RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Psychological distance and the pandemic: Insights from Construal Level Theory and relationship science

Jeffrey D. Bowen ⓘ

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore,
Maryland, USA

Correspondence
Jeffrey D. Bowen, Department of
Psychological & Brain Sciences, Zanvyl
Krieger School of Arts & Sciences, Johns
Hopkins University, 3400 N. Charles Street,
Baltimore, MD 21218, USA.
Email: jbowen@jhu.edu

Abstract

The coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic has brought about unprecedented challenges to public health. Compounding these hardships is the fact that typical social functions such as maintaining valued relationships cannot proceed as usual. Social cognitive perspectives like that presented by Construal Level Theory (CLT) can provide a valuable framework for understanding our unique interpersonal experiences during this difficult time, and potentially offer avenues for adaptation and healthier coping. I begin by introducing CLT and follow with a discussion of its implications for understanding the psychological effects of *social distancing* on our interpersonal relationships and pursuit of social goals. I describe how abstract and concrete construals can affect our experiences of maintaining close relationships that vary widely in terms of geographic distance or separation. CLT can offer insight not only into how geographic distance or closeness may shape our thoughts and feelings about our close others, but also how we approach pursuing goals that are directly or indirectly shaped by these close others. The more effectively we can frame and communicate about experiences during this challenging time in history, the better equipped we may be to support our public health apparatus and satisfy our psychological needs.

1 | INTRODUCTION

"Alone together."

The idea has received plenty of circulation in the past year. The coronavirus has upended the dynamics of global life on the broadest and most intimate of scales. We are living through a trenchant moment in history, in which many of us have had to take inventory in certain domains for the first time. We have had to reckon with the spread of infectious disease in a far more deliberate way. We have had to weigh the risks of venturing out to purchase life's essentials against the potential harm to our own health and that of our loved ones. If we have been lucky enough to avoid unemployment, we have still had to manage potential cuts to wages, increased workload and pressure (even danger in some health and service fields), and stagnation in many spheres of professional and personal growth.

As vaccine distribution gets underway, our best available solution to stem the tide and take steps toward rediscovering some form of normalcy is *social distancing*, accompanied by the wearing of protective face-wear. Social distancing is a practice endorsed by experts in population health and epidemiology around the world. It is a strategy designed to buy time and resources for our healthcare providers (Lewnard & Lo, 2020; Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020), and to protect others with whom we may directly or indirectly interact. Still, it can be frustrating as a best available option, because to many it can feel like *inaction*. We are disengaging from traditional social and civic life, to help many people we do not know, over an expansive period of time whose end is uncertain, by separating ourselves from many treasured others. Additionally, by restricting activities that would bring us into close or extended contact with most others, we may be relying on a smaller number of close relationship partners to fulfill our social needs and help us pursue important goals. This may place additional strain on relationships with others from whom we are *not* socially distancing (see Finkel et al., 2014 and replies).

Many psychological and medical scientists have lent their knowledge and experience to the myriad questions surrounding the social consequences of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19; see Van Bavel et al., 2020), including the challenge of balancing self-interest with collective welfare (e.g., Dunham et al., 2020) and the mental health consequences of social isolation or caring for others who fall ill (e.g., Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Galea et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020). Social psychology is uniquely positioned to examine how various meaning-making processes (i.e., Kunda, 1990) also shape our experiences during the pandemic, particularly in the context of close others. While these processes can certainly be hijacked by discouraging forces (e.g., anxiety, confusion, or exhaustion), resulting in resentment, paranoia, or selfishness, they can also be understood as frameworks for supporting efforts toward healthy, enriching, and affirming pursuits of meaningful relationships and social goals.

2 | CONSTRUAL LEVEL THEORY

One social psychological perspective with a great deal to say about meaning-making and cognitive framing, particularly with respect to *distance*, is Construal Level Theory (CLT; see Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010). CLT is concerned with how we mentally represent the people, objects, events, and ideas we encounter, which is directly shaped by our *psychological distance* from these entities. Consider yourself. Right now. Exactly where you are. In reality. CLT researchers have labeled this reference point the "self in the here and now." Your friends, your laptop, and your next birthday are all more psychologically distant than that anchor. However, these entities are not all psychologically distant in the same way. According to CLT, psychological distance can unfold along four different dimensions: geography, time, social familiarity, and likelihood. The "self in the here and now" is *here* (geographically close), *now* (close in time), *socially familiar* (it is you, after all), and *real* (certain to exist).

Different entities can vary across one or more of these dimensions of psychological distance, with significant implications for how we think, feel, and behave with respect to these entities. The principal idea behind CLT is that

when something is more psychologically distant, we tend to think about it (mentally represent it) in more abstract ways. This is also known as "high-level" construal. On the other hand, when something is less psychologically distant (more psychologically proximal), we tend to mentally represent it in more concrete ways. This is also known as "low-level" construal. When we mentally represent something more abstractly, we tend to focus on its central characteristics, features that define the entity and are unlikely to change. We are less concerned with idiosyncratic details or features that do not hold true (or are difficult to predict) over time. Conversely, when we mentally represent something more concretely, the situation is often reversed. We *are* focused on smaller or more peripheral details and features that can change from moment to moment. We might be more concerned with what something *does* and less concerned with what it *is*. To use a familiar analogy, more abstract construals help us to see the forest, whereas more concrete construals allow us to focus on the trees (see Burgoon et al., 2013).

More abstract and more concrete construals exist along a continuum, which is consistent with how we conceptualize psychological distance. Decades of research guided by CLT have found that when an entity is more psychologically distant we tend to mentally represent it (*construe* it) more abstractly, and when an entity is more psychologically proximal, we tend to construe it more concretely. This has implications for social perception (e.g., Rim et al., 2009), communication (e.g., Stephan et al., 2010), and even decision-making and self-control (e.g., Fujita & Carnevale, 2012; Liberman et al., 2007; Wakslak & Trope, 2009). Because CLT concerns how we experience psychological distance, and the effects of that distance on our attitudes, behaviors, and goals, it can be a valuable framework for understanding daily life during the pandemic. Consider a trip to the grocery store. When framed abstractly, we are more likely to reflect on why having groceries is important for our well-being, what the availability of groceries suggests about our agricultural pipeline, and that shopping for food is a natural and essential part of our weekly routine (even before the pandemic). When that same activity is framed concretely, we might be more focused on the physical elements of the grocery store today (e.g., markers on the ground to encourage six feet of separation), the path we will take to and through the store, and the particular shopping list we are trying to satisfy. Importantly, these more abstract and more concrete construals do not simply differ in their content, but also in the emotions they may evoke. The abstract considerations might make us feel grateful for what we can afford and the sacrifices made by service workers, whereas the concrete considerations might make salient our anxiety about the transmission risk posed by lack of adherence to safety guidelines or the unknown state of the groceries themselves.

A similar exercise in framing could be applied to the other individuals with whom we share our lives. Differing construals can shape how we conceptualize these social partners, how we experience our relationships with them, and how this affects our interpersonal motives and behaviors. Indeed, CLT researchers have identified the utility of drawing on the theory's principles to expand our understanding of interpersonal processes, such as social influence and attribution (Hess et al., 2018). Neither abstract nor concrete construals are inherently better suited to promote (or undermine) well-being during a challenging time like the COVID-19 pandemic, but we may be able to draw on some of CLT's core ideas to evaluate and potentially manage our strange and uncertain new experiences. In particular, CLT can offer a lens through which to understand how the practice of social distancing may shape our social relationships, and the implications thereof to our pursuit of valued personal and interpersonal goals. This may be especially important to consider given a growing body of evidence, suggesting negative psychological consequences of social distancing (e.g., Ford, 2020; Killgore et al., 2020; Marroquin et al., 2020; Tull et al., 2020), despite its role in supporting public health.

3 | CONSTRUAL LEVELS AND THINKING ABOUT SOCIALLY DISTANT OTHERS

According to the dimensions of psychological distance outlined in CLT, the phenomenon of "social distancing" is essentially *geographic* distancing (i.e., physical separation). In terms of framing, this increased distance should lead us to think more abstractly about those close others from whom we are apart. That means, we are likely focused

more on their enduring and central attributes, and on our broader feelings about these people and our relationships to them. These "big picture" thoughts and feelings contribute to why we can miss being with these people so much. Indeed, previous research has found that missing significant others is associated with a focus on central features and occurs to a greater extent in long-distance versus proximal relationships (Le et al., 2008). This is consistent with CLT's claims about the relationship between distance and abstract construal. These feelings may also be especially strong because they are directed toward people to whom we feel *socially* close (i.e., another psychological distance dimension), as psychological proximity has been shown to predict emotional intensity (see Van Boven et al., 2010).

How might we draw on the principles of CLT to understand the kinds of relationship maintenance practices that could help sustain partners' well-being while socially distanced? Some useful perspectives come from research on relationships that are chronically managed at a distance—long-distance relationships (LDRs). Due to social distancing guidelines, most of us are managing more simultaneous LDRs than we were prior to the pandemic. Nevertheless, connecting with loved ones across distance may be especially gratifying when we can reaffirm social closeness and intimacy in spite of physical separation. Even if our time together is mediated through technology (e.g., Zoom), we may derive more substantial satisfaction from these interactions if we focus on the "big picture" value that we place on these relationships, which we may not have done as deliberately when spending time together offline before the pandemic. Such abstract framing of our partners and relationships could manifest as savoring of time spent together (e.g., Borelli et al., 2014) and can foster relationship maintenance processes such as partner idealization (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Murray et al., 1996), which has been documented as more common in long-distance versus geographically close relationships (Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford & Reske, 1990). Indeed, research finds LDRs to be as satisfying, stable, and committed as geographically close relationships (Guldner & Swensen, 1995; Kelmer et al., 2013; Van Horn et al., 1997). This is supported especially when partners focus on each other's stable and defining positive qualities, capturing an abstract representation of their attributes (Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford & Reske, 1990). This enables us to frame our social partners in a more positive light, despite the occasional letdowns of their minor foibles and irritants (see Neff & Karney, 2002, 2005). Similarly, idealized preferences are also predictive of positive partner ratings when attributes are evaluated in more abstract or psychologically distant (e.g., hypothetical) contexts (Eastwick et al., 2011). Furthermore, the experience of missing a significant other—which promotes some forms of abstract thinking (Le et al., 2008)—has been shown to promote commitment and various relationship maintenance activities as well (Le et al., 2010).

4 | CONSTRUAL LEVELS AND SOCIALLY DISTANCED INTERACTIONS

While construal levels (particularly abstract construals) may play an important role in shaping our psychological experiences in socially distanced close relationships, they can also affect how we communicate and pursue important goals with our relationship partners. As noted previously, more abstract or more concrete construal levels are not inherently equipped to promote relational well-being in any given context. Rather, they are a framework for processing information about other entities with which we may interact. Differing construal levels can moderate how we pursue important goals and interact with others by bringing different motives or emotions to the fore or by moderating how existing individual differences affect our interpretations and priorities during social encounters. Prior research suggests that flexibility in construal levels may support goal pursuit, via adaptation of construal levels to relevant task demands, obstacles, or other self-regulatory considerations. For example, individuals have been shown to possess meta-motivational knowledge about the utility of varying construal levels to support task performance, drawing on the level of construal that will increase the likelihood of goal acquisition (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2019). Other work suggests an even more granular role for construal levels in goal pursuit, by way of the idea of "construal ambidexterity." That is, shifting between more abstract or concrete mental representations over the course of goal pursuit as evolving task demands require a more detail-oriented versus big picture focus (e.g.,

Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). More generally, construal levels can offer a *regulatory scope* that can be aligned with salient motives and available mechanisms for achieving desired goals (see Trope et al., 2020).

We may be able to draw on these ideas of construal fit and flexibility to manage our interactions with socially distant relationship partners in a few key ways. One approach is simply to take advantage of small gestures and reminders to sustain our relationships, like a quick text message or phone call. Concrete reminders of these abstract goals may allow us to simultaneously "keep our eyes on the prize" while also managing goal pursuit "on the ground." These reminders could function similarly to incremental rewards (see Woolley & Fishbach, 2016, 2017) or implementation intentions (Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997; Gollwitzer, 1999; see also Brandstätter & Frank, 2002). Communicating with another person is itself an explicit action—a concrete behavior that can serve as a means for conveying the global value we place on our relationship to another person and the meaningfulness of connecting with them. Gestures like these are often quite simple too, which is especially valuable when we are under chronic stress and struggling to find the same sources of rejuvenation as we may have had prior to the pandemic (see Baumeister et al., 1998; Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Tice et al., 2007).

Another approach to managing communication with socially distant close others via construal levels involves how we construct the messages and the media through which they are transmitted. For example, researchers have found that when communicating messages to psychologically distant others, we prefer to craft those messages with more abstract (vs. concrete) elements (Joshi et al., 2015). This can take many forms. One critical example is that text is generally construed more abstractly than imagery, all else equal (Amit et al., 2013; Rim et al., 2015). This is because an image is a higher fidelity representation of an idea than a word or phrase in most cases. The same can be said for visual media versus audio-only media (see Daft & Lengel, 1986). When we see text, we must first read it, recognize its referent(s), convert that into a mental representation of some kind, and then store that as an idea. This process of being several steps removed from the idea itself is a manifestation of psychological distance, consistent with the physical separation we experience from more distant correspondents. Therefore, if we wish to send an informative message to a physically distant communication partner, text may often be more effective than imagery for conveying informational content. That said, not all communication needs to be matched in its construal level to the *physical* distance of a communication partner. Other times, we may wish to convey a message that enables us to psychologically traverse physical distance and simulate proximity by capitalizing on social closeness (see Torrez et al., 2019). This should be especially poignant with an intimate other, such as a loved one or close friend. In these cases, a message that includes imagery (such as an emoji or picture, see Kaye et al., 2017) may be most effective, particularly when that imagery is emotionally evocative (Van Boven et al., 2010). In sum, when communicating with others from whom we are socially distancing, our interactions may be most enriching if we use text to convey important factual content (i.e., abstract messages aligned with geographic distance), but use imagery to convey emotion and affirmations of closeness (i.e., concrete messages to overcome geographic distance but aligned with social closeness). Similarly, we may wish to use audio-only media (e.g., a phone call) for more abstract informational communication, but visually immersive media (e.g., a video-chatting service) for more concrete and/or emotional communication (see Torrez et al., 2019). As a framework, CLT can offer a set of predictions about how we might experience *and* interact with socially distant close others by calibrating our construal levels to interactional needs (e.g., informing or connecting) and constraints (i.e., physical separation).

5 | CONSTRUAL LEVELS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF HEIGHTENED COPRESENCE

While separation from loved ones presents a unique set of challenges, a different set of obstacles may be facing social partners who have experienced marked increases in physical proximity during the pandemic. Romantic partners, for example, have encountered difficulties managing their intimate time together as a function of conflict during the pandemic (Luetke et al., 2020), which can heighten when levels of interdependence increase (i.e., relational turbulence; Solomon & Knoblock, 2004; Theiss & Solomon, 2006). These difficulties are

exacerbated by the relationship-external stressors (e.g., fear of exposure to the virus, financial hardship, childcare while working from home, caring for high risk family members outside one's household) that also place strains on partners and can interfere with relationship maintenance, particularly if they interact poorly with existing individual differences (e.g., attachment styles) that shape susceptibility to maladaptive coping (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2020). Part of the turmoil partners may be experiencing could also be attributable to increased opportunities for misaligned goals. Transactive goal dynamics theory suggests that heightened interdependence coupled with a dense network of intersecting goals can exacerbate relationship difficulties if goal pursuits are not managed cooperatively (Fitzsimons et al., 2015).

Research on LDRs transitioning to proximity is also consistent with these patterns. Studies have found that despite similar levels of satisfaction and well-being between partners in long-distance versus geographically close relationships, long-distance partners who transition to proximity were more likely to break up than those who did not (Stafford et al., 2006). Exposure to more partner flaws, opportunities for jealousy, and lost autonomy were among the primary contributors to relationship dissolution. From a CLT perspective, more opportunities to experience idiosyncratic fluctuations in partner behavior emerging as a result of copresence suggest that decreases in psychological distance are playing an important role. As such, partners are likely adopting more concrete construals of one another, thereby struggling to maintain the positive illusions and idealizations that supported relationship maintenance at a distance. A similar phenomenon may be taking place when partners are spending significantly increased time together as a result of pandemic restrictions. Both partners may need to undergo a shift in regulatory scope (Trope et al., 2020) in order to continue supporting one another's intersecting goals when the psychological distance at which they are navigating their relationship has undergone a substantial change. This process may require some time and calibration, which may be why reports of relationship troubles were especially prevalent in popular media sources during the earliest pandemic-related lockdowns (e.g., Hollingsworth, 2020). Winnowing of social networks may also be contributing to friction, as partners may come to rely on one another to meet a greater proportion of their social and psychological needs than before. This could potentially drive partner conflict if partners are especially focused on certain concrete behaviors or tendencies in one another that evoke negative emotional responses, which would be expected based on CLT given their proximity. Furthermore, according to some theoretical models (see Finkel et al., 2015), the reliance on significant others (specifically spouses) to provide for one's personal growth in addition to safety and security has created unreasonably high expectations in some relationships, resulting in disappointment and relational decline.

6 | CONSTRUAL LEVELS AND SELF-CONTROL IN THE CONTEXT OF CLOSE OTHERS

In spite of the limitations presented by the pandemic on the avenues available to us to pursue important personal and social goals, CLT provides mechanisms for understanding how that goal pursuit can still take place in the context of our close others (whether socially distant or ever-present). Indeed, research has found that construal levels shape how we guide not only our own but others' self-regulatory efforts (Freitas et al., 2004). As noted previously, there is growing evidence for the flexible calibration of construal levels to our motivational priorities (Nguyen et al., 2019; Torrez et al., 2019; Trope et al., 2020), and the important role of close others in shaping a dynamic network of individual and collective goal pursuit (Fitzsimons et al., 2015). A considerable body of literature also points to the importance of self-regulation in goal pursuit, with self-control playing an especially important role when we need to resist immediately tempting alternatives in order to sustain our goal-directed efforts (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998; Baumeister & Vohs, 2007; Tice et al., 2007). CLT research has repeatedly found that for those who possess an important long-term goal, abstract construal mindsets can support temptation resistance by drawing attention to the goal relevance of the decision and the long-term implications of the progoal versus protemptation options (Fujita, 2008; Fujita & Carnevale, 2012; Fujita & Han, 2009; Fujita et al., 2006). Similarly, in

interdependent contexts such as those with close relationship partners, a particular set of conflicts of interest can emerge (often called *interdependence dilemmas*) wherein propartner or prorelationship courses of action are pitted against immediately gratifying self-interest (see Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Many of the most well studied relationship maintenance activities (e.g., sacrifice, benign attributions, conflict management, forgiveness, fidelity) represent partners' capacities to forgo self-interest in favor of sustaining relational well-being. These cognitive and behavioral responses are shown to be facilitated by self-control capacity, whether measured or manipulated in the lab (e.g., Burnette et al., 2014; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Pronk & Karremans, 2014; Ritter et al., 2010). While not all interdependence dilemmas may be more likely to crop up given pandemic-related limitations on socializing, those that do may be especially impactful. Some preliminary evidence suggests that abstract construals may help partners navigate these conflicts of interest and respond in a prorelationship manner, particularly those higher in relationship commitment (Bowen, 2017). Partners' long-term relationship maintenance goals are reflected in their commitment (see Arriaga & Agnew, 2001), which may populate an abstract construal of an interdependence dilemma with prorelationship and propartner priorities. As such, partners who find themselves in conflict may benefit most from more abstract framings of the disagreement they are facing. Such a mindset may be more accessible to partners who are socially distanced because of the congruence between their psychological distance and an abstract construal level. The concrete mindset that is more available to cohabiting partners may represent the converse situation during conflict, whereby self-control is inhibited and disagreements may therefore be more destructive. Calibration of construal levels to stages of goal pursuit more generally versus self-control contexts in particular is certainly complex, and made even more so by variability in psychological distance between oneself and the relationship partner with whom one may be managing intersecting goals. Nevertheless, the CLT framework enables us to appreciate the role of mental representation in shaping social processes and psychological functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and can make several useful predictions about partners' behaviors. While more data are needed to test the predictions identified here, CLT may also provide insights and strategies that can help partners successfully navigate these difficult times.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

Due to the pandemic, our social lives can feel unusually static. We did not arrive at this state of affairs through gradual transition and ample preparation. As such, we have not been well positioned to develop robust coping mechanisms geared toward sustaining our most valued relationships and maintaining large-scale lifestyle changes to support public health. Social cognitive mechanisms like those outlined in CLT can help us to frame and communicate about many of our greatest social challenges in the wake of COVID-19, which may support partners' efforts to sustain and grow their relationships despite the difficulties of the pandemic. More work is needed to gain a fuller picture of how partners may be leveraging construal levels to cope with the varied challenges they are facing, such as an examination of the more abstract and concrete linguistic properties of their narratives about their experiences during the pandemic (e.g., Semin & Fiedler, 1991). The more healthily we can manage our daily lives during this unprecedented and trying time, the more earnestly we may be able to rediscover intimate and public social life once the pandemic is behind us.

ORCID
Jeffrey D. Bowen https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9151-5469

REFERENCES

Amit, E., Wakslak, C., & Trope, Y. (2013). The use of visual and verbal means of communication across psychological distance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *39*, 43–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167212460282

Armitage, R., & Nellums, L. B. (2020). COVID-19 and the consequences of isolating the elderly. *The Lancet Public Health*, *5*, e256. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30061-X

Arriaga, X. B., & Agnew, C. R. (2001). Being committed: Affective, cognitive, and conative components of relationship commitment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*, 1190–1203. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167201279011

Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M., & Tice, D. M. (1998). Ego depletion: Is the active self a limited resource? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*, 1252–1265. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.5.1252

Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2007). Self-regulation, ego depletion, and motivation. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *1*, 115–128. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00001.x

Borelli, J. L., Rasmussen, H. F., Burkhart, M. L., & Sbarra, D. A. (2014). Relational savoring in long-distance romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *32*, 1083–1108. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407514558960

Bowen, J. D. (2017). *The 4-A model of relationship maintenance: Abstraction in attention, assessment, and action* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of California, Santa Barbara.

Brandstätter, V., & Frank, E. (2002). Effects of deliberative and implemental mindsets on persistence in goal-directed behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*, 1366–1378. https://doi.org/10.1177/014616702236868

Burgoon, E. M., Henderson, M. D., & Markman, A. B. (2013). There are many ways to see the forest for the trees. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *8*, 501–520. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691613497964

Burnette, J. L., Davisson, E. K., Finkel, E. J., Van Tongeren, D. R., Hui, C. M., & Hoyle, R. H. (2014). Self-control and forgiveness. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *5*, 443–450. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550613502991

Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H. (1986). Organizational information requirements, media richness and structural design. *Management Science*, *32*, 554–571. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.32.5.554

Dunham, A. M., Rieder, T. N., & Humbyrd, C. J. (2020). A bioethical perspective for navigating moral dilemmas amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons*, *28*, 471–476. https://doi.org/10.5435/JAAOS-D-20-00371

Eastwick, P. W., Finkel, E. J., & Eagly, A. H. (2011). When and why do ideal partner preferences affect the process of initiating and maintaining romantic relationships? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *101*, 1012–1032. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024062

Finkel, E. J., & Campbell, W. K. (2001). Self-control and accommodation in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*, 263–277. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.2.263

Finkel, E. J., Cheung, E. O., Emery, L. F., Carswell, K. L., & Larson, G. M. (2015). The suffocation model. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *24*, 238–244. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721415569274

Finkel, E. J., Hui, C. M., Carswell, K. L., & Larson, G. M. (2014). The suffocation of marriage: Climbing Mount Maslow without enough oxygen. *Psychological Inquiry*, *25*, 1–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2014.863723

Fitzsimons, G. M., Finkel, E. J., & vanDellen, M. R. (2015). Transactive goal dynamics. *Psychological Review*, *122*, 648–673. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039654

Ford, M. B. (2020). Social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic as a predictor of daily psychological, social, and health-related outcomes. *The Journal of General Psychology*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221309.2020.1860890

Freitas, A. L., Gollwitzer, P., & Trope, Y. (2004). The influence of abstract and concrete mindsets on anticipating and guiding others' self-regulatory efforts. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *40*, 739–752. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2004.04.003

Fujita, K. (2008). Seeing the forest beyond the trees: A construal-level approach to self-control. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *2*, 1475–1496. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00118.x

Fujita, K., & Carnevale, J. J. (2012). Transcending temptation through abstraction. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *21*, 248–252. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721412449169

Fujita, K., & Han, H. A. (2009). Moving beyond deliberative control of impulses. *Psychological Science*, *20*, 799–804. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02372.x

Fujita, K., Trope, Y., Liberman, N., & Levin-Sagi, M. (2006). Construal levels and self-control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*, 351–367. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.3.351

Galea, S., Merchant, R. M., & Lurie, N. (2020). The mental health consequences of COVID-19 and physical distancing. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, *180*, 817–818. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.1562

Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. *American Psychologist*, *54*, 493–503. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.7.493

Gollwitzer, P. M., & Brandstätter, V. (1997). Implementation intentions and effective goal pursuit. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*, 186–199. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.1.186

Guldner, G. T., & Swensen, C. H. (1995). Time spent together and relationship quality: Long-distance relationships as a test case. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *12*, 313–320. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407595122010

Hess, Y. D., Carnevale, J. J., & Rosario, M. (2018). A construal level approach to understanding interpersonal processes. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *12*, e12409–e12413. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12409

Hollingsworth, J. (2020). *Love under lockdown: The couples pushed together and kept apart by coronavirus*. https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/28/asia/love-lockdown-couples-intl-hnk/index.html

Jiang, L. C., & Hancock, J. T. (2013). Absence makes the communication grow fonder: Geographic separation, interpersonal media, and intimacy in dating relationships. *Journal of Communication*, *63*, 556–577. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12029

Joshi, P. D., Wakslak, C. J., Raj, M., & Trope, Y. (2015). Communicating with distant others. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *7*, 37–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550615590449

Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, methods, and research. *Psychological Bulletin*, *118*, 3–34. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.118.1.3

Kaye, L. K., Malone, S. A., & Wall, H. J. (2017). Emojis: Insights, affordances, and possibilities for psychological science. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *21*, 66–68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2016.10.007

Kelmer, G., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S., & Markman, H. J. (2013). Relationship quality, commitment, and stability in long-distance relationships. *Family Process*, *52*, 257–270. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2012.01418.x

Killgore, W. D. S., Cloonan, S. A., Taylor, E. C., Lucas, D. A., & Dailey, N. S. (2020). Loneliness during the first half-year of COVID-19 lockdowns. *Psychiatry Research*, *294*, 113551–113552. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113551

Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, *108*, 480–498. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480

Le, B., Korn, M. S., Crockett, E. E., & Loving, T. J. (2010). Missing you maintains us: Missing a romantic partner, commitment, relationship maintenance, and physical infidelity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *28*, 653–667. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510384898

Le, B., Loving, T. J., Lewandowski, G. W., Feinberg, E. G., Johnson, K. C., Fiorentino, R., & Ing, J. (2008). Missing a romantic partner: A prototype analysis. *Personal Relationships*, *15*, 511–532. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2008.00213.x

Lewnard, J. A., & Lo, N. C. (2020). Scientific and ethical basis for social-distancing interventions against COVID-19. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*, *20*, 631–633. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30190-0

Liberman, N., Trope, Y., & Wakslak, C. (2007). Construal Level Theory and consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *17*, 113–117. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1057-7408(07)70017-7

Luetke, M., Hensel, D., Herbenick, D., & Rosenberg, M. (2020). Romantic relationship conflict due to the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in intimate and sexual behaviors in a nationally representative sample of American adults. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, *46*, 747–762. https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2020.1810185

Marroquín, B., Vine, V., & Morgan, R. (2020). Mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: Effects of stay-at-home policies, social distancing behavior, and social resources. *Psychiatry Research*, *293*, 113419. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113419

Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Griffin, D. W. (1996). The benefits of positive illusions: Idealization and the construction of satisfaction in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*, 79–98. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.1.79

Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2002). Judgments of a relationship partner: Specific accuracy but global enhancement. *Journal of Personality*, *70*, 1079–1112. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.05032

Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2005). To know you is to love you: The implications of global adoration and specific accuracy for marital relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *88*, 480–497. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.88.3.480

Nguyen, T., Carnevale, J. J., Scholer, A. A., Miele, D. B., & Fujita, K. (2019). Metamotivational knowledge of the role of high-level and low-level construal in goal-relevant task performance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *117*, 876–899. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000166

Pietromonaco, P. R., & Overall, N. C. (2020). *Applying relationship science to evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic may impact couples' relationships. American Psychologist*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000714

Pronk, T. M., & Karremans, J. C. (2014). Does executive control relate to sacrificial behavior during conflicts of interests? *Personal Relationship*, *21*, 168–175. https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.120124

Rim, S., Amit, E., Fujita, K., Trope, Y., Halbeisen, G., & Algom, D. (2015). How words transcend and pictures immerse. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *6*, 123–130. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550614548728

Rim, S., Uleman, J. S., & Trope, Y. (2009). Spontaneous trait inference and Construal Level Theory: Psychological distance increases nonconscious trait thinking. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *45*, 1088–1097. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2009.06.015

Ritter, S. M., Karremans, J. C., & van Schie, H. T. (2010). The role of self-regulation in derogating attractive alternatives. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *46*, 631–637. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.02.010

Rusbult, C. E., & Van Lange, P. A. M. (2003). Interdependence, interaction, and relationships. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *54*, 351–375. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.54.101601.145059

Semin, G. R., & Fiedler, K. (1991). The Linguistic Category Model, its bases, applications and range. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *2*, 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779143000006

Solomon, D. H., & Knobloch, L. K. (2004). A model of relational turbulence: The role of intimacy, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners in appraisals of irritations. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *21*, 795–816. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407504047838

Stafford, L., & Merolla, A. J. (2007). Idealization, reunions, and stability in long-distance dating relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *24*, 37–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407507072578

Stafford, L., Merolla, A. J., & Castle, J. D. (2006). When long-distance dating partners become geographically close. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *23*, 901–919. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407506070472

Stafford, L., & Reske, J. R. (1990). Idealization and communication in long-distance premarital relationships. *Family Relations*, *39*, 274–279. https://doi.org/10.2307/584871

Stephan, E., Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (2010). Politeness and psychological distance: A construal level perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *98*, 268–280. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016960

Sun, N., Wei, L., Shi, S., Jiao, D., Song, R., Ma, L., Wang, H., Wang, C., Wang, Z., You, Y., Liu, S., & Wang, H. (2020). A qualitative study on the psychological experience of caregivers of COVID-19 patients. *American Journal of Infection Control*, *48*, 592–598. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajic.2020.03.018

Theiss, J. A., & Solomon, D. H. (2006). A relational turbulence model of communication about irritations in romantic relationships. *Communication Research*, *33*, 391–418. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650206291482

Tice, D. M., Baumeister, R. F., Shmueli, D., & Muraven, M. (2007). Restoring the self: Positive affect helps improve self-regulation following ego depletion. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *43*, 379–384. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.05.007

Torrez, B., Wakslak, C., & Amit, E. (2019). Dynamic distance: Use of visual and verbal means of communication as social signals. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *85*, 103849. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2019.103849

Trope, Y., Ledgerwood, A., Liberman, N., & Fujita, K. (2020). *Regulatory scope and its mental and social supports. Perspectives on Psychological Science.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620950691

Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2003). Temporal construal. *Psychological Review*, *110*, 403–421. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.110.3.403

Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review*, *117*, 440–463. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018963

Tull, M. T., Edmonds, K. A., Scamaldo, K. M., Richmond, J. R., Rose, J. P., & Gratz, K. L. (2020). Psychological outcomes associated with stay-at-home orders and the perceived impact of COVID-19 on daily life. *Psychiatry Research*, *289*, 113098–113106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113098

Van Bavel, J. J. V., Baicker, K., Boggio, P. S., Capraro, V., Cichocka, A., Cikara, M., Crockett, M. J., Crum, A. J., Douglas, K. M., Druckman, J. N., Drury, J., Dube, O., Ellemers, N., Finkel, E. J., Fowler, J. H., Gelfand, M., Han, S., Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., ... Willer, R. (2020). Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *4*, 460–471. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0884-z

Van Boven, L., Kane, J., McGraw, A. P., & Dale, J. (2010). Feeling close: Emotional intensity reduces perceived psychological distance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *98*, 872–885. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019262

Van Horn, K. R., Arnone, A., Nesbitt, K., Desllets, L., Sears, T., Giffin, M., & Brudi, R. (1997). Physical distance and interpersonal characteristics in college students' romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships*, *4*, 25–34. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.1997.tb00128.x

Wakslak, C., & Trope, Y. (2009). The effect of construal level on subjective probability estimates. *Psychological Science*, *20*, 52–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02250.x

Wiesenfeld, B. M., Reyt, J.-N., Brockner, J., & Trope, Y. (2017). Construal Level Theory in organizational research. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *4*, 367–400. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032516-113115

Wilder-Smith, A., & Freedman, D. O. (2020). Isolation, quarantine, social distancing and community containment: Pivotal role for old-style public health measures in the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) outbreak. *Journal of Travel Medicine*, *27*, 1–4. https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taaa020

Woolley, K., & Fishbach, A. (2016). For the fun of it: Harnessing immediate rewards to increase persistence in long-term goals. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *42*, 952–966. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv098

Woolley, K., & Fishbach, A. (2017). Immediate rewards predict adherence to long-term goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *43*, 151–162. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216676480

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jeff Bowen is a teaching faculty member in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences at Johns Hopkins University. He received his PhD in Social and Personality psychology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. His work examines the role of mental representation in intimate relationships, particularly with respect to navigating conflicts of interest. Along with his undergraduate research team, he also explores psycholinguistic properties of romantic partner communication and the role of social media in relationship maintenance.