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The effect of construal level on unethical behavior

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ABSTRACT
Construal level theory predicts that people will judge immoral events more harshly when these are presented in a way that elicits a higher construal level, relative to a lower construal level. Previous research supported this prediction using an Israeli sample but not a U.S. sample. This article compared Israeli and U.S. samples with respect to the interactive effect of utility and construal level on unethical behavioral intentions. We found that construal level did not affect unethical behavioral intentions in either the U.S. samples for low-utility level or the Israeli samples for low- and high-utility levels. In contrast, construal level affected unethical behavioral intentions in the U.S. sample for high-utility level: unethical behavioral intentions were higher in the low-construal level compared to the high-construal level. We discuss these findings and suggest additional factors that challenge arguments concerning the direct effect of construal level on unethical behavior.

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Consequentialism; construal level theory; deontology; moral judgment; unethical behavior; utility

Research in the behavioral sciences has examined a number of possible factors affecting human moral behavior. Several studies have shown support for construal level theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998) as a viable way to explain and predict moral and immoral behavior. Construal level theory suggests that psychological distance affects the way people mentally represent future events: A large psychological distance produces more abstract representations conveying the perceived essence of the events (high-level construal), whereas a small psychological distance generates more concrete and incidental details of the event (low-level construal; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003). The predictions of construal level theory have been examined in various domains and with different operationalizations of psychological distance. For example, directing participants to think about how they will act in a particular situation elicits a lower construal level, whereas directing participants to think about why they will act elicits a higher construal level. Temporal distance is another typical operationalization of construal level, where near-future events are characterized by low-level construals, and distant-future events are characterized by high-level construals (Trope & Liberman, 2003).

The effect of construal level on moral judgments

Applying construal level theory to moral judgments leads to the prediction that individuals will judge immoral events more harshly when they are presented in a way that elicits a higher construal level relative to a lower construal level. The theoretical rationale of this prediction is that when a higher construal level occurs, individuals consider the more abstract value of moral issues (why), whereas in a lower construal level they may consider more concrete aspects of the event (how).

The findings from several studies support predictions for construal level on moral judgments. In one example, Cojuharenco, Patient, and Bashshur (2011) found that when participants focused on future or distant time frames (high construal), they were more concerned by unfair outcomes,
whereas participants focusing on present or near time frames (low construal) were more concerned by procedural and interpersonal justice issues. That is, time construal appears to affect fairness judgments by focusing individuals on different aspects of possible immoral or unfair acts. Similarly, Agerström, Björklund, and Carlsson (2013) showed that a third-person perspective led to a more abstract construal of a situation, and as a result, to harsher judgments of moral actions relative to a first-person perspective.

To the first- vs. third-person perspective, Lammers (2012) added a manipulation of construal level (using several operationalizations—e.g., time construal). Lammers showed that when relating to someone else, participants judged moral dilemmas more harshly in the high- vs. low-construal level, but this pattern was reversed when the moral dilemmas related to one’s own perspective. Lammers’s findings suggest that moral judgments not only depend on construal level but may also be biased by people’s focus of attention—themselves vs. others.

Accumulating evidence suggests that construal level affects moral judgments, yet some of the evidence is inconsistent with regard to the nature of such effects. Critically, in a series of four experiments in which construal level was manipulated in various ways, Eyal, Liberman, and Trope (2008) demonstrated that people applied their moral principles more readily to distant rather than proximal behaviors. However, more recent findings by Gong and Medin (2012) seem to be at variance with Eyal et al.’s findings. In a series of five experiments that manipulated construal level in various ways, Gong and Medin found that individuals applied their moral principles more readily to proximal rather than distant behaviors. The contradiction between the Eyal et al. and Gong and Medin findings is especially puzzling, because each study showed consistent results in several experiments. The inconsistency is especially salient in Gong and Medin’s Experiment 5, where its results were the converse of Eyal et al.’s Experiment 2, despite performing a close replication and using the same vignettes. Understanding the issues underlying these seemingly inconsistent findings may shed light on the factors that interact with construal level and, in turn, moral judgments.

Gong and Medin (2012) offered several possible accounts for the opposite and seemingly contradictory sets of findings. One account related to the character of the samples: The Eyal et al.’s (2008) research participants were sampled from Israeli students, while the Gong and Medin research relied on U.S. students. Hofstede (1980, 2001) suggested that cultural differences may result from the different mental programs that develop very early in familial relations and are fostered by interaction with organizations such as educational institutions. One interesting difference between Israeli and American cultures may be relevant to the effect of construal level on moral judgment and behavior. The Israeli culture has been characterized as more collectivist, whereas the American culture has been described as more individualistic (Erez & Earley, 1987; Fischer & Shavit, 1995). This distinction may entail utilitarian differences (Wagner, 2002) that can be expected to interact with construal level when predicting moral judgment (Gong, Iliev, & Sachdeva, Unpublished manuscript). This cultural difference may help explain the discrepancy between Israeli and U.S. samples with regard to the possible effect of construal level effects on moral judgment.

Although cultural differences may provide a partial explanation of the inconsistency between these two series of studies, there may be other possible methodological explanations. First, the three vignettes used in the Gong and Medin’s (2012) replication study (Experiment 5) of the Eyal et al. (2008) study (Experiment 2)—mopping the floor with a flag, incest between a brother and sister, and eating the meat of a dead dog—are very likely to be remote from the participants’ personal experiences. Thus, their involvement was likely low, and their ability to imagine themselves in such situations may have been similarly restricted. Previous research has suggested that when individuals are less involved, they rely on more heuristic processing and are more susceptible to peripheral cues (the heuristic-systematic model; Chaiken, 1987; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; the elaboration likelihood model; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

An additional issue raised by Gong and Medin (2012) was that extraneous variables, intrinsic to the vignette, may affect construal level and, in turn, moral judgment. Two such factors are the perceived probability and the perceived severity of the alleged vignettes. These factors may have moderated the
effect of construal level on moral judgments of the proposed actions. For example, when the incest vignette was presented in the proximal time (tomorrow), the subjective probability of the action was very high. In contrast, when the incest vignette was presented in the distant time (in a year), it has a lower subjective probability. Alternatively, the perceived severity of the hypothetical scenarios in the near future may be higher than the severity in the distant future. These concerns might also interact with the vignettes’ remoteness from the participants’ personal experiences.

These concerns may be addressed by employing more realistic life situations, for which participants have better probability judgments and more consistent levels of severity, rather than using hypothetical scenarios they are unlikely to encounter. One aim of this study was to examine such realistic life situations, and specifically, situations that would be highly relevant for the participants. In addition, with the aim of further increasing the relevance and involvement of participants with the vignettes, we replaced the rather abstract moral judgment measure by a more concrete measure of behavioral intentions. Moral judgments and behavioral intentions are closely related, both theoretically and empirically. The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) related unethical behavioral intentions with moral judgments, and several studies confirmed this relation empirically (Buchan, 2005; Karacaer, Gohar, Aygün, & Sayin, 2009). Moreover, whereas cultural differences may explain differences in moral judgments, unethical behavioral intentions may be affected less by cultural differences, and more by other factors, such as the utility of the unethical act (e.g., Nga & Lum, 2013).

**Utility and construal level**

Previous research has suggested yet another element affecting [un]ethical behavioral intentions, in addition to moral rules and moral judgment (deontology), namely consequentialism, the utility of an action in terms of costs and benefits (Bennis, Medin, & Bartels, 2010). Building on this rationale, Gong et al. (Unpublished manuscript) examined the effect of construal level on behavioral intentions while manipulating utility. Specifically, they examined the effect of construal level on U.S. students’ choice between an action that would harm some innocent people, but would save a larger number of anticipated victims (classified as a consequentialist perspective) and an inaction that would not immediately harm innocent people but would eventually result in more victims (deontologist perspective). The findings showed that participants chose the consequentialist options more often in the high-construal condition, and the deontological options more often in the low-construal condition. These findings suggest that construal level interacts with utility in affecting moral judgments.

However, these findings are not entirely clear with regard to the interaction because of the dependency between the two types of considerations—consequentialist and deontologist—that were embedded in the Gong et al.’s (Unpublished manuscript) measures. Because these types of considerations were used as mutually exclusive, there was always a trade-off, such that participants could not supply high (or low) values in both types. The current study is designed to examine the interaction between construal level and utility by manipulating construal level and utility as independent factors.

**Research aim and hypotheses**

The purpose of the current investigation is to further investigate the predictions of construal level theory. In particular, our study is designed to examine to what extent construal level interacts with utility considerations in affecting (un)ethical behavioral intentions. Following Eyal et al. (2008) and Gong and Medin’s (2012) conflicting results with respect to moral judgment, we examined the research question using two samples: A U.S. student sample and an Israeli student sample.

In order to increase the ecological validity of the study and participants’ involvement, we employed a vignette involving academic cheating, which is closely related to students’ lives and
consequently more relevant and realistic for our participants. We used the same vignettes in both the American and Israeli samples. In addition, we manipulated construal level and utility independently. Our manipulation was designed so that it would allow us to disentangle the possible effect of consequentialist and deontologist considerations on [un]ethical behavioral intentions.

Construal level theory predicts that moral rules and judgments affect unethical behavioral intentions more when the action is presented in high-construal level (e.g., in a distant event), relative to presenting the same action in low-construal level (e.g., in a proximal event). However, we hypothesize that the effect of construal level on unethical behavior may interact with consequential considerations. Construal level is expected to have a stronger effect on unethical behavior for high-utility levels compared to low-utility levels. In other words, in high-utility levels, we expect that participants would exhibit higher levels of unethical behavioral intentions for the low-compared to high-construal levels. By contrast, in low-utility levels, much smaller differences are expected. We examined these hypotheses using two samples, comprised of U.S. and Israeli students.

**Method**

**Participants**

The U.S. sample comprised 120 students (71% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.6$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.1$) from an average-size university of moderate ranking, while the Israeli sample was comprised of 141 students (85% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.5$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.8$) from an average-size academic college. Students in both samples participated in the study in partial fulfillment of course requirements. The studies were approved independently by the respective university Institutional Review Boards. The sample size in each of the four conditions comprise about 65 participants (in the two samples) to ensure sufficient statistical power (90% for Cohen’s $d = 0.50$).

**Research design**

The design comprised 2 construal levels (high vs. low) * 2 utility levels (high vs. low) * 2 samples (U.S. vs. Israeli) in a between-participants experimental design. Each participant in both national samples was randomly assigned to one of the four experimental groups.

**Materials**

Each participant read two vignettes, one relating to a paper assignment and the other to an exam. There were four versions of the questionnaire representing the four experimental conditions. The high-construal vignettes described the tasks as due in 2 months and the low-construal level described the tasks as due in 3 days. The high-utility vignettes presented the prospect of receiving a high grade and low chances of getting caught cheating, and the low-utility presented the prospect of receiving an average grade and some chance of getting caught cheating. The following text presented the [high/low] utility in [high/low] construal:

**Situation 1: Paper assignment.** You have a required assignment in one of your classes. The grade on the assignment would constitute 50% of your final grade. The assignment requires reading three papers and thoroughly analyzing them, and to get a good grade, you estimate the assignment would take you about 10 hours to complete. A friend of yours who turned in a similar assignment last year received a grade of [A/B-]. You believe that if you turn in the same paper with your name on it, you would get a similar grade. Your friend further tells you that the professor grading the assignment [does not check the papers thoroughly, so the chances that the plagiarism would be detected are very low / checks the papers thoroughly, so there is a chance that the plagiarism would be detected]. Assuming the deadline for submission is in [2 months / 3 days], to what degree would you agree with each of the following statements.
Directly after this introductory vignette, participants were asked two questions, one relating to their intentions to behave unethically and the second relating to their close friends’ intentions in similar circumstances (behavioral intentions). The text in the questions reminded the participants of the [high low] utility and the [high/low] construal levels:

Under these circumstances of a [two month / three days] deadline, where it is likely that you would get [a high grade, with the chance that the plagiarism of the paper would be detected being very low / an average grade, with the chance that the plagiarism of the paper would be detected], would (you / your close friend) turn in the non-original paper?

The answers were given on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“I/He would definitely not turn it in”) to 7 (“I/He definitely would turn it in”); points 2 and 6 replaced the “definitely” by “probably,” and points 3 and 5 replaced the “definitely” by “might.” Point 4 read: “Maybe I/He would turn it in, maybe I/He wouldn’t.”

The next two questions were manipulation checks asking participants for the perceived utility (“It is worthwhile to turn in the non-original paper in the above circumstances?”) on a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 “Not at all” through 7 “To a very great degree”), and the perceived time left until the deadline on a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 “very close” to 7 “very far”).

The second situation presented similar [high /low] utility in [high /low] construal level:

Situation 2: An exam. In one of your courses, you have to take a final exam that constitutes 100% of the course’s final grade. The required reading for this course includes many papers and book chapters, and in order to be well prepared for the exam, you would need to spend dozens of hours studying and memorizing the course materials. You heard that a copy of the exam, stolen by one of your classmates, could be purchased. The student who stole it offers a copy of the exam for sale for $15. You estimate that if you would buy a copy of the stolen exam and use it you would get [a high grade, and that it is unlikely that you would be caught /an average grade and there is a chance that you would get caught]. Assuming that the test is in [two months /three days], to what degree you would agree with each of the following statements:

Four questions similar to those in Situation 1 followed the Situation 2, including the personal and close friend’s behavioral intentions, and the two manipulation check questions. The scales used were the same as those used in Situation 1.

All participants were presented with the two situations in the same experimental condition, and the order of presenting the questions was identical for both situations. Two final questions asked participants for their age and gender.

Procedure

Participants in the U.S. sample were presented with the paper questionnaires in a laboratory setting while an experimenter monitored their performance. Participants in the Israeli sample completed computerized questionnaires in a laboratory, using computerized questionnaires, and were monitored by an experimenter.

Results

Manipulation checks

Perceived time

Figure 1 illustrates participants’ perceived time for the paper assignment and for the test in the high-construal-level condition versus the low condition for both the Israeli and U.S. samples and for the two utility conditions. As Figure 1 illustrates, participants perceived the time as much more distant for the paper assignment and for the test in the high-construal-level condition versus the low condition for both the U.S. and Israeli samples, and for both the low- and high-utility conditions. The respective effect sizes (Cohen’s d for the paper assignment and for the test, respectively) for the U.S. sample were 1.68 and 1.56 for the low-utility level, and 2.32 and 2.26 for the high-utility level. The respective effect sizes for the Israeli sample were 2.37 and 2.17 for the low-utility level, and 2.23 and 3.36 for the high-utility level.
Two three-way ANOVAs predicted the perceived time of the two situations from the construal-level condition, the utility level, and the sample group revealed non-significant three-way interactions, $F(1, 253) = 3.73$ and $0.14$, $p = .054$ and $.71$, $eta^2 = .015$ and $.001$; the two-way interactions between construal level and the group were also non-significant, $F(1, 253) = 1.71$ and $3.78$, $p = .19$ and $.053$, $eta^2 = .01$ and $.015$; the two-way interactions between utility and the group were both significant, $F(1, 253) = 6.76$ and $12.71$, $p = .01$ and $.000$, $eta^2 = .026$ and $.048$; the two-way interaction between construal level and utility was significant for the test, $F(1, 253) = 9.63$, $p = .002$, $eta^2 = .037$; but not for the paper assignment, $F(1, 253) = 1.37$, $p = .24$, $eta^2 = .005$; the utility factor was non-significant, $F(1, 253) = 0.88$ and $0.28$, $p = .35$ and $.60$, $eta^2 = .003$ and $.001$; the group factor was significant for the test, $F(1, 253) = 7.19$, $p = .008$, $eta^2 = .028$, but not for the paper assignment, $F(1, 253) = 2.01$, $p = .16$, $eta^2 = .008$; finally, as hypothesized, the construal level factor was significant, and its effect was much larger than all the other factors, $F(1, 253) = 299.3$ and $341.0$, both $p’s < .001$, $eta^2 = .543$ and $.574$.

**Perceived utility**

Figure 2 illustrates participants’ perceived utility for the paper assignment and for the test as a function of utility level in the two construal levels for both the Israeli and U.S. samples. As Figure 2 illustrates, participants perceived the utility as higher for the paper assignment and for the test in the high-utility condition versus the low-utility condition for both the U.S. and Israeli samples, and for both the low and high-construal-level conditions. The effect sizes (Cohen’s $d$ for the paper assignment and for the test, respectively) for the U.S. sample were 1.16 and 0.70 for the low-construal level, and 0.58 and 0.30 for the
high-construal level. The respective effect sizes for the Israeli sample were 0.30 and 0.25 for the low-construal level, and 0.66 and 0.46 for the high-construal level. These effect sizes are lower than those found for the effect of construal level on perceived time, and the effect of utility was high only with respect to the paper assignment in the low-construal level for the U.S. sample.

Two three-way ANOVAs predicted the perceived utility of the two situations from the construal-level condition, the utility level, and the sample group revealed non-significant three-way interactions, $F(1, 253) = 2.44$ and $2.76, p = .12$ and .10, $\eta^2 = .001$ and .011; all three two-way interactions between construal level and the group, between utility and the group, and between construal level and utility were all non-significant for the paper assignment, $F(1, 253) = 0.01, 1.11, and 0.30, p = .91, .29, and .86, \eta^2 = .000, .004, and .000$, and for the test, $F(1, 253) = 2.94, 0.90, and 1.34, p = .09, .34, and .25, \eta^2 = .012, .004, and .005$; the group factor was non-significant, $F(1, 253) = 2.07$ and $1.78, p = .15$ and .18, $\eta^2 = .008$ and .007; the construal level factor was significant, $F(1, 253) = 4.10$ and $5.48, p = .044$ and .02, $\eta^2 = .016$ and .021; and finally, the effect of the utility factor was also significant, $F(1, 253) = 26.62$ and $17.27, both p’s < .001, \eta^2 = .095$ and .064.

Key research findings

Each participant was asked about his and a close friend’s behavioral intentions in the two situations. Figure 3 presents the averages of these two measures as a function of the two independent variables of construal level and utility for the two samples.

Figure 3 reveals several interesting patterns: Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Lammers, 2012), in both situations the unethical behavioral intentions attributed to the friend were much
higher than those attributed to oneself. The median effect sizes (Cohen’s $d$) across the two independent variables were 0.9 and 0.5 for the respective two situations in the U.S. sample, and 1.2 and 0.8 for the Israeli sample, respectively.

A second pattern clearly revealed in Figure 3 is that unethical behavioral intentions were higher for the test situation relative to the paper assignment situation for all experimental conditions. The median effect sizes (Cohen’s $d$) across the two independent variables were 0.7 and 0.5 for the self and the friend’s attributed behavioral intentions, respectively, in the U.S. sample, and respective values of 0.6 and 0.4 for the Israeli sample.

In order to simplify the presentation of the main research aim, the internal reliability of the four answers each participant provided (own and friend’s behavioral intentions in the two situations) was examined. High alpha coefficients were revealed for both the U.S. (.81) and the Israeli (.76) samples. Hence, the responses to the four questions were averaged to create a behavioral intentions index.

A three-way ANOVA predicted the behavioral-intentions index from three predictors: construal level (high vs. low), utility (high vs. low), and sample (Israeli vs. U.S.). The three-way interaction was not significant, $F(1, 253) = 2.21$, $p = .14.$, $\eta^2 = .009$. The three two-way interactions were also not significant, $F(1, 253) = 0.47, 2.36, 1.68, p = .49, .13, .20, \eta^2 = .002, .009, .007$, for the respective interactions: construal level*utility, construal level*sample, and utility*sample. The construal level had a marginally statistical significant effect, $F(1, 253) = 3.47, p = .06.$, $\eta^2 = .014$. Utility had a significant effect, $F(1, 253) = 40.06, p < .001.$, $\eta^2 = .137$, and a significant difference was also found between the two samples: $F(1, 253) = 4.81, p = .029.$, $\eta^2 = .019$.

**Figure 3.** Own unethical behavioral intentions and a close friend’s unethical behavioral intentions in the two situations as a function of utility and construal levels (high vs. low) (error bars represent 1 standard error).
Figure 4 presents the means of the behavioral-intentions index as a function of construal level and utility for the Israeli and the U.S. samples.

Figure 4 shows that the effect of utility reflects a consistent pattern across the two samples and the two construal levels: In each condition, participants presented more unethical intentions in the high-vs. the low-utility condition. Results relating to the other two effects—construal level and sample—were less systematic: The significant sample effect derives mainly from a between-sample mean difference in one of the four conditions: the low-construal—high-utility condition. While in the other three conditions, the averages were similar in the two samples. In this condition, the U.S. sample expressed much higher unethical behavioral intentions. Similarly, the marginal significance of the construal level derived from a difference between high and low-construal levels only for the U.S. sample in the high-utility condition. In this condition, participants expressed much higher unethical behavioral intention in the low compared to the high-construal level. These findings could be explained by the fact that participants’ perceived utility was highest for this low-construal—high-utility condition of the U.S. sample (Figure 2).

In order to better understand the results, two contrasts compared the unethical-behavioral-intentions index between the high and low levels of construal for low and high levels of utility for each sample. The results revealed non-significant contrasts for both samples when comparing the construal levels for the low-utility level, contrast values of 0.15 and 0.17, $t(137) = 0.67$ and $t(116) = 0.52$, $p = .50$ and .60, for the Israeli and U.S. samples, respectively. A non-significant result was also found for the respective comparison of the construal levels for high-utility level for the Israeli sample, contrast value of 0.06, $t(137) = 0.28$, $p = .78$. It was only the comparison between the

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**Figure 4.** The means of the unethical behavioral-intention index as a function of utility and construal levels (high vs. low) for the U.S. and Israeli samples (error bars represent 1 standard error).
behavioral-intentions index between the high and low-construal levels for high-utility level for the U.S. sample that revealed a significant difference, contrast value 0.76, \( t(116) = 2.37, p = .02 \). As mentioned, the latter revealed more unethical behavioral intentions for the low construal relative to the high construal in the U.S. sample.

**Discussion**

This study has several interesting findings. First, consistent with a social desirability account, and consistent with the findings of Lammers (2012), we found that both U.S. and Israeli participants attributed more unethical behavioral intentions to their close friend than to themselves. Lammers (2012) found larger differences between moral judgments participants expressed about others vs. themselves in high-construal level vs. low-construal-level conditions. In contrast, we found similar differences in both high and low-construal levels with respect to the two samples. One possible account for these differential findings is the different measures used in Lammers (2012) study and in the current one. While Lammers used moral judgment as his measure, the measure used in this study was behavioral intentions.

Our main findings relate to the possible effect of construal level on unethical behavioral intentions. Previous research on the possible effect of construal level on moral judgments resulted in inconsistent results: Using an Israeli sample, Eyal et al. (2008) found, across a series of studies, that moral rules affected participants’ judgments more on temporally distant relative to proximal events. These findings supported the prediction of construal level theory, suggesting that a large psychological distance results in an abstract representation and conveys the perceived essence of the events (high-level construal), while a small psychological distance results in more concrete details of the event (low-level construal) (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003). An opposite pattern was found by Gong and Medin (2012) using a U.S. sample, even when replicating one of Eyal et al.’s studies. In our review, we suggested several explanations for these converse findings. To examine these possibilities, we developed a novel methodology that examined the possible interaction of construal level and utility on unethical behavioral intentions.

Our results suggest that the effect of construal level on unethical behavioral intentions may be moderated by several factors that challenge previous attempts to examine the direct effect of construal level on unethical behavior. Two such moderators are utility and cultural differences. Our results showed that construal level affects unethical behavioral intentions only for the high-utility condition and only for the U.S. sample. However, construal level did not affect the unethical behavioral intentions for both utility levels of the Israeli sample and for the low-utility level of the U.S. sample. Thus, our results confirmed previous suggestions that consequential and deontological considerations affect unethical behavior (Bennis et al., 2010). Moreover, these results suggest the possibility that cultural differences moderate the effect of consequential considerations. Specifically, it may be that construal levels have more impact for U.S. students relative to the Israeli students because of several cultural differences. One such difference could be uncertainty: Israelis may be more uncertainty avoidant, whereas the U.S. population may be more uncertainty accepting (Hofstede, 1980). In light of this distinction, then U.S students may be more sensitive to consequential considerations than Israeli students at low-construal levels. Such an account is also consistent with previous research that has suggested that Israeli and U.S. populations differed along the collectivism-individualism continuum (Erez & Earley, 1987; Fischer & Shavit, 1995). Future research is needed to further establish this relationship and to empirically demonstrate whether these differences are more apparent in low- or high-construal levels.

The differential pattern of findings between the two countries’ samples in this study deviates from the dissimilar results found in previous findings: The predictions of construal level theory were previously confirmed only by the Israeli samples (Eyal et al., 2008), while converse findings were found for the U.S. samples (Gong & Medin, 2012). One possible explanation for the cultural differences is the measures used in the studies, namely, moral judgments in previous studies and
unethical-behavioral intentions in the current study. While the moral judgments measure might be confounded with other factors (e.g., perceived probability and perceived severity), the behavioral intentions measure is assumed to be less vulnerable to such factors. Thus, the behavioral-intentions measure seems to offer a better way to examine possible cultural differences in the interaction of construal level and consequential-deontological considerations on (un)ethical behavior.

This study has higher ecological validity than previous studies (e.g., Eyal et al., 2008; Gong & Medin, 2012), as the latter used vignettes that are less relevant to the participants, whereas we used scenarios that are highly relevant for the participating students. Nevertheless, this study is confined to particular student populations with respect to particular moral conflicts related to unethical behaviors in the academic context, and future research is needed to generalize the findings to other contexts.

In this study, we manipulated utility with respect to the actor (the benefits of cheating and the chances of being caught). Previous research (e.g., Gong et al., Unpublished manuscript) manipulated utility in terms of potential benefit for a larger group. Future research should examine whether such different manipulations of utility affect unethical behavioral intentions.

In conclusion, although the results of the current study do not provide a full explanation for the puzzling contradiction that has emerged in the literature, they do suggest that the predictions of construal level theory concerning moral judgments and behavior should consider additional factors, such as cultural differences and their impact with regard to uncertainty and utility. Future research is needed to confirm the cultural differences account offered in this study. While the effect of consequential considerations on unethical behavior is both intuitive and well established, the effect of construal level on unethical behavior, as well as the possible interaction of construal level theory and deontological considerations, awaits future research.

Note

1. A second methodological limitation of the above two studies is the small number of participants in each condition (between 16 and 29 participants), which may result in low statistical power (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2013), and inconsistent results. This limitation is evident in Gong and Medin (2012) Experiment 5 (n = 18 in each of the two condition) that was designed as an exact replication of Eyal et al. (2008) Experiment 2 (n = 29 in each of the two condition). Such low statistical power might explain the inconsistent effect sizes found within these two experiments and between the three vignettes they related to: in Gong and Medin’s Experiment 5 the Flag vignette yielded a small effect that did not achieve significance, whereas the Incest vignette yielded a significant effect; a reverse pattern was shown in Eyal et al.’s Experiment 2 for the very same two vignettes.

Notes on contributors

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