Responses to Ethical Scenarios: The Role of Construal Level and the Self

This research explores how variation in consumers’ construal level can influence their expectations about how ethically others, as well as the self, will behave in hypothetical situations. Across four experiments, construal levels are manipulated by altering social distance, temporal distance, perceptual fluency and by using a well-established cognitive method. Tests of mediated moderation indicate that by altering the relative priority placed on the desirability of end-state goals or the feasibility of means used for accomplishing those goals, changes in construal level predictably influence self-reported (un)ethical behavior. Contrary to prior research, however, the present findings demonstrate when a higher construal level prompts greater unethical behavior - in all cases except one. The final experiment provides new insight into the apparent inconsistency between the present findings and prior research on the effects of construal level on moral decision-making. Specifically, results demonstrate that the salience of the trade-offs that are inherent in many ethical scenarios systematically influence the effects of construal level on ethical decision-making.

Keywords: Ethical Scenarios, Trade-off Salience, Self-imagery, Construal Level.

Introduction

Employees are often asked to provide responses to ethical dilemmas as part of an initial screening test (West and Berman 2004) or as a critical component of a firm’s ethical training program (Sekerka 2009). As an employee at one of these organizations, a typical scenario that you might face could ask you to imagine that you need to complete an important personal project that requires the use of a unique marker, and that this marker is available in the office supply room at your place of work. The question then asks how likely you would be to take the marker from work for use on your personal project at home? How would you respond to this question? Might your response change if minor alterations were made in the wording or appearance of the scenario such as the timing of the event or the font of the text? More importantly, how might someone’s responses be influenced by the extent to which they view the situation as a trade-off between a dishonest behavior and a desirable outcome?

According to reports, more than 80% of training programs make use of hypothetical scenarios to both assess and teach employees (West and Berman 2004). Scenarios of this sort also are frequently used in scholarly studies of ethics (e.g. Amit and Greene 2012; Janoff-Bulman et al. 2009; Torelli et al. 2009). The widespread use of such scenarios presumably reflects organizations’ recognition that they serve an important role in predictive
assessments, and yet a number of important questions remain. One concerns how stable people’s responses to ethical scenarios are. That is, could seemingly minor variations in presentational aspects of the scenarios (e.g. small changes in wording, text font, or even pronoun changes, say, from “you” to a fictitious individual’s name) influence how people respond to them? This research examines these issues by drawing on core principles of construal level theory (CLT) and, in so doing, also helps to explain the a recently uncovered opposing prediction that can be made by CLT with respect to ethical decision-making.

First, by investigating the role of construal level, the present work sheds light on how minor variations in the way scenarios are presented may influence people’s responses to ethical dilemmas and do so by altering respondents’ construal level in various ways. Note that the modifications that are considered include not only seemingly trivial ones such as the timing of the event described; they also include ones that are quite common and strategic, such as identifying the scenario’s protagonist as either the self (“you”) or an anonymous fictitious person (“Chris”). Such pronoun variation is based on the logic that the latter may be more valid as it surreptitiously invites respondents to unwittingly project their own inclinations on to a fictitious person (e.g. Sherman 1980).

Second, the present findings also help to resolve an inconsistency between a recent set of findings and the hypothesized effects of construal level in the present research and the majority of research that has investigated the effects of construal level on moral judgment. Specifically, a significant body of literature has demonstrated that higher construal levels can increase moral behavior by elevating the salience of higher-level values (Torelli et al. 2009; Eyal et al. 2009; Eyal, Liberman and Trope 2008) or by activating a more idealistic, as opposed to pragmatic, self-concept (Kivetz and Tyler 2007). One recent set of results, however, investigating the effects of forced choice on ethical decision-making, found some evidence to suggest that higher construal levels can have negative consequences on ethical decision-making. In their research, Wood, Noseworthy and Colwell (2013) found that managers were more likely to make unethical hypothetical decisions when scenarios were framed as psychologically distant (i.e. higher construal levels were elicited). By incorporating a recently introduced framework to the Construal Level Theory research by Goodman and Malkoc (2012), the present research tests a theoretical explanation for this apparent inconsistency.

In summary, this research contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge in several ways. First, by exploring the intersection between CLT and (un)ethical behavior, this work advances our understanding of ethical decision-making by identifying the mechanism that underlies such behavior. Specifically, it shows that variation in construal level influences the process of decision-making and thereby alters how people respond to ethical dilemmas. This occurs because rendering ethical decisions entails making a trade-off between assigning greater priority to the desirability of an end-state (e.g. enhancing one’s financial status) or the feasibility considerations that surround the enactment of a given (i.e. unethical) response (e.g. the likelihood that any
enacted actions or misdeeds will prompt negative consequences). Because a high (low) construal level increases attention to the former (latter) issue (Sagristano, Trope and Liberman 2002; Todorov, Goren and Trope 2007), presentational features that alter construal level are likely to affect how ethical people’s decisions are made. Second, this research contributes to CLT by assessing respondents’ thoughts about desirability as well as feasibility aspects of the ethical situation and then demonstrating how such thoughts, both individually and combined, mediate and influence ethical decisions. Thus, the present research illustrates how these two inputs shape the decision-making process in a more systematic manner than extant research in this area has shown to date. Finally, by investigating the importance of trade-off salience for the first time, the present work provides a parsimonious explanation for the opposing predictions made in previous research about the effects of construal level on self-reported ethical behavior.

Construal Level Theory

Construal level theory (CLT; Liberman, Trope and Stephan 2007; Liberman and Trope 2008) contends that the meaning people attach to events and actions changes as a function of whether people mentally represent them at a high or low level of construal. High construal level representations are relatively abstract and frequently address the “why” of the situation. As such, they capture the central or most important features of a situation, but omit those that are incidental or concern particulars. In contrast, low level construal representations are concrete and specific in nature. They typically dwell on the “how” of the situation and emphasize concrete details that contextualize the situation (Vallacher and Wegner 1987).

Considerable research has identified factors that influence people’s construal level. One especially crucial factor is psychological distance -- the gap that a person subjectively feels exists between him or herself and an item (e.g. an event or object) when a temporal, social, spatial, probabilistic likelihood, or a fluency-based property separates the item from the direct, personally experienced, and well-known reality of the here and now (e.g. Liberman and Forster 2009). Items that are more psychologically distant from the personal, direct experience of the self are construed at a higher or more abstract level, while those grounded in the personal experience of the self are construed at a concrete low level (Liberman et al. 2007; Liberman et al. 2008).

Thus, a noteworthy premise of CLT is that psychological distance is fundamentally egocentric: regardless of which dimension (i.e. temporal, social, etc.) produces the gap known as psychological distance, it always takes as its reference point, and low construal level benchmark, the self’s personal or egocentric reality of the here and now (Liberman and Forster 2009; Trope and Liberman 2010). This suggests that situations that strongly induce people to attend to the self explicitly are likely to instill an exceptionally low construal level and foster an emphasis on concrete and specific aspects of the situation,
regardless of other factors that might increase an individual’s construal level.

Equally noteworthy is research which establishes that because psychological distance alters construal level, it prompts people to attend to, accentuate, and make dominant use of alternative aspects of goal-derived behavior, namely either its desirability or its feasibility (Eyal et al. 2009). The desirability of behavior is a high construal level feature, for it refers to the general or overarching value of the end state that a behavior brings about (e.g. financial rewards). In contrast, feasibility constitutes the particular means that are used to reach the end-state, so it represents a lower level feature as it dwells on the particular method used to accomplish the objective (e.g. the effort required to earn financial reward).

**Ethical Behavior and the Role of Construal Level**

The preceding observations are informative for they suggest a theoretical basis for anticipating how people are likely to respond to situations that involve ethical challenges. Research on construal level suggests that minor variations in, say, temporal or social distance, which often characterize ethical dilemmas or appear in hypothetical scenarios used to describe them, can alter psychological distance and thus people’s construal of such scenarios. Moreover, when people engage in unethical goal-directed behavior, they generally do so because their behaviors enable them to achieve a desirable higher-level goal or end-state, even though the particular means used to make feasible this end-state are unethical. Because research attests that people’s assessments of goal-directed behavior are likely to be especially sensitive to and guided by desirability concerns (i.e. the favorableness of the overarching end-state) when they construe an event at a high level, whereas they are likely to be driven by feasibility concerns (i.e. the means used to make the end-state possible) when people construe the same event at a low level (e.g. Liberman and Trope 1998), it stands to reason that people’s responses to goal-related ethically-challenging situations should vary as a function of the psychological distance of the situation as a result of changes in the decision-maker’s construal level. Specifically, when individuals anticipate how an unknown and thus socially distal person will react to an ethical challenge, they should adopt a relatively high construal level. This high construal level should prompt them to focus on a goal’s desirability – not the feasibility of the means used to attain the goal, resulting in an anticipation of even more unethical actions when the situation in question will take place at a more distal versus proximate time. This follows because the more distal timing should further magnify the use of a high construal level.

On the other hand, when individuals are asked to indicate how they themselves will respond to such situations, they should focus quite firmly on the highly familiar and concrete self in the here and now (low psychological distance) and adopt a very low construal level. This makes sense because here the actor is the self who exists right now and represents the low construal level...
benchmark or end-point (i.e. the “floor” on the construal level continuum) against which all dimensions of psychological distance are gauged. For this reason, relatively minor variations in other aspects of psychological distance are likely to exert only a small or non-significant impact on individuals’ very low construal level responses. Hence, when individuals indicate how they themselves will respond to ethically-challenging situations, they should engage in low construal level thinking, regardless of other minor sources of variations in psychological distance. As such, they should anticipate that the self will engage in minimal unethical behavior owing to their heightened attention to means and feasibility concerns (i.e. the unethical means used to accomplish the goal). The first three studies provide support for this basic hypothesis, doing so by altering construal level via different dimensions of psychological distance that are common in the present ethical situations in the workplace, namely temporal distance (study 1a), perceptual fluency (e.g. ease of processing; study 1b), and social distance (studies 1a, 1b, and 2). Study 2 probes further and offers evidence of the mediating roles played by desirability and feasibility concerns about events.

Finally, some scholars reasoned that contrary to the relationship proposed above, a low-construal level could increase, rather than decrease, unethical behavior because the actor might neglect the higher-level (e.g. value-oriented) consequences of their actions (e.g. Gong and Medin 2012). Early evidence has supported this contention by demonstrating that people expect higher levels of moral behavior from themselves, and others, when a higher construal level is elicited (e.g. Torelli et al. 2009; Eyal et al. 2009). This finding is predicted by CLT because a higher construal level presumably heightens attention to higher-level values such as moral concerns and values. However, an important distinction between the scenarios utilized in this earlier work and the first three studies presented in the present research is the extent to which a clearly idealistic or moral choice was present. For example, in much of the previous research participants were presented with actions that were unequivocally immoral (e.g. eating one’s dog, incest, Torelli et al. 2009; Eyal et al. 2009) or instructions or response scales explicitly conveyed that the scenarios depicted morally corrupt behaviors (Agerstrom and Bjorklund 2009). In the present research, however, the scenarios under investigation are more innocuous – they are similar to the unethical situations that individuals are likely to encounter in everyday life, and consistent with the kinds of scenarios commonly utilized by organizations’ unethical screening and training initiatives (West and Berman 2004; Sekerka 2009), such as sharing private information to gain favor with an employer, or taking office supplies home for personal use. In other words, as opposed to the clearly immoral behaviors that are often utilized in previous research, the present scenarios present a trade-off between an unethical yet feasible behavior, and a positive and desirable outcome for the hypothetical actor.

The importance of this distinction in understanding why construal level might make opposing predictions for these two types of scenarios (i.e. clearly immoral, as opposed to unethical but desirable) can be understood by a
framework that has recently been introduced into the CLT literature. Specifically, in their research, Goodman and Malkoc (2012) found that scenarios like the ones used in the present research that include a trade-off as an integral element of the decision or judgment, can cause consumers to focus more(less) on desirability(feasibility) related elements of the task when higher(lower) construal levels are elicited. However, when a trade-off is not salient, an increase(decrease) in construal level, rather than changing the relative importance of desirability or feasibility related thoughts, instead causes consumers to rely more on abstract(concrete) decision elements such as values (actions). Recall, that while previous research investigated behaviors associated with abstract moral values in which no trade-off was present (e.g. eating your dog, incest, etc.), the ethical dilemmas such as those used in the present research have been defined as a trade-off between a beneficial outcome (i.e. desirability consideration) and a dishonorable behavior (i.e. feasibility consideration) (Murphy and Laczniak 2006). It should be noted that this automatic consideration of desirability and feasibility elements as a result of integrated trade-off salience, is not unique to the domain of ethics. Recently CLT has been used to study the dual role of prices as a signal of either quality (desirability) or sacrifice (feasibility), which supports that the trade-off element can be elicited automatically as an integral part of the decision process (Yan and Sengupta 2011; Bornemann and Homburg 2011). In the fourth and final experiment, preliminary support is provided for this hypothesized role of trade-off salience in accounting for the opposing predictions made by CLT with respect to ethical decision-making.

**Experiment 1A**

Study 1a sought to demonstrate our basic hypothesis by investigating whether individuals’ predicted behavior in hypothetical ethical situations differs as a function of their construal level.

**Design and Procedure**

Study 1a was conducted with 114 undergraduate non-business students who were seated at computers and directed to a URL that randomly assigned them to one of the four conditions in a 2 (social distance: self or unknown other) by 2 (temporal distance: proximate or remote distance) between-subjects factorial design. The role of construal level was assessed by presenting participants with nine scenarios (Appendix A). The scenarios were either taken from prior research (Fullerton, Kerch and Dodge 1996; Lysonski and Gaidis 1991) or newly created and presented to participants. Care was taken to ensure that all scenarios were ones that participants could relate to, and none of the behaviors mentioned were extremely objectionable (i.e. patently wrong or immoral). In each scenario, a focal individual wished to achieve a desired goal, but s/he
contemplated doing so by engaging in ethically questionable means or actions. Each scenario included two different psychological distance manipulations intended to vary construal level. The first manipulated social distance; the focal individual was either the self, and referred to as “you” (low construal level) or an unknown other who was referred to by a gender neutral first name (e.g., “Chris”; high construal level). The second manipulation was the temporal distance of the described event. For example, the events were said to take place either next weekend (low construal level) or next month (high construal level).

Participants read the nine scenarios, and for each they assessed, on a 9-point scale, how likely the focal individual would behave in an unethical manner (1=definitely would not and 9=definitely would engage in the behavior). Next, participants evaluated each of the same nine scenarios, but this time they rated how right or wrong (i.e., ethical) they perceived the described behavior (1=absolutely fine and 9=absolutely wrong). Participants then completed the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding scale (BIDR; Paulhus 1984) in order to explore a possible rival self-presentation explanation for participants’ predictions of ethical behavior. Specifically, participants in the self condition may have eschewed unethical behavior, not because the self invokes a very low construal level as predicted, but instead because reference to the self elevates participants’ desire to present themselves favorably to either oneself or other people. The BIDR is composed of two separate subscales that assess distinct aspects of desirable responding: social desirability and impression management. Participants who score higher on social desirability claim more familiarity with bogus products, over-confidence in memory-based judgments, and exhibit a greater illusion of control (Paulhus and Reid 1991; Paulhus 1988); high scores on the impression management subscale reflect a greater deliberate attempt to distort responses in order to present a more favorable image to others.

**Results**

First, an examination of participants’ judgments of how right or wrong they felt each behavior described in the scenarios was (i.e. how ethical it was) provided judgments ranging from 4.14 to 7.57 (Table 1a), confirming that the scenario behaviors were viewed as moderately, but not excessively unethical. These judgments were negatively correlated with the key dependent variable, participants’ predictions of unethical behavior (all p’s < .01), (i.e. participants predicted more unethical behavior when the behavior was judged as being more acceptable). In addition, a MANOVA investigated whether the two construal level manipulations (social distance and temporal distance) affected participants’ judgments of each behavior’s acceptability. Results showed that neither of these factors nor their interaction influenced the judgments of any of the individual scenarios (grand mean, and individual scenario p’s all > .30).

Next, an ANOVA\(^1\) investigated the key dependent measure, participants’

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\(^1\)A multivariate test confirmed that the main effects and interaction effects were not driven by a small number of scenarios. MANOVA results revealed main effects for both focal individual
average predictions about the behavior depicted in the scenarios. Results revealed a main effect of both focal individual (F(1, 110) = 20.84, p < .01, $\eta^2 = .16$) and temporal distance (F(1, 110) = 18.43, p < .01, $\eta^2 = .14$), as well as a significant interaction of these two factors (F(1, 110) = 14.10, p < .01, $\eta^2 = .12$). Follow-up analysis of the overall two-way interaction revealed that when construal level was relatively high, because the focal person was an unknown distal other, participants anticipated that they would engage in less ethical behavior when temporal distance was far rather than close (which prompted the use of an even higher construal level; MFar = 6.16 (.223) vs. MClose = 4.53 (.218), p < .01). However, when the focal person was the highly familiar self, which should activate the use of a very low construal level, participants anticipated low levels of unethical behavior, irrespective of variations in temporal distance (M Far = 4.47 (.186) vs. M Close = 4.36 (.183), p > .50). These results conform with our hypotheses (Figure 1).

An examination of self-presentation concerns, through regression analyses, revealed only a single significant effect; the main effect and interaction effect of self-deception were not significant (i.e. F(1,106) = .215, p > .6 and F(1,106) = 1.31, p > .25, respectively) and while the main effect of impression management was not significant (F(1, 106)=1.26, p > .25), a significant three-way interaction between social distance, temporal distance and impression management was found (F(3,106) = 3.93, p < .01, $\eta^2 = .10$). A spotlight analysis (Aiken & West 1991; Irwin & McClelland 2001) found that predictions about unknown others were unaffected by impression management (both contrasts, p > .05). The effects of changes in construal level on participants’ predictions about their own behavior however exhibited directional, but not significant, reversals in the high- and low-impression management groups. Moreover, comparisons failed to yield significant differences (High IM: M LowCL = 4.26 (.245) vs. M HighCL = 3.73 (.263), p = .14; Low IM: M LowCL = 4.48 (.268) vs. M HighCL = 4.96 (.218), p = .26).

Most importantly, when impression management was included as a covariate in the initial ANOVA, while reduced, the effect of the social and temporal distance interaction was still significant (F(1,106) = 4.06, p = .046, $\eta^2 = .04$). Hence, these results suggest that while impression management is significantly correlated with predictions about ones’ own ethical behavior, once this relationship has been accounted for, the significance of the predicted effects of construal level on ethical behavior remain.

**Discussion**

The results of study 1a suggest that when individuals adopt a higher construal level (the focal individual was a distal unknown other and/or the

(F = 3.90, p < .01) and temporal distance (F = 4.06, p < .01) and a significant interaction effect (F = 1.91, p = .058) with 6 of the 9 scenarios significant or approaching significance (Table 1b). Similar consistency was found for the remaining studies when MANOVAs were conducted.

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event would occur in the far future), concerns about the desirability of their
ultimate goal are likely to take priority and guide their responses, even if the
means used to achieve that end-state involve unethical behavior. On the other
hand, when individuals adopt a low construal level (e.g. the event involved the
highly familiar self), attention is devoted to the specific and unethical means
used and its feasibility, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will eschew
the unethical actions. The present study also found that self-presentation
concerns alone do not appear to account for the predictions that participants
rendered about the likelihood of behaving unethically.

Experiment 1B

In the preceding study, participants’ construal level was varied using two
well-established methods for altering psychological distance: social distance
and temporal distance. Yet, one weakness of varying these particular factors is
that doing so requires altering the descriptive content of the messages. It would
be constructive to show that the predicted findings replicate when such
alterations in the descriptive content, and any potential confounds associated
with those alterations, are eliminated. Pertinent to this, recent research suggests
that changes in construal level may be induced in a manner that is independent
of the scenario-embedded descriptive content. Indeed, findings by Alter and
Oppenheimer (2008) suggest that manipulating psychological distance
metacognitively could accomplish this. Thus, study 1b used this approach.
Specifically, study 1b investigated the proposition that manipulating how
fluently participants read and apprehended the scenarios that described the
unethical behavior (i.e. the material’s perceptual fluency) could itself alter the
magnitude of the distance these individuals metacognitively experienced the
described event in relation to themselves. As such, the increased (decreased)
perceptual fluency a reader experiences when apprehending such messages
would prompt him or her to use a low (high) construal level. In turn, this
variation in individuals’ construal level should produce responses toward
ethically questionable events that conceptually replicate those observed in the
previous study.

Design and Procedure

Experiment 1b was similar to the previous study except for two important
modifications. First, temporal distance was replaced by metacognitive distance.
This change permitted all of the descriptive content in the scenarios to stay
constant across conditions, only the focal individual, described as either the
self or an unknown person, was varied across conditions. The perceptual
fluency of the scenario materials was altered by varying the size, style, and
resolution of the typeface that was employed. In the high perceptual fluency
condition, the scenarios were presented using a black, 14-point Tahoma
typeface; while in the low fluency condition, they were presented employing a

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50% gray scale, 10-point italicized Comic Sans typeface, which was harder to read (Alter and Oppenheimer 2008). Second, after responding to the nine scenarios, participants completed the Public and Private Self-Consciousness scale (Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss 1975) to further explore the role that participants’ self-presentation concerns may have had on their predictions of ethical behavior. This scale contains items that measure two aspects of self-awareness, where each gauges different self-presentation concerns. For individuals who are high in private self-consciousness, heightened awareness of the self and one’s internal thoughts and feelings can result in a denial of objective assessments of his or her own ethical behavior because of how these assessments impact self-image. On the other hand, for individuals who are high in public self-consciousness, a chronic concern for the way others view the self could prompt very low predictions of unethical behavior. Thus, these latter individuals’ chronic concern with public self-presentation may result in a habitual need to present oneself positively.

Study 1b was conducted in a computer lab where 112 undergraduate business students were seated at computers and directed to a URL which randomly assigned them to one of four treatments defined by the study’s 2 (focal individual: self vs. unknown other) by 2 (perceptual fluency: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants read the same nine scenarios used in study 1a and assessed the likelihood that the focal individual would behave in an unethical manner using the same 9-point scale. Participants were then asked to complete the Public and Private Self-Consciousness scale.

Results

Pre-test. While Alter and Oppenheimer (2008) have demonstrated the effects of metacognitive difficulty on construal level, as a result of changes in psychological distance, evidence also suggests that the processing difficulty that may be experienced by reducing the font clarity can also affect responses to ethical behavior (Moore and Tenbrunsel 2014) by activating analytical reasoning (Alter et al. 2007). In order to rule out this potential role of processing difficulty, a pre-test was conducted with 84 participants drawn from the same undergraduate student population as the main study. Participants were seated at computers and assigned to the same treatments from the main study; however, after providing responses to the ethical scenarios, they were asked to respond to three questions aimed at gauging perceived processing difficulty (“How much effort was required of you in providing your responses?”, “How difficult was the task of predicting the behavior in these scenarios?”, and “Compared to other studies that you’ve completed, how much effort was required to complete this one?”). No significant differences emerged for difficulty (F(1,82)=2.04, p > .15, η² = .02), effort (F(1,82)=0.02, p > .90, η² = .00) or comparative effort (F(1,82)=.10, p > .75, η² = .001).

Main experiment. An ANOVA on anticipated ethical behavior revealed a significant main effect of focal individual (F(1,108) = 32.42, p < .001, η² = .23) and a significant two-way interaction of focal individual by perceptual fluency.
(F(1,108) = 4.91, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04). The key contrasts of this interaction also supported the predictions. Specifically, when the focal individual was an unknown distal other (prompting use of a high construal level), participants anticipated greater unethical behavior when a low, rather than high, level of perceptual fluency fostered a higher construal level (M_{LowFluency} = 6.59 (.205) vs. M_{HighFluency} = 5.92 (.213), p < .05). But when the focal individual was the extremely familiar self and thereby stimulated the use of a very low construal level, the perceived likelihood of unethical behavior was low and constant, regardless of variation in perceptual fluency (M_{LowFluency} = 5.00 (.209) vs. M_{HighFluency} = 5.17 (.195), p > .50). No significant effects emerged for either private or public self-consciousness (Private SC: Main effect: F(1,102)=.051, p > .80, \eta^2 = .00; 3-way interaction effect: F(1,102)=.527, p > .60, \eta^2 = .02. Public SC: Main effect: F(1,102)=1.50, p > .20, \eta^2 = .01; 3-way interaction effect: F(1,102)=.183, p > .90, \eta^2 = .01). Thus, these findings cast further doubt on the view that self-presentation concerns played a significant role in producing the key outcomes on predictions of (un)ethical behavior.

Discussion

The results of study 1b offer further support for the thesis that construal level can influence people’s ethical decision-making. When construal level was heightened—in this study by means of a meta-cognitive experience that increased psychological distance (i.e. perceptual fluency), assessments of unethical behavior replicated those observed in study 1a. Specifically, changes in perceptual fluency significantly altered predictions of other people’s ethical behaviors, but such changes had no effect on participants’ predictions of their own behavior. Notably, additional investigation into the effect of the two types of self-consciousness (i.e. private and public) indicated that neither played a significant role in producing the preceding effects.

Consistent with previous research on the relationship between desirability and feasibility and changes in construal level, the preceding two studies inferred the degree to which participants actually attended to desirability and feasibility aspects of the scenarios, from the outcomes that were reported (i.e. consideration of these aspects was never measured). Study 2 seeks to address this weakness by obtaining evidence of the actual process that underlies the predicted outcomes. Specifically, study 2 aims to demonstrate the mediating role of individuals’ consideration of desirability and feasibility aspects of ethical dilemmas on the relationship between construal level and assessments of unethical behavior.

Experiment 2

The present theorizing contends that variation in construal level affects the roles that desirability and feasibility related thoughts exert on predictions of
ethical behavior. Moreover, while psychological distance represents one way of influencing construal level, the predicted outcomes on anticipated ethical behavior should hold for any manipulation of construal level. Thus, in study 2, in addition to using the same social distance (construal level) manipulation employed in the previous two studies (i.e. the focal person in each scenario was identified as either the self or an unknown person), the manipulation of temporal (study 1a) or metacognitive (study 1b) distance was replaced with an established construal level priming task (Fujita et al. 2006). Participants completed this construal level priming task prior to responding to three ethical scenarios that were taken from study 1a. A second important modification made in study 2 was that after participants reported their responses about the focal individual’s anticipated behavior in each of the three scenarios, they were asked to report all thoughts they had as they considered that scenario. These thoughts were coded for whether they concerned either desirability or feasibility concerns, thereby serving as indicators of the importance participants assigned to each of these factors as they evaluated each scenario.

**Design and Procedure**

Participants consisted of 276 undergraduates who completed the study, in a computer lab, in small groups of up to 16 people, in exchange for course credit. The study utilized a 2 (construal level priming task: low vs. high) by 2 (focal person: self or unknown other) between-subjects design. To begin, participants performed a construal level priming task (Fujita et al. 2006) that encouraged them to think at either a high or low construal level. The task entailed presenting individuals with a list of items, and for each, they were asked to identify either a superordinate category that the item exemplified (e.g. chocolate bar – junk food) or a subordinate level instance that exemplified the item (e.g. chocolate bar - KitKat). The logic underlying this task is that categorizing items at a superordinate level prompts a high construal level, whereas exemplifying items at a subordinate level fosters a relatively low construal level. All participants received the same list of 26 items and first completed two sample items (responses were analyzed to ensure comprehension of the task).

After responding to the construal level priming task, participants were presented with three ethical scenarios in random order. In each, the protagonist’s social distance from the self was varied, thereby altering construal level in a second way (i.e. the protagonist was either the self or a distal unknown other). Immediately after responding to each scenario, participants completed a thought-listing task in which they recorded all feelings, thoughts and opinions that went through their minds as they reflected on the preceding scenario. Instructions underscored that participants were to

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2This study limited responses to three of the nine scenarios because of the nature of recorded responses and the content that was analyzed. Also, the nature of the proposed mediator (i.e. what they thought about while deciding how to respond) required that it follow, not precede, the dependent measure (predicted ethical behavior).
Two trained judges who were blind to the conditions coded all thoughts for whether they concerned either desirability or feasibility aspects of the scenario. Thoughts were classified as desirability focused if they discussed either a positive or negative end state that could be attained (e.g. gaining favor with the boss, losing one’s job, being promoted, etc.). They were classified as feasibility focused if they discussed the specific actions or behaviors that the protagonist would enact (e.g. he or she would perform the requested actions, but not actually do the unethical deed; would report the unethical request to a supervisor; etc.). Thought classifications of the two coders were significantly correlated ($r = .73$, $p < .01$) and were averaged to obtain a score for each response type.

Results

An ANOVA on the average anticipated (un)ethical behavior across the three scenarios revealed results that were consistent with those of the previous two studies. A main effect of focal individual emerged ($F(1,271) = 45.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$), but it was qualified by an interaction of construal level prime and focal individual ($F(1,271) = 6.02, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$). Planned comparisons were also consistent; when the focal individual was an unknown distal other (inducing a high construal level), participants anticipated greater unethical behavior when a higher, rather than a lower construal level was primed ($M_{HighCL} = 5.54 (.153)$ vs. $M_{LowCL} = 5.02 (.160); p < .05$). But when the focal individual was the self, which prompted an extremely low construal level, anticipated unethical behavior was low and constant, regardless of the primed construal level ($M_{HighCL} = 4.10 (.156)$ vs. $M_{LowCL} = 4.35 (.160), p > .25$).

The Mediating Roles of Desirability and Feasibility. To assess the role that consideration of desirability and feasibility related aspects of the scenarios played in shaping how participants expected the protagonist (i.e. the self or an unknown other) to behave, mediation analysis was conducted. The present theorizing contends that when participants consider the behavior of an unknown person and receive a priming task that stimulates high versus low construal level thinking, they should generate a higher (lower) level of desirability (feasibility) related thoughts. However, because when one anticipates one’s own behavior, explicit contemplation of the self should induce particularly low construal level, thoughts about feasibility related concerns are likely to be especially potent and relevant. This should cause these feasibility related thoughts to play an important role, irrespective of variation in the construal level prime and desirability related thoughts.

This notwithstanding, extant theorizing in the CLT literature proposes an important addendum. It contends that prior to engaging in any goal directed behavior, individuals must first determine whether the behavior in question attains a threshold level of desirability, indicating its potential worthiness of pursuit at all (e.g. Todorov, Goren and Trope 2007). Only if this threshold is attained can feasibility concerns become germane. Thus, the preceding logic
suggests that regardless of whose behavior is at issue (i.e. the self or an unknown person), desirability related concerns will play a paramount role in participants’ anticipation of how (un)ethically a focal person will behave. Therefore, we predict that desirability related thoughts will mediate the moderating effect of social distance on the construal level prime in predicting anticipated (un)ethical behavior. This will be so even though we expect that the combination of desirability related and feasibility related thoughts will fully mediate the effects of the construal level prime and social distance on anticipated ethical behavior.

To explore these predictions, separate indicators were investigated for participants’ two types of thoughts by averaging their desirability related and their feasibility related thoughts across the three scenarios. Evidence of mediated moderation was then tested using a 5,000 bootstrapped model (Model 8: Preacher and Hayes 2008) in which the conditional effect of social distance on construal level prime was examined by including each of the two mediators, desirability and feasibility thoughts, simultaneously in a single model.

The results support the proposed role of the two types of thoughts. Desirability related and feasibility related thoughts were each significant predictors of anticipated (un)ethical behavior ($\beta = -0.40, p < .01$ and $\beta = 0.65, p < .01$, respectively); moreover, after accounting for these indirect effects, the direct effect of construal level and social distance was no longer significant ($\beta = -0.22, p > .45$). The independent roles of desirability related and feasibility related thoughts were also investigated by calculating the indirect effects of the mediated moderation using the analysis recommended by Muller et al. (2005).

Specifically, the conditional indirect effects of the construal level prime on desirability related and feasibility related thoughts were calculated for the different levels of the social distance factor. Among participants who anticipated the behavior of an unknown person, the results revealed indirect effects of the construal level prime on both desirability-related and feasibility-related cognitions. Specifically, a higher construal level increased the average number of desirability related thoughts (95% CI [-.47 to -.13]), and it reduced the average number of feasibility related thoughts (95% CI [-.40 to -.12]). However, among participants who predicted their own behavior, desirability related thoughts were relatively high but unaffected by construal level (95% CI [-.06 to .27]), though a higher construal level did reduce the number of feasibility related thoughts (95% CI [-.27 to -.02]).

Discussion

The results of experiment 2 not only add to our understanding of individuals’ anticipated (un)ethical behavior, but they also contribute to the CLT literature more generally. First, these findings concur with the preceding results, showing that variation in construal level can affect how (un)ethically individuals anticipate that they or others will respond to an ethical quandary. Notably they do this while using a different construal level manipulation (i.e. a construal level priming task) - an important finding, given recent results which
suggest that the effects of direct manipulations of construal level may not be consistent with those resulting from manipulations of psychological distance (e.g. Gong and Medin 2012). Second, the results generally affirm extant CLT theorizing, which claims that prior to pursuing any goal directed behavior or even considering feasibility related matters, a requisite threshold level of desirability related thoughts must be attained. The observation from the present mediated moderation analysis, that the interaction of the two treatments significantly predicted desirability related, but not feasibility related thoughts, aligns with this thesis. A third noteworthy aspect of this study involves the approach that was used to investigate the unique roles that desirability and feasibility related thoughts played in producing the outcomes. Whereas prior construal level research has relied on less compelling methods to examine the influence of such thoughts (i.e. inferential or correlational evidence), this study administered measures that assessed the extent to which respondents generated desirability-related and feasibility-related thoughts in response to ethical dilemmas. Thus, this work provides a more rigorous and systematic investigation of when and how each type of thought influences anticipated behavior. Importantly, all findings supported a critical prediction: desirability (feasibility) related thoughts were generally elevated when respondents employed higher (lower) construal level thinking, and both types of thoughts mediated anticipated (un)ethical behavior. Yet, feasibility related thoughts exerted a more dominating influence when respondents anticipated how they themselves (versus an unknown person) would behave.

**Experiment 3**

The three studies reported to this point provide converging support for the role of construal level on self-reported ethical behavior. In so doing, they suggest that minor alterations such as the clarity of the text (study 1b) or the timing of the depicted events (study 1a) can affect responses to ethical scenarios in substantial and predictable ways. Interestingly, in all three previous studies, when participants were asked to anticipate their own behavior, individuals reported that they would behave relatively ethically, regardless of other factors that might influence the individual’s construal level. Moreover, this result is also inconsistent with previous research which has demonstrated that people expect higher levels of moral behavior from themselves, and others, when a higher construal level is elicited (e.g. Torelli et al. 2009; Eyal et al. 2009). Recall however, that an important distinction between the scenarios utilized in this earlier work on moral decision-making, and the present results is the extent to which the scenarios present a trade-off between an unethical yet feasible behavior, and a positive and desirable outcome.

New findings in the CLT literature highlight the importance of this distinction. Specifically, in their research, Goodman and Malkoc (2012) find that when judgments or choices inherently incorporate a trade-off, increases in
construal level can cause consumers to focus more on the desirability related elements of the unethical behavior. In the present context, this suggests that an individual will have more thoughts related to the potential benefits of behaving dishonestly than the detailed (i.e., unethical) actions associated with attaining that outcome, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will predict the enactment of the dishonest behavior. However, according to Goodman and Malkoc (2012), when trade-offs are not salient (i.e., when the behavior is perceived as clearly immoral) an increase in construal level causes consumers to rely more on abstract processing, making high-level values more salient and reducing the acceptability of unethical behavior, thereby lowering predicted unethical behavior. In the fourth and final experiment, the role of trade-off salience in accounting for the opposing predictions made by CLT on ethical decision-making is investigated by manipulating the extent to which a scenario is perceived as being clearly immoral (i.e., not a trade-off between a somewhat dishonest action in exchange for desirable outcome).

**Design and Procedure**

Study 3 was conducted with 256 undergraduate business students, in exchange for course credit, who were seated at computers and directed to a URL which randomly assigned them to one of eight treatments defined by the study’s 2 (temporal distance: proximate vs. remote) by 2 (focal individual: self vs. unknown other) by 2 (trade-off salience: high vs. low) between-subjects design. Participants were presented with the same nine scenarios and the same 9-point scale used to assess the likelihood that the focal individual would behave in an unethical manner. Prior to evaluating the hypothetical scenarios, however, participants were randomly assigned to see initial instructions that were either identical to those used in the previous 3 experiments (i.e., high trade-off salience) or instructions that highlighted the perceived immoral elements of the scenarios (i.e., low trade-off salience) (Appendix B).

**Results**

**Pre-test.** A pre-test was conducted to measure the extent to which the initial instructions would indeed elicit different perceptions about the extent to which the scenarios presented a trade-off between feasible but dishonorable actions and desirable outcomes. Ninety-seven participants, drawn from the same subject pool as the main experiment, were asked to indicate the extent to which each of the nine-scenarios presented a trade-off through a 7-point scale anchored by “1 = this was totally about right and wrong” and “7 = this was really about a trade-off between doing something to get something”. A MANOVA that included social distance, temporal distance and trade-off salience as between-subjects factors, revealed only a single main effect of trade-off salience instructions (F(10, 94)=1.94, p = .053, η²=.20), no other main effects or interaction effects were found (all p’s > .25); mean comparisons also revealed that participants for whom trade-off salience was reduced (i.e., when
the immorality of the hypothetical action was highlighted) reported
significantly lower perceptions of trade-offs for 6 of the 9 scenarios, and
approached significance for one other (Table 2), confirming the effectiveness of the trade-off salience manipulation.

Main Experiment. A MANOVA found that 6 of 9 scenarios produced significant 3-way interaction between tradeoff salience, social distance and temporal distance. However, an ANOVA of the average responses across all 9 scenarios revealed a 3-way interaction that failed to reach conventional levels of significance (F(1,248)=2.75, p < .09, η²=.01). The analysis did provide significant main effects for social distance (F(1,248)=17.34, p < .01, η²=.07) and temporal distance (F(1,248)=4.75, p < .05, η²=.02) and a significant interaction effect for tradeoff salience by temporal distance (F(1,248)=20.70, p < .01, η²=.08). An investigation of the main effects revealed that more ethical behavior was predicted for the self than for unknown others (M_Self = 4.89 (.10) vs. M_Other = 5.47 (.10)), as well as greater expectations of ethical behavior in the distal future than the near future (M_Far = 5.03 (.10) vs. M_Close = 5.33 (.10)). More importantly, the role of trade-off salience was investigated through planned comparisons of mean predictions of unethical behavior. The results suggest that trade-off salience is an important factor in accounting for the opposing predictions made by CLT for ethical decision-making (Figure 2). Specifically, when the initial instructions reduced trade-off salience, the effects of construal level were largely consistent with prior research (i.e. higher construal levels reduced, rather than increased, predicted unethical behavior) - more ethical behavior was reported in the temporally distant conditions (F(1,137)=24.83, p < .01, η²=.15; M_Close = 5.66 (.13) vs. M_Far = 4.72 (.14)) although no significant differences were found for social distance (F(1,137)=3.22, p > .05, η²=.02). When trade-off salience was high, however, the results were consistent with the previous 3 experiments. Participants reported significantly less unethical behavior for the self than for an unknown other (F(1,111)=16.14, p < .01, η²=.13; M_Self = 4.75 (.15) vs. M_Other = 5.58 (.14)); but the effect of temporal distance was present only for predictions about others (F(1,111)=22.85, p < .01, η²=.17; M_Far = 5.99 (.19) vs. M_Close = 5.16 (.21)), not for predictions about the self (F(1,111)=1.17, p > .20, η²=.01; M_Far= 4.67 (.20) v. M_Close = 4.84 (.21)).

The final experiment demonstrates why a potentially integral element of moral decision-making, trade-off salience, is important in understanding the effects of construal level on moral judgments and sheds light on the apparent inconsistency between the present results and many of the results found by previous research on CLT and moral decision-making. While a significant reduction in predicted unethical behavior for the self, compared to an unknown other, was seen when trade-off salience was high (i.e. participants were faced with a decision to behave somewhat dishonestly to achieve a desired outcome), no such difference emerged when salience was low (i.e. the scenarios were framed as clearly immoral). More importantly, the effects of temporal distance were reversed. When the scenarios were perceived as depicting immoral behavior, an increase in construal level, it presumably increased the salience of
values which increased participants admonition of the unethical behaviors. When the scenarios were, instead, presented merely as dishonest, common acts that someone might encounter in their day-to-day life, temporal distance (i.e. a higher construal level) increased/reduced the number of desirability-(feasibility)-related thoughts, which increased their willingness to predict that they would behave in an unethical manner.

**General Discussion**

Together, the results from the four experiments reported provide converging evidence for the hypothesized effects of construal level on ethical behavior. In addition, they shed light on the mediating roles that the desirability and feasibility of events play in producing this effect and the importance of trade-off salience in understanding when these thoughts become relevant to decision-makers. In three of the experiments, construal level was altered through various dimensions of psychological distance (i.e. temporal distance (study 1a), perceptual fluency (study 1b), and social distance (studies 1a, 1b and 2)). The outcomes observed in these first three studies can be explained in terms of respondents’ construal level and the relative emphasis that such construal leads people to place on the desirability of end-states and the feasibility of means. Recall that when people engage in unethical behaviors, they generally do so because their behaviors allow them to achieve a desirable higher level end-state or goal, even though the particular means used to make that end-state feasible are unethical. This suggests that when other people’s behavior is in question, increasing respondents’ sensitivity to feasibility (desirability) concerns by inducing a lower (higher) construal level will generally lead these individuals to anticipate that others’ behavior will be more ethical (unethical). Yet, importantly, a different outcome should occur when respondents explicitly consider the self and their own behavior. Because direct attention to the self encourages adoption of a particularly potent and very low construal level, other factors that otherwise could alter construal level should be subjugated, prompting respondents to focus strongly on feasibility-related concerns, resulting in increased claims that they would behave ethically.

**The Mediating Effects of Desirability and Feasibility**

The first two studies offered initial support for the predicted outcomes and the underlying role of desirability and feasibility concerns. Importantly, however, study 2 provided support for the assumed relationships between construal level, concerns about desirability and feasibility, and (un)ethical behavior. Tests of mediation demonstrated how both desirability and feasibility related cognitions play important roles in explaining the influence of construal level on (un)ethical behavior. More specifically, while variation in construal level significantly influenced the number of desirability related thoughts that participants produced when they considered the behavior that an unknown
other person would enact, this relationship was absent when participants anticipated how they themselves would behave. When participants considered how they themselves would behave when faced with various ethical dilemmas, desirability related thoughts were high but unchanged by changes in construal level, while the importance of feasibility related thoughts became particularly germane and especially so when a low construal level was elicited. Hence, when participants anticipated their own behavior to the ethical dilemmas, the increase in feasibility related thoughts that transpired dampened the influence of desirability related thoughts. As a result, the heightened feasibility related thoughts prompted participants to anticipate that they would behave ethically in response to the dilemma, and this was irrespective of construal level prime.

**The Role of the Self: Self-Presentation and Salience of the Self**

In the first three studies, when individuals were asked to anticipate how they themselves would respond to ethical dilemmas, they consistently maintained that they would behave ethically. Yet, this observation seems curious, given that much real-world evidence suggests that people quite frequently engage in unethical actions. What might account for this seeming disparity? One possible explanation is that participants who were asked to anticipate their own behavior reported that they would behave quite ethically; not because the self-invoked a very low construal level as we predict, but instead because consideration of the self-stimulated their desire to present themselves favorably either to themselves or to other people. However, analyses of various self-presentation variables uncovered only one, impression management, that suggested it had a systematic effect on anticipated ethical behavior and, neither this factor, nor any of the other measures of self-presentation ever eliminated the significant interaction between the two instantiations of construal level (i.e. social distance and primed construal level, or either temporal or metacognitive distance). Thus, there seems to be weak, if any, support for the view that the results can be explained by self-presentation concerns.

Another potential explanation comes from work conducted on self-activation following changes in construal level (Kivetz and Tyler 2007). This research suggests that a higher(lower) construal level activates a more idealistic(pragmatic) self, which would systematically influence predictions about one’s own ethical behavior. In the present research however, changes in temporal or metacognitive distance (studies 1a, 1b and 3) and direct manipulations of construal level (study 2) failed to influence predicted unethical behavior for the self. Interestingly, in the final experiment, when trade-off salience was low (i.e. elements of feasibility and desirability were not important considerations) participants who were asked to make predictions about their own behavior did exhibit significant differences in ethical decision-making when construal levels were manipulated by relative differences in temporal distance. This finding is informative because it suggests that the two proposed consequences of changes in construal level (changes in the relative
importance of feasibility versus desirability considerations as opposed to higher, more abstract, versus lower, more concrete, level processing) introduced by Goodman and Malkoc (2012) appear to have significantly different underlying mechanisms driving ethical decision-making. This is an important issue that warrants future research. For example, it is possible that when trade-off salience is low (e.g. clearly immoral actions are depicted) a higher construal level increases both moral concerns and makes the idealistic self more salient. It is possible these simultaneous effects of increased construal level (i.e. increased moral concerns and making the idealistic self more salient) can cause respondents to overcome the exceptionally low construal level that explicit visualization and attention to the self elicited in the present research. This is a potentially important element to research in CLT that warrants additional attention.

Finally, some evidence from prior research also supports the particularly important role that attention to the self can play in eliciting low construal levels in the present research. First, in previous CLT research, participants have not been asked to explicitly imagine or observe themselves making a choice or behaving in a particular manner. Instead, prior research has asked participants to evaluate a product (Trope and Liberman 2000) or a message (e.g. Chandran and Menon 2004) or choose a product (e.g. Borovi, Liberman and Trope 2010) without requiring that they explicitly envision the self as the decision maker. In the present research, however, attention to the self was heightened (i.e. by explicitly asking that participants envision themselves acting out the action). Based on CLT, the dedicated and explicit attention that was devoted to the self in our research reduced psychological distance, magnifying low construal level thinking. Note that this impact of explicitly considering the self prior to making a judgment is supported by research in social psychology. Specifically, the importance of the actor-observer distinction, which was first introduced by Jones and Nisbett (1972), has since generated a substantial body of evidence which shows that while actors focus more on the surrounding environment and situational factors, observers focus more on the actor performing a particular behavior (e.g. Hung and Mukhopadhyay 2012; Frank and Gilovich 1989; Jones and Nisbett 1972). This research suggests that prior research in CLT which has asked participants to make a choice or judgment solicited responses from participants as “actors,” which increased participants’ focus on situational factors relevant to the choice or judgment at hand. In the present research, however, by asking participants to envision (i.e. observe) themselves prior to making a judgment, the salience of the self was significantly heightened for participants by adopting the role of an observer. This increased focus on the self reduced psychological distance, such that additional changes in construal level were effectively mitigated. Additional research would help to illuminate the role that explicit attention to the self might play in mitigating the effects of factors that would otherwise increase an individuals’ construal level.
Together, the results from all four experiments make important contributions to both the study of ethical behavior and CLT. While researchers have already produced a sizable body of research on the topic of ethics (e.g. Nill and Schibrowsky [2007] listed over 400 articles on this subject in marketing journals alone), there is still limited effort directed toward theory testing in this area. By drawing on the established theory concerning construal level, this research makes progress in filling this gap. Specifically, it informs researchers and practitioners of the important role that construal level can have on individuals’ ethical decision-making. The findings clarify this role by demonstrating that alternative manipulations of construal level all exert similar effects, yet a social distance induction that draws explicit attention to the self can invoke the use of a particularly potent low construal level that can override the effects of other manipulations. The present research also makes a contribution by illuminating the workings of the mechanism that operates and affects ethical decision-making (i.e. thoughts about desirability and feasibility aspects of the situation). Not only does this analysis enhance our understanding of the underlying process, but it adds to CLT itself by explicating a consequence that can occur when construal level is varied.

Specifically, CLT has posited that variation in construal level can alter the emphasis people place on desirability versus feasibility related concerns (see Trope and Liberman 2003, and 2010 for reviews). However, extant evidence of this has consisted of outcome-based inferences (i.e. by identifying outcomes thought to signify high or low desirability or feasibility, pairing these outcomes into options, and then asking individuals which option they preferred [e.g. temporally in Liberman et al. 1998 or probabilistically in Sagristano, Trope and Liberman 2002]). To date, the strongest evidence of these different emphases has come from correlational data, which have shown a relationship between construal level and desirability or feasibility related attributes (Todorov, Goren and Trope 2007). Hence, prior research has never explicitly documented the nature of the cognitions produced by people who employ alternative construal levels. In contrast, the present research provides a more rigorous investigation of the proposed linkage between construal level and people’s emphasis on desirability or feasibility related concerns. In so doing, it also provides additional support for an important assertion made by researchers of CLT (Todorov, Goren and Trope 2007). Specifically, while feasibility concerns were found to be secondary to desirability matters, they played an important role when individuals employed a low construal level, particularly when they considered their own behavior. The present results also provide insight into a potentially new contributing factor that might play a role in the negative expectations that people often report about the behavior of others (e.g. Diekman, Tenbrunsel and Galinsky 2003). Specifically, when individuals consider the behavior of unknown others, the increased social distance (i.e. relative to the self) may increase an individual’s attention to the desirability related elements of the task or decision at hand, thereby increasing the
expectation that the hypothetical actor will behave in a more self-serving, selfish manner.

Finally, the results of the present research are also noteworthy as they provide the first evidence for the unique role that explicit consideration of the self can play in strongly lowering one’s construal level. When participants considered their own behavior, and did so in a way that prompted explicit attention to the self (i.e. in a hypothetical context), they elicited such high levels of feasibility related thoughts that other factors which typically alter construal level exerted no effect on predicted self behavior. Although researchers who study CLT have previously proposed that feasibility related thoughts can become very important in determining the choices and behaviors of individuals (Freitas, Salovey and Liberman 2001; Sagristano, Trope and Liberman 2002), this research provides the clearest empirical evidence of this.

### Tables and Figures

**Table 1a**

Study 1a: Mean Judgments of Unethical Behavior

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<th>Scenario</th>
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<th>Std. Dev.</th>
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### Table 1b

**Study 1a: Mean Anticipated Unethical Behavior**

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### Table 2

**Pre-test Results for Trade-off Salience Manipulation**

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<th>( \eta^2 )</th>
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<th>Mean</th>
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Figure 1
Comparison of Low vs. High Trade-off Salience

Figure 2
Comparison of Low vs. High Trade-off Salience
Appendix A

Scenarios Utilized Across All Four Experiments (*denotes scenarios used in Experiment 2)
Some time ago Chris / you bought a headset for some new voice-recognition software, but it isn’t working. Chris / You lost the receipt but has / have been told that it’s possible to get a refund without a receipt at a small nearby computer store, even though the headset wasn’t purchased there. How likely is Chris / are you to return the product for a refund at the nearby computer store?

Leslie / You intend(s) to purchase a television set. To get a better deal, Leslie / you could tell the salesperson that another retailer is selling the same TV at a much cheaper price. In such cases, the word is that the retailer always matches the lower price without ever checking. How likely is it that Leslie / you will tell the salesperson that the same television is selling for a cheaper price at another store?

Jami / You discovered that the mailman delivered a package that contains an unordered sweater along with some other items that were ordered. The bill includes no charge for the extra item, which was added by mistake. Jami / You tried on the sweater and it was a perfect match—perfect in coloring, style, and fit! Jami / You could easily return the sweater since some other items didn’t work out and need to be returned anyway. Still the temptation to keep it is high. What is the likelihood that Jami / you will say nothing and keep the sweater?

*After a meeting, JD’s / your new boss asked for some confidential information about JD’s / your previous employer. What are the chances that JD / you will provide the boss with this information?
*At work, a high ranking manager asked Sam / you to leave a vent open that will release smoke pollution in the air late at night when no one can see it. What is the likelihood that Sam / you will comply with this request?

Jeri has / You have a frequent flier ticket that is non-transferable. A friend has offered to buy the ticket from Jeri / you for cash. Despite the fact that there is no question that the ticket is non-transferable, how likely is it that Jeri / you will sell the ticket?

*Jessie has / You have an important school project that has yet to be completed, but the project requires using a special type of marker. Aware that the supply room at work has some of these markers, how likely is it that Jessie / you will go to the supply room and bring the markers home for this purpose?

Shelby is / You are hungry but forgot to bring lunch to work. There are no restaurants, vending machines, or other means of getting something to eat in the area. A co-worker has about a week’s worth of snacks in the fridge, but she always refuses to share and no doubt will say no if asked for food. So Shelby is / you are debating whether or not to simply take a snack and not tell anyone. How likely is Shelby / are you to take a snack from the co-worker’s stash?

Dominique was / You were invited to a dinner party at a friend’s house. The friend mentioned that his brother, who is intolerable to be around, will be there. The brother’s presence will ensure that Dominique / you won’t enjoy the party. However, Dominique’s your friend is very fond of his brother, which makes it extremely uncomfortable to tell your friend the truth. Two options seem possible: You could either tell the friend the truth about his brother or lie by claiming to be ill on the night of the party. How likely is it that Dominique / you will claim to be ill on the night of the party?

Appendix B

High Trade-off Salience, Self Condition, Instructions (Study 1a, 1b, 2 and 3)

When confronted with unexpected situations, people often behave in ways that may or may not be in character. Our purpose is not to judge anyone, but instead to get a sense of how a broad cross-section of people would respond to such situations.

On the next page, are several scenarios that someone might encounter in ones normal everyday life. In each case, please imagine yourself as described in the scenario and indicate what you believe that you would do. People are human, so what ever you respond, many other people are likely to respond in the same way. All responses are completely anonymous, so please be candid in indicating what you feel you would do.

Low Trade-off Salience, Self Condition, Instructions (Study 3)

When confronted with an opportunity to behave immorally, people often behave in ways that may not be in character for them. Our purpose is get a
sense of how a broad cross-section of people would respond when facing an opportunity to behave badly - do something unethical.

On the next page, are several moral dilemmas that you might encounter. In each case, please imagine yourself as described in the scenario and indicate what you think you would do. All responses are completely anonymous, so please be candid in providing your responses.

References


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