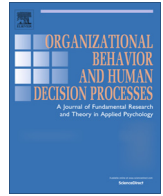




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# Big picture is better: The social implications of construal level for advice taking

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## ABSTRACT

Advice taking is of growing interest to organizational scholars because it is a critical pathway for knowledge transfer and learning. Based on construal level theory, we hypothesize that high construal advisors are viewed as experts and, in turn, others are more likely to take their advice. In a field study of an online community of programmers and a laboratory experiment measuring psychological mechanisms, we find that signaling higher construal by communicating more abstractly is positively associated with expert reputation, which in turn explains others' advice-taking behavior. Implications for research on the social consequences of construal level and novel antecedents of perceived expertise and advice taking are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Advice is valuable because it enables people to overcome the limitations of their own knowledge and experience by taking advantage of social resources. In the business world, advice giving has changed substantially in recent decades. Entire industries focus on the provision of advice (e.g., management consulting, financial planning) and they are now a much larger proportion of the economy in developed countries. For example, consulting services alone are responsible for more than a quarter of US exports, and the worldwide consulting industry grew twice as fast as the global economy (Gartner, 2015; United States International Trade Commission (USITC), 2013). New information technologies and social networks make it possible to access a much wider range of advice and advisors, whether on the internal corporate knowledge network or the internet. Understanding the relationship between advice giving and advice taking is therefore important organizationally as well as theoretically.

Prior research has shown that the mental mindsets of advisors and decision makers differ, influencing advice giving (Danziger, Montal, & Barkan, 2012; Kray, 2000; Kray & Gonzalez, 1999). In particular, Danziger et al. (2012) found that advisors represent problems more abstractly than those in the decision-making role, perhaps because they are more psychologically removed from the decision (Kray, 2000; Kray & Gonzalez, 1999). Moreover, relative to decision makers, advisors focus more on idealistic considerations and less on pragmatic ones (Danziger et al., 2012). These patterns are consistent with construal level theory, which suggests that people's mental representations range from lower levels of construal (i.e., more concrete and contextualized) to higher levels of construal (i.e. more abstract and decontextualized; Trope & Liberman, 2010), and those able to distance themselves from a situation (more true of advisors than decision-makers themselves) will mentally represent the situation at a higher construal level. As yet unexplored, however, is the possibility that advisors' construal level may have social implications for other people; that is, advisors' construal level may influence decision makers' advice taking behavior in addition to the advice giving behavior studied previously.

The present research evaluates whether construal level cues contained in advisors' communication influence others' perception

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of these advisors and, in turn, decision makers' advice utilization and the appeal of particular advisors. We suggest that the level of construal in advisors' communication is a signal of their expert reputation. Moreover, people are more likely to choose and follow the advice of advisors who signal higher construal because of their presumed expertise.

Our study advances the advice taking and construal level literatures in several important ways. The construal level literature has largely focused on the consequences of an individual's construal level for their own decisions. Extending recent research and theory (Wakslak, Smith, & Han, 2014), we explore the social consequences of construal level for others' decision-making. We also contribute to the advice-taking literature by exploring how the mental mindsets advisors signal in their communication influence decision-makers' perceptions of the advisor (i.e., advisors' expert reputation) and advice utilization. In particular, our research is the first to explore the possibility that how abstractly people communicate and frame their advice influences others' advice taking and the effective transfer of knowledge.

### 1.1. Advice taking

One of the most robust findings in the advice-taking literature is "egocentric discounting," whereby people fail to take full advantage of the advice they have access to (e.g., Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Krueger, 2003; Yaniv & Kleinberger, 2000). In parallel, the knowledge transfer and learning literature laments the fact that shared knowledge is infrequently put to use (e.g., Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Zollo & Winter, 2002). Thus, a topic of ongoing interest is decision-makers' failure to take full advantage of advice, and the factors that can exaggerate or attenuate the tendency to discount advice and the knowledge others share. For example, recipients of advice are thought to discount advice because they anchor on their own opinions and insufficiently adjust, they have greater mental access to their own internal justifications, or they believe their own views are superior (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006; Krueger, 2003; Yaniv & Kleinberger, 2000).

Much of the literature concerning the predictors of advice taking has focused on the attributes of advice recipients (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2006). For example, research demonstrates that people show a higher propensity to take advice when they feel grateful (Gino & Schweitzer, 2008) or anxious (Gino, Brooks, & Schweitzer, 2012), when they pay more for the advice (Gino, 2008), when they engage in perspective-taking (Yaniv, Choshen-Hillel, & Milyavsky, 2009) and when they are performing a more difficult task (Gino & Moore, 2007). At the same time, people are less likely to take advice when they feel more powerful (See, Morrison, Rothman, & Soll, 2011; Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2012), when they are part of a team (Minson & Mueller, 2012) and when they feel angry (Gino & Schweitzer, 2008). The literature on knowledge transfer and learning similarly focuses on the characteristics of knowledge recipients as predictors of whether knowledge transferred will be assimilated and exploited; for example, the absorptive capacity of knowledge recipients (individual, group or organizational) has been the target of much study (see Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011, for a summary).

Research has also explored how the attributes of advisors influence their credibility and, in turn, others' advice taking. Prior research suggests that advisors' expertise and confidence are among the most influential advisor characteristics shaping advice taking (Bonaccio & Dalal, 2010). Moreover, people appear to attend to relatively subtle cues and signals to create judgments of advisors; for example, advisors' confidence seems to serve as a heuristic influencing whether they are perceived to have expertise, task-related knowledge, or accurate advice (Snizek & Van Swol, 2001). Other characteristics such as age, education and wisdom have also

been associated with advice taking in prior research (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006), many of which may serve as signals of expertise.

To date, the ways advisors communicate has not been extensively studied in the advice taking literature, but there are some indications that communication style may influence persuasion more generally. For example, Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr (1978) found that in artificial court settings, people were less persuaded by witnesses who used 'powerless' speech, where powerless speech is characterized by features such as hesitations (e.g., "um"), hedging forms (e.g., "kind of", "sort of"), and questioning intonation. This research suggests that people draw inferences about the communicator from their communication style.

Communication style conveys a variety of cues in addition to power. In an advice-taking context, advice recipients may be especially interested in cues regarding how an advisor thinks to get a sense of how their advice was produced. Recent developments in the field of psychology (reviewed below) suggest that construal level, or how abstractly people mentally represent problems and situations, is a powerful way of characterizing the mental mindsets people use. Moreover, construal level is signaled in interpersonal communication.

### 1.2. Construal level as a social cue

Construal level is a key descriptor of people's cognitive representations of targets (e.g. actions, situations, other people). These cognitive representations are organized hierarchically, and may range along a continuum from low-level construals to high-level construals (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Lower-level construals are more concrete, contextualized, and place greater emphasis on "how" things are done. Higher-level construals are more abstract, decontextualized, and place greater emphasis on "why" things are done (see Trope & Liberman, 2010, for a review). For example, the same problem or situation, such as giving a client investment advice, may be represented more concretely and be focused on "how" investment advice is given (e.g., sending an email to the client containing information). Alternatively, it may be represented more abstractly and focused on "why" the advice is given (e.g., helping the client to achieve his/her life goals).

Construal level research has long acknowledged that people's construal level may be inferred from the type of language they use. Semin and Fiedler's (1989) Linguistic Category Model (LCM), for example, proposes a set of rules to calculate the degree of abstraction of textual data based on the types of words it contains. Brysbaert, Warriner, and Kuperman (2014) used crowdsourcing techniques to generate a dataset of concreteness ratings for 40,000 common English words. Vallacher and Wegner's (1989) Behavior Identification Form (BIF) and Rey and Wiesenfeld's (2015) Work-Based Construal Level Scale (WBCL) are measures that capture people's construal level by asking them to evaluate lower- and higher-level descriptions of a set of common activities, with lower-level descriptions focused on "how" the activity is performed and higher-level descriptions addressing "why" it is performed. In sum, the language people use reflects the way they cognitively represent targets such as situations or problems, ranging along a hierarchy from more concrete and subordinate representations focused on "how" things are done to more abstract and superordinate representations focused on "why" things are done.

Much of the research on construal level addresses individual-level personal outcomes. However, Wakslak et al. (2014) and Palmeira (2015) recently found that the construal level of individuals' communication may shape how others perceive them. In particular, they had participants read material they thought was communication from another person, and found that participants

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