Commentary on Jagiello, Heyes, & Whitehouse, "Tradition and Invention: The Bifocal Stance Theory of Cultural Evolution."

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Psychological Closeness and Concrete Construal May Underlie High-Fidelity Social Emulation

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Abstract:

We compare BST's approach to social learning to Construal Level Theory's—a social-cognitive theory positing that psychological closeness to a model influences action-representation and thus modulates how concretely or abstractly observers emulate models. Whereas BST argues that social motives produce higher-fidelity emulation; CLT argues that psychological closeness impacts cognitive construal and produces more concrete emulation across diverse motivations for emulation.

Jagiello et al., ask why and when do social learners engage in low- vs. high-fidelity copying? What are the factors that influence the nature and degree of copying fidelity during social learning, and what are the cognitive mechanisms by which they do so? In this commentary we connect and compare Bifocal Stance Theory's (BST) answers to such questions with those of Construal Level Theory (CLT; Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), a social-cognitive theory that views psychological closeness to a model as a major driver of action representation and thus a modulator of how concretely or abstractly observers emulate social models (Genschow, Hansen, Wänke, & Trope, 2019; Hansen, Alves, & Trope, 2016; Kalkstein, Kleiman, Wakslak, Liberman, & Trope, 2016; Kalkstein, Hubbard, & Trope, 2018).

BST proposes that social emulation fidelity is largely influenced by which of two modes of observation, or stances, people adopt during social learning: the ritual stance, which is more detail oriented and produces more concrete, or higher-fidelity emulation; or the instrumental stance, which is more outcome oriented and produces more abstract, or lower-fidelity emulation. Like BST, CLT also proposes that social emulation fidelity is influenced by how observers process the modeled behavior. CLT argues that any action or event can be processed and mentally represented at varying degrees of abstraction, or at different levels of construal (Gilead, Trope, & Liberman, 2020). Lower level construals (i.e., more concrete representations) focus more on how the action is performed and include specific details such as movements and gestures. Higher level construals (i.e., more abstract representations) focus more on why the action is performed and the end goals the action serves. Thus, lower level construals of the modeled behavior should lead to more concrete, higher-fidelity emulation, and higher level construals of the behavior should lead to more abstract, lower-fidelity emulation.

While BST and CLT both posit that attention to more concrete versus more abstract aspects of a model's behavior influences social learning and emulation, the two theories differ in the psychological factors they focus on as antecedents to these different processing modes. BST focuses on learners' motivations—social/affiliative motives vs. knowledge/skill acquisition motives. By contrast, CLT focuses on the degree of psychological closeness that observers feel to a model (Genschow et al., 2019; Hansen et al., 2016; Kalkstein et al., 2016). This work shows that increased psychological closeness to a model leads observers to construe the model's behavior at a lower level and engage in more concrete emulation, or literal imitation of the model. On the other hand, increased psychological distance away from a model leads observers to construe the model's behavior at a higher level and increases observers' tendency to emulate the model based on higher-level, or more goal-oriented representations of the model's behavior. This effect of psychological closeness on level of emulation has been demonstrated across the four dimensions of distance identified by CLT—social (e.g., ingroup vs. outgroup members), spatial (e.g., models located in the same city vs. a distant city), temporal (e.g., models from a video recorded recently vs. over 10 years ago), and hypothetical (e.g., real vs. fictional models).

To be sure, psychological closeness factors in as a psychological variable within both BST and CLT. However, within BST, closeness is presumed to increase social motivations to affiliate with the model, which in turn promotes the adoption of the ritual stance and more concrete emulation. CLT, on the other hand, draws on extensive research documenting a basic relationship between psychological distance and level of construal (see Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010) to posit that a more general cognitive construal process may

also be involved in the effect of psychological closeness on emulation. According to CLT, the tendency for increased psychological distance to promote more abstract processing of modeled behavior is a functional response to the cognitive challenge of learning across distance (Hubbard, Kalkstein, Liberman, & Trope, 2021; Kalkstein et al., 2018). As a model becomes more distant from oneself, the potential increases for the details surrounding their experience and behaviors to differ. Moving to a more abstract level of representation ensures that the lessons extracted from the model remain stable and applicable when transferred to the self. While borne out of functionality, CLT argues that this relationship between distance and level of abstraction has become overgeneralized in the mind such that it persists even when concrete details of a distant event are readily applicable to one's own circumstance. Colloquially, the central idea of CLT is that when immersed in processing close events, it is easy to get lost in the weeds and details of what one is observing; taking a step back and getting some distance away from the event can help observers see the bigger-picture.

A general prediction that follows from CLT, but diverges from BST, is that *psychological closeness will increase concrete emulation and distance will increase abstract emulation across diverse motivations—both social and nonsocial.* Thus, CLT predicts that even when inspired by social motivations, emulation may become more abstract as those that one is seeking to affiliate with become more psychologically distant. Past research applying CLT to social learning has focused primarily on skill or knowledge acquisition and has left this prediction largely untested. However, it may be an intriguing avenue for future research.

Another unique prediction by CLT is that as our world becomes increasingly interconnected, and as people increasingly interact with and learn from distant and diverse others, rates of cultural innovation should increase (Kalkstein et al., 2018). This prediction draws on the general hypothesis that increased distance between a model and an observer decreases copying fidelity during social learning and thereby increases innovation during cultural transmission. On the other hand, high-fidelity transmission of traditions and rituals should be expected to persist most when those traditions and rituals are passed through socially and psychologically close connections.

Overall, we applaud the efforts of Jagiello et al., to integrate diverse social sciences on the important questions of social learning and cultural transmission. Here, we aimed to introduce the social-cognitive perspective of CLT to the discussion as it has many points of convergence with BST as well as intriguing divergent predictions.

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