# The Impacts of Psychological Distance on Corporate Sustainability

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Most people perceive the risks associated with climate change as psychologically distant. As a concept, psychological distance finds its origins in the construal level theory developed by two American psychologists. According to this theory, psychological distance can be defined as "a subjective experience that something is close or far away from the self, here, and now" (p. 440). Logically, it is improbable that people will directly experience things that are not happening in the present and around them. Since it takes the here and now as reference points, psychological distance is thus egocentric. Psychological distance involves four interrelated dimensions: temporal, spatial, and social distance, and hypotheticality. The theory predicts that, as psychological distance increases, people use more and more abstract "mental representations" (hereafter referred to as construals) to represent an event or object. Trope and Liberman describe high-level construals as "relatively abstract, coherent, and superordinate mental representations, compared with low-level construals" (p. 441). Accordingly, people can move from low-level (more concrete) to high-level (more abstract) construals through the process of abstraction, which involves omitting detailed features of an event or object.

psychological distance    construal level theory    corporate sustainability

sustainable development    organizational behavior    climate change

## 1. Emerging Research in Corporate Sustainability

The concept of psychological distance seems to have been overlooked in the literature on corporate sustainability [1] with the exception of a few studies [2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9] that have applied it in a rather fragmented way. Despite this fragmented approach, however, similar results arose. One of these converging results is that the use of lower (more concrete) construal levels in communications about an issue triggers feasibility considerations regarding the response to the issue. Conversely, higher (more abstract) construal levels trigger desirability considerations [4][8]. According to Liberman and Trope [10], feasibility refers to more concrete construals related to the efforts in reaching an objective whereas desirability refers to more abstract construals as it focuses on the value of an objective. In other words, when a person begins to consider the immediate, practical, and concrete aspects of an issue, they are likely to also consider the concrete solutions that could be implemented to address it, while if they engage in abstract thinking about the issue instead, they are likely to debate whether or not it is worth addressing at all.

In that vein, research demonstrates that feasibility messages (e.g., in business campaigns to inform stakeholders on corporate social responsibility) represent a more effective engagement lever in the case of events or actions

that are perceived as psychologically closer or more proximal [4] and desirability messages work best when an issue is perceived as distant [8]. On the other hand, Simpson et al. [5] suggest that a high psychological distance (and thus more abstract construals) might also influence decision-making differently, "as it can encourage individuals to rely more on predictions (rather than data), be more risk-averse, or believe events are less likely to occur" (p. 990).

Other researchers have highlighted the considerable influence of emotional factors in two distinct cases: the influence of psychological distance on emotional factors [3][7] and vice versa [2]. With regard to the influence of psychological distance on emotional factors, O'Connor and Keil [7] conclude that students with a high level of environmental concern were committed to environmental goals only when these goals were presented to them through higher (more abstract) construal levels but that such higher construal levels had a negative effect for those who were less concerned about the environment. For their part, Mi et al. [3] found that greater emotional closeness between an employee and employer promotes pro-environmental behaviors on the part of the employee, among others due to emotional communication or enhanced sense of identity [3]. When it comes to the reverse, meaning the influence of emotional factors on psychological distance, Bendell et al. [2] suggest that, as entrepreneurs' psychological distance from looming megacatastrophes diminishes (thus increasing the emotional intensity), their strategies proportionally shift towards shorter-term adaptation [2] as opposed to longer-term mitigation [11].

These different studies provide interesting nuances on the diverse effects of psychological distance depending on how it is used and with which variable it is measured (i.e., environmental behaviors, climate change consequences, or relationships). However, a central conclusion can be drawn from these scattered results. Regardless of the type of event or action for which psychological distance was analyzed, it seems that to obtain the desired behavioral outcome (e.g., among students or stakeholders), the construal level at which people perceive an event (e.g., abstract construals of climate change consequences) should be matched by the construal level on which the corresponding action is presented (e.g., desirability-oriented educational approaches) [4][5][6]. On that matter, Schill and Shaw [6] underline the importance of message consistency between the construal level at which climate issues and pro-environmental behaviors (e.g., recycling) are presented to the public. Indeed, inconsistencies might create tensions and create direct behavioral barriers in general [6]. This is interesting especially given that research on corporate sustainability, dominated by institutional and stakeholder theories [12], often insists on the importance of pressures from outside the organization and tends to underestimate the role of "intrinsic drivers and deeper psychological aspects" (p. 398) in businesses' sustainability endeavors [13].

By respectively emphasizing either the feasibility or desirability of an action [10], research has shown that concrete and abstract construals have complementary effects on motivating environmental behaviors. Indeed, if concrete construals predominate, the corresponding predominance of feasibility considerations might keep organizations entrenched in their superficial implementation of sustainability practices. In contrast, if abstract construals take precedence, a dominance of desirability concerns might lead to a lack of pragmatism when addressing desired sustainability actions. From a solution-oriented perspective, construal flexibility could allow business leaders or managers to switch with more ease between higher and lower construal levels depending on the necessity of the task or issue [1][5][14].

In sum, this fragmented set of studies, each of which has employed the concept of psychological distance in a different specific context, together shows the various and sometimes diverging effects of psychological distance or construal levels on individual actions or intentions to act. In addition, three aspects stand out in particular. First, none of these studies address environmental management specifically. Second, Bendell et al. [2] are the only researchers to have linked psychological distance to climate change consequences. Third, three out of the eight studies found through this integrative review underline the relevance of either putting emotional factors in relation to the construal level theory [2][7] or extending the theory to additional psychological distance dimensions (such as emotional distance) [3]. The relevance of considering emotional factors (such as environmental concern) is supported by several studies from other research fields.

It is thus noticeable that even in the general field of corporate sustainability, the concept of psychological distance has only been researched by organizational scholars in a limited way despite its relevance. Indeed, the nuanced outcomes covered above already suggest the potential of customizing sustainability approaches not only from one organization to the next but also to address different sub-groups within organizations.

# 2. Exploring the Impacts of Psychological Distance on Corporate Sustainability

## 2.1. The Centrality of Time and Uncertainty in Sustainability

Time and uncertainty are respectively related to the temporal and hypothetical dimensions of psychological distance [15]. Just as they are interrelated through the construal level theory, they appear to also be essential and tightly bound variables in research on corporate sustainability.

To begin with, research has shown that an increase in managers' time horizon or perspective leads to an increased ability to deal with the complexities and uncertainties of climate change issues [16][17][18]. In contrast, short-termism, defined as "decisions and outcomes that pursue a course of action that is best for the short term but suboptimal over the long run" [19] (p. 826), has been proven to have a considerable negative impact on sustainability endeavors within organizations [20][21]. Indeed, firms facing and integrating intertemporal trade-offs and tensions, which are inherent to decisions related to climate change, see the true complexity of the issue through both its business and societal implications [20]. From a solution perspective, Slawinski and Bansal [20] suggest the usefulness of temporal ambidexterity, which can be defined as "an organization's ability to be aligned [with] and efficient in its management of today's business demands while simultaneously being adaptive to changes in the environment" [22] (p. 375). The extending of the time horizon necessarily implies increasing the temporal (psychological) distance and, consequently, dealing with increasing (more abstract) construal levels [15].

Through different concepts, these studies show the clear influences of time on managers' views and priorities. While Raisch and Birkinshaw [22] suggest further research on the organizational adaptations around ambidexterity, reviews on the topic have shown that psychological aspects have not been considered [23][24][25]. Indeed, although individual biases are mentioned, mechanisms are suggested, and calls for future research are made, a gap

remains about the underlying psychological influences of temporal distance on managers' perceptions of large-scale, complex issues. From a temporal perspective, having the "now" as a reference point [10], psychological distance is thus automatically involved when it comes to future consequences of climate change and allows a more detailed understanding of temporal influences on managers' sustainability approaches.

As for uncertainty, related to hypotheticality [15], it is inseparable from time, as "anything that is delayed is almost by definition uncertain" [26] (p. 784). Due to their considerable temporal delays [27], climate change consequences necessarily involve hypotheticality, making them especially challenging for organizations to deal with. In the context of corporate sustainability, Slawinski et al. [18] affirm that "short-termism and a low tolerance for uncertainty reinforce each other" (p. 261). Furthermore, these authors suggest that managers' propensity for uncertainty reduction might be a reason why they lean towards short-termist practices as opposed to practices that would significantly reduce organizations' greenhouse gas emissions [18]. What might truly reduce this unwanted uncertainty are enhanced connections between people's daily lives and longer-term future issues (such as climate change) [17]. According to Slawinski et al. [18], due to a lack of concreteness and certainty, climate change is excluded from managers' practices, which instead focus more on the market's logic, favoring short-term preoccupations (such as competitiveness). Indeed, managers seem to have an aversion to the abstractness that comes with uncertainty, which impacts their day-to-day practices. These levels of abstractness (construal), influenced by psychological distance, are precisely at the core of the construal level theory [15].

To sum up, time is directly linked to uncertainty. Although studies on managers' time-related perspectives offer interesting insights regarding their handling of corporate sustainability, these studies do not shed light on the psychological drivers that fuel these time-related perspectives. Indeed, individual biases are mentioned to explain decision-makers' preference for short-term options, and mechanisms are proposed to promote temporal ambidexterity, while remaining rather superficial and vague. Such individual biases can be related to the individual influences of psychological distance regarding long-term issues. Finally, research on the influences of uncertainty on managers' views of complex and large-scale issues brings up the topic of abstractness, which is central to the construal level theory [15]. Since time and uncertainty are two tightly associated dimensions, and both are deeply intertwined in the climate change issues with which managers struggle, it is relevant to tackle corporate sustainability through the concept of psychological distance for a better understanding of inadequate environmental management.

Although psychological distance has been undertheorized in corporate sustainability, other parallel concepts have been studied. For decades now, organizational researchers have studied the mismatch between organizations' decision-making and ongoing environmental issues through different concepts related to psychological distance. These concepts, explored in the following sections, include stages of consciousness development, nature connectedness, CASTRATED environment (an acronym representing a set of criticisms of unsustainable organizational practices), sociomateriality, cognitive framing, and organizational attention. All these concepts are covered below. This section finishes by examining postmodern critiques of corporate sustainability.

## 2.2. The Role of Nature Connectedness and Consciousness Development in Environmental Management

With their emphasis on the handling of complex and larger-scale issues (such as climate change) and personal experiences with nature, two theoretical concepts—stages of consciousness development and connectedness to nature—respectively address the two remaining dimensions of psychological distance (i.e., social and spatial dimensions).

To start with, the influence of consciousness development stages on corporate sustainability has been addressed by various scholars [13][28][29][30]. In their research, Boiral et al. [13] explore the influences of consciousness development stages on organizational citizenship behaviors for the environment (OCBEs), which are defined as "individual and discretionary social behaviors that are not explicitly recognized by the formal reward system and that contribute to a more effective environmental management by organizations" [31] (p. 431). Their results show that managers at post-conventional stages (as opposed to conventional stages), associated with weaker egocentrism and representing only 20% of the adult population, have an increased capacity to handle complex issues (such as climate change) [13]. This egocentric factor can be linked to the social dimension of psychological distance, which has the here and now as egocentric reference points [15].

Within the definition of OCBEs, the part concerning a lack of recognition through formal reward systems is interesting as it suggests that better environmental management would require reaching out of formal or standard management practices [32]. Since they tend to do exactly this, managers at post-conventional stages tend to better manage complex, long-term, and large-scale environmental issues. While Boiral et al. provide a partial explanation of the underlying influences on managers' handling of complex issues, their study only considers the psychological impacts of temporal and social distances. Complex issues such as climate change involve large scales across different dimensions, which underlines the importance of studying managers' perceptions of the issue through all four dimensions of psychological distance.

As for the concept of connectedness to nature, which can be defined as "the sense of affiliation with nature and feeling of well-being resulting from increased contact with natural ecosystems" [33] (p. 228), it is mainly related to the spatial dimension of psychological distance and has been studied in the field of corporate sustainability by several scholars [33][34][35]. Its relevance lies in the fact that modern societies tend to limit people's contact with natural environments [33]. Through their research, Boiral et al. [33] propose that connectedness to nature influences employees' environmental concerns, potentially leading to behavioral changes "particularly when the impact of workplace practices on surrounding ecosystems is clearly perceived" (p. 234). The opposite of connectedness to nature implies a disconnection and thus a distance from nature. This would suggest that such a greater distance between employees and their natural environment has consequences on employees' environmental attitudes and behaviors.

Connectedness to nature can also be related to the social dimension of psychological distance. Indeed, research has demonstrated its links with various personality traits [36], such as empathy [37][38][39]. In their study, Di Fabio and

Bucci [37] suggest that empathic individuals, who are sensitive towards other individuals, are also more connected to nature as they display a similar sensitivity towards nature. It is thus arguable that personal and proximal connections to nature make climate change consequences more psychologically proximate. However, the concept of connectedness to nature does not give insights or details on how distance from climate change consequences might psychologically impact business managers in their perceptions and decisions.

## 2.3. The Denaturing of Environmental Variables in Organizational Contexts

By focusing on the mismatch between the scales of the natural and organizational environments, and the abstraction of environmental processes, the concepts of CASTRATED environment and sociomateriality respectively address the two core tenets of the construal level theory (i.e., distance and abstraction).

In the 1990s, through the rise of organizational research focusing on environmental issues [40][41], Shrivastava [42] proposed the acronym of CASTRATED environment referring to competition, abstraction, shallowness, theoretical immaturity, reification, anthropocentrism, time-independent (ahistorical), exploitable, and denaturalized. Through this concept, the author criticizes unsustainable organizational approaches to the natural environment. More specifically, some of the acronym's components can be related to psychological distance (or one of its dimensions): reification (reductionism), time-independent, and abstraction. Reification refers to taking external, firm-unrelated forces (e.g., environmental forces) and reducing them to "economic, social and technological forces that impact financial performances" [42] (p. 713). Certain variables from the natural environment (such as time or geographical location) are thus not considered. For its part, "time independent" refers to organizational environments as being analyzed without historical connections to the past (as opposed to natural environments).

Abstraction is the component most closely related to the concept of psychological distance. Shrivastava [42] asserts that organizations convert concrete environmental consequences of organizational activities into abstract, barely acknowledged aspects. The natural environment is, therefore, more or less ignored. Relatedly, Milne et al. [43] address this omnipresent abstractness involved in corporate sustainability through the journey metaphor. By focusing less on precise outcomes, the journey metaphor reveals the double-edged sword of more postmodernist perspectives (further discussed below). By presenting sustainability as a blurred journey or as a work in progress, organizations "justify and reinforce incremental rather than radical efforts to change" (p. 823). Radical efforts are crucial in corporate sustainability [43]. There are thus consequences to the absence of specific details about where the sustainability journey leads in terms of longer-term, more concrete objectives. These nuanced influences described by different levels of abstractness are very similar to the ones described by scholars in their research on psychological distance. The interplays between abstractness and concreteness are precisely what the construal level theory addresses [15].

Taking a slightly different angle, based on organizational research on sociomateriality [44][45], Bansal and Knox-Hayes [46] discuss the impacts of time and space compression in socio-material environments (such as organizations). Harvey [47] explains this time-space compression as a shrinkage in distances and acceleration in time influenced by the evolution of our means of communication and transportation (among other things). This

compression affects the information that business practitioners retain from the natural environment and also how organizational instruments are created and used. For example, financial systems through which carbon credits are exchanged no longer fit carbon cycles and "cannot accurately account for the spatial and temporal scales at which carbon sinking actually occurs" [46] (p. 73). Consequently, these concepts demonstrate that there is a (psychological) disconnection or distance between the organizational and environmental (physical) worlds. A consequence of such a distance between these two worlds seems to be that business practitioners denaturalize the natural characteristics of the environment.

## 2.4. The Processing of Information by Decision-Makers in Organizations

With their focus on information processing and their emphasis on abstraction processes, respectively, the concepts of cognitive framing and organizational attention specifically address the abstraction component of the construal level theory, as well as the effects of such abstraction (related to construal levels) on decision-making.

Based on organizational research on cognition [48][49], Hahn et al. [50] developed a cognitive framing perspective with regard to corporate sustainability. To define a cognitive frame, the authors use the definition from Walsh [51]: "a mental template that individuals impose on an information environment to give it form and meaning" (p. 281). Through such frames, "managers reduce complexity and ambiguity by selectively organizing and interpreting signals from the organizational context" [50] (p. 465). This complexity reduction is similar to abstraction, as the abstraction process involves "omitting features that by the very act of abstraction are deemed incidental" [15] (p. 442). However, although this cognitive framing perspective relates to psychological distance through an abstraction process, the effects of (psychological) distances from climate change on managers' perceptions and behaviors are not addressed in the study.

Similarly, organizational scholars have tackled the concept of organizational attention [52][53][54]. This organizational attention is influenced by what Bansal et al. [52] call "grains" and "extent". Concerning the time scales involved in climate change, Bansal et al. [52] give the following example to explain the nuances between the two terms: "climate change is measured in years (grain) and over hundreds of years (extent). However, the grain would be too coarse and the extent too broad to identify weather events, such as tornadoes or floods" (p. 224). Just as tornadoes and floods slip through in the previous example, the same can occur with organizational issues if they are not dealt with using the appropriate grain size or extent [52].

In addition, Bansal et al. [52] mention that "organizational attention tends to be biased towards specific grains and extents, either deliberately or unconsciously through the attentional structures embedded in organizational routines" (p. 224). This is important as psychological distance would shed light on these unconscious biases. This is also in line, among others, with the concept of consciousness development stages, which suggests deeper mental structures that lead to biases for either broader or more egocentric views of reality [13][55]. Indeed, grains and extent can be referred to as abstraction and distance, respectively. Just as previously discussed, the abstraction process involves excluding more detailed information [15], consequently coarsening the grains. As for the extent, its broadening involves considering more (psychologically) distant events or issues.

## 2.5. The Postmodern Critiques of Corporate Sustainability

By respectively criticizing business practitioners' often-oversimplified perspectives regarding corporate sustainability and their disconnection with the reality outside of the organizational world, postmodernism and the concepts of simulacra and spectacle tackle the two tenets of the construal level theory (i.e., abstraction and distance).

By their very nature, postmodern approaches often stand in opposition to the functionalist perspective. In the functionalist perspective, rational measures play a central role in the evaluations that companies make as they can be manipulated to increase organizational performance [56]. This is also true for corporate sustainability, which emphasizes sustainability reporting using controllable, comparable, and precise metrics [57]. Based on their analysis of the postmodernist perspective, Boiral and Henri [57] advance that these metrics tend to oversimplify and thus reduce the complex nature of sustainability. Additionally, this focus on reporting can be a distraction from core sustainability objectives.

Järvinen et al. [58] share similar views about the quantification of corporate sustainability. These authors argue that the precision and persuasiveness that come with quantitative approaches to corporate sustainability make some organizations seem environmentally proactive while in fact they are lagging [58]. In contrast, the postmodernist perspective sheds light on the "fuzzy, elusive, and unmeasurable nature of sustainability itself instead of highlighting reporting technicalities" [57] (p. 309). However, there is a double edge to this sword of increasing abstractness, as discussed previously through the journey metaphor from Milne et al. [43].

Additionally, Boiral and Henri [57] suggest that this functionalist desire to measure sustainability might be a result of abstract perceptions of the concept of sustainability itself. These authors propose that through tangible and concrete indicators about sustainable development, sustainability somehow materializes, exists, and can thus be tackled [57]. This can be interpreted as a means to mentally proximate the concept of sustainability. This process of concretization through reducing the psychological distance is exactly what the construal level theory addresses [15].

Next, related to the distance tenet of the construal level theory, the concepts of simulacra and spectacle tackle the idea of distorting reality through disconnections (or distances). Regarding the first concept, Baudrillard [59] advances that the postmodern society is hyperreal as it is filled with disconnected or "unreal" information. In short, this society is a simulacrum that has no connection to the objective reality [59]. As for the concept of spectacle, it is brought by Debord [60] and also refers to the lack of connection with reality, although it places greater emphasis on the manipulation of society's needs and expectations, such as through advertising or politics, for example. Both of these concepts posit a hyperreality based on "signs, data and images without any reference to the real world," a framework from which sustainability reporting does not escape [61] (p. 1043).

In business, there is a bias toward order and coherence, which are sometimes artificially simulated or controlled [57]. Similarly, Boiral et al. [62] tackle this "fictional appearance of order, measurability and comparability" (p. 17) with regard to sustainability ratings by using the concept of moral fictionalism. This concept can be defined as "moral

claims or judgments based on convenient fictions rather than objective descriptions of reality" [62] (p. 5). This concept involves a certain selectivity or complexity reduction regarding the construction of this fictional reality. This distortion of information in this "fake" reality creates a disconnection or distance from the "true" reality, potentially leading to the blurring of critical sustainability issues [63].

In addition, this distance between realities can be increased as the information on which the hyperreality is based increases in realism or even gets certified [63]. Connections can be drawn with psychological distance as consequences of climate change are (in reality) concrete but are erroneously perceived as abstract because of the considerable psychological distance involved. Hence, a distance or rupture is created between the two realities. However, this (psychological) distance dimension is still not explicitly mentioned or linked to the construal level theory.

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