Construal Level Theory and Regulatory Scope

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Abstract

Humans spend a large portion of their lives in pursuit of desired ends, from finding food and meeting deadlines to pursuing important career and relationship goals. The desired ends that people seek can vary in their proximity: For instance, food may be spatially close or distant; we might plan to meet a friend in the near or distant future. Thus, the ability to mentally support the pursuit of desired ends that are distant as well as close is essential for adaptive human functioning. This essay examines the basic mental processes that allow humans to contract and expand their regulatory scope in this functional way. A growing body of research suggests that different levels of psychological supports enable people to effectively pursue ends that can be closer or more distant. High-level supports emphasize central and general aspects of an experience, and therefore tend to travel well—they can effectively guide action and interaction for the distant future, for remote locations, for unlikely scenarios, or with dissimilar others. Lower-level supports emphasize specific, secondary, and unique aspects of an experience, and therefore support contractive scope—they help immerse people in the particular details of the current context to act effectively in the here and now. As the field moves forward, researchers are beginning to investigate how people expand and contract the scope of their social relationships in particular—an area of inquiry with important implications for understanding domains such as social communication and social learning that are central to human experience as social creatures.

INTRODUCTION

Humans spend much of their lives pursuing desired ends. Whether we are trying to find a snack, find true love, send an e-mail, learn a new skill, ace a test, get in shape, or vote for the next President, our minds are constantly working to help us set goals, make plans, and take action to achieve our goals. This process of regulating our thinking and behavior in ways that help us to reach our goals is called *self-regulation*.

Moreover, the ends that we seek can vary in their proximity. Food may be spatially close or distant; we might plan to meet someone in the near or distant future; a conversation partner might be someone socially close to us (e.g., a member of our own social group) or someone who is more socially distant (a member of a different group); and we might prepare for a near certainty or for a distant chance. The term *regulatory scope* refers to the extent to which a person regulates herself toward psychologically close or psychologically distant ends.

Being able to modulate regulatory scope—that is, being able to mentally support the pursuit of desired ends that are distant as well as close—is essential for adaptive human functioning. On the one hand, humans need to be able to immerse themselves in the here and now, contracting their regulatory scope to adapt to the demands of the immediate situation and to respond with context-appropriate behavior. Yet people also frequently need to move beyond current experience to plan for the future, coordinate action at a distance, communicate with dissimilar others, and contemplate possible alternatives to their present reality. The key goal of the research described in this essay is to understand the mental processes that allow humans to contract and expand their regulatory scope in this functional way.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH: LEVELS OF MENTAL REPRESENTATION

Foundational research in this topic area has established that mental representation—the way we think of or imagine something—plays a key role in enabling humans to contract and expand their regulatory scope. According to Construal Level Theory (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), the same object or event can be mentally represented (or *construed*) in more or less abstract ways. In other words, mental representations can be arranged along a vertical continuum of levels of abstraction, from low to high. Higher-level construals are relatively abstract and structured: They extract the central information about an object or event and leave out specific and peripheral details. In contrast, lower-level construals are more concrete; they represent an object in terms of its detailed, subordinate, and contextualized features, and tend to lack a clear structure separating important from peripheral and irrelevant features. For example, the same pair of sandals can be mentally represented as blue rubber flip-flops with a scuff on the toe (a very low-level, concrete, and detailed representation) or as footwear (a more high-level, abstract representation).

Considerable evidence supports the idea that these different levels of mental representation enable contractive and expansive thinking (see Trope &

Liberman, 2010, for a review). Higher-level construals are especially useful for thinking about psychologically distant objects because high-level construals are more likely than low-level construals to remain unchanged as one gets closer to an object or farther away from it. For example, when we shift from representing an object as "a pair of flip-flops" to "footwear," the latter, more abstract mental representation is less likely to change across distance. Whereas the concrete construal of flip-flops may be relevant only when planning a vacation for this coming June but not next winter, the higher-level construal of footwear can remain unchanged across temporal distance. Likewise, more people wear footwear than flip-flops, and therefore the higher-level construal is more useful for communicating with socially distant individuals who may or may not wear flip-flops, but who probably wear footwear.

Construal Levels Modulate Scope

Thus, higher-level mental representations can support people's ability to think about (and regulate toward) psychologically distant ends. Consistent with this notion, research suggests that low-level construals focus people on what is psychologically proximal, whereas higher-level construals orient people toward what is psychologically remote. For instance, in one study, participants were led to construe a series of actions (e.g., Laura is buying a computer) either in terms of their high-level, superordinate characteristics (e.g., why Laura would buy the computer) or in terms of their low-level, subordinate characteristics (e.g., how she would buy the computer; Liberman, Trope, McCrea, & Sherman, 2007, Study 1). Participants were then asked to estimate when the person would perform the action. The researchers found that participants who had been led to adopt low-level representations of the actions estimated that the actions would be performed relatively soon, in the near future, whereas participants who had been led to adopt higher-level representations expected the actions to occur in the more distant future. In other words, higher-level construals appeared to orient people to the more distant future. Indeed, other research has shown that regardless of the particular dimension of psychological distance (temporal, social, spatial, etc.), abstraction in mental representation seems to allow mental horizons to expand outward, away from immediate experience (e.g., Liberman & Förster, 2009; Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2011; Wakslak & Trope, 2009).

Scope Influences Level of Construal

Moreover, depending on whether people need to contract their mental horizons to think about psychologically proximal objects, or expand their mental horizons to think about psychologically distant objects, they tend

to use different levels of mental representation. For example, people tend to adopt more abstract, high-level construals when planning for the more distant future (Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002). Likewise, when people need to think about spatially distant or socially distant others, they tend to mentally represent those psychologically distant others more in terms of their high-level, general dispositions (e.g., she is smart; he is mean), and less in terms of low-level, concrete behaviors and circumstances (e.g., she answered the question correctly; he got into an argument with his roommate; Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Rim, Uleman, & Trope, 2009).

SUMMARY

Taken together, considerable evidence converges on the notion that levels of mental representation help people modulate the scope of their thinking: Whereas low-level construals guide people to think about what is psychologically proximal, high-level construals help people consider what is psychologically remote. Moreover, when people need to think contractively or expansively, research suggests that they tend to naturally adopt low- or high-level construals, respectively.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Beyond Mental Representation: Applying the Principle of Level More Broadly

In order to self-regulate effectively, people must not only be able to mentally represent the world around them—they must also be able to evaluate, want, and act. In other words, self-regulation involves answering not only the question of "*What is it?*" but also the questions of "*What do I want?*" and "*What do I do?*" Recent research suggests that the principle of level can be applied to a wide range of psychological supports that humans have developed to guide contractive and expansive action. High-level supports emphasize central and general aspects of an experience, and therefore tend to "travel" well—they can effectively guide action and interaction for the distant future, for remote locations, for unlikely scenarios, or with dissimilar others. Lower-level supports emphasize specific, secondary, and unique aspects of an experience, and therefore support contractive scope—they help immerse people in the particular details of the current context to act effectively in the here and now.

Evaluations

Consider the example of evaluations, which summarize the extent to which an object or event is positive or negative (Do I like it?). Evaluations provide efficient guides for action that help people determine whether to approach

or avoid a given object. Just as one can distinguish different levels of mental representation that answer the question *"What is it?"* in different ways, so too can one distinguish different levels of evaluation that answer the question *"Do I want it?"* or *"Do I like it?"* in different ways. Low-level evaluations that incorporate specific and incidental information help people contract their scope, immersing them in the details of the current context so that they can easily adapt to the demands of the immediate situation. Higher-level evaluations that incorporate more general, abstract information help people transcend the particular details of their current situation to guide expansive action toward more remote time points, places, possibilities, and people (see Ledgerwood, Trope, & Liberman, 2010, for a review).

Consistent with this notion, research has shown that when people need to contract their mental horizons to respond to a proximal issue (e.g., a political policy that will take effect next week, in the relatively near future), their evaluations of the issue tend to incorporate specific and incidental social influences, such as the opinion of an acquaintance or a briefly encountered stranger (Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010; Ledgerwood, Wakslak, & Wang, 2010). In contrast, when people need to expand their mental horizons to relate to a more distant issue (e.g., a political policy that will take effect next year), their evaluations of the issue tend to reflect general social influences, such as what most people in their group think about the issue (Ledgerwood & Callahan, 2012).

General social influences provide just one source of broad, high-level information that can help guide expansive evaluations. Moral principles—abstract, decontextualized information about what is typically right or wrong—can provide another. Indeed, research has shown that people's evaluations are more likely to reflect their moral principles when they need to act on psychologically distant (rather than near) objects or events. For instance, one study asked participants to imagine a series of potentially offensive moral transgressions (e.g., using a flag to clean the house) from either their own perspective (low social distance) or from a third person perspective (high social distance; Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). The results showed that participants' evaluations of the behaviors more strongly reflected their own broad, moral principles when they made their judgments from a psychologically distant perspective (the third person) rather than from a psychologically proximal one (the first person). Similar patterns have been found for high-level ideological principles and values, and across different dimensions of psychological distance (see Ledgerwood *et al.*, 2010, for a review).

Goals

The same basic principle of level can also be applied to goals. Goals are hierarchically organized: Higher-level, superordinate goals tend to guide and inform more specific subgoals. For example, jogging and weight lifting are subordinate to the higher order goal of exercising, which in turn is subordinate to the even higher order goal of staying healthy. Because lower-level goals are specific and contextualized, they can help immerse people in what is psychologically proximal. Because higher-level goals are more abstract and general, they can extend to more distant situations. For example, weight lifting might be planned for the relatively near future or for nearby locations, whereas planning to exercise might take into consideration more distant times and locations.

In general, low-level goals underlie short-term plans and help contract regulatory scope, whereas higher-level goals underlie long-term plans and help expand regulatory scope. For instance, research has shown that although individuals usually show a strong preference for immediate over delayed outcomes (a short-term focus that often hampers self-control), this tendency is reduced when people focus on higher-level goals (e.g., being healthy) rather than lower-level goals (e.g., lifting weights; Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). In other research, participants tended to focus on more superordinate goals when planning for an event in a spatially distant rather than a spatially near location (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006), and when planning behavior for the more distant future (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009). Likewise, people's behaviors tend to be more strongly guided by their high-level goal to either look out for themselves (pro-self motivation) or to look out for others (pro-social motivation) when they think about the more distant future (next year) compared to the near future (next week; see Giacomantonio, De Dreu, Shalvi, Sligte, & Leder, 2010).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

New Questions: Expanding and Contracting the Scope of Relationships

As research on regulatory scope moves forward, one key new area of investigation involves the basic question of how people expand and contract the scope of their social relationships. A common theme running through much of social psychological research is that people tend to relate to others who are psychologically close: People often compare their abilities, outcomes, and opinions to similar rather than dissimilar others (Festinger, 1954), they prefer their own group to other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), they are more influenced by others who are close in space and time (Latané, 1981), and they are

more likely to form relationships with other people who are spatially close, familiar, or similar to the self (Byrne, 1971; Zajonc, 1968).

The evidence for this human tendency to contract the scope of social relationships, however, highlights the possibility—and importance—of a less frequent alternative. Humans can, after all, sometimes transcend the psychologically proximal and *expand* the scope of their social relations. They may connect to people who are unlike themselves, who belong to group other than their own, and who come from remote and foreign places.

The question of whether, and how, relational scope may vary has relevance for countless domains central to human experience as social creatures. In particular, we see current and future research focusing on three key areas of social relations: social communication, social comparison, and social exchange. In each case, research is beginning to ask: What determines the scope of human relationships within this domain? For instance, what determines whether people communicate with others who are removed from them, or whether they confine their communication to close others? What psychological processes lead people to expand or contract the range of people to whom they compare themselves, or from whom they learn? What determines people's tendency to give and take with those who are close by, or to expand these exchange relationships across the psychological boundaries that separate people?

Researchers are also beginning to consider the corresponding question of how relationships in these domains differ as a function of their scope. For instance, new findings suggest that people communicate differently with those who are close by or faraway: People prefer to use more concrete representations (pictures) rather than abstract representations (words) when communicating with other people who are closer in time, space, or social distance (Amit, Wakslak, & Trope, 2013). We also expect that studies will soon explore whether the basis of social comparison and learning shift depending on how far away a target of comparison is, as well as what people are willing to exchange with others who are near or distant. Such research will be both theoretically important for understanding regulatory scope and social functioning within each of these domains, as well as practically important for understanding and improving social relationships, learning, and social exchange.

CONCLUSION

In sum, theory and research suggest that the ability to modulate regulatory scope is essential for adaptive functioning, and that humans rely on a range of psychological supports to effectively pursue ends that can be closer or more distant. These supports vary in level: Low-level supports include specific,

secondary, and unique aspects of an experience, and therefore help immerse people in the here-and-now, whereas higher-level supports emphasize central and general aspects of an experience, and therefore help effectively guide action for the there-and-then.

Importantly, the clear adaptive advantages of being able to flexibly contract and expand one's regulatory scope may have provided evolutionary pressure for the development of brain structures underlying these different levels of thinking, wanting, and planning. This coevolution idea would be fruitfully tested in future interdisciplinary research that integrates theory and methods of brain, behavioral, and social sciences.

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