Cheating or Coping with Situational Constraints?
How Contemplation and Construal Level Influence Perceptions of Academic Dishonesty
and Cheating Behaviour

by

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Abstract

The current program of research investigated factors that influence students’ perceptions of everyday moral violations, as well as their own inclinations to engage in immoral behaviours. In Experiment 1, I demonstrated that participants’ evaluations of a hypothetical student who contemplated plagiarizing an assignment depended on both the choice that was ultimately made and the length of time spent deliberating about it (cf., Tetlock et al., 2000). Specifically, when participants were informed that the student ultimately elected to refrain from cheating, the length of time that this individual spent considering the decision had no impact on their subsequent behavioural or character evaluations. However, when participants were informed that the student had succumbed to the temptation to cheat, they evaluated the individual more harshly if the decision to cheat had been made after a period of deliberation than if the decision had been made blithely, without any forethought. Experiment 2 extended this program of research by showing that stable and transient variations in construal level interact to influence participants’ perceptions of students who engage in acts of plagiarism. Specifically, participants with low levels of personal agency evaluated a hypothetical student who had plagiarized an assignment relatively charitably, regardless of how they were prompted to construe the situation. Furthermore, these participants felt a greater affinity for the student after being induced to construe the student’s actions in low-level terms. On the other hand, participants with high levels of personal agency who were induced to construe the student’s actions in high-level terms were less positive in their evaluations, and also felt less of an affinity for the student. Experiment 3 assessed the extent to which stable and transient variations in construal level interact to predict actual cheating
behaviour during an evaluative task. The results of this investigation revealed that priming participants with low levels of personal agency to adopt high-level construals lessened the incidence of cheating among members of this group. In sum, the results associated with the current program of research suggest that transient shifts in construal level interact with stable levels of personal agency to influence students’ perceptions of peers who engage in academic dishonesty. Furthermore, they provide evidence that these two factors play a role in the extent to which students behave dishonestly in evaluative settings themselves. Potential applications that could be derived from the current findings and possible avenues for future research are discussed.
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Chapter 1

General Introduction

Although the notion that we are responsible for our own well-being enjoys popular support in our society, our personal welfare is undeniably linked to the actions of other people. Perhaps because individuals are predisposed to assume that the people they meet possess positive characteristics (Gardner, 1997), they generally take it for granted that others are behaving honestly and fairly (Buller, Strzyzewski, & Hunsaker, 1991; Burgoon, Blair, & Strom, 2008; Masip, Garrido & Herrero, 2006). The nature of this trust is illustrated in peoples’ most mundane behaviours. For instance, many individuals routinely fall asleep on airplanes or trains without worrying that the strangers sitting next to them will make off with their wallets. Similarly, people buy items from others without worrying about whether they might be short-changed, or whether the vendor might try to steal their credit card information. To a large extent, people also enjoy their food, cars, and other amenities without worrying excessively about whether the numerous individuals who were involved in producing these items did their work responsibly, without cutting corners. In short, people are generally trusting in nature, and our ability to trust others is highly adaptive – allowing us to function effectively in society (Hayashi & Yosano, 2005).

Importantly, however, the inclination to see others in a positive light does not render people hopelessly naïve and vulnerable. In fact, individuals continually make attributions about the behaviour of others, and this process takes place without much conscious effort or thought (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Uleman, Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2008). Research has shown that individuals are especially likely to consider the possible
causes of other peoples’ behaviour when their actions have personal implications or are negative in nature (Bohner et al. 1988; Hastie, 1984; Weiner, 1985). Although peoples’ perceptions of what constitutes negative behaviour are somewhat subjective (Bartels, 2008; Haidt, 2001), scholars have argued that many moral conventions transcend various contexts and cultures (Fiske, 1991; Hauser, 2006; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987), and that violating them elicits strong negative reactions from others (Tetlock et al. 2000). For instance, the literature on value trade-offs posits that certain values (such as love, honour, loyalty, justice and fairness) are widely viewed as being infinitely important, and trading them off for things of finite worth (such as money, time or convenience) constitutes a “taboo trade-off” that most people find highly offensive (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Hanselmann & Tanner, 2008; Lichtenstein, Gregory, & Irwin, 2007; McGraw & Tetlock, 2005; Tetlock, 2000). Behaviours that involve violating such values for instrumental purposes are especially threatening because they undermine our relationships with other people, as well as our ability to function effectively as a society (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997).¹

Naturally, some types of value trade-offs are widely perceived as being worse than others. Drawing on the framework provided by Fiske’s relational theory (1991), Fiske and Tetlock (1997) convincingly argue that trade-offs which involve undermining one’s communal relationships (or the values related to them, such as love) in favour of finite resources (such as time or money) are regarded as being particularly unpalatable. Similarly, trade-offs that involve sacrificing life for a secular commodity (e.g., money) are evaluated especially negatively (Tetlock et al. 2000). However, one could argue that

¹ Of course, not every moral violation can be conceptualized as a situation in which prized values have been sold out for finite assets. Notably, morality researchers who are proponents of the social intuitionist model have demonstrated that many moral violations elicit immediate feelings of disapproval and disgust, but are difficult to describe in terms of why they are harmful or wrong (cf., Haidt, 2001).
more common moral violations can often be conceptualized as value trade-offs, as well. Academic dishonesty, for instance, involves a trade-off between integrity and fairness (which are infinitely valuable) on the one hand, and time, convenience, and academic performance (which are of finite value) on the other. Similarly, tax evasion involves a trade-off between honesty and integrity (which again are infinitely valuable) and money (a secular commodity of finite value). In a strict definitional sense, then, these types of violations can still be characterized as “taboo trade-offs,” even though the stakes involved in committing such infractions are undeniably lower than the ones involved in the types of trade-offs that are routinely studied by Tetlock and his colleagues.

Research assessing the link between psychology and morality has experienced a pronounced revival over the past decade, and has greatly facilitated our understanding of how people perceive (and respond to) moral issues. However, one might also question the generalizeability of the literature on morality and value trade-offs in that the most influential work in these areas assess peoples’ reactions to moral violations that differ from the types of infractions that they might regularly witness. First off, much of the current work on morality requires individuals to evaluate (or anticipate their response to) situations that they are unlikely to encounter, even on an indirect basis. For instance, research conducted under the rubric of the social intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993) often involves asking participants to evaluate highly improbable, obscure moral violations (e.g., using a national flag to clean one’s bathroom). Similarly, much of the contemporary research on the resolution of moral dilemmas requires individuals to consider situations that virtually never occur (e.g., deciding whether to redirect a train so that it kills 2 people, thus sparing the lives of 10 people stuck on the
original track, cf. Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007). Even the more realistic value trade-offs employed in Tetlock et al.’s (2000) research (e.g., evaluating the decision made by a hospital administrator who must decide whether to assign a dollar value to a child’s life) would be completely outside the realm of experience for the vast majority of study participants, leaving them with no frame of reference for such events. Second, many of the moral violations that are used in contemporary morality research tend to evoke strong, visceral reactions from people, in spite of their relative obscurity. Indeed, people are likely to experience elevated levels of personal distress after reading about violations that involve failing to protect innocent lives (e.g., Tetlock et al., 2000) or intense disgust after reading about violations that involve incest (e.g., Haidt et al., 1993). However, many of the common moral transgressions that people routinely witness (or hear about) fail to evoke such visceral reactions. For example, we may feel disillusioned with other people after learning that they cheated on their taxes or that they failed to leave their contact information after hitting a parked car, but such violations rarely deliver a strong emotional punch (unless, of course, the car belongs to us). In short, although peoples’ judgments about the transgressions that grace the morality literature are coloured by their emotions (Haidt et al., 1993), affect likely plays a much smaller role in determining their responses to more familiar violations. Finally, many of the moral violations that have been employed in the literature (e.g., deviant sexual acts, unusual methods of homicide) are highly non-normative, which may prompt individuals to evaluate the transgressor’s mental health as well as his/her moral fortitude. As such, the dynamics involved in peoples’ attributions and judgments about these types of moral violations may not translate neatly to their evaluations of relatively normative ones.
Given the magnitude of these differences, empirical work assessing the extent to which the principles that have been uncovered in the existing morality research map onto peoples’ reactions to common moral transgressions would be beneficial. As well, additional work is needed in order to delineate the specific factors that influence the moral judgments and actions that people engage in on a regular basis.

Considering that the participants in the current set of experiments were drawn from a student population, I felt that the domain of academic dishonesty provided an ideal backdrop for investigating factors that influence students’ judgments about value trade-offs, as well as their propensity to engage in immoral behaviours themselves. As research indicates that the majority of post-secondary students have directly witnessed some form of cheating (Jendrek, 1992), I reasoned that this type of behaviour would be well-grounded in everyday experience for the average participant, and that assessing students’ reactions to such transgressions would provide insight into how they might evaluate a host of other common moral violations.

A secondary reason for studying morality and value trade-offs in the context of academic dishonesty pertains to the fact that while a burgeoning literature on this topic exists, relatively little empirical work has assessed the psychological factors that contribute to this problem. Instead, the majority of papers that have been published on this issue present descriptive data pertaining to the prevalence of cheating (e.g., Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992; Pino & Smith, 2003; Vandehey, Diekhoff, & LaBeff, 2007; Whitley & Kost, 1999), the variables associated with such behaviours (e.g., Eisenberg, 2004; Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2002; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2006) or the ways in which students rationalize academic
dishonesty (e.g., Murdock & Stephens, 2007). While this work is interesting in its own right, additional research that systematically varies aspects of a cheater’s behaviour would shed new light on the factors that influence students’ perceptions of their dishonest peers.

The initial focus of this program of research will be to determine whether some of the key findings derived from the morality literature accurately reflect the types of moral judgments that people make on a regular basis. More specifically, I will pit a set of predictions derived from Tetlock et al’s (2000) Sacred Value Protection Model (SVPM) against an opposing set of predictions derived from the attribution literature (Experiment 1). I will then assess the way in which stable and transient differences in how people construe a situation affect their perceptions of moral transgressions (Experiment 2). Finally, I will determine whether differences in how concretely or abstractly a situation is construed influence peoples’ inclinations to engage in immoral behaviour themselves (Experiment 3). I will end by discussing the theoretical implications of these experiments, possible directions for future research, and the practical applications that might be derived from these findings.
Chapter 2

Experiment 1

Although most people think of themselves as being relatively even-handed in their judgments (Brown, 1986), there are several well-documented asymmetries in the way that individuals use positive and negative information to evaluate others. Negative events and behaviours tend to elicit more elaborate causal reasoning than positive events and behaviours (Bohner et al., 1988), and negative information is typically weighted more heavily in our evaluations of others than is positive information (Fiske, 1980; Hamilton & Zanna, 1972; Riskey & Birnbaum, 1974), particularly in the judgments that we make about morality (Martijn, Spears, Van der Pligt, & Jakobs, 1992). Researchers have speculated that there are at least two reasons why this asymmetry exists. First, we have developed a heightened sensitivity to the presence of undesirable behaviours because it enables us to avoid individuals who might undermine our welfare in some way (Pratto & John, 1991; Wojciszke, Brycz, & Borkenau, 1993). One can imagine how failing to notice positive behaviours might result in missed opportunities or the cooling of interpersonal relationships, but failing to notice (and correctly interpret) negative behaviours would almost always have more serious consequences for one’s well-being. Secondly, relative to desirable behaviours, undesirable behaviours are perceived to be better indicators of a person’s true character (Skowronski & Carlston, 1987; Wojciszke, Brycz, & Borkenau, 1993). After all, immoral people may engage in seemingly moral behaviours when it is in their best interests to do so (i.e., they may engage in highly desirable behaviours for immoral, self-serving reasons) – but moral people, by definition,
do not engage in immoral behaviours (Rothbart & Park, 1986; Skowronski & Carlston, 1987).

As one might expect, asymmetries also exist in the meaning that we ascribe to the information that we receive about moral and immoral behaviours. Learning that people performed a given behaviour intentionally exacerbates the blame that we assign to them if their actions were negative, but has no impact on our evaluation of them if their actions were positive (Ohtsubo, 2007). Similarly, immoral behaviour is deemed to be much more sinister and indicative of a person’s bad character if the behaviour is carried out in a deliberative, thoughtful manner as opposed to an uncontrolled, impulsive manner (Pizarro, Uhlmann, & Salovey, 2003). Moral behaviour, on the other hand, is evaluated in a uniformly positive manner – regardless of whether it was performed deliberately or impulsively (Pizarro et al., 2003).

What is more surprising is that asymmetries also emerge when the difficulty that an individual experiences in deciding to engage in a given behaviour is varied. In his research on taboo trade-offs, Tetlock and his colleagues (2000) found that participants evaluated a hypothetical hospital administrator who had to decide between saving a child’s life and cutting medical costs more negatively if he deliberated over his choice rather than making an immediate decision. Furthermore, participants in Tetlock et al.’s study endorsed significantly harsher sanctions for administrators who struggled over the dilemma before making an immoral choice (i.e., failing to save a child’s life for financial reasons) than for administrators who blithely pursued the same course of action. In fact, administrators who purportedly had an easy time making an immoral choice were deemed no more deserving of punishment than administrators who struggled to make a
more noble choice (i.e., saving a child’s life at great financial cost to the hospital). At first blush, these results seem highly counter-intuitive. However, according to Tetlock et al.’s Sacred Value Protection Model (SVPM; 2000), the amount of time that a person spends contemplating an unacceptable value trade-off has a profound effect on our evaluations of that individual, regardless of the decision that they ultimately make. Specifically, spending a long time deliberating over a decision that perceivers feel should be easy to make (because one alternative is clearly morally superior to the other) appears to signify that the decision-maker lacks a strong moral compass (Tetlock et al., 2000).

Furthermore, making an immoral decision after deliberating about a dilemma (and thereby presumably gaining a heightened understanding of the issues involved) might be perceived as more blameworthy than rather quickly and mindlessly making a poor choice.

The significance of Tetlock et al.’s (2000) research and the types of trade-offs that they examine is undeniable. Politicians and administrators are often faced with decisions that pit the lives and welfare of the people that they are charged with protecting against finite commodities such as time and money, and it is important to understand how people evaluate their choices. Nonetheless, these are not the types of value trade-offs that individuals typically encounter in their own lives – and it is conceivable that their thought processes about familiar trade-offs and moral violations might be quite different. For instance, would a student who agonizes over the decision to plagiarize an assignment (and finally succumbs to the temptation to do so) really be evaluated more harshly than another student who cheats in a cavalier manner? Would the former behaviour be deemed more negative than the latter? Furthermore, if a student merely entertained the
temptation to plagiarize someone else’s work (before doing the right thing), would they incur strong disapproval from their peers? An overview of two distinct research traditions would lead a person to make two very different predictions.

If the predictions associated with the SVPM are indeed generalizeable to a variety of less extreme value trade-offs, the answer to these questions would be “yes.” Specifically, finding the decision to plagiarize a paper difficult should make a cheater more culpable in the eyes of their peers than finding the decision easy, and seriously contemplating the decision to cheat before choosing not to should “taint” one’s character, thereby incurring more negative evaluations from others than one would have been subject to if the moral course of action had been chosen right away.

However, a reading of the attribution literature might lead a person to make a very different set of predictions. For instance, Fleming and Darley (1989) demonstrated that people often incorporate the behavioural cues that actors exhibit (intentionally or otherwise) into their causal attributions. Using a variation of the classic Jones and Harris paradigm (1967), these researchers had participants view videotaped performances of a student reading a pro-abortion essay. Under conditions where behavioural constraints were present (i.e., the student had purportedly been assigned to read the pro-abortion essay by the experimenter, or through the flip of a coin), participants’ inferences about the student’s actual attitude toward abortion were heavily influenced by the individual’s facial expressions and demeanour. Specifically, when the student appeared to be content to read the essay, participants inferred that he viewed abortion favourably. However, when the student performed the task in a grudging, unhappy manner, participants discounted his behaviour in generating inferences about his attitude toward abortion. In
short, the cues emitted by the student reader appeared to heighten participants’ awareness of the situational constraints inherent in his situation, thereby leading them to infer a discrepancy between his actions and his attitude (Fleming & Darley, 1989). More recently, Krull, Seger, and Silvera (2008) found that if participants felt that an individual had carried out a positive behaviour in a grudging manner, they were less inclined to view her actions as being reflective of her personality. Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals are highly sensitive to the level of willingness that people exhibit in their behaviour – using cues that suggest hesitancy or unhappiness to decide how closely their actions correspond to their underlying attitudes.

Based on this literature, one might expect that students would judge a peer who struggled over the decision to cheat before succumbing to temptation less harshly than a casual cheater. Namely, the student’s hesitation might be perceived as an indication that he/she was behaving in a way that conflicted with his/her attitude toward academic dishonesty, and might therefore heighten participants’ awareness of the constraints and pressures that the student was facing.

In sum, the literature on value trade-offs would lead a person to predict that students who experience a lengthy internal struggle before deciding to cheat should be evaluated more negatively than students who make the decision to cheat quickly, whereas the attribution literature would suggest that a contemplative cheater would actually be evaluated less negatively than a casual one. Determining which prediction is supported will help to establish the parameters of the existing theories associated with taboo trade-offs. More generally, it will constitute an important step in delineating the factors that influence peoples’ perceptions of common moral violations. As such, the primary goal of
Experiment 1 was to establish which of the two predictions outlined above would be supported.

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred and seventy introductory psychology students completed Experiment 1 in exchange for course credit\(^2\) or monetary compensation (41 males and 129 females, \(M_{\text{age}} = 18.16, SD = 1.54\))\(^3\).

**Procedure**

The current experiment employed a 2 (delay: delay vs. immediate) x 2 (choice: plagiarism vs. honesty) between-subjects design. After reading an experimental information sheet (see Appendix A for all Experiment 1 ethics materials) and giving their written consent to participate, all participants received a scenario describing a same-sex\(^5\) Queen’s student who was facing the temptation to plagiarize a housemate’s academic work\(^6\):

Janice, an undergraduate student at Queen’s University, has worked hard over the course of her academic career. Her parents do not support her financially, and Janice has had to hold down a variety of part-time jobs over the past several years in order to cover living

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\(^2\) As this short questionnaire-based experiment was included in the experimental sessions of a number of different projects, the amount of course credit or monetary compensation that students received for completing it varied substantially.

\(^3\) The mean presented is based on the 157 participants who reported their age. Thirteen additional participants failed to do so. Additionally, three participants were dropped from the data set as they had completed the experiment twice, and it was impossible to tell which of their duplicate measures had been filled out first.

\(^4\) As I had no a prior hypotheses about how gender would influence participants’ responses to our dependent measures, I did not include it as a variable in the analyses for this experiment. It is worth noting, however, that when the analyses for Experiment 1 were repeated without the male participants, the general pattern of results for each of the dependent variables remained the same.

\(^5\) We elected to have participants read about a same-sex student in an effort to minimize any effects that might result from having them evaluate a member of the opposite sex.

\(^6\) For ease of presentation (and because the overwhelming majority of our sample were female), only the female version of the scenario used in this program of research is presented in the text. Male participants received identical scenarios in each experiment, except that the hypothetical student was portrayed as a man named Michael.
expenses and tuition. Needless to say, all of her time is taken up with her academic pursuits or her part-time work. This past semester was especially demanding for Janice, and on several occasions, she has barely managed to finish everything on time. Late one night, she was working on an essay for one of her classes, and she casually read over an essay that her housemate had written for the same course several years ago. It occurred to Janice that she could either spend hours writing the essay herself, or save time by incorporating her housemate’s ideas and writing into her paper.

Importantly, the first portion of the scenario cast the student in a somewhat sympathetic light, emphasizing the various obstacles to academic success that the student faced through no fault of his/her own. In framing the student’s situation in this way, I hoped to make this individual’s behaviour appear somewhat constrained – thereby avoiding ceiling effects and providing a viable test of the two competing sets of predictions associated with the experiment.

The information that participants received next varied depending on which experimental condition they had been assigned to. Mirroring the manipulation employed by Tetlock and his colleagues (2000), participants in the delay condition went on to read that “Janice finds this decision very difficult, and is only able to make it after much time, thought, and contemplation,” whereas participants in the immediate condition read that “Janice sees her decision as an easy one, and is able to decide what to do quickly” (see Appendix B for all Experiment 1 manipulations and dependent measures). Participants then learned that the student either had or had not succumbed to the temptation to engage in academic dishonesty.

After reading the scenario, participants first used 7-point scales in order to evaluate the student’s decision on six dimensions (bad-good, wise-foolish, negative-positive, moral-immoral, fair-unfair, disgusting-not at all disgusting; cf. Tetlock et al., 2000). Participants’ ratings of the hypothetical student’s decision were scored so that
higher ratings corresponded to more positive evaluations on the dimension in question. In keeping with Tetlock et al. (2000), I aggregated participants’ responses into a single decision evaluation score. In the current sample, this measure possessed a high degree of internal consistency, $\alpha = .97$, which is similar to what previous research has established (e.g., Tetlock et al., 2000).

Participants also used a 7-point scale to indicate their overall impression of the student (1 = very bad; 7 = very good). They then responded to several ancillary measures that were less relevant to the central predictions associated with the study. Specifically, participants used 7-point scales to rate the extent to which they believed the student’s actions were attributable to their character vs. their circumstances (1 = entirely attributable to character; 7 = entirely attributable to circumstance), as well as their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with statements concerning their liking and respect for the student, their understanding and empathy for the student’s position, their perceived similarity to the student, and the degree to which the student’s actions were forgivable. Finally, participants estimated the percentage of their peers at Queen’s who would have behaved similarly to the hypothetical student, given the circumstances. At the end of the experimental session, all individuals received a written debriefing.

The items pertaining to participants’ levels of liking and respect for the hypothetical student were correlated at .81, $p < .001$. As such, I computed the mean of these items to create a composite measure of participants’ regard for the student. I also computed the mean of the two items pertaining to understanding and empathy (which were correlated at .51, $p < .001$) in order to form a single measure of empathy.
Results

The composite score relating to participants’ evaluations of the student’s decision were subjected to a 2 (delay: delay vs. immediate) x 2 (choice: plagiarism vs. honesty) between-subjects ANOVA. Not surprisingly, the analysis yielded a strong main effect of choice, indicating that the student’s decision was evaluated much more favourably when he/she chose to behave honestly ($M = 6.47, SE = .10$) instead of plagiarizing the assignment ($M = 2.56, SE = .10$), $F(1, 166) = 777.36, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .824$. A main effect of delay also emerged, indicating that the student’s decision was generally viewed more favourably when it was made quickly ($M = 4.67, SE = .10$) rather than after a period of deliberation, ($M = 4.37, SE = .10$), $F(1, 166) = 4.55, p = .03, \eta^2_p = .027$. However, these two main effects were qualified by a significant delay x choice interaction, $F(1, 166) = 5.16, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .030$. As depicted by the two bars on the right-hand side of Figure 1, when the student was depicted as being honest, the amount of time that he/she spent deliberating about his/her decision had no discernable impact on participants’ evaluation of his/her choice, $t(166) = 0.09, p = .93, d = .02$. When the student was described as having behaved dishonestly, on the other hand, participants evaluated the decision more negatively if the student had given it some thought ($M = 2.25, SE = .13$) than if he/she had acted impulsively ($M = 2.87, SE = .14$), $t(166) = 3.21, p < .01, d = 0.68$ (see the two bars on the left-hand side of Figure 1).

A 2 (delay: delay vs. immediate) x 2 (choice: plagiarism vs. honesty) between-subjects ANOVA using participants’ overall impressions of the student as the dependent variable yielded a similar pattern of results. Although the main effect of delay was not significant in this instance, $F(1, 166) = 1.59, p = .21, \eta^2_p = .009$, a significant effect of
Figure 1. Experiment 1: Evaluation of student’s decision as a function of choice and delay conditions
choice emerged in that participants formed a more positive impression of the student when he/she was depicted as being honest ($M = 6.43, SE = .13$) than when he/she was portrayed as having plagiarized ($M = 3.92, SE = .12$), $F(1, 166) = 215.39, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .565$. Once again, though, this main effect was qualified by a delay x choice interaction, $F(1, 166) = 5.52, p = .02$, $\eta^2_p = .032$. As illustrated by the two bars on the right-hand side of Figure 2, when the student was depicted as being honest, the amount of time that he/she spent deliberating about the decision had no impact on how he/she was evaluated, $t(166) = 0.75, p = .45, d = .17$. As illustrated by the two bars on the left-hand side of Figure 2, however, when the student was depicted as having plagiarized, participants tended to form a more negative impression of him/her when the act had been considered carefully ($M = 3.61, SE = .16$) than when the act had been committed quickly, without a lot of forethought ($M = 4.23, SE = .17$), $t(166) = 2.63, p < .01, d = 0.56$.

Although no further interactions emerged, the choice manipulation had very strong (albeit unsurprising) effects on all of the ancillary measures. Specifically, participants felt less positive regard for the student when he/she was depicted as having behaved dishonestly ($M = 3.74, SE = .12$) than when he/she was depicted as having been honest ($M = 6.23, SE = .12$), $F(1, 166) = 216.04, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .565$. Likewise, the student’s plight elicited less empathy when he/she had cheated ($M = 5.55, SE = .10$) than when he/she had not ($M = 6.03, SE = .11$), $F(1, 166) = 9.90, p < .01$, $\eta^2_p = .056$, and participants felt that simply being tempted to cheat was considerably more forgivable ($M = 6.30, SE = .16$) than actually cheating ($M = 4.46, SE = .15$), $F(1, 166) = 74.63, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .311$. 
Figure 2. Experiment 1: Impressions of student as a function of choice and delay conditions
Consistent with previous research on self-serving biases (e.g., Balcetis & Dunning, 2008), participants felt that they were less similar to the student when he/she was depicted as behaving dishonestly ($M = 2.90, SE = .16$) than when he/she was depicted as behaving honourably and making a moral choice ($M = 4.81, SE = .17$), $F (1, 166) = 68.31, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .292$. Interestingly, however, they were somewhat more cynical about the behaviour of their peers. Participants who read the scenario in which the student cheated estimated that a marginally higher percentage of students at Queen’s would behave similarly ($M = 62.44, SE = 2.38$) than participants who read the scenario in which the student behaved honestly ($M = 55.72, SE = 2.54$), $F(1, 166) = 3.73, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .022$. However, participants were significantly more likely to attribute the hypothetical student’s behaviour to circumstances when he/she cheated ($M = 5.16, SE = .19$) than when he/she resisted cheating ($M = 3.57, SE = .20$), $F (1, 166) = 33.57, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .168$.

**Discussion**

The purpose of Experiment 1 was to determine whether the thought processes that underlie peoples’ responses to taboo trade-offs (in which the stakes are very high and the trade-offs involved seem especially depraved) would also emerge when they evaluated the types of moral transgressions that they might encounter on a regular basis. According to the SVPM (Tetlock et al., 2000), merely contemplating an immoral course of action is enough to taint a person’s character in the eye of a beholder, and considering one’s decision carefully before making an immoral choice renders a person especially culpable. On the other hand, research stemming from the attribution literature suggests that struggling with a decision before deciding on a course of action may actually lead
perceivers to discount the extent to which one’s choice reflects one’s character (Fleming and Darley, 1989).

The results of Experiment 1 indicate that the findings derived from the attribution literature may not extend to the domain of moral judgments, and that the same thought patterns that shape peoples’ evaluations of extreme taboo trade-offs may generalize to their evaluations of more common moral transgressions. Namely, succumbing to the temptation to plagiarize an assignment after a lengthy internal struggle was indeed perceived less favourably than easily deciding to cheat without giving the issue much thought. Relative to the hypothetical student who blithely plagiarized his/her housemate’s essay, the hypothetical student who found the decision to cheat highly difficult and thought about it extensively was rated as having made a poorer decision and a less favourable impression on participants. In addition to simply making an unacceptable value trade-off, spending time contemplating the trade-off before acting appears to make transgressors even more blameworthy in the eyes of perceivers.

However, another facet of Experiment 1’s findings departed from the hypotheses associated with the SVPM. When the hypothetical student was depicted as having successfully resisted the temptation to cheat, the amount of time he/she had spent wrestling with the decision had no discernable impact on participants’ evaluations of his/her decision or character. This deviation might reflect the likely reality that academic dishonesty, though technically a taboo value trade-off, is perceived less negatively than a value trade-off that pits another person’s welfare against monetary concerns. As previously noted, degrading the values associated with human life or one’s communal relationships by attempting to assess their worth in terms of secular commodities (e.g.,
time, money) is perceived especially negatively (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997). Thus, even contemplating a trade-off that involves this type of comparison will likely be met with strong disapproval. Simply entertaining the temptation to engage in academic dishonesty in the face of time constraints and competing demands, on the other hand, might not evoke the same level of censure – as long as one ultimately opts to do the right thing.

The central findings associated with this study are also consistent with previous literature documenting the various asymmetries inherent in peoples’ evaluations of positive and negative behaviours. Specifically, research has generally shown that the extent to which an action was performed intentionally or deliberatively appears to affect the amount of blame cast for negative behaviours, but not the amount of praise offered for positive behaviours (Ohtsubo, 2007; Pizarro et al., 2003). Pizarro and his colleagues (2003) have attempted to explain such findings by invoking the concept of meta-desires. In short, they define meta-desires as “the degree to which agents embrace or reject the impulses leading to their actions” (p. 267) and note that by default, individuals generally assume that the meta-desires of others are positive. Thus, when people engage in moral, upstanding behaviours, their actions are seen as reflective of their positive meta-desires, regardless of whether they were performed in an impulsive or deliberative manner.

However, when they behave immorally, the extent to which their actions are perceived to be reflective of their meta-desires varies depending on the degree to which they were deliberate and controlled. Namely, impulsive negative behaviours are perceived to be unreflective of a person’s meta-desires and are therefore discounted in peoples’ subsequent attributions and judgments, whereas deliberate, thoughtfully enacted negative behaviours are perceived to be accurate reflections of a person’s true desires and
character. Said differently, deliberate, controlled behaviours are always perceived to be reflective of a person’s meta-desires, while impulsive behaviours are not (Pizarro et al, 2003).

Although this explanation is intriguing, it fails to provide a clear account for the results of Experiment 1, which manipulated the ease or difficulty with which the hypothetical student made the decision to plagiarize an assignment, as opposed to the level of control that he/she had over his/her actions. Making a decision with ease is not synonymous with acting uncontrollably or impulsively, and does not seem to denote a failure to behave in a way that might be inconsistent with one’s meta-cognitions. However, one could argue that making a decision quickly and easily denotes a certain level of mindlessness, and that students who decide to plagiarize assignments quickly might not have contemplated the negative implications of their actions to the same degree as students who decide to cheat after a period of deliberation. As such, it seems conceivable that individuals might not view blithe cheaters as being as culpable as their more deliberate, thoughtful counterparts.

Although they are secondary to the purpose of this experiment, the results associated with the ancillary measures also warrant discussion. Not surprisingly, participants reported experiencing less positive regard and empathy for the student when he/she was depicted as dishonest rather than honest, and also perceived his/her behaviour to be less forgivable. Ironically, though, one could argue that the absence (rather than the presence) of effects is more informative in these instances. Specifically, the length of time that the student spent contemplating cheating before either engaging (or not engaging) in this behaviour had no discernable impact on participants’ responses. As this
manipulation was strong enough to influence participants’ responses to the main dependent measures, it seems unlikely that these null results are attributable to its lack of effectiveness. However, at least two viable explanations for this pattern of results (or lack thereof) exist. First, as previously noted, the absence of any effects associated with the amount of time the student spent deliberating about the decision to cheat may reflect the fact that plagiarism (although undeniably immoral in nature) is not perceived as negatively as undercutting the values associated with human life (which was a key aspect of the taboo trade-offs in Tetlock’s research). As such, contemplating this behaviour might not “taint” ones’ character to the same degree that withholding resources to save a child’s life would. Second, it is highly possible that many of the participants in the study could relate to the hypothetical student’s dilemma on a very personal level. Having faced the competing demands associated with university life themselves, they might withhold judgment of another student who merely entertains the idea of plagiarizing – as long as that person ultimately resists the temptation to cheat. However, this level of empathy might actually cause participants to evaluate students who succumb to the temptation more harshly – particularly if they have faced similar obstacles themselves without resorting to dishonest behaviour. This possibility was not explicitly addressed in Experiment 1. However, it is intriguing, and merits further investigation.

As one might expect, given the extensive literature on positive illusions (for a classic review, see Taylor & Brown, 1988), participants perceived themselves as being significantly more similar to the student who elected not to cheat than to the student who chose to behave immorally. However, this positivity was not reflected in their evaluations of their peers. In fact, participants felt that a significantly higher percentage
of Queen’s students would cheat rather than behave honestly in the hypothetical student’s situation. This finding might further reflect participants’ self-serving biases, regardless of whether they had engaged in some form of academic dishonesty themselves. Specifically, among students who had never plagiarized another person’s work, estimating that a large proportion of their peers would cheat might serve to enhance the uniqueness and desirability of their own honest character. Among participants who had plagiarized an assignment in the past, on the other hand, furnishing disproportionately high estimates might alleviate any lingering dissonance associated with their actions by rendering them attributable to the situation, and not to their character (i.e., former cheaters might reason that if most people were to behave similarly in their situation, their own indiscretions were not reflective of their underlying personality).

Alternatively, these high estimates might constitute a dismally accurate reflection of the percentage of students who actually do engage in academic dishonesty at Canadian universities. Given that previous research indicates that a sizeable number of post-secondary students have witnessed instances of academic dishonesty (Jendrek, 1992) or even engaged in such behaviours themselves (Pino & Smith, 2003; Vandehey, Diekhoff, & LaBeff, 2007; Whitley & Kost, 1999), the participants in Experiment 1 may have generated realistic predictions of the percentage of peers who would engage in plagiarism under the same conditions.

Finally, participants tended to attribute the hypothetical student’s behaviour to his/her character when he/she opted not to cheat and to circumstances when he/she elected to do so. This finding dovetails nicely with the percentage estimates that participants generated; as mentioned previously, assuming that most other individuals
would behave similarly to the hypothetical cheater implies that something inherent in the situation, as opposed to the person’s character, caused him/her to behave dishonestly. However, it counters previous research indicating that individuals are more inclined to attribute negative behaviours to a person’s character than positive behaviours (e.g., Skowronski & Carlston, 1987; Wojciszke, Brycz, & Borkenau, 1993). Importantly, this finding underscores the fact that participants in the current experiment demonstrated a remarkable level of sensitivity to the contextual factors that might have influenced the hypothetical student’s actions.

Given that participants appeared to be aware of the situational constraints that the student was facing, one might wonder why the predictions derived from the attribution literature were not supported in the current experiment. Based on previous research (Fleming & Darley, 1989; Krull, Seger and Silvera, 2008), it would have been reasonable to expect that an awareness of the situational constraints in the scenario might have prompted participants to treat the length of time that the student spent deliberating about the choice to plagiarize as a distancing cue. Had this happened, participants would have discounted the student’s behaviour in their subsequent character evaluations if he/she had a difficult (vs. easy) time making the decision to plagiarize – thereby assessing the hesitant cheater more favourably than the flippant one. This, however, did not occur -- leading one to wonder about the exact conditions under which individuals incorporate situational constraints into their subsequent evaluations of cheaters.

In Experiment 2, I examined the effects of two factors associated with a heightened sensitivity to contextual constraints on participants’ responses to acts of plagiarism. Specifically, I assessed the way in which individual differences in levels of
personal agency and variations in construal level might interact to influence peoples’ reactions to such behaviours.
Chapter 3

Experiment 2

Experiment 1 demonstrated that at least some of the elements of moral judgment are consistent across different contexts, regardless of whether people are evaluating taboo trade-offs in which the stakes are exceedingly high or more common moral violations (in which the stakes are somewhat lower). It also revealed that although people acknowledge that contextual factors may contribute to a person’s immoral behaviour, this awareness does not lead them to discount the individual’s actions in their subsequent character evaluations. My second experiment constitutes an investigation of two factors that may influence the extent to which people incorporate contextual information into their perceptions of students who cheat, namely (1) individual differences in levels of personal agency (i.e., the extent to which one generally construes actions in concrete, means-oriented vs. abstract, ends-oriented terms; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989) and (2) experimentally-induced variations in construal level (i.e., the degree to which situations, behaviours and people are construed in high-level vs. low-level terms). Before outlining the specific hypotheses associated with the current experiment, I will provide an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of these two variables, highlighting previous research that has examined the role that they play in person perception and moral judgments.

Levels of Personal Agency: Overview and Implications for Judgments of Morality

The notion that the same situation or behaviour can be construed in a variety of ways is self-evident. For instance, two people might ascribe very different meanings to the same simple action (i.e., smiling at an acquaintance who experienced a career setback
might be construed as a gesture of sympathy by one observer and of malice by another).
Alternately, people might construe the same action at differing levels of abstractness (i.e.,
one person may focus on the action itself, while the other might ponder its meaning or
purpose). The latter difference is a central tenet of Action Identification Theory (AIT;
Vallacher & Wegner, 1987), a precursor of Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman,
2000) which posits that a given action can be construed at differing levels of specificity,
and that these levels can be arranged into a type of hierarchy. Namely, actions can have
both low-level identities (which tend to encompass concrete details, and pertain to the
means by which an action is performed) and high-level identities (which tend to be
abstract, and pertain to the purpose with which an action performed). For instance, the
action “balancing the household budget” can be identified using low-level, means-
oriented terms (e.g., crunching numbers) or high-level, ends-oriented terms (e.g., looking
for ways to maximize savings). As previous Action Identification researchers have
noted, actions that are identified at a high-level can have several low-level manifestations
(e.g., balancing a budget can be conceived as number-crunching or tracking bank account
withdrawals). Similarly, actions that are construed at a low level can be associated with
multiple high-level identities (e.g., balancing the household budget may be done to look
for ways to maximize savings or to avoid going into debt; Punzo, 1993; Vallacher &
Wegner, 1987). Furthermore, an action’s hierarchical identity structure consists of a
continuum as opposed to two distinct categories. Specifically, the different identities
associated with a given action range in nature from high-level (e.g., looking for ways to
maximize savings) to mid-level (e.g., balancing a budget) to low-level (e.g., crunching
numbers). In formulating the Action Identification Theory, Vallacher and Wegner
articulated three basic principles that describe the way in which people identify and regulate their behaviour:

(1) The specific behaviours that people engage in are defined and influenced by what they think they are doing.

(2) Given the choice, people generally prefer to characterize their actions in high-level as opposed to low-level terms – focusing on the implications of their behaviour and what they are trying to accomplish.

(3) When people find that they are unable to maintain an action at a high-level identity, they switch to a lower-level identity.

Taken together, these principles suggest that a cyclical relationship exists between what people are doing and how they characterize their actions (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). When engaging in an action is straightforward, or when it falls within one’s area of expertise, one may be able to focus on the goal of the behaviour without dwelling on the mechanics involved in its execution. However, when an action is more complicated, or when it falls outside of one’s area of expertise, one might be forced to focus on the specific steps involved in completing the action in order to carry it out successfully (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). For instance, a seasoned accountant might easily be able to balance a budget, all the while focusing on the end goals of maximizing savings or avoiding debt. Faced with a similar undertaking, however, those less familiar with the world of finance might be forced to focus on each individual step of the task, first devoting their attention to “tracking bank withdrawals” and then focusing on “entering
numbers onto a spreadsheet.” In all likelihood, such novice bookkeepers might actually find it distracting (rather than motivating) to focus on the ultimate purpose of their work.

Vallacher and Wegner (1987) also maintain that even when a lack of experience or the complexity of a given action forces a person to construe their behaviour in low-level terms, that individual will ultimately try to assign some significance to what they are doing. This has important implications for the fluidity of meaning associated with a given course of action. Namely, behaviours that are identified at a high level are already imbued with meaning and are therefore unlikely to be reinterpreted in light of aspects of the situation or new information imparted by other people. Behaviours that are identified at a low level, on the other hand, are more susceptible to alternate high-level identities that might be evoked by contextual factors. To illustrate this point, Wegner and his colleagues (1984) conducted an experiment which involved having participants drink coffee out of either a regular cup or an unwieldy cup before being exposed to contextual information suggesting that drinking coffee caused them to either seek out or avoid extra stimulation. While participants who received the regular cups were relatively impervious to the contextual cues, participants who were made to drink out of the unwieldy cups (and who therefore presumably viewed their actions in low-level terms) were easily convinced that they consumed coffee for the purposes of either increasing or decreasing the level of stimulation that they were exposed to. These changes in beliefs were also manifested in participants’ subsequent actions. When they had the opportunity to listen to music during the experimental task, individuals who had been given an unwieldy cup tended to increase its volume if they had been led to believe that they drank coffee to seek stimulation, and decrease its volume if they had been led to believe that they drank coffee
in order to avoid it (Wegner, Vallacher, Macomber, Wood, & Arps, 1984). Based on these results, Wegner and his colleagues (1984) concluded that actions that are identified in low-level terms are sensitive to (and therefore shaped by) contextual information. Actions that are identified in high-level terms, on the other hand, tend to reflect a person’s beliefs, goals, and identity, and are therefore less likely to be defined or influenced by contextual factors.

After establishing the parameters of their theory, Vallacher and Wegner (1989) also investigated the possibility that there might be stable individual differences in the extent to which people habitually construe actions in low versus high-level terms. In their subsequent program of research they developed the Behavioural Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), an inventory that could be used to classify people as either low-level agents (i.e., individuals who tend to construe behaviours in terms of how they are performed) or high-level agents (i.e., individuals who conceptualize behaviours in terms of their purpose, their social meaning, or their implications for the actor’s identity). The initial studies investigating this construct revealed consequential differences between the two groups of individuals. For instance, although they are no less intelligent than their high-level counterparts, low-level agents tend to experience greater difficulty in performing a variety of everyday actions and are more prone to making mistakes – a tendency that led Vallacher and Wegner to characterize such individuals as “chronic klutzes” (p. 669). They also tend to be less motivated than their abstract-thinking peers, and are more prone to engaging in impulsive, unstable

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7 As with most individual differences, the degree to which people identify actions in low versus high-level terms is best ordered along a continuum rather than into separate categories. However, in keeping with Vallacher and Wegner (1989) and to highlight the implications associated with this individual difference, I will refer to people who fall at either end of this continuum as low and high-level agents.
behaviours – a tendency which may reflect the sudden changes in meaning that these individuals ascribe to their behaviour as they cycle between trying to characterize their actions in high-level terms and being forced to identify them in low-level terms due to a general lack of competence (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989).

Variations in levels of personal agency may influence the way in which people perceive themselves, as well. While high-level agents describe themselves in terms of the traits that they possess, low-level agents tend to describe themselves in terms of their actions or mannerisms (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Because they lack a well-defined self-concept, low-level agents also tend to be heavily influenced by contextual cues in making inferences about their own behaviour. This point is well-illustrated in a study that actually preceded the development of the BIF. Using the extent to which individuals generated high or low-level descriptions of a behaviour as a proxy for levels of personal agency, Wegner, Vallacher, Kiersted and Dizadji (1986) subtly varied the wording of a questionnaire to frame the completion of their experiment in high-level terms that were either altruistic (e.g., assisting a graduate student) or self-serv ing (e.g., obtaining course credit). Rather tellingly, these researchers found that while high-level agents were not swayed by the manipulation, low-level agents readily adopted the suggested high-level identity of their participation. Furthermore, they subsequently behaved in a way that reflected their new behavioural identity – acting selfishly if the questionnaire had construed their participation in self-serving terms, and generously if it had construed their participation in altruistic terms (Wegner et al., 1986).

Naturally, one might wonder about the implications that such differences have for individuals’ perception of others. The existing research on this topic is scarce, and
appears to offer diverging information about how high and low-level agents evaluate the actions of those around them. On the one hand, a recent set of studies has suggested that high-level agents may empathize more easily with other people than low-level agents (Levy, Freitas, & Salovey, 2002). This finding may be attributable to two factors. First, high-level agents tend to construe their own goals and the goals of others in high-level terms. At a certain level of abstraction, the goals of most people tend to be quite similar even if they are pursued through strikingly different means (Levy et al., 2002). For instance, virtually everybody shares the goal of living a happy life – however, this might be accomplished through late nights at the office for one person and through enjoying plenty of family time for another. Construing goals at a high level fosters a greater sense of similarity between oneself and others, which in turn may make it easier to empathize with other people (Levy et al., 2002). Second, because prior research has linked abstract thinking to more clearly defined, homogenous conceptions of members of various social groups, high-level agents may simply have an easier time imagining the types of experiences that a particular type of person might encounter (Levy et al., 2002). On the basis of these findings, one could easily imagine that high-level agents would be more empathetic and generous in the evaluations of others than their low-level counterparts.

On the other hand, low-level agents do not generally focus on the high-level meaning associated with a given behaviour. As such, they may be less inclined to view other peoples’ actions in terms of their abstract, moral underpinnings, and may therefore be less critical of their misdemeanours. For instance, a high-level agent may view the actions of a student copying a peer’s work as “cheating,” and might subsequently draw an undesirable trait inference about that person (i.e., they might conclude that the person is
dishonest). In contrast, a low-level agent may merely perceive the same action as “completing the test more efficiently,” and fail to draw any conclusions about the student’s character at all (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2008). Furthermore, due to their heightened sensitivity to contextual factors, low-level agents may show a greater awareness of the situational constraints that caused the person to behave the way that they did. As such, it seems equally plausible that low-level agents would be less judgmental than their high-level peers – particularly in evaluating a person who had engaged in some form of immoral behaviour or illicit value trade-off.

**Construal Level Theory: Overview and Implications for Judgments of Morality**

Similar to more stable differences in levels of personal agency, a person’s psychological distance from an event may affect whether the incident is construed in concrete or abstract terms. Construal Level Theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003) postulates that psychological distance, which refers to the degree to which an event or object falls within a person’s immediate frame of reference, has a profound impact on the way in which it is perceived. Specifically, people tend to generate high-level construals of psychologically distant events, and low-level construals of psychologically proximal events. High-level construals are schematic, abstract representations that include the superordinate, immutable features of events. Low-level construals, on the other hand, tend to be more contextualized and include subordinate, mutable features of events (Trope & Liberman, 2003). In layperson’s terms, high-level construals capture the gist of an event or object, while low-level construals are less coherent representations that include a host of secondary details (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Thus, altering a high-level feature of an event or object would result in a significant change in its meaning or
nature, while altering a low-level feature would not (see Trope & Liberman, 2003, for a more detailed overview).

In discussing the potential cause of this phenomenon, CLT researchers have proposed that distance-induced variations in how objects and events are construed are actually associated with differences in the amount of knowledge that we typically have about them. Namely, it is generally true that when people contemplate something that is not in their immediate frame of reference, they can readily bring to mind the primary features of the object or situation that they are thinking about, but they tend to lack information about its secondary features (Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008). For instance, in contemplating a trans-Atlantic flight to Paris, a would-be traveller might focus exclusively on the flight’s destination (a primary feature), and be blissfully unaware of some of the less attractive secondary features of the journey (a seatmate who snores, or an unexpected delay in taking off). As we can only focus on information that we actually have access to, our inclination to consider psychologically distant events in high-level terms is hardly surprising. What is interesting, however, is that this tendency is generalized to situations in which people are equally knowledgeable about the primary and secondary features of a psychologically distant event or entity (Liviatan et al., 2008). In other words, even in situations where we are privy to contextually rich secondary information about something that we are considering at arm’s length, we unwittingly focus on the information that we expect to have access to and disregard the rest. As such, our conception of things perceived from a distance tends to be shaped by primary, high-level information, even when secondary information is readily available (Liviatan et al., 2008).
Research conducted under the rubric of CLT has varied psychological distance on a number of different dimensions (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007). While the initial studies associated with this research tradition altered participants’ perceived temporal distance from a person or event (e.g., Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2000) subsequent studies have demonstrated that the types of construals that people generate can also be manipulated through spatial distance (e.g., Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006; Henderson, Fujita, Trope & Liberman, 2006), different forms of social distance associated with power or interpersonal similarity (e.g., Liviatan et al., 2008; Smith & Trope, 2006), and probability or hypotheticality (in that people tend to generate low-level construals of probable events and high-level construals of improbable events; Wakslak, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 2006). Recent work has even demonstrated that construal level can be manipulated more directly by prompting individuals to focus on either the high-level or low-level aspects of a given entity or behaviour. For example, Fujita, Trope, Liberman & Levin-Sagi (2006) successfully primed construal level by asking participants to write about either why or how they were pursuing a given goal. Having participants explain why they were pursuing their goals caused them to focus on the primary purpose of their behaviour, thereby activating high-level construals. Conversely, having participants explain how they were pursuing their goals caused them to focus on the concrete steps involved in meeting their objectives, thereby causing them to generate low-level construals.

Over the past decade, CLT researchers have produced an impressively large literature documenting the way in which construal level influences peoples’ thoughts and behaviours as they navigate through their social environment. At a fundamental level,
psychological distance has a profound impact on our representations of the events – affecting both their breadth and their level of schematicity (Henderson et al., 2006; Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Nussbaum et al., 2003). For example, relative to perceptions of proximal events, perceptions of distant events tend to be highly schematic, and are characterized by low levels of intercategory homogeneity (in other words, different types of events are viewed as being very distinct, and are thought to share relatively few features; Liberman et al., 2002). Furthermore, we are more likely to attribute distant events to global (as opposed to specific) causes (Liberman et al., 2002), and to expect such events to exemplify general trends (Henderson et al., 2006).

Importantly, construal-induced changes in salience and complexity also extend to our evaluations of other people and their behaviours. Due to our tendency to generate high-level construals of distant events, we are relatively more likely to extrapolate meaning from the actions of people who are removed from us in some manner (Fujita et al., 2006; Henderson et al., 2006). Specifically, when we observe other individuals, psychological distance increases our inclination to make inferences about their overarching objectives and decreases our tendency to focus on the minutiae of their actions (Henderson et al., 2006) Similarly, we tend to describe distant social interactions in more abstract, ends-oriented terms than proximal social interactions (Fujita et al., 2006).

Distance and construal level influence our social acuity in other ways, as well. Notably, we tend to assume that the actions of people in distant locations are more normative than the actions of their proximal counterparts (Henderson et al., 2006), and
we expect individuals who are removed from us in time or space to exhibit less cross-situational variability in their behaviour (Henderson et al., 2006; Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003). Furthermore, relative to the inferences that we make about people who are close at hand, our inferences about individuals who are not in our immediate frame of reference tend to be more susceptible to the correspondence bias (Henderson et al., 2006; Nussbaum et al., 2003) and may also be more heavily influenced by social stereotypes (Liberman et al., 2002).

Like more conventional dimensions of distance, feelings of interpersonal similarity may also foster variations in construal level that affect our perceptions of other people. Namely, we tend to generate low-level construals of individuals who we feel are similar to ourselves, and high-level construals of individuals that we perceive to be different (Liviatan et al. 2008). In turn, we are inclined to believe that the choices of people who are similar to us in some respect will be more heavily influenced by the secondary features and feasibility of an alternative than the choices of people who are different. Using a clever series of experiments, Liviatan and his colleagues (2008) demonstrated that similarities as superficial as having the same initials as another person can alter our perceptions and expectations of that individual. For instance, we are more inclined to consider information that is secondary to a decision in attempting to predict the choice that a similar (versus dissimilar) other will make. Furthermore, we believe that relative to dissimilar others, people who are similar to ourselves are more likely to be influenced by feasibility of engaging in a given activity, and less likely to be influenced by the desirability of the activity itself (Liviatan et al., 2008).
Based on such findings, it is clear that distance-induced changes in construal have profound effects on our perception of other peoples’ mundane actions. However, one might also wonder whether such variations in construal level would influence our evaluations of behaviours that have a strong moral component. As moral principles and values tend to be abstract and transcendent in nature, Eyal and her colleagues (2008) reasoned that they would be more salient (and thus more influential) in instances where individuals generated high-level construals of a given behaviour. To test this hypothesis, these researchers presented participants with a variety of moral transgressions ranging from the relatively common (e.g., cheating on a test) to the bizarre (e.g., eating the family dog), and asked them to imagine each event occurring in either the near or distant future. As expected, participants who imagined the transgressions taking place in the distant future tended to characterize these events in more abstract terms and evaluate them more negatively than participants who imagined them occurring in the immediate future. Interestingly, participants also evaluated virtuous actions more positively if they were imagined to take place in the distant (as opposed to the immediate) future. In short, prompting individuals to construe behaviour in high-level terms focuses their attention on the moral principles inherent in the situation, thereby causing them to generate more extreme evaluations. Prompting individuals to construe behaviour in low-level terms, on the other hand, may lessen the extremity of their moral judgments in at least two possible ways. First, it may heighten their sensitivity to any mitigating situational factors that could explain the transgressor’s actions (Eyal et al., 2008). Second, mirroring the differences associated with varying levels of personal agency, more transient factors that cause individuals to adopt low-level construals may draw their attention away from the
moral implications of an action by causing them to characterize it in means-oriented (as opposed to ends-oriented) terms (Eyal et al., 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2003). 8

Levels of Personal Agency, CLT, and Reactions to Academic Value Trade-offs

As an overview of the literature attests, both stable and transient variations in the level at which events are construed are likely to influence peoples’ responses to moral transgressions. However, the nature of the relationship between one’s level of personal agency and one’s reaction to such violations is not well understood. Furthermore, it is likely that such stable differences interact with context-induced changes in construal level to affect peoples’ reactions to moral transgressions (and to the transgressors themselves).

The primary objective of Experiment 2 was to assess the interactive influence of transient and stable variations in construal level on peoples’ evaluations of common moral transgressions and their perceptions of the individuals who engage in them. To that end, participants in the current sample with varying levels of personal agency were randomly assigned to 1 of 4 conditions (control, high construal, low construal, empathy induction). They were then presented with a vignette in which a hypothetical student engaged in an act of plagiarism and were subsequently asked to respond to dependent measures that assessed: (a) their evaluations of the academic transgression, (b) their impressions of the hypothetical student’s personality, and (c) their ability to relate to the student.

8 An interesting caveat is that the effects of construal level on moral judgment may vary depending on the type of intentionality that is ascribed to the actor. In a recently published paper pertaining to individuals’ judgments of culpability for criminal behaviour, Plaks, McNichols and Fortune (2009) distinguished between proximal intent (i.e., the degree to which people exercise conscious control over their behaviour while engaging in it) and distal intent (i.e., the degree to which people conceptualize their behaviour as a means to an end). Of relevance to the current program of research, these authors determined that individuals who were induced to generate high-level construals weighed distal intent relatively more heavily in their judgments of a perpetrator’s guilt, while individuals who were induced to generate low-level construals weighed proximal intent more heavily in their subsequent judgments (Plaks et al., 2009)
Previous work has suggested that low levels of personal agency or low-level construals may contribute to both an increased sensitivity to the contextual factors that influence behaviour and a decreased awareness of the moral implications associated with a given action. Thus, I hypothesized that low levels of personal agency and the low construal manipulation would independently contribute to more lenient evaluations of the student’s behaviour, more positive evaluations of his/her personality, and an increased ability to relate to his/her situation. Furthermore, I predicted that low levels of both variables would intensify these effects.

Conversely, high levels of personal agency or high-level construals have been associated with a decreased sensitivity to the contextual factors that influence behaviour and an increased awareness of the moral connotations of a given action. As such, I hypothesized that high levels of either variable would independently contribute to more negative evaluations of the student’s behaviour and personality, as well as a decreased ability to relate to his/her situation. I also expected that high levels of both variables would intensify these effects.

A secondary (and largely exploratory) purpose of Experiment 2 was to determine whether inducing participants to construe another person’s actions in low level terms would produce effects similar to those of a traditional perspective-taking or empathy manipulation. As low level construals contribute to a heightened awareness of the mitigating factors associated with a moral transgression, it is possible that they might affect feelings of empathy in much the same way as the types of perspective-taking manipulations that are typically used in the empathy literature.

**Method**
Participants

One hundred and fifty-one introductory psychology students completed Experiment 2 in exchange for course credit or $5.00. Data from 22 participants were excluded, as they failed to complete the personality inventory that was central to the purpose of the study. As such, the final sample consisted of 129 participants (41 males and 87 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 18.32, SD = 1.04$).9

Materials

**Behavioural Identification Form.** The Behavioural Identification Form (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989, see Appendix C) assesses individual differences in levels of personal agency. More specifically, it measures the extent to which people typically construe their actions in concrete, means-focused ways (reflecting low levels of personal agency) as opposed to abstract, ends-focused ways (reflecting high levels of personal agency). The form consists of 25 items, each of which lists a simple action (e.g., “eating”), which is then reframed in both concrete, means-oriented terms (e.g., “chewing and swallowing”) and abstract, ends-oriented terms (e.g., “getting nutrition”). For each item, participants in the current experiment were asked to indicate the response option that best reflected the way in which they naturally thought about the action. Total BIF scores were calculated by assigning a value of 1 to every high-level response option that participants chose, so that higher overall scores reflected higher levels of personal agency.

Past research has established that the BIF possesses a high degree of internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$) and excellent test-retest reliability over a 2-week period ($r = .91$; 9 I was unable to discern the gender of 1 participant, and 13 participants did not report their age.)
Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). In the current sample, participants’ scores on this measure ranged from 1 to 25 ($M = 15.42$, $SD = 4.75$), and the degree of internal consistency was similar to that found in previous studies, $\alpha = .80$.

**Procedure**

Upon arriving, individuals received an information sheet (see Appendix D for all Experiment 2 ethics materials) which stated that their participation would entail reading a scenario that described a hypothetical student’s actions and subsequently completing a short questionnaire. After signing a consent form they were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions or to a control condition (see Appendix E for all Experiment 2 manipulations and dependent measures). Participants who were not assigned to the control condition received one of the following sets of instructions$^{10}$:

**High construal condition.** As you read about the following situation, please think about how you would summarize the focal event that took place in a single sentence (e.g., think about the central principles involved).

**Low construal condition.** As you read about the following situation, please imagine vividly how this situation would occur. Think fully about the concrete, physical details of the event, such as the physical sensations one would experience, and what one would see, hear and feel.

**Empathy condition.** As you read about the following situation, please imagine what it would be like to be the person who is described. Put yourself in her shoes, and think really hard about how you would be feeling in her situation. In you mind’s eye, try to see the situation from her perspective.

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$^{10}$ The construal manipulation employed in Experiment 2 was adapted from previous work by Sagristano (2005), and Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman and Chaiken (2009). The perspective-taking manipulation that I employed is also an approximation of others that have been used in the past (e.g., Kozak, Marsh, & Wegner, 2006).
Participants then read a scenario that was similar to the one used in Experiment 1, except that the delay and choice manipulations were omitted. Furthermore, all participants learned that the student had succumbed to the temptation to cheat\(^\text{11}\):

Janice, an undergraduate student at Queen’s University, has worked hard over the course of her academic career. Her parents do not support her financially, and Janice has had to hold down a variety of part-time jobs over the past several years in order to cover living expenses and tuition. Needless to say, all of her time is taken up with her academic pursuits or her part-time work. This past semester was especially demanding for Janice, and on several occasions, she barely managed to finish everything on time. Late one night, she knowingly plagiarized an essay that she was writing for one of her courses. Her housemate had taken the same course several years ago, and she had casually read over the essays that this person had written. Janice decided to incorporate her housemate’s central ideas into her own writing.

After reading the scenario, participants in the three experimental conditions were asked to generate a written description of what the manipulation had prompted them to think about. All participants then completed a number of dependent measures that were grouped into three broad categories.

**Dependent Measures**

**Behavioural Evaluations.** Three of the items in Experiment 2 assessed participants’ evaluations of the hypothetical student’s behaviour. Specifically, they were asked to use a 7-point scale to indicate how severe the student’s punishment should be if he/she were caught (1 = relatively severe; 7 = relatively light). Participants subsequently used similar scales to rate the degree to which they felt the student’s actions were forgivable (1 = not at all forgivable; 7 = entirely forgivable) and immoral (1 = very immoral; 7 = not all that immoral).

\(^{11}\) As with Experiment 1, all participants read about a hypothetical student of the same gender. As such, male participants received a scenario that was identical except for the fact that the student was described as a male named Michael.
**Character Evaluations.** Participants used a series of 8-point scales to evaluate the hypothetical student’s personality on a number of traits related to morality and competence (trustworthy-untrustworthy, honest-dishonest, unselfish-selfish, mature-immature, moral-immoral, considerate-inconsiderate, kind-unkind, responsible-irresponsible, reliable-unreliable, decent-indecent, good-bad, principled-unprincipled, strong-weak, brave-cowardly, undisciplined-disciplined). They also used a 7-point scale to rate their overall impression of the student (1 = very negative; 7 = very positive).

**Relatedness Measures.** Participants responded to several items that assessed the degree to which they could relate to the hypothetical student in some manner. Specifically, they used a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: “I can empathize with this person’s position”, “I can understand why this person chose to behave the way that he/she did,” and “I feel that this person is similar to me.”

Participants also completed a short empathy questionnaire that assessed the degree to which they were experiencing a number of empathy-related feelings toward the student (cf. Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). To this effect, they used a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much) to indicate the extent that they were feeling sympathetic, compassionate, soft-hearted, warm, tender, and moved. Participants then completed several individual difference measures, including the BIF, before receiving a written debriefing form. I formed a composite empathy score by averaging participants’ ratings of understanding and empathy for the student, $\alpha = .82$. I also summed participants’ responses to the 6 empathy scale items to create an overall empathy questionnaire score.
In keeping with previous work (cf. Batson et al., 1987), the empathy questionnaire possessed a high degree of reliability, $\alpha = .88$.

**Results**

As participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions, it would be reasonable to assume that BIF scores would be similarly distributed in each one. However, to demonstrate more definitively that the effects of personal agency would not be confounded with construal level, I conducted a one-way ANOVA to determine whether participants in the different experimental conditions varied in terms of their BIF scores. This analysis confirmed that there were no significant differences in levels of personal agency across conditions, $F(3, 125) = 1.84, p = .14$.

**Behavioural Evaluations**

The impact that construal level and personal agency had on participants’ evaluations of the hypothetical student’s behaviour was assessed separately for each of the three relevant measures. First, participants’ ratings of the severity of punishment that the student should receive were regressed onto participants’ centered BIF scores, a set of dummy-coded variables representing the 4 experimental conditions, and all of the corresponding interaction terms. To properly assess the significance of the overall effects in my regression analysis, I conducted a series of omnibus tests comparing the squared correlation ($R^2$) from the full regression model to the squared correlation ($R^2$) of (a) a reduced model that included only the main effects of each variable, and (b) a reduced model that included only the main effect of participants’ BIF scores and the interaction terms (cf. Cohen & Cohen, 1983; West, Aiken, & Krull, 1996). The results indicated that participants’ severity ratings were not significantly influenced by the experimental
manipulation, $F(3, 116) = 0.75, p = .52, \Delta R^2 = .02$, by participants’ stable levels of personal agency, $b = 0.05, t(117) = 1.15, p = .25$, or by the interaction between these two variables, $F(3, 116) = 2.13, p = .10, \Delta R^2 = .05$.

Participants’ evaluations of the forgivability and immorality of the hypothetical student’s behaviour were analyzed in the same manner. In both instances, neither stable nor transient differences in how participants’ construed the student’s situation yielded significant results.

**Character Evaluations**

I conducted a series of maximum likelihood common factor analyses with Direct Oblimin rotation in order to delineate the factor structure of the personality trait items. Although I had originally expected a 2-factor solution to constitute the best fit for the data (i.e., I anticipated only 2 factors representing competence and morality to emerge) and the scree plot of the reduced eigenvalues appeared to be somewhat ambiguous (see Figure 3), the other fit indices that I employed indicated that a 3-factor solution might be more appropriate. Although the RMSEA values for the 1- and 2-factor solutions were both between .07 and .08 (thereby suggesting an acceptable fit to the data) the RMSEA value for the 3-factor solution was .043, which indicated an excellent fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1992). This was further corroborated by the results of a parallel analysis, which suggested that the 3-factor solution constituted the best fit to the data.\(^{12}\)

An examination of the factor loadings indicated that my intuition about the underlying factor structure had been partially correct. Namely, the first factor appeared

\(^{12}\)The results of this factor analysis (as well as the regression analyses associated with each factor) should be interpreted with caution, as the factor structure described above did not replicate within the individual conditions. However, the number of participants within each condition was relatively small, and may have been insufficient for these analyses to yield reliable results.
Figure 3. Reduced eigenvalues for personality trait items in Experiment 2
to encompass traits that were associated with morality (honest-dishonest, trustworthy-untrustworthy, moral-immoral, considerate-inconsiderate, unselfish-selfish, mature-immature, principled-unprincipled), while the second factor encompassed traits that were related to competence and strength (brave-cowardly, strong-weak, reliable-unreliable, disciplined-undisciplined, responsible-irresponsible). The third factor seemed to correspond to a more general construct of “niceness” (good-bad, decent-indecent, kind-unkind).

I computed the averages of participants’ ratings for the traits that corresponded to each of the three factors, thereby obtaining three sets of overall scores representing participants’ evaluations of the student’s morality, the student’s level of competence, and the student’s general level of “niceness.” Reliability analyses for each set of trait ratings revealed that they were highly consistent measures. Specifically, the Cronbach’s alpha for the morality trait ratings was $\alpha = .91$, while the Cronbach’s alpha for the competence trait ratings and the niceness trait ratings were $\alpha = .86$ and $\alpha = .84$, respectively.

To determine whether construal level and personal agency influenced evaluations of the hypothetical student’s personality on these three dimensions, each score was regressed onto participants’ centered BIF scores, a set of dummy-coded variables representing the 4 experimental conditions, and all of the corresponding interaction terms.

Although the analysis of participants’ morality ratings did not uncover a main effect of experimental condition, $F(3, 120) = 0.63, p = .60, \Delta R^2 = .02$, it did yield a significant personal agency x condition interaction, $F(3, 120) = 2.88, p = .04, \Delta R^2 = .07$. To gain a better understanding of this interaction, I performed simple slopes analyses (cf.,
Aiken & West, 1991) to assess the main effect of condition on morality ratings at differing levels of personal agency. As expected, relative to the control, the low construal manipulation and the empathy induction were both associated with more positive evaluations of the student’s morality among low level agents, although these results were marginal, \( b = -.86, t(121) = 1.74, p = .08 \) and \( b = -.94, t(121) = 1.88, p = .06 \) (see the black slopes on Panels 1 and 3 of Figure 4). More surprisingly, as depicted by the black slope in Panel 2 of Figure 4, the high construal manipulation appeared to affect low-level agents in a similar manner – causing them to view the student’s level of morality in a significantly more favourable light, \( b = -1.07, t(121) = 2.16, p = .03 \).

Among high-level agents, on the other hand, the high construal manipulation was associated with marginally less positive assessments of the student’s morality, \( b = .92, t(121) = 1.84, p = .07 \) (as depicted by the grey slope in Panel 2 of Figure 4). Neither of the other experimental manipulations significantly altered the morality ratings generated by these individuals.

The analyses assessing the effects of condition and personal agency on participants’ competence and niceness ratings did not yield any significant main effects or interactions. Furthermore, these two variables did not appear to affect participants’ more general overall impressions of the student, either on their own or in relation to one another.

**Relatedness Measures**

**Similarity.** Participants’ feelings of similarity to the hypothetical student were regressed onto their centered BIF scores, the dummy-coded variables representing the experimental conditions, and all of the interaction terms. Although the main effect of
Figure 4. Morality trait ratings as a function of experimental condition and personal agency

Panel 1. Difference between Low Construal and Control Conditions

Panel 2. Difference between High Construal and Control Conditions

Panel 3. Difference between Empathy and Control Conditions
condition did not achieve significance, $F(3, 120) = 1.45, p = .23, \Delta R^2 = .03$, a significant personal agency x condition interaction emerged, $F(3, 120) = 3.29, p = .02, \Delta R^2 = .07$.

Follow-up simple slopes analyses were conducted to assess the effects of the experimental manipulations at differing levels of personal agency. As shown in Panel 1 of Figure 5, these analyses indicated that among participants with low levels of personal agency, the low construal manipulation was strongly associated with a heightened sense of similarity to the hypothetical student, $b = 1.66, t(121) = 2.92, p = .004$. Among participants with high levels of personal agency, on the other hand, the high construal manipulation was marginally associated with a tendency to see oneself as less similar to the student, $b = -0.94, t(121) = 1.72, p = .09$ (See Panel 2 of Figure 5). No other effects of condition were significant.

**Empathy.** To assess the interactive influence of personal agency and construal level on empathy (and to determine whether the low construal manipulation might produce results similar to those of a conventional empathy induction), participants’ composite empathy scores were also subjected to regression analyses. The results of the subsequent omnibus tests yielded a strong effect of construal condition, $F(3, 120) = 3.21, p = .03, \Delta R^2 = .08$. Specifically, participants who were exposed to either the low construal manipulation or the empathy induction experienced greater feelings of empathy for the student than their peers in the control condition, $b = .72, t(121) = 2.34, p = .02$ and $b = .80, t(121) = 2.48, p = .01$, respectively. In this instance, the personal agency by condition interaction did not achieve significance, $F(3, 120) = 0.53, p = .66, \Delta R^2 = .01$. Nor did personal agency, in itself, influence the amount of empathy and understanding that participants experienced, $b = .06, t(121) = 1.41, p = .16$. 

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Panel 1. Difference between Low Construal and Control Conditions

Panel 2. Difference between High Construal and Control Conditions

Panel 3. Difference between Empathy and Control Conditions

*Figure 5.* Perceived similarity as a function of experimental condition and personal agency
These analyses were repeated using participant’s empathy questionnaire scores as the criterion variable. The omnibus tests for this regression yielded a marginal effect of construal condition, $F(3,120) = 2.29, p = .08, \Delta R^2 = .06$. Not surprisingly, a more detailed examination of these results indicated that participants in the empathy induction condition exhibited higher overall scores on the empathy questionnaire than participants in the control condition, $b = 4.06, t(121) = 2.19, p = .03$. No other effects were significant.

**Discussion**

The hypotheses associated with Experiment 2 were partially supported by the data. Although construal level and personal agency did not appear to influence participants’ evaluations of the hypothetical student’s immoral behaviour, these variables did affect several of the measures that assessed participants’ evaluations of the student’s character and their ability to relate to that individual.

**Character Evaluations.** On their own, personal agency and experimentally-induced changes in construal level did not influence participants’ perceptions of the hypothetical student’s character. As I had anticipated, however, a two-way interaction between personal agency and condition emerged. A more detailed examination of this interaction revealed that the low construal and empathy manipulations appeared to bolster perceptions of the student’s morality among low-level agents. Previous literature has suggested that such individuals may be more sensitive to contextual influences on other peoples’ behaviour, and are not inclined to conceptualize actions in moral terms to begin with. Being further induced to consider the situational pressures inherent to hypothetical student’s situation by either the low construal or empathy manipulation, low level agents
may have discounted the moral implications of the student’s cheating behaviour altogether. Such reasoning would manifest itself in relatively positive evaluations of the student’s morality. The morality trait ratings of high-level agents, on the other hand, were only affected by the high construal manipulation. When prompted to focus on the central aspects of the hypothetical student’s situation, these individuals formed a marginally less favourable impression of the student’s character. Based on the Action Identification literature, one could reasonably presume that the high-level agents in Experiment 2 were predisposed to evaluate the student’s behaviour in terms of its moral connotations. The high construal manipulation may have exacerbated this tendency by causing these individuals to focus exclusively on the student’s actions (and the principles being violated by them) while drawing their attention away from any situational pressures inherent in the situation. With a lessened awareness of the mitigating circumstances that the student was facing, high-level agents might have been especially inclined to evaluate the student’s character negatively.

Although these findings were encouraging, the analyses pertaining to participants’ evaluations of the hypothetical student also yielded several unexpected (and somewhat puzzling) results. For instance, low-level agents in the high construal condition who were prompted to focus on the main event in the scenario were especially inclined to evaluate the student’s character positively. While it is difficult to generate a definitive explanation for such a finding, it is possible that the high construal manipulation simply had the effect of making both high and low-level agents more inclined to focus on the aspects of the student’s situation that would naturally seem the most salient to them. Specifically, the high construal manipulation may have prompted low-level agents to
focus exclusively on the concrete aspects of the hypothetical student’s behaviour and the situational pressures that he/she was facing, while lessening their attention to the moral connotations of his/her actions (which would not have been that salient to them to begin with). Similarly, the high construal manipulation may have simply kept the attention of high-level agents focused on the aspects of the situation that would naturally be the most salient to them (namely, the morals and principles being violated by the student’s behaviour) without independently eliciting thoughts about such concepts. While the viability of this explanation cannot be addressed in the context of the current experiment, the possibility that inducing individuals to construe a situation in high level terms could heighten their tendency to think schematically certainly merits further investigation.

The fact that construal level and personal agency did not influence participants’ perceptions of the hypothetical student’s competence is not that surprising, as acts of academic dishonesty are likely less diagnostic of competence than they are of morality and integrity. However, I had expected these two variables to influence participants’ summary impressions of the student, and this pattern of results did not emerge. Although it is difficult to speculate about the cause of null findings, it is possible that this measure was simply too general to tap into participants’ nuanced evaluations of the student’s character. Furthermore, having just rated the hypothetical student’s standing on a wide range of traits (some of which were related to morality and some of which were not), participants may have been reminded of just how complex people are, and how their evaluation of another person on one dimension might differ substantially from their evaluation of the same person on a different dimension. If this occurred, it may have undermined the measure pertaining to participants’ overall impressions of the student.
**Relatedness Measures.** The effects of construal level and personal agency on participants’ perceived similarity to the student and their feelings of empathy for this individual were also assessed. While neither construal level nor personal agency independently affected participants’ ratings of perceived similarity, the anticipated two-way interaction between these two variables did emerge. Specifically, inducing low-level agents to construe the hypothetical student’s actions in relatively concrete terms increased the degree to which they felt similar to that individual. Conversely, inducing high-level agents to construe the student’s behaviour in relatively abstract terms led to a marginal decrease in perceptions of interpersonal similarity. These results suggest that when individuals with a predisposition for construing actions in means-oriented terms are induced to focus on the details of a cheating student’s dilemma, they may come to experience a type of affinity toward that person – perhaps through a heightened awareness of the external pressures inherent to the situation. Individuals with a predisposition for construing actions and events in abstract, ends-oriented terms, on the other hand, perceived themselves as being less similar to the student after being induced to construe the person’s actions at a high level. Presumably, the moral implications of the student’s cheating behaviour became especially salient to these individuals, thereby causing them to disassociate themselves from the student.

It is worth noting that the measure of perceived similarity might be particularly susceptible to shifts in construal on at least two additional fronts. First, perceived similarity might be a subtle proxy for the extent to which participants condone the student’s dishonest actions. While participants might be loath to express direct acceptance of the student’s cheating behaviour, appraising the student as being similar to
oneself might indicate a tacit acceptance of that individual’s decision. Appraising the
student as being dissimilar, on the other hand, might indicate disapproval of the student’s
actions. Second, relatively recent work has indicated that using a given method of
manipulating construal can alter peoples’ perceptions of psychological distance on
seemingly unrelated dimensions (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2008; Liberman, Trope, McCrea
& Sherman, 2007). As CLT researchers have conceptualized interpersonal similarity as a
form of psychological distance (Liviatan et al., 2008), one could reasonably expect that
altering construal on another dimension would correspond with changes in participants’
perceived similarity to the hypothetical student. This explanation for the interaction
involving perceived similarity is less theoretically interesting. Unfortunately, however, it
cannot be ruled out in the context of the current experiment.

The personal agency by condition interaction did not emerge when participants’
levels of empathy for the hypothetical student were assessed. However, in certain
instances prompting participants to construe the student’s cheating behaviour in low-level
terms appeared to be as effective as a conventional perspective-taking manipulation in
eliciting feelings of empathy for the person. Namely, relative to their peers in the control
condition, participants who were exposed to either the low construal or the empathy
manipulation reported a greater general sense of empathy and understanding for the
student. However, only the empathy manipulation produced shifts in the degree to which
participants experienced more specific empathy-related emotions (e.g., compassion and
soft-heartedness), and these were marginal in nature. In other words, the low construal
manipulation influenced participants’ general feelings of empathy for the student without
affecting more specific empathy-related emotions while the perspective-taking manipulation influenced both dependent measures.

Although these results offer mixed support for the possibility that a low construal manipulation might operate similarly to a perspective-taking manipulation in certain contexts, a viable explanation for this inconsistency exists. Because the perspective-taking manipulation specifically instructed participants to envision themselves in the student’s position and to try to imagine the feelings that this person might be experiencing, it is possible that this manipulation had a more visceral impact on participants than the low construal manipulation (which merely required participants to think about the details of the student’s situation). Thus, both manipulations may have increased participants’ general understanding for the student by making them more aware of the constraints and pressures that he/she was facing. However, the perspective-taking manipulation may have given participants a unique sense of the unpleasant emotional state that a person in the hypothetical student’s situation would likely experience – thereby increasing their feelings of sympathy and soft-heartedness toward the student.

**Behavioural Evaluations.** As mentioned previously, neither stable nor transient variations in construal level appeared to have a significant impact on participants’ evaluations of the hypothetical student’s actual behaviour. While these null results were not anticipated, it may be the case that peoples’ assessments of moral infractions and trade-offs are less labile than their evaluations of the individuals who commit them. In other words, people may be relatively unwavering in their conviction that certain behaviours (e.g., plagiarism) are immoral, while being willing to concede that under certain circumstances, individuals who are usually upstanding will engage in actions that
are generally regarded as being dishonourable (Murphy & Gilligan, 1980). Furthermore, the measures that assessed participants’ evaluations of the hypothetical student’s behaviour may have been more susceptible to the influence of social desirability than the measures that assessed their evaluations of the student’s character or their feelings of empathy. In all likelihood, most students would deem it perfectly acceptable to experience some degree of empathy for a peer who succumbed to the temptation to plagiarize an assignment. Condoning an act of plagiarism, on the other hand, would probably be considered less acceptable, and might be perceived as bringing the respondent’s own character into question.

One other aspect of the findings associated with Experiment 2 warrants discussion. In instances where the expected two-way interaction between personal agency and condition emerged, there seemed to be an unanticipated asymmetry in the way that the construal manipulation affected low and high-level agents. Specifically, while low-level agents evidenced a significant increase in morality and similarity ratings after being exposed to the low construal manipulation, high-level agents evidenced only a marginal decrease in these ratings after being exposed to the high construal manipulation. A reading of the Action Identification literature suggests that the relatively greater susceptibility of low-level agents to the low construal manipulation may reflect the fact that these individuals have a less defined value system and sense of self (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). As a result, it may be easier to manipulate their evaluations of another person, as well as the degree to which they feel similar to this individual. High-level agents, on the other hand, have comparatively well-defined value systems and self-
concepts (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), which may make their evaluations of other people (and their feelings of similarity to them) less labile and more difficult to influence.

In closing, Experiment 2 showed that transient and stable variations in construal level interact to influence certain aspects of peoples’ evaluations of individuals who engage in common moral violations. It also demonstrated that in some respects, inducing individuals to adopt low-level construals produces effects similar to those of a conventional empathy induction manipulation.

After reading about how variations in construal level affect the judgments that individuals pass on other people who commit moral transgressions, one might wonder how these factors would influence their own behavioural choices if they were faced with the opportunity to engage in immoral behaviour themselves. Laypeople might entertain the notion that individuals hold themselves and others to the same moral standards, and that as a result, they’d be inclined to interpret and evaluate their own actions and the actions of other people in a similar manner. If this were the case, one might simply assume that high-level agents who were prompted to adopt a high-level construal would be especially disinclined to behave immorally, and that low-level agents who were prompted to adopt a low-level construal would be especially vulnerable to the temptation to do so.

However, research stemming from the literature on self-serving biases has shown that people are rarely able to view themselves (or their actions) in an impartial, objective manner. Namely, individuals tend to attribute their own failures and weaknesses to external causes – particularly if they have high self-esteem (Campbell & Fairey, 1985). Furthermore, most people can readily trivialize or rationalize behavioural choices that
deviate from their personal moral code – thereby eliminating any feelings of guilt or discomfort that they might otherwise experience (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Tedeschi, 1984; Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). Given that people can masterfully justify engaging in behaviours that they wouldn’t normally condone, it might also be the case that inducing individuals to adopt high-level construals would be a relatively ineffective way to curb cheating behaviour, as they may simply dismiss any salient morals or values as being irrelevant to their particular circumstances. The purpose of experiment 3, then, was to investigate the role that stable and transient variations in construal level might play in determining the extent to which people would engage in common forms of immoral behaviour themselves.
Chapter 4

Experiment 3

Experiment 3 was conducted to determine whether variations in construal level affect peoples’ own choices to engage in (or abstain from) immoral behaviour. Laypeople might assume that individuals hold themselves and others to a similar moral standard. If this were true, the general pattern of results that was obtained on some of the indices in Experiment 2 would be likely to emerge in Experiment 3. Specifically, prompting high-level agents to construe their actions in high-level terms would cause them to be especially unlikely to behave poorly by making the moral implications of their actions salient to them. Prompting low-level agents to construe their actions in low-level terms, on the other hand, would lead to an increase in immoral behaviour among members of this group.

However, psychological research documenting the prevalence of self-serving biases and dissonance-reducing strategies might lead a person to expect that high-level construals would not be strongly associated with upstanding behaviour (cf., Rosenfeld et al., 1984; Simon et al., 1995). After all, if people can easily rationalize their own immoral actions, they might dismiss the moral implications of a given behaviour as being irrelevant to their situation. Before discussing Experiment 3 in detail, I will review the research assessing the way in which construal level and personal agency affect decision-making and moral behaviour.

As one might expect, CLT researchers have conducted a number of investigations that are pertinent to this question. At the most general level, a sizeable portion of the CLT literature documents the relationship between construal level and decision-making
processes. To fully grasp the implications associated with this research, one must be familiar with the idea of asymmetric conditional importance, a catchphrase that refers to the idea that the various pieces of information associated with a given decision are not given equal consideration (Eyal, Liberman, Trope, & Walther, 2004). For example, people are unlikely to evaluate the drawbacks or difficulties associated with a given course of action unless it could also yield a desirable outcome (Eyal et al., 2004; Liberman & Trope, 1998). Nor do they typically consider the secondary features of a given alternative without first considering its primary features (Trope & Liberman, 2000). Put simply, if individuals conclude that there is no good reason for pursuing an alternative (or if its primary features fail to capture their attention), they will generally not spend time contemplating the negative consequences that this course of action could have, the challenges involved in pursuing it, or any of its other secondary features (Eyal et al., 2004). Thus, the difficulties, drawbacks, and secondary consequences associated with an alternative tend to be subordinate to its benefits, and are most salient when a decision is construed in low-level terms (Eyal et al., 2004; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2000). The benefits associated with an alternative, on the other hand, tend to be most salient when a decision is construed in high-level terms (Eyal et al., 2004; Liberman & Trope, 1998). As such, peoples’ choices about psychologically distant events tend to be based on the primary aspects of alternatives and the benefits associated with pursuing them. In contrast, their immediate preferences tend to be heavily influenced by a host of secondary factors, and are characterized by more complexities (Liberman, Sagristano & Trope, 2002).
Interestingly, recent work has also assessed whether construal level influences the extent to which one’s attitudes and values are incorporated into the decision-making process. Noting that the link between peoples’ professed values and their actual behaviour is often tenuous, CLT researchers hypothesized that the abstract nature of values renders them relatively inaccessible when a decision is construed in low-level terms (which tends to be the case when people are deciding on an immediate course of action; Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman & Chaiken, 2009; Sagristano, 2005). Indeed, Eyal and her colleagues (2009) assessed the extent to which students valued benevolence, and subsequently asked them to indicate the number of minutes that they would be willing to donate to an unpaid study in either the near or distant future. While the endorsement of this value was not predictive of students’ generosity with their time in the immediate future, a very different pattern emerged when students were asked to consider their participation in the distant future. In such instances, students who placed a premium on benevolence were willing to donate significantly more minutes to the study than their less generous counterparts, suggesting that this value was playing an important role in shaping their intentions (Eyal et al., 2009). Although attitudes tend to be narrower in scope than values (Sagristano, 2005), a similar pattern of results emerged when the effects of construal level on attitude-intention correspondence were investigated. For instance, Sagristano (2005) found that a very general measure of peoples’ attitudes toward donating blood was an excellent predictor of their intentions to engage in this activity in the distant future, but a rather poor predictor of their intentions to do so immediately. Sagristano (2005) attributed this to the fact that while students’ general attitudes toward blood donation and its purpose (i.e., saving lives) tend to be quite
favourable, their feelings about the specifics and means associated with this activity (e.g., feeling faint, being poked with a needle) are somewhat less positive. Thus, because they are construed at a comparatively high level, the choices that people make about distant future activities tend to correspond more closely to their attitudes and values than their choices about more immediate activities (Eyal et al. 2009; Sagristano, 2005).

Changing the salience of a given attitude or value is not the only way in which construal level affects the relationship between these self-defining beliefs and a person’s subsequent behaviour. Indeed, the way that we construe situations in our lives may also impact our ability to exercise self-control and perseverance in the face of temptations or difficulties. Fujita and his colleagues (2006) noted that most peoples’ personal goals tend to be abstract, and typically involve some type of desirable outcome. As such, they postulated that construing a situation in high-level terms should make such goals more accessible (and thus more influential). Construing a situation in low-level terms, on the other hand, should increase peoples’ awareness of incidental, goal-irrelevant details that might distract them from pursuing their objectives (Fujita et al., 2006). In a compelling series of studies, Fujita et al. (2006) demonstrated that relative to individuals who were prompted to adopt low-level construals, participants who adopted high-level construals were better able to delay gratification and persevere at a difficult task. Furthermore, compared to their low-level counterparts, these participants evaluated hypothetical temptations more negatively, and indicated that they would feel worse if they succumbed to temptation in a self-control conflict (e.g., cheating on an exam or indulging in a calorie-laden dessert; Fujita et al., 2006). Thus, Fujita and his colleagues (2006)
concluded that adopting a high-level construal enhances one’s self-regulatory efforts, while adopting a low-level construal undermines them.

Taken together, the findings associated with these programs of research indicate that inducing individuals to construe situations in high-level terms increases the salience of pertinent values and strengthens their sense of self-control and perseverance. Inducing them to construe situations in low-level terms, on the other hand, appears to do just the opposite (Fujita et al. 2006; Sagristano, 2005).

Assuming that honesty is generally valued among undergraduate students,\(^{13}\) it seems reasonable to expect that prompting them to generate a high-level construal of a skill-testing, evaluative task should decrease their inclination to cheat, and that prompting them to generate a low-level construal of the task should increase their inclination to do so.

In contrast to the CLT literature, the research documenting the effects of personal agency on peoples’ inclinations to behave morally is relatively sparse. In his unpublished dissertation work, Punzo (1993) demonstrated that high levels of personal agency are modestly predictive of intentions to engage in prosocial behaviour. Furthermore, descriptive data collected by Vallacher and Wegner (1989) suggest that low levels of personal agency are related to a propensity to engage in criminal offences – a finding that these researchers attributed to the lack of forethought and impulsivity associated with this characteristic. Although such findings are interesting, they do not systematically

\(^{13}\) 129 introductory psychology students in a previous sample were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that a variety of values were personally important to them (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). As expected students placed a premium on honesty and integrity (M = 6.17, SD = 1.10), which suggests that undergraduates generally ascribe to these values.
demonstrate how personal agency influences peoples’ immediate responses to opportunities to behave immorally.

The objective of Experiment 3 was to assess the interactive influence of construal level and personal agency on students’ cheating behaviour during a difficult evaluative task. As such, participants were randomly assigned to a control group or to one of two experimental conditions in which they were primed to think in either low or high-level terms. They were subsequently asked to perform a difficult mathematical task that provided opportunities for both passive and active cheating. After this, their stable levels of personal agency were assessed.

As discussed earlier, low level construals and low levels of personal agency have both been associated with decreased impulse control, greater susceptibility to situational influences, and a disinclination to consider the moral connotations of behaviours. As such, one might expect that low levels of either variable would be associated with an increased tendency to cheat and that low levels of both variables would amplify this effect. On the other hand, as high level construals and high levels of personal agency have both been associated with increased self-control and a greater tendency to consider the moral implications of behaviours, one might expect that high levels of either variable would be negatively associated with cheating behaviour, and that high levels of both variables would amplify this effect.

However, a potential caveat to consider is that people are surprisingly adept at justifying or trivializing their own questionable behaviours (Rosenberg et al., 1984; Simon et al., 1995). Based on these findings, one might alternatively predict that having individuals construe their actions in high-level terms would not be a particularly effective
way to discourage them from cheating. Given these conflicting hypotheses, Experiment 3 will help to delineate the way in which variations in construal level influence peoples’ inclinations to commit (or abstain from committing) moral transgressions.

**Method**

**Participants**

Eighty-one introductory psychology students took part in Experiment 3 in exchange for course credit or $5.00. The computerized responses from 12 participants were lost due to a program malfunction, and an additional 3 participants in the low construal condition were excluded because they failed to complete the key experimental manipulation correctly (i.e., they generated very vague, non-specific responses to the questions involved in the manipulation). Thus, the final sample consisted of 66 participants (22 males and 44 females, $M_{age} = 18.24, SD = 1.61$).

**Materials**

**Construal Manipulation.** Prior to completing the main portion of the experiment, two-thirds of our participants completed a construal manipulation (see Appendix G for all Experiment 3 manipulations and dependent measures) adapted from Burrus and Roese (2006). Specifically, participants were asked to record a personal goal that related to their health status or to another aspect of their life outside of university. They then issued written responses to three questions which varied depending on the construal condition that they had been assigned to. In the high construal condition, these questions prompted participants to construe their goals in relatively broad, abstract terms. Specifically, participants were asked (a) why they wanted to achieve their goals, (b) what good could come out of achieving their goals, and (c) what achieving their goals would

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14 11 participants in the current sample failed to report their age.
mean for their life. Conversely, in the low construal condition, the questions prompted participants to think of their goals in concrete, immediate terms. Specifically, they were asked (a) what types of tasks they were performing to complete their goals, (b) what techniques they were using to complete their goals, and (c) what specific, concrete steps they were following to complete their goals. The final third of our sample were assigned to a control condition, and did not undergo a construal manipulation before completing the main portion of the experiment.

**Analytical Task.** During the main portion of the experiment, participants completed a modified version of the SDMath Task™ (von Hippel, Lakin, & Shakarchi, 2005; Vohs & Schooler, 2008). This computerized testing program purportedly assessed participants’ analytical abilities and required them to mentally calculate the responses to 15 mathematical equations that involved adding and subtracting a set of numbers between 1 and 20. Each equation was presented individually and remained on the screen until the participant had keyed in an answer. Before starting, participants were told that the experimenter had just discovered that the test contained a programming error that caused the answer to each equation to appear on the screen 1 second after it had been presented, and that the departmental computer technician had yet to fix it. However, participants learned that they could prevent the answer from appearing on the screen by pressing the space bar immediately after each equation appeared. The experimenter stressed that although she had no way of checking to see whether participants had solved the equations themselves, she would appreciate it if they would try their best to hit the space bar after every equation so that their data would not be invalidated. Unbeknownst to participants, the “error” that caused the answers to appear on the screen was actually an intentional
feature of the program, which also recorded the number of times that participants pressed the space bar to avoid cheating. In the current experiment, instances of passive cheating per participant ranged from 0 to 15 ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 3.71$), which is comparable to the amount of passive cheating that previous researchers have elicited through the use of this task (cf., von Hippel et al., 2005).

**Behavioural Identification Form** (BIF; Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Toward the end of the experimental session, all participants completed the BIF (for a detailed description, see Experiment 2). Participants’ scores on this measure ranged from 1 to 25 ($M = 14.17$, $SD = 4.77$; $\alpha = .79$).

**Procedure**

Participants completed the experiment individually, or in small groups of 2 to 4. After arriving, each individual was led to a separate room and was seated in front of a computer. Participants were then informed, orally and in writing (see Appendix F for all Experiment 3 ethics materials), that the purpose of the experiment was to determine whether certain individual differences were predictive of differing levels of analytical ability, and that the main portion of the experiment involved a 15-item mathematical test that they would be required to finish in 5 minutes. To increase the degree to which participants were concerned about performing well (thereby presumably increasing the temptation to cheat), the experimenter assumed a reassuring tone of voice and informed them that Queen’s students typically answered 80 to 90% of the items correctly, and that she would be very surprised if they encountered any difficulties15.

After giving their consent to participate, participants who had been assigned to one of the experimental conditions were asked to complete the construal manipulation

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15 Please see Appendix G for the complete version of the experimental script and protocol.
under the pretence that they were doing a pilot test for a separate study. All participants
then received more detailed information about the mathematical test. Specifically, the
experimenter told them about the purported programming error and also gave each
individual a sheet of loose leaf paper, asking them to record their answer to each
problem in writing (in addition to keying it into the computer) so that the researchers had
a hard copy of their responses in case the program failed to save their data. To further
heighten participants’ anxieties about the task, the experimenter finished by informing
participants that they would be discussing their overall performance at the end of study.
Participants were then given 5 minutes to complete the task privately.

After the allotted time had passed, the experimenter emerged and asked
participants to cease working on the test. Looking flustered, she explained that the
central computer in the lab’s network was indicating that the program had malfunctioned,
and that all of the data that the participants had keyed into their computers had been lost.
Feigning relief that the participants had recorded their responses on a sheet of paper, the
experimenter apologetically mentioned that she urgently had to use the restroom. She
then distributed answer keys to the participants, asking them to evaluate their own
performance before leaving the lab for a few minutes. Upon returning, the experimenter
administered a variety of short personality scales, including the BIF.

Participants then completed a few ancillary items, including a post-experimental
survey. The survey was comprised of measures that assessed participants’ concerns
about their performance, and the degree to which they were tempted to cheat. More
importantly, it also included several open-ended questions that were designed to gauge
participants’ suspicions about the true purpose of the experiment. Specifically,
participants were asked (a) whether anything about the experiment struck them as being unusual, (b) what they thought I might actually be investigating, and (c) what prompted their suspicions. Upon finishing this task, participants were thoroughly debriefed and compensated for their time.

**Results**

I had originally anticipated a type of matching effect, in that low-level agents would be more apt to cheat on the mathematical task after completing the low construal manipulation, while high-level agents would be less apt to cheat after completing the high construal manipulation.

To test this prediction, I created two indices of cheating behaviour. A proportional index of passive cheating was computed by dividing the number of times that individuals failed to press the spacebar by the total number of items that they managed to complete. As well, a proportional index of active cheating was created for each participant by tallying all of the instances in which an incorrect response (or no response) had been keyed into the computer program while a correct response was recorded on paper, and dividing this figure by the total number of responses recorded.\(^\text{16}\)

**Passive Cheating**

Participants’ passive cheating scores were regressed onto their centered BIF scores, a set of dummy-coded variables representing the construal conditions, and all of the corresponding interaction terms. I subsequently conducted omnibus tests of the overall effects in the regression analysis, which revealed that the main effect of condition did not achieve significance, \(F(2, 59) = 0.83, p = .44, \Delta R^2 = .03\). The tests also indicated

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\(^{16}\) I felt that it was reasonable to treat such discrepancies as evidence that participants had copied the correct responses from the answer key after the computerized task had been completed.
that the main effect of personal agency was not significant, $b = -1.91$, $t(62) = 1.19$, $p = .24$. However, a personal agency by condition interaction emerged, $F(2, 59) = 3.05$, $p = .05$, $\Delta R^2 = .09$.

To better understand the nature of this interaction, I conducted simple slopes analyses. As in Study 2, I created new variables to represent high and low levels of personal agency, and subsequently assessed the effect of the construal manipulation on the propensity to cheat at each one. These analyses revealed that at low levels of personal agency, the high construal manipulation was associated with a significantly lower incidence of cheating behaviour than both the low construal manipulation, $b = -33.98$, $t(60) = 2.20$, $p = .03$ and the control condition, $b = -31.49$, $t(60) = 2.24$, $p = .03$ (see Panel 2 of Figure 6 for an visual depiction of this effect). At high levels of personal agency, however, participants in the different construal conditions did not vary from each other in their propensity to cheat.

**Active Cheating**

The influence that personal agency and construal level had on active cheating was assessed in the same manner. In this instance, the anticipated personal agency by

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17 Given that low levels of personal agency have previously been associated with stronger inclinations to engage in deviant behaviour (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), the absence of this effect was initially surprising to me, so I conducted a median split on participants’ BIF scores and passive cheating scores in the control condition and subsequently performed a chi-square analysis to determine whether personal agency influenced passive cheating within this group. The results of this analysis were significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 21) = 7.47$, $p < .01$, indicating that participants whose cheating scores fell above the median tended to be low-level agents, while participants whose cheating scores fell below the median tended to be high-level agents.

18 As in Study 2, we conducted a one-way ANOVA to ensure that there were no variations in BIF scores across the different construal conditions. Once again, the results indicated that participants’ BIF scores in all 3 conditions were virtually identical, $F(2, 63) = 0.16$, n.s.
Panel 1. Difference between Low Construal and Control Conditions

Panel 2. Difference between High Construal and Control Conditions

Figure 6. Passive cheating as a function of experimental condition and personal agency
condition interaction did not emerge, $F(2, 50) = 0.92, p = 0.37, \Delta R^2 = .03^{19}$.

Furthermore, the main effects of this analysis did not achieve significance.

**Participant Suspicions**

Participants’ responses to the open-ended questions on the post-experimental survey were assessed in order to gauge their level of suspiciousness about the purpose of the study. While approximately 52% of the participants correctly ascertained that the experiment was somehow related to cheating behaviour, the causes associated with their suspicions were somewhat more variable, as evidenced by Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature of experiment</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construal manipulation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error in evaluative task</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure of active cheating</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty of task</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-experimental survey</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General deceptiveness of psychological studies</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given that a third of the sample expressed some suspicions about the error in the evaluative task, I conducted an independent-samples t-test in order to determine whether such thoughts had any influence over their tendency to engage in passive cheating. This analysis revealed that participants who expressed doubts or confusion about this aspect of

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As several participants forgot to record their responses on paper during the computerized task, the degrees of freedom for this analysis differ from those of the previous analysis.
the experiment ($M = 57.14$) did not differ from their less suspecting counterparts ($M = 53.93$) in their tendency to cheat, $t(46) = .32, p = .75, d = .09$.

**Discussion**

Experiment 3 yielded an interesting (albeit unexpected) pattern of results. I had originally anticipated that low levels of personal agency and low level construals would each be associated with a greater inclination to engage in immoral behaviour (i.e., cheating), and that low levels of both variables would exacerbate this tendency. I also expected that one of two competing hypotheses about the relationship between high-level construals and immoral behaviour would be supported. Specifically, I expected that high-level construals would either be associated with a decreased incidence of immoral behaviour among high-level agents, or that such construals would have very little bearing on immoral behaviour at all (due to peoples’ tendencies to rationalize their own actions). Furthermore, I expected the same pattern of results to emerge regardless of whether indices of passive or active cheating behaviour were being analyzed.

What my analyses actually revealed was that the effects of personal agency and construal on students’ inclinations to behave dishonestly depended on the type of cheating that was being assessed. Namely, the frequency of passive cheating was affected by these two variables, while the frequency of active cheating was not. As well, although a significant two-way interaction between personal agency and condition was evident when the index of passive cheating was analyzed, the nature of this effect was somewhat different from what I had hypothesized. Specifically, the high construal manipulation led to a significant decrease in the incidence of passive cheating among low level agents. The low construal manipulation, on the other hand, failed to have any
discernable influence on participants’ cheating behaviour regardless of their levels of personal agency.

Although these findings were unexpected, they are consistent with previous work in this area. Existing Action Identification research has demonstrated that the thoughts and actions of low-level agents are more easily influenced by contextual factors than those of their high-level counterparts (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Indeed, this tendency was also evident in the asymmetries that emerged in Experiment 2, in which low-level agents were more strongly affected by the experimental manipulations than were high-level agents. When these previous findings are considered in conjunction with the very real possibility that the low-level agents in the current experiment may have been more prone to committing impulsive, deviant acts than their high-level peers (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), the fact that the high construal manipulation had such a positive influence on low-level agents seems less surprising.

That low-level agents were apparently uninfluenced by the low construal manipulation is somewhat more difficult to explain. However, this non-effect may be attributable to at least two factors. First, the low-level agents in the current sample may have already been accustomed to thinking of their goals (and of their lives in general) in relatively concrete terms (i.e., these participants may have exemplified the type of student that regularly parses each of their projects into a series of specific steps before tackling them). As such, it may have been difficult to influence them to construe their goals in even more detailed, means-oriented ways. Furthermore, low-level agents may have been relatively likely to behave dishonestly in the first place. Although a main effect of personal agency did not emerge in my initial analyses of the passive cheating index, an
informal chi-square analysis assessing the effects of personal agency on passive cheating in the control condition did lend some support to this possibility. Specifically, participants whose scores in the passive cheating index fell above the median tended to be low-level agents, while participants whose scores on the index fell below the median tended to be high-level agents. Given these two tendencies of low-level agents, it may have been challenging to produce a significant increase in the degree to which they cheated during the experimental task.

As mentioned previously, neither experimentally-induced changes in construal level or stable variations in personal agency appeared to affect the tendency to engage in active cheating. This may be largely attributable to the fact that the incidence of active cheating was comparatively low. Indeed, only 25% of the participants who recorded their responses to the mathematical task on a sheet of paper engaged in active cheating at all, and in most of these cases the individual had only changed one of their answers. The discrepancy between the amounts of passive and active cheating that participants engaged in was not entirely unexpected, as it would presumably be easier for students to cheat by simply doing nothing (i.e., failing to hit the space bar quickly enough to avoid seeing the correct responses pop up on the screen) than by actively recording an answer that they had not solved themselves on paper. Furthermore, participants would likely find this form of cheating easier to rationalize than a more active variation (von Hippel, Lakin, & Shakarchi, 2005), and would feel less culpable (as people tend to experience less of a sense of responsibility for their failures to act than for their actions; Gilovich, Medvec, & Chen, 1995).
As is often the case with psychological studies that entail deception (and extensive involvement on the part of the experimenter), participants’ suspicions about the true purpose of Experiment 3 merit some discussion. While approximately half of the sample correctly ascertained that its’ purpose was related to cheating, there are several reasons to feel optimistic about the validity of the results that did emerge. First off, while a third of the sample expressed some suspicions or confusion about the malfunction that occurred during the computerized task, such thoughts appeared to be entirely unrelated to their tendency to cheat. Second (and more importantly), only one participant suspected that the construal manipulation might be anything other than a pilot test for a separate study, and this individual was unable to explain how it might relate to subsequent parts of the experiment. As such, it seems unlikely that the two-way interaction that I obtained when I assessed the index of passive cheating was attributable to participants’ levels of suspiciousness. Finally, if participants’ suspicions about the purpose of the experiment had influenced my results in any manner, they would presumably have done so by decreasing the incidence of cheating (and thereby compromising the likelihood of obtaining any results whatsoever). Given the high incidence of passive cheating that participants engaged in (indeed, approximately 92% of the current sample indulged in the latter form of dishonest behaviour), this does not seem to have occurred.

Another possible limitation of Experiment 3 pertains to the nature of the construal manipulation that was employed. Specifically, the means by which the high construal manipulation reduced the incidence of passive cheating among low-level agents is not entirely clear. On the one hand, it is possible that the high construal manipulation actually did prompt low-level agents to construe their situation in high-level terms –
thereby making the moral connotations of their actions more salient to them. However, it is also possible that prompting these individuals to consider the implications of their life goals reminded them of the type of people that they were striving to be (presumably upstanding and honest), and put their performance on the mathematical task into perspective (thereby undermining their motivation to do exceptionally well). If this were the case, using another construal manipulation may not have yielded the same pattern of results. This possibility remains open for further investigation.

In sum, although the original hypotheses associated with Experiment 3 were not supported, this study offers encouraging evidence that students who habitually construe events and actions in concrete, means-oriented terms can be compelled to behave more honestly if they are prompted to adopt a high-level construal of their behaviour. Assuming that these results are generalizeable to more conventional evaluative settings, they also provide valuable insight into how stable and transient variations in construal level might interact to influence students’ tendencies to cheat (or to refrain from doing so).
Chapter 5

General Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

The current set of experiments identified several factors that may influence peoples’ perceptions of common moral violations and that also appear to affect their own inclinations to engage in immoral behaviour. Experiment 1 demonstrated that some of the effects stemming from the existing literature on morality and taboo trade-offs (which generally gauge peoples’ responses to relative extreme violations) are readily generalizeable to more common transgressions. Specifically, the degree to which a hypothetical student contemplated his/her decision to plagiarize an assignment had a significant impact on participants’ evaluations of his/her behaviour and character. Participants tended to evaluate the student more harshly when they were led to believe that he/she had found his/her decision difficult than when they were led to believe that he/she had cheated blithely, without a lot of forethought.

The subsequent experiment extended this program of research by examining the way in which participants’ perceptions of moral transgressions might be affected by two factors (construal level and personal agency) that influence the degree to which individuals are aware of the situational constraints faced by other people, as well as the moral implications of their actions. This experiment revealed that transient changes in construal level interacted with stable levels of personal agency to affect participants’ ability to relate to a transgressor and their evaluations of his/her character. Moreover, it demonstrated that under certain circumstances, inducing individuals to construe another
person’s behaviour in low-level terms may produce effects that are very similar to those of a conventional empathy induction manipulation.

The final experiment investigated the degree to which construal level and personal agency influence peoples’ tendencies to engage in immoral behaviour (in the form of cheating) themselves when presented with the opportunity to do so. A two-way interaction emerged, which indicated that low-level agents who were primed to adopt a high-level construal were less likely to engage in immoral behaviour than their low-level peers in both the control and low construal conditions.

The current set of experiments assessed phenomena that are associated with several distinct research traditions and thus adds to our understanding of each one. First off, unlike much of the existing morality research (in which individuals have generally been asked to evaluate atypical situations and behaviours) these experiments required students to evaluate a form of immoral behaviour that they have likely witnessed (or perhaps even engaged in) over the course of their academic careers. As such, these experiments demonstrated that some of the findings derived from the existing literature on morality and trade-offs are generalizeable to relatively familiar contexts and moral violations. These experiments also make an important contribution to the literature on plagiarism in that they constitute one of the few programs of research that systematically investigate factors that influence peoples’ perceptions of students who engage in academic dishonesty. Although a substantial amount of descriptive research on this topic exists, relatively little empirical work has been done.

Moreover, my thesis research constitutes a substantial contribution to the CLT literature. Several recently published papers have documented the effects of construal
level on peoples’ judgments of moral transgressions (Eyal et al., 2008), as well as the extent to which individuals’ values influence their behavioural intentions (Eyal et al., 2009; Sagristano, 2005). Furthermore, other work by Fujita and his colleagues (2006) has assessed the way in which construal level affects peoples’ efforts to resist temptation and their perseverance at a difficult task. However, to my knowledge, the current program of research constitutes the first attempt to determine whether experimentally induced changes in construal level affect the degree to which people engage in a form of immoral behaviour (namely cheating). As such, these experiments contribute to the literature on CLT and morality by moving beyond the assessment of peoples’ behavioural intentions and morally neutral actions and actually examining the ways in which construal level influences their proclivity to behave immorally.

**Are High-level Construals Always Associated with Positive Outcomes?**

An implicit assumption underlying the current program of research (and much of the existing literature on CLT and personal agency) is that perceiving the elements of one’s social world in high-level terms is generally preferable to perceiving them in low-level terms. While it is certainly true that high-level construals are often associated with an increased awareness of the moral underpinnings of a situation (Eyal et al., 2009), several recently published studies have suggested that “seeing the big picture” may not always contribute to highly desirable thoughts or behaviours.

In the relatively neutral domain of personal work habits, for example, thinking of the over-arching goals associated with one’s work rather than focusing on the specific steps involved in its completion may undermine a peoples’ sense of motivation and cause them to procrastinate (Houser-Marko & Sheldon, 2008; Liberman, Trope, McCrea, &
Furthermore, individuals who generate high-level construals of their goals may be good at “thinking outside the box” (Förster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004), but may not be realistic about tackling the logistics associated with the work that they have to do (Smith & Trope, 2006). Taken together, these findings suggest that people who perpetually generate high-level construals in the work-a-day world may come across as clever, creative and idealistic, but may be ill-equipped to identify and address the feasibility concerns associated with completing their projects (Förster et al., 2004; Smith & Trope, 2006).

The potential drawbacks associated with construing the various components of one’s social world in high-level terms may extend to the moral realm, as well. For instance, a sizeable portion of the CLT and Action Identification literature suggests that individuals who are inclined to generate high-level construals (due to high levels of personal agency or high-powered roles, for instance) may be more likely to evaluate other people on the basis of stereotypes (Levy et al., 2002; Liberman et al., 2002; Smith & Trope, 2006), a tendency which could make them more prone to engaging in various forms of discriminatory behaviour. At a more general level, it is worth noting that the degree to which construing a situation in high-level terms elicits positive behaviour may depend heavily on a person’s goals and values (Eyal, Liberman, Sagristano & Trope, 2009). In instances where those goals and values are honourable in nature, high-level construals will likely contribute to moral conduct. However, in instances where people’s goals and values are morally questionable, prompting them to adopt a high-level

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20 These results compliment findings from the Mindset Theory literature, which suggest that implementation intentions (i.e., intentions pertaining to the means associated with pursuing a goal) are more strongly predictive of goal completion than abstract, general intentions (Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997)
construal of their actions may do little to elicit stellar behaviour (Eyal et al., 2009). In the context of the current program of research, it would be interesting to determine whether the pattern of results in Experiment 3 is further moderated by the extent to which individuals actually value honesty and integrity (cf., Eyal et al., 2009; Sagristano, 2005). Namely, high-level construals may lower the incidence of cheating among students who basically view themselves as honest, but may be relatively ineffective among students who place little importance on this value.

In sum, additional research aimed at delineating the circumstances under which prompting individuals to generate high-level construals may elicit undesirable or maladaptive behaviour would help to establish a more even-handed understanding of the association between construal level and morality.

**Implications and Further Directions for Future Research**

The results of the current set of experiments add to our understanding of morality, and also have direct implications for the high incidence of cheating at post-secondary institutions. One could reasonably assume that the motivated and intelligent low-level agents who took part in Experiments 2 and 3 bore little resemblance to some of the low-level agents in Vallacher and Wegner’s (1989) early samples (these researchers often administered their scale to groups of delinquents). Even so, these task-oriented individuals clearly preferred to think of their actions in means-oriented vs. ends-oriented terms – a tendency which, without intervention, may normally have left them more susceptible to the temptation to cheat.

Fortunately, however, the level at which people construe their social world is highly malleable in nature (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Indeed, as the results of
Experiment 3 suggest, prompting low-level agents in an academic setting to continually consider the utility of their current actions in terms of their over-arching goals may reduce their inclination to behave dishonestly – and similar options for inducing individuals to generate high-level construals have been suggested by previous researchers, as well (cf., Trope & Liberman, 2003; Trope & Fishbach, 2000).21

One possible avenue for future research would be to determine how very subtle variations in the environment influence students’ susceptibility to the temptation to cheat, given that they can sometimes have a substantial impact on how individuals construe the events around them. For instance, a recently published program of research by Meyers-Levy and Zhu (2007) demonstrated that ceiling height can have a discernable impact on how individuals construe and process information. Namely, lofty ceilings appear to induce people to generate high-level construals and subsequently facilitate relational processing. Low ceilings, on the other hand, induce people to generate low-level construals and appear to facilitate item-specific, concrete processing (Meyers-Levy & Zhu, 2007). Given that we know from the current set of experiments that inducing individuals to generate high-level construals reduces the incidence of cheating (at least among low-level agents), how might we utilize such findings to lessen the tendency to cheat during exam time? Might lecture theatres with high ceilings encourage more honest behaviour than classrooms with low ones? Only subsequent research will tell for

21 Of course, one would also have to consider the effects of such interventions on students’ sense of motivation, as previous research has suggested that inducing individuals to focus on high-level goals may contribute to flagging motivation (Houser-Marko & Sheldon, 2008).
certain, but in the meantime it may be worth lobbying the exams office to schedule one’s final in a larger room.\footnote{On a related note, one might wonder whether the sense of transcendence that people experience when they enter a cathedral (or a similar place of worship) is at least partially attributable to factors such as ceiling height.}

Delineating the exact means by which the construal manipulation in Experiment 3 reduced cheating behaviour among low-level agents also constitutes a worthwhile goal for future research. For instance, Freitas, Salovey, and Liberman (2001) have found that inducing individuals to generate high-level construals before an evaluative task increases their interest in accurate self-relevant feedback, and that inducing them to generate low-level construals beforehand increases their interest in flattering self-relevant feedback. As such, one might question whether low-level agents who were prompted to adopt a high-level construal were less inclined to cheat because the value of honesty was made salient to them (cf., Eyal et al., 2009) or because they wished to obtain accurate feedback about their skills and abilities (Freitas et al., 2001). Obviously, these two possible determinants of honest behaviour among low level agents are not mutually exclusive. However, it would be interesting to test the relative strength of each one by assessing the degree to which individuals valued both honesty and self-knowledge before recruiting them for a study similar to Experiment 3, and then determining which value was more predictive of reduced cheating among individuals in the high construal condition (cf., Sagristano, 2005; Eyal et al., 2009).

On a related note, the high construal manipulation that was employed in Experiment 3 may have reduced cheating among low-level agents by directly activating their self-standards instead of inducing them to generate broad, high-level construals. Specifically, by prompting participants to think about the reasons behind their personal...
goals, I may have succeeded only in activated thoughts about their ideal selves (cf., Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). Thus, the two-way interaction in Experiment 3 may reflect an attempt by low-level agents in the high construal condition to meet the standards associated with their ideal selves and avoid the feelings of dejection and guilt that typically accompany actual-ideal self-discrepancies (Higgins et al., 1997; Eastburg, Johnson, Woo, & Lucy, 1988) without a change in construal level being a mediating factor. 23 If this were the case, another type of construal manipulation that was less self-focused (e.g., having participants group common objects into superordinate categories; Fujita et al., 2006) may not have been as effective in reducing cheating. While this possibility cannot be completely negated by the current program of research, some recently published findings in the CLT literature suggest that the different methods of manipulating construal tend to be interrelated (Bar-Anan, Liberman, & Trope, 2007; Liberman, Trope, McCrea, & Sherman, 2007), and that some of the less personalized manipulations of construal level (e.g., traditional temporal construal manipulations) also activate the ideal self (Kivetz & Tyler, 2007; Rogers and Bazerman, 2008). Based on these findings, it seems likely that another type of construal manipulation would have produced a similar pattern of results. Even so, a conceptual replication using a less personal manipulation of construal level would provide additional support for the findings obtained in Experiment 3.

It would also be interesting to determine whether the results of Experiments 1 and 2 would be replicated in a more naturalistic setting. The fact that these experiments are scenario-based could be construed as either an asset or a weakness. On the one hand, the

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23 In fact, previous research has indicated that the greater the salience of an individual’s ideal self, the less inclined the person is to cheat (Wojciszke, 1987).
participants in these experiments were entirely unaffected by the moral violations that they read about, which enabled them to make “pure” moral judgments and character evaluations that were unhindered by self-interest. Given that the majority of the moral judgments that we render in real life pertain to situations that have little (if any) impact on our own well-being, one could convincingly argue that the judgments that participants in Experiments 1 and 2 made are reasonable approximations of the types of moral judgments that people make on a daily basis. On the other hand, critics of scenario-based research might argue that these two experiments are devoid of the visceral “punch” that real life frequently delivers. Admittedly, there are situations in which the consequences of academic dishonesty negatively affect students who refrain from engaging in such behaviour (e.g., instances in which students are competing for a limited number of spots in a highly competitive program). As such, a true-to-life study design in which a confederate cheats on a competitive task in a way that puts participants at a disadvantage would be an interesting complement to the existing program of research.

Finally, it would be worth investigating whether variations in construal level influence peoples’ propensity to engage in other forms of immorality in a similar manner. Although the effects of construal on stereotype usage and cheating have been assessed, countless other forms of immoral thoughts and behaviours exist. As noted earlier, newly published research by Plaks and his colleagues (2009) has shown that when individuals construe a misdemeanour in low-level terms their judgments of guilt are more heavily influenced by the presence or absence of proximal intent (i.e., the degree to which people exercise conscious control over the means associated with their crime). However, when they construe a misdemeanour in high-level terms, their judgments are more heavily
influenced by the presence or absence of distal intent (i.e., the degree to which people were focused on the goal associated with the misdeed). Clearly, then, individuals who construe situations in low-level terms are relatively more focused on the means of a transgression, while individuals who construe them in high-level terms are more focused on the ends (Plaks et al., 2009). But how would the judgments of these two groups of people be affected by a discrepancy in the desirability of the means and ends associated with an action? Could high-level construals be related to the tendency to turn a blind eye to unsavoury means as long as the ends are justified (e.g., stealing in order to feed one’s family)? Similarly, could such construals predict the denigration of do-gooders if their ultimate goals are suspected to be selfish (e.g., politicians who support charitable causes and events in order to promote their campaigns)? In keeping with other construal researchers (e.g., Eyal et al., 2009), I originally hypothesized that an enhanced awareness of the mitigating circumstances associated with a moral infraction would be the exclusive by-product of low-level construals. However, the relationship between construal level and a heightened sensitivity to mitigating circumstances might depend rather heavily on the nature of the transgression (and on the mitigating circumstances themselves). Such questions are currently unanswered and await further research.

In closing, the current program of research demonstrated that some of the findings in the morality literature associated with relatively uncommon violations and trade-offs generalize to peoples’ perceptions of common moral transgressions (Experiment 1). In this set of studies, I also demonstrated that stable and transient variations in construal level may interact to influence peoples’ perceptions of individuals who engage in immoral behaviour (namely academic dishonesty, Experiment 2). Finally, I obtained
promising evidence that inducing certain individuals to generate high-level construals may reduce their tendency to behave dishonestly during an evaluative task – thereby definitively showing that changes in construal level affect moral behaviour as well as moral intentions. My hope is that this research will act as a springboard for future investigations on how changes in construal level can reduce the prevalence of immoral behaviour and prompt people to live up to their highest ideals.
References


http://icf.som.yale.edu/pdf/behavconf05papers


Appendix A: Experiment 1 Ethics Materials

Letter of Information
“Perceptions of Others”
Researchers: Anna Ebel-Lam (graduate student), Dr. Tara MacDonald (professor)
Department of Psychology, Queen’s University

The purpose of this study is to assess the way in which people think about decisions in their lives.

This study will take approximately 5-10 minutes of your time, and will involve reading about (and evaluating) another person’s behaviour. The risks associated with this study are minimal. In exchange for your participation, you will earn 0.5 credits toward your final grade in Psychology 100, or $5.00 if you are not enrolled in Psychology 100.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any point of time without penalty, and you may also choose not to respond to any questions that you find objectionable. Should you withdraw during the study, you will still be compensated for your time, and any data that you have provided will be destroyed. If you choose to withdraw your data after the study is complete, we will still remove your data (which will not be associated with your name, but that will be labelled with a subject number that has been assigned to you) from our data set, and destroy all hard copies of your responses.

All of the data collected over the course of this study will be kept confidential. Completed questionnaires will be kept in a secure laboratory, and only the primary researcher (Anna Ebel-Lam) and her supervisor (Dr. Tara MacDonald) will have access to it. The data will be destroyed 7 years after publication in accordance with the standards of the American Psychological Association. The results of this study will only be presented or published in aggregate form.

This project has been approved through the Queen’s Research Ethics Board. If you have any comments or questions about your participation in this study, please contact the Head of the Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, at 613-533-2492, or the GREB chair at 613-533-6081 (or chair.greb@queensu.ca). You may also contact the researcher, Anna Ebel-Lam, at 1ape@qlink.queensu.ca or her supervisor, Dr. Tara MacDonald at tmacdon@psyc.queensu.ca or at 613-533-2873.
Experiment 1 Consent Form
“Perceptions of Others”

I, __________________________, hereby state that I have volunteered to participate in a study that was designed to assess the way in which people think about decisions. I understand that the study will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete, and that it will involve reading about (and evaluating) another person’s behaviour. I also understand that I’ll receive 0.5 percent toward my final grade in Psychology 100 in exchange for my participation, or $5.00 if I am not enrolled in Psychology 100.

By signing below, I indicate that I understand the nature of the study, and consent to participate voluntarily as a research participant. I understand that I am free to discontinue participant in this study at any time. I also understand that my responses to the items will remain anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, I understand that all questionnaires will be kept in a secure laboratory and only authorized researchers will have access to the data.

I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction. I am aware that I have a right to keep a copy of this consent form, should I choose to do so.

I am aware that I can contact the researcher (Anna Ebel-Lam), her supervisor (Dr Tara MacDonald), the Head of the Department of Psychology at 533-2492, or the Queen’s General Research Ethics Board (533-6081) should I have any questions, complaints or comments about my participation in this study.

The general procedure of this study has been explained to me. I have read and understood the above statement. I freely consent to participate in this study.

Signature: __________________________

Date: __________________________
Experiment 1 Debriefing Form

At the outset of this study, we told you that its purpose was to assess our perceptions of other peoples’ behaviours. We only gave you a vague description of the study when you came in because we didn’t want to influence your responses in any way. In fact, we were interested in assessing different factors that affect individuals’ evaluations of other peoples’ means of resolving moral dilemmas.

To date, research assessing our evaluations of other peoples' methods of resolving moral dilemmas has produce some rather counter-intuitive findings. For instance, Philip Tetlock and his colleagues (2000) have found that when individuals who are faced with the opportunity to engage in immoral behaviour spend time deliberating about their decision before making the right choice, they are evaluated much more negatively by others than individuals who immediately choose to pursue the right course of action. The current study will build on this research by determining whether individual differences in self-regulatory focus might moderate this effect.

Self-regulatory focus pertains to whether individuals are more motivated to achieve positive outcomes (promotion-focused), or to avoid negative outcomes (prevention-focused; see Higgins, 2000). Based on previous research (Pennington & Roese, 2003; Forster & Higgins, 2005), suggesting that promotion-focused individuals may be more inclined to perceive situations in terms of their values while prevention-focused individuals may be more inclined to construe situations in terms of what makes certain courses of action more or less feasible, we reasoned that the effect that Tetlock et al. (2000) obtained would be strengthened in the prior group, and attenuated in the latter group.

If you would be interested in obtaining a copy of the results of this study, you may contact the primary researcher, Anna Ebel-Lam, at lape@qlink.queensu.ca. If you have a more general interest in this area of research, you may wish to consult the following reference:

Tetlock, P.E., Kristel, O.V., Elson, S.B., Green, M.C., & Lerner, J.S. (2000). The psychology of the unthinkable: Taboo trade-offs,

As stated earlier, your responses to the questionnaire items will be confidential. This project has been approved by the Queen’s Research Ethics Board. If you feel upset as a result of your participation, you may wish to contact Queen’s Counselling Services, at 613-533-2893. If you have any comments or questions about your participation in this study, please contact the Head of the Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, at 613-533-2492, the GREB chair at 613-533-6081 (or chair.greb@queensu.ca) or the Vice-Chair, Queen’s Research Ethics Board, at 613-533-6288. You may also contact the researcher, Anna Ebel-Lam, at lape@qlink.queensu.ca or her supervisor, Dr. Tara MacDonald at tmacdon@post.queensu.ca or at 613-533-2873.
Appendix B: Experiment 1 Manipulations and Dependent Measures

Immediate/Plagiarism

Janice, an undergraduate student at Queen’s University, has worked hard over the course of her academic career. Her parents do not support her financially, and Janice has had to hold down a variety of part-time jobs over the past several years in order to cover the costs of living expenses and tuition. Needless to say, all of her time is taken up with her academic pursuits or her part-time work. This past semester was especially demanding for Janice, and on several occasions, she barely managed to finish everything on time. Late one night, she was working on an essay for one of her classes, and she casually read over an essay that her housemate had written for the same course several years ago. It occurred to Janice that she could either spend hours writing the essay herself, or save time by incorporating her housemate’s ideas and writing into her paper. Janice sees her decision as an easy one, and is able to decide what to do quickly. She decides to plagiarize the essay that her housemate had written.

Delay/Plagiarism

Janice, an undergraduate student at Queen’s University, has worked hard over the course of her academic career. Her parents do not support her financially, and Janice has had to hold down a variety of part-time jobs over the past several years in order to cover the costs of living expenses and tuition. Needless to say, all of her time is taken up with her academic pursuits or her part-time work. This past semester was especially demanding for Janice, and on several occasions, she barely managed to finish everything on time. Late one night, she was working on an essay for one of her classes, and she casually read over an essay that her housemate had written for the same course several years ago. It occurred to Janice that she could either spend hours writing the essay herself, or save time by incorporating her housemate’s ideas and writing into her paper. Janice finds this decision very difficult, and is only able to make it after much time, thought, and contemplation. She finally decides to plagiarize the essay that her housemate had written.
Immediate/Honesty

Janice, an undergraduate student at Queen’s University, has worked hard over the course of her academic career. Her parents do not support her financially, and Janice has had to hold down a variety of part-time jobs over the past several years in order to cover the costs of living expenses and tuition. Needless to say, all of her time is taken up with her academic pursuits or her part-time work. This past semester was especially demanding for Janice, and on several occasions, she barely managed to finish everything on time. Late one night, she was working on an essay for one of her classes, and she casually read over an essay that her housemate had written for the same course several years ago. It occurred to Janice that she could either spend hours writing the essay herself, or save time by incorporating her housemate’s ideas and writing into her paper. Janice sees her decision as an easy one, and is able to decide what to do quickly. She decides not to plagiarize her housemate’s essay, and to only use her own ideas in her paper.

Delay/Honesty

Janice, an undergraduate student at Queen’s University, has worked hard over the course of her academic career. Her parents do not support her financially, and Janice has had to hold down a variety of part-time jobs over the past several years in order to cover the costs of living expenses and tuition. Needless to say, all of her time is taken up with her academic pursuits or her part-time work. This past semester was especially demanding for Janice, and on several occasions, she barely managed to finish everything on time. Late one night, she was working on an essay for one of her classes, and she casually read over an essay that her housemate had written for the same course several years ago. It occurred to Janice that she could either spend hours writing the essay herself, or save time by incorporating her housemate’s ideas and writing into her paper. Janice finds this decision very difficult, and is only able to make it after much time, thought and contemplation. She finally decides not to plagiarize her housemate’s essay, and to only use her own ideas in her paper.
Please evaluate this individual’s decision on the following dimensions:

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<tr>
<td>bad</td>
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<tr>
<td>moral</td>
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<tr>
<td>disgusting</td>
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Generally speaking, my overall impression of this person is:

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<tr>
<td>Very bad</td>
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To what extent is this person’s behaviour attributable to their character or their circumstance?

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entirely attributable to character</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>6</td>
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Please use the scale below to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

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<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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</table>

_____ Based on my understanding of the person in this scenario, I like her.

_____ Based on my understanding of the person in this scenario, I respect her.

_____ I can empathize with this person’s position.

_____ I can understand why this person thought and acted the way that she did.
I feel that this person is similar to me.

How forgivable is this person’s behaviour?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all forgivable
Entirely forgivable

Please estimate the percentage of people in the general population who would engage in behaviours that are similar to what this person did, given the situation: ______%.

Please list, in point form, any factors that might have influenced this person’s decision to behave the way that they did:

1.________________________________________________________________________
2.________________________________________________________________________
3.________________________________________________________________________
4.________________________________________________________________________
5.________________________________________________________________________
6.________________________________________________________________________
7.________________________________________________________________________
8.________________________________________________________________________

Please use the scale below to indicate the extent to which you see each of the following values as being personally important:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all important
Extremely important

1 _____ Responsibility (dependability/reliability)
2 _____ Self-discipline (restraint/resistance to temptation)
3 _____ Honesty (integrity)
4 _____ Reciprocation of Favors
5 _____ Respect for tradition
6 _____ Cleanliness

Please indicate how serious an offense you think plagiarism is, in general:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all serious
Very serious
In general, how negatively do you view people who plagiarize:

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<th>7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all negatively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very negatively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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## Appendix C: Behavioural Identification Form (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989)

Please indicate the way that you would naturally think of each action by circling one of the response items associated with it:

1. **Making a list**
   - a. getting organized
   - b. writing things down

2. **Reading**
   - a. following the lines of print
   - b. gaining knowledge

3. **Joining the army**
   - a. helping the nation’s defense
   - b. signing up

4. **Washing clothes**
   - a. removing odors from cloths
   - b. putting cloths in the machine

5. **Picking an apple**
   - a. getting something to eat
   - b. pulling an apple off the branch

6. **Chopping down a tree**
   - a. wielding an axe
   - b. getting firewood

7. **Measuring a room for carpeting**
   - a. getting ready to remodel
   - b. using a yardstick

8. **Cleaning the house**
   - a. showing one’s cleanliness
   - b. vacuuming the floor

9. **Painting a room**
   - a. applying brush strokes
   - b. making the room look fresh

10. **Paying the rent**
    - a. maintaining a place to live
    - b. writing a cheque

11. **Caring for houseplants**
    - a. watering plants
    - b. making a room look nice

12. **Locking a door**
    - a. putting a key in a lock
    - b. securing a house

13. **Voting**
    - a. Influencing a decision
    - b. marking a ballot
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Reason 1</th>
<th>Reason 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Climbing a tree</td>
<td>a. getting a good view</td>
<td>b. holding on to branches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Filling out a personality test</td>
<td>a. answering questions</td>
<td>b. revealing what you’re like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Toothbrushing</td>
<td>a. preventing tooth decay</td>
<td>b. moving a brush around in one’s mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Taking a test</td>
<td>a. answering questions</td>
<td>b. showing one’s knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Greeting someone</td>
<td>a. saying hello</td>
<td>b. showing friendliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Resisting temptation</td>
<td>a. saying “no.”</td>
<td>b. showing moral courage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Eating</td>
<td>a. getting nutrition</td>
<td>b. chewing and swallowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Growing a garden</td>
<td>a. planting seeds</td>
<td>b. getting fresh vegetables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Traveling by car</td>
<td>a. following a map</td>
<td>b. seeing the countryside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Having a cavity filled</td>
<td>a. protecting your teeth</td>
<td>b. going to the dentist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Talking to a child</td>
<td>a. teaching the child something</td>
<td>b. using simple words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Pushing a doorbell</td>
<td>a. moving a finger</td>
<td>b. seeing if someone’s home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Experiment 2 Ethics Materials

Experiment 2 Letter of Information

The purpose of this study is to assess individuals’ perceptions of other peoples’ behaviours.

This study will take approximately 30 minutes of your time, and will entail reading about another person’s behaviour, writing about your perceptions of the situation, and answering several questions about the person. You will also be asked to complete some personality inventories, and to complete a short, follow-up questionnaire via e-mail a day or two after the study takes place. In exchange for your participation, you will earn 0.5 credits toward your final grade in Psychology 100. If you already have your credits, or if you are not in Psychology 100, you will receive $5.00 instead.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any point of time without penalty, and you may also choose not to respond to any questions that you find objectionable. If you choose to withdraw from the study completely, any data that you have provided to us will be destroyed immediately.

All of the data collected over the course of this study will be kept confidential. Furthermore, your names will never be associated with your responses. Completed questionnaires will be kept in a secure laboratory, and will be destroyed after 7 years in accordance with the standards of the American Psychological Association. The results of this study will only be presented or published in aggregate form.

This project has been approved through the Queen’s Research Ethics Board. If you have any comments or questions about your participation in this study, please contact the Head of the Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, at 533-2492 or the Vice-chair of the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board, at 533-6288. You may also contact the researcher, Anna Ebel-Lam, at 1ape@qlink.queensu.ca or her supervisor, Dr. Tara MacDonald at tmacdon@psyc.queensu.ca or at 533-2873.
Experiment 2 Consent Form

I, __________________________, hereby state that I have volunteered to participate in a study that was designed to assess our perceptions of other peoples’ behaviour. I understand that the study will take approximately thirty minutes to complete, that I’ll be asked to read about another person’s behaviour, write about my perceptions of the situations, answer some questions about the person, fill out some personality measures, and complete a short, follow-up questionnaire via e-mail a day or two after participating in the study. I understand that I’ll receive 0.5 percent toward my final grade in Psychology 100, or $5.00, in exchange for my participation.

By signing below, I indicate that I understand the nature of the study, and consent to participate voluntarily as a research participant. I understand that I am free to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and that if I choose to do so, my data will be destroyed. I also understand that my responses to the items will remain anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, I understand that all questionnaires will be kept in a secure laboratory and only authorized researchers will have access to the data.

I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I am aware that I can contact the researcher (Anna Ebel-Lam), her supervisor (Dr Tara MacDonald), the Head of the Department of Psychology at 533-2492, or the Queen’s General Research Ethics Board (533-6081) should I have any questions, complaints or comments about my participation in this study.

The general procedure of this study has been explained to me. I have read and understood the above statement. I freely consent to participate in this study.

Signature: __________________________

Date: __________________________
Experiment 2
Debriefing
At the outset of this study, we told you that its purpose was to assess our perceptions of other peoples’ behaviours. We only gave you a vague description of the study when you came in, because we didn’t want to influence your responses in any way. In fact, we are interested in assessing different factors that influence the way that individuals respond to other peoples’ moral transgressions. In the current study, we were investigating whether individual differences in self-regulatory focus, empathy, and construal level influence our perceptions of other peoples’ transgressions. According to Construal Level Theory (CLT; Liberman & Trope, 1998), the way in which we construe an event depends on its’ immediacy. Namely, we tend to think of less immediate events very broadly, in terms of their central features (i.e., we focus on the events’ high-level attributes). However, when we consider events that are more immediate, we focus more heavily on their peripheral features (i.e., their low-level attributes). Liberman & Trope (1998) have speculated that the abstract moral principles associated with a situation constitute high-level attributes, while the feasibility concerns associated with a given course of action constitute low-level attributes. Furthermore, previous research has suggested that people perceive immoral behaviours to be less repugnant when they focus on the low-level attributes of the behaviour in question (Eyal et al., 2006), and that inducing people to experience empathy for the perpetrator of a crime causes them to endorse more lenient punishments than their peers (e.g., Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000). Our specific goal was to determine whether having participants generate low-level, detailed descriptions of crime-related situation would produce effects that were similar to a traditional empathy induction manipulation. As such, all of the participants in the current study read about a moral transgression. Afterwards, we had some participants generate a high-level construal of the situation (i.e., they described it in terms of its’ central, abstract features), some participants generate a low-level construal of the situation (i.e., they described it in terms of its’ concrete, detailed features), and some participants generated an empathy-based construal of the situation (i.e., they described the situation from the perpetrator’s perspective). A fourth group of participants served as a control, and did not undergo any type of construal manipulation. Afterwards, all participants answered the same questions about their perceptions of the perpetrator, and the behaviour that the individual had engaged in. We expected that individuals in the high-level construal condition would express harsher views about the transgressor and his or her behaviour than their peers in the low-level and empathy-based construal conditions. We were also interested on the effects of self-regulatory focus on peoples’ perceptions of moral transgressions. Self-regulatory focus pertains to whether individuals are more motivated to achieve positive outcomes (promotion-focused), or to avoid negative outcomes (prevention-focused; see Higgins, 2000). Based on previous research (Pennington & Roese, 2003; Forster & Higgins, 2005), we reasoned that independent of the construal manipulation, promotion-focused individuals might be more inclined to frame moral transgressions in terms of high-level moral principles (and would therefore be less sympathetic toward the perpetrator), while prevention-focused individuals might be more inclined to frame transgressions in terms of low-level feasibility concerns (and would therefore be more sympathetic toward the perpetrator). If you would be interested in obtaining a copy of the results of this study, you many contact the primary researcher, Anna Ebel-Lam, at lape@queensu.ca. If you have a more general interest in this area of research, you may wish to consult the following reference:


As stated earlier, your responses to the questionnaire items will be confidential and anonymous. This project has been approved by the Queen’s Research Ethics Board. If you feel upset as a result of your participation, you may wish to contact Queen’s Counselling Services, at 533-2893. If you have any comments or questions about your participation in this study, please contact the Head of the Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, at 533-2492 or the Chair, Queen’s General Research Ethics Board, at 533-6081 (or greb@queensu.ca). You may also contact the supervisor of this project, Dr. Tara MacDonald at tmacdon@psyc.queensu.ca or at 533-2873. Please do not tell anyone about the purpose of this study. It is very important that other participants are not aware of the full purpose of the study before they participate, so please honour our confidentiality. Thank you for your participation!
Appendix E: Experiment 2 Manipulations and Dependent Measures

Low Construal Manipulation

As you read about the following situation, please imagine vividly how this situation would occur. Think fully about the **CONCRETE, PHYSICAL** details of the event, such as the PHYSICAL SENSATIONS one would experience, and what one would SEE, HEAR and FEEL.
Low Construal Manipulation – cont’d

Please take a minute or two to imagine vividly how this particular event occurred. Think fully about the concrete details of this event, *envisioning as many physical aspects of the event as you can, such as the sights, sounds, smells and physical sensations that one would experience.* Use the space below to write a detailed description of how this event would have unfolded. Try to make your description as detailed and concrete as possible:

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High Construal Manipulation

As you read about the following situation, please think about how you would summarize the focal event that took place in a single sentence (e.g., think about the central principles involved)
High Construal Manipulation – cont’d

Please take a minute or two to think about how you would summarize the focal event that took place in a *single sentence* (e.g., think about the central principles that are involved in this situation). Use the space below to write a description of these things:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
As you read about the following situation, please imagine what it would be like to be the person who is described. PUT YOURSELF IN HER SHOES, and think really hard about how you would be feeling in her situation. In your mind’s eye, try to see the situation FROM HER PERSPECTIVE.
Empathy Manipulation – cont’d

Please take a minute or two to imagine what it would be like to be this person. *Put yourself in her shoes.* Try hard to put yourself in this person’s place, and think really hard about how you would be feeling in her situation. In your mind’s eye, *try to see the situation from her perspective.* Use the space below to write a detailed description of these things. Try to make your description as detailed as possible:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

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________________________________________________________________________
Within the range of possible punishments for this type of transgression, how severe do you think this person’s punishment should be if she is caught?

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<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relatively severe</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Relatively light</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Imagine that this person has been accused of plagiarism, and that it is up to you to decide on the punishment. Which of the following consequences would you be most likely to endorse for the accused?

_____ Receiving a stern reprimand from the instructor
_____ Receiving a 10% deduction on the assignment
_____ Having to re-do the entire assignment
_____ Receiving a “0” on the assignment
_____ Being expelled from the class, and having to re-take it next year
_____ Receiving an automatic “F” in the class.
_____ Being suspended from Queen’s University for the remainder of the term
_____ Being suspended from Queen’s University for 1 year.
_____ Being expelled from Queen’s University
Based on your understanding of the person in this scenario, please evaluate their character on the following dimensions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Trait</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>irresponsible</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>bad</td>
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<tr>
<td>unprincipled</td>
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<td>strong</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>brave</td>
<td>cowardly</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>disciplined</td>
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</table>

**Generally speaking, my overall impression of this person is:**

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<tr>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very negative</td>
<td>Very positive</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**To what extent is this person’s behaviour attributable to their character?**

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<tr>
<th>1</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all attributable</td>
<td>Entirely attributable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**To what extent is this person’s behaviour attributable to their circumstances?**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all attributable</td>
<td>Entirely attributable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**How forgivable is this person’s behaviour?**

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<th>7</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all forgivable</td>
<td>Entirely forgivable</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How immoral is the behaviour that this person engaged in?**

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<th>3</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very immoral</td>
<td>Not all that immoral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Please use the scale below to indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

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<tr>
<th>1</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

____ Based on my understanding of the person in this scenario, I like her.

____ Based on my understanding of the person in this scenario, I respect her.

____ I can empathize with this person’s position.

____ I can understand why this person chose to behave the way that she did.

____ I feel that this person is similar to me.

Please use the scale below to indicate the extent to which you are experiencing the following feelings toward the person that you read about:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Very much</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

____ Sympathetic

____ Compassionate

____ Soft-hearted

____ Warm

____ Tender

____ Moved

Please estimate the percentage of people in the general population who would engage in behaviours that are similar to what this person did, given the situation:

________ %
Please list, in point form, any factors that might have influenced this person’s decision to behave the way that they did:

1.______________________________________________________________________
2.______________________________________________________________________
3.______________________________________________________________________
4.______________________________________________________________________
5.______________________________________________________________________
6.______________________________________________________________________
7.______________________________________________________________________
8.______________________________________________________________________
9.______________________________________________________________________
10._____________________________________________________________________

Now, please rate the importance of each of the factors that you listed in determining the person’s behaviour using the scale below. You may rate the importance of each factor you listed by recording a number from this scale beside each point that you listed above:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Important Extremely Important

Please use the scale below to indicate how much you support each of the following values, and see it as being personally important:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree
Not at all Important Extremely Important

1 _____ Responsibility (dependability/reliability)
2 _____ Self-discipline (restraint/resistance to temptation)
3 _____ Politeness (courtesy, good manners)
4 _____ Obedience (dutiful, meeting obligations)
5 _____ Reciprocal of favours
6 _____ Respect for tradition
7 _____ Honesty (integrity)
8 _____ Wealth (material possessions, money)
9 _____ Pleasure (gratification of desires)
10 _____ Cleanliness (neat, tidy)
Please indicate how serious an offence you think plagiarism is, in general:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all serious
Very serious

In general, how negatively do you view plagiarism:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all negatively
Very negatively

In general, how negatively do you view people who plagiarize:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all negatively
Very negatively
Appendix F: Experiment 3 Ethics Materials

Experiment 3 Letter of Information

The purpose of this study is to assess factors that influence peoples’ analytical abilities.

This study will take approximately 30 minutes of your time, and will entail sharing information about your goals and completing a computerized mathematical task. You will also be asked to complete some personality inventories. In exchange for your participation, you will earn 0.5 credits toward your final grade in Psychology 100. If you already have your credits, or if you are not in Psychology 100, you will receive $5.00 instead.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any point of time without penalty, and you may also choose not to respond to any questions that you find objectionable. If you choose to withdraw from the study completely, any data that you have provided to us will be destroyed immediately.

All of the data collected over the course of this study will be kept confidential. Furthermore, your names will never be associated with your responses. Completed questionnaires will be kept in a secure laboratory, and will be destroyed after 7 years in accordance with the standards of the American Psychological Association. The results of this study will only be presented or published in aggregate form.

This project has been approved through the Queen’s Research Ethics Board. If you have any comments or questions about your participation in this study, please contact the Head of the Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, at 533-2492 or the Vice-chair of the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board, at 533-6288. You may also contact the researcher, Anna Ebel-Lam, at taepe@qlink.queensu.ca or her supervisor, Dr. Tara MacDonald at tmacdon@psyc.queensu.ca or at 533-2873.
Experiment 3 Consent Form

I, ___________________, hereby state that I have volunteered to participate in a study that was designed to assess factors that influence students’ analytical abilities. I understand that the study will take approximately 30 minutes to complete, and that I’ll be asked to share some information about my goals and take part in a mathematical task. I understand that I’ll earn 0.5 percent toward my final grade in Psychology 100, or $5.00.

By signing below, I indicate that I understand the nature of the study and consent to participate voluntarily as a research participant. I understand that I am free to discontinue participation in this study at any time, and that if I choose to do so, my data will be destroyed. I also understand that my responses to the items will remain anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, I understand that all questionnaires will be kept in a secure laboratory and only authorized researchers will have access to the data.

I have read the Letter of Information and have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I am aware that I can contact the researcher (Anna Ebel-Lam), her advisor (Dr. Tara MacDonald), the Head of the Department of Psychology at 533-2492, or the Queen’s General Research Ethics Board (533-6081) should I have any questions, complaints or comments about my participation in this study.

The general procedure of this study has been explained to me. I have read and understood the above statement. I freely consent to participate in this study.

Signature:  ________________________________

Date:  ________________________________
Experiment 3 Debriefing

This study does not pertain to students’ analytical skills. However, we could not tell this to you at the outset of the experiment because it might have affected the way you behaved in our study.

In the current study we were investigating whether individual differences in self-regulatory focus, as well as the way in which people are prompted to perceive a situation, affect their subsequent behaviour. According to the precepts of Construal Level Theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998) people may either generate a high-level construal of an event (by focusing on its abstract, central features) or a low-level construal of an event (by focusing on its concrete, peripheral features). Interestingly, recent research has indicated that the way in which we construe an event affects our subsequent ability to exercise self-control. Namely, individuals who were prompted to generate a low-level construal of an event exhibited less self-control and will-power during a subsequent experimental task than individuals who were prompted to generate a high-level construal of the event (Fujita et al., 2006). Our specific goals in the current study were two-fold. First, we wished to demonstrate that participants who were prompted to generate a low-level (as opposed to a high-level) construal would be more inclined to cheat during the subsequent mathematical task. Second, we wished to determine whether our hypothesized effects would be moderated by individual differences in self-regulatory focus, which pertains to the extent to which people motivated to achieve positive outcomes (promotion-focused), or to avoid negative outcomes (prevention-focused; see Higgins, 2000) Based on previous research (Pennington & Roese, 2003; Forster & Higgins, 2005), we reasoned that promotion-focused individuals might be more inclined to generate high-level construals (and would therefore be less likely to cheat), while prevention-focused individuals might be more inclined to generate low-level construals (and would therefore be more likely to cheat). To allow us to test these hypotheses, all of the participants in the current study described a goal in their lives. Some participants generated a high-level construal of the goal (i.e., they described it in terms of its’ central, abstract features), while other participants generated a low-level construal of the goal (i.e., they described it in terms of its’ concrete, detailed features). Another group of participants served as a control, and did not undergo any type of construal manipulation. Afterwards, all participants completed the mathematical task – during which they had several opportunities to cheat (e.g., by looking at the answer key when it appeared on the computer screen or by inflating their performance while marking their work).

As our main dependent variables centered on participants’ cheating behaviours, we want to re-emphasize that **your data will be kept completely confidential, and that your name will not be associated with your experimental performance.** Furthermore, we purposefully orchestrated a situation in which it would be exceptionally tempting for people to cheat. As such, we feel that cheating behaviour in the current study is likely not indicative of a person’s tendency to cheat under normal circumstances. If you would be interested in obtaining a copy of the results of this study, you may contact the primary researcher, Anna Ebel-Lam, at 1ape@qlink.queensu.ca. If you have a more general interest in this area of research, you may wish to consult the following reference:


This project has been approved by the Queen’s Research Ethics Board. If you feel upset as a result of your participation, you may wish to contact Queen’s Counselling Services, at (613) 533-2893. If you have any comments or questions about your participation in this study, you may contact Dr. Tara MacDonald at tmacdon@post.queensu.ca or (613) 533-2873, the Head of the Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, at (613) 533-2492, or the Chair of the Queen’s University General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Steve Leighton, at (613) 533-6081. You may also contact the researcher, Anna Ebel-Lam, at 1ape@qlink.queensu.ca. **Please do not tell anyone about the purpose of this study.** Thank you for your participation!
Appendix G: Experiment 3 Manipulations and Dependent Measures

Mexico II Study – 2007
Experimenter Instructions

Prior to the study:

1. Log into the subject pool website at: http://psyc.queensu.ca/subpool/, and Yahoo Calendar.

2. To log into Yahoo Calendar, enter user id: StudyMexico, and password: g1w9y9m6. To log into the subject pool website, enter userid: 1ape and password: g1w9y9m6. **Note that it’s only necessary to log in to the subject pool website if one of the participants in the session is doing the study for credit. You can check this on Yahoo Calendar beforehand.**

3. Yahoo Calendar should indicate whether the participants who are attending your session plan to do the study for credit or for money. If the recruiter forgot to record this information, double-check with the participant before they arrive. Make a note of the participants’ subject numbers, as well.

4. Open up SD math task on computers. Once participants have arrived, compare their names to their subject numbers – and discreetly enter their subject numbers into the program. Wait until all participants arrive (or until 5 minutes after scheduled start time)

When participants arrive:

5. Seat participants at their respective computers. Have them read the LOI and consent form. Say the following:

“We are going to be completing a study assessing the way certain individual differences relate to their analytical abilities, which will involve the completion of a series of 15 math problems over the course of 5 minutes. Queen’s students typically respond to approximately 80 to 90% of the items correctly, so you shouldn’t really have a problem with this. In fact, it will be really surprising if you do have trouble. **If the participant is in an experimental condition:** You’ll also be doing a separate pilot-testing task both immediately before and after the main portion of the experiment. Any questions?”

“Okay, as you know, your data will be kept confidential, your responses won’t be shared with anybody else, and your consent forms and questionnaires will be stored separately.”

6. Administer Roese construal manipulation. Follow randomization sheet to assign participants to either the high construal or the low construal condition. Assign participants in every third session that you run to the control condition (i.e., these students will not receive this manipulation). Introduce the manipulation as part of a pilot-test that we are doing for another study about how university students approach their goals. Once all participants have finished, say:
“Okay – now we’ll start the mathematical task. This will consist of a series of equations that you’ll have to solve that involve adding and subtracting a set of numbers between 1 and 20. We’d like you to do this task in your head, without writing any computations down on paper.

Now, the program seems to have a couple of glitches that we’ve just discovered, and the departmental technician hasn’t had a chance to come and fix them yet. What’s happening, though, is that the answer for every math problem is popping up 1 second after the problem is presented. We don’t know why this is – but it seems that we can prevent this from happening by hitting the space bar immediately after the problem comes up. If you wouldn’t mind doing this when you’re working on the task, we’d really appreciate it – we can’t check to make sure that you’re doing this, though. Given that this is a fairly new program, I’m also going to get you to write your responses down on a looseleaf sheet of paper in addition to entering it into the computer – just so we definitely have a hard copy of your responses.” Give each participant a looseleaf sheet of paper.

“Now because we’re interested in your analytical abilities, at the end of 5 minutes, I’ll get you to share the strategies that you used to do this task, as well as your overall performance, and we’ll discuss it in terms of how it compares to what other people have done.”

7. Close door to individual rooms. Time participants, tell them when to start. At the end of 5 minutes, say:

“Shoot! These computers are networked – so your data should be showing up on my computer screen, as well. That’s not happening – which means that the entire system is freezing again. Okay, well fortunately, I got you to write your responses down on a piece of paper. Now I actually really have to go to the bathroom. I’m so sorry – but while I run out for a minute, would you mind just evaluating your own work?” Give participants the answer keys, and leave the lab for 2 minutes.

8. Administer questionnaire packet.

******************************************************************************

If participant is doing the study for all full credit, administer proportionality study, if they are doing the study for payment, skip to step # 11 :

9. Give participants information sheet and consent form for proportionality study. If participant has been assigned to the cognitive load condition, tell participants that the next study is about multi-tasking, and that they will need to memorize a 9-digit number while they complete another experimental task. Emphasize that they shouldn’t write the number down anywhere, but that they should just rehearse it in their head. Give participant sheet with number for about 10-15 seconds, then remove the sheet and give them the presidential assassination scenario. If the participant has been assigned to the control condition, simply give them the presidential assassination scenario.

10. If participants have been assigned to the cognitive load condition – give them the recall questionnaire.
11. After this – give them the final post-experimental questionnaire for the computer-based study.

12. Debrief participants for both studies. Emphasize that they should let you know if they have any questions/concerns. Refer ones with additional questions to my e-mail address.

13. Pay participants, or assign them credit.

14. If participants didn’t finish the computer-based portion of the behavioural study – go through program and enter “999” for each subsequent answer. Do not press control/alt/delete – this closes the program down, but it also erases all of the participants’ previous responses.

Clip measures for each study together. Label all materials with subject number, and initial and date the packets. On first study packet, also record whether participant was run alone, or as part of a pair, the construal condition they were assigned to (low construal, high construal or control), and which computer they were at.
Low Construal Manipulation

Please think about a goal that is either related to your health status (e.g., exercising regularly, getting enough sleep) or to your life outside of university (e.g., starting a new hobby) that you have set for yourself recently, or that you might pursue in the near future. In a sentence, describe the goal below:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What kind of tasks are you performing (or planning to perform) to complete this goal?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What techniques are you using (or planning to use) in completing this goal?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What are the specific, concrete steps that you must follow in order to complete this goal?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
High Construal Manipulation

Please think about a goal that is either related to your health status (e.g., exercising regularly, getting enough sleep) or to your life outside of university (e.g., starting a new hobby) that you have set for yourself recently, or that you might pursue in the near future. In a sentence, describe the goal below:

________________________________________________________________________

Why do you want to achieve this goal?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What good can come out of achieving this goal?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

What does achieving this goal mean for your life?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Post-experimental Survey

Please indicate the extent to which each statement is true of you using the scale below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all true</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Completely true</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. _____ I was concerned about my performance on the mathematical task.
2. _____ I wanted to perform as well as I could on the mathematical task.
3. _____ I was concerned about sharing the details of my performance with the experimenter and the other participant.
4. _____ During the mathematical task, I was aware that I had opportunities to cheat.
5. _____ I considered cheating during the mathematical task.
6. _____ I was tempted to cheat during the mathematical task.

Does anything about this experimental session strike you as being unusual? Do you have any thoughts or comments about your participation so far? If so, please write them down:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Please respond to the questions on the back of this sheet.
Did it ever occur to you that we might be studying something that differs from what we told you at the outset of the experimental session?

_____ Yes  _____ No

If yes, what do you think we might be investigating?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Please explain what tipped you off.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________