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How Spatial is Social Distance?

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Introduction

The construct of social distance has been studied extensively since the early 1900's (e.g., Bogardus, 1933). However, studies examining the existence of absolute social distance have been scarce. Do people think about social groups in terms of space? Does spatial thinking influence the conceptualization of concepts pertaining to gender, race, SES, or national origin? Results of the current study suggest that an underlying spatial framework may influence socially relevant information.

Method

In the current study 316 UC Merced students were given narratives that differed with regard to embedded characters' national origin. After these participants read the narrative, they drew figures representing the characters in a natural scene. Drawings were coded by view type (bird's eye, semi bird's eye, eye level), respective figure placement (horizontal, vertical, and diagonal), average figure height (mm), and inter-figure distance (mm) to get at participants' spatial representation of social information.

Results

Differences by narrative condition were not found for figure placement nor average figure height. Inter-figure distance approached significance $F(2, 313) = 3.00$, $p = .051$, participants who believed that two characters shared a common national origin drew representative figures further from one another ($M = 89.65$ mm, $SD = 38.90$ mm) than participants who believed the individuals came from different national

origins ($M = 77.35$ mm, $SD = 34.77$ mm). Participants who were given national origin-absent information drew figures with inter-figure distance residing between the two experimental conditions ($M = 82.38$ mm, $SD = 40.65$ mm).

Discussion

Results suggest that an underlying spatial framework may influence socially relevant information for off-line tasks such as drawing.

Results could be explained in terms of out-group homogeneity, the tendency for people to see those that belong to their social or racial groups as more varied than those in other social or racial groups (Quattrone & Jones, 1980). Participants drew characters of differing nationality closer together suggesting "physical" out-group homogeneity (or similarity), while characters of similar nationality were drawn further apart, emphasizing, their differences or "physical" in-group heterogeneity.

This preliminary study on nationality and drawing do not support the idea that the link between "social distance" and "spatial distance" is a simple positive relationship, where greater social distance is analogous to greater physical distance.

Future research will examine the link between social distance and physical distance using a variety of social group manipulations and outcome measures that are not limited to off-line tasks such as drawing.

References

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