



Spontaneous trait inference and construal level theory: Psychological distance increases nonconscious trait thinking

SoYon Rim *, James S. Uleman, Yaacov Trope

Department of Psychology, New York University, 6 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 December 2008

Revised 12 June 2009

Available online 21 June 2009

Keywords:

Person perception

Social cognition

Trait inference

Construal

Psychological distance

ABSTRACT

Can psychological distance affect how much perceivers form spontaneous trait inferences (STI) from others' behaviors? On the basis of construal level theory (CLT) which posits that distant (vs. near) entities are represented more in terms of their abstract, global, and decontextualized features, we predicted that perceived distance would increase the tendency for perceivers to draw spontaneous trait inferences from behavioral information about actors. In two experiments, participants learned about people who were perceived as being distant or proximal to the self, and STI formation was subsequently assessed. We found that perceivers were more likely to form STIs about distant vs. near actors from the same behavioral information. These findings generalized across two distance dimensions: space and time. In addition, we found that priming individuals to adopt a high-level (vs. low-level) construal mindset also resulted in increased STI (Experiment 3). In sum, psychological distance facilitates STI formation, and this occurs via high-level construal of actors and their behaviors.

© 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Imagine that you are listening to someone give a presentation, and you hear another member of the audience talking loudly to his neighbor throughout the talk. What do you think about this person? What kind of impression do you form about him? Research on spontaneous trait inferences (STIs; Winter & Uleman, 1984; see Uleman, Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2008, for a review) indicates that you will spontaneously, effortlessly, and unintentionally form the impression that the person is *rude*. Across multiple paradigms, this work has demonstrated that perceivers readily infer dispositional traits from minimal information about previously unknown individuals. However, are STIs inevitable in the face of trait-implicating information about others? We suggest that this is not the case. We propose that contextual information concerning the actor's relative distance to the perceiver is crucial in determining how the perceiver will represent the actor's behaviors and that this will, in turn, affect the likelihood of STIs.

We draw on construal level theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2000) for our prediction that psychological distance (vs. proximity) leads to greater STI formation. According to CLT, psychological distance is associated with a focus on the abstract, global, and superordinate features of a perceived person (i.e., high-level construal) rather than on the concrete, local, and subordinate features (i.e., low-level construal). Traits are considered to be high-level because they share the major qualities of high-level construals (e.g.,

abstractness and globality). Therefore, in the above case of the disruptive audience-member, you will be more likely to draw the trait inference, *rude*, if he is sitting at the opposite corner of the auditorium (i.e., is spatially distant) than if he is sitting next to you (i.e., is spatially proximal) and if he is a student at a different university (i.e., is socially distant) than if he goes to your university (i.e., is socially proximal). Following from this same premise, we also expect that directly manipulating level of construal through a mindset prime will yield the same effects, thereby pinpointing the mechanism through which psychological distance affects STI formation.

Spontaneous trait inferences from behaviors

Spontaneous trait inferences form when perceivers observe trait-implicating behaviors of other people. For example, upon reading the sentence, "The secretary solved the mystery halfway through the book," people spontaneously inferred the trait, "clever" (Winter & Uleman, 1984). Various cognitive methods have been used to detect STI (see Uleman, Newman, & Moskowitz, 1996, for a review). The use of multiple paradigms, (e.g., recognition probe and cued-recall) provided converging evidence that STI exist.

Several characteristics of STI have been examined. First, the most defining characteristic of STI is that it is unintentional (Winter & Uleman, 1984). In other words, STIs do not require a conscious and explicit goal to form an impression and can form even when behavioral sentences are presented as part of a distracter task (Uleman, Newman, & Winter, 1992; Winter, Uleman, & Cunniff, 1985). A second characteristic is that STIs form during encoding of behavioral information and cannot be attributed to elaborative

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: soyon.rim@nyu.edu (S. Rim).

retrieval processes (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Uleman, Hon, Roman, & Moskowitz, 1996). Third, STIs are linked to specific actors in memory (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Todorov & Uleman, 2002). Lastly, STIs represent attributional knowledge about actors and reflect inferential processes rather than mere associations (Carlston & Skowronski, 2005; Crawford, Skowronski, Stiff, & Scherer, 2007). In sum, STIs represent meaningful dispositional information about particular individuals, and they do not require conscious awareness (i.e., of the process or the link between behaviors and inferences) or explicit intentions (i.e., to infer traits or dispositions) to form.

The apparent ubiquity of STIs raises the following question. Will STIs form inevitably when trait-relevant information is presented about perceived persons? We are not the first to raise this issue. In fact, past research has revealed several moderators. Some of these concern explicit processing goals and cognitive capacity. While particular goals are not necessary for STI, it can be augmented or reduced relative to when the goal is simply to memorize the person information. Uleman and Moskowitz (1994) showed that asking participants to detect isolated features in the behavioral sentences (e.g., phonemes) led to a marked reduction in STI formation. In addition, explicit questions about the veracity of information about actors at encoding can affect STI (Crawford et al., 2007). Furthermore, cognitive load affects the extent to which STIs form. Although earlier studies found that STIs do not require much cognitive capacity (Uleman et al., 1985), interference occurs with high levels of cognitive load (Uleman et al., 1992).

Other moderators concern individual and cultural differences. Individuals can differ in the extent to which they spontaneously draw trait information from others' behaviors. Personal need for structure (PNS; Neuberg & Newsom, 1993), a desire for certainty and an aversion to ambiguity, has been established as an individual difference variable that moderates STI. Moskowitz (1993) found that STIs are more likely among perceivers high (vs. low) on PNS. Furthermore, culture can affect the likelihood that perceivers form STIs. People from individualistic (e.g., European and American) and collectivistic (e.g., Asian and Latin-American) cultures differ in the extent to which they spontaneously attribute traits as causes for others' behaviors. For instance, Newman (1991) found no evidence of STIs among Puerto Rican participants. Likewise, Zarate, Uleman, and Voils (2001) used a sample of Anglo and Chicano students at the University of Texas at El Paso and showed that STIs were prevalent among Anglo but nonexistent for Chicano students. Apparently cultural differences in the importance placed on the individual (vs. the individual's relationship to his/her social environment) result in differences in how chronically one implicitly adopts a trait explanation for behaviors.

Thus, it is clear that STI effects can be moderated by explicit encoding goals or interference with the encoding process, and also by chronic individual and cultural differences that make STIs more or less likely. Therefore, our central question was, can more subtle features of the immediate social context affect STI? Considering the utility of trait inferences may help to identify meaningful contextual variables that also influence STIs. For one thing, traits represent knowledge about global behavioral tendencies. Believing that a person is *honest* involves the assumption that individual will behave in an honest manner across different situations and time. Moreover, traits have causal implications for behavior. Someone who is *honest* is expected to display a set of behaviors that are presumably elicited by virtue of the trait. Hence, trait-characterization of individuals holds more utility when forming impressions of others who are distant (e.g., in time or space) from the self. For psychologically distant actors, it is more beneficial (in terms of predictive utility) to extract the invariant features of the person's behavior that transcend the constraints of the specific situation. On the other hand, for psychologically close actors, traits have less

predictive weight and direct observables, such as the specific behaviors and current situations, are more important. Thus, spontaneous trait inferences may be more prevalent when perceivers form implicit impressions of distant, rather than proximal, others.

A construal level theory analysis of STIs can potentially explain the relationship between psychological distance and STI. CLT postulates a relationship between psychological distance and the level at which objects or persons are represented, which enables us to make systematic predictions regarding the role of distance in STI formation. In accordance with CLT's central tenets, we believe that behaviors of psychologically distant (vs. close) others will be represented at a high-level of construal and thus, be more conducive to STI formation.

The role of psychological distance in person perception

Construal level theory (CLT) assumes that psychologically distant events are represented by high-level construals, and psychologically near events are represented by low-level construals. High-level construals are more abstract, decontextualized, schematic, and structured than low-level construals, which are concrete, contextualized, and incidental. When an object or event is removed from the self in the here and now, it is described as being psychologically distant. The following dimensions of psychological distance have been examined in the literature: time, space, social distance, and hypotheticality (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006; Henderson, Fujita, Trope, & Liberman, 2006; Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2000; Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 2006). According to CLT, there is usually less available information about distant objects, and consequently they are represented more schematically in terms of abstract features that are invariant across different distances from the object. On the other hand, there is usually more available information about proximal objects, and consequently they are represented in more detailed and concrete ways. It is assumed that this tendency is overgeneralized so that even when information about distant and near objects is identical, the former is construed at a high-level while the latter is construed at a low-level.

Psychological distance affects social judgments. In one study, perceivers encountered a scenario from the classic Jones and Harris (1967) attitude attribution paradigm in which a writer either wrote a situationally-constrained or unconstrained essay in favor of or against an issue (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003, Study 1). Perceivers were then asked to make predictions about the writer's near or distant future behaviors related to the essay issue. When predicting the writer's near future behaviors, perceivers' judgments differed depending on whether the essay was constrained or unconstrained. However, when predicting the writer's distant future behaviors, perceivers' judgments did not depend on the constrained vs. unconstrained nature of the essay. Hence, the correspondence bias was more evident in the distant future condition than in the near future condition. The same effect was replicated in another study with spatial distance (Henderson et al., 2006).

According to CLT, an actor should be perceived as more cross-situationally consistent when perceived as psychologically distant. When the actor's behaviors are psychologically remote, the perceiver's construal is abstract, decontextualized, and not dependent on specific situational conditions. However, when the actor's behaviors are psychologically proximal, the perceiver's construal is more concrete and includes contextual and incidental details; therefore, the actor is seen as behaving less consistently across situations. This is what Nussbaum et al. (2003, Study 2) found. Participants were asked to imagine someone in their lives engaging in various activities either a couple days from today (near condition) vs. a few months from today (distant condition). Subsequently,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/948755>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/948755>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)