The antecedents and consequences of a beyond-choice view of decision situations: A construal level theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

Evaluating alternatives and comparing them to each other are integral to decision-making. In addition, however, decision makers may adopt a view that goes beyond choice and make inferences about the entire set of alternatives, about the dimensions that are relevant in similar decisions, and about the range of values on a specific dimension. We examined some antecedents and consequences of adopting a beyond-choice view of decision situations. Based on Construal Level Theory we suggest that a beyond-choice view entails high (vs. low) level of construal of the decision situation and hence is more likely to occur for decisions that are more psychologically distant. We further suggest that a consequence of a beyond-choice view might be a later difficulty to remember which attribute belongs to which alternative. To examine these predictions we conducted an experiment in which participants evaluated decision scenarios that were described as being relevant for the distant (vs. the near) future. One day later they answered a decision-related source recognition test in which they were asked to remember which attribute belongs to which alternative. As predicted, people had more source-memory errors in the distant than in the near future condition. These results suggest that a beyond-choice view of decision situations is an important consequence of psychological distance (vs. proximity).

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1. Introduction

When decision makers face a set of alternatives, such as a menu in a restaurant or a list of available apartments in a real-estate agency, they obviously evaluate the dishes on the menu or the apartments in order to choose. In addition to evaluating individual alternatives, however, they may engage in a different process, one that goes beyond choice. They may look at the decision situation as an exemplar in a category of similar decisions, and make inferences about this more general category. For example, decision makers may seek to learn about the entire set (e.g., what is this restaurant like), dimensions that one should consider (e.g., when choosing an apartment, what are the relevant dimensions?) or the range of values on a specific dimension (e.g., in a trendy chef restaurant, what is the price range of desserts?) What makes decision makers adopt a beyond-choice view on the decision situation, and what are the consequences of doing so? We approach these questions from the perspective of Construal Level Theory (CLT, Trope & Liberman, 2010) via a paradigm that examines memory errors about which attribute belongs to which alternative in a set.

1.1. Level of construal and choice versus beyond-choice view of decision situations

Evaluating the alternatives in a set is an integral part of deciding. For example, when facing a decision between different apartments in a real-estate agency, the decision maker naturally evaluates the available apartments by size, location and price to form an impression on each apartment. However, a decision situation also affords extracting more general information, in which the focal decision situation is regarded as an exemplar of a category of similar decision situations, bearing information on that general category. We term this perspective *a beyond-choice view of the decision situation*. For example, the decision maker might learn about dimensions that are relevant to consider when choosing an apartment, the price-range of apartments, and/or form an impression about the real-estate agency that offers the apartments s/he considers. The beyond-choice view seeks to characterize the decision situation *in principle*: In principle, what is the price range of apartments? In principle, what kind of apartments is offered in this agency? In principle, what are the relevant dimensions in choosing an apartment? The choice view, in contrast, seeks to evaluate the specific alternatives that comprise the choice set *in practice*, at the specific point in time at which the decision is made: In practice, among the particular apartments in the choice set, which one is the best?

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The beyond-choice view of a decision situation seeks to extract information that is more invariant than the specific alternatives that happen to be in the set. For example, whereas the specific apartments that comprise a choice set might change, the real-estate agency is more likely to remain, as are the dimensions on which apartments are evaluated. A specific apartment will probably not be there the next time you have to make a choice, but the dimensions of location, size and neighborhood quality would still be relevant.

We would like to suggest that in terms of CLT (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010), a beyond-choice view should be regarded as a higher-level of construal of a decision situation than a choice view. Lower-level construals are, according to CLT, concrete, contextualized representations that include incidental features of events. Specific alternatives are, indeed, incidental, and contextual – they are there only for the focal choice situation, but will not necessarily be there the next time one makes a similar decision. Higher-level construals are abstract, schematic, representations that emphasize relatively invariant features. A beyond-choice view emphasizes general and invariant aspects of the decision, such as the entity that generated the entire set (the real estate agency, the restaurant), and the dimensions of choice (location, price).

Many distinctions between high-level and low-level construals in the domain of decision making align with the "in principle vs. in practice" distinction we proposed here for beyond choice vs. choice views of decision situations. Consider for example, the distinction between high-level, desirability considerations (e.g., why I want to hear the lecture) and low-level, feasibility considerations (e.g., how I am going to get to the lecture; Liberman & Trope, 1998). The former is what matters in principle, whereas the latter matters in practice. Consider as another example the distinction between values and moral principles (high-level aspect) and extenuating circumstances (low-level aspect, Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008; Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009). Again, people tend to think that values and morality matter in principle, but in practice extenuating circumstances might prevail.

Initial empirical support for the notion that looking at choice alternatives comprises a lower-level of construal than looking at the dimensions comes from a recent study by Marzocchi, Pizzi, and Scarpi (2015; see also Pizzi, Scarpi, & Marzocchi, 2014). In this study, participants were asked to decide between four lotteries that varied on four dimensions (likelihood of winning, amount to be won, ease of playing and fun of playing). They were presented with a 4×4 grid in which each row represented one of the lotteries (alternatives) and each column represented one of the dimensions (or vice versa). The content of the grid was initially blanked. Participants could browse the grid by clicking on a column label to reveal the content of that column or by clicking on a row label to reveal the content of that row. Prior to the decision task, participants went through a high-level or a low-level priming procedure. In line with our theorizing and the authors' prediction, participants that underwent a high-level priming tended to start the information search by clicking on a dimension and were oriented toward clicking on dimensions throughout the task, whereas participants that underwent a low-level priming tended to start the search by clicking on an alternative and were more oriented toward clicking on alternatives throughout the task.

1.2. Temporal distance and beyond-choice view of decision situations

An important finding of studies within the CLT framework is that psychological distance is related to a high-level of construal whereas psychological proximity is related to a low-level of construal (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010). As people get farther away from an object—in time, space, probability or social space—they tend to represent it using increasingly higher-levels of construal. For example, decisions regarding distant future activities are more influenced by the desirability of the end state (a high-level aspect) and less influenced by the feasibility of attaining the end state (a low-

level aspect), compared with decisions regarding near future activities (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Similarly, people construe more distant situations in terms of moral principles, rather than in terms of attenuating situation-specific considerations (Eyal et al., 2008; Eyal et al., 2009).

Consistent with these findings and with CLT theorizing, we predict that psychological distance from a decision situation would enhance a beyond-choice view of the decision situation. We specifically focus here on the effect of temporal distance and predict that a beyond-choice view would be more likely for a decision that is more temporally distal.

1.3. The consequences of a beyond-choice view of decision situations for memory

What are the consequences of using a beyond-choice view (vs. a choice view) of decision situations? One important consequence has to do with long-term memory for the alternatives and their attributes. A choice view represents the distinction between the alternatives in a decision set. A beyond-choice view, in contrast, puts less emphasis on representing distinctions between individual alternatives, and focuses instead on the entire set and on attributes. A consequence of adopting a beyond-choice view (rather than a choice view) might be a later difficulty to remember which attribute belongs to which alternative. For example, when looking for an apartment to rent in a few days one is likely to contrast the available apartments and compare them on size, location and price. As a consequence, he or she should be able to later remember relatively well which apartment was large and which one was the most expensive. In contrast, when looking for an apartment to rent in a few months a decision maker is likely to also pay attention to the range of sizes, locations and prices of the apartments that are offered, attempt to learn the relevant dimensions, and form an impression about the real-estate agency that offers the apartments (e.g., does the agency seem to have enough relevant alternatives?) As a consequence, he or she should later find it more difficult to remember which apartment had a specific attribute (e.g., which apartment was 7 miles away from campus). Thus, a difficulty to remember which attribute belongs to which alternative should be indicative of using a beyond-choice view rather than a choice view.

Of relevance to the current prediction is the large-body of research on the relationship between the course of time and memory accuracy. Research on memory has repeatedly demonstrated that people remember more recent past events in a more concrete, detailed manner (as opposed to a more abstract manner, e.g., Conway, 2009) and that the accuracy and grain size of memory decreases as events recede back into the past (Bartlett, 1932). For example, fuzzy trace theory (Reyna & Brainerd, 1995) distinguished between gist traces, which are high-level representations, and verbatim traces, which are low-level representations (Fukukura, Ferguson, & Fujita, 2013). The theory suggests that initially, an event can be represented by both its gist and its verbatim. However, with the course of time, verbatim representations become inaccessible more rapidly than gist representations, giving rise to gist-consistent memory errors. The current assertion extends this idea by suggesting that mental, prospective time travel should have similar consequences for memory accuracy as the actual course of time. Mental temporal distance (vs. proximity) should yield representations that are more gist-based (vs. verbatim-based), giving rise to more memory errors, just like actual temporal distance does.

1.4. The current research

In the current research we examined memory errors for attributes of alternatives in near and distant future decision sets. We predicted that after considering a decision for the distant (vs. near) future people would make more memory errors when trying to remember which attribute characterized which alternative, but not more errors overall.

To examine this prediction we used a decision-related source recognition paradigm (Mather, Shafir, & Johnson, 2000). Participants