



Using Psychological Distance to Change Environmental Attitudes



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Abstract

Climate change is often perceived as a distant phenomenon, which may contribute to reduced levels of concern and mitigation intention. This study finds that framing climate as starting within one's lifetime does not reduce psychological distance compared to starting before one's lifetime. Additionally, the data collected here replicates past research by finding that lower perceived psychological distance of climate change is associated with greater concern for the environment and stronger mitigation intention.

Background

Psychological distance is the perception of how close or far away something feels on spatial, temporal, social, and hypothetical scales.

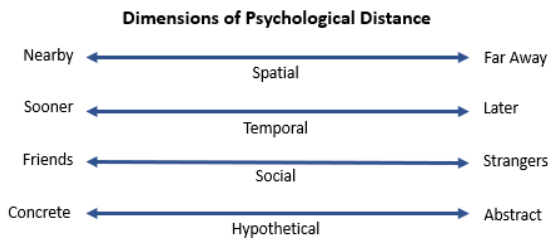


Fig. 1. Dimensions of psychological distance.

Spence et. al. found that perceptions of climate change as psychologically distant are associated with reduced environmental concern and intentions for mitigation¹.

Experimental manipulations of psychological distance have been effective at changing attitudes^{2,3}.

Methods

Research Question: Does framing climate change information as starting within one's lifetime increase concern and mitigation intention, relative to framing it as starting before one's lifetime?

Methods:

- Survey participants read information about climate change that was either framed as:
 - beginning in the years before they were born (high distance) or
 - beginning in the years after they were born (low distance).
- Participants rate their concern for the environment, intention to engage in mitigation behavior, and their perceived distance of climate change.

Results

Higher psychological distance of climate change was associated with reduced concern and mitigation intention.

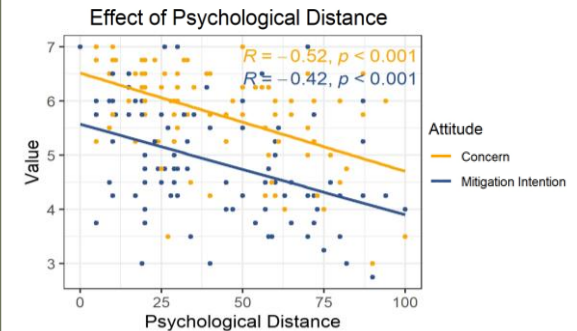


Fig. 3. Correlation between psychological distance and attitude value.

Results

The distance manipulation did not affect concern or mitigation intention (N=101).

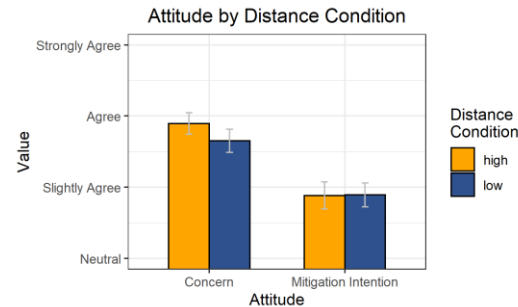


Fig. 2. Mean concern and mitigation intention by distance condition.

Discussion

The psychological distance manipulation did not affect participants' perceived distance of climate change.

Conclusions:

- Future research could investigate alternative ways of framing historic climate change with low psychological distance.
- These results highlight the importance of risk communication techniques designed to reduce the psychological distance of climate change.

Acknowledgements

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 2. Kim, K., & Ahn, S. J. (2019). The moderating role of cultural background in temporal framing: focusing on climate change awareness advertising. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 29(4), 363-385.
 3. Jones, C., Hine, D. W., & Marks, A. D. G. (2017). The Future is Now: Reducing Psychological Distance to Increase Public Engagement with Climate Change. *Risk Analysis*, 37(2), 331-341