

David A. Kalkstein

Statement of Research Interests

My research explores three interrelated topics that are fundamental to the study of organizations: social norms, social learning, and social coordination. Throughout my work, I take an approach that is rooted in social psychological theory and uses methods ranging from tightly controlled behavioral experiments that explore basic processes to applied field interventions designed to affect real-world outcomes.

Ultimately, my goal is to understand the bidirectional relationship between organizations and individual psychology: how participating in social organizations structures individual thought and behavior, and the psychology that enables diverse individuals to come together to effectively live, learn, and work with one another in organizations.

Social Norms Promote Individual and Collective Goal Pursuit

Every organization, and indeed every social context, carries with it social norms. Classic research within the social sciences has documented the power for social norms to influence and predict individuals' behaviors (e.g., Azjen, 1991; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). My research builds on this tradition by demonstrating that social norms not only shape what people *do*, they also strongly determine what people *think*. By focusing on how social norms shape basic cognition, my research uncovers how organizations can leverage social norms to promote individual and collective goal pursuit.

I propose that social norms govern people's perceptions of what behaviors are afforded to them by a given situation, thereby powerfully shaping people's thoughts and experience in that situation. Across several studies, I show that not only do people typically not engage in counternormative behavior, they don't even *think* about doing so (Kalkstein et al., 2023, *JPSP*). For instance, in a study using a cognitive-change blindness paradigm, I showed that people don't even notice objects in their environment that would be counternormative to engage with. In another study, I found that people think of counternormative behaviors as so far outside of what is afforded by the situation that they are liable to misrepresent them as impossible. These studies demonstrate that the behaviors people consider and are motivated to pursue—in addition to those they actually enact—strongly depend on social norms (see also Kalkstein et al., 2022, *BPP*).

The finding that norms effectively define the range of behaviors people consider in a situation has major implications for personal goal pursuit. A common challenge people face in pursuing valued goals is the presence of distracting temptations (Kalkstein & Fujita, 2020). However, temptations that are not ever considered do not pose serious threats to one's global goals. Thus, to the extent that norms can preclude certain behaviors from consideration, they may be effective tools for supporting self-regulation. Supporting this proposal, in a third study, I found that even tempting behaviors that typically pose difficult self-control conflicts (e.g., eating extra dessert) often go unconsidered when they are counternormative in context (e.g., the dessert is on a stranger's plate).

Applied to organizations, my research suggests that social norms can be used to create social environments that enhance individual goal achievement and well-being. When organizations establish social norms that align with people's personal goals, they can promote individual flourishing by channeling behavior away from distracting temptations and towards valued goals. As a demonstration of this, in a semester long field-experiment, I found that instituting a no-tech norm in a college lecture (i.e., no cellphones or laptops) not only reduced the amount of time students spent multitasking during class, but it also reduced their temptation to multitask and, thus, their experience of psychological conflict during class. This reduction in experiences of temptation and conflict is critical: it suggests that not only can norms promote goal-consistent behavior, they also can reduce the effort and resources required to do so. This, in turn, freed attention and resources that students were then able to devote to their primary goal of learning. Importantly, students who experienced class with a no-tech norm came to overwhelmingly endorse it precisely because they experienced its facilitation of their learning goals. This

demonstrates the potential for social norms to be experienced as positive and beneficial influences on individual self-regulation.

In contrast to classic work in social psychology that warns of the dangers and irrationality of social influence (e.g., Asch, 1951; Milgram, 1963; Zimbardo, 1971), my work suggests that norms can provide useful structure to individual thought and behavior. In the best-case scenario, social norms simultaneously and synergistically promote individual and collective goal pursuit. However, whether norms ultimately benefit or harm individuals within a group, organization, or society depends on the nature of those norms. Social norms are constructed by people, groups, and organizations. As such, organizations—including leaders and members within it—have the power to reflect on personal and collective values and set norms that serve both. In my future work, I will continue researching how social organizations can set and leverage norms to create social environments that channel thought, motivation, and behavior towards individually and collectively adaptive behaviors.

Learning from Distant and Diverse Others Promotes Higher Level Thought

A distinguishing feature of modern work is the expansiveness of our social environments. For many people, interactions with distant, dissimilar, and diverse others are now a routine aspect of daily life and daily work. In a second stream of research, I explore whether people process information differently when learning from more distant others than when learning from more proximal others. Across multiple studies, I have shown that when people learn from more distant and dissimilar others—such as outgroup members—they process information at a higher, more abstract level than when they learn from closer others or through direct experience (Kalkstein et al., 2016, *JPSP*; Kalkstein et al., 2020, *JESP*). For instance, when people are learning from a distant model, they are more likely to attend to and emulate the models' overall goals; when people are learning from a proximal model, they are more likely to emulate the specific means through which the model is pursuing the goal (Kalkstein & Trope, 2022, *BBS*).

Applied to organizations, my work suggests that there is distinct value in fostering opportunities to interact with and learn from distant, dissimilar, and diverse others: not only do they have potential to expose people to new information, they also tend to orient people towards bigger-picture thinking (Kalkstein et al., 2018a). The implications of this shift towards more abstract thinking are far-reaching. Abstract processing is known to underlie many of humans' most important capabilities such as creativity, innovation, problem solving, and long-term goal pursuit (Hubbard, Kalkstein, et al., 2020). Thus, providing people opportunities to learn from more distant and diverse others may be a useful strategy for encouraging innovation and long-term thinking. However, when the task at hand involves attention to detail and specific mechanics, my work suggests that turning towards more proximal others would be more functional as they would help orient learners to these more concrete aspects of the work to be done. In future work, I plan to further explore the implications of shifts in cognitive processing that result from learning from close vs. distant others. For instance, what kinds of work are adaptable to remote work? What kinds of tasks benefit more from in-person work? Can organizations foster innovation by providing opportunities for learning and collaboration with distant and diverse others?

Abstraction Enables Social Learning and Coordination with Diverse Others

Although modern organizations offer ample opportunity to learn from diverse others, people may not always do so when they do not recognize people who are distant or different from themselves as relevant sources of information. Illustrating a bidirectional relationship between social learning and abstraction, I have shown that abstract thinking helps people overcome this myopia and expand their social horizons. For instance, in several studies, I found that when people are primed to think about learning at a more abstract level versus a concrete level (e.g., about *why* to eat healthy vs. *how* to eat healthy), they express greater interest in learning from distant others (Kalkstein et al., 2016, *JPSP*). In general, encouraging

people to adopt a higher-level mindset—e.g., focusing on global goals—may help people take advantage of opportunities to learn from a broader array of others.

However, while thinking abstractly does help orient people to more distant and diverse others, it does not, by itself, ensure effective communication or coordination across diverse individuals. Social coordination is a two-way street that additionally requires the people involved to hold a *shared* abstract understanding of the information or event at hand. The necessity of holding a shared abstract representation can pose a challenge for interacting with diverse others: differences in personal experience can lead people to approach the same situation with divergent beliefs, assumptions, or worries (e.g., Sanchez, Kalkstein, & Walton, 2021, *JPSPP*). Similarly, differences in perspective, roles, and backgrounds can still lead people to extract different higher-level meanings from the same information or event. When people don't share a common representation of the activities they are engaged in, their ability to successfully work together suffers.

Delivering Critical Feedback. One type of interaction that is integral to professional and educational organizations, but is particularly prone to interpersonal misalignment, is interactions involving critical feedback. In feedback exchanges, the giver of critical feedback (e.g., a supervisor) often genuinely intends for that feedback to serve the higher-level purpose of helping the recipient (e.g., a direct report or a more junior member of their team) learn and improve. However, the recipient may instead wonder whether the feedback simply reflects negative judgment. Such a negative interpretation may lead them to respond to the feedback defensively or by disengaging. This potential for misalignment can become exacerbated when feedback is delivered across group lines (e.g., from a White supervisor to a Black employee). In these cases, the prevalence of negative stereotypes in society may lead the recipient to reasonably wonder whether the feedback reflects biases that the supervisor holds about people from certain racial/ethnic groups (Cohen et al., 1999). When these kinds of interpretations are allowed to persist, they can erode trust and perpetuate social inequalities by causing people from negatively stereotyped groups to miss out on the opportunity to use feedback to learn and improve.

My research proposes that such interpersonal misalignment can be avoided by explicitly establishing shared higher-level understandings that bridge the variable perspectives of diverse individuals. In an ongoing project (Kalkstein & Walton, *in progress*), I have begun testing this proposal in educational contexts through partnerships with multiple national education nonprofits (The College Board, Equal Opportunity Schools, and Leading Educators). Using a multi-year iterative design process, I have developed an intervention that explains to teachers the importance of explicitly understanding a shared higher-level understanding with students of ***why*** they give critical feedback—to help the student learn and grow—and ***what it means*** to receive critical feedback—that the teacher believes in the student and their ability to succeed. By working with students to establish this shared higher-level understanding of feedback, teachers can proactively ward off detrimental interpretations of the feedback that cause disengagement. In doing so, this intervention aims to align the perspectives of students and teachers, thereby improving their ability to overcome role-based and group-based differences and work together towards the joint goal of students' development and education. While this work is ongoing, I have obtained promising pilot evidence that this intervention positively impacts students' receptiveness to feedback, teachers' confidence in their ability to deliver effective feedback, and student-teacher trust and relationships. As I continue to build and test this intervention, I aim to develop a scalable tool to help people learn how to deliver critical feedback that motivates and engages its recipients and do so in ways that work to ameliorate existing social inequalities in educational and professional settings.

Applied to organizations more generally, my work suggests one place to look to solve persistent problems of social cohesion, interpersonal conflict, or negotiation: Anytime an issue can be diagnosed as a problem of social coordination, or of misaligned perspectives, a place to start is examining the higher-level representations of the issue held by each of the people involved. Situating individual perspectives

within shared higher-level understandings or goals can facilitate effective coordination and communication across diverse people. In future work, I aim to use these insights to continue developing interventions that help organizations build trust and cohesion amongst its members by establishing shared higher-level representations that bridge personal and group divides. In a future line of research, I will integrate these ideas with my previously described work on social norms. Social norms are examples of shared abstractions that serve exactly the coordinating function described here—they align the behaviors of diverse individuals. Going forward, I will continue research to understand how groups, organizations, and societies can create norms, policies, and narratives that coordinate the efforts of diverse members towards valued collective goals.

Future Directions

Looking further ahead, I am excited to extend my research into the domain of collective thought and group-regulation. During my PhD training, I conducted basic cognitive research on how people process and respond to variability in their environment. Across multiple projects, I demonstrated that the act of comparing variable objects or events to each other promotes higher-levels of abstract thought (e.g., Kalkstein et al., 2018b, *JEP:G*; Kalkstein et al., 2020, *JEP:LMC*). This basic finding that integrating across diversity promotes abstraction has intriguing implications when extended to organizations. If integration across diverse contexts promotes abstraction, then organizations that are comprised of individuals with diverse experiences and perspectives should be capable of producing more abstract knowledge than isolated individuals. Higher levels of abstract thought have been linked to improved self-control and regulation towards more distal outcomes (see Kalkstein, Fujita, & Trope, 2018). Thus, the hypothesis that collective thought leads to greater abstraction implies that group-regulation may be more expansive and oriented towards more distal outcomes than individual self-regulation.

I plan to build a program of research that investigates a) whether collective thought tends to be more abstract than isolated individual cognition, b) whether groups regulate their behavior towards more distant and global goals than individuals, and c) whether this is particularly true of more diverse (vs. less diverse) groups. With this work, I aim to build on past literature exploring the benefits of social diversity (e.g., Phillips, 2014) by highlighting abstraction as a particular cognitive outcome with far reaching implications for thought and behavior in domains such as problem solving, creativity, self-regulation, and group-regulation. In addition, I am eager to pursue a line of research that investigates parallels between individual functioning/self-regulation and group functioning/group-regulation. I am intrigued by the possibility that individual mechanisms of self-regulation are reflected at the group-level and vice-versa and plan to launch a line of research that searches for such analogs between individual and group functioning. To the extent that such analogs exist, they may generate novel strategies to improve self-regulation as well as group functioning.

Overall, I will continue to leverage psychological theory to generate insights into real-world issues surrounding social coordination and social diversity. By pursuing both basic experimental work and seeking out collaborations with institutional partners, my goal is to use my research to promote diversity and harness its benefits for groups, organizations, and society at large.