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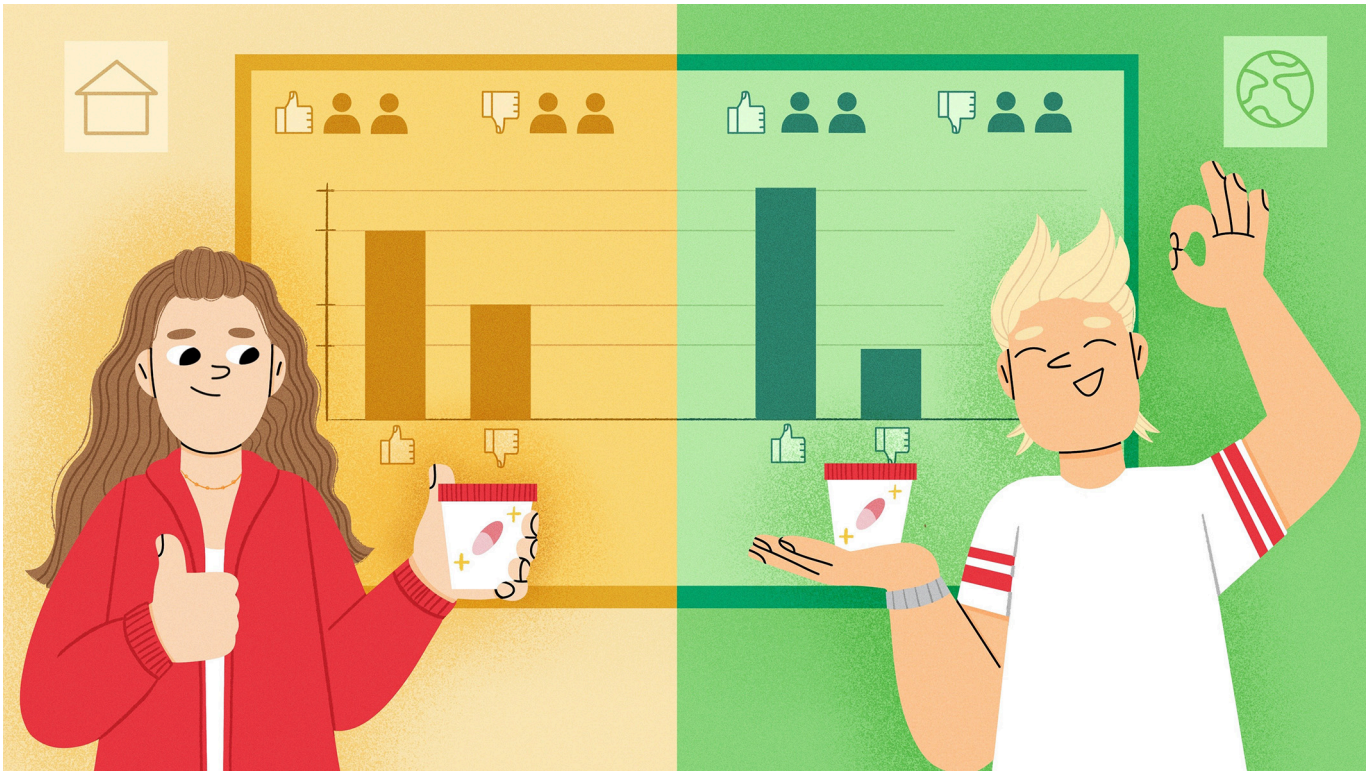

DO WE THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT PEOPLE AND THINGS FAR AWAY?

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:

ZALMAN ARAN JUNIOR HIGH, HOLON: 8TH GRADE

AGES: 13–14

People develop attitudes toward objects, other people, and events. For example, we like one person but not another, or we prefer one style of music over other types. Often, our attitudes are based on learning from previous experiences. For example, if you meet someone and they are friendly, you are likely to develop a positive attitude toward that person. People tend to generalize what they have learned, which means they expect similar people to behave the same way. For example, you would probably expect the friendly person's friends to be friendly as well. But does it matter if the person you meet is from another country or your own country? In this article, we will review findings showing that, when people learn about distant things, such as a product imported from a faraway country, they are more likely to generalize their attitudes. We will explain why this happens and how it relates to stereotypes.

WHAT IS GENERALIZATION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Imagine that you wanted to learn to play the guitar, so you enrolled in a class. In the first lesson, you discover that the teacher is from a foreign country. The lesson was excellent—you learned new things and enjoyed it. What do you expect to happen in the next lesson? After your first good experience, you will probably develop a positive **attitude** toward the teacher and expect the next lesson to be good as well. But would you expect *all* guitar teachers from that same country to be good? Would you even perhaps start to think that all teachers from that same country are good in all subjects? Now imagine a similar situation, but this time with a teacher from your own country. Would you still expect all teachers from your country to be good? This example illustrates our research question: Do people tend to make broader generalizations when it comes to far away vs. nearby experiences?

Most of the knowledge we acquire about the world is learned from personal experience. But because of the enormous number of objects and events in the world, it is impossible to learn about everything through personal experience. **Generalization** is one way people overcome this inability to learn about every little thing [1]. As in the guitar example, if you learn that a specific teacher is good, you might generalize about other teachers in the same subject or teachers from the same country and expect them to be good, too. The ability to generalize serves us in almost every area of life. For example, if you buy headphones and discover that they are poor quality, you will probably develop a negative attitude toward the company that made them and may even decide not to buy from that company in the future. Although the ability to generalize is important, sometimes it can lead to undesirable consequences, such as **stereotypes** toward social groups. If these stereotypes are negative, they can lead to **prejudice** and even **discrimination**. For example, if the guitar teacher from the foreign country was not good, a person might use this experience to generalize about all teachers from that country and avoid them unfairly.

Generalization has a widespread influence on how people think and behave. Therefore, it is interesting to examine what factors affect generalization, and whether and how it can be increased or reduced. One of the classic findings in the study of learning is that people tend to generalize more about things that are similar to their previous experiences [1]. For example, if you learn that a foreign guitar teacher is a good teacher, you are more likely to expect a saxophone teacher from the same country to be good too, as opposed to a driving instructor from the same country. In the present study, we tested the hypothesis that **psychological distance** [2], or the extent to which the object of experience is far, can also affect the degree of generalization. We hypothesized that generalization would be greater when learning

ATTITUDE

A positive or negative assessment of people, objects, and ideas. Attitudes often influence behavior.

GENERALIZATION

The ability to use learning from previous experiences in new but similar situations.

STEREOTYPES

Generalizations toward groups of people that attribute the same characteristics to all members of the group.

PREJUDICE

A learned attitude toward individuals or groups that involves negative emotions (hostility, fear) and negative beliefs (stereotypes) that supposedly justify the attitude. Prejudice can lead to avoidance of a group.

DISCRIMINATION

An unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or sexual orientation.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE

The degree to which objects and events are far from the direct experience of the self here and now.

from a "far" experience (such as a product from a foreign country) vs. a "near" experience (such as a product from your own country).

WHY MIGHT PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE AFFECT GENERALIZATION?

As human beings, we constantly deal with things that happen beyond the here and now. For example, we remember the past and plan for the future, we imagine faraway places or wonder about people from other cultures, and we think about "what if" (hypothetical) situations. These examples represent the four dimensions of psychological distance: time, space, social distance, and hypothetical distance (the likelihood that an event will occur—the lower the likelihood of an event occurring, the more hypothetically distant it is). Psychological distance presents us with a challenge of uncertainty. While in the here and now we can know what is happening with a fairly high degree of certainty, the farther we get from the present, the greater the uncertainty. For example, I know, with a pretty high degree of certainty what I am going to eat this evening. On the other hand, I am much less sure about what I will be eating in 10 years. So, how can we overcome the challenge of uncertainty associated with distant situations?

Construal level theory is a theory in the field of psychology that deals with exactly this question [2–4]. According to the theory, people use **abstract thinking** to deal with the uncertainty that characterizes distant situations. Abstract thinking allows us to find the commonalities between things and ignore irrelevant information that may change. For example, a guitar and a saxophone are different in almost every way, but if I call them both "musical instruments", they then have a kind of similarity. The use of the abstract term "musical instrument" is appropriate for a wider range of situations than the term "guitar" is. It may be that, in the distant past, people did not play guitar; and perhaps even today there are cultures that do not know what a guitar is. On the other hand, the term "musical instruments" is suitable for distant times, distant places, distant cultures, and hypothetical situations.

CONSTRUAL LEVEL THEORY

A theory in social psychology according to which the more distant objects and events are from the individual, the more abstract they will be thought of, and vice versa.

ABSTRACT THINKING

Finding common ground and connecting related objects or ideas into categories, helping us move beyond specific details to understand the essential features of things and see the big picture.

In our study, which was based on construal level theory, we hypothesized that psychological distance would increase generalization. Specifically, experience with a distant object, as opposed to a near object, should be represented in a more abstract way (e.g., musical instrument vs. guitar) and therefore lead to generalization of a wider range of similar objects.

HOW DID WE TEST OUR HYPOTHESIS?

We conducted three experiments. In each, participants were asked to read a short piece of text and then answer several questions. In the text, we asked participants to imagine that they had a headache and went to

a nearby pharmacy to buy a headache medicine that they had not tried before. We divided the participants into two research groups: a *near condition* and a *far condition*. The participants assigned to the near condition read that the medicine they bought was made locally, in their own country. Participants in the far condition read that the medicine was produced in a different country and imported. It is important to note that these first two experiments were carried out in Israel and Germany simultaneously. In the near condition, German participants read about a German company, and Israeli participants read about an Israeli company. In the far condition, German participants read about an Israeli company, and Israeli participants read about a German company.

In addition, each research group was divided into two subgroups: positive experience and negative experience. In the positive condition, participants were asked to imagine that, shortly after taking the medicine, the headache passed. In the negative condition, participants read that the medicine worsened the headache and even caused nausea. Thus, we had four experimental conditions, as shown in Figure 1. Each participant was assigned to one of the four research conditions and read the appropriate text. Remember that in each group there were German and Israeli participants, but since no differences were found between the countries, we will present the experimental setup and the results without referring to the country.

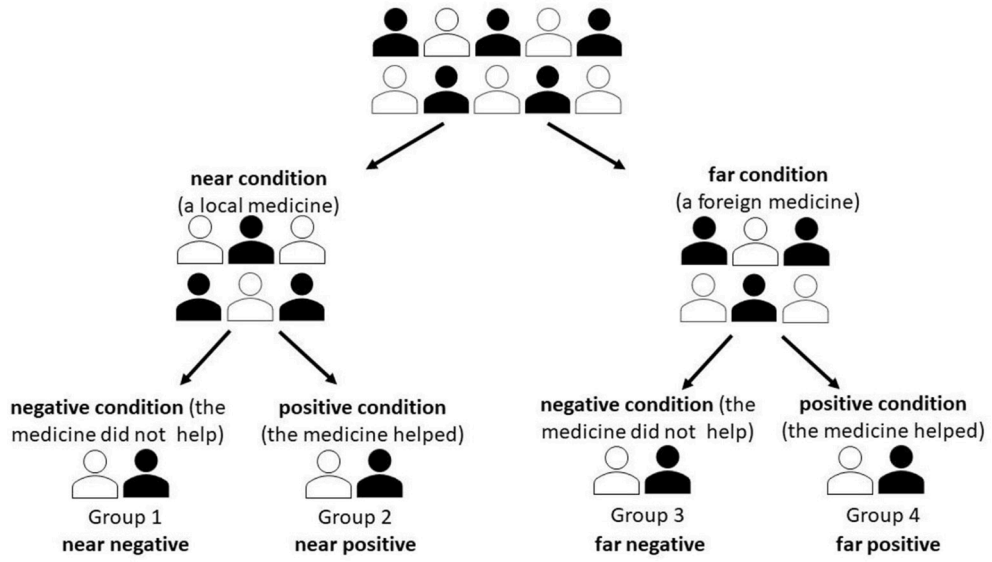

Figure 1

Figure 1

Setup of our experiment. We divided participants into 4 groups. First, they were divided into either the near condition (local medicine) or the far condition (foreign medicine). Those two conditions were both divided into positive experiences (groups 2 and 4) and negative experiences (groups 1 and 3). Each research group had Israeli and German participants, represented by the black and white figures.

DID A PSYCHOLOGICALLY DISTANT PRODUCT INCREASE GENERALIZATION?

To measure generalization, after they read the text about their research condition, we asked participants how willing they would be to purchase five products (their buying intentions): (1) the same exact

headache medicine; (2) another headache medicine from the same company; (3) vitamins from the same company; (4) band-aids from the same company; (5) a headache medicine from another company but from the same country. Participants marked their buying intentions for each product on a scale from 1 (not likely at all) to 10 (very likely).

First, we compared the results from the positive condition (the medicine cured the headache) with those from the negative condition (the medicine did not work; Figure 2A). We found that there was a greater intention to buy a product after a positive experience than a negative one. The difference between the positive and negative experiences indicates the degree to which people distinguish between products based on those experiences. The greater this difference, the greater the degree of generalization. In the second stage, we tested this research hypothesis by comparing the difference between the near condition and the far condition. In accordance with the hypothesis, we found that the difference was greater when the experience was with a far (a foreign) product compared to an experience with a near (a local) product. That is, psychological distance increased generalization. This pattern of results was obtained only for

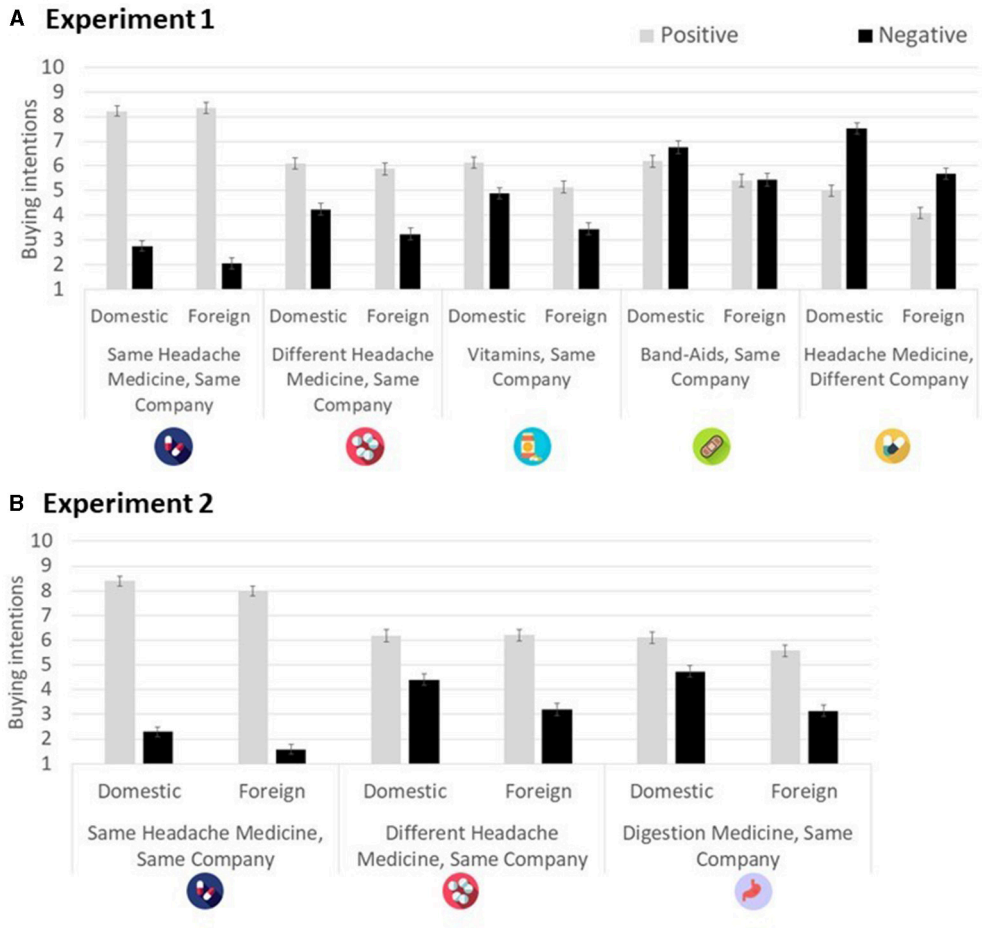

Figure 2

These graphs show the results of our experiments. The Y-axis shows the buying intentions indicated by the participants (from 1 to 10). The X-axis shows the different products, divided into near (domestic) and far (foreign) conditions. The black bars represent negative experience, while the gray bars represent positive experience. **(A)** In Experiment 1, we found greater generalization in the far condition than the near condition for the original headaches medicine, a new medicine for headaches, and vitamins. **(B)** In Experiment 2, we found similar results for the original headaches medicine, a new medicine for headaches and indigestion medicine.

the first three questions: the original medicine for headaches, a new medicine for headaches, and vitamins.

In the second experiment, we replicated the first experiment with the following modifications: first, in the far conditions, we used a Canadian medicine. That is, both the German and Israeli participants in the far conditions read about a Canadian medicine. This change was intended to rule out the possibility that the results of the first experiment stemmed from existing stereotypes about Israeli or German products. Second, we also looked at generalizations about an indigestion medicine. We removed the questions about vitamins, band-aids, and medicine from another company, since the generalization toward them was low. The results of the second experiment also showed that distance increases generalization (Figure 2B). These results were also obtained in a third experiment that was an exact replication of the second.

HOW MIGHT THIS RESEARCH BE USED?

The results of the study showed that psychological distance increases generalization. The fact that the same results were obtained in several experiments and with participants from different countries reinforces the conclusion. One of the direct applications of this study is to the fields of marketing and consumer behavior. For example, the results suggest that, when it comes to a foreign brand imported into Israel, people will develop stronger feelings (both positive and negative) compared to a local brand. Another application has to do with the social world—perhaps the tendency to use stereotypes toward social groups is related to the fact that these groups are perceived as more distant. Another potential application is in education and teaching. It will be interesting to examine whether learning from distant examples increases a student's ability to generalize. For example, if a mathematical word problem talks about a train in a distant country traveling at a certain speed, as opposed to a train traveling in the students' own country, will students be better able to understand the abstract relationship between the variables and how to solve the problem? Future studies will be able to examine these questions in depth.

ORIGINAL SOURCE ARTICLE

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

YOUNG REVIEWERS

ZALMAN ARAN JUNIOR HIGH, HOLON: 8TH GRADE, AGES: 13–14
We are curious 8th graders from Zalman Aran Middle School in Holon. This year, our entire class took part in the Frontiers for Young Minds program, in which we were challenged with interesting topics, learned how to read a scientific article and reviewed articles. The activity with Frontiers Science for Young Minds is part of our curriculum and appears on our end-of-year report card.

AUTHORS

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I am a social psychologist and a faculty member in the Department of Social and Health Sciences at Bar-Ilan University. My research deals with learning and decision-making processes. I take a social and cognitive perspective to examine how

our past experiences shape our decision making and behavior. For example, I study how psychological factors such as psychological distance, probability associations (the likelihood of events occurring) and valence (negative vs. positive experiences) influence learning processes. I love researching these questions with researchers from Israel and around the world. In my free time, I enjoy going to the beach, checking out art exhibitions, and exploring the learning abilities of Mitzi, the cat who adopted my parents. *hadar.ram@biu.ac.il