Big Thoughts, Small Wants: The Impact of Mental Construal on Impulse Strength

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Abstract
The way people mentally represent objects and events influences self-control; high-level construals, made up of abstract, global features, assist self-control, while low-level construals, made up of concrete, proximal features, hinder self-control. Previous research has assumed that high-level construals enhance self-control by increasing the salience of long-term goals (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). However, self-control is determined by not only a person’s ability to override an impulse, but also the motivational force that compels the impulse (impulse strength). The current investigation examined how mental construal affects visceral and need states (e.g., hunger) that determine impulse strength and undermine self-control. It was predicted that high-level construals would diminish the subjective intensity of hunger states, while low-level construals would intensify these feelings. Overall results showed that construal level did not impact subjective hunger states, and subsequently impulse strength, however exploratory findings revealed a relationship between construal level, eating tendencies, and subjective hunger. For restricted eaters, a high-level construal (versus a low-level construal) led to greater subjective hunger. For normal eaters, a high-level construal attenuated feelings of hunger. These results were attributed to the high-level construal’s influence on mood state. The current research provides a more comprehensive account of how mental construal impacts self-control and emphasizes the important role of impulse strength in self-regulation.

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Subject
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Citation
Construal level theory (CLT) is a theory in social psychology that describes the relation between psychological distance and the extent to which people's thinking (e.g., about objects and events) is abstract or concrete. The general idea is that the more distant an object is from the individual, the more abstract it will be thought of, while the closer the object is, the more concretely it will be thought of. In CLT, psychological distance is defined on several dimensions—temporal, spatial, social and Construal and Distance. According to CLT, people typically have limited information about the concrete, readily observable features of objects and events that relate to distant locations, including the context in which they will be encountered and alternative means that might be used to carry out actions toward them. The research described to this point highlight findings that support this association in one direction: the impact of spatial distance on construal and concrete thinking. Social Psychology 2011; Vol. 42(3):165–173. © 2011 Hogrefe Publishing.