



Does reduced psychological distance increase climate engagement? On the limits of localizing climate change



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ABSTRACT

It is commonly suggested that reducing the psychological distance of climate change will increase public engagement. However, extant studies are limited by their correlational design, or by depicting impacts that vary in distance but also in kind or severity. We conducted two experiments designed to vary distance only, holding impacts constant. U.S. participants completed a visual-spatial task that portrayed the Maldives—a remote island nation facing severe climate impacts—as relatively proximal or distal, before judging the nation's geographic distance (Studies 1 and 2) and summarizing a video depicting its climate vulnerabilities (Study 2). Suggesting an effect on psychological distance, participants in the proximal condition judged the Maldives as geographically closer and described its climate impacts using more concrete (vs. abstract) language. However, this reduced psychological distance did not translate into increased policy support. Complementing other work, results suggest that localizing climate change, by itself, is unlikely to increase engagement.

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1. Introduction

Although scientists warn that urgent action is needed to mitigate the impacts of climate change, public engagement continues to lag, as evidenced by the significant portion of the U.S. public that denies the issue's existence or its human causes (e.g., Dunlap, McCright, & Yarosh, 2016). To help explain this disconnect, scholars have increasingly turned to the concept of psychological distance (Lieberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007). Psychological distance refers to the distance at which objects and events are perceived to occur, a construct that has been conceptualized along four distinct dimensions—namely spatial (physically close vs. far), temporal (e.g., near vs. distant future), social (e.g., involving similar vs. dissimilar others), and uncertainty (e.g., as likely vs. unlikely to occur). It is commonly suggested that for many people, particularly those in Western industrialized nations that contribute disproportionately to climate change but are less vulnerable to its impacts, climate change is perceived as distant along all four of these dimensions (e.g., Gilbert, 2006; Weber, 2006; van der Linden,

Maibach, & Leiserowitz, 2015). Psychological distance is widely assumed to represent a significant barrier to public engagement on climate change, by undermining the motivation to take actions that mitigate the problem (Gifford, 2011), leading to calls for framing climate impacts in ways that feel relevant and psychologically close to audiences (e.g., Scannell & Gifford, 2013; Schuldt, McComas, & Byrne, 2016; van der Linden et al., 2015). To date, however, evidence that reducing the psychological distance of climate change increases issue engagement is mixed.

2. The psychological distance of climate change

Suggesting that climate change is a psychologically distant phenomenon, Leiserowitz (2006) found that the most common thought or image associated with “global warming” among U.S. adults was related to melting glaciers and polar ice—impacts that are spatially distant for most Americans. Moreover, when asked about the global warming impacts that most concern them, greater percentages selected impacts on “people all over the world” (50%) or “nonhuman nature” (18%), as compared to more proximal impacts on “you and your family” (12%), “your local community” (1%), or “the United States as a whole” (9%). Similarly, in a study examining mental imagery among Australian residents,

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Leviston, Price, and Bishop (2014) found that distant associations were more common than concrete images of climate impacts (see also McDonald, 2016). Such associations may reflect, in part, the recognition that less developed nations are indeed more vulnerable to climate impacts (Millner & Dietz, 2015; Rosenzweig & Parry, 1994). For instance, in a representative survey of U.K. residents (Spence, Poortinga, & Pidgeon, 2012), respondents were more likely to agree (45.8%) than to disagree (36.1%) that climate change would disproportionately affect the world's developing countries; at the same time, however, respondents were more likely to agree (44.6%) than to disagree (32.3%) that climate change would affect people similar to themselves, suggesting complexity across the different dimensions of psychological distance.

3. Does reduced psychological distance predict increased engagement?

In recent years, numerous studies have sought to examine whether reduced psychological distance leads to greater public engagement on the issue. These studies have taken different approaches, from cross-sectional surveys to randomized experiments that test for effects of alternative messages. For instance, survey research with U.K. residents (Spence, Poortinga, Butler, & Pidgeon, 2011) has found that residents who reported direct experience with coastal flooding perceived climate as less uncertain and were more willing to restrict energy usage. Similarly, data from a national probability sample of New Zealand residents (Milfont, Evans, Sibley, Ries, & Cunningham, 2014) revealed that those living closer to the country's shoreline reported greater certainty that global warming is real and heightened support for government actions to address it. Beyond proximity to the coast, a survey of 11,000 respondents from 24 countries (Broomell, Budescu, & Por, 2015) found that personal experience with global warming predicted intentions to take specific climate-mitigation actions (e.g., using less air conditioning in the summer).

Other studies have taken an experimental approach. For instance, Scannell and Gifford (2013) randomly assigned a sample of British Columbia residents to view a poster containing information about local or global impacts from climate change; in the local condition, the message depicted impacts relevant to the participants' specific locale (e.g., about mountain pine beetle infestations in the Kootenay region), whereas in the global condition, the message focused on melting polar ice and associated sea-level rise. Suggesting an effect of proximity, the researchers observed higher scores on a self-report measure of climate change engagement in the local condition, relative to the control group. Similarly, Jones, Hine, and Marks (2017) invited Australian participants to view an approximately 4-min video that portrayed climate impacts in more proximal (i.e., occurring in Australia) or in more distal places (i.e., occurring in foreign nations, including Greece and the Philippines). Results revealed lower levels of psychological distance in the proximal video condition, a pattern that mediated increased levels of concern and heightened intentions to perform climate-mitigation behaviors.

However, other research suggests that the link between psychological distance and climate engagement is more nuanced (for a review, see McDonald, Chai, & Newell, 2015). As previously mentioned, in their nationally representative sample of U.K. residents, Spence et al. (2012) observed that climate change is perceived as more psychologically distant on some distance dimensions (e.g., spatial distance) than others (e.g., social

distance), and interestingly, that perceiving greater impacts on *distant* places (i.e., developing countries) positively predicted respondents' preparedness to conserve energy to mitigate climate change. In a messaging experiment examining the influence of climate "departure dates" (i.e., the year after which the annual climate in a given location will be warmer than any year on record; see Mora et al., 2013), Rickard, Yang, and Schuldt (2016) found that neither increased spatial nor temporal proximity, by themselves, positively affected policy support. Instead, suggesting a moderation effect, results varied by political orientation—for example, U.S. conservatives expressed greater support for climate change policy after reading about impacts occurring nearby (i.e., in New York City vs. Singapore) but in the more distant future (i.e., in 2066 vs. in 2047 or 2020). In a recent study examining the role of psychological distance in response to portrayals of human versus non-human climate change victims, Manning et al. (2018) report little evidence that psychological distance increases behavioral intentions on either self-report or implicit measures.

To explain such mixed findings, Brügger, Dessai, Devine-Wright, Morton, and Pidgeon (2015) have recently argued that construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010)—a common basis for the hypothesis that reduced psychological distance will promote climate engagement—does not in fact predict that localizing climate change should automatically lead individuals to support or undertake climate-mitigating actions. Instead, the researchers point out that the theory predicts that psychological distance should influence whether relatively concrete ("low-level") considerations versus relatively abstract ("high-level") considerations come to dominate climate-related judgments and behavioral intentions (Brügger et al., 2015). Offering support for this perspective, Brügger, Morton, and Dessai (2016) asked U.K. participants read about climate impacts occurring either in the U.K. or in other parts of the world. Although results revealed no main effects of the distance variable, this variable interacted with individuals' feelings of fear (a low-level consideration) versus skepticism (a high-level consideration), such that fear dominated skepticism in predicting increased risk perception and personal intentions among participants assigned to the proximal condition, and vice versa for the distal condition.

In addition to a tendency to oversimplify construal level theory, we further suggest that many extant studies are limited by their correlational nature, or in the case of experiments, by depicting impacts that vary in distance but also in kind or severity—design features that make it difficult to isolate the unique effect of distance. For example, survey studies that examine correlations between residents' climate change concerns, behavioral intentions, and physical proximity to coastlines threatened by sea-level rise (e.g., Milfont et al., 2014; Spence et al., 2011) cannot fully rule-out the possibility that a "third variable" is causally influencing what may be, in fact, a spurious correlation (Simon, 1954); attempting to statistically control for such influences (e.g., political orientation, household income; Milfont et al., 2014) is a helpful but imperfect solution. Moreover, experimental studies that attempt to avoid the causal inference problem by employing random assignment to alternative distance treatments have, by and large, exposed participants not only to different distance treatments but also to *different impacts* (e.g., Brügger et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2017; Scannell & Gifford, 2013). Although such designs offer ecological validity by depicting real-world impacts occurring closer to or farther from the self (e.g., in a distant country vs. one's home country), they raise the possibility that differences besides

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