Level of Detail in Near and Far Future Imagined Events

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How does psychological distance influence the level of detail in our mental representations of future imagined events? According to Construal Level Theory (CLT), there are four psychological distance dimensions: events can feel distant in time (temporal), space (spatial), social relationship (social), or probability (hypothetical). Yet we lack direct measures of how these distances affect the level of detail in mental representations. We bridged this gap by adapting Reality Monitoring Theory's Memory Characteristics Questionnaire to measure the level of detail in future imagined scenarios. Across six studies (N=1,749), we demonstrated that psychological distance, including the temporal dimension, systematically reduces the level of detail in mental imagery. Study 1 found that more psychologically distant imagined scenarios were rated as significantly less detailed (r = -.16, p = .005). Studies 2-3 manipulated hypotheticality, showing that probable future meetings were imagined with greater detail than improbable future meetings (d = 0.47, p < .001). Study 4 examined the same idea in spatial distance (d = 0.20, p = .007), and Study 5 examined social distance (d = 0.31, p = .01). Study 6 specifically examined temporal distance: older adults closer to retirement age imagined their future retirement with greater detail than younger adults (r = .23, p < .001), and this increased temporal detail mediated the relationship between temporal closeness and actual retirement savings behavior (indirect effect: b = 0.06, 95% CI [0.01, 0.03]). These findings demonstrate that psychological distance systematically affects the level of detail in future mental representations. For timing research, this reveals how temporal distance affects mental representation: feeling temporally closer to events increases mental detail, which influences real-world planning behavior

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