



## “Proximising” climate change reconsidered: A construal level theory perspective



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### ABSTRACT

Reducing the psychological distance of climate change has repeatedly been proposed as one strategy to increase individuals' motivation to respond to climate change. From the perspective of construal level theory, decreasing psychological distance should not itself influence people's willingness to act but change the processes that underlie individual decision-making. We conducted two experiments in which we manipulated the psychological distance of climate change. We found that participants with a distant focus relied more on scepticism to represent risks and make decisions about supporting climate change, whereas participants with a proximal perspective relied more on fear when making such judgements. However, the predicted Fear  $\times$  Distance interaction was only found when self-reported fear rather than experimentally manipulated fear was used as a moderator. Our results suggest that simply proximising won't increase engagement and call for a more differentiated perspective on the effects of psychological distance in the context of climate change.

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### 1. Introduction

A common explanation for currently insufficient public support to address climate change (e.g., European Commission, 2011; PEW Research Center, 2010) is that people perceive climate change as a distant threat: something that affects strangers, and that happens in remote times and places rather than in the here and now (Fleury-Bahi, 2008; Leiserowitz, 2006; Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole, & Whitmarsh, 2007; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). The distance at which people perceive climate change could lead to the perspective that climate change risks are irrelevant to one's self and that there is no need for personal action. To remedy this, it has repeatedly been suggested that highlighting the proximal consequences of climate change is an important strategy to engage and mobilize publics around this issue (e.g., CRED, 2009; Moser & Dilling, 2007; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Although the proximising strategy

has been proposed frequently, its effectiveness has rarely been tested in the context of climate change. Of more concern, the studies that have experimentally tested the proximising approach have not revealed the expected positive effects on individual support for addressing climate change (e.g., Shwom, Dan, & Dietz, 2008; Spence & Pidgeon, 2010).

The missing positive effect of such proximising is counter-intuitive and may, at first glance, seem disappointing. However, it is not unexpected when considered from the perspective of dominant theoretical models of psychological distance. Construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010) argues that varying levels of psychological distance (e.g., here vs. far away) influence *how* people represent objects mentally and *what* information they consider when making judgments and decisions. In accordance with this perspective, we expect that proximising climate change should affect *how* climate change is mentally represented, and through this *what* people *act on*, not whether or not people *act per se*.

Following the above reasoning, the aim of the present research was to reconsider the widely held belief that focusing on proximal (vs. distant) impacts of climate change should straightforwardly increase people's motivation to support mitigation and adaptation

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strategies. Before presenting two studies that tested this, we elaborate further on why considering psychological distance is crucial in the context of climate change and what kinds of information we expect people to rely on when they zoom in on proximal (or zoom out to distant) climate change consequences.

### 1.1. Climate change as a distant threat

Climate change and distance are two strongly entangled topics: Wherever greenhouse gases are emitted, they spread throughout the atmosphere and will contribute to global (distant) climate change. Similarly, the consequences of climate related actions are often felt by people other than those who carry these actions out both in space and time. The entanglement of distance and climate change is also obvious in the fact that many consequences of climate change, due to the inertia of the climate system, will only be manifest several decades from now. This is, from the perspective of an individual, a long time span and far away from one's present situation. Finally, although it is certain that the climate is changing and will continue to do so, the exact magnitude and quality of future climate change impacts can never be absolutely known. This uncertainty can also be regarded as a form of psychological distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Research on public perception of climate change indicates that distance is an important factor. When people are asked about how they think about climate change, they tend to perceive climate change as a threat that is more likely to affect strangers remote in time and space rather than oneself, the people one knows, or nearby places; in addition, climate change is perceived as a greater danger to the natural world than it is to humans (Bord, Fisher, & O'Connor, 1998; Fleury-Bahi, 2008; Leiserowitz, 2006; Lorenzoni, Leiserowitz, De Franca Doria, Poortinga, & Pidgeon, 2006; Lorenzoni et al., 2007; Milfont, 2010). Somewhat in contrast to this general pattern, a recent study found that roughly 40–50% of participants perceive climate change as psychologically close on various dimensions of psychological distance (Spence, Poortinga, & Pidgeon, 2012; see also The World Bank, 2009). Nonetheless, research suggests that at least a sizable part of the public perceives climate change as a distant threat.

The perception of climate change as a distant threat is considered problematic because individuals' perception of being personally at risk can be an important motivation to react to the respective risk (e.g., Floyd, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 2000; Miceli, Sotgiu, & Settanni, 2008; Zaalberg, Midden, Meijnders, & McCalley, 2009). Indeed, the link between perceived personal risk and willingness to act on climate change has been observed in several studies (Brody, Grover, & Vedlitz, 2012; Dietz, Dan, & Shwom, 2007; O'Connor, Bord, & Fisher, 1999; O'Connor, Bord, Yarnal, & Wiefek, 2002; Terpstra, 2011; Zaalberg et al., 2009).

### 1.2. Climate change and proximising climate change from the perspective of construal level theory

Against the above backdrop, the idea that emphasising proximal consequences of climate change should increase people's motivation to act is intuitively appealing. However, previous attempts to implement this idea raise doubt about the effectiveness of proximising climate change. To our knowledge, only four studies have examined the impact of proximising on people's motivation to act on climate change, and none reveals unambiguously supportive evidence. Shwom et al. (2008) provided their participants with information about climate change trends either on a regional or a national scale. Contrary to the common expectations, the extent to which participants endorsed climate change policies did not differ across conditions. In a similar vein, Spence and Pidgeon (2010)

framed climate change in proximal versus distant terms. The proximal frame included a text on national consequences, a proximal map illustrating potential flooding caused by sea-level rise, and three photographs of urban flooding that were recognisable as places in the UK (where the study was conducted). The distant frame included similar stimuli but with reference to continental Europe. Again, proximising climate change had no effect on attitudes towards climate change mitigation.

The third study we are aware of was by Scannell and Gifford (2013), who provided members of the general public with information posters describing either one broad distant impact of climate change (sea levels rising) or a proximal impact specific to the area they lived in (one of the following three: forest fires, beetle infestation, rising sea levels). Relative to a third condition, where no information was provided, the proximally framed information poster increased participants' engagement with climate change (including affective, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of engagement). In contrast, people's engagement with climate change did not differ between the distantly framed poster and the control condition. Thus, this study suggests that providing information about proximal climate change may be helpful to increase people's engagement with climate change. However, two aspects of this study make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the specific advantages of zooming in on proximal climate change relative to a more distant approach. First, Scannell and Gifford (2013) did not directly compare the proximal and the distant frame. Second, they varied not only the psychological distance of impact but also the type of impact (sea level rising vs. forest fires, beetle infestation, rising sea levels); this raises the possibility that effects in the "proximal" condition may have been multiply determined.

The fourth study again compared locally versus globally framed climate change information and compared the effects of these frames to a control condition with no information about climate change (Schoenefeld & McCauley, 2015). The study again failed to reveal a statistically significant main effect. That is, participants' ratings of the importance of climate change, their intentions to personally mitigate climate change, and their support for mitigation policies were identical across the three conditions. Thus, while proximising climate change impacts is a "common sense" strategy to increase engagement (Devine-Wright, 2013), to date there is limited evidence that this strategy actually works.

This finding may not be so surprising when considered from the perspective of construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). Construal level theory (CLT) starts from the assumption that humans can only directly experience the present situation. Everything that is removed from the current situation, be it on a spatial (here vs. far away), temporal (now vs. future/past), social (me vs. others), or hypothetical (certain vs. uncertain) dimension, needs to be mentally construed. The further away an object is from the present situation of a person, the more effort she has to make to construe it, and the more abstract and generalized the resulting mental representation will be (high-level construal). Conversely, the present situation offers a lot of context-specific information and is rich in details; it involves no or only little mental construal (low-level construal). In simpler terms, this means that when we think of an object as close versus distant, we form different mental representations of it. These representations then guide subsequent judgments and decisions. Thus, psychological distance – the perception of when, where, to whom, and whether an event occurs (Trope & Liberman, 2010) – affects what evaluations and even behavioural intentions are based on.

Illustrative of this, one study (Ledgerwood, Trope, & Chaiken, 2010) found that participants with a proximal and concrete perspective considered primarily low-level incidental

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