

The Psychology of Transcending the Here and Now

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People directly experience only themselves here and now but often consider, evaluate, and plan situations that are removed in time or space, that pertain to others' experiences, and that are hypothetical rather than real. People thus transcend the present and mentally traverse temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and hypotheticality. We argue that this is made possible by the human capacity for abstract processing of information. We review research showing that there is considerable similarity in the way people mentally traverse different distances, that the process of abstraction underlies traversing different distances, and that this process guides the way people predict, evaluate, and plan near and distant situations.

Our experiences of the world are limited to the self, here and now, yet people, events, and situations that are beyond our immediate experience populate our mind. We plan for the future, remember the past, think about remote locations, take others' perspective, and consider alternatives to reality. In each case, we transcend the present to consider psychologically distant objects. An object is psychologically distant from us to the extent that it is remote in time (future or past) or in space; refers to experiences of others (e.g., relatives, acquaintances, or strangers); and unlikely to occur. But how do we transcend the present, evaluate, and make decisions with respect to psychologically distant objects? And how does increasing distance from objects affect the way we respond to these objects?

The question of how people transcend the present and respond to increasingly more distant objects is central to behavioral and social sciences, because both collective and personal human development is associated with traversing increasingly greater distances. The turning points of human evolution include developing tools, which required planning for the future; making function-specific tools, which required constructing hypothetical alternative scenarios of future events; developing language, which enabled forming larger and more complex social groups and relations; and domestication of animals and plants, which required an extended temporal perspective (1). Human history is associated with expanding horizons—traversing greater spatial distances (e.g., discovering new continents, space travel); forming larger social groups (families versus cities versus states versus global institutions); planning and investing in the more distant future; and reaching farther back into the

past. Human development in the first years of life involves acquiring the ability to plan for the more distant future, to consider possibilities that are not present, and to consider the perspective of more distant people [from self-centeredness to acknowledging others, from immediate social environment to larger social groups (2)].

Although evolution, history, and child development have different time scales, we propose that the expanding horizons that all of them entail require and are enabled by the human capacity for abstract mental representation. This hypothesis is based on Construal Level Theory (CLT) of psychological distance (3, 4), which links psychological distance from objects to the mental construal of those objects. In the following, we explain what we mean by mental construal and how it relates to traversing psychological distances. We then describe research findings demonstrating that there is considerable commonality in the way people traverse different dimensions of psychological distance; that similar mental construal processes underlie traversing different distance dimensions; and that these construal processes guide the way people predict, evaluate, and plan psychologically near and distant situations.

Any event or object can be represented at different levels of construal. Lower-level construals are concrete, relatively unstructured, and contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of events. Higher-level construals are abstract, schematic, and decontextualized representations that extract the gist from



Musée des Beaux Arts

by W. H. Auden

*About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters; how well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;*

*....
In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.*

Fig. 1. Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* represents an intriguing mixture of high-level, abstract features, and low-level, concrete features.

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