

Distant Others: Understanding Transgender Bias at Work with a Construal Level Theory Lens

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This study investigates how the gender identity of a prospective team member, specifically, transgender versus cisgender (male or female), influences perceived interpersonal similarity and willingness to collaborate in high-stakes workplace projects. Through two between-subjects experiments using vignettes, we explore how respondents evaluate a potential team member based on their gender described as either male, female, or transgender. Results from Study 1 reveal that female respondents perceive transgender candidates as significantly less similar to themselves compared to female candidates, across multiple dimensions of interpersonal and task-related compatibility. Study 2 investigates the underlying psychological mechanisms using Construal Level Theory (CLT). Mediation analysis demonstrates that the proposed candidate's gender and perceived similarity are significantly mediated by psychological distance. Transgender candidates are perceived as more psychologically distant, leading to lower perceived similarity. The findings provide robust empirical support for CLT in the domain of workplace inclusion, demonstrating that social identity factors, such as gender identity, influence cognitive construals and collaboration preferences in team settings. The paper contributes to diversity management, social cognition, and human resource literature by highlighting how transgender bias in hiring and team formation is not merely attitudinal but cognitively mediated through psychological mechanisms. Implications for inclusive organizational practices and training interventions are discussed.

Keywords: transgender bias, construal level theory, psychological distance, perceived similarity, workplace discrimination, team selection decisions

INTRODUCTION

Being transgender frequently entails not only stigma but also risks to one's safety and well-being and an increased risk of experiencing discrimination in the workplace or housing market (Baboolall et al., 2021). There are several difficulties that transgender people face in employment, and the experience of people who identify as transgender gender is significantly more unique than other concerns pertaining to sexual minorities than previous studies have indicated. Notwithstanding their numerous parallels, transgender people have different struggles than LGB people, especially in the workplace (Budge et al., 2010).

The advancement of LGBTQ+ rights at work has been sporadic in recent years, notwithstanding a historic 2020 US Supreme Court decision shielding LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination in the

workplace (Morrison, 2022) or the Indian government's "Transgender Persons Act," enacted in 2019, prohibiting discrimination against transgender individuals in healthcare, work, and education, there are still many obstacles in the way (Zachariah & Nandini, 2023).

Despite us all being aware of transgenderness, most of the understanding of what it is to be a transgender person comes from the media and media depictions of them. Most people would say that they have not met a transgender person in their lives.

In today's complex and diverse work environments, it is essential to understand biases in workplace decision-making processes, particularly those related to gender and gender identity. Our study aims to study the prejudices when it comes to decisions related to their jobs, as the reaction of co-workers is necessary to reduce discrimination (Ruggs et al., 2015).

In recent years, discussions on workplace diversity have expanded beyond binary gender categories to encompass the lived experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals. Despite increasing visibility and policy-driven advocacy for inclusion, transgender individuals continue to face systematic exclusion and underrepresentation in core professional roles and leadership positions (OECD, 2019). Discrimination against transgender individuals in hiring and team selection is often covert, rooted not in explicit prejudice but in implicit psychological biases. Among these, the role of perceived similarity, the tendency to affiliate with those we consider to be like ourselves, and the cognitive mechanisms that shape these perceptions remain underexplored. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the interplay between perceived similarity, psychological distance, and media portrayals in shaping workplace inclusion of transgender individuals.

Drawing from Construal Level Theory (CLT) (Trope & Liberman, 2010), this research investigates how transgender individuals are perceived in terms of psychological proximity and how that perception affects decisions related to inclusion in project teams. CLT posits that people evaluate others and events differently depending on how "psychologically close" or "distant" they feel from them, which in turn affects the level of abstraction in their judgments. When individuals or groups are perceived as psychologically distant—due to differences in identity, experience, or familiarity—judgments about them tend to be more abstract, decontextualised, and stereotype-driven (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007), such abstraction can have significant implications in a workplace context where decisions about teamwork, collaboration, and leadership often hinge on subtle interpersonal dynamics.

The inclusion of transgender individuals in professional spaces is not just a question of policy or training; it is also shaped by how people *feel* about and *perceive* those who are different from them. Thus, this paper asks: What psychological mechanisms underlie the discomfort or hesitation in working with transgender colleagues? Can these biases be explained and mitigated through frameworks like CLT? And finally, what role does media representation play in shaping or shifting these perceptions?

By conducting sequential experiments, this study offers a comprehensive framework to explore the following: (i) how perceived similarity influences decisions to include transgender individuals in teams, (ii) the mediating role of psychological distance and abstractness in these judgments. The findings offer both theoretical advancement in CLT and practical implications for human resources in the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Seminal studies on the discrimination against women in decision-making at the workplace have revealed notable differences. Traditionally, men have been favoured for senior-level positions and it is common to have prejudices about women's leadership qualities (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The senior-level recruiting decisions are still influenced by the "think leader, think male" stereotype (Koenig et al., 2011). It is found that in male-dominated areas, women often encounter problems linked to competence, hampering their selection in teams requiring technical or leadership skills (Heilman et al., 2023).

However, transgender individuals suffer even more prejudice, often because of how society views their gender identity. According to research, transgender people frequently lack representation in leadership positions and experience prejudice in the recruiting process (Budge et al., 2010). In situations where they must function as a team or when they are suspected of wrongdoing, such as in fraud cases, they may also

encounter unconscious biases. Research indicates that transgender individuals are disproportionately perceived as less capable or reliable as a result of deeply rooted cultural biases (Miller & Grollman, 2015). In fact, transgender people are often the most marginalised in a society (Kurian et al., 2021).

A 2022 meta-analysis on predictors of transgender prejudice (Hatch et al., 2022) found that greater interactions with transgender people may contribute to a change in views toward transgender people, and a straightforward strategy for doing this might be to include media representations because it allows for a wide audience.

Flores et al. (2018) conducted a study in the United States on the attitude of people towards transgender community and were able to prove that exposure to images and information about transgender people was a source of prejudice reduction. (Flores et al., 2018). They also showed that attitudes improved, and prejudices were reduced because people were able to categorize transgender people as a new subcategory within the existing gender category schema. Perceived similarity is more strongly linked to discrimination (King & Hauser, 2005).

A crucial strategy for gaining support for transgender rights is to lessen transphobia. By exposing persons to facts about and depictions of transgender people, one might lessen transphobia. Reduced anti-transgender bias was linked to more positive transgender contact (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2018). Studies have found that brief interventions promoting the active examination of anti-prejudicial ideas could result in long-term modifications in attitudes toward an outgroup can reduce transphobia (Broockman & Kalla, 2016), and is an important research area (Zhang & Billard, 2024).

To develop more inclusive practices, this research provides insights into biases in high-stakes decision-making, such as hiring for senior roles. Much of the research has focused on the male-female bias; this paper aims to focus on how these biases play out in various scenarios, especially in comparison with cisgender men and women.

RESEARCH AIM AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

To understand the mechanisms behind transgender exclusion in workplace decision-making, we draw upon Construal Level Theory (CLT) as the central theoretical framework. CLT posits that psychological distance, defined as the subjective experience of distance between the self and others in time, space, social identity, or hypotheticality, affects how individuals mentally construe people and events (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The further an object or person is perceived from the self, the more abstract and generalized is the mental representation. Conversely, psychological proximity tends to result in more concrete, detailed, and empathetic evaluations.

This theory has proven effective in understanding judgments and social cognition (Soderberg et al., 2015), especially where social or identity differences are salient. Recent applications of CLT in organizational contexts have shown that individuals may judge out-group members more harshly or abstractly because they are perceived as more psychologically distant (Liberman et al., 2007). These construals are not neutral; they often activate stereotypes, suppress individual-specific data, and influence behavior. In the context of workplace hiring or team formation, psychological distance can distort the assessment of a candidate's ability, potential for collaboration, and overall fit.

As Saeed et al. (2024) elaborate, high-level construals result in "decontextualized representations that extract the gist from the available information," while low-level construals are more grounded in context and detail. For transgender individuals, who are often perceived as socially and culturally distant from cisgender norms, psychological distance can inadvertently trigger high-level construals that reduce them to abstract stereotypes. Such processes may explain why transgender individuals are often deemed less relatable or suitable for collaboration, despite having identical credentials and qualifications.

The study first examines the role of perceived similarity in decisions regarding the inclusion of transgender individuals in core professional teams. Perceived similarity has long been linked with interpersonal liking, group cohesion, and team performance (Montoya & Horton, 2014). However, similarity is not only a function of observable traits but is also deeply embedded in psychological

perceptions. In this study, we argue that transgender individuals are often perceived as less similar due to psychological distance stemming from gender identity differences.

This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H1: *Perceived psychological distance mediates the relationship between the proposed candidate's gender and the candidate's similarity to self.*

This study uses an experimental methodology to investigate biases with transgender candidates at the workplace. We investigate how prejudices against transgender people in workplace team selection are mediated by psychological distance, as defined by Construal Level Theory (CLT). Using a scenario-based approach, we asked participants to make decisions where profiles differed only in terms of the candidate's gender identity (male, female, or transgender). We use the construal level theory as the underlying theory for the explanation.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Investigate the role of perceived similarity in shaping decisions to include transgender individuals in core project teams.
2. Examine the relationship due to psychological distance evaluations of transgender candidates, focusing on factors contributing to perceived dissimilarity.

Construal level theory suggests that individuals perceive objects at different levels of construal, which influences their judgments of the objects (Trope and Liberman, 2010). The level of construal is typically studied at both higher and lower levels. A higher-level construal is a schematic, decontextualised representation that extracts the gist from the available information. On the contrary, the lower-level construal describes relatively unstructured, contextualised representations that include subordinate and incidental features (Saeed et al., 2024).

The Construal Level Theory (CLT) describes psychological distance. It is defined as the perceived proximity or distance from the self, situated here and now. A far psychological distance leads to a higher construal level, and a near psychological distance leads to a lower construal level. There are four dimensions of psychological distance, viz., spatial (distance from here in place), temporal (distance from now in time), social (experienced by others rather than by the self), and hypothetical (less likely to happen than what is happening) (Trope et al., 2007).

Experiment Design

This research utilizes a series of interconnected experiments grounded in CLT to investigate biases against transgender individuals. Each experiment builds upon the findings of the previous one to provide a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms driving such biases and the potential for mitigating them.

The first study experiment was designed to investigate how the gender identity of a candidate (male, female, or transgender) affects perceived similarity and subsequent team selection decisions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions and presented with identical vignettes describing a candidate under consideration for a core project team. The only variable manipulated was the candidate's gender. Perceived similarity, measured through a Likert scale, was analysed using ANOVA. The second experiment was then conducted to uncover the psychological mechanisms underlying the findings from Experiment 1, with a focus on psychological distance and abstractness. Using a similar between-subjects design, this experiment introduces scale items to measure psychological distance and perceived abstractness of performance. Together, these experiments provide a comprehensive framework for understanding transgender bias. By leveraging CLT, the research identifies psychological distance as a key factor driving and potentially mitigating such biases, offering theoretical and practical contributions to diversity and inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

Study 1

We conducted a between-subjects experiment manipulating the gender of the proposed candidate at three levels [male, female, transgender]. All respondents received the following vignette with one of the gender levels assigned randomly:

You are leading a critical project with tight deadlines and high visibility within the company. You must select a new team member to join your core project team. The proposed candidate is a MALE/FEMALE/TRANSGENDER. The proposed candidate has been with the company for three years, is known for being thorough and detail-oriented, and has worked on similar projects before. However, you've never directly collaborated with the proposed candidate in the past, and this project will require close collaboration between team members. This project's success depends heavily on effective communication, trust, and a collaborative team atmosphere. You'll need to ensure that whoever joins the team can handle the pressure and seamlessly integrate into the project dynamics. After reviewing the proposed candidate's profile and background, you are tasked with recommending bringing the person to your team.

Respondents ($n = 101$, Mage = 35.5, Females = 30%) were recruited from MTurk (Buhrmester et al., 2016). After receiving their consent to participate in an exchange of payment, they answer the questions. We measured the perceived similarity of the self with the proposed candidate joining the team through four measures, viz., I can imagine that the proposed candidate and I would work well together because we are similar; given the project requirements, I am willing to collaborate closely with the candidate on this high-priority project; based on the information, it will be easy to communicate with this candidate during stressful project phases; this candidate's working style, communication approach, and problem-solving methods are similar to my own.

We ran ANOVAs for each measure of perceived similarity independently as dependent variables and the manipulation of the proposed candidate's gender and the gender of the respondent as independent variables. For the measure, *I can imagine that the proposed candidate and I would work well together because we are similar*, the interaction effect of the gender of the respondent and the manipulation was significant, $F(2, 95) = 3.54, p = .033$, with the female respondents finding female candidates as more similar to themselves than to transgenders, $M_F = 6.01, M_T = 4.92, SE = 0.49, 95\% CI [0.13 \text{ to } 2.05]$. Similar results were observed for the other three statements as well: *given the project requirements, I am willing to collaborate closely with the candidate on this high-priority project*, the interaction effect of the gender of the respondent and the manipulation was partially significant, $F(2, 95) = 2.66, p = .075$, with the female respondents finding female candidates as more similar to themselves than to transgenders, $M_F = 5.96, M_T = 5.12, SE = 0.50, 95\% CI [-0.15 \text{ to } 1.83]$; *based on the information, it will be easy to communicate with this candidate during stressful project phases*, the interaction effect of the gender of the respondent and the manipulation was significant, $F(2, 95) = 3.17, p = .046$, with the female respondents finding female candidates as more similar to themselves than to transgenders, $M_F = 5.86, M_T = 5.03, SE = 0.45, 95\% CI [-0.06 \text{ to } 1.71]$; *this candidate's working style, communication approach, and problem-solving methods are similar to my own*, the interaction effect of the gender of the respondent and the manipulation was significant, $F(2, 95) = 4.95, p = .009$, with the female respondents finding female candidates as more similar to themselves than to transgenders, $M_F = 6.09, M_T = 5.22, SE = 0.48, 95\% CI [-0.09 \text{ to } 1.83]$.

From the four similarity measures, we conclude that females perceive transgender individuals as less similar to themselves when selecting them as team members to join their core project teams.

Study 2

This study aims to understand the reasons for perceived similarity or dissimilarity observed in Experiment 1. For this, we introduce the scale items for psychological distance. Using construal level theory, we hypothesize that the greater the psychological distance between the self and the proposed

candidate, the greater the expectation of abstractness of their performance. Higher psychological distance leads to a perceived dissimilarity between the self and the proposed candidate. We expect this dissimilarity to arise from the gender differences between the self and the proposed candidate.

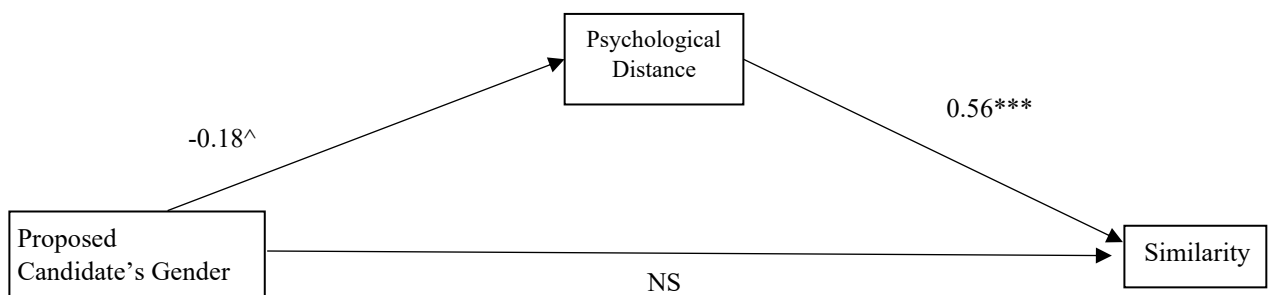
We conducted a between-subjects experiment manipulating the gender of the proposed candidate at three levels [male, female, transgender]. All respondents received the same vignette as in Experiment 1, with one of the gender levels assigned randomly.

Respondents ($n = 112$, $M_{age} = 37.6$, $Females = 21\%$) were recruited from MTurk in India. After receiving their consent to participate in an exchange of payment, they answer the questions. We measured the perceived similarity of the self with the proposed candidate joining the team through the measure: I can imagine that the proposed candidate and I would work well together because we are similar. Psychological distance is measured by: How close do you think the proposed candidate will likely be to you?

We conducted an ANOVA using the measure of perceived similarity as the dependent variable and the manipulation of the proposed candidate's gender and the respondent's gender as independent variables. As we were interested in the underlying mechanism for the difference in perceived similarity, we combined the manipulated variable into two categories: cisgender (male and female) and transgender. As all the respondents reported their genders as male or female, we wanted to understand their perceptions of non-binary transgender individuals. The interaction effect of the respondent's gender and the manipulation was partially significant, $F(1, 108) = 3.06, p = .083$, with cisgender treatment as more similar, $M_{Cis} = 5.77$, than the transgender treatment, $M_{Trans} = 5.33$.

Then we used Process Macro Model 4, bootstrapped with 5000 draws, and conducted a mediation analysis of the proposed candidate's gender on perceived similarity mediated by psychological distance (see Fig. 1). The proposed candidate's gender has a partially significant effect on psychological distance ($\beta = -0.18, SE = 0.10, 95\% CI [-0.38 \text{ to } 0.02]$). The total effect of the proposed candidate's gender on perceived similarity is ($\beta = -0.22, SE = 0.11, 95\% CI [-0.43 \text{ to } -0.01]$). Psychological distance has a significant effect on perceived similarity ($\beta = 0.56, SE = 0.09, 95\% CI [0.39 \text{ to } 0.73]$).

FIGURE 1
PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE AND ABSTRACTNESS SERIAL MEDIATION OF PROPOSED CANDIDATE'S GENDER AND PERCEIVED SIMILARITY



* - $p < .05$; ** - $p < .01$, *** - $p < .001$, ^ - $p < .10$;

Psychological distance partially mediates the relationship between the proposed candidate's gender and perceived similarity. Transgender individuals are perceived at a higher psychological distance from the self, and the lower the distance, the more the perceived similarity. This supports our hypothesis and the CLT proposition that greater social distance leads to more abstract thinking and reduces perceived interpersonal closeness.

The analysis validates the mediation of the proposed candidate's gender on perceived similarity by psychological distance. Transgenders are perceived as psychologically more distant than cisgenders. Higher psychological distance is associated with higher abstractness in expected performance and higher dissimilarity.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study reveal critical insights into how perceived similarity and psychological distance contribute to biases against transgender individuals in the workplace, and the results emphasize the multidimensional nature of these biases, shaped by psychological mechanisms.

First, the observation that females perceive transgender individuals as less similar to themselves highlights the role of gender dynamics in team selection processes. Perceived similarity, a crucial determinant of interpersonal trust and collaboration, was mediated by the candidate's gender identity. This suggests that biases are not merely a function of overt discrimination but are rooted in deeper psychological processes. The study demonstrates that transgender individuals are perceived as psychologically more distant than their cisgender counterparts, which aligns with the Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The increased psychological distance leads to abstract evaluations of their performance, reinforcing perceptions of dissimilarity. This finding is significant as it points to the need for interventions that reduce psychological distance to foster greater inclusivity in team settings (Liberman et al., 2007).

The findings of this multi-part study underscore how psychological mechanisms, informed by Construal Level Theory (CLT), shape interpersonal and societal biases against transgender individuals, particularly in workplace settings.

The first experiment highlighted that transgender candidates were consistently perceived as less similar by cisgender respondents, with the effect more pronounced among female respondents. Given that perceived similarity is a precursor to trust and inclusion in team settings, this offers critical insights into micro-level exclusion mechanisms operating even in ostensibly inclusive environments. These findings align with social psychological models of ingroup-outgroup dynamics and similarity-attraction paradigms, suggesting the need to address unconscious filters through which team members are evaluated.

The experiments revealed how psychological distance—a sense of social “otherness”—influences not just how transgender individuals are evaluated, but how abstract or “non-specific” those evaluations become. As predicted by CLT, the farther an individual feels from the self, the more abstract the mental representation becomes. This abstraction reduces perceived closeness and reinforces a cycle of marginalization.

The dual mediation analysis confirms that the pathway from transgender identity → distance → abstraction → dissimilarity is not only theoretically robust but also empirically supported.

Finally, the interplay between psychological distance, abstractness, and perceived similarity provides a comprehensive framework for understanding biases against transgender individuals. Higher psychological distance fosters abstract expectations about performance and exacerbates perceived dissimilarity, thereby reducing the likelihood of their inclusion in core professional teams.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the understanding of transgender bias by elucidating the mediating role of psychological distance. Yet it is necessary to portray real-life circumstances and people, as well as involve transgender participation in the creative process (Villegas-Simón et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study advances our understanding of workplace bias toward transgender individuals by applying Construal Level Theory (CLT) to investigate the psychological processes that underlie team selection decisions. Through two experimental studies, we demonstrated that gender identity significantly influences perceived similarity, with transgender individuals perceived as less similar to the self than their cisgender counterparts. Importantly, our findings show that this effect is mediated by psychological distance, which in turn shapes the abstractness of performance expectations, reinforcing perceptions of dissimilarity.

By unpacking these cognitive mechanisms, the study not only enriches the theoretical understanding of gender-based workplace discrimination but also provides actionable insights for organizational practice. In particular, the findings underscore the need for diversity training, inclusive hiring protocols, and structured decision-making frameworks that help mitigate unconscious biases in team formation and candidate evaluation. As inclusion becomes a core imperative for modern workplaces, this research offers a

framework for understanding why transgender individuals may be implicitly excluded, despite policy-level support for diversity.

LIMITATIONS

While the study presents robust evidence across two carefully designed experiments, several limitations must be acknowledged. The participant pool was drawn from an Indian respondent base via MTurk, which may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts. Cultural variations in gender norms, attitudes toward trans identities, and organizational behavior could yield different results in Western or other Asian contexts. All respondents in the current study identified as either male or female. Future work could include non-binary participants to better understand in-group/out-group perceptions across a wider gender spectrum.

The experimental setup involved vignettes and hypothetical team selection decisions. Although this is a widely used method in social psychology and HR research, it may not capture the full complexity or pressures of real-world hiring decisions. While perceived similarity and psychological distance were effectively measured, the actual selection or rejection behavior in organizational hiring contexts can further be tracked.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To build upon the findings of this research, future studies can consider the following extensions: Longitudinal or Field Experiments can be conducted, which embed similar measures in real workplace settings (e.g., job interviews or performance reviews), could help verify the ecological validity of the findings. Future research should investigate how psychological distance and construal levels vary by cultural attitudes toward transgender identities, particularly in countries with differing legal and social rights for transgender people.

Experimental designs that test bias mitigation techniques such as inclusive language prompts, DEI training, or perspective-taking exercises could help develop evidence-based practices to reduce psychological distance. While this study focused on cognitive pathways of psychological distance and abstractness, affective responses (e.g., empathy, anxiety, threat perception) could be studied in parallel to better understand their role in perceived similarity and bias. Finally, understanding how these biases translate into performance evaluations, promotion decisions, and workplace conflicts can provide a holistic picture of how psychological distance impacts workplace equity.

PROPOSED CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

Workplace inclusivity is a corporate motto bugled worldwide yet remains an elusive target and the subject of much research and debate. This research could help create training and interventions that explicitly incorporate gender diversity, with the awareness and acceptance of non-binary and transgender identities. Additionally, experimental studies could further explore how these biases manifest in diverse cultural and organisational contexts, which would aid in developing more effective, evidence-based interventions.

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