

CONSTRUAL LEVEL AND INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT RESPONSE

by

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### **Abstract**

The current study examined whether individuals who have been primed to think more abstractly would attempt to avoid conflict more often than those who have been primed to think more concretely. This hypothesis was tested by randomly assigning participants to either a high-level or low-level construal condition group. Participants in the high-level construal condition indicated why they complete tasks and those in the low-level construal condition indicated how they would complete tasks. Following the construal level manipulation, participants read three scenarios involving interpersonal conflict. Participants indicated which response to conflict they felt they would engage in. Participants then completed an agreeableness survey to see if personality type had an influence on response choice. Contrary to the hypothesis, there was no statistically significant difference in response choice between the two condition groups. Participants in both condition groups may have felt that one choice was more ideal than the other despite construal manipulation. These results may have indicated that responses to hypothetical scenarios are not an accurate assessment of real-life conflict resolution.

### **Construal Level and Interpersonal Conflict Response**

Interpersonal conflict can arise in many facets of life. Whether between an individual and their coworker, another driver on the road, or a close friend, it can be difficult to avoid situations that involve disagreements. The way an individual responds to conflict can lead to different consequences. In scenarios involving conflict with others, a person can decide to act on an impulsive decision or one that involves a great amount of consideration. In situations where one chooses to act beyond impulse, having a greater amount of self-control can make this choice easier. The way an individual perceives the abstractness or concreteness of situations influences that self-control. The shift from a quick response to a deliberate one that promotes security of the relationship is referred to as a transformation of motivation (Finkel & Campbell, 2001). Transformation of motivation is a concept that suggests that individuals progress from immediate self-interest to a more in-depth consideration of values to make a choice.

In close relationships, a person who is distressed may respond to their partner's negative behavior by reciprocating that negativity. In Gottman's (1998) review of marital behavior, it was found that couples experiencing unhappy marriages often responded to negative partner behavior in a similarly negative way. This may indicate an immediate desire to dish out what you have been given. Maintaining relationships can be difficult. People encounter differing opinions or perspectives that may force them to make a choice in how they will respond. Consider a scenario where a peer responds to attempts at conversation in a particularly moody and distant way. Immediately you might think to respond to your fellow student by being rude back. This thought may be implicit initially, but after further consideration of the long-term consequences of such a

response, you might remove yourself from the situation as a different approach. Specifically, an individual may weigh the options of mitigating conflict or engaging in it further.

In Sternberg and Dobson's (1987) research on the consistency of resolving conflict between their participants, they found that participants typically sought to mitigate conflict rather than provoke it as an ideal solution but did not actually carry out this behavior in actuality. Their research design consisted of three studies with the intention to investigate whether individuals show consistency between their actual response to conflict and their ideal response to conflict. The participants of this study consisted of Yale college students. Participants in the first study were instructed to describe the details of a recent conflict and how they attempted to resolve it. After providing this information, participants were made to rate, on a scale of one (low) to nine (high), the extent to which the provided methods of conflict resolution characterized the way they actually handled the conflict. The methods of conflict resolution included behaviors such as physical force, confrontational discussion, acceptance, separation, verbal force, wait and see, and third party, to name a few. Participants then indicated how, ideally; they would've resolved the conflicts they described earlier. They then were shown the same methods of conflict resolution that they rated prior regarding their real solutions to conflict. They were instructed to indicate the extent to which these methods align with how they wanted to respond to conflict ideally. The results of this study indicated that participants' real solutions to conflict involved more conflict intensifying behaviors, whereas their ideal solutions involved behaviors that would mitigate conflict.

With that desire to resolve conflict, this choice to behave in a way that they do not view as ideal but in hindsight seek to alleviate conflict could be due in part to the fact that an

individual may need access to higher amounts of self-control. Self-control might be necessary to mitigate rather than intensify conflict. An approach that attempts to mediate interpersonal disagreements can place an increasing amount of strain on the self. Finkel and Campbell (2001) analyzed this need for self-control when dealing with conflict in their study on self-control and accommodation in close-relationships. They hypothesized that individuals are less accommodating following potentially destructive partner behavior in situations where they possess low dispositional self-control or are temporarily experiencing self-regulatory strength depletion. Finkel and Campbell define accommodation as the desire to inhibit responses that might further conflict and choose to respond in a way that reduces conflict. Their study consisted of undergraduate women. These participants were instructed to complete Tangney and Baumeister's (2000) Self-Control Scale and Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, and Lipkus' (1991) Accommodation Scale. Items from the self-control scale included statements such as "I blurt out whatever is on my mind." and "I have a hard time breaking bad habits." Items from the accommodation scale included statements such as "When I'm upset with my partner, I sulk rather than confront the issue." and "When I'm angry at my partner, I threaten to break up." Finkel and Campbell (2001) found that participants who had higher dispositional self-control were more likely to engage in accommodative behavior in their romantic relationships, relative to individuals who possess low dispositional self-control.

When considering self-control as an influential component of interpersonal conflict response, it is important to note the past literature pertaining to how individuals can access higher levels of self-control. Firstly, construal level theory suggests that individuals may perceive, or construe, events or objects in either a high-level construal or a low-level construal.

Liberman and Trope (1998) discuss what construal level theory suggests. A high-level construal is focused on the abstract details and a low-level construal focuses more on the concrete details. For example, when a person might perceive a salad at high-level construal as something they would eat to maintain health. At the low-level an individual may focus on the vegetables that make up the salad itself. Fujita, Trope, Liberman & Levin-Sagi (2006) investigated whether construal level effects self-control. They looked at whether the activation of a high-level construal would lead to greater self-control compared to activation of a low-level construal. Their study consisted of six experiments testing that hypothesis. The participants of their first study were randomly assigned to either a high-level or low-level construal condition. Depending on assignment, they were made to complete a task where they would indicate why they would maintain health and the activities associated with it or how they would maintain health and the activities associated with it. This construal level manipulation was developed by Freitas, Gollwitzer & Trope (2004). More specifically, when an individual is made to explain *why* they complete an activity and then why they complete the activity they just described and so forth, it primes them to think more broadly and abstractly, characteristics associated with high-level construals. When an individual explains *how* they would complete activities and activities associated with what they described, it gets more specific and concrete, an association with low-level construals.

After completion of the construal manipulation, participants read scenarios involving a purchase of various items. Participants indicated how much money they would pay to have the item now vs. having the item in the future. For three out of the four items, participants in the low-level construal condition indicated that they would pay more to have the item immediately

compared to those in the high-level. This demonstrates that the immediate gratification of owning the item was less salient to participants in the high-level construal condition and the item was therefore less valuable. Their second study tested how construal level influences self-control using a different self-control measure. Participants in this study were instructed to hold a handgrip for as long as possible to provide a baseline measurement. After measurement of the duration of use of the handgrip, participants were randomly assigned to construal condition and were instructed to indicate why they maintain good relationships and the activities associated with it or how, depending on assignment. After they completed this activity, participants were told that the handgrip task could be used as a personality measure. The experimenter attached dummy electrodes to participants and they were told that this would need to be completed multiple times for a precise assessment. They were also told that the longer they held the handgrip the more accurate the personality information would be. The results of this study showed that participants who were primed to be in a high-level construal condition held the handgrip for longer after completing the construal task, compared to those in the low-level condition. This study is another example of how construal level can influence one's exertion of self-control.

Although past research shows that the amount of self-control one possesses affects how they respond to interpersonal conflict, another variable is at play. Graziano, Jensen-Campbell & Hair's (1996) study investigated how agreeableness influences how individuals perceive and react to interpersonal conflict. Their study had participants complete a personality assessment of agreeableness utilizing items from Goldberg's (1992) self-rating markers of the five-factor model of personality. Following the agreeableness scale, participants read interpersonal conflict scenarios and indicated how excellent or poor the 11 strategies of conflict resolution were for

each scenario. The researchers divided these strategies into three categories: power assertion, disengagement, and negotiation. They found that participants who were low in agreeableness rated power assertion tactics higher compared to those who were high in agreeableness. This study demonstrates that personality type, and more specifically agreeableness, has an impact on the methods individuals deem fit for interpersonal conflict resolution.

The current study attempts to connect the viewpoints found in past literature in regard to construal-level's influence on self-control and how that self-control affects the way individuals respond to interpersonal conflict. This study also aims to assess the influence of agreeableness on interpersonal conflict resolution. The current research hypothesizes that individuals who are manipulated to be in a high-level construal condition will respond to conflict in a way that mitigates it rather than accentuates compared to those in a low-level. We also predict that those who are high in agreeableness will lean towards avoiding conflict more often than those who are low in agreeableness despite construal condition.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

102 (78.4% White, 6.9% Hispanic or Latinx, 4.9% Asian, 3.4% Black or African American, 6.9% mixed race or other) participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. They were compensated with the prorated federal minimum wage for their time. Exclusion criteria included a requirement of an 18-year age minimum. There were originally 103 but one participant was omitted due to a failure to complete the manipulation. Participants were 62.6% male, 36.3% female, and 2.6% non-binary with a mean age of 38 years old.

### **Materials**



**Construal level manipulation.** This study manipulated construal level using the “why/how” task developed by Freitas, Gollwitzer & Trope (2004). It involves a diagram of vertically aligned boxes flowing upwards if in the high-level condition or flowing downwards if assigned to the low-level condition. There is an initial statement such as “Improve and maintain health” with the prompt “Why?” going upwards or “How?” going downwards. Participants explain why (in the high-level condition) or how (in the low-level condition) they would or want to complete that task at the first box. Moving upwards or downwards they indicate why or how they would complete the task they wrote and then do that again until all of the boxes are filled.

**Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Scale.** The interpersonal conflict scenarios involved in this study were created by the researcher. The scenarios describe various interpersonal conflicts that people encounter in everyday life. An example scenario is as follows, “You are going through a crisis and try to reach out to a close friend for aid. Your friend seemingly ignores these attempts as the hours go by. You see that your friend is active on social media. You see your friend in person the next day and they explain that they were busy and couldn’t be available to help.” Participants indicated, by use of a 7-point Likert scale, which response they would lean toward or choose. Some response choices included “I would tell my friend what was going on last night and how it was rude of them to ignore me,” and “I would not complain at all, happily noting that at least we are talking now.” Choice one involves a response that may potentially further or incite conflict and choice 7 involves no addressal of the behavior posed in the scenario. Participants can make the choice to either directly address conflict or not. Participants who lean towards the behavior in choice one exhibit a desire to engage in conflict and participants who lean towards the behavior in choice seven do not want to address conflict.

**Agreeableness Measure.** The agreeableness assessment was developed from Goldberg's (1992) self-rating markers of the five-factor model of personality. Participants read statements, some including "I am helpful and unselfish with others." and "I can be cold or distant," and were made to indicate the extent to which they disagreed or agreed, by the use of a 7-point Likert scale, with them as pertaining to their own personality. Statements like "I can be cold or distant." and "I tend to start arguments with others." were reverse coded.

### **Procedure**

Participants obtained access to the survey via an online link distributed through Amazon Mechanical Turk. After clicking the link, participants completed the survey via the online data collection platform, Qualtrics. First, participants were greeted with a message informing them that they will be completing a survey aiming to investigate one's response to interpersonal conflict. Participants then completed the demographics questionnaire. After providing demographics information, participants were randomly assigned to either a high-level construal condition or a low-level construal condition. Depending on the condition, participants viewed an example of the flowchart task (Freitas, Gollwitzer & Trope, 2004) that they would complete shortly. Participants then completed the task that they were shown an example of. This involved describing why or how they would complete various activities depending on written responses and condition assignment. All participants were given the same starting behavior, "improve and maintain good health." Those in the high-level construal condition were asked why they would improve and maintain good health. Participants in the low-level construal condition were asked how they would improve and maintain good health.

After completing the construal level manipulation, participants read scenarios involving interpersonal conflict with friends or peers. They indicated which response to the scenario presented would be most similar to how they would respond. These scenarios were created by the researcher as were the response choices. An example scenario is as follows, “You are going through a crisis and try to reach out to a close friend for aid. Your friend seemingly ignores these attempts as the hours go by. You see that your friend is active on social media. You see your friend in person the next day and they explain that they were busy and couldn’t be available to help.” Participants indicated, by use of a 7-point Likert scale, which response they would lean toward or choose. Some response choices included “I would tell my friend what was going on last night and how it was rude of them to ignore me,” and “I would not complain at all, happily noting that at least we are talking now.

Following the interpersonal scenario task, participants completed an agreeableness scale. Some responses to conflict included in the previous assessment involve a higher comfortability with confrontation. Participants indicated their level of agreement with various statements such as “I am helpful and unselfish to others” 1 (Disagree strongly) to 7 (Agree strongly) scale.

### **Results**

Overall, the whole sample had an average score of 4.00 on the conflict scenario responses and an average agreeableness score of 3.69. One independent t-test was conducted to test whether participants in the high-level construal condition leaned towards avoiding conflict more than those in the low-level construal condition. Contrary to prediction, there was no significant difference ( $t(100) = .39, p = .698, d = .07$ ) in conflict response choice between participants in the high-level condition ( $M = 4.31, SD = 1.15$ ) and participants in the low-level condition ( $M = 4.41,$

$SD = 1.30$ ). A second independent t-test was conducted to test whether participants in a specific condition may have been more inclined to avoid conflict due to a higher inclination towards the agreeable trait. Participants who had agreeableness averages between 4 and 7 ( $N = 36$ ) were placed in a subset category of high agreeableness and those under 4 ( $N = 66$ ) were placed in a low agreeableness category. Participants in the high agreeableness category ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) did not have a significant difference ( $t(100) = -.337$ ,  $p = .737$ ,  $d = -.07$ ) in conflict response choice compared to those who were low in agreeableness

### Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate whether construal level's influence on self-control would impact the responses to interpersonal conflict that participants deem appropriate. Although there was no significant difference between the two construal level conditions, there is more to explore within the topics. The initial hypothesis was that individuals who were primed to think abstractly, by the use of a construal level manipulation, would lean towards avoiding conflict more often than those primed to think concretely. Contrary to this hypothesis, the results did not show any impact of construal level on responses to interpersonal conflict. The past literature on self-control and construal does show that high-level construal leads to higher amounts of self-control compared to low-level construal. In the current study, self-control was assessed by the desire to disengage, rather than engage, in interpersonal conflict. The lack of effect in the current study may have to do with the fact that the interpersonal conflict scenarios were hypothetical. It may not have taken any self-control to choose an accommodating response to a situation that is not currently happening in one's life. The results also demonstrated that participants who were more agreeable did not differ in their responses to conflict regardless of construal condition. In

Sternberg and Dobson's (1987) study, they had participants write out their personal experience with conflict. This kind of measure allows for individuals to examine situations that are more applicable to their own lives. Perhaps if the current study had participants indicate the details of a time they experienced interpersonal conflict, and then choose from several resolution strategies to demonstrate how they would respond if they were experiencing that conflict right now, results would have demonstrated a significant effect of construal level on the type of resolution strategies people choose. In Finkel and Campbell's (2001) study, participants completed a self-control scale. They found that participants with higher amounts of self-reported self-control were more accommodating towards their partner after experiencing potentially destructive partner behavior. If a self-control assessment was distributed to participants in the current study before construal level manipulation, there would be a better indication of what the baseline level of self-control was for participants.

There were notable limitations involved with the current study. The current measure of self-control was assessed by what response to the conflict scenario participants chose. The scenarios involved hypothetical situations that may not have been applicable to their lives. A response choice to a conflict that one may have never experienced may not require any amount of self-control, unlike actually accommodating a partner during a real-life conflict. The responses to conflict involved two anchor choices - one choice that presents a response that may be deemed rude or unacceptable and another response where one does not address the behavior posed in the scenario at all. Perhaps participants do want to respond to conflict in constructive rather than impulsive ways but also do not align their own character with the behaviors posed in the anchor choices. The study needed to utilize a clearer assessment of self-control following the construal

level manipulation. Another important limitation to note is that individuals tend to stay away from anchor choices. Participants may have found more comfort staying in the middle of the two choices. There is also the influence of self-monitoring when participants complete surveys. There may be a choice that participants believe the researcher deems ideal as a behavior and gravitate towards that choice despite their own opinion.

Despite the described limitations, the current study is novel due to its attempt to investigate construal level and interpersonal conflict response. Although construal level manipulations influence self-control, they also may change the perspective of the individual who has been primed. Perhaps this change of perspective has the ability to influence what individuals deem necessary for achieving goals or whether they keep goals in mind. For example, an individual may have a long-term goal of experiencing a long healthy marriage. This goal may encourage them to engage in behaviors that promote the success of their current relationship. With past research showing that a high-level construal manipulation allows individuals to make choices that are in accordance with long-term goals compared to the short-term (Fujita et al, 2006), there can be more to investigate in regard to how construal changes can impact the behaviors we deem appropriate. More research on the variables that affect the way we treat our interpersonal connections is crucial when attempting to understand the factors that influence conflict resolution style.

The current study aimed to investigate whether participants in a high-level construal condition compared to those in a low-level construal condition would attempt to avoid conflict more often. This hypothesis grew out of previous literature expressing that high-level construal compared to a low-level construal promotes a greater amount of self-control. Individuals with

greater amounts of self-control choose more mitigating conflict resolution styles. This hypothesis was tested by the use of a construal level manipulation. After participants completed a construal level manipulation, they read three scenarios and indicated whether they would engage in conflict or avoid conflict. People who have traits like agreeableness tend to look for conflict resolution styles. Perhaps there is more investigation needed into understanding how personality type affects the way we engage in conflict. More specifically, whether personality type trumps certain self-control modifying efforts. Although there was no statistical significance within the study, more studies on construal level theory and interpersonal conflict resolution style can provide more information towards the factors that influence how individuals approach conflict in their everyday lives.

### References

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**Appendix A**  
**Informed Consent Form**

Name of Study: Construal-level and Interpersonal Accommodation

Researchers: Brazille Noel and Dr. Jessica Carnevale

Contacts: brazille.noel@purchase.edu (516-362-8793) jessica.carnevale@purchase.edu

**Purpose:** We would like permission to enroll you as a participant in a research study. This study investigates how individuals may respond to interpersonal conflict. You must be 18 or older to be eligible to participate in this study.

**Procedure:** In this experiment, an online survey will be provided. Demographic information will be asked. This includes age, race/ethnicity, gender. Once you have read and signed the informed consent form you will complete a cognitive task and will answer questions about yourself and how you would respond to hypothetical scenarios. and completed the demographics questionnaire you will be asked to complete a flowchart task. After completion, scenarios involving interpersonal conflict will be presented to you. You will be asked to rate how unlikely or likely you would behave in the same way as posed in the scenario. Lastly, a survey on agreeableness will be presented to you.

**Costs, risks, and discomforts:** Risks may include minimal emotional discomfort. If you encounter negative emotions feel free to contact the Purchase College Counseling Center at (914) 251-6390.

**Benefits and compensation:** The general benefit of participating in scientific research is the satisfaction that comes from contributing to science and the pursuit of knowledge. Participants enrolled in the Intro Psych Participant Pool at Purchase College will receive 1 credit for their participation.

**Confidentiality:** The results of this study may be published in a scholarly book or journal or used for teaching purposes. However, your name and other identifiers will not be used in any publication or teaching materials. Your data will never be associated with your name or any other information that would make it possible to identify you.

**Refusal or withdrawal of participation:** You do not have to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you can change your mind and drop out of the study at any time without affecting your present or future interactions with the experimenters and with no loss of credit for

participation.

**Signature:** I confirm that the purpose of the research, the study procedures, the possible risks and discomforts, as well as potential benefits that I may experience have been explained to me. All my questions have been answered. I have read this consent form. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study. I understand that I may contact the chair of the Institutional Review Board if I experience any problems during this experiment or have concerns about the ethics of this research [irb.chair@purchase.edu].

By checking this box you are indicating that you are 18 or older and that you consent to participate in this study.

**Appendix B**  
**Demographics Questionnaire**

Q1 How old are you?

“Insert answer”

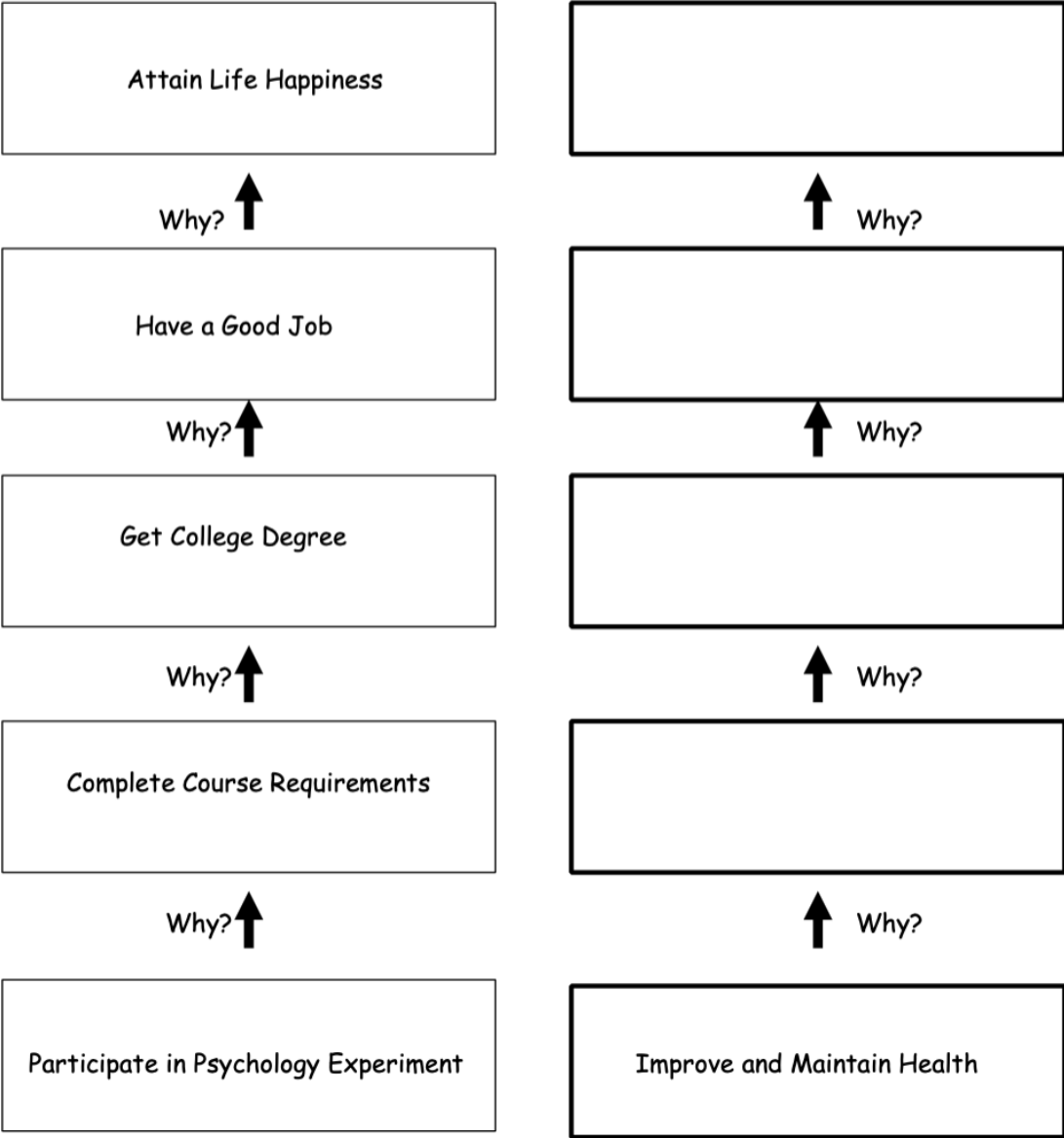
Q2 What is your race/ethnicity? (you may select more than one response)

- Black/African-American
- White
- Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- Asian
- Native American or Pacific Islander
- Other
- Prefer not to answer

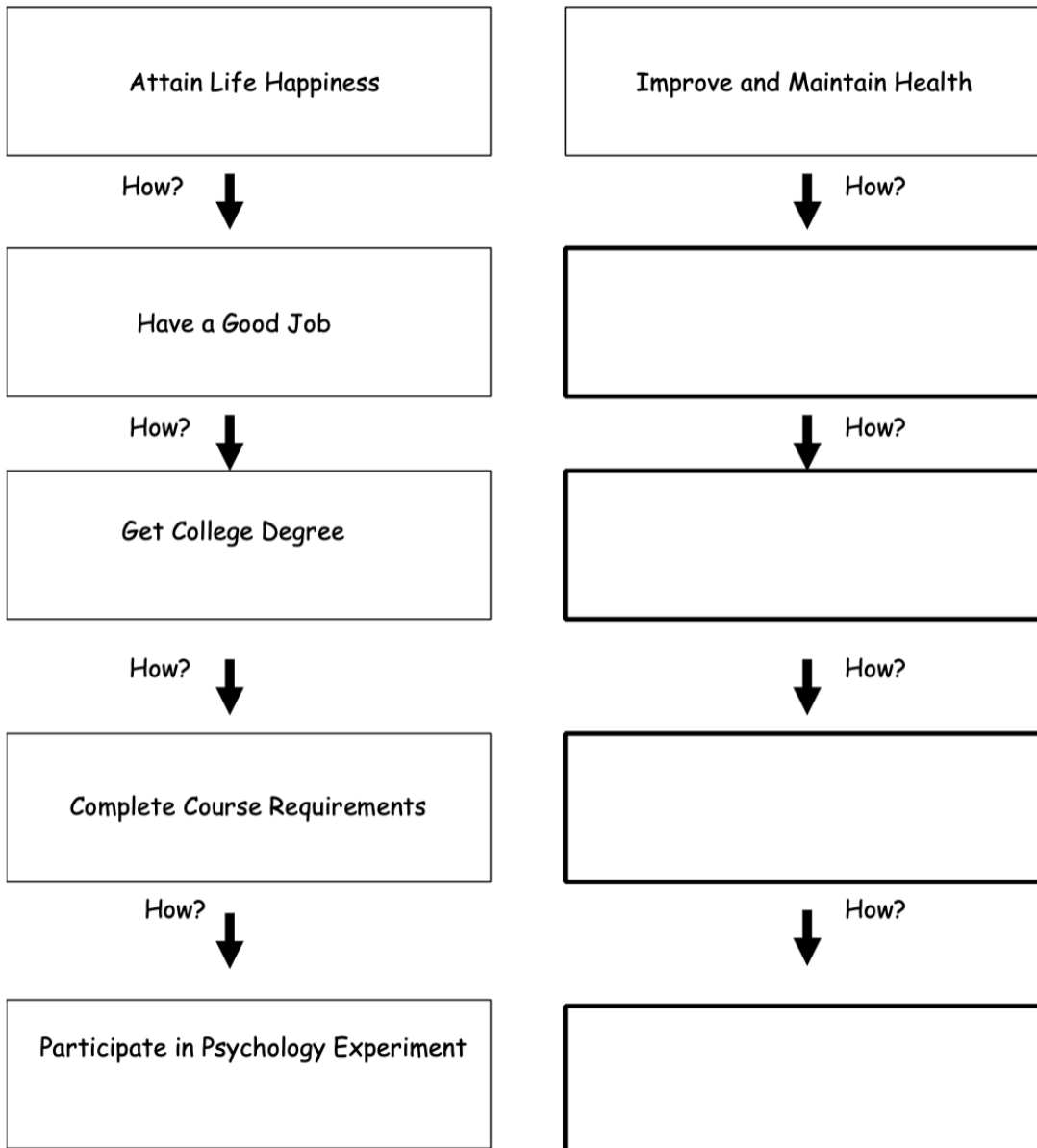
Q3 Please select your gender.

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to answer

**Appendix C**  
**High-level Construal Manipulation**



**Appendix D**  
**Low-level Construal Manipulation**



**Appendix E.**

### Interpersonal Conflict Scenarios

Hypothetical scenarios: You are now going to read scenarios where you are experiencing conflict with a friend. Please be as honest as possible in your responses.

- I. You and your friend made plans to attend a concert together. You get there and wait in line for admission. After 30 minutes of being on the line by yourself, your friend texts you that they will be there in 45 minutes. Your friend finally arrives to the venue to meet you after over an hour of waiting. Imagine that you have two ways to respond. Indicate which response you would most likely lean towards or choose.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7

Definitely give my friend the 'cold shoulder' and act unpleasantly

I would not complain at all, happily noting that at least we are together now.

- II. You find yourself in a disagreement with a classmate about a topic you feel very strongly about. You try to convey your point of view with no luck. The classmate ridicules you in front of everyone. The following week your classmate tries to reach out to you about an assignment. Indicate which response you would most likely lean towards or choose.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5                      6                      7

I would tell my classmate how furious I was and call them 'disrespectful.'

I would not bring up what happened and engage in conversation.

- III. You are going through a crisis and try to reach out to a close friend for aid. Your friend seemingly ignores these attempts as the hours go by. You see that your friend is active on social media. You see your friend in person the next day and they explain that they were busy and couldn't be available to help. Indicate which response you would most likely lean towards or choose.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

I would tell my friend what was going on last night and how it was rude of them to ignore me.

I would not complain at all, happily noting that at least we are talking now.

**Appendix F.****Agreeableness Assessment**

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1. I tend to find fault with others. (R)

Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

1. I am helpful and unselfish with others.

Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

1. I tend to start arguments with others. (R)

Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

1. I have a forgiving nature.

Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

1. I am generally trusting.

Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

1. I can be cold or distant. (R)

Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

1. I am considerate and kind to almost everyone.

Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

1. I am sometimes rude to others. (R)

Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

1. I like to cooperate with others.



Disagree strongly, Disagree a little, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree a little, Agree strongly

\*(R)= reverse coded item