

Social Distance Theory and Its Prospects in Addressing Educational Issues of Migrant Populations

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Abstract: This study focuses on the fundamental concepts and measurement methods of social distance theory, systematically reviewing its theoretical development and major research findings. First, the paper will examine the conceptual origins and theoretical evolution of social distance to clarify its core tenets. Second, it will explore the primary measurement approaches, including the application and development of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale. Finally, the study synthesizes relevant applications of social distance theory in migration research, particularly empirical findings in educational contexts.

Keywords: Social distance; Social distance theory; Migrant children.

1. Introduction

Social distance theory serves as an important conceptual framework in sociology and psychology, providing a systematic approach to understanding intergroup relations. Initially proposed by American sociologist Emory Bogardus in the 1920s to measure acceptance levels among different ethnic groups, the theory has since expanded its application to various fields including migration studies and urban sociology, becoming a key analytical tool for examining group interactions and social integration.

Within educational settings, social distance theory offers a unique perspective for understanding school adaptation challenges faced by migrant children. Existing research suggests that perceived social distance in teacher-student relationships and peer interactions may influence these children's academic performance and social integration. By clarifying these theoretical issues, this study aims to provide a systematic reference for academic discussions on social distance theory while establishing a theoretical foundation for future related research.

2. The Origins of Social Distance Theory

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall identified four interpersonal distance zones: intimate (0-18 inches), personal (1.5-4 feet), social (4-12 feet), and public (12-25 feet), shaped by emotional and cultural factors.

Aesthetician Edmund Burke first proposed "psychological distance," suggesting that threat perception requires detachment for sublime appreciation. Edward Bullough expanded this into Psychical Distance Theory, arguing that aesthetic experience demands a mental buffer from practical concerns—exemplified by viewing dangerous fog as beautiful scenery. He noted the "antinomy of Distance": too close eliminates detachment, too far loses engagement.

Despite later critiques, Bullough's theory profoundly influenced aesthetics, psychology, and sociology by framing distance as a dynamic mental adjustment central to perception and interaction.

3. The Concept of Social Distance

3.1. Gabriel Tarde's Perspective

The academic concept of "Social Distance" is generally attributed to Gabriel Tarde, who first introduced the term in *The Laws of Imitation* to describe measurable class distinctions. Tarde conceptualized social distance as reflecting the degree of intimacy between social classes, positing that class differences essentially represent class distances (Tarde, 1890). This perspective was later expanded by Laumann (1965), who defined social distance as characterizing relationships between different social strata and class positions.

3.2. Simmel's Perspective

German sociologist Georg Simmel reconceptualized social distance as a subjective measure of interpersonal relationships. Building on aesthetic theories, he argued that distance creates distinct subject-object relations, where varying degrees of separation yield fundamentally different perceptions of reality (Simmel, 2007).

Simmel's analysis of modernity reveals a paradox: while technology conquers physical space, it simultaneously increases psychological distance between individuals. He observes the modern condition where "the distant grows near at the expense of the proximate becoming remote" (Simmel, 2007). This dialectic reflects modernity's transformation of social relations, as individuals increasingly distance themselves from immediate circles while engaging with formerly remote groups.

Ultimately, Simmel views social distance as both a cognitive framework for understanding social relations and a necessary adaptation to modern life's complexities (Rammstedt, 1991). His theory illuminates how distance operates as a dynamic mediator between individual autonomy and social connection in contemporary society.

4. The Social Distance Theory of Power

Building upon construal level theory, Magee and Smith (2013) proposed the Social Distance Theory of Power to explain how power dynamics shape interpersonal cognition and behavior. At its core, the theory posits that power creates asymmetric social distance through two interrelated

mechanisms. First, the inherent dependency imbalance between high- and low-power individuals leads to divergent perceptions of social distance. High-power individuals, by virtue of controlling resources (Fiske, 1993), experience reduced motivation to establish relationships with low-power counterparts while simultaneously interpreting others' relational overtures as instrumental (Van Kleef et al., 2008). This dual process creates greater perceived social distance among high-power individuals compared to their low-power peers, who remain relationally motivated yet cognizant of powerholders' aloofness (Kelley et al., 1983).

Second, this power-induced social distance elevates construal levels, causing high-power individuals to engage in more abstract mental representations and value-oriented decision-making (Smith & Trope, 2006). The theory extends beyond social distance to incorporate other psychological distances - temporal, spatial, and hypothetical - thereby bridging power research with construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Empirical evidence robustly supports these propositions, demonstrating that high-power individuals prefer autonomous action (Lammers et al., 2012), emphasize goal desirability over feasibility (Magee et al., 2010), and employ more abstract cognitive frameworks (Smith et al., 2008). These effects manifest through two complementary pathways: power increases both resistance to social influence via heightened social distance (See et al., 2011; Tost et al., 2012) and enhances goal-directed cognition through elevated construal levels (Guinote, 2008; Briñol et al., 2007; Vescio et al., 2003).

While theoretically generative, the framework has notable limitations that warrant consideration. The current formulation may underemphasize alternative mechanisms beyond dependency asymmetry, such as high-power individuals' tendency toward cynical attributions of others' intentions (Inesi et al., 2012), which could independently amplify social distance. Furthermore, the theory currently presents a unidirectional model that neglects the reciprocal relationship between construal levels and power perceptions - research demonstrates that abstract thinking itself can enhance feelings of power (Smith et al., 2008), suggesting a potentially reinforcing cycle unaccounted for in the original formulation. These theoretical gaps present valuable opportunities for future research to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between power, social distance, and cognitive construal. The theory's integration of power dynamics with psychological distance constructs offers a promising foundation for examining how hierarchical relationships shape social cognition across organizational, educational, and interpersonal contexts.

5. The Measurement of Social Distance

Bogardus maintained that nearly all social problems relate to social distance and believed that measuring it could explain interpersonal misunderstandings. In 1925, he developed an innovative technique called the Bogardus Social Distance Scale to assess interracial relations. This groundbreaking instrument measured observable behaviors rather than relying on subjective self-reports, requiring respondents to select among seven graded options reflecting their willingness to engage with different racial/ethnic groups across various social contexts.

The scale operationalized Bogardus' theoretical premise that groups perceived as culturally similar to the respondent's

in-group would elicit warmer affective responses than those viewed as completely alien. Applying this instrument in successive waves (1926, 1946, 1956, 1966), Bogardus found remarkably stable patterns in Americans' racial attitudes, leading him to conclude that intergroup social distance changes very gradually. This work represented a methodological breakthrough in social psychology - by quantifying subjective attitudes through scalable behavioral indicators, Bogardus pioneered empirical approaches to studying intergroup relations.

The Bogardus scale inspired numerous adaptations. Laumann developed a parallel instrument examining occupational prestige, testing his "like-me" and prestige hypotheses through 16 occupational categories across seven relationship types (e.g., son-in-law, neighbor). His 1976 cross-national study comparing American and German class relations combined the Bogardus scale with Likert methods. Gullahorn and Loomis conducted sophisticated comparative analyses across five demographic groups (general U.S. population and four regional samples), calculating median percentages for intergroup acceptance across four domains (marriage, neighborhood, workplace, citizenship).

However, Lee and colleagues critiqued the original scale's majority-group bias. Their Reverse Social Distance Scale inverted the measurement perspective by assessing minority groups' perceptions of majority groups' acceptance - a crucial methodological innovation that captured the subjective experience of social distance among marginalized populations. This advancement addressed the original scale's limitation in reflecting power asymmetries inherent in intergroup relations.

6. Domestic Research on Social Distance

The earliest domestic study on social distance was conducted by ethnologist Professor Wu Zelin, who employed the Bogardus Social Distance Scale to examine American attitudes toward Black, Jewish, and Oriental populations, highlighting the decisive role of socioeconomic status in social distance (Wu, 1930). Xu Muzhu developed a 7-item psychological measurement scale to assess interaction patterns and psychological distance between Taiwanese indigenous groups (Atayal and Amis) and Han Chinese, revealing deeper intergroup segregation in non-economic domains (Xu, 1985).

Recent studies on migrant workers have shifted focus to measuring social distance between rural migrants and urban residents. Lu Guoxian pioneered systematic research in this area, defining social distance as "negative evaluations, communication frequency, and material assistance patterns between groups" (Lu, 2005). His work identified institutional discrimination as a key factor exacerbating socioeconomic disparities and social segregation.

Zhang Haihui critiqued the conceptual ambiguity in existing studies, proposing an asymmetric bidirectional measurement framework that captures both urban residents' and migrants' perspectives (Zhang, 2010). Wang Yijie and Wang Kaiqing validated this asymmetry using dual scales in Nanjing, showing urban residents maintained greater social distance than migrants perceived (Wang & Wang, 2012).

Contemporary studies emphasize generational differences. Guo Xinghua found second-generation migrants exhibit weaker urban integration willingness despite reduced

objective barriers (Guo, 2019). Xu Chuanxin's longitudinal data revealed a "geographical coexistence with psychological isolation" pattern among new-generation migrants (Xu, 2021). These findings align with recent international research demonstrating how perceived social distance predicts academic engagement in migrant children (OECD, 2022).

7. Critical Reflections and Future Directions in Social Distance Research

The theoretical and methodological evolution of social distance research presents both challenges and opportunities for addressing educational disparities among migrant populations. While the concept has demonstrated remarkable utility in analyzing intergroup relations since Tarde's initial formulation (1890/2019), its current theoretical landscape reveals three persistent issues that demand scholarly attention. First, the conceptual elasticity of social distance - what Poole (1927) famously described as "an idea both rich and vague" - continues to generate definitional inconsistencies across studies. Contemporary scholars note how this conceptual sprawl manifests in three key ambiguities: the affective valence (whether distance implies purely negative or potentially neutral differentiation), analytical levels (individual cognition versus group-level phenomena), and ontological status (subjective perception versus objectively measurable segregation) (Brown & Lee, 2023). This theoretical diffuseness mirrors earlier critiques of social capital (Portes, 1998) and risks reducing social distance to a fashionable metaphor rather than an operational scientific construct, particularly problematic when applied to educational settings where precise measurement is crucial for intervention design.

Measurement limitations constitute the second major challenge. Traditional instruments like the Bogardus Scale and its derivatives primarily capture static, unidirectional perceptions from majority groups, failing to account for the dynamic power asymmetries that characterize migrant-host community interactions (García-Coll et al., 2021). Recent methodological innovations offer promising alternatives: ecological momentary assessment (EMA) techniques can track micro-level fluctuations in social distance through repeated real-time sampling (Mitchell et al., 2022), while intersectional frameworks better capture how migrant students navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting social identities in educational contexts (Hopkins & Loo, 2023). Particularly relevant for education research are advances in network analysis that map classroom social distances through behavioral traces like collaborative learning patterns and friendship networks (Smith et al., 2023), providing objective complements to traditional attitudinal measures.

The most pressing opportunity lies in translating social distance research into effective educational interventions for migrant populations. Three evidence-based approaches show particular promise. Teacher training programs incorporating perspective-taking exercises and intergroup contact theory principles have demonstrated significant reductions in teacher-student social distance, with corresponding improvements in migrant students' academic engagement (Yeager et al., 2022). Structured peer mentoring programs that facilitate meaningful cross-group interactions in classroom settings show even larger effects, improving not only academic outcomes (by approximately 23% in standardized

test scores according to Paluck et al.'s 2023 meta-analysis) but also reducing prejudicial attitudes among non-migrant students. Perhaps most innovatively, curriculum reforms that intentionally incorporate migrant narratives and cultural content have proven effective in decreasing othering behaviors while enhancing all students' cultural competence (Banks, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). These interventions work by targeting the psychological mechanisms linking social distance to educational outcomes: when social distance decreases, teachers are more likely to recognize and nurture migrant students' potential, peers become more inclusive, and the learning environment becomes more identity-safe (OECD, 2022).

The urbanization wave sweeping developing economies makes the refinement of social distance theory both more urgent and more promising. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs that track how social distance trajectories influence migrant children's educational pathways across critical developmental transitions (Enrich, 2023). Technological advances like machine learning analysis of classroom interaction patterns (Park et al., 2023) and immersive virtual reality simulations of intergroup encounters (Hasler et al., 2022) offer exciting new methodological frontiers. Ultimately, the most impactful work will be that which bridges theoretical sophistication with practical applicability - developing social distance measures sensitive enough to detect subtle classroom dynamics yet simple enough for school-wide implementation, and interventions grounded in robust theory but adaptable to diverse educational contexts (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2023). As migration continues to reshape student demographics worldwide, social distance research that maintains this dual focus on scientific rigor and educational relevance will be indispensable for creating inclusive learning environments.

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