluations and those of their political group, whereas when participants' national group identity was salient, abstraction led their evaluations to reflect the more moderate group opinion of the overall nation. Thus, while distance and abstraction seem to guide evaluations to incorporate more general and prototypical (versus specific and individualized) social influences, salience can play a key role in determining *which* of several general social influences (and presumably, which of several specific social influences) people tune into.

Implications for decision-making and dissonance

The effect of distance and abstraction on susceptibility to different kinds of social information has important implications for decision-making in a variety of domains, including health decisions and voting behavior. For instance, when making everyday medical decisions, consumers are often faced with conflicting information from aggregate and individualized sources: Research evidence aggregated across a large number of people might suggest that one drug or

procedure tends to work best for most people, whereas an acquaintance or personal testimonial might favor a different option. Studies suggest that in such contexts, the temporal distance of the decision changes the relative weight placed on general research evidence as opposed to specific personal anecdotes (Ledgerwood, Wakslak, & Wang, 2010, Studies 1a and 1b).

This effect could be important for understanding how to increase reliance on research findings when people make consequential decisions about their health care. Indeed, although recent years have witnessed a growing emphasis on evidence-based medicine across multiple health domains, the increased availability of research findings has not necessarily translated into an increased *use* of evidence when people make important health decisions. For example, the most recent recommendations released by the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists draw on research evidence to conclude that less frequent screenings for breast and cervical cancer could often promote better health outcomes, yet many patients and doctors have responded to these evidence-based recommendations with disbelief (Sack, 2009). New findings suggest that distance could play a key role in helping to increase reliance on these evidence-based guidelines (Wakslak, Ledgerwood, & Sanchez, 2014): In two studies, women increasingly incorporated the USPSTF recommendations into their cancer screening intentions when making a decision about a pap smear or mammography for the relatively distant future (e.g., eight months from now) rather than for the near future (e.g., this week). Current research in our lab is exploring whether simple, distance-based interventions could increase reliance on evidence-based guidelines even for near-future screening decisions.

Recent findings also suggest that the effect of distance on susceptibility to different kinds of social information has repercussions for people's evaluations of other decision-makers. In a series of studies, Burgoon, Henderson, and Wakslak (2013) manipulated either the geographical distance of a political candidate (e.g., whether a debate involving the candidate took place in the participant's hometown or another state) or participants' level of abstraction (via a mindset prime), as well as whether the candidate made their decision based on aggregate information (e.g., what the majority of community members thought about a proposal) or on individualized information (e.g., a single community member's opinion). Both distance and abstraction increased preferences for a candidate who relied on aggregate rather than individualized information. Thus, distance can have important implications for how constituents evaluate decision-makers who appear to be swayed by more general or more specific social information.

The tendency for distance to shape the extent to which evaluations incorporate different sources of social influence may also have interesting implications for cognitive dissonance. By orienting people toward general, normative social information (versus specific, individualized information), distance may change the evaluative standards to which people compare their behavior, thereby moderating when people experience dissonance. Such a prediction is consistent with theory and research suggesting that the experience of dissonance depends on the particular standards that are salient to a person in a given situation (Stone, 2003; Stone & Cooper, 2001). Based on the present perspective, it seems reasonable to predict that distance and abstraction could increase the salience of high-level standards, like group norms, whereas proximity might increase the salience of low-level standards, like what one other person thinks one should do. Indeed, recent research connecting construal level and cognitive dissonance is broadly consistent with the notion that distance may change the standards to which people compare their behavior (Wakslak, 2012).

Distance and Broad, Socially Shared Principles

General social influences provide just one source of high-level information that should help guide evaluations of distant attitude objects. Morals, values, and ideological principles — all

of which reflect abstract, high-level information about what is generally good or bad — could provide another. In fact, these two types of information may be more tightly entwined than they seem at first: Morals, ideologies; they values tend to be consensually shared within longstanding relationships and social groups; they could thereby provide another way to tune to general social influences (Conover & Feldman, 1981; Hofstede, 1980; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; see Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012; Jost et al., 2008, for reviews). Our theoretical framework therefore suggests that evaluations should more strongly reflect these general and socially shared guides when people need to act on objects or events that are relatively distant (versus close).

Consistent with this idea, Eyal, Liberman, and Trope (2008) found that participants expressed stronger, more morally driven evaluations of various offensive and virtuous behaviors when they imagined those behaviors taking place in the relatively distant future (next year) compared to the near future (tomorrow). A subsequent study extended these findings to another dimension of psychological distance by manipulating whether participants judged behaviors from their own perspective (low social distance) or from a third person perspective (high social distance). As in the studies with temporal distance, participants' evaluations more strongly reflected moral principles when they made their judgments from a more psychologically distant (versus proximal) perspective.

Other research has illustrated the implications of these evaluative processes for shaping behavioral intentions (see Eyal & Liberman, 2012, for a review). For instance, participants in one study were asked to imagine three scenarios taking place in the near or distant future (today versus 30 years from now), in which human welfare was threatened in some way (Agerström & Björklund, 2009, Study 2). Participants indicated the extent to which they would like to help in each situation. Consistent with the prediction that evaluative responses would more strongly reflect broad moral principles for psychologically distant (versus near) objects and events, participants endorsed more prosocial behavioral intentions that corresponded to their moral principles when imagining the scenarios in the more distant future.

In a similar vein, distance may increase the extent to which a person's intentions to vote for a political policy reflect their broad ideological principles. In research designed to test this possibility, participants first reported their general ideological preference for maintaining (versus changing) the societal status quo and later indicated how likely they would be to vote for a national policy that would increasingly enforce the deportation of illegal immigrants (Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010, Study 3). Participants' voting intentions reflected their previously reported ideological principles when they believed the policy would take effect in the relatively distant future, next year, but not when they thought it would take effect in the near future, next week.

Another relevant line of research examined the extent to which participants' personal values guided their intentions to engage in related behaviors in the near or distant future (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, and Chaiken, 2009). Using Schwartz (1992) value inventory, these researchers assessed participants' endorsement of broad values such as benevolence and achievement and used these values to predict participants' related behavioral intentions for the near (versus distant) future. For instance, in one study, participants rated the likelihood of engaging in a series of value-relevant behaviors either next week, in the relatively near future, or next year, in the relatively distant future. If evaluations are more likely to incorporate general, high-level information when people expand their mental horizons to consider distant attitude objects, then people's expressed behavioral intentions should be more consistent with their broad values when planning for more distant future events. Supporting this notion, participants' values more strongly predicted relevant behavioral intentions for next year (average correlation = 0.40) than for next week (average correlation = 0.25; Eyal, Sagristano, et al., 2009, Study 2).

Of course, just as people belong to multiple groups whose views sometimes conflict, people can endorse morals, ideological principles, or values whose implications for an issue conflict as well. For instance, a policy that strengthens national security by increasing government surveillance would pose a conflict between principles that value national security versus individual privacy. If distance tends to increase the correspondence between evaluations and general principles, then when principles conflict, which principle wins out? The research on group identity salience reviewed earlier suggests that in such cases, it may be important to consider situational salience as well as distance. More specifically, distance may tend to increase alignment with whichever broad principles are highlighted in the current context (e.g., the framing of the message might emphasize one or another ideological concern; a relevant and salient group identity might call to mind an associated moral value).

In addition to situational variations in salience, chronic salience or importance seems likely to work in conjunction with distance to guide evaluative responding. In other words, if a person tends to think about or prioritize one broad principle over another, distance may increase alignment with that principle in particular. Consistent with this notion, Eyal, Liberman, Sagristano, and Trope (2009, Study 1) found that temporal distance increased the extent to which participants' evaluations reflected their chronic value structure (see also Napier & Luguri, 2013). For instance, the more participants prioritized the value of national security over individual freedom, the more they supported a policy that would give the CIA the authority to open US citizens' mail in the interests of national security — but only when the policy would be implemented in the distant (versus near) future. Thus, while distance tends to increase the correspondence between evaluations and broad, socially shared principles, chronic or situational salience may govern which of several possible broad principles people tune into. Again, from a functional perspective, tuning into these broad principles can help people relate to an attitude object in a way that is likely to be appropriate across multiple contexts, as salient values and morals tend to reflect the socially shared beliefs of important and longstanding social groups that represent a relatively consistent aspect of an individual's social environment.

Summary and Conclusion

Taken together, the research reviewed above converges on the notion that distance plays a key role in regulating evaluative responding. When attitude objects are proximal, evaluations tend to incorporate specific and individualized social information, such as the opinion of an incidental conversation partner or acquaintance. These local evaluations are often ideally suited to help immerse people in the rich details of their immediate social environment, allowing them to create local shared realities that form the basis of effective communication and coordination and to respond with context-appropriate behavior. Proximity, in other words, enables a highly functional flexibility in evaluation, helping people tune into their immediate social context.

As attitude objects grow more distant, however, people respond with evaluations that increasingly reflect general social influences and broad ideological and moral principles. These more global evaluations are often well suited to guide behavior outside of the present situation by incorporating information that tends to be consistently relevant and socially shared across many different contexts. Distance, in other words, prompts evaluations that enable people to transcend their immediate situation, instead of always being stuck inside it.

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Short Biographies

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Notes

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¹ For a full discussion of how the present perspective relates to and diverges from the compatibility principle, see Ledgerwood, Trope, and Liberman (2010, pp. 266–268).

² Lest this description appear to border on tautology, it is important to distinguish between the prediction and the functional rationale underlying it. The prediction is that as an attitude object gets psychologically closer (e.g., as the start date of a new policy approaches), evaluations of that object will increasingly reflect low-level, specific social influences (e.g., a single stranger's opinion). Note that the object may or may not be part of the immediate context (e.g., a policy that will take effect next month is not yet part of a person's direct experience, but it is still psychologically more proximal than a policy that will take effect next year). Moreover, the specific social influence could be near or distant (indeed, in the studies described below, the specific social influences vary in distance, from a similar student sitting just down the hall to a random stranger who could be located anywhere in the country). Thus, although we assume that the hypothesized tendency for proximity to increase susceptibility to specific social influences is often functional because it *can* help people tune into their current context, it is important to note that level of social influence (e.g., a specific individual vs. a general group opinion) and the psychological distance of an attitude object (e.g., time until a policy is implemented) are distinct constructs.

³ Importantly, psychological distance can be distinguished from involvement (see Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010, for a full discussion). Most of the participants in this study would have been directly influenced by the new requirement regardless of when it was implemented, and excluding the few fourth-year students in the sample from the analysis had no impact on the results.

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