

“Once Upon a Time, Far, Far Away”: Psychologically Distal Stories Are Judged as More Suitable to Convey General Messages

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Abstract

Storytelling helps people learn, make sense of the world, and connect with others. But stories and narrative may vary in how effective they are perceived to be at communicating different types of messages. Drawing on research on storytelling, communication, and psychological distance, we predicted that psychologically distant (vs. proximal) narratives would be perceived as more appropriate for conveying general messages. Findings across seven preregistered studies that used diverse tasks and manipulations of distance—including foreign versus local settings (Studies 1–3), large versus small audiences (Study 4), more versus less hypothetical scenarios (Study 5), and temporally proximal versus distal personal documentation (Study 6)—supported this prediction, suggesting that psychological distance signals that a narrative is intended to convey a general, abstract lesson. These findings have implications for how narratives are used in education, interpersonal communication, art, and persuasive messaging.

Keywords

storytelling, communication, psychological distance, abstraction, narratives, social cognition

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Storytelling is a powerful tool for communicating knowledge, values, and lessons across time and cultures. From transmitting traditions and moral lessons to educating and persuading, stories serve functions that go far beyond entertainment. Yet not all stories are perceived as equally effective in conveying different types of messages. A common narrative feature across genres and cultures is the use of psychological distance. From phrases like “once upon a time” to faraway settings and fantasy characters, stories often situate events in distant times, places, or realities. This raises a key question: What role does distance serve in narrative-based communication? What would happen if Athena were portrayed as a neighbor instead of a goddess or Harry Potter lived in a regular universe rather than a magical one? Although distancing is a widespread feature of both traditional and contemporary storytelling, empirical research examining its communicative function remains scarce.

The central argument we make in the current manuscript is that psychological distance in stories is not merely a stylistic convention but rather serves a function: it signals that the story is intended to convey a general message. We base this prediction on construal level theory (CLT; Liberman &

Trope, 2008, 2014; Trope & Liberman, 2010), which posits that any event can be construed both abstractly and concretely. Abstract construals are general; they emphasize core features while omitting incidental details that can vary without significantly altering the event’s meaning. In contrast, concrete construals are relatively unstructured and context-dependent, incorporating subordinate or incidental features of events (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Gilead et al., 2020; Rosch, 1978). For example, the same event might be described as “giving this particular homeless person a meal” (concrete), “helping someone in need”

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(intermediate), or “showing compassion” (abstract). The theory posits that because abstract construals are more context-independent, their messages “travel” more easily—that is, they can be better understood and applied across time, space, social context, and alternative realities (i.e., across psychological distance). Applying CLT to narrative communication, we predict that psychologically distant (vs. proximal) stories and narratives more broadly would be seen as more suitable for conveying abstract, general messages that apply across contexts, rather than specific, concrete information, and that people would actually perceive their messages as more general. Notably, not all narratives intend to communicate general messages. Some aim to inform about concrete events (e.g., how was the present government formed) or supply actionable instructions (e.g., how to navigate bureaucratic procedures). In such cases, proximal narratives may be better suited for conveying the specific information.

Two additional perspectives provide important complementary insights. First, as alluded to earlier, many traditional features of folk stories map onto the four dimensions of psychological distance (Thomson, 2017; Vansina, 1971) identified in CLT: (a) temporal distance (e.g., “once upon a time”), (b) spatial distance (e.g., “faraway lands”), (c) social distance (e.g., protagonists such as kings, princesses, or heroes), and (d) hypotheticality (e.g., “a spell” or “a fairy”). Over time, the use of psychologically distant elements within folk stories intended to provide insight may have reinforced an association between distance and meaning-making in storytelling. A CLT perspective supplements this observation by pointing to why this association may have developed in the first place, suggesting that these features are not random but rather serve to encourage people to understand a story as communicating a general message rather than an account of a specific event.

Second, an association between distance and narrative meaning also dovetails well with pragmatic theories of communication, which emphasize that listeners go beyond the literal content of utterances to infer a speaker’s communicative intent (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). According to such accounts, contextual cues guide listeners’ inferences about what a speaker means to convey. For example, the Rational Speech Act (RSA) framework (Degen, 2023) formalizes this process as recursive Bayesian inference between speakers and listeners. CLT complements pragmatic approaches by identifying psychological distance as one such contextual cue: when narrated events are set in distant contexts, listeners are more likely to infer that the intended message is general rather than specific. CLT, however, may apply more broadly than pragmatic communication-based accounts, because it does not assume a communicative intent. Whereas pragmatic frameworks presuppose a speaker who intends to convey meaning and a listener who tries to recover that intent, CLT predicts that psychological distance evokes greater abstraction among both speakers and listeners, rendering a distal narrative a

more appropriate conduit for a general lesson from each of their potential perspectives.

Empirically, some preliminary evidence is consistent with the current arguments. For example, Kross and Grossmann (2012) found that social distance—manipulated through instructing participants to reason about personally significant issues (e.g., career decisions or presidential elections) from a distanced (rather than immersed) perspective—enhanced wise reasoning. They defined wisdom as intellectual humility, open-mindedness, perspective-taking, and compromise-seeking (see also Grossmann, 2017; Kross et al., 2017). Relatedly, Shaeffer et al. (2015) found that visual perspective influenced participants’ preference for abstract over concrete language. After viewing an image of an action (e.g., wrapping a gift) from a third-person (vs. first-person) perspective, participants read a fable unrelated to the image, followed by abstract and concrete descriptions of the actions in the fable (see also Niese et al., 2024). Those primed with a third-person perspective showed a greater preference for abstract descriptions, suggesting a carryover priming effect of visual perspective on descriptions’ construal. Importantly, in both studies, psychological distance was manipulated through perspective, either linguistic or visual, rather than through the content of the narrative itself.

In the present research, we extend this prior work by manipulating psychological distance of the narrative itself and examining (a) whether distant (vs. proximal) narratives are perceived as better suited for conveying general, abstract messages (Studies 1–5) and (b) whether distant (vs. proximal) narratives are indeed interpreted as conveying more general and abstract messages (Studies 5–6).

Transparency, Openness, and Power Considerations

All studies were preregistered. Preregistrations, data, analysis code, and materials are available on OSF. Sample sizes were determined using G*Power (Faul et al., 2013) aiming for at least 80% power to detect small-to-medium effects and were increased to account for data collection in noisy environments (i.e., online samples). In Study 1, we were only able to recruit 210 of the intended 230 participants. In Study 3, we were only able to recruit 76 out of the intended 90 participants due to strict eligibility criteria requiring that participants live near the story’s referenced locations. The Supplemental Online Materials present detailed power calculations for each study, along with data exclusions based on preregistered criteria

Study 1: Perceived Effectiveness of Distant and Proximal Stories in Conveying General Messages

Method

Participants. We recruited participants via the Israeli internet platform Panel4All. After preregistered exclusions (see

A

A young boy from Ramat Gan walked into a craft store [One day, a young boy named Tran walked into a store in Vietnam] and asked: 'Do you have small nails?' 'Certainly' They replied. Ron [The boy] continued to ask: 'And threads, do you have those?' 'Yes, of course' They answered him. 'And painting supplies?' 'Yes'. 'Then' Ron asked [the boy] in surprise, 'why don't you produce shoes?'

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

There is something to be learned from this text

1 = Strongly disagree ☐	2 ☐	3 ☐	4 ☐	5 = Strongly agree ☐
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B

Where does the event described in the text take place?

☐ Israel

☐ Vietnam

Are you familiar with the text you read?

☐ yes

☐ no

Figure 1. Study 1 materials. Panel (A) shows the story (proximal and distant versions) and the dependent measure. Panel (B) shows the manipulation check and familiarity questions.

Note. The distant version is shown in brackets.

the Supplemental Online Materials for details), 192 participants remained (140 women, 50 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 27.79$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 5.17$). They were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions ($N_{\text{proximal}} = 94$, $N_{\text{distant}} = 98$).

Materials and Procedure. Participants read a short story adapted from Arabic folktales of Juha (Dawood, 2022). The original folktale served as inspiration, but we created our own versions (Figure 1). We manipulated psychological distance by varying both the protagonist's name and the geographic location mentioned in the story: The proximal condition included a local name and a local city, whereas the distant condition included a foreign name and a geographically distant country.

After reading the story, participants rated their agreement with the statements: "There is something to be learned from this text" on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Participants then reported whether they are familiar with the text and completed a manipulation check asking about the location in which the event took place. Finally, they provided demographic information and reported any technical issues during the study.

Results

As predicted, participants indicated that there was more to learn from psychologically distant stories ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.22$) than proximal stories ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.28$),

$t(190) = 2.43$, $p = .008$, $d = .35$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.65]. Excluding participants who reported familiarity with the text did not change the results (see the Supplemental Online Materials for full analyses).

Study 2a: Judging What Messages Are Likely to be Extracted From Near and Distant Stories—Forced Choice

Study 2a explored whether people associate psychologically distant stories with general messages and proximal stories with concrete messages. Unlike in Study 1, no specific story content was used, so as to minimize potential content-related alternative explanations, or familiarity with particular story-location pairings.

Method

Participants. We recruited participants via Prolific. After pre-registered exclusions (see the Supplemental Online Materials for details), 109 participants remained (69 women, 35 men, five other gender; $M_{\text{age}} = 26.49$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.11$).

Materials and Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to read about one of two fictional characters: Helen, who lives in a snowy area, or Jihan, who lives in a desert area. Each character listens to two stories—one story set in a nearby location (e.g., snowy for Helen, desert for Jihan) and

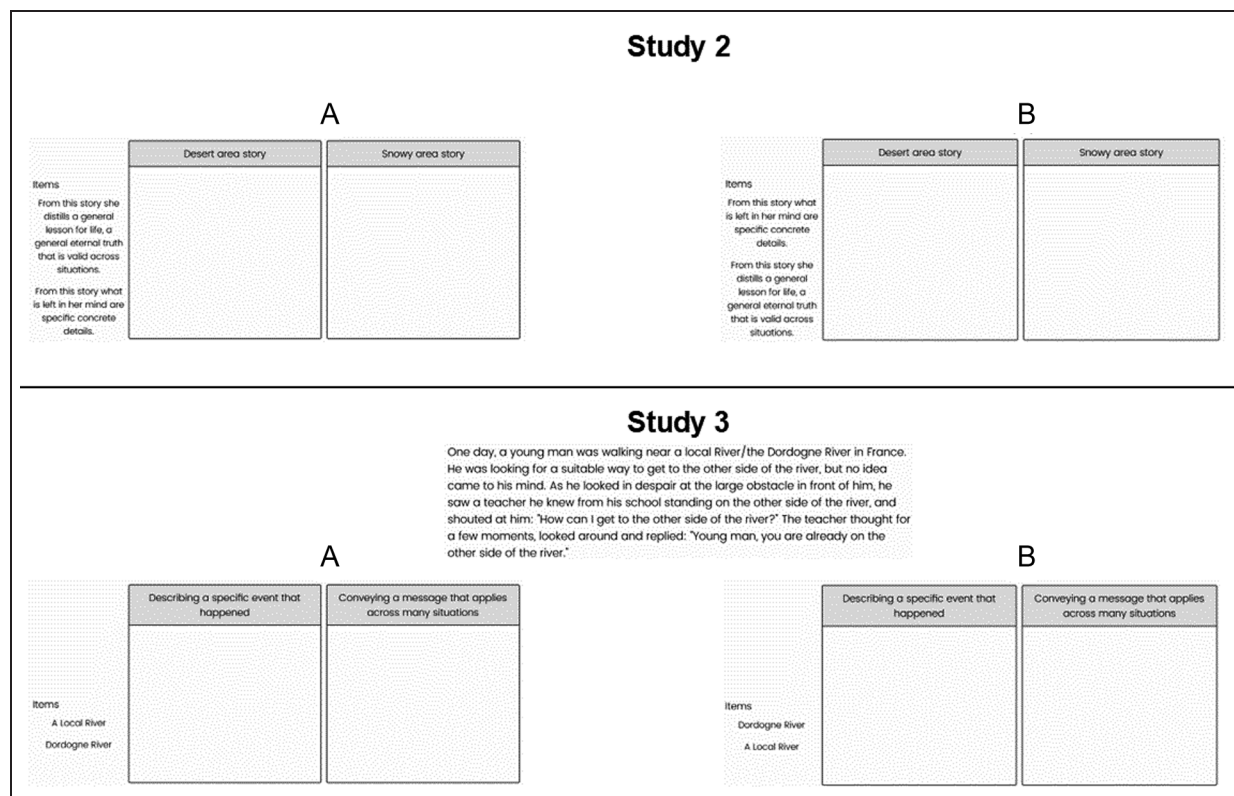


Figure 2. Sample trials from Studies 2 and 3, illustrating the task structure and version counterbalancing (A vs. B).

another story set in a distant location (e.g., desert for Helen, snowy for Jihan). The characters' names matched their environments to reinforce spatial distance between where the character lives and the setting of each story. Participants were told that the character retained specific, concrete details from one story and extracted a broad, general message from the other story. They then indicated which story corresponded to each type of information in a drag-and-drop task (for a similar approach, see Cian et al., 2015; Nussinson et al., 2019, 2021, 2024). Specifically, participants dragged two items—one describing retention of specific, concrete details and the other describing extraction of a general lesson—to one of two boxes labeled *Snowy area story* and *Desert area story* (see Figure 2). We hypothesized that participants would match the abstract message to the spatially distant story and the concrete details to the spatially proximal story at rates above chance (50%). The order of the two items (i.e., information types) was counterbalanced across participants: in one version, the item describing retention of a general lesson appeared above the item describing retention of specific, concrete details; in the other, the order was reversed (see Figure 2).

Results

Hypothesis-congruent responses—in which the character extracts a general message from the distant story, and

specific, concrete details from the proximal story—were coded as 1; non-congruent responses were coded as 0. The proportion of hypothesis-congruent responses was .82 ($SD = 0.39$) and significantly differed from chance (.50), $t(108) = 8.50$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.81$, 95% CI [0.60, 1.03]. The results did not vary by version (Helen vs. Jihan) or information order (general-above vs. specific-above; see the Supplemental Online Materials for full analyses).

Study 2b: Judging What Messages Are Likely to be Extracted From Near and Distant Stories—Ratings

Whereas Study 2a relied on a forced-choice drag-and-drop task, in Study 2b, participants independently rated the extent to which each story led the character to retain specific details and a broad, general lesson.

Method

Participants. We recruited via Prolific only female participants to insure that social distance from both female characters would be kept constant across participants. After preregistered exclusions (see the Supplemental Online Materials for details), 197 remained ($M_{age} = 31.61$, $SD_{age} = 7.06$).

Materials and Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to read about one of two fictional characters: Helen, who lives in a snowy area, or Celestina, who lives in a desert area. In both versions, the character (Helen or Celestina) listens to two stories, one set in a nearby location (e.g., snowy for Helen, desert for Celestina) and one set in a distant location (e.g., desert for Helen, snowy for Celestina). For each story, participants were asked to rate the extent to which what remains in the character's mind are specific details that are relevant to the story only, or a broad, general lesson of the story, on a scale from 0 (*specific details that are relevant to the story only*) to 100 (*a broad, general lesson of the story*). We hypothesized that the expectations of a general lesson remaining over specific details would be higher for the distant story as compared with the proximal story. We counterbalanced the order of rating the stories: half of the participants rated the proximal story first, and half rated the distant story first.

Results

We conducted a paired-samples *t*-test with the rating of the distant and proximal stories as the dependent variables. As predicted, the distant story was perceived as more likely to lead the character to retain a general lesson over specific details ($M = 60.78$, $SD = 27.56$) as compared with the proximal story ($M = 50.54$, $SD = 28.70$), $t(196) = 5.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.42$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.57]. The results did not vary by version (Helen-first vs. Jihan-first) or rating order (distant story-first vs. the proximal story-first; see the Supplemental Online Materials for full analyses).

The results of Studies 2a and 2b support our hypothesis that people perceive distant (vs. proximal) narratives as better suited for conveying general messages, even when distance is manipulated solely through the location of the narrated event—without describing the event itself—thereby minimizing alternative explanations related to specific story content or familiarity with particular story-location pairings.

Study 3: Perceived Compatibility Between Spatial Distance and the Goal of Conveying General Messages

Study 3 investigated whether people perceive psychological distance, specifically spatial distance, as a cue that can be used strategically to communicate broad messages. This study extends Study 2 by introducing communicative intent: the stories are explicitly framed as serving different communicative purposes of conveying specific details versus a general message.

Method

Participants. We were able to recruit only 76 of the intended 90 participants on the Israeli platform Panel4All, due to a

specific eligibility criterion: participants had to live in the location referenced in the proximal story. After preregistered exclusions (see the Supplemental Online Materials for details), 73 participants remained (56 women, 17 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 28.63$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.78$).

Materials and Procedure. Participants were first introduced to two distinct communicative goals: (a) conveying specific details and (b) communicating a general message. They then read a story that took place in two possible settings: a nearby location (the Yarkon River in Israel), and a distant location (the Dordogne River in France). The two locations were presented side by side within the story, separated by a slash, with their order counterbalanced across participants (see Figure 2). After reading, participants completed a drag-and-drop task in which they assigned each location (the nearby: Yarkon or the distant: Dordogne) to one of two boxes labeled with the communicative goals: *describing a specific event that happened* or *conveying a message that applies across many situations* (see Figure 2). This task assessed whether participants perceived distant versus proximal settings as better suited for communicating general versus specific messages.

Results

Data were analyzed similarly to Study 2a. The proportion of hypothesis-congruent responses was .78 ($SD = 0.42$) and significantly differed from chance (0.50), $t(72) = 5.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.67$, 95% CI [0.42, 0.93], suggesting that stories set in distant (vs. proximal) locations were perceived as more compatible with the goal of conveying general messages rather than describing specific events. The results did not vary by version (Yarkon-first vs. Dordogne-first; see the Supplemental Online Materials for full analyses). These findings suggest that people perceive distance in narratives as a cue that can be used strategically for different communicative goals—namely, to convey general, broadly applicable messages over concrete, context-specific information.

Study 4: Perceived Compatibility Between Audience Size and Conveying General Messages

Study 4 manipulated psychological distance by varying the context in which the story is told rather than within its content. Building on findings that larger audiences feel more psychologically distant from the speaker (Joshi & Waksalak, 2014), we examined whether general (vs. specific) messages would be perceived as more appropriate for wider audiences than for a single recipient.

Study 4

Please read the story below that someone could tell in one of two situations:

(a) Someone told the story to you alone, in a situation where only the two of you were in the room

(b) Someone told the story to a large crowd of people that you were in a room with.

A young man walked near the river, looking for a suitable way to get to the other side. However, no ideas came to mind. While staring in despair at the great obstacle before him, he saw a teacher he knew from school standing on the other side of the river and shouted, "How can I get to the other side?" The teacher pondered for a moment, looked around, and answered, "Young man, you are already on the other side of the river."

In which situation is it likely that the speaker wanted to convey a message that is suitable for many situations in life ?

In which situation is it likely that the speaker wanted to describe a specific event that happened?

Please drag and drop each situation to the box that suits it best.

	To describe a specific event that happened	To convey a message that is suitable for many situations in life
Items A situation where only I am spoken to A situation where I am part of a large audience		

Figure 3. Overview of task used in Study 4.

Method

Participants. We recruited participants via the Israeli platform Panel4All. After preregistered exclusions (see the Supplemental Online Materials for details), 108 participants remained (77 women, 31 men, $M_{\text{age}} = 27.16$, $SD = 4.53$).

Materials and Procedure. Participants read that a speaker might tell a story in one of two situations: either to the participant alone or when the participant is part of a large audience (see Figure 3). These options appeared one above the other, with position counterbalanced across participants. Participants then read the story itself (a story about a young man attempting to cross a river and receiving an unexpected response from a teacher on the other side, Figure 3). Next, participants indicated in which situation the speaker was more likely to convey a general message and in which situation the speaker was more likely to describe a specific event. They completed a drag-and-drop task in which the two audience contexts ("only I am spoken to" vs. "I am part of a large audience") were assigned to one of two communicative goals ("to describe a specific event that happened" or "to convey a message suitable for many situations in life"; Figure 3).

Results and Discussion

The proportion of hypothesis-congruent responses ($M = 0.88$, $SD = 0.33$) was significantly above chance (.50),

$t(107) = 12.07$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$, 95% CI [0.92, 1.40], supporting our prediction that a narrative told to a single person is perceived as more suitable for conveying a specific message, whereas a narrative told to a larger audience is perceived as more compatible for conveying a general message. There was no effect of order (see the Supplemental Online Materials for full analyses).

Studies 1 to 4 examined the hypothesis that psychological distance affects how suitable the narrative is perceived to be for conveying a general, abstract message. Studies 5 and 6 move forward to examine whether the narrative's psychological distance affects how specific versus general participants actually interpret its message to be.

Study 5: The Effect of Psychological Distance in Stories on How General Their Messages Are Actually Perceived to be

We predicted that participants would perceive distant stories as more message-oriented (as opposed to event-oriented) and that abstract messages would resonate more in distant than proximal versions of Aesop's fables.

Method

Participants. We recruited participants via Prolific. After preregistered exclusions (see the Supplemental Online Materials for details), 270 participants remained (162

	Proximal Version	Distal Version
Story 1	Patty and Her Job Interview Patty was going to a job interview, carrying a portfolio in a small briefcase. As she went along, she began daydreaming about what she would do once she got the job. "I'll get the job as an analyst," she thought, "and I'll do such a good job that I'll be promoted to senior analyst, then to manager of my department. Then the CEO will be so impressed that he'll promote me to Vice-President. Others will be jealous, but I don't care. I'll just toss my head and keep marching forward!" As she thought the words in her head, she waved her arm as if starting to march; her portfolio fell, and her papers were scattered everywhere. So she was late for her interview, and did not get the job.	Patty and Her Milk Pail Patty the Milkmaid was going to the market carrying her milk in a pail on her head. As she went along, she began calculating what she would do with the money she would get for the milk. "I'll buy some fowls from Farmer Brown," she thought, "and they will lay eggs each morning, which I will sell to the parson's wife. With the money that I get from the sale of these eggs, I'll buy myself a new dimity frock and a chip hat; and when I go to market, won't all the young men come up and speak to me! The other girls will be jealous; but I don't care. I'll just look at them and toss my head like this." As she spoke she tossed her head back, the pail fell off it, and all the milk spilled on the ground. So she had to go home without anything.
	Messages from most concrete to most abstract: 1) Be careful while you walk in the street not to drop things, 2) If you are careless, you cannot complete even something simple, 3) Do not dream about the future while forgetting the present.	
Story 2	The Girl and the Dancers A girl walked into a dressing room of a dance studio and found a rack of beautiful costumes. She decided to put on a costume and strutted down towards where the dancers were practicing, pretending to be one of them. When she got to the practice room and began dancing, the dancers soon discovered the cheat, and told her to return the costume and leave. So the girl could do no better than go back to her old friends who had watched her behavior from a distance. They were equally annoyed with the girl and told her to go away.	The Jay and the Peacock A Jay venturing into a yard where peacocks walk, found a number of peacock feathers which had fallen from the peacocks when they were moulting. The Jay tied them all to his tail and strutted down towards the peacocks, pretending to be one of them. When the Jay came near the peacocks, they soon discovered the cheat, and striding up to him pecked at him and plucked away his borrowed plumes. So the Jay could do no better than go back to the other jays who had watched his behavior from a distance. They were equally annoyed with the Jay and told him to go away.
	Messages from most concrete to most abstract: 1) Dressing up as someone who you are not is a bad idea, 2) If you pretend to be a part of a group that you don't belong to, you will get caught, 3) It is better to be happy and contented about who you are, rather than pretending to be someone else.	

Figure 4. Stories and messages used in Study 5.

women, 105 men, three other gender; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.68$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.85$, $N_{\text{proximal}} = 136$, $N_{\text{distant}} = 134$.

Materials and Procedure. Each participant read two short stories from Aesop's Fables, both presented in the same distance condition: proximal or distant. Psychological distance was manipulated by presenting humans in everyday situations in the proximal conditions, and animals or characters with ancient occupations (e.g., milkmaid) in the distant condition. After each story, participants answered two comprehension questions and then rated the extent to which the story was intended to convey a message on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Finally, participants evaluated three potential messages of varying levels of abstraction, rating how much each message was actually conveyed by the story from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*to a very large extent*); this served as the second dependent variable. Figure 4 displays the stories along with their corresponding message options.

Results

Perceived Intent to Convey a Message. A mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) tested the effects of distance (proximal vs. distant; between participants) and story (Patty vs. Girl/Jay; within participants) on the perceived intent to convey a message. As predicted, an effect of distance, $F(1, 268) = 43.22$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.21], indicated that participants in the distant condition rated

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Intent to Convey a Message by Distance and Story in Study 5.

Condition / Story	Patty story		Girl/Jay story	
	M	SD	M	SD
Proximal	5.41	1.36	4.75	1.51
Distant	5.90	1.02	5.82	1.13

the story as more message-oriented (i.e., intending to convey a broader message) than those in the proximal condition. An interaction between distance and story, $F(1, 268) = 8.51$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.08], indicated a stronger distance effect for the Patty story. There was also a main effect of story, $F(1, 268) = 14.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.11], with higher message-oriented ratings for the Patty story than the Girl/Jay story. Follow-up independent-samples *t*-tests confirmed the predicted distance effect in both stories (see the Supplemental Online Materials for the full analyses): Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations by distance and story.

Evaluations of Messages of Varying Abstractness. A mixed-design ANOVA tested distance (proximal vs. distant; between participants) and story (Patty vs. Girl/Jay; within participants) and message abstraction (concrete, intermediate, abstract; within participants). The predicted two-way interaction between distance and message abstraction, $F(2, 536) =$

19.78, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.11], indicated a stronger preference for abstract over concrete messages in the distant condition. This effect emerged in both stories, (see Table S2 in the Supplemental Online Materials for the means and standard deviations by distance, abstraction level, and story). Additional effects not central to our main prediction are also reported in the Supplemental Online Materials.

In sum, whereas Studies 1 to 4 focused on the perceived connection between psychological distance and message generality, Study 5 demonstrated that these perceptions are in line with the actual effect of psychological distance on how people interpret the “take home message” of narratives. Participants were more likely to perceive general messages as actually being conveyed by psychologically distant stories, confirming that distance influences not only perceptions about stories but also shapes how their lesson is interpreted.

Study 6: The Effect of Psychological Distance on the Lesson Interpretation of Personal Documentation

Studies 1 to 5 examined situations in which a narrative was designed to be communicated to readers or listeners. However, our theorizing suggests that the perceived and actual connection between psychological distance and message generality are not contingent on interpretations of communicative intent. Thus, Study 6 tested the hypothesis that psychological distance influences whether a text is interpreted as conveying a broad lesson even in the absence of a communicative intent. Participants read a text ostensibly written by a military commander, and which was a personal documentation for private use (rather than an utterance intended for communication). We predicted that temporal distance from when the text was written would increase the tendency to judge it as applying to situations in general rather than to the specific situation in which it was written.

Method

Participants. We recruited participants via Prolific. After preregistered exclusions (see the Supplemental Online Materials for details), 250 participants remained (age 19–40, $M = 26.33$, $SD = 6.09$; 150 female, 93 male, seven other), $N_{\text{proximal}} = 116$, $N_{\text{distal}} = 134$.

Materials and Procedure. Participants read a lesson that was ostensibly written by a military commander for his own private use based on his military experience: *Position often matters more than numbers*. We manipulated temporal distance by telling participants that the lesson was written either recently (last year) by an American commander, or in the distant past (around 76 BCE) by a Roman

commander. Participants then rated the extent to which the lesson applies to a specific war as opposed to wars in general (1 = *applies to the specific war in which the commander took part*, 7 = *applies to wars in general*).

Results

As predicted, participants in the distal condition rated the lesson as applying more to wars in general ($M_{\text{distal}} = 5.16$, $SD_{\text{distal}} = 1.39$) than participants in the proximal condition ($M_{\text{proximal}} = 4.83$, $SD_{\text{proximal}} = 1.55$), $t(248) = 1.81$, $p = .036$, $d = .23$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.48].

General Discussion

In seven preregistered studies, we extend CLT by applying it to the domain of narratives, examining the question of how psychological distance shapes the perceptions of the message a narrative conveys. We demonstrated that the psychological distance of a narrative affects both how suitable the narrative is perceived to be for conveying a general, abstract message and whether the narrative’s psychological distance affects how specific versus general people actually interpret its message to be. Studies 1 and 2a established that when psychological distance was manipulated via foreign versus local settings, people perceived a compatibility between a story’s psychological distance and the type of message it conveys. Study 2b showed that abstract messages are judged as more likely to be conveyed by distant than proximal stories. Study 3 manipulated distance via spatially proximal versus distant settings showing that psychological distance is seen as something that can be strategically introduced into stories to better communicate universal messages. Study 4 showed that, consistent with prior work suggesting that larger audiences are perceived as more spatially and socially distant, general messages are considered more appropriate for large audiences than for individual listeners. Study 5 manipulated distance via hypotheticality (more vs. less hypothetical scenarios), and found that abstract messages are perceived as more strongly conveyed by distal, hypothetical stories than proximal stories. Finally, Study 6 presented temporally distant versus proximal private reflections that had no communicative intent. We found that psychological distance increases the tendency to interpret these reflections as applying more to situations in general than to the specific situation in which they were written.

We grounded our predictions in CLT (Liberman & Trope, 2008, 2014), which proposes that distant (vs. proximal) events are mentally represented more abstractly, emphasizing their broader meaning or “gist” over specific details. Some of our findings, however, are also compatible with extant communication theories. For instance, the RSA framework (Degen, 2023) models communication as a process in which listeners infer speakers’ intended meanings from contextual cues. CLT complements this

perspective by identifying psychological distance as one such cue: when narrated events are more distal, listeners may infer a more abstract communicative intent and thus arrive at a more abstract interpretation. That is, if the shared information is distant listeners may infer that what is important in that information is its general properties.

Unlike communication-based accounts, CLT also applies to situations that do not necessarily have communicative intent. Consistent with this idea, Study 6 provides initial support for the notion that psychological distance may increase preference for general lessons even when the narrative is framed as a private documentation rather than communication intended for an audience. It would be interesting to examine whether adding a communicative intent in such a context would make the effect of distancing even stronger.

Our findings have implications for domains in which narration and storytelling plays a central role, including history, ideology, education, law, communication, and persuasion. Understanding that psychological distance shapes whether messages are perceived as specific or general can help communicators match narrative form to intent. If the goal is to teach a general lesson, distant stories may be seen as more appropriate and more effective. Conversely, if the goal is to convey concrete details about a specific situation, proximal stories may be better suited.

Future research could examine whether psychological distance facilitates the communication of potentially ego threatening messages such as when messages imply personal failure or negative outcomes. This possibility is consistent with the use of parables, which often convey moral or critical insights through distant narratives. Such distance may both reduce defensiveness and may make potentially threatening insights easier to accept.

Future research could examine boundary conditions of the effects observed here. Psychological distance may not always increase receptivity to general messages. People may resist messages from distant sources, perceiving them as incompatible with their values or as associated with conflicting social groups. For example, although both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are temporally distant, they may evoke different associations—hostility and prejudice versus progress and open-mindedness—leading people to be more receptive to general messages from one period than the other.

In addition, future research could extend the present findings by examining whether people extract more general messages from distal (vs. proximal) texts using a broader range of paradigms. For instance, free recall paradigms could be used to test whether psychological distance influences the spontaneous generation and retention of more abstract versus concrete interpretations over time.

Future research could further examine how psychological distance operates in contexts in which readers become deeply immersed in richly constructed but distant narrative worlds, such as multi-book sagas or films (e.g., *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*). Such experiences are related to narrative transportation, a state in which readers

become cognitively and emotionally absorbed in a story world (Green & Brock, 2000). This raises an interesting question: does immersion in detailed narrative worlds attenuate the tendency for psychological distance to promote abstract interpretations, or do the two processes operate in parallel? On one hand, transportation focuses attention on concrete details of the narrative, which may reduce abstraction. However, it is also plausible that transportation may increase engagement with the story's meaning, potentially amplifying the impact of general messages. That is, psychological distance and transportation may play complementary roles: Psychological distance may signal that a story conveys a general message, whereas transportation may enhance the extent to which that message is seen as personally relevant and hence the extent to which it is processed and internalized.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that psychological distancing not only affects level of construal of the information per se but also guides higher order processes of lesson extraction and meaning making. Our findings are relevant to a great number of domains involving narration including education, politics, public relations, and the arts.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

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