



# Does perspective taking increase or decrease stereotyping? The role of need for cognitive closure☆



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## ABSTRACT

Being able to take the perspective of others is an important part of human social competence that has considerable impacts on social cognition. Previous research found that taking the perspective of an outgroup member is an effective strategy for reducing stereotyping and prejudice towards an outgroup member. Yet other studies showed that the perspective taking heightens the stereotyping in certain situations. In the present study, we hypothesized and found that the effect of perspective taking on stereotyping depends on the perspective taker's need for cognitive closure (NFC). In Study 1, after taking the perspective of the elderly, people with high NFC used more stereotypic traits in describing the elderly, whereas those low in NFC used significantly less. In Study 2, people with high NFC had higher level of stereotype accessibility, as compared with people with low NFC.

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## 1. Introduction

An overgeneralized belief of group members, or a stereotype, may facilitate our classification of individuals, and spare us an otherwise substantial cognitive burden (Allport, 1954; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Meanwhile, it may also lead to some undesirable consequences, such as misperception, social injustice and group conflict (Kunda, 1999). Therefore, reducing stereotyping of others has always been of great interest to social psychologists. Recently, a considerable amount of research has addressed this issue by investigating the role of perspective taking. In these studies, the perspective taking was defined as the process of individuals imagining or inferring other's attitude or perspective "from another's vantage point or imagining oneself in another's shoes" (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005), or else a cognitive capacity to view the world in another's position (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008). A large body of research has shown that perspective taking could effectively reduce stereotyping and negative evaluations of outgroup members (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Shih, Wang, Trahan Bucher, & Stotzer, 2009; Todd, Galinsky, & Bodenhausen, 2012; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003; Wang, Kenneth, Ku, & Galinsky, 2014). A proposed underlying mechanism of these effects is self–other overlap (Galinsky &

Moskowitz, 2000; Galinsky et al., 2005). People engaged in taking the perspective of one target person will have to use the self as an analogy to infer and simulate the person's thinking and feelings. This process would lead people to perceive the target as more "self-like", and then decrease their stereotyping of the target. Meanwhile, people may also feel themselves to be more "other-like", or perceive the self as possessing characteristics of the target person, which may increase the behavioral similarity between themselves and the target (Galinsky, Wang, & Ku, 2008).

However, some researchers take a different view, believing that the benefits of perspective taking is not without its boundary conditions, and suggesting that in certain circumstances perspective taking may actually increase stereotyping (Skorinko & Sinclair, 2013), and exacerbate intergroup relations (Tarrant, Calitri, & Weston, 2012; Vorauer, Martens, & Sasaki, 2009). A study by Skorinko and Sinclair (2013) showed that taking the perspective of ambiguously stereotypic targets could decrease the extent to which one engages in stereotyping, but taking the perspective of a stereotype-consistent target would increase stereotyping. This is because in the process of perspective taking, clearly stereotype-consistent targets would make their group stereotype highly salient. Against this backdrop, perspective takers were more apt to use the stereotype to estimate the thoughts and feelings of others.

Without direct access to another person's mental processes, a person would try to perceive another's mind using simulation and theory-driven strategy (Epley & Waytz, 2010). Simulation here refers to a person's use of the self to simulate the minds of others, a process whereby people turned themselves into informational sources. In addition, theoretically driven individuals tended to use the pre-existing categorical

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knowledge of the targets to infer their mental states. Self and stereotype, therefore, are the two basic templates on which people relied to construe the mental state of others (Ames & Mason, 2012).

Although both inferential tools based on these two templates were efficient means for saving cognitive efforts, they seem to be mutually exclusive alternatives. Ames (2004) found that the use of self-projection, or the simulation of another person's mind based on that of the self, is negatively correlated with stereotyping. A person's choice of strategies to infer another's mental processes is situationally contingent. When the target is similar to the self, people often use self-projection. When the target is not similar, people would not use egocentric simulations, but opt instead to seek categorical information (Krueger, 1998; Vorauer, Hunter, Main, & Roy, 2000). Epley and Waytz (2010) pointed out that when stereotypic information about the target is highly accessible, a person would not use self-relevant information to infer the target, but would turn to stereotypic and categorical information. Therefore, when taking the perspective of another person, the perspective taker could use the self-relevant information and stereotype as resources. Under certain situations, they could choose a particular kind of information, or might rely heavily on one of them, and these differences in informational usage sometimes cause perspective taking to reduce one's stereotyping of targets, but in other times may boost the stereotyping.

As a stable dimension of individual difference (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) and an important motivational-cognitive basis of prejudice (Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2013; Roets & Van Hiel, 2011), the need for cognitive closure (NFC) could drive an individual to over-utilize the chronically accessible stereotype, bias and pre-existing attitudes, and to ignore the case-specific or individuating information in forming a judgment (Webster & Kruglanski, 1997). Previous research has shown that NFC may occasion a heuristic, over-simplistic and top-down processing style (for an overview, see Kruglanski, 2004). Relative to individuals with low NFC, those with high NFC are more reliant on stereotype when processing judgment-relevant cues, because "stereotype represent pre-existing knowledge structures, ready to be used momentarily, whereas individuating information may require extensive further processing" (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). As expected, individuals with high NFC are more likely to judge social groups stereotypically (Dijksterhuis, van Knippenberg, Kruglanski, & Schaper, 1996).

Drawing on the relevant literature, we believe that an individual's NFC level may moderate the influence of perspective taking on stereotyping. Relative to an individual with low NFC, those with high NFC would be more reliant on stereotypes in judging another person (Webster & Kruglanski, 1997). This difference in reliance may, when evaluating the target of perspective taking, cause changes in levels of stereotyping. After perspective taking, individuals with high NFC may end up with an even higher level of stereotyping than before, whereas those low in NFC may become more individuating and less reliant on stereotypes. We tested our hypothesis in two studies. In Study 1, we manipulated perspective taking and measured one's NFC level to test the hypothesized moderating role of NFC. In Study 2, we further tested whether the accessibility of stereotypes may fluctuate in a similar fashion.

## 2. Study 1

The aim of Study 1 is to demonstrate that the NFC level may moderate the effect of perspective taking on stereotyping. Supposedly, people with high NFC and engaging in perspective taking would become more stereotypical, whereas those with low NFC would lower their stereotyping after perspective taking.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants

A total of 103 undergraduate (42 males and 61 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.14$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.25$ ) students participated for credits towards their

introductory psychology course. The experiment adopted a 2 (perspective taking vs. control)  $\times$  2 (High NFC vs. Low NFC) between subject design.

#### 2.1.2. Procedure

Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants learned that the experiment is about verbal skills, and they were to finish several unrelated verbal tasks. Participants first filled out the NFC questionnaire and then finished the perspective-taking task. According to Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000), each participant was asked to view a photo of an elderly person and then given 5 min to write a short essay about "a day in the life" of the elderly. Participants were randomly assigned to the perspective taking condition or the control condition. The instruction for the perspective taking condition was "Please adopt the perspective of the individual in the photograph, and imagine a day in the life of this individual as if you were that person, looking at the world through his eyes and walking through the world in his shoes". The instruction for the control condition was "Please adopt the perspective of a third-party, and objectively describe a day in the life of this individual". After the essay, there was a manipulation check on the perspective taking task, and then participants performed a 10-min filler task. Lastly, the stereotypic trait attributions towards the elderly were measured and the demographic information was collected.

#### 2.1.3. Measures

**2.1.3.1. Need for cognitive closure.** The Chinese version (Liu & Liang, 2007; Liu, Zhang, & Liang, 2007) of Webster and Kruglanski's (1994) need for closure scale was used. The Chinese version has 21 items, rated on a 6-point answering scale, ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 6 (*completely agree*). The Chinese version yielded two factors. The first factor consisted of seven items, corresponding to the decisiveness component in Webster and Kruglanski's (1994) scale. The second factor consisted of items from the other four domains of need for closure, i.e., preference for order and structure, predictability, discomfort with ambiguity, and close-mindedness.<sup>1</sup> The present study used the 14 items of the second factor as the index of NFC (cf. Kossowska, Dragon, & Bukowski, 2015).<sup>2</sup> In the present sample, the Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ . The average of the items in the scale was used as the measure of NFC, with higher score indicating higher NFC.

**2.1.3.2. Manipulation Check.** A single item was used to measure the extent to which participants adopted the perspective of the elderly, following previous research (Dovidio et al., 2004; Tarrant et al., 2012). Participants rated "To what extent did you adopt the perspective of the elderly person during writing the essay?" on a 6-point answering scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*extremely*).

**2.1.3.3. Stereotyping of the elderly.** Participants were shown 50 trait words, and were asked to rate the extent to which each trait could describe the elderly, using a 6-point answering scale, ranging from 1

<sup>1</sup> Liu and Liang (2007) translated and revised the original NFC questionnaire (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). The 42 items in the original version were analyzed by exploratory factor analysis, in which items with multiple factor loadings or with a factor loading lower than 0.3 were deleted. The result left 21 items that belongs to two factors. The first factor consisted of seven items, which corresponded to the decisiveness component in Webster and Kruglanski's (1994) scale. The second factor consisted of items from the other four domains of need for closure, i.e., preference for order and structure, predictability, discomfort with ambiguity, and close-mindedness. The results from the confirmatory factor analysis established the construct validity of the shortened 21-item scale,  $CMIN/df = 3.11$ ,  $NFI = 0.97$ ,  $CFI = 0.98$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.08$ ,  $IFI = 0.96$ . The reliability of internal consistency of the whole scale is 0.78, and the reliability for the two subscales is 0.78 (decisiveness) and 0.80 (need for structure), respectively (Liu & Liang, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Kossowska et al. (2015) excluded the decisiveness subscale in their study, using the average of the other four subscales (preference for order and structure in the environment, predictability of future contexts, affective discomfort occasioned by ambiguity, and closed-mindedness) as the index of NFC.

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