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Moral Orientations and Psychological Distance Across Construal Levels

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Abstract. Individuals with different moral value orientations may perceive targets at different construal levels with distinct psychological distances. Drawing on the Construal Level Theory, this study explored whether moral philosophical orientations (idealism vs. relativism) are associated with high school students' perceived psychological distance toward objects at different construal levels, in four dimensions: temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical distance. In an online survey, participants reported their perceived distance of high-level (fine art) and low-level (landscape photographs) construal targets in the relevant scales and tasks evaluating. Results revealed that both idealism and relativism were positively associated with higher perceived psychological distance for both high-level and low-level targets. Notably, while relativism positively correlated with perceived spatial distance for high-level targets, it exhibited a negative association with social distance, suggesting that relativists perceive abstract art as spatially more distant yet socially closer. By combing moral philosophy, construal level, and psychological distance (an outcome variable) into the same framework, this research contributes to understanding individuals' preference differences. Practically, it provides evidence for understanding individual differences in art reception and informs beauty education practices for high school students.

Keywords: moral philosophical orientation, idealism, relativism, Construal Level Theory, psychological distance

1. Introduction

Individuals with different value orientations normally have different preferences for objects. For instance, when discussing abstract concepts such as pure art, some people can feel strong emotional resonance and regard it as spiritual sustenance; others may think that it lacks figurative beauty and prefer to appreciate concrete works. Such preference and reasoning processes, to some extent, root in their philosophical values. In other words, individuals with different moral and philosophical value orientations may have different degrees of closeness and psychological distance for entities at different levels of construction (such as highly abstract concepts vs. concrete and realistic everyday objects). However, to the present author's knowledge, existing literature has yet to address whether individual differences in the perception of psychological distance at varying construal levels are related to individuals' internal moral and philosophical orientations.

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Therefore, this research focuses on the relationship between the moral philosophy orientation of students from different educational levels and the distance perception of goals at different construction levels (i.e., abstract vs. specific).

Construal Level Theory [1] suggests that individuals understand objects through four different dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., time, space, social, and hypothetical), and they tend to adopt an abstract mindset when thinking about distant events [2, 3]. Herein, this study examines whether individuals with different value orientations differ in their perception of distance toward different targets, especially abstract objects. According to CLT, people generally have less psychological distance with those low-construal-level objects, as those objects are concrete and specific, resulting in them feeling closer. In contrast, high-construal-level objects are perceived as psychologically more distant due to their abstract nature [1]. For individuals who usually engage in abstract thinking, such as those with high idealistic value, their cognitive style may reduce the association, making them feel closer to high-construal targets. For example, Zaikauskaite et al. [4] found that high idealism was correlated with all investigated dependent variables, whereas relativism was only correlated with moral identity and social judgment, not with environmental judgment and behavior (i.e., high-construal object). This finding provides direct evidence that value orientation influences moral judgment across different construal-level targets.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the associations between moral philosophy orientations (idealism and relativism) and perceived psychological distance of different construal levels of objects (high vs low) among students. By doing so, this study will bring some contributions. At the theoretical level, it examined the association between moral philosophy (stable trait) and psychological distance (outcome variable) with different-level objects. At the practical level, it provides new perspectives for understanding the hindrance in art acceptance, moral education, and cross-group communication and provides empirical evidence for beauty education of high school students. The present study contributes to the field by examining the potential associations among moral orientation, default construal level, and psychological distance perception, thereby integrating stable value orientations with dynamic cognitive processing mechanisms. Existing research has not systematically answered whether moral philosophy orientation, as a stable trait, shapes individuals' default construal level tendencies and thereby affects their psychological distance perception of objects at different construal levels.

2. Literature review

2.1. Moral philosophy orientation and perceived psychological distance

Moral philosophy orientation is the basic stance individuals hold in moral judgment. Forsyth [5] divided it into two dimensions: idealism and relativism. Idealists believe that right actions always produce good outcomes. They believe the universal moral principles, tend to avoid harming others, and have thought with a strong orientation toward "what ought to be" and abstract principles. In contrast, relativists doubt the existence of absolute moral rules and believe that moral judgments should be based on specific situations and cultural contexts. In other words, individuals with a relativist orientation pay more attention to specific contextual details, conditions, and actual consequences, which indicates that their cognitive processing may rely more on concrete, low-level information. For example, when mapping the moral domain, Graham et al. [6] pointed out that different moral foundations correspond to different points of social cognition, and idealists tend to project moral concern to broader circles. A meta-analysis [7] of individual differences in ethics positions also show that idealism and relativism show consistent different patterns in predicting

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behavioral outcomes, and this differentiation may also be reflected in the perception of psychological distance of objects with different construal levels. Therefore, the present study aims to examine whether different moral philosophy orientations are associated with different perceived psychological distances toward the same objects.

In addition, Construal Level Theory [1] points out that psychological distance (temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical) impacts the way people construct things: the farther the distance, the more people tend to use abstract, core, and decontextualized high-level construal; the closer the distance, the more they rely on concrete, surface, and contextualized low-level construal.

Gong and Medin [8] introduced construal level into the moral domain and found that construal level itself can influence the type of moral judgment. High-level construal associated with principle-based reasoning. Low-level construal leads to outcome-based reasoning. Körner and Volk [9] added that abstract thinking supports rule-following judgments, while concrete thinking focuses on situational results. In all, these studies suggest construal level links with idealism's abstract principles to relativism's concrete situational focus.

Trope and Liberman [1] proposed that psychological distance includes four dimensions: temporal distance (perception of future/past events), spatial distance (perception of geographic proximity), social distance (perception of similarity between self and others), and hypothetical distance (perception of the likelihood of events occurring). Stephan et al. [10] found that people with a future-oriented mindset think in more abstract terms. This helps them think of cross-temporal distances more easily. Subsequent studies have extended this proposal. For instance, O'Boyle and colleagues' meta-analysis [7] confirmed that idealism and relativism show consistent patterns of differentiation in predicting behavioral outcomes. Idealists tend to use universal principles regardless of context. Relativists adjust their judgments based on the specific situation. This difference may also influence how the two groups perceive psychological distance.

2.2. Perceived psychological distance of objects with different construal levels

This study also examined whether these patterns differed across construal levels. Idealists tend to focus on universal meanings rather than concrete details. This makes it easier for them to connect abstract concepts like "fine art" with distant places and broader social groups. In contrast, relativists do not show this tendency. CLT suggests that high-level construal links to objects across wider ranges of time, space, and social contexts [1]. That is, individuals who prefer to think in an abstract way are better at mentally bridging distances.

There is some supporting evidence. For example, Gong and Medin [8] found that high-level construal increases principle-based moral reasoning, the same style that characterizes idealist thinking. Körner and Volk [9] showed that abstract thinkers rely on rules, while concrete thinkers focus on specific outcomes. Stephan et al. [10] found that how people mentally represent the future influences their present decisions. People who think abstractly find it easier to cross temporal distances.

When the perceived object becomes concrete, the rich details and clear contextual cues of the object produce a "context leveling effect." This low-level construal stimulus forces a unified cognitive critical point, thereby hiding the construal differences brought by underlying value orientations. For example, Kalkstein et al. [11] pointed out that when contextual cues are concrete, individuals' perception of social distance is more influenced by the immediate environment than by stable individual traits. Review from Märtens and Traut-Mattausch [12] showing that specific situational cues can temporarily override stable cognitive tendencies. Hung and Lo [13] found the same patterns: when behaviors are described concretely, all perceivers shift to low-level processing,

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regardless of their individual traits. These findings support the "context-leveling effect." Therefore, the present study examines how moral philosophy orientation relates to psychological distance perception of low-level construal concepts.

Building on the literature above, this study proposes the hypotheses: Hypothesis 1: Higher idealism scores are associated with closer perceived psychological distance toward high-level targets and greater perceived distance toward low-level targets. Hypothesis 2: Higher relativism scores are associated with greater perceived psychological distance toward high-level targets and closer perceived distance toward low-level targets.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

This study collected data through an online questionnaire survey. A total of 131 valid responses were collected. Among them, there were 52 male participants (39.7%) and 79 female participants (60.3%). The distribution of education levels was primary school 2 (1.5%), middle school 15 (11.5%), high school 53 (40.5%), university 56 (42.7%), graduate school 5 (3.8%). The mean self-rated subjective socioeconomic status was 6.46 (SD = 1.89), on a scale ranging from 1 to 10.

3.2. Measures

Moral Philosophy Orientation. Moral philosophy orientation was measured based on the Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) developed by Forsyth [5]. Participants answered questions such as "One should ensure that one's actions never intentionally harm others, even if the harm is small" and "Moral standards do not change with different situations and societies" on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Moral philosophy orientation was divided into two dimensions: idealism and relativism. In this study, Cronbach's α coefficient for the idealism dimension was 0.816 and for the relativism dimension was 0.728.

High-Level Construal Concept Perception. High-level construal concept perception was measured by an abstract concept perception task. Participants answered questions such as "The value of fine art works requires a long time to be understood by the world" and "Fine art works express thoughts about the future world" on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). High-level construal concept perception included four dimensions: temporal abstraction, social distance, hypothetical abstraction, and spatial distance. In this study, the reliability coefficients for each dimension were: temporal abstraction (α = 0.775), social distance (α = −0.360), hypothetical abstraction (α = 0.765), and spatial distance (α = 0.837).

Low-Level Construal Concept Perception. Low-level construal concept perception was measured by a concrete concept perception task. Participants answered questions such as "Beautiful landscape photos can be seen everywhere in daily life" and "I am a completely different person from those who take photos every day" on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Low-level construal concept perception was divided into four dimensions: temporal concreteness, social distance, hypothetical concreteness, and spatial concreteness. In this study, the reliability coefficients for each dimension were: temporal concreteness (α = 0.815), social distance (α = 0.611), hypothetical concreteness (α = 0.891), and spatial concreteness (α = 0.797).

Demographic Variables. This study collected participants' gender (0 = female, 1 = male), education level (1 = primary school to 5 = graduate school), and subjective socioeconomic status (1 = lowest to 10 = highest).

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3.3. Data analysis

This study used R software for data analysis. First, descriptive statistics and reliability analysis were conducted for the main variables. Second, Pearson correlation coefficients among the variables were calculated. Finally, correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships between moral philosophy orientation and dimensions of construal level.

4. Results

As shown in Table 1, idealism was significantly positively correlated with temporal abstraction ($r = .43$, $p < .001$) and hypothetical abstraction ($r = .38$, $p < .001$) of high-level construal but showed no significant correlation with high-level social distance ($r = -.03$, $p > .05$). Relativism was significantly positively correlated with temporal abstraction ($r = .51$, $p < .001$), hypothetical abstraction ($r = .44$, $p < .001$), and spatial distance ($r = .45$, $p < .001$) of high-level construal. Notably, relativism showed a significant negative correlation with high-level social distance ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$), indicating that individuals with a relativist orientation perceived closer social distance to fine art works as high-level construal subjects.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	0.40	0.49	—											
2. Education	3.48	0.91	.10	—										
3. SES	6.46	1.89	.19*	.26**	—									
4. Idealism	3.30	0.90	–.06	.10	.09	—								
5. Realism	3.43	0.77	.11	–.16	.09	.43***	—							
6. Htime	4.62	1.12	.08	–.10	.10	.43***	.51***	—						
7. Hsocial	4.05	1.05	–.01	–.08	–.05	–.03	–.20*	–.01	—					
8. Hhyper	4.75	1.24	–.07	–.03	.11	.38***	.44***	.51***	–.18*	—				
9. Hspace	4.67	1.34	.14	–.13	–.02	.12	.45***	.60***	.05	.48***	—			
10. Ltime	4.64	1.19	–.03	–.11	.13	.39***	.39***	.48***	–.07	.52***	.39***	—		
11. Lsocial	4.45	1.14	.08	–.17	.22*	.44***	.40***	.49***	.03	.33***	.45***	.45***	—	
12. Lhyper	5.22	1.28	–.12	–.06	.04	.28**	.24**	.34***	.06	.50***	.30***	.66***	.36***	—
13. Lspace	4.87	1.34	–.02	–.05	.14	.34***	.25**	.31***	–.09	.50***	.15	.64***	.30***	.73***

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. H = high construal level, L = low construal level.

According to low-level construal targets, both idealism and relativism showed significant positive correlations with all dimensions of low-level construal (temporal, social, hypothetical, spatial) ($ps < .01$). This pattern suggests that both moral philosophy orientations show similar perception patterns when facing concrete concepts (landscape photos), consistent with the "context leveling effect" hypothesis, though a formal test of group differences was not conducted.

This study aimed to explore the relationship between moral philosophy orientation (idealism vs. relativism) and psychological distance perception of concepts at different construal levels.

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5. Discussion

Overall, the results partly supported the research hypotheses. But because the main hypotheses were not confirmed, the findings below should be seen as exploratory, not conclusive.

First, for high-level construal concepts, both idealism and relativism were significantly positively correlated with high-level objects (fine art). This indicates that individuals with higher scores in either orientation can, to some extent, adopt an abstract perspective when engaging with fine artwork. However, a divergence emerged on the social distance dimension: relativism correlated negatively with social distance toward fine art ($r = -.20$, $p < .05$), while idealism did not ($r = -.03$, $p > .05$).

This divergence has theoretical implications: individuals with a higher relativist orientation pay more attention to specific situations and concrete consequences [5]. One might guess they would feel distant from abstract art across all dimensions. But social distance went the other way. Perhaps this is because "artists" feel like real people to relativists, not just abstract figures. Still, this is just a guess. The finding is unexpected and needs more testing before we can say anything firm.

Second, for concrete targets (landscape photos), both idealism and relativism were positively linked to all four distance dimensions. This fits the "context leveling effect" idea: concrete things may reduce the impact of personal traits by giving everyone a shared set of sensory cues to work with. Earlier studies found similar things. Kalkstein et al. [11] showed that concrete details push people toward similar judgments, no matter their personality. Märtens and Traut-Mattausch [12] also found that concrete cues can override people's usual thinking patterns.

In our data, this pattern showed up across all low-level dimensions. The rich visual details in landscape photos may have given everyone a common reference point, making idealists and relativists respond in similar ways. But this is still a guess. Our design does not prove that concreteness caused convergence. Other factors—like interest in photography or art training—might also explain why the two groups responded alike. Future studies need to test this more directly.

5.1. High spatial distance

This study also finds an unexpected finding regarding spatial distance. As shown in the results, relativism was significantly positively correlated with perceived spatial distance for high-level construal targets ($r = .45$, $p < .001$), whereas idealism showed no significant correlation with the same dimension ($r = .12$, $p > .05$). This pattern brings a question: why did relativists perceive abstract objects as spatially more distant, while idealists did not?

One possible reason is the thinking style. Relativists focus on concrete details and specific situations [5]. They rely on clear, explicit cues to understand things. Fine art, being abstract, does not provide these cues. Without clear clue to understand fine art, relativists may feel disconnected from it. That disconnection manifested as spatial distance. That is, art feels like it belongs somewhere else, not in their daily lives. The results support this logic: higher relativism scores went with greater spatial distance ($r = .45$).

In contrast, idealists think of abstract terms as normal. For them, "fine art" is a common concept. It is associated with how they already think about values and meaning. Therefore, spatial distance becomes less relevant. As the non-significant correlation ($r = .12$) showed: idealists do not perceive abstract art as spatially far.

This interpretation is consistent with prior research. Related research [14] has shown that individuals with a chronic tendency toward abstract thinking (e.g., those high in need for cognition or openness to experience) show less sensitivity to psychological distance manipulations [15].

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Idealists, who normally reason in abstract, principle-based ways, may exhibit reduced sensitivity to spatial distance as a dimension of psychological distance when evaluating abstract targets.

Furthermore, this specific finding fits the idea that psychological distance is not a unique construct but a set of related separable dimensions [1]. The results reveal that different moral orientations influence different distance dimensions in different ways. Specifically, while relativism predicts greater distance across temporal, hypothetical, and spatial dimensions, idealism shows different patterns. This suggests that the link between moral traits and psychological distance depends on the dimensions of distance [16].

The comparison between the two correlations (r = .45 for relativism vs. r = .12 for idealism) is interesting. The estimation difference suggests that relativism is a meaningful predictor of spatial distance perception for abstract targets, whereas idealism is not. This may be caused by what each orientation cares about. Relativists focus on concrete things. When they meet something abstract, they are not familiar, so they push it away spatially. Idealists are comfortable with the abstract. For them, the same target does not trigger spatial distance at all. This suggests that spatial distance is not just about how abstract a target is. It is about the match, or mismatch, between the target and how people usually think.

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, idealists did not perceive abstract targets as closer. The results reveal that idealism was positively correlated with temporal and hypothetical distance for high-level targets. Idealists felt fine art was temporally distant, unlikely to relate to everyday reality.

One possible reason is that idealists realized the gap between ideals and real life. Fine art represents beauty and abstract meaning, things idealists think far away from daily experience. This awareness may actually increase distance.

For low-level targets, idealism was positively correlated with distance across all dimensions. Idealists perceived concrete objects as farther, because an abstract thinker may find everyday object like landscape photos less personally relevant.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, in this research, relativism was positively related to temporal, hypothetical, and spatial distance for high-level targets, which means relativists perceived fine art as more distant in time, less likely, and spatially farther away. Relativists saw fine art as more distant in time, less likely to matter, and spatially farther away. This fits the idea that relativists are concrete thinkers who find abstract things hard to grasp. But there was one exception. Relativism was negatively linked to social distance for high-level targets. However, the social distance scale had poor reliability (α = -0.360), so we should be careful with this finding. One guess is that relativists may still feel connected to artists as people, because artmaking is a concrete human activity. Artists are real people doing real things, even if the art itself feels abstract.

Both idealism and relativism showed similar positive correlations with all dimensions of low-level construal objects, providing partial support for the "context leveling effect." When the cognitive object is concrete, the rich details and clear situational cues create a shared cognitive anchor point that reduces the influence of individual differences. However, the effect was not complete. Both orientations still showed significant positive correlations, meaning individual differences did not fully disappear, even with concrete stimuli.

The results extend previous work. Specifically, Gong and Medin [8] found that cognitive style relates to construal level and distance perception. But the pattern was more complex than a simple model would predict. Both idealism and relativism correlated positively with distance across most dimensions, something a straightforward alignment model would not expect. The social distance finding for relativism echoes Zaikauskaite et al. [4] who also found relativism tied to social but not environmental judgment.

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A key contribution of this study is the specific looking at four psychological distance dimensions separately. The results demonstrate that different dimensions can relate to moral philosophy in different ways. For relativism, temporal/hypothetical/spatial were all positive, but negative with social distance for high-level targets. This dimension-specific pattern suggests that psychological distance is not a unified thing, at least when examined in relation to stable individual differences. Temporal and hypothetical distance showed very similar correlation patterns across both orientations; perhaps they are closely related ideas. Social distance showed the most distinctive pattern.

This study draws the following main conclusions: (1) Both idealism and relativism are significantly positively correlated with temporal abstraction and hypothetical abstraction of high-level construal; (2) Relativism is significantly negatively correlated with social distance of high-level construal, though this finding is limited by the low reliability of the social distance scale and warrants replication; (3) Idealism and relativism show similar patterns in perceiving low-level construal concepts, supporting the "context leveling effect"; (4) The reliability issue with the high-level social distance dimension needs to be fixed in future research.

5.2. Theoretical and practical implications

This study integrates three things: moral philosophy (stable trait), construal level (cognitive mechanism), and psychological distance (outcome variable) into a single framework, to see how values shape individuals' perception of the world. The results are consistent with the rationality of the causal chain "moral orientation → default construal level → psychological distance," though the correlational design does not permit causal inference.

The findings provide a new opinion for understanding individual differences in art acceptance. For beauty education, especially at the high school level, people should pay attention to the cognitive features of students based on their moral values: students who prefer to think as idealism may connect more easily with abstract art. Students who are more relativism may need more concrete examples and context to get there. Knowing this could help teachers adjust their teaching style.

6. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that inform future research. First, the correlational design prevents causal conclusions, so we cannot say that moral orientation causes differences in distance perception. Future experiments could test this more directly, for example, by priming people to think in idealist or relativist ways and then measuring how they see distance. Second, the small student sample (N = 131) limits generalizability that mostly came from student population. Future studies could replicate these findings in larger, diverse populations and examine cross-cultural differences (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism). Third, the scale used in this work for high-level social distance had poor reliability (α = -0.360). Findings involving that measure, especially the negative link between relativism and social distancing, may need to be treated with care. Future work can revise the items or develop a better scale. Finally, the findings are practical. For example, educators can design art lessons that take students' value orientations into account, giving relativist-leaning students more concrete entry points into abstract art.

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7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that moral value orientations predict perceived psychological distance. Both idealism and relativism were linked to greater distance across most dimensions: temporal, hypothetical, and spatial, regardless of construal level. One exception stood out: relativism was associated with closer social distance toward abstract art. But because the social distance scale had poor reliability, we should not read too much into this. It needs to be tested again with a better measure. Overall, the link between moral traits and psychological distance is not the same across all dimensions. It depends on which dimension you look at. For art teachers, the social closeness finding (if it holds up) could offer a useful way to reach students who lean toward relativism. But for now, that idea remains tentative.

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