

Understanding the Link Between Spatial Distance and Social Distance

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Abstract. Why do people use spatial language to describe social relationships? In particular, to what extent do they anchor their thoughts about friendship in terms of space? Three experiments used drawing and estimation tasks to further explore the conceptual structure of social distance using friendship as a manipulation. In all three experiments, participants read short narratives and then drew what they imagined happened during the narrative and estimated passing time. Overall, the results of these exploratory studies suggest that the conceptual structure of friendship is linked to thought about space in terms of path drawing. Results are discussed in light of social distance and intercharacter interaction.

Keywords: spatial language, spatial reasoning, imagery, drawing, social distance, friendship

In any given language there are countless ways to describe spatial relations, including the distance between objects. People routinely use words such as *near*, *close*, and *by* to describe spatial relations that are proximal, and words such as *far*, *away*, and *beyond* to describe spatial relations that are distal. They use these same spatial terms to describe other kinds of distance as well, including distance in social relationships. In communicating about friendship, for instance, they use spatial language to express how they feel close to or far from others. They convey loyalty, concern, and fondness with spatial language that refers to proximity, such as “I’ll stand by your side,” “You can lean on me in hard times,” and “We’re close friends.” They imply rejection, betrayal, or waning interest with spatial language that refers to distance, as in “He turned his back on me,” “You seem distant lately,” and “We are drifting apart.” Surprisingly, little work has investigated the extent to which people actually conceptualize space when they are thinking about friendship or other social relationships. Our research investigates this connection and provides new insights into social distance in the realm of friendship.

Social scientists have often discussed social behavior in terms of physical space. Some of this work focused on the attitudes that members of one group hold toward members of another group. This is aptly reflected in the term *social distance*, which describes the “distance” that exists between two or more social groups (Bogardus, 1933). Social distance can affect how comfortable one group feels interacting with another group. For example, individuals in some racial groups may be reluctant to interact with individuals in other racial groups. African-Americans tend to feel *close* to other African-Americans, but *far* from people

of Asian or European ancestry (Hoxter & Lester, 1995). People of Southeast Asian descent (e.g., Laotian, Vietnamese) feel *close* to members of their own group, but desire *close* ties with Caucasians (Lee, Templer, Mar, & Canfield, 2002). Social distance can also influence decisions made by social groups, including choices related to selection of educational attainment (Akerlof, 1997) and even the ease with which people learn a second language (Schumann, 1976). It may also refer to the strategic use of language to create distance to exhibit power or control (Shepard, Giles, & Le Poire, 2001), and it can be used to make others feel excluded (Riggins, 1997). Social distance can also refer to physical distance between individuals while they are interacting (Hall, 1966). It can also influence how people reason about space. In one study, Americans with negative attitudes toward Mexicans estimated that Mexican cities were farther south than they actually are, and Americans with negative attitudes toward Canadians estimated that Canadian cities were farther north than they actually are (see Kerkman, Stea, Norris, & Rice, 2004).

More generally, this sort of psychological distance has also been studied with regard to how people think about everyday objects and events. For instance, construal level theory (CLT) holds that when thinking about events, people naturally think about temporally distant events (e.g., a birthday party next year) in more abstract ways (e.g., celebrating, eating cake), while temporally proximate events (e.g., a birthday party tomorrow) is thought of in a more concrete fashion (e.g., dancing with friends, eating chocolate cake) (see Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002). This type of mapping has also been applied in other domains such as procrastination, politeness, self-control, and representations of the self (Fujita,