



Case Report

Abstractness leads people to base their behavioral intentions on desired attitudes☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Desired attitudes can differ from people's actual attitudes.
- Desired attitudes are more stable across time and context than actual attitudes.
- Desired attitudes predict behavioral intentions more in an abstract than a concrete mindset.

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ABSTRACT

People sometimes want attitudes that differ from the ones they currently possess. These desired attitudes appear to be psychologically meaningful, but little is known about the properties of these evaluations. Because desired attitudes are hypothetical constructs (i.e., attitudes that one does not yet possess) and are distant in time (i.e., attitudes one could have in the future), we argued, based on construal level theory, that they should be represented in a relatively abstract manner, and consequently, we examined the implications of this abstractness for the characteristics and impact of desired attitudes. Consistent with this, we demonstrate that people perceive desired attitudes as more invariant across time and context, that desired attitudes are less impacted by changes in low-level features related to the attitude object (Study 1a and 1b) and that desired attitudes have a greater impact on behavioral intentions when people are in an abstract rather than concrete mindset (Studies 2–3). Although we did not make specific predictions regarding actual attitudes, they better predicted behavioral intentions in the concrete mindset (Studies 2–3). This last result should be taken with caution, considering that the level of abstraction shown by actual attitudes in Study 1a was at or slightly above the midpoint of our abstraction index.

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1. Introduction

Maio and Thomas (2007) argued that people sometimes want attitudes that differ from the attitudes they actually have and will attempt to obtain these desired attitudes (see also Lu, Lord, & Yoke, 2015; Resch & Lord, 2011). It is surprisingly common for people's desired attitudes to differ from their actual attitudes, and initial studies support the idea that desired attitudes have motivational properties (see DeMarree & Rios, 2014; DeMarree, Wheeler, Briñol, & Petty, 2014; DeMarree, Clark, Wheeler, Briñol, & Petty, 2016).

However, little is known about the nature of people's desired attitudes. The existing work on the origins, structure, and representation of desired attitudes has largely been speculative (e.g., see discussions in DeMarree et al., 2016; DeMarree et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2015; Maio &

Thomas, 2007). In the present paper, we argue that desired attitudes are relatively more abstract than actual attitudes, and we examine the implications of this idea for the stability and impact of desired attitudes.

2. Construal level theory

In brief, construal level theory (CLT) argues that the representation of any given object, event, or concept varies as a function of its psychological distance (which is considered in relative, not absolute terms; Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2003, 2010). Psychologically distant objects and events are those that are perceived to be relatively far in time or space, socially far away, or far away in reality (e.g., hypothetically). Psychological distance promotes abstract mindsets or "high-level" construals. Consequently, with greater distance, objects and events are more likely to be represented in an abstract manner, with the central, core features highlighting the representation. In contrast, close psychological distance is more likely to create concrete construals, which are associated with greater emphasis on transient, non-central,

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contextualized features (i.e., “low-level” construals) of the object or event under consideration. Because the effects of psychological distance operate through the differences in abstraction that they are thought to produce, manipulations of abstraction are often used to test CLT predictions (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004).

CLT (e.g., Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007) and related perspectives such as the Linguistic Category Model (LCM; Semin & Fiedler, 1991) hold that these features of an object that *transcend time and situations* are most likely to be the core or central aspects of people's evaluation of the object (Ledgerwood & Trope, 2011; Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010).

CLT also argues that objects, features, and information that are congruent with a given mindset will have greater impact than those that are incongruent with the mindset. For example, for people in an abstract (versus concrete) mindset, abstract concepts such as their values (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009; Torelli & Kaikati, 2009), ideology (Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010), general attitudes (Carrera, Muñoz, Caballero, Fernández, & Albarracín, 2012) and affective attitudes (see also Carrera, Caballero, Muñoz, González-Iraizoz, & Fernández, 2014) are more likely to predict subsequent behavioral intentions.

3. Abstractness of desired attitudes

As Semin and Fiedler (1988) noted, abstractness is a matter of degree rather than an absolute concept, and Trope and Liberman (2010), setting out their basic assumptions of CLT, stressed that there are multiple levels of abstractness. Taking into account this point, we argue that people's desired attitudes are more abstract than their actual attitudes. People's desired attitudes are more psychologically distant due to distance in time, hypothetically compared to their more “real” current actual attitude, and consequently should be more likely to be determined by core, central features related to the evaluation of the object (i.e., those that transcend time and the situations). Furthermore, desired attitudes direct greater attention to desirability issues (i.e., *why one is doing the behavior*), while actual attitudes focus more on feasibility concerns (i.e., *how one is doing the behavior*). Construal level theory (see Liberman & Trope, 1998) has extensively studied desirability versus feasibility considerations and has shown that desirability reflects a high-level feature of events, while feasibility reflects a low-level feature of events. Thus, Ledgerwood, Trope and Chaiken (2010) showed that when individuals construe an evaluation about a distant object or with an abstract mindset, these attitudes are less context-dependent and reflect their ideological values. In the same vein, we propose that desired attitudes are more abstract than actual attitudes because they focus on context-independent information such as ideals and desires instead of being based on feasibility concerns such as means and situations. Based on these differences, in the present paper, we derive and test two predictions.

First, because their representation is more likely to be composed of core, central, context-independent features, people's desired attitudes should be more stable than their actual attitudes across time and context. In Study 1a, we examined whether people *believe* that their desired attitudes are more likely to be stable across time and context than their actual attitudes. In Study 1b, we tested whether people's desired attitudes would resist the influence of a context-specific feature related to the attitude object – the ease or difficulty of a specific attitude-congruent behavior considered.

Our second prediction concerns the conditions under which desired attitudes predict behavioral intentions. Previous research has shown how participant's mindset (abstract versus concrete) moderated the influence of different types of predictors. Eyal et al. (2009) found that participants' values (assessed in a separate session) better predicted behavioral intentions in distant compared to the temporally near future. Torelli and Kaikati's (2009) results supported that values (evaluated in the same session) were more likely to be expressed through value-

congruent judgments and behaviors when individuals think abstractly about their actions. These findings demonstrated that coherence in abstractness between a participant's mindset and a specific predictor (e.g., values) increased the strength of predictions. Ledgerwood, Wakslak and Wang (2010) tested this effect by presenting information differing in level of abstraction (i.e., aggregate versus individualized) to participants. They found that the construal level, manipulated by temporal distance, increased the relative weight placed on aggregate (abstract) versus individualized (concrete) information. Following this comparative paradigm, Carrera et al. (2012, 2014) found that when people reported two predictors with different levels of abstraction (e.g., general attitudes versus past behavior), individuals are more likely to use the most abstract construct reported in forming behavioral intentions when they are in an abstract mindset compared to the case of a concrete mindset. The novelty of the present proposal is to extend the effect of the construal level when two predictors are reported by participants, being that these predictors are conceptually similar (i.e., both are general attitudes) but different in abstraction, such as the case of desired and actual attitudes. Reporting both types of attitudes reveals the differences in their abstractness and leads people to choose the attitudes that are consistent with the level of abstractness of their mindset to form their behavioral intentions.

Thus, in Studies 2 and 3, we predicted that desired attitudes would more strongly predict behavioral intentions when participants are in an abstract rather than a concrete mindset. Regarding actual attitudes, we must be cautious. Under an abstract construal level (the mindset is abstract by default; see Huntsinger, Isbell, & Clore, 2014), the previous extensive research on general attitudes (i.e., actual attitudes in terms suggested by DeMarree et al., 2014) has shown their importance in predicting behavioral intentions (see Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), and this influence (vs. past behavior) has been seen when abstractness is induced (see Carrera et al., 2012). For these reasons, we did not make specific predictions regarding actual attitudes when they are reported alone or along with other predictors. In the studies described below, we report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions (see footnote 2 for information on the additional measures collected).

4. Abstractness of desired attitudes

4.1. Study 1a

Study 1a tested the hypothesis that desired attitudes are relatively abstract by exploring whether they are perceived to be relatively more stable across time and context than actual attitudes. As noted above, in CLT, abstract construals are typically seen to be gist-based mental representations focused on the central properties of an object – representations containing *lasting, stable, decontextualized* features (Liberman et al., 2007; Trope et al., 2007; Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010; see also Semin & Fiedler, 1991). In contrast, concrete construals are more detailed, including incidental, context-dependent properties. If desired attitudes are represented abstractly, they should be less likely than actual attitudes to be constrained by temporal or situational influences. Thus, we expected higher perceived stability in desired attitudes (versus actual attitudes).

4.1.1. Method

4.1.1.1. Participants. Participants were twenty-five undergraduate volunteers at the Autonomous University of Madrid (17 females; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.08$, $SD = 1.15$). In these studies, we sought to collect at least 20 participants per between-participant condition (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). The sample size in this study was appropriate given the entirely within-subject design.

4.1.1.2. Procedure. Participants completed self-report measures of their actual and desired attitudes towards a specific topic. On the same

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