

Achieving local and global shared realities: distance guides alignment to specific or general social influences

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Humans routinely navigate a multitude of potential social influences, ranging from specific individual's opinions to general social norms and group values. Whereas specific social influences afford opportunities to achieve shared inner states with particular individuals, general social influences afford opportunities to achieve shared inner states with broader groups. We review recent theory and evidence examining how people tune into different kinds of social influence in the service of shared reality. We argue that the distance of an attitude object (e.g. how far away it is in time or space) systematically influences what kind of social influence informs people's attitudes. As an attitude object grows more distant, people's attitudes increasingly align with general (vs. specific) social influences.

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Humans are surrounded by potential social influences — individual and group opinions that afford opportunities for creating and maintaining a shared sense of the world with other people. How do people navigate among these different sources of social information? In this paper, we review recent research that sheds light on when people will be more likely to align their attitudes with a specific individual's position or with a general group opinion.

Local and global shared realities

According to shared reality theory, people are motivated by both epistemic and affiliative concerns to achieve shared inner states with others [1,2]. In other words,

the perception that we share others' beliefs, attitudes, and feelings confers confidence that our judgments are true and correct as well as a sense of connection with other people.

Importantly, theory and research on shared reality and related constructs has emphasized that people need to achieve shared realities both locally, in interpersonal contexts, and globally, in group contexts. For example, interpersonal communication requires that people take into account another individual's perspective [3,4], which often involves sharing the other person's beliefs and attitudes [5]. The sense that one's inner states are shared with another individual thereby forms an important basis of interpersonal interaction and connection [6–9].

At the same time, humans also need to achieve global shared realities with various social groups. Like local shared realities, global shared realities serve key epistemic and affiliative functions: A belief or attitude seems valid to the extent that it is socially shared with a group [10], and sharing group opinions helps foster a sense of belonging [11]. Indeed, Sherif's early experiments on norm creation illustrated how quickly shared realities can emerge in group settings [12]. Moreover, some scholars have argued that achieving shared reality within groups is 'a necessary precondition for virtually any group activity' ([13], p. 89). Thus, local and global shared realities arguably serve as crucial foundations for interpersonal and group functioning, respectively.

Attitude alignment with specific and general social influences

One key route to achieving shared reality is through attitude alignment. Aligning one's attitudes with a specific individual's opinion enables the creation and maintenance of a local shared reality with that particular individual (e.g. 'she and I both like this musician'). Considerable research has documented that people often show a strong tendency to incorporate these kinds of specific social influences into their attitudes (e.g. [14,15]). Meanwhile, aligning one's attitudes with a general group opinion or social norm enables the creation and maintenance of a global shared reality, allowing one to

experience shared inner states across a larger commonality (e.g. ‘most people in my community and I like this politician’).¹ In addition, numerous studies have shown that people often align their attitudes with these general social influences as well (see e.g. [17]). Of course, attitude alignment need not lead to shared reality, which has been defined as ‘a product of experiencing commonality with others’ inner states about the world’ ([2], p. 498) — for example, if people are unaware that their attitudes are aligned with those of another person or group, they may not experience sharing an inner state with others. Nevertheless, attitude alignment with specific and general social influences can provide a crucial foundation for achieving shared reality with individuals and with groups, respectively.

As the above summary makes clear, people need — and often seek to achieve — shared realities in both interpersonal and group contexts. But left unaddressed in the literature is the question of *when* people will tune toward specific versus general social influences in the service of creating local versus global shared realities.

One way to approach this question is to consider that specific and general social influences may serve distinct functions. Specific social influences often (though not always) vary from one context to the next — a person might converse with one individual today who loves guns and hates dogs, and then talk to someone tomorrow who loves dogs but hates guns. Local shared realities can therefore help people flexibly navigate their immediate environment, coordinating their actions and communications with others around them (should I refer to this political policy as a gun rights policy or a gun control policy?) and regulating their behavior toward immediate goals (should I pet or avoid this barking dog?). Thus, when a person considers an attitude object in their immediate environment — something that is close to them in time, space, or social distance — it may be especially useful for their attitudes to align with specific social influences.

In contrast, general social influences often (though not always) remain consistent from one context to the next — social norms and group opinions tend to be relatively slow-changing. Most people in one’s social network, for instance, might like dogs; most people in one’s political party probably have a common position on gun

control — such group opinions are fairly stable across time and contexts. General social influences therefore enable people to transcend their immediate situation to plan for the future (should I adopt a dog next year?) and coordinate action at a distance (should I join this national group that lobbies for gun control legislation?). Thus, when a person considers an attitude object that is far from their immediate environment — for instance, something that is distant from them in time or space — it may be especially useful for their attitudes to align with general social influences.

These functional considerations have led us to posit that the *psychological distance* of an attitude object (how far away it is in time, space, social distance, or likelihood) [18^{**},19^{*}] should govern the extent to which people’s attitudes align with specific or general social influences [20,21]. As an object grows more psychologically distant from a person’s immediate experience, evaluations should move from summarizing specific social information (which is often context dependent) to summarizing general social information (which is often invariant across contexts). In other words, a person’s evaluation of the same attitude object should incorporate different types of social influence depending on how far away the object happens to be.

Proximity prompts alignment with specific social influences

Consistent with the reasoning described above, several studies suggest that specific social influences exert a stronger impact on people’s attitudes when an attitude object is psychologically more proximal (vs. distant). In one series of studies, researchers asked participants to evaluate a policy that was going to take effect in either the near future (next week) or the more distant future (next year) ([22], Studies 1 and 3). Participants read information about a specific social influence: They learned that they would have a brief conversation with another participant and saw that this other individual happened to support or oppose the policy in question. Participants then privately reported their own evaluations of the policy. The results showed that participants’ attitudes aligned more strongly with those of the expected conversation partner when the policy would take effect in the near (vs. distant) future.

Distance prompts alignment with general social influences

Meanwhile, research also suggests that general social influences exert a stronger impact on people’s attitudes when an attitude object is psychologically more distant (vs. proximal). In one study, researchers asked student participants to evaluate a proposal that would require all bicycles (a primary mode of transportation for many participants) to have rear lights for night travel ([23], Study 1). Distance was manipulated by informing participants that the proposal would take effect in either the

¹ Note that here, we focus on attitude alignment with a group opinion or social norm — often termed private acceptance — as opposed to outwardly conforming to a social norm while inwardly disagreeing with it — often termed public conformity [16]. Whereas aligning one’s attitude with a general group opinion can provide an important foundation for achieving a sense of shared reality with that group, public conformity without attitude alignment is unlikely to foster the experience of sharing an inner state with a group of people (since in the case of public conformity, the attitude is not shared).

near future (next month) or the distant future (next year). Participants also learned about a general social influence: They read about recent poll results ostensibly showing that the majority of students either favored or opposed the proposal. As predicted, participants' attitudes toward the proposal aligned more strongly with the majority group opinion in the distant (vs. near) future.

Research on justice principles as well as moral values provides additional evidence consistent with the prediction that distance will increase attitude alignment with general social influences. Consider that both justice principles and moral values tend to be broad, consensually shared information about what is good versus bad in a society. For instance, principles of equity and fairness are widely shared in the United States [24] and therefore represent general social information about what most people value. In one study, researchers assessed the extent to which participants aligned their attitudes with the general, broadly shared principle of equity ([25], Study 2). American participants read about a case of payment discrimination that took place in either a spatially distant location (Abu Dhabi) or a spatially close location (the United States). Participants evaluated the instance of discrimination more negatively — that is, their attitudes aligned more strongly with the general justice principle of equity — when the event took place in the distant (vs. near) location.² Similar patterns of results have been found in studies examining attitude alignment with moral values ([26–28]; but see [29]). Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that as an attitude object grows more distant, people's attitudes increasingly align with broad, socially shared principles and values.

Distance and competing social influences

Of course, in the real world, people may often encounter multiple social influences, and these social influences can contradict one another. A conversation partner might oppose gun control even though most people in one's ingroup support it. An online news story might report consensus information from a national poll, but the first reader's comment to appear beneath the news story might express disagreement. From a shared reality perspective, conflicting social influences provide competing opportunities to achieve different kinds of shared realities. Our theoretical approach suggests that distance will guide people toward global versus local shared realities by regulating the type of social influence people tune into.

Empirical evidence supports this idea. In one study, for instance, student participants were asked to evaluate a new course requirement on diversity and inclusion that

would take effect in either the relatively near future (the next academic quarter) or the relatively distant future (the next academic year) [20]. Participants then read an ostensible news article that included conflicting general and specific social influences — in one condition, they read that 80% of students polled supported the diversity course and saw a quote from a single student opposing it; in the other condition, they read that 80% of students opposed the diversity course and saw a quote from a single student supporting it. Results showed that the temporal distance of the diversity course modulated participants' susceptibility to the general (vs. individual) social influence, increasing the extent to which participants' attitudes aligned with the group (vs. individual) opinion. Similar results have emerged in research manipulating social (rather than temporal) distance: General (vs. specific) social influence exerted a stronger impact on participants' evaluations of a target person when that target was socially distant (the CEO of the corporation) rather than close (a coworker) ([30], Study 2).

Furthermore, research suggests that distance influences not only the extent to which people tune into general (vs. specific) social influences, but also which sources of social influence they actively seek out when given a chance to do so. In a study examining how women search for information on breast cancer screening, researchers asked female participants to imagine either deciding whether to screen for breast cancer during an upcoming appointment that week (near future condition), or deciding what kind of screening schedule to set up for the next 10 years (distant future condition) (Ledgerwood, Waksak, Sánchez, & Rees, unpublished data, Study S3). Participants saw an array of headlines that they could click on to get more information. Half the headlines described general social influence information (i.e. articles containing broad, evidence-based information about what cancer screening schedule is recommended for most women) and half described specific social influence information (i.e. specific stories or anecdotes, each describing one individual's particular experience). Participants could click on as many headlines as they wanted, and could spend as much or as little time as they liked reading the information that each click revealed. The results suggested that participants clicked on more general (vs. specific) headlines — and spent more time reading the general (vs. specific) social influence information — when thinking about the more distant future. Thus, distance appears to increase people's susceptibility to general (vs. specific) social influences both in terms of attitude alignment and in terms of the kinds of information that people actively seek out.

Conclusion

We reviewed research supporting a functional account of how distance guides attitude alignment with different types of social influence. Whereas proximity to an attitude

² Similarly, the researchers found that participants applied a broad justice principle more consistently across a range of targets when they imagined freedom of speech legislation that would be enacted in the more distant (vs. near) future ([25], Study 1).

object prompts people's attitudes to align with those of special social influences, such as a conversation partner's opinion, distance prompts people's attitudes to align with those of general social influences, such as group norms and broadly shared principles. By facilitating attitude alignment with specific and general social influences, distance enables people to navigate effectively among local and global shared realities.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- of special interest
- of outstanding interest

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