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# Psychological Distance and Group Judgments: The Effect of Physical Distance on Beliefs about Common Goals

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*The present research examined the consequences of physical distance on beliefs about common goals, which have been implicated in judgments of entitativity (“groupness”) of social entities. A central feature of task groups is the degree to which its members are driven by common goals. According to construal level theory, as stimuli are removed psychologically (e.g., physically), people construe stimuli in more abstract terms, focusing more on central features of stimuli. Adopting this framework, four studies demonstrated that people are more likely to assume the behavior of task group members is driven by common goals for physically distant rather than near groups. This effect occurred when perceived identification and similarity to others were held constant. Implications for intergroup relations are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *entitativity; construal; psychological distance; physical distance; common goals*

An inherent feature of human existence is social interaction. Throughout the course of a lifetime, individuals frequently communicate and engage with a variety of social entities. These entities can be loose associations (e.g., people in a cinema), intimacy groups (e.g., kin relations), task groups (e.g., colleagues), or social categories (e.g., Blacks; Lickel et al., 2000). Importantly, not all social entities are judged to possess the same level of entitativity or “groupness”. Over the past 50 years, much research has been dedicated to understanding the factors that affect the degree to which social entities are judged to be a group (e.g., see Yzerbyt, Judd, & Corneille, 2004), as well as the dimensions on which groupness is judged for different social entities (e.g., common goals, common traits, etc.). Identifying the factors that affect judgments of groupness has contributed to a better understanding of important social

consequences, including stereotyping and prejudice (Spencer-Rodgers, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2007; Yzerbyt, Corneille, & Estrada, 2001) and the encoding, organization, and processing of social information (Sherman, Castelli, & Hamilton, 2002). The current set of studies examines the role physical (geographical) distance from social entities plays in beliefs about their common goals.

## GROUPNESS

Several studies have examined the role different features or properties play in the perceived groupness of members of a social entity (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2006; Campbell, 1958; Dasgupta, Banaji, & Abelson, 1999; Ip, Chiu, & Wan, 2006; Magee & Tiedens, 2006), including the amount of interaction among the members, the degree to which members’ behavior appears to be motivated by common goals, the degree to which members experience the same fate, the degree to which members have similar traits, the uniformity and valence of the emotional expression of members, and the importance that membership in the social entity has to its members. Importantly, people’s intuitive theories about social entities assume different features govern interactions for different kinds of social entities (Lickel et al.,

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2000). Although no single feature or property defines the distinctions people make among different types of social entities, some features seem to be more central for people's theories about social entities. For example, members of social categories (e.g., AIDS patients, women) are generally believed to have common traits (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000), whereas members of task groups (e.g., sports teams, political action committees) are believed to be motivated by common goals (Lickel et al., 2000). In fact, task groups in particular represent a case where the initial creation of the social entity is predicated on the existence of the feature of common goals.<sup>1</sup>

### PHYSICAL DISTANCE

Interestingly, despite the fact that early research on judgments of groupness argued that the degree of proximity between members of a social entity impacts group judgments (Campbell, 1958), the impact of distance *from* others rather than *between* others has not been systematically studied. In fact, when distance from others has been studied, it has been in the form of a dependent rather than independent variable (e.g., see Knowles & Bassett, 1976, for an examination of the spatial properties of interacting groups). People's physical distance from others during social interactions has grown dramatically within the past decade. With increased access to the Internet and mobile telecommunication (Horrigan, 2008), individuals can immediately communicate and interact with social entities in both near and distant geographical locations. Most of the early research on physical distance has demonstrated that increased distance from others reduces social connectedness to them (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Latané, Liu, Nowak, & Bonevento, 1995).<sup>2</sup>

The present research is grounded in a construal level theory of physical distance (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003), which posits that people adopt different levels of representation or construal depending on their psychological distance from objects and events. Lower level, more concrete construals are presumably used to navigate direct experiences with objects and events. However, as people's experience with objects and events becomes less direct and more psychologically distant (e.g., removed in space or time), people presumably become less knowledgeable or certain about specific details and instead rely on abstract, higher levels of construal (schemas or prototypes). Construal level theory argues that people develop an association between distance and construal, such that objects and events that are close in space or time trigger lower levels of construal whereas objects and

events that are far away in space or time trigger higher levels of construal.

The content of more concrete, lower levels of construal consists of specific details (Cohen, 2000; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987) and emphasize idiosyncratic, incidental features of objects and events (Sherman, 1980; Trope & Liberman, 2000). The content of more abstract, higher levels of construal consists of an essence, gist, or summary (Reyna & Brainerd, 1995; Schul, 1983) and emphasizes central features of objects and events that tend to be more independent of context (E. R. Smith, 1998; Semin & Fiedler, 1988; Trope & Liberman, 2000). For example, when an individual agrees to serve as a speaker at a conference, she might construe the experience at a higher level of construal as "disseminating knowledge" or at a lower level of construal by focusing on the specific details for attending the conference (e.g., "securing a hotel," "finding a substitute for her class," etc.).

Recently, Fujita and his colleagues provided the first evidence that greater physical distance led to a more abstract construal of social events (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). For example, in one study, individuals who watched a video that was purportedly taped in a geographically distant place used more abstract language to describe the content of the video as compared to individuals who thought the video was taped in a geographically near place. Research has shown that the use of abstract language is an indicator of higher levels of construal (Semin & Fiedler, 1988). Further studies by Henderson and his colleagues examined the nature of physical distance in construal-dependent social judgments (Henderson, Fujita, Trope, & Liberman, 2006). For example, in one study, participants expected a greater likelihood for typical events and a lesser likelihood for atypical events in a geographically distant rather than near location. That is, a specific event was believed to resemble a prototypical event, which is relatively abstract (J. D. Smith & Minda, 2001), to a greater degree when individuals were making judgments about distant events.

### PHYSICAL DISTANCE AND GROUP JUDGMENTS

As mentioned previously, increased physical distance from objects and events is posited to increase the focus individuals give to central, defining information about objects and events over more situationally dependent, idiosyncratic features. The present research will test whether increased physical distance from members of a social entity leads individuals to have more confidence in inferring that members have certain central characteristics.

As mentioned previously, a central feature of task groups is the common goals that drive its members' behavior (Lickel et al., 2000). Construing events or objects at a more abstract, higher level consists of bringing to mind the most prototypical or average features that individuals extract out of experiences with those events or objects (Posner & Keele, 1968). As events or objects are construed at a more concrete, lower level, individuals are likely to bring to mind more idiosyncratic characteristics or attributes that vary as a function of the context or situation those events or objects are placed in (e.g., see Griffin, Dunning, & Ross, 1990; Idson & Mischel, 2001).

By definition, abstraction occurs through a process of increased weighting of information concerning the central tendency of a set of instances (Posner & Keele, 1970). In the case of construing members of a task group at a higher level, individuals should be particularly likely to think about members in more general terms (i.e., as simply a group), thereby resulting in greater confidence in inferring that members exhibit features that are prototypical of the group (i.e., common goals). Consequently, factors that are likely to promote a higher level construal of members of a task group, including increased physical distance, should lead individuals to expect members of the group to possess or exhibit the group's most prototypical features. Assuming common goals are a central feature that members of a task group prototypically share, increased physical distance from members of a task group is hypothesized to lead individuals to infer more common goals among the members of the group.

## STUDY 1

In the current study, individuals are asked to judge members of a task group that are framed either as being geographically close by or far away. The farther away members of a group are from someone, the more likely those members should be construed in terms of their central group-relevant features. Given that a defining feature of any task group is the common goals and purposes of the group, individuals are predicted to be more likely to assume that members of a task group that are geographically far rather than close share common goals. Note that individuals' experiences with others who are geographically far away typically tend to be with others who are less similar to them and more difficult to identify with (i.e., more socially distant others). Consequently, the present research takes steps to isolate the effect of increased physical distance on group judgments independent of any differences in social distance from others (see Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008, for a discussion of social distance).

## Method

In Study 1, 38 University of Chicago students and employees (15 females) were given a bottled soft drink in return for responding to a brief survey about group dynamics. Participants were asked to imagine themselves as a manager of a team that worked for a global corporation that had its main office located in Chicago. For half of the participants, the team members were said to be in Chicago (physically near condition). For the other half of the participants, the team members were said to be in Edinburgh, Scotland (physically distant condition). Importantly, in both conditions participants were told to imagine that as the manager most of their communication with the team members occurred via e-mail and conference calls. Also, in both conditions the team members were said to be originally from different parts of the world. Both of these pieces of information were included to ensure that social distance from the team members did not differ between the experimental conditions. These pieces of information were also included to ensure that participants in the physically distant condition did not infer that team members put in more effort to participate in the group (i.e., traveled farther) than participants in the physically near condition. Finally, in both conditions participants were told to imagine that as the manager one of their duties was to evaluate the dynamics of the team members. Specifically, participants in the physically near [distant] condition read:

You are managing the team members in Chicago [Scotland] who are responsible for a project with one of your corporation's clients. After the team members in Chicago [Scotland] have worked together for about a month, you decide to check in with each of the team members individually to try to assess how the team is doing. If there are problems, it might be advantageous to make some changes in the way you manage the team members in Chicago [Scotland] or to the tasks you assign them. In the meeting with the team members in Chicago [Scotland], you asked them a series of questions. You took brief notes about each team member during the meetings.

### Measures

Participants were presented with two possible descriptions that might characterize the team members. These descriptions were modified from statements that were used by Rydell and McConnell (2005) to manipulate group entitativity. One of the descriptions described the team as lacking cohesion and driven by different goals. Specifically, it stated:

The team members in Chicago [Scotland] rarely act as a single unit. The team members in Chicago [Scotland]

usually engage in behaviors that help them move toward their own separate goals. The team members in Chicago [Scotland] behave in different ways with different underlying intentions motivating their actions.

The other description described the team as having cohesion and driven by common goals. Specifically, it stated:

The team members in Chicago [Scotland] usually act as a single unit. The team members in Chicago [Scotland] usually engage in behaviors that help them move toward their common goal. Although the team members in Chicago [Scotland] behave in different ways, their actions are motivated by the same underlying intentions.

Participants indicated the extent to which they believed the descriptions were true of the team members using an 8-point scale (1 = *unlikely that it characterizes them* to 8 = *likely that it characterizes them*).<sup>3</sup> To address potential confounds, two 8-point scales were also included to measure participants' evaluation of people who reside in the same location as the team members ("How much do you like/dislike people who work where the team members work?") and identification with the team members ("How much do you identify with the team members described in this questionnaire"); higher numbers indicated a more negative evaluation and higher identification.

## Results

### *Beliefs About Common Goals*

Participants' beliefs about the members of the task group were analyzed using a 2 (member framing: different goal pursuit vs. common goal pursuit)  $\times$  2 (physical distance: near vs. distant) mixed-factor ANOVA, with the first factor as a within-participant factor and the second factor as a between-participant factor. Results revealed no main effect of physical distance,  $F(1, 36) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .11$ , and a significant main effect of member framing,  $F(1, 36) = 4.28$ ,  $p = .05$ , which was qualified by a significant Member Framing  $\times$  Physical Distance interaction effect,  $F(1, 36) = 4.91$ ,  $p < .05$ . Specific comparisons revealed that participants in the physically near condition were just as likely to infer that the members were driven by different goals ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) as they were to infer that the members were driven by common goals ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $t < 1$ . A different pattern emerged for participants in the physically distant condition, as they were more confident in inferring that the members were driven by common goals ( $M = 5.79$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) than different goals ( $M = 4.26$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ),  $t(18) = 3.22$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 1.52$ .

The effect of physical distance on beliefs about common goals, however, does not appear to be explained by

differences in evaluation or identification. Participants in the physically near and distant conditions did not differ significantly in their evaluations of people who reside where the team members were located ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.11$  vs.  $4.37$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) nor in their identification with the team members ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 1.90$  vs.  $3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ). Moreover, when adjusting for evaluation and identification, the Framing  $\times$  Physical Distance effect remains significant,  $F(1, 35) = 4.77$ ,  $p < .05$  and  $F(1, 34) = 5.56$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively, suggesting that they do not mediate the effect of physical distance on beliefs about common goals.<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion

The results from the current study demonstrated that simply framing a group as being geographically far away was enough to lead individuals to be more confident in assuming that the behavior of the members of the group was driven by common goals. A well-established finding from social psychology is that socially distant others (outgroups) are generally perceived as being more homogenous than others that are socially close (ingroups; Judd & Park, 1988; Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989; Messick & Mackie, 1989; Park & Judd, 1990; Wilder, 1984). Typically, the more socially distant others are from someone, the more physically distant they tend to be also (e.g., racial segregation in neighborhoods). What makes the results of the current study particularly striking is that the effect of physical distance on beliefs about the common goals of others was still found even when social distance (measured via identification and evaluation) was held constant, illustrating the importance of physical distance independent of social distance for group judgments.

## STUDY 2

The previous study involved having participants imagine themselves as an authority or leader of a group. The current study attempts to replicate the findings from the previous study while eliminating any power differences between the participants and the group members being judged. The current study assumes that the further away members of a group are from someone, the more likely those members will be expected to share central group-relevant features, which in the case of a task group are the common goals of group members. The following study tests this hypothesis.

## Method

In Study 2, 23 New York University students (11 females; 1 person failed to indicate his or her sex)

responded to a brief survey about group dynamics in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Participants were presented with a supposedly real group of students (National Accrediting Board of Higher Education) who participated in a roundtable discussion about how American universities should respond to requests to implement senior comprehensive exams. This group description was adopted from stimuli used by Rydell and McConnell (2005). Participants were told the roundtable discussion took place at the group's most recent meeting. For half of the participants, the location where the students held their meeting was New York City (physically near condition). For the other half of the participants, the location where the students held their meeting was San Francisco (physically distant condition). Importantly, in both conditions the students who were at the meeting were said to be from various American universities. This information was included to ensure that the experimental conditions did not differ in either their social distance from the students or the amount of effort they believed students put into traveling to the group's meeting.

### Measures

Participants were presented with two possible descriptions that might characterize the students who belonged to the group. As in Study 1, these descriptions were modified from group entitativity manipulations that were used by Rydell and McConnell (2005). One of the descriptions described the students as lacking cohesion and driven by different goals. Specifically, it stated:

Students who were at the San Francisco [Manhattan] meeting about senior comprehensive exams rarely act as a single unit. This group is loosely organized with no specific purpose or intention. Students who were at the San Francisco [Manhattan] meeting engage in behaviors that help them move toward their own separate goals. Students on the Board might behave in different ways with different underlying intentions motivating their actions.

The other description described the students as having cohesion and driven by common goals. Specifically, it stated:

Students who were at the San Francisco [Manhattan] meeting about senior comprehensive exams tend to act as a single unit. This group is highly organized with a specific purpose or intention that drives the group's behaviors. Students who were at the San Francisco [Manhattan] meeting engage in behaviors that help the group move toward their common goal. Although students on the Board might behave in different ways, their actions are motivated by similar underlying intentions.

Participants indicated the extent to which they believed the descriptions were true of the students using an 8-point scale (1 = *unlikely that it characterizes them* to 8 = *likely that it characterizes them*). To address potential confounds, three 8-point scales were also included to measure participants' evaluation of the students ("If you got the chance to interact with the students described in this questionnaire, how much do you think you would like/dislike them?"), identification with the students ("If you got the chance to interact with the students described in this questionnaire, how much do you think you would identify with them?"), and perceived similarity to the students ("If you got the chance to interact with the students described in this questionnaire, how dissimilar/similar do you think you would be to them?"); higher numbers indicated a more negative evaluation, higher identification, and more perceived similarity.

## Results

### Beliefs About Common Goals

Participants' judgments of the members were analyzed using a 2 (member framing: different goal pursuit vs. common goal pursuit)  $\times$  2 (physical distance: near vs. distant) mixed-factor ANOVA, with the first factor as a within-participant factor and the second factor as a between-participant factor. Results revealed no main effect of physical distance,  $F < 1$ , and a marginally significant main effect of member framing,  $F(1, 21) = 3.07$ ,  $p = .09$ , which was qualified by a significant Member Framing  $\times$  Physical Distance interaction effect,  $F(1, 21) = 5.07$ ,  $p < .05$ . Specific comparisons revealed that participants in the physically near condition were just as likely to infer that the members were driven by different goals ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) as they were to infer that the members were driven by common goals ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ),  $t < 1$ . Similar to Study 1's results, participants in the physically distant condition were more confident in inferring that members were driven by common goals ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) rather than different goals ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ),  $t(10) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 1.74$ .

The effect of physical distance on beliefs about common goals, however, does not appear to be explained by differences in evaluation, identification, or perceived similarity. Participants in the physically near and distant conditions did not differ significantly in their evaluations of the students ( $M = 4.67$ ,  $SD = 1.23$  vs.  $4.55$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ), their identification with the students ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.68$  vs.  $4.45$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ,  $t < 1$ ), nor their perceived similarity with the students ( $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.29$  vs.  $4.63$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ). Moreover, when adjusting for evaluation

of the members, identification with the members, and perceived similarity to the members, the Framing  $\times$  Physical Distance effect remains significant,  $F(1, 20) = 5.43, p = .03, F(1, 20) = 4.19, p = .05$ , and  $F(1, 20) = 4.79, p = .04$ , respectively, suggesting that they do not mediate the effect of physical distance on beliefs about common beliefs.

## Discussion

As in Study 1, the results from the current study demonstrated that simply framing others as being geographically far away was sufficient to lead individuals to assume that the behavior of members of a task group were especially driven by common goals. Importantly, the effect of physical distance on perceived common goals emerged even after power differences were eliminated between the individuals being judged, illustrating that the effects of physical distance are not limited to situations involving power differences. Moreover, the results remained even after holding social distance constant, again highlighting the importance of physical distance independent of social distance for group judgments.

## STUDY 3

The previous studies hypothesized and found support for the notion that the farther away members of a task group were from someone, the more those members would be expected to share central group-relevant features (common goals). One limitation of the previous studies, however, is that they failed to examine whether increased physical distance from task groups only affected judgments about the central features of those task groups. That is, increased physical distance from members of a task group is expected to impact only the perceived common goals of the members of that group. In order to test this hypothesis, the following study asks participants to rate a task group that is framed as either geographically close by or far away on several group-relevant features, including common goals.

## Method

In Study 3, 68 University of Chicago students and employees (39 females) were given a bottled soft drink in return for responding to a brief survey about group dynamics. The same procedure as in Study 1 was used in this study. For half of the participants, the team members were said to be in Chicago (physically near condition). For the other half of the participants, the team members were said to be in Toronto, Canada (physically distant condition).

## Results

### Measures

Four 9-point scales were used to assess participants' beliefs about *common goals* ("One way of describing a group is the extent to which the members of the group have the same goals. So, aside from whether the people themselves are similar or dissimilar, they may have common goals that bring them together. Please indicate the extent to which you think the team members in Toronto [Chicago] have common goals"), beliefs about *common fate* ("Groups also differ in the extent to which membership in the group means that the group's members experience the same outcomes. That is, in some groups, all members either succeed or fail together, whereas in other groups, individual members may succeed or fail independently of the other members. Please indicate the extent to which you think the team members in Toronto [Chicago] experience the same outcomes."), beliefs about *group membership importance* ("Another way of describing a group is the extent to which membership in the group is important to the people in the group. Please rate the extent to which you think being a member of the group is important for the team members in Toronto [Chicago]."), and beliefs about *similarity* ("One important element in describing a group is the extent to which the people in the group are the same or different from each other. Sometimes we would expect that the people are all quite similar to each other. In other cases, we might not expect a high degree of similarity among members of the group. Please indicate the extent to which you think the team members in Toronto [Chicago] are similar or dissimilar to each other."); higher numbers indicated greater common goals, common outcomes, group membership importance, and similarity. These measures were drawn from Lickel et al. (2000). A 9-point scale was also included to measure participants' identification with the team members ("How much do you identify with the team members described in this questionnaire?"); higher numbers indicated higher identification.

## Results

### Beliefs About Group-Relevant Features

As predicted, participants who imagined the team members at a physically distant location were more likely to believe that their actions were driven by common goals ( $M = 6.26, SD = 0.98, N = 35$ ) than participants who imagined the team members at a physically near location ( $M = 5.67, SD = 1.31, N = 33$ ),  $t(66) = 2.11, p < .05, d = .52$ . Critically, participants in the physically near and distant conditions did not differ in their beliefs

about the common fate of the team members ( $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.87$  vs.  $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ), beliefs about importance of group membership to the team members ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $SD = 2.10$  vs.  $M = 5.86$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ),<sup>5</sup> or beliefs about the similarity of the team members ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.94$  vs.  $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ,  $t < 1$ ). Also as expected, the effect of physical distance on beliefs about common goals does not appear to be explained by differences in identification. Participants in the physically near and distant conditions did not differ significantly in their identification with the team members ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 2.08$  vs.  $3.92$ ,  $SD = 2.37$ ,  $t < 1$ ), and when adjusting for identification the effect of physical distance on beliefs about common goals remains significant,  $F(1, 65) = 4.22$ ,  $p = .04$ , suggesting that it does not mediate the effect of physical distance on beliefs about common goals.

## Discussion

The findings from the current study demonstrated that the farther away members of a task group were from participants, the more the group members were assumed to be driven by common goals. As in the previous studies, the effect of physical distance remained even after controlling for social distance from the group members. Critically, only beliefs about common goals were affected by the amount of physical distance from group members, as beliefs about common fate, group membership importance, and similarity did not differ for near and distant groups. This supports the contention that increased physical distance from a group increases the weight people give to central group-relevant features when they are forming group judgments.

## STUDY 4

Across the previous three studies, the amount of physical distance from task group members was manipulated and individuals' beliefs about common goals were examined. The underlying assumption across the previous studies has been that when individuals construe members of a task group at a higher level, rather than considering the unique idiosyncratic circumstances that might impact particular members of the group, individuals think about the members more generally in terms of simply being group members. Consequently, higher levels of construal are assumed to lead individuals to infer that task group members' actions are driven by things that are most central to being in the group (common goals). In essence, the impact of increased

physical distance from task group members on inferences about their common goals should be mediated by the extent to which members are thought about more generally in terms of simply being group members rather than as individuals who have unique experiences outside of the group. The current study set out to provide direct evidence that increased physical distance from members of a group will lead individuals to construe those members as simply group members rather than as individuals with unique experiences.

The current study also set out to provide direct evidence that physical distance impacts group judgments independent of social distance (i.e., identification and similarity). Specifically, participants are presented with group members who are in a single geographical location and asked to indicate their beliefs about common goals, their perceptions of the geographical distance from the members' location, and their perceived social distance from the members. The amount of perceived physical distance from the members is hypothesized to positively relate to people's confidence in inferring common goals in the members, even after controlling for social distance from the members.

## Method

In Study 4, 98 University of Chicago students and employees (47 females; 3 people failed to indicate their sex) were given a bottled soft drink in return for responding to a brief survey about group dynamics. The same procedure as in Study 2 was used in this study with the following modification. All participants were told that the students held their meeting in Evanston, Illinois.

### Measures

The same measures of beliefs about common goals as used in Studies 1 and 2 were used in this study. Using an 8-point scale, the extent to which participants construed the students as members of a group as opposed to unique individuals was assessed ("As you were making your judgment about the students who were at the meeting, how did it seem like you were thinking about them? 1 = *as unique individuals* to 8 = *as members of a group*") and their perceived physical distance from the location where the students held their meeting ("How physically close/far does this location seem to you? 1 = *very close* to 8 = *very far*"). Using the same measures as in Study 2, participants' evaluation of the students, identification with the students, and perceived similarity with the students were also assessed.

## Results

### *Beliefs About Common Goals*

For ease of data analysis, a composite was created by reverse-coding agreement with the description that characterized the group as driven by different goals and averaging participants' responses to their agreement with the description that characterized the group as driven by common goals. Higher numbers indicated greater common goals of the group members. As expected, the farther away participants perceived the students' location to be, the more they believed the students' actions were motivated by common goals ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ).<sup>6</sup> The relationship between perceived distance and beliefs about common goals remains significant after partialling out participants' evaluation of the students ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ), participants' identification with the students ( $r = .27, p < .01$ ), and perceived similarity with the students ( $r = .28, p < .01$ ).

### *Tests of Mediation*

To test whether participants' construal of the group members mediated the relationship between physical distance on beliefs about common goals, a multiple regression analysis was performed following Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998). First, perceived physical distance significantly predicted beliefs about common goals,  $\beta = .27, t(96) = 2.74, p < .01, d = .56$ , and construal of the group members,  $\beta = .27, t(96) = 2.73, p < .01, d = .56$ . Second, construal of the group members predicted beliefs about common goals,  $\beta = .54, t(95) = 6.20, p < .001$ , with perceived physical distance held constant. Finally, perceived physical distance no longer significantly predicted beliefs about common goals when construal of the group members was included in the model,  $\beta = .13, t(95) = 1.44, p = .15$ . A Sobel test of mediation (Sobel, 1982) confirmed that construal of the group members mediated the relationship between perceived physical distance and beliefs about common goals (Sobel test = 2.50,  $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrated that the farther away individuals perceived the members of a task group to be, the more they were thought of as a group rather than as separate individuals, which led individuals to assume their behavior was driven by the same goals rather than different goals. Importantly, this relationship held even after controlling for perceived social distance from the group members. By holding the actual location of the group members constant in the study, the findings demonstrated the importance of the perceived physical distance for group judgments.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across four studies, greater physical distance from others who belonged to a task group led individuals to assume others were more unified around common goals and purposes for the group. The effect occurred regardless of whether actual physical distance was manipulated (Studies 1-3) or perceived physical distance was measured (Study 4). Importantly, the effect of physical distance on perceived common goals was repeatedly found to be independent of social distance that was assessed multiple ways, which supports the general argument that varying the amount of physical distance from groups can impact group judgments regardless of whether any differences in social distance occur as a result. In addition, physical distance only affected judgments of common goals for task groups (Study 3), as physical distance was hypothesized to only be relevant for judgments of central group-relevant features. This latter effect has particular theoretical value to the domain of group perception, as it adds to the growing body of literature that strives to better define the entitativity (groupness) construct (e.g., see Yzerbyt et al., 2004). For example, Ip and her colleagues (2006) have recently argued for different forms of entitativity based on the degree to which people perceive either similarity or cohesion among others. The present research fits in nicely within this broader literature, as psychological distance and concomitant construal are assumed to impact judgments about group-relevant features in different ways for different groups.

Many properties have been recognized as feeding into individuals' judgments of groupness for a social entity (Campbell, 1958). In many ways, the present research was based on the reverse notion that thinking about people more generally as group members feeds into individuals' inferences about the extent to which people possess or share certain properties. A main assumption throughout the present work has been that certain features are more central to a group, making those features more prototypical of its members. In the case of a task group, common goals have been identified as a key characteristic that is defining for the group. Increased physical distance from members of a task group was posited to lead individuals to construe those members more generally in terms of being a group, resulting in central group-relevant properties being given great weight in individual's representation of members. Conversely, as the physical distance from a task group was decreased, individuals were posited to be more sensitive to the fact group members' actions can be heavily determined by the specific situation or context those members find themselves in (e.g., see Henderson, et al., 2006, Study 2).

By definition, the behavior of members of a task group is centered on the group's goals. However, idiosyncratic situational constraints may impact particular members differently, thereby creating variability in the motives driving their behavior. To the extent that individuals weight such situational variability more when thinking about members of a task group (i.e., thinking about members more in terms of their unique circumstances), they should be less inclined to assume that members are uniformly driven by the same goals. This is consistent with the observed pattern of results, as participants appeared unsure of whether members of a task group were driven by common goals or different goals when they were framed as physically close by. As increased physical distance from members led individuals to construe them more in terms of being a part of a group and less in terms of the idiosyncratic circumstances operating on the members, individuals appeared to think about the members as prototypical members who pursue common goals.

### Limitations

One of the limitations of the present research is that it relied on a self-report measure of the extent to which individuals represented others as a group versus as unique persons. With such a measure, it is impossible to know whether the effects of increased physical distance on the degree of individuation actually occurred during the processing of information about others or as a downstream consequence of perceiving others as high in entitativity. In order to address this issue, future research should rely on more direct cognitive measures and examine, for example, how individuals handle variability information about others (e.g., see Park & Hastie, 1987, Study 2).

Another potential limitation of the present research is the absence of a "neutral" condition where physical distance from the members of a task group is not specified. This lack of control condition may lead one to question whether physical distance from the self increases individuals' beliefs about common goals in others or physical closeness to the self decreases individuals' beliefs about common goals in others. From the point of view of construal level theory, these are in fact the same thing. Specifically, a construal level theory of distance makes relative claims about the impact of distance on representations and judgments. That is, concepts such as time and space exist on a continuum, and all events and objects must exist at some point in time or space. While the present research was mostly framed in terms of examining the effects of increased physical distance from the self, it could have just as well been framed in terms of the effects of increased physical closeness to the

self. The inclusion of a distance-unspecified condition would presumably reflect individual differences within the sample of where participants imagined the task group to be located. Importantly, the results of Study 4 illustrate that even individual variability in perceived geographical distance impacts group judgments.

### Implications

The current findings would seem to have specific implications for when individuals are likely to think others are responsible and capable of carrying out action, as well as additional implications for stereotyping and intergroup relations.

*Action.* Several factors are assumed to influence the degree to which people judge others as being unified around common goals (e.g., see Magee & Tiedens, 2006). Importantly, such factors are particularly likely to have an influence when not much information is known about others (e.g., Ip et al., 2006), as is often the case when people learn about the past or future actions of unfamiliar others. Research has shown that the more people assume that others are unified around common goals, the more likely they are to assign collective responsibility when the actions of a few are carried out (Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003). Research has also shown that the more people assume that others are unified around common goals, the more likely they are to assume that others are capable of engaging in collective action in the future (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998). The findings from the present research imply that individuals should be more likely to assign collective blame for the past actions of group members and expect more collective action in the future from members when they are physically farther away.

*Stereotyping.* Much research has been devoted to studying the antecedents and consequences of stereotyping (Fiske, 1998; Hamilton & Sherman, 1994), with the emphasis heavily placed on social categories (e.g., race, gender). Recently, research has shown that the degree of groupness inferred in others predicts the extent to which individuals hold stereotype-like representations of not only members of social categories but task groups as well (Spencer-Rodgers et al., 2007). To the extent that increased physical distance from others leads individuals to be more likely to construe others as a group rather than as unique persons, the findings from the present research have the potential to advance basic theoretical work in the area of stereotyping and its effects (i.e., prejudice). Specifically, as physical distance is increased from others, individuals should be more inclined to form stereotypes and exhibit prejudice toward others.

One could predict that classic group perception effects such as the outgroup homogeneity effect might even be moderated by the perceived geographical distance from others. That is, members of an outgroup might be assumed to be even less variable than members of an ingroup when they are physically farther away. Of course, whether increased physical distance would similarly impact people's variability judgments for ingroup versus outgroup members is an empirical question. From a construal level theory point of view, outgroup members are already more psychologically remote from the self than ingroup members, and therefore one might predict that increased physical distance from the self would have a greater impact on group judgments for ingroup members than outgroup members. Future research should examine this issue.

*Social conflict.* Individuals frequently engage with others whose goals are incompatible with their own, setting the foundation for social conflict (Klar, Bar-Tal, & Kruglanski, 1988). One of the main procedures used to deal with social conflict is open communication, frequently referred to as negotiation. If one extends the findings from the current studies to interactions with others who have oppositional goals, one might argue that when individuals have difficulty resolving a goal conflict with a member of a group that is geographically far away, individuals will be more inclined to assume that it will be just as difficult to engage with other members from that same group since they are likely to have the same goals. As a result, individuals may be more willing to exhaust opportunities for resolving social conflicts when engaging with others that are geographically close by, simply because they assume that people from geographically close groups are likely to have different agendas or goals from one another, which facilitates deal making and negotiation. With distant groups, individuals may think there is less room for negotiation with members of those groups because they assume the members of those groups are unified around common goals that are completely opposed to their own goals.

#### Future Directions

Across the present set of studies, participants' assumptions about the common goals of group members reflected their initial beliefs about why the members behaved the way they did based on no actual observations of how the members behaved within the groups. Future research should examine what happens to such initial beliefs after individuals actually interact with group members that are geographically close versus far away. One possibility is that individuals will rely on their initial beliefs to disambiguate group members'

behavior in such a way that they end up confirming their beliefs that the distant group members are driven by common goals more than near group members (assimilation effect). The other possibility is that individuals will realize that the degree of common goals in distant groups is not as high as they expected and end up judging the distant group members as being even less driven by common goals than near group members (contrast effect).

Future research should also explore the consequences of increased physical distance for judgments about other groups besides task groups. For example, given that a central feature of social categories are their common traits, one would expect increased physical distance from members of a social category to lead individuals to assume that members have more traits in common. Finally, future research should examine the impact of other forms of psychological distance besides geographical distance on group judgments. As noted earlier, much research has examined the impact of social distance on group judgments, but whether increased temporal distance from members of a task group influences beliefs about common goals has never been examined. As individuals reflect about others in the distant past or prepare for interactions with others in the distant future, one would predict that individuals would be inclined to view others' behavior as being driven by common goals.

#### CODA

The present research examined previously unexplored consequences of increased physical distance for group judgments. More and more, cultures are incorporating increased physical distance into fundamental aspects of human experience, including distant learning and education (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006), distant therapy and treatment (Mohr, Vella, Hart, Heckman, & Simon, 2008), and distant political participation (Best & Krueger, 2005). The present research helps to understand how increased physical distance from others influences how individuals think about others during such important social interactions.

#### NOTES

1. One might question whether the pursuit of a common goal always leads to a common fate or outcome for individuals within a task group, thereby making common goals and common fate equally central features of a task group. There are several reasons to assume that common fate is not at the same degree of centrality as common goals for task groups. First, inferences about common goals and common fate have been shown to be differentially affected by group-relevant information (Magee & Tiedens, 2006). Second, whether members of

a task group experience the same outcomes will depend on members' individual successes and failures. Given that the presence of common goals within a task group is not determined by such variability and given that the existence of common fate is more of a downstream consequence of the particular actions carried out by members, the present research assumes that common goals is more of a central feature of task groups than common fate.

2. In an insightful chapter, Wicklund (2004) recognized that several theoretical perspectives (e.g., reactance theory, delay of gratification) actually predict that the farther away others are, the more attracted people would be to them.

3. The presentation order of the two descriptions was counterbalanced in Studies 1, 2, and 4 and did not affect the results of any of the studies.

4. One participant failed to respond to the identification item.

5. In each of the studies presented in this article, group members in both the physically near and distance conditions were always described as coming from various parts of the country or world. This information was included to ensure that participants in the physically distant conditions did not infer that the members put in more effort traveling to participate in the group and therefore were more motivated to belong to the group. Such increased motivation could translate into greater inferences of shared goals and purpose for the group. Critically, the failure to find any differences between experimental conditions on beliefs about importance of group membership suggests that the current studies were successful in controlling for any difference in the perceived motivation of the group members.

6. The perceived distance from the members of the task group was positively associated with the belief that the members are driven by common goals ( $r = .32, p = .001$ ) and negatively associated with the belief that the members are driven by different goals, although this latter relationship failed to reach significance ( $r = -.14, p = .16$ ).

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