

# Bringing climate change to the people: Does decreasing distance really enhance individuals' motivation to respond to climate change?

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## Introduction

The readiness to mitigate climate change and to adapt to its consequences is still rather limited. Research shows that climate change is usually perceived as something affecting primarily strangers and taking place in distant places and times (e.g., Leiserowitz, 2005). Reducing the perceived distance has repeatedly been proposed as a strategy to increase individuals' (affective) engagement and their motivation to respond to climate change. According to construal level theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2010), however, distance should not influence the level of engagement per se but rather how the object of interest is construed mentally: Proximal objects are construed concretely whereas distant objects are represented in more abstract terms.

In a previous correlational study, we found that localised risk perceptions had different consequences to global risk perceptions. Following on from this, the aim of the present study was to further explore the relationship between distance and both people's perception of climate change and their motivation to support mitigation and adaptation strategies. In particular, we were interested in how risk perceptions and response strategies are mentally construed when individuals have a local vs. global mindset. We assumed that the experience of fear represents a lower level construal relative to more abstract beliefs about climate change, for example skepticism. Drawing on CLT, we therefore predicted that participants with a local perspective would rely more on fear to represent risks and make decisions about supporting climate change responses whereas they would rely more on skepticism when they had a global focus.

## Methods

In exchange for course credit, students ( $N = 80$ ) received either local or global information about climate change. Levels of sup-

port in the two conditions were compared using *t*-tests. Multiple regression analyses were used to check for interactions between condition and fear (low-level construal) as well as between condition and skepticism (high-level construal).

## Results

As expected, the results showed that focusing on local climate change did not increase participants' support for response strategies. In line with CLT, it was also found that participants with a local perspective relied more on low-level construal fear when they made risk judgements whereas those with a global focus were more influenced by high-level construal skepticism. The same pattern was found for some of the response measures.

## Conclusions

Consistent with CLT, our results suggest that psychological distance does not translate into different levels of engagement per se but influences on what perceptions and decisions are based on (low- vs. high-level construal information). These findings challenge the idea that simply localizing climate change increases individuals' motivation to act. Rather, localising climate change changes what people act on. These findings suggest that future research should adopt a more differentiated perspective on the effects of psychological distance in the context of climate change.

## References

- Leiserowitz, A. (2005). American risk perception: Is climate change dangerous? *Risk Analysis*, *25*, 1433-1442.
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review*, *117*, 440-463.