



The relationship of psychological construals with well-being

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationships of construals of the properties of psychological distance dimensions with well-being. Construal-Level-Theory (CLT) has identified space, time, social distance, and hypotheticality as psychological distance dimensions. Close objects are construed, or mentally represented, in terms of low-level features. These are concrete, specific, unstructured, and contextualized representations. Distant objects are construed in terms of high-level features. These are abstract, global, coherent, and decontextualized representations. Additionally, the properties of construals, like values, give them meaning and importance. These dimensions, properties, and construals have been shown to guide evaluations, decisions, predictions, and other behaviors. Little research, however, has applied them to issues of mental health and psychological well-being. This paper examines identity, security, value, and control as important properties of psychological distance dimensions. The review demonstrates that, in many circumstances, when these properties of distance dimensions are construed at high-levels, they are associated with psychological well-being and behavioral adjustment.

1. Introduction

In construal theories, cognitive and motivational processes are viewed as central to the maintenance and enhancement of psychological well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2001). According to Construal-Level Theory (CLT), objects are perceived from an egocentric perspective along four psychological distance dimensions, namely, space, time, social distance, and hypotheticality (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2010; Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). These are also the psychological dimensions with which objects are construed. Construals are the mental representations of actions, objects, and events at various levels of abstraction. Objects, events, and actions perceived close to oneself on these four distance dimensions are represented with low-level construals. They are construed in specific, detailed, peripheral, contextualized, changing, or concrete ways. These construals represent the external or non-essential features of objects. For example, when considering the pursuit of goals that are psychologically close, the focus is often on the feasibility, efficiency, and practicality of the action (Trope et al., 2007). Objects, events, and actions perceived further from oneself on these four distance dimensions are represented with high-level construals. They are construed in abstract, global, central, enduring, or coherent ways. These construals represent the core or essential features of objects. When considering the pursuit of goals that are psychologically distant, the focus is often on the desirability, enjoyment, and interest of the action (Trope et al., 2007). The relationships of psychological distance dimensions and construal levels are

bidirectional in influence. Furthermore, the four types of psychological dimensions were found to be related, to influence each other, and to have similar correlates (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Taken together, these findings suggest that they are connected at a deeper and meaningful level, implying some common underlying and integrated psychological structure.

These four psychological distance dimensions and their construals, on their own, are neutral in meaning (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Psychological properties, features, or qualities, such as value, endow distance dimensions and construals with meaning. These properties can also be understood as the topics or issues at hand. CLT has identified some of these properties such as the self and not-self distinction, valence, and control (Liberman, Trope, & Wakslak, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Similarly, previous research has identified evaluation, potency, and activity as some of the basic dimensions of meaning (Osgood & Suci, 1955). Since psychological distance dimensions are connected and related, it is also likely that their psychological properties are also related in some ways. CLT researchers have proposed that further studies be undertaken on psychological distance dimensions and their properties (Trope & Liberman, 2010). CLT has been used to examine some applied areas such as consumer behavior (Liberman et al., 2007). However, little research has explored the relationship of psychological distance dimensions, construals, and their properties with psychological well-being and behavioral adjustment, even though these are important topics in the literature.

According to broaden-and-build theory and research, emotions

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influence people's cognitive orientations, resources, and flexibilities (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). Positive emotions broaden one's thought-action repertoires and facilitate the growth of psychological resources, whereas negative emotions constrict and reduce them. Therefore, the situations that people face, and the emotions they arouse, can be expected to influence their psychological orientations and construals. As with the findings from CLT, broaden-and-build theory suggests that situations and conditions influence the types of construals that might be activated. More demanding, emergency, or upsetting situations are psychologically close and require immediate action. In such circumstances, one's options are more limited. People may have to rely on practical solutions, skills, and repertoires they already possess. With events at close psychological distances, low-level construals are more task-focused and practical, and therefore, are more likely to be used. On the other hand, when there is no emergency and there is more time to consider what might be the best solutions, people can avail themselves of more opportunities and options. With farther psychological distances, high-level construals, that are more ideal solutions or serve long-term interests, can be entertained. Therefore, if conditions require immediate action, then a short-term focus and the use of low-level construals might be best to eliminate the problem quickly and efficiently. On the other hand, if conditions allow for them, then a long-term focus and the use of high-level construals might be better to promote long-term satisfaction and well-being.

This paper reviews the correlates and effects of some properties of psychological distance dimensions, construed at different levels. Identity, security, value, and control are properties or features of psychological distance dimensions. I wish to show that in many situations, high-level construals of these psychological properties promote emotional adjustment, behavioral adaptation, and psychological well-being. Some of the reasons for these are that high-level construals, like having a coherent sense of self or having cultural values, organize and give one's life meaning and counter the transitory nature of everyday experience (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Arndt, 2012). In addition, psychological properties that are central to the person, such as intrinsic motives, promote long-term satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this paper, I do not review the origins or sources of these psychological properties. These topics have been addressed in other reviews as important attributes, needs, and aspects of adaptation, survival, and social life (e.g., Cassidy, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012; Rokeach, 1979). To summarize, properties of psychological distance dimensions construed at different levels of abstraction have important consequences for behavioral adaptation and well-being. In the following sections of the paper, I first present an overview of these psychological properties in terms of distance dimensions. For example, I describe identity as extended views of the self across different objects or time. Next, I show that these psychological properties, when construed at high-levels, are often associated with behavioral adaptation and psychological well-being. It is hoped that this review will further elucidate the relationships of psychological distance dimensions, their properties, and their construals, with psychological well-being.

2. Identity

Identity is a subset of the self and the self-concept (Oyserman et al., 2012). It is thought to include content and readiness to act and employ mindsets to make personal meaning. In this paper, identity is conceptualized as a psychological property or feature of psychological distance dimensions that describes what the individual identifies with and maintains across space or time. It connects objects with the person and gives them importance and meaning. Identity is discussed in the literature on the self. For William James, the self was an extensive and valued domain with all the things that one identifies with and regards as important (James, 1890). Allport (1937) also described several aspects of the self and ego functions, including self-extensions, under the

concept of *proprium*. Aaron Beck (1976) used the concept of the *personal domain* to describe the extended self. In his theory, the personal domain was comprised of certain tangible and intangible (i.e., psychological) objects with special meaning and relevance to the person. At the center of the personal domain were the person's self-concepts, goals, and values. Clustered around this central core were other tangible and intangible objects in which the person had an investment. What was perceived to happen to this personal domain and its objects affected an individual's emotions and psychological well-being. Perceived success or self-enhancement produced euphoria, threat of harm or danger evoked anxiety, and loss lead to sadness. Perceived intentional transgression by others on one's personal domain provoked anger.

Object relations theory has described some of the processes by which the self develops (Cashdan, 1988; Hamilton, 2004). In personality development, psychological objects are incorporated into the self. These psychological objects are the perception of people important to the individual. Psychological objects with a positive valence contribute to the development of self-esteem and good adjustment. Self-esteem relates to how people evaluate themselves and their extended selves. Self-esteem predicts psychological well-being better than the other way around (Manna, Falgares, Ingoglia, Como, & De Santis, 2016). The literature on self-protection and self-enhancement illustrates the continued importance of self-esteem for psychological well-being in the adult. Self-enhancement refers to motivation and behavior to protect the self-concept, boost self-esteem, and facilitate personal growth (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011). If the self-concept is threatened or diminished, the person often engages in self-defensive and self-enhancing processes to protect and bolster it (Leary & Tangney, 2012).

People promote themselves and protect themselves from existential threat with high-level construals of the self that give their lives permanency and meaning. They can do this by living up to the standards that their worldviews prescribe (Pyszczynski et al., 2012). Other examples of the use of high-level construals of the self include having coherent, consistent, and stable self-concepts. People desire and seek information to confirm self-coherence (Swann & Buhrmester, 2012). Consistency of the self-concept across situations is associated with psychological well-being (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003). People with stable self-esteem show higher well-being and are lower in defensiveness (Kernis & Waschull, 1995; Kernis, 2005; Paradise & Kernis, 2002). Abstract mindsets or orientations also mitigate the effects of negative feedback on state self-esteem (Vess, Arndt, & Schlegel, 2011). On the other hand, individuals with high but instable self-esteem react to negative feedback with rejection of the feedback and defensiveness (Kernis, Cornell, Sun, Berry, & Harlow, 1993). There is strong evidence, therefore, to conclude that the self-concept and the self-esteem, at high-levels of construal, or when they are coherent, consistent, or enduring, are associated with psychological well-being and behavioral adjustment.

3. Security

Security has been a central topic of attachment theory and research. Attachment is an important affectional bond with caretakers for the development of the child (Cassidy, 1999). An *attachment behavioral system* begins in childhood as secure psychological connections to nurturing caretakers (Cassidy, 1999; Marvin & Britner, 1999). The love, protection, and guidance of the child by good parenting boosts the child's security and confidence. Children construct *internal working models* or mental representations of their relationships with these attachment figures which generalise to inferences about themselves and influence other relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999; Thompson, 1999). These internal working models gradually extend to other people and provide a general sense of security. Furthermore, they are at high-levels of construal. They are relatively global, consistent, and enduring (Feeney, 1999). A secure internal working model promotes psychological stability, well-being, and social adaptation

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