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Delivering bad news fairly: Higher construal level promotes interactional justice enactment through perspective taking

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Summary

How can managers deliver bad news with greater interactional justice? We propose a novel cognitive pathway: Construing the activity at a higher (vs. lower) level increases actors' other-oriented perspective taking, which in turn promotes the enactment of interactional justice. Three studies provide support. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated a beneficial effect of construal level on interactional justice enactment when explaining a hypothetical bad news decision. Study 2 also showed that other-oriented perspective taking is the mechanism through which construal level promotes interactional justice enactment. Study 3 replicated and extended these findings with a different paradigm and the addition of a moderator variable (*trait* perspective taking), providing a converging test of the proposed mechanism. Overall, the present research suggests that how managers think about delivering bad news—whether at higher or lower levels of construal—affects the extent to which they think from the recipient's perspective, and in turn how they communicate the news. Our research generates novel avenues for future research on justice enactment, construal level theory, and perspective taking. It may also have implications for better understanding downstream consequences of interactional justice enactment for bad news deliverers themselves.

KEYWORDS
abstract mindset, construal level, empathic concern, interactional justice, organizational justice, perspective taking

1 | INTRODUCTION

Managers must often deliver bad news, a task which is highly undesirable (Bies, 2013; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). The bad news may affect many employees, such as when managers announce layoffs, or it may affect individuals, such as when managers deliver negative performance evaluations. Bad news is certainly distressing for the recipient, but this distress can be reduced to some degree—or unfortunately it can be greatly aggravated—by *how* the news is delivered.

A large volume of research indicates that negative reactions can be mitigated when managers deliver bad news with greater interactional justice—that is, when they provide timely, adequate explanations, and when they treat recipients politely, sensitively, and respectfully. When managers deliver negative news with greater interactional justice, recipients respond more favorably—they are more accepting of the news and have more favorable attitudes (e.g., Bies, 1987; Brockner, 2016). The impact of interactional justice cannot be overstated, as demonstrated by Lind, Greenberg, Scott, and Welchans (2000) who found that employees were less likely to file for wrongful termination claims when they had been treated with interactional justice at the time of termination.

Nevertheless, in practice, it is not always easy to display interactional justice when delivering bad news. Knowing that one is about to cause harm to another can elicit personal distress in the actor who is delivering the news (Batson, 1987; Bies, 2013; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). As a result, actors may disengage both psychologically and behaviorally as a coping mechanism (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997; Folger & Skarlicki, 2001). For

example, they may detach emotionally, appearing cold and insensitive, and offer perfunctory explanations, all of which undermine interactional justice enactment.

We build on insights from three literatures—interactional justice, perspective taking, and construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010)—to propose a novel cognitive path to promote managers' enactment of interactional justice when delivering bad news. In brief, we argue that higher levels of mental construal (abstraction) will be associated with greater interactional justice enactment through increased other-oriented perspective taking (OOPT). As discussed more below, a higher construal level functions to broaden people's mental horizons and encourages a big picture outlook, which we suggest will increase perspective taking. As perspective taking increases prosocial behavior, we suggest that greater perspective taking will motivate managers to soften the blow of bad news by communicating with greater interactional justice. We contribute to the literature in three primary ways.

First, we add to the growing literature investigating justice as a dependent variable rather than as an independent variable (Brockner, Wiesenfeld, Siegel, Bobocel, & Liu, 2015). One line of research within this movement aims to understand factors that affect the fairness behaviors of managers who deliver justice, often referred to as the actor perspective (see Graso, Camps, Strah, & Brebels, 2020; Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock, 2009). Our research contributes to the actor perspective of justice scholarship. More specifically, we examine how to promote managers' enactment of interactional justice when delivering bad news, a topic with great practical value (Bies, 2013). Past research has examined several antecedents, such as contextual factors, personality characteristics of the actor, and characteristics of the recipients themselves (for review, see Graso et al., 2020). Given the difficulty of delivering negative news, emphasis has been placed on the importance of increasing managers' other-oriented emotions (empathic concern) as a way to improve interactional justice enactment (Cornelis, Van Hiel, De Cremer, & Mayer, 2013; Molinsky, Grant, & Margolis, 2012; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010; Whiteside & Barclay, 2016). Our research builds on this literature by investigating perspective-taking, a cognitive component of empathy (Davis, 1983).

Second, we connect interactional justice enactment to construal level theory. Researchers are discovering the relevance of construal level theory for understanding many organizational phenomena (see Wiesenfeld, Reyt, Brockner, & Trope, 2017), including the study of justice (e.g., Carter, Bobocel, & Brockner, 2020; Cojuharenco & Patient, 2013; Cojuharenco, Patient, & Bashshur, 2011; Melkonian, Soenen, & Ambrose, 2016). Although interest in construal level and justice is expanding, empirical research to date has focused on the recipient and observer perspectives. To our knowledge, our research is the first to focus on the *actor*. Moreover, basic research on construal level theory has largely examined intrapersonal judgments, whereas we examine implications for *interpersonal* behavior. Thus, we both draw on and extend basic construal level research (Wiesenfeld & Brockner, 2012).

Third, by highlighting the role of OOPT, our research may ultimately have broader downstream implications. Existing psychological research demonstrates that OOPT is associated with positive physiological stress reactions and beneficial health outcomes. Thus, our theorizing may suggest a way for those delivering bad news to not only help the recipients, but also ensure better health outcomes for themselves. As such, our work may add to an emerging literature on the effects of justice enactment on actors (e.g., Johnson, Lanaj, & Barnes, 2014).

2 | BACKGROUND THEORY AND RESEARCH

2.1 | Interactional justice and delivering bad news

Interactional justice comprises two interrelated facets: interpersonal and informational justice (Colquitt, 2001). Interpersonal justice refers to the sensitivity with which a decision is communicated, such as whether the recipient is treated politely and respectfully. Informational justice refers to whether the authority provides adequate and timely explanations. Being interactionally just is especially important when managers are delivering negative news (Bies, 2013; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998, 2001). Although receiving bad news is never easy, managers can soften the blow to some degree, or at least not add to it, by communicating the news with sensitivity and by offering informative explanations.

Yet managers often fail to communicate bad news in ways that uphold interactional justice. Delivering bad news is an emotionally and psychologically demanding task (Bies, 2013; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998, 2001; Margolis & Molinsky, 2008; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Knowing that one is about to cause harm to another person can elicit personal distress—an automatic, aversive, self-focused reaction to the suffering of others (Batson, 1987; Batson et al., 1997; Davis, 1980, 1983). One way to cope with such personal distress is to avoid the target (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Cameron & Payne, 2011; Decety & Lamm, 2009). Thus, one dominant account for why managers fail to enact interactional justice is that they disengage as a way of protecting themselves from the aversive experience of personal distress (Folger & Skarlicki, 1998, 2001; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Of course, whereas disengagement helps managers cope with personal distress in the moment, it is antithetical to displaying interactional justice. Interactional justice requires the opposite, namely that managers engage with recipients.

Importantly, whereas personal distress leads to disengagement and withdrawal, research shows that prosocial behavior *increases* when actors engage in OOPT (Batson et al., 1981, 1997). Thus, we propose that OOPT will promote interactional justice enactment when delivering bad news.

2.2 | Other-oriented perspective taking

OOPT involves adopting the psychological point of view of another person to consider the situation from their vantage point

(Davis, 1983; Epley & Caruso, 2009). It requires consciously putting oneself into the mind of another person to understand what they are thinking or feeling (Batson, 2009; Decety, 2015). OOPT, also referred to as cognitive empathy (Davis, 1983), is often confused with empathic concern. Although related, they are distinct: Empathic concern (affective empathy) refers to other-oriented emotions such as feelings of tenderness, sympathy, and concern for unfortunate others. Prior justice research has demonstrated a beneficial role for empathic concern in promoting interactional justice while delivering bad news (Patient & Skarlicki, 2010; Whiteside & Barclay, 2016). Participants higher on trait empathic concern were observed to communicate bad news with greater interactional justice; moreover, in one study, students who were induced (experimentally) to feel empathic concern for the recipient displayed greater interactional justice (Patient and Skarlicki, Study 2). In the present research, our focus is on testing a cognitive route to promoting interactional justice enactment via OOPT. This is important because whereas both empathic concern and perspective taking promote motivation to reduce the suffering of others, excessive sharing of others' negative emotions can be maladaptive and can contribute to burnout (Buffone et al., 2017; Davis, 1983; Lamothe, Boujut, Zenasni, & Sultan, 2014).

Perspective taking has long been recognized as a critical aspect of social functioning (Davis, 1983; Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). Particularly relevant, much empirical research shows that perspective taking triggers actors' fairness motivation and prosociality, that is, actions and decisions that seek to improve the target's circumstances (e.g., Batson, 1991; Lamm, Batson, & Decety, 2007). For example, perspective taking increases the individual's concern for justice for others (Decety & Yoder, 2016) and reduces focus on the costs of helping (Barraza & Zak, 2009). Drawing on these lines of research, we predict that OOPT will motivate managers to communicate negative news in ways that are fairer and more helpful to the recipients.

Despite the positive outcomes associated with OOPT, basic psychological research shows that people often fail to engage in perspective taking in situations that call for it, such as in tense or conflictual interpersonal situations (Epley & Caruso, 2009). Ordinarily, people are anchored in their own (self) perspective given that it is immediate, automatic, and therefore easily comes to mind. In contrast, the act of considering another person's perspective is typically slow, conscious, and therefore more difficult (Cameron, Spring, & Todd, 2017). In short, perspective taking is effortful, which is especially likely to be true when delivering negative news. We suggest one factor that may enable actors to cognitively move from their ego-centric perspective to the perspective of the recipient—construal level.

2.3 | Construal level theory

As already mentioned, humans have the cognitive capability to leave their current experience so as to adopt another person's mental state. Construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), a conceptualization well-known in the psychological literature, can explain how people are able to accomplish this mental feat. According to construal level theory, people experience only themselves in the here-and-now. The subjective experience that something is close to or far away from the self in the here-and-now is termed psychological distance. Anything that is not experienced directly—for example, a memory, a prediction, another person's perspective—is psychologically distal and requires higher levels of mental construal to be represented in the cognitive system and to be acted upon (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Thus, higher construal levels enable people to traverse psychological distance, which is needed to adopt the perspective of others.

Any target (e.g., event, activity) can be represented at higher or lower levels of construal (Trope & Liberman, 2010). For example, a work activity such as "attending a meeting" can be construed at a low (more concrete) level, such as "convening in a conference room with colleagues," or at a high (more abstract) level, such as "becoming well-informed" (Reyt & Wiesenfeld, 2015, p. 742). The high-level construal extracts the gist to reflect what is central to the perceiver and goal-relevant (in this example, to learn), whereas the low-level construal focuses on what is peripheral and subordinate (where the meeting is held and who is attending). By abstracting away incident information, but retaining the core, more invariant aspects, construal level expands people's mental horizons (Ledgerwood, Trope, & Liberman, 2015).

The idea that construal levels expand and contract people's mental horizons (Kalkstein, Hubbard, & Trope, 2018) is borne out in much empirical research (Förster, Friedman, & Liberman, 2004; Förster, Liberman, & Kuschel, 2008). Expansive processing broadens mental categories, prompts problem-solving mindsets, and promotes overall understanding, whereas contractive processing narrows people's attentional scope, limits nonobvious solutions, and impairs overall understanding (Förster & Dannenberg, 2010; Marguc, Förster, & Van Kleef, 2011). In short, construal level enables "Gestalt-like" processing in which perceivers consider the big picture and conceptually integrate information (Marguc et al., 2011).

Key to our research, construal level has been associated with perspective taking. Higher construal level/expansive processing increases interpersonal accuracy, defined as the ability to identify other people's feelings (Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009; Schmid, Schmid Mast, Bombari, Mast, & Lobmaier, 2011). Interestingly, this effect is stronger when the perceiver is sad versus happy (Schmid et al., 2011), as one might expect while delivering bad news. Equally relevant, research has demonstrated an association between higher construal level and interpersonal politeness (Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010), a component of interactional justice enactment.

2.4 | Integration of theorizing and hypotheses

Integrating the preceding literatures on interactional justice, perspective taking, and construal level theory, we suggest that managers will communicate negative news with greater interactional justice when they think about the task at a higher rather than lower level of construal due to increased OOPT. On the surface, our predictions regarding the effect of construal level on interactional justice could seem counterintuitive. In particular, Cojuharenco et al. (2011) found that

interactional justice concerns are more salient among employees (justice recipients) at lower levels of construal whereas distributive justice concerns are more salient at higher levels of construal. The authors theorized that because distributive injustice represents the violation of definitional aspects of employment it is more salient at a higher construal level, whereas interactional injustice is a nondefinitional aspect and thus is more salient at lower levels. Other construal level research similarly shows that some targets (e.g., values) are more salient at higher levels and other targets (e.g., actions) are more salient at lower levels. From these ideas, one might think that managers would be more likely to enact interactional justice at lower (vs. higher) levels of construal.

Nevertheless, it is crucial for our theorizing to highlight two key points. First, whereas Cojuharenco et al. (2011) examined the different types of justice that come to mind among justice recipients at higher and lower construal levels, we are examining how construal level of the same activity affects the enactment of one type of justice. This is an important distinction. Although construal level can indeed affect the type of target that people bring to mind (as in Cojuharenco et al., 2011), construal theory also explicitly recognizes that the *same target or activity* can be construed at higher (more abstract) or lower (more concrete) levels. Thus, we are examining whether construing the same activity (delivering negative news) at a higher or lower level affects managers' interactional justice enactment.

Consider a manager who must deliver a negative performance evaluation. This activity can be represented at higher levels (e.g., as facilitating employee development) or at low levels (e.g., telling Mark his poor performance score). At the high level, managers will be focused on the big picture and on overall understanding of the situation. Expansive processing will enable managers to move past their egocentric perspective to consider the point of view of the recipient and what is of value to the recipient for improved performance. Conversely, at lower levels, managers will be focused solely on their egocentric perspective. Contractive processing will interfere with deeper understanding, leading to explanations that are mechanistic or "programmed" (thus appearing insensitive) and which do not add meaning for the recipient.

Second, construal level theory argues that targets are more "decontextualized" when they are mentally represented at a higher level, but this does not mean that actors will be inattentive to relevant details when thinking about the activity at a high level. Quite the opposite—when thinking about delivering negative news at a high level, attending to recipients' needs is what is central and goal-relevant. Thus, meaningful contextual information should be salient. In contrast, peripheral and idiosyncratic details will be more salient at lower levels of construal, which may detract from coherent explanations. In short, when the activity is construed at a low level, actors may become mentally bogged down in peripheral (irrelevant) details that are not responsive to the needs of the recipient. Given the above theorizing, we suggest, all else equal, that when delivering bad news:

Hypothesis 1. Actors will display greater interactional justice behaviors when they think about delivering negative news at a higher rather than lower level of construal.

Hypothesis 2. Actors will engage in greater OOPT when they think about delivering negative news at a higher rather than lower level of construal.

Hypothesis 3. OOPT will be positively associated with actors' interactional justice enactment.

Hypothesis 4. The beneficial effect of higher (vs. lower) construal level on interactional justice enactment will be mediated by OOPT.

A final point is worth clarifying here. Research shows that construal level and psychological distance are not the same construct (Soderberg, Callahan, Kochersberger, Amit, & Ledgerwood, 2015) although they are related functionally (Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). As noted earlier, a fundamental tenet of construal level theory is that higher construal level (abstraction) enables people to traverse distance, which is needed to adopt the mental perspective of another person (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Thus, our focus is on construal level, but our theorizing potentially indirectly implicates a role for distance insofar as it is involved in OOPT.

2.5 | Overview of the studies

We conducted three studies. Studies 1 and 2 used a paradigm in which managers delivered a hypothetical bad news decision (demotion, layoff, respectively) in writing to an employee recipient. Study 1 was intended as proof of concept (Hypothesis 1): We manipulated high versus low level construal and coded participants' open text responses. Study 2 extended our research by examining mediation through managers' OOPT (Hypotheses 1-4). In Study 3, we used a different paradigm and added a moderator variable (*trait* perspective taking) to provide a converging test of our proposed mechanism (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). Our reasoning holds that high (vs. low) construal level promotes interactional justice enactment by *enabling* OOPT (in the situation). If so, then individual differences in the *motivation* to engage in perspective taking (*trait* perspective taking) should predict behavior under high (but not low) construal level conditions.

3 | STUDY 1

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants

U. S. participants were recruited from the CloudResearch data acquisition platform[1] (Litman, Robinson, & Abberbock, 2017) and earned

[1]CloudResearch is powered by Turk Prime and enables several data quality features, such as verification of worker country location, blocking suspicious geocode locations, and blocking duplicate IP addresses.

USD $1.50. Two-hundred and nineteen people met our prescreen eligibility criteria: over 18 years old and work full-time (outside of MTurk) in a managerial position. Twenty-eight people failed one or more of our data quality checks and were excluded prior to analysis (failed either: 2/3 careless responder items [Marjanovic, Struthers, Cribbie, & Greenglass, 2014], a vignette comprehension check, did not complete the construal level prime, or gave no written response for justice coding). This left 191 participants: 40.3% female, M_{age} = 36.24 (*SD* = 10.67), $M_{managerial\ experience}$ = 7.46 years (*SD* = 7.14), M_{tenure} = 5.55 years (*SD* = 4.61).

3.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were told that we were investigating workplace well-being and how managers deliver negative news. Participants read a vignette, adapted from Patient and Skarlicki (2010), envisioning themselves in the role of a manager who must deliver news of a demotion to an employee (Jim). Due to poor managerial decisions and Jim's mixed performance reviews, both the organization and Jim were partially responsible for the demotion. Participants were randomly assigned to construal level condition, which was experimentally manipulated using the how/why priming task described below. Then, participants wrote verbatim what they would say to communicate news of the demotion decision to Jim. Following ethical guidelines, participants were thanked and fully debriefed after completing the study.

3.1.3 | Construal level manipulation

We adapted Freitas, Gollwitzer, and Trope's (2004) how/why task, commonly used to induce high-level and low-level construal mindsets (see Soderberg et al., 2015). In brief, the high construal task requires participants to indicate in four consecutive steps *why* they would engage in a certain activity, which cues participants to think more abstractly of higher order goals. Conversely, those in the low construal condition are prompted in four consecutive steps to indicate *how* they would engage in the same activity, cueing them to think more concretely about lower-order means (Freitas et al., 2004). We had managers engage in this activity in relation to communicating the demotion decision to Jim ("how would you communicate the news?" vs. "why would you communicate the news?") rather than in an unrelated context, as in the original Freitas et al. (2004) task.

3.2 | Measures

3.2.1 | Interactional justice

We followed Patient and Skarlicki's (2010) procedures to content code managers' written responses. Two research assistants blind to condition independently coded for five interactional justice criteria, that is, whether the manager was (a) polite and courteous, (b) treated the recipient with dignity and respect, (c) expressed concern for the recipient, (d) gave a clear and adequate explanation, and (e) provided justification for the news by appealing to a higher group goal, each rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Coders' scores were averaged for each item, then a composite was formed by averaging the items (*M* = 3.31, *SE* = 0.98). Inter-coder agreement was excellent (ICC_2 = .91).

3.3 | Results and discussion

Regression analysis demonstrated a significant, positive relation between construal level condition (0 = low, 1 = high) and interactional justice, R^2 = .030, β = .17, $F(1, 189) = 5.87$, p = .016. Participants who were induced to think about delivering the negative news at a high level communicated the news with greater interactional justice (*M* = 3.48, *SE* = 0.10) compared to participants who were induced to think about the activity at a low level (*M* = 3.14, *SE* = 0.10). These findings support Hypothesis 1.

4 | STUDY 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate and extend Study 1. We manipulated construal level and again measured managers' interactional justice (Hypothesis 1). We also measured managers' OOPT to test Hypotheses 2–4. In addition to manipulating construal level, we assessed managers' general tendencies to construe work activities at a higher versus lower level using Reyt and Wiesenfeld's (2015) domain-specific work-based construal level (WBCL) measure. Research shows that construal level can be situationally induced (e.g., with the how/why task), as well as measured as a general tendency of action identification (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). Ideally, for convergence, we would show similar effects with the manipulation and WBCL measure.

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants

U. S. participants were again recruited through CloudResearch and were paid USD $2.00. Three hundred and fifty-four people met the same three prescreen eligibility criteria as in Study 1 and had not previously participated in Study 1. Fifty-two people failed one or more data quality checks and were excluded prior to analysis (failed either: 2/3 careless responder items, a vignette comprehension check, did not complete our construal level manipulation,[2] or gave no written response for justice coding). Final

[2]In Study 2, we included an exploratory manipulation to possibly heighten the predicted effect of construal level on interactional justice. Before reading the bad news vignette, participants were told briefly about the values of the company; in the treatment condition, the values were described as communal; in the control, the values were described as economic. The manipulation had no significant main effect on the dependent variables nor did it interact with the construal level manipulation. Therefore, the results in Study 2 are presented collapsed across this manipulation.

sample: 302 participants: 40.4% female, M_{age} = 34.60 years (*SD* = 9.14), $M_{managerial\ experience}$ = 5.55 years (*SD* = 5.33), and M_{tenure} = 4.44 years (*SD* = 4.03).

4.1.2 | Procedure

As in Study 1, participants read the vignette and then were randomly assigned to either a high or low construal level condition. Next, they wrote their letter to Jim, and then completed the OOPT, the quantitative measure of interactional justice, and the WBCL.

4.1.3 | Construal level manipulation

We used the original version of the how/why task in which participants are asked to reflect on a goal unrelated to the target task (Freitas et al., 2004), but we modified it by asking them to reflect on two goals in consecutive order. To make the task seem more work-related, we created our own goals: Participants described how (or why) they (a) keep their energy levels high at work, and (b) dress professionally for work.

4.2 | Measures

4.2.1 | Other-oriented perspective taking

Given no previously validated measure of situational perspective taking, we adapted four items (α = .82) from the trait perspective taking scale (Davis, 1980). Participants were asked to indicate (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*), to what degree: "I would try to look at Jim's side of the situation," "I would try to understand Jim better by imagining things from his perspective," "I would try to look at all sides of the situation," "I would find it difficult to see things from Jim's point of view (R)".[3]

4.2.2 | Interactional justice

Two research assistants blind to condition independently coded interactional justice (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), using the same five criteria as in Study 1. Coders' scores were averaged for each item, and a composite was formed by averaging the items. Inter-rater agreement was excellent (ICC_2 = .89).

We also assessed managers' interactional justice using a quantitative measure developed (and validated) by Huang et al. (2017) for the Patient and Skarlicki (2010) vignette. Participants were presented with eight bipolar items; at each pole was a statement that reflected a more (or less) interactionally just response. Participants indicated (on a 9-point scale) the likelihood that they would offer Jim one of the two statements.

The eight items were intercorrelated (α = .79) and averaged to form a composite. Because the qualitative and quantitative measures were significantly correlated (*r* = .53, *p* < .001) and loaded on one factor (PCA with oblimin rotation; *eigenvalue* = 1.53; *rotated % variance* = 76.58), we standardized the scales and averaged them to yield a broader index. Results are the same (all *p*s < .05) for the two measures examined separately.

4.2.3 | Work-based construal level

Reyt and Wiesenfeld's (2015) 18-item WBCL scale asks participants to envision themselves doing various work activities (e.g., "proofreading a document") and to select one of two descriptions (on a 6-point scale) that best represents how they conceptualize the activity. One option is a low level (concrete) representation of the activity (e.g., "reading carefully for errors"); the other is a high level (abstract) representation ("ensuring accuracy"). Higher scores reflect higher (more abstract) construal (α = .86).

4.3 | Results

4.3.1 | Construal level manipulation

The manipulation of construal level failed to influence the dependent variables. Construal level condition (0 = low, 1 = high) showed no association with interactional justice, R^2 < .001, β = .002, *F*(1, 300) = 0.001, *p* = .975, nor OOPT, R^2 = .003, β = .05, *F*(1, 300) = 0.78, *p* = .377. Therefore, we tested Hypotheses 1-4 using WBCL scores.[4]

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics. In line with predictions, WBCL was positively correlated with interactional justice enactment (Hypothesis 1) and with OOPT (Hypothesis 2); moreover, OOPT was significantly related to interactional justice enactment (Hypothesis 3). We used SPSS (version 23) script (PROCESS—Model 4; Hayes, 2013) to assess Hypothesis 4, namely, whether the positive association between managers' WBCL and their interactional justice is mediated by greater OOPT. If the CI indirect effect does not include zero, then the null hypothesis of non-significance is rejected (Hayes, 2013).

The results are presented in Figure 1. WBCL significantly, positively predicted OOPT, 95% CI [0.12, 0.43], and also significantly, positively predicted interactional justice enactment, 95% CI [0.06, 0.26]. When both WBCL and OOPT were used as predictors, OOPT had a significant positive relation with interactional justice, 95% CI [0.31,

[3]Davis' (1980) original trait perspective taking scale contains seven items, six of which were included in the survey (one was omitted in error). However, two items ask people to imagine *themselves* in the shoes of the other (e.g., "I would try to imagine how I would feel in Jim's place" and "I would try to put myself in Jim's shoes" and thus take an egocentric perspective. Therefore, we present results for the four items assessing *other-oriented perspective taking*. The results remained significant whether we analyzed the four items or all six.

[4]Condition did not affect WBCL scores, β = .06, *p* = .335. Also, condition did not interact with WBCL on either interactional justice, *B* = −.03, *SE* = .11, *p* = .769, or perspective taking, *B* = −.03, *SE* = .16, *p* = .846.

TABLE 1 Study 2: Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

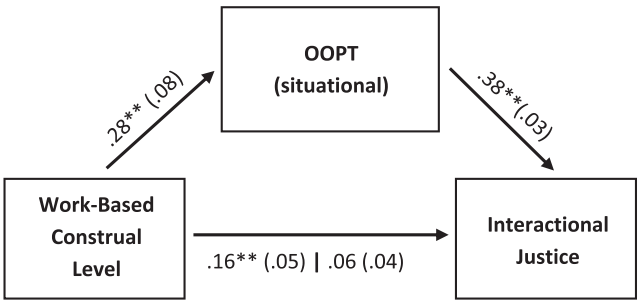
	M̄	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Construal level condition	0.50	0.50				
2. Work-based construal level	3.85	0.95	.06	(.86)		
3. OOPT	5.31	1.30	.05	.20**	(.82)	
4. Interactional justice	0.00	0.88	.002	.17**	.57**	–

Note. N = 302. Higher scores reflect more of the construct. Cronbach's α is on the diagonal. Construal level condition (low = 0, high = 1). OOPT and work-based construal level (7-point scale). Interactional justice is a standardized composite of qualitative codes (M = 3.10, 5-point scale; SD = 1.01; ICC_2 = .89) and quantitative score (M = 6.80, 9-point scale; SD = 1.49; α = .79).
Abbreviation: OOPT, other-oriented perspective taking (situational).
**p < .01.

0.44], whereas WBCL was no longer significant, 95% CI [−0.03, 0.14]. The indirect effect through OOPT was significant; Sobel z test similarly indicated that the indirect effect was significant, z = 3.40, p = .001. These findings support Hypothesis 4.

4.3.2 | Supplementary analyses

We conducted two sets of supplementary analyses. First, because Study 2 became a correlational design, we wanted to be sure that our results were not accounted for by demographic variables, which theoretically could predict interactional justice. We controlled for manager gender, given associations between gender and empathy (Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987). We controlled for managerial experience and job tenure, because prior research suggests that experience contributes to fair treatment (Gilliland & Schepers, 2003). We included age, as older employees are more motivated to create positive social–emotional experiences (Carstensen, 1995). Indeed, we observed significant correlations between justice and gender, such that males were less interactionally fair than females (r = −.13, p = .025), manager experience (r = .23, p < .001), and manager age (r = .29, p < .001). We conducted a supplementary mediation analysis (PROCESS—Model 4) with controls in the model, and the results for all of our hypotheses remained significant. Thus, we present the results without control variables following best practice guidelines (see Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Becker et al., 2016).



indirect effect = .10, SE = .03, CI_{95} =.04, .17

FIGURE 1 Study 2 unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationship between work-based construal level and interactional justice as mediated by other-oriented perspective taking (situational). Standard errors are in parentheses. Total effect (not controlling the mediator) is on the left of the vertical bar. Indirect effect computed using 5000 bootstrap samples. N = 302. **p < .01

Second, our focal mediator is OOPT, but we recognize that perspective taking and empathic concern are conceptually related. We also included a measure of managers' feelings of empathic concern for the recipient for secondary interest. Participants were asked to rate six emotions that they would feel while delivering the layoff news to Jim. The emotions (from Batson, 1987) were sympathetic, moved, soft-hearted, tender, warm, compassionate, rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*; α = .91). We conducted a supplementary analysis to demonstrate the unique effect of OOPT.

As expected from prior research (e.g., Davis, 1983), feelings of empathic concern and OOPT were positively correlated (r = .58, p < .001). When considered alone, empathic concern (like OOPT) was positively correlated with our predictor, WBCL (r = .13, p = .024) and with interactional justice (r = .36, p < .001). Nevertheless, when we examined empathic concern and OOPT as parallel mediators (PROCESS—Model 4; Hayes, 2013), only the indirect path through OOPT was significant (*IDE* = .10, SE = .03, 95% CI [.04, .17]). In contrast, the indirect effect of WBCL on interactional justice via empathic concern was not significant (*IDE* < .01, SE < .01, 95% CI [−.01, .02]).

4.4 | Discussion

Study 2 provides support for Hypotheses 1-4 using a different bad news decision, albeit only when we used WBCL as the predictor. It is not clear why our experimental manipulation of construal level was not effective, but we suspect that our alterations to the original task were problematic (we shortened the original task instructions and did not ask the follow-up questions as in Freitas et al., 2004), and that the goals we chose may not have been engaging. It is also possible that the procedural priming effect—in which thinking in a certain way in one task temporarily carries over to a completely unrelated task

(Schooler, 2002)—is weaker in the context of a negative target activity. Prior construal level research that shows procedural priming effects typically involves neutral or positive target activities. In the context of delivering negative news, and perhaps because of the online format (which can weaken effect sizes; Soderberg et al., 2015), it may be necessary to have actors think at higher or lower levels about the target activity (as we did in Study 1). Although WBCL is not specific to delivering negative news, it assesses the tendency to construe *work activities* at higher versus lower levels; thus, it is reasonable to think that it could have better "carry over" to the target work activity compared to an unrelated prime. Overall, procedural priming effects are complex and generally understudied (Förster & Dannenberg, 2010), and future research is needed to assess the efficacy in the context of delivering negative news relative to other methods.

Despite these limitations, managers' general tendency to construe work activities at higher levels of construal predicted greater OOPT, which in turn increased managers' interactional justice. In line with our theorizing, supplementary analyses demonstrated a unique role for perspective taking rather than empathic concern as the mediator between managers' construal levels and increased interactional justice.

5 | STUDY 3

We sought to constructively replicate the earlier findings by using a different study paradigm and manipulation of construal level for generalizability. In addition, we added a moderator variable—*trait* perspective taking—to provide a converging test of our proposed mechanism. Including moderator variables in the design can help researchers to better evaluate the hypothesized mechanism (Spencer et al., 2005).

As stated in Hypothesis 4, we have argued that, relative to low level construal, high level construal promotes interactional justice by increasing the actor's *ability* to take the perspective of the recipient. If so, then when people are primed to think at a high level, individual differences in the *motivation* to engage in perspective taking should matter: The more people are generally motivated to engage in perspective taking (i.e., higher trait perspective taking), the more they will take the perspective of the recipient in the particular situation (i.e., OOPT), and in turn enact greater interactional justice. In contrast, low level construal contracts people's mental horizons and interferes with their ability to take the recipient's perspective. Therefore, when primed to think at a low level, the level of one's general motivation to engage in perspective taking should not matter. Put differently, high level construal "turns on" the ability to engage in perspective taking in the situation; thus, actors' motivational orientations will affect behavior. In contrast, low level construal "turns off" the ability to engage in perspective taking, which nullifies the effect of actors' motivational orientations.

Therefore, we expected the following two-way interactions:

Hypothesis 5. There will be a positive association between trait perspective taking and interactional justice enactment in the high construal level condition, but the effect will be non-significant in the low-level condition.

As in the prior studies, we assessed OOPT in the situation and expected a similar two-way interaction on the measured mediator.

Hypothesis 6. There will be a positive association between trait perspective taking and OOPT in the high construal level condition, but the effect will be non-significant in the low-level condition.

Finally, we predicted a moderated mediation effect.

Hypothesis 7. There will be a significant indirect effect of trait perspective taking on interactional justice via OOPT in the high (but not low) construal condition.

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants

One hundred and thirty-one undergraduate students from the University of Waterloo participated for course credit or $5.00. Twenty-one people failed one or more of our data quality checks and were excluded prior to analysis (failed either: two careless responder items, vignette comprehension check, or did not provide a written response for justice coding). Final sample was 110 participants: 77% female and M_{age} = 19.89 (*SD* = 2.03).

5.1.2 | Procedure

We adapted a paradigm from Molinsky et al. (2012, Study 2). Participants read that the university was cutting its scholarship budget for the next academic year's incoming students. Participants read that the school faced financial hardship due to provincial funding cuts and needed to revoke 5% of undergraduate admissions scholarships to maintain programs. They were told that students were still admitted, but those affected by the cut could face hardships such as needing to take loans or having to unenroll. As in Molinsky et al. (2012), participants were told that the university was seeking input from current students based on research that letters from peers can be helpful and that the committee would ultimately draw on their letters for the official announcement (see Appendix A for the vignette).

Next, participants were randomly assigned to a condition (see below), after which they completed the OOPT scale, then wrote their letter. Finally, the deceptions were explained following University of Waterloo ethics protocols.

5.1.3 | Construal level manipulation

We used a different manipulation, which directly instructs participants to think at a high (abstract) versus low (concrete) level, adapted from van Houwelingen, Bobocel, and Okimoto (2020); see Appendix B. The instructions are modeled on definitions of high-level and low-level construals (Burgoon, Henderson, & Markman, 2013; Nguyen, Carnevale, Scholer, Miele, & Fujita, 2019). To bolster the manipulation, a visual prime (using phrasing from Nguyen et al., 2019, Study 1) was shown at the top of the page and remained as a header on the remaining pages: Either "Mentally zoom in on the specifics" (low-level condition) or "Mentally zoom out to the big picture" (high-level condition). Such direct instructional manipulations have been used successfully in other areas of research (e.g., Barclay & Saldanha, 2016; Kross & Grossmann, 2012).

5.1.4 | Independent manipulation check

We assessed the effectiveness of the manipulation in a separate sample of 90 U. S. participants (via CloudResearch). Participants were randomly assigned to the high-level or low-level condition, slightly modified to fit the sample. Following the prime, they responded to three 6-point bipolar items (α = .89), to assess features of high and low construals (see Appendix C for the materials). There was a significant main effect of condition, $F(1, 88) = 44.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$, with greater endorsement of the high-level endpoints in the abstract prime ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.63$, $n = 44$) as compared to the concrete prime ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.17$, $n = 46$).

5.2 | Measures

5.2.1 | Trait perspective taking

About two months prior to the focal study, participants completed Davis' (1980) 7-item perspective taking scale as part of a larger mass-testing survey. Two example items are: "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision", and "I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's point of view." Respondents indicated how well the items describe them in general, on a 5-point scale (1 = *does not describe me well* to 5 = *describes me very well*; α = .79).

5.2.2 | Other-oriented perspective taking

To assess OOPT in the situation, we used the same four items as in Study 2, rated on an 11-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 11 = *very much*; α = .65).[5]

5.2.3 | Interactional justice

Two research assistants blind to condition independently coded the letters on four interactional justice criteria: (a) expressed regret about the situation, (b) showed concern for the recipient, (c) provided justifications for the scholarship withdrawal, and (d) listed the criteria that the University used to withdraw scholarships as stated in the vignette. All items were coded on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). From the descriptive statistics, the majority (69%) of the participants did not mention (d)[6]; therefore, it was excluded. Coders' ratings for the other three items were averaged, and a composite was formed by averaging the items. Inter-coder agreement was excellent ($ICC_2 = .84$). PCA with oblimin rotation on the three items revealed one factor (*eigenvalue* = 1.68, rotated *% variance* = 56.12).

5.3 | Results

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics. We used hierarchical multiple regression to examine the two-way interaction between construal level condition (0 = low, 1 = high) and trait perspective taking on interactional justice (Table 3). Trait perspective taking was first mean-centered (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). As shown in Table 3, there were no significant main effects, only a significant interaction between construal level and trait perspective taking ($B = .59$, $p = .022$; $\Delta R^2 = .05$, $p = .022$).

Figure 2 (left panel) depicts the interaction. Participants with higher (vs. lower) trait perspective taking were more interactionally just in the high construal condition ($B = .42$, $SE = .18$, $p = .022$), whereas the effect was non-significant in the low construal condition ($B = -.17$, $SE = .18$, $p = .342$). These results support Hypothesis 5. There was also a marginally significant benefit of high (vs. low) construal level on interactional justice enactment among those with high trait perspective taking ($B = .39$, $SE = .22$, $p = .079$), whereas there was no effect among those with low trait perspective taking ($B = -.34$, $SE = .22$, $p = .128$).

We used SPSS (version 23) script (PROCESS—Model 7; Hayes, 2013) to investigate Hypotheses 6 and 7.[7] As seen in Table 4 (top panel), construal level condition and trait perspective taking interacted to predict OOPT. The interaction is plotted in Figure 2 (right panel). Participants with higher (vs. lower) trait perspective taking showed greater OOPT in the high construal condition ($B = 1.49$, $SE = .25$, $p < .001$), whereas the effect was non-significant in the low construal condition ($B = .23$, $SE = .24$, $p = .351$). These results support Hypothesis 6. Interestingly, there was a significant benefit of high

[5]One item "I am trying to see *all* sides of the situation" did not correlate as well with the other three items that reference taking the perspective of the *student recipient*, α = .80 for the three remaining items. Nevertheless, all of the results are the same with the 4- and 3-item measures, so we retain the 4-item composite.

[6]The information stated that the decision regarding which students would be affected "was determined by information in the application file, including high school grades, extracurricular activities, and statements of interest."

[7]There were two extreme outliers on other-oriented perspective taking (very low perspective taking in the concrete condition), as indicated by studentized residuals of −3.80 and −5.08, which exceed recommended ±3.50 (see Cohen et al., 2003) and therefore are excluded. The regression analyses (including model fit and parameter estimates) and simple slope analysis remain the same with and without outliers, but the conditional indirect effects become non-significant with outliers included, which could be due to the strong influence of outliers in mediation analysis (Zu & Yuan, 2010; also see Hayes, 2013, for discussion of this issue).

TABLE 2 Study 3: Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

	M̄	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Construal level condition	.49	.50				
2. Trait perspective taking	3.73	.62	−.01	(.79)		
3. OOPT[a]	9.30	1.28	−.04	.40**	(.65)	
4. Interactional justice	3.29	.83	.02	.09	.29**	(.84)

Note. N = 110. Higher scores reflect more of the construct. Cronbach's α on diagonal for trait perspective taking and perspective taking (context specific). ICC_2 on diagonal for interactional justice (coded). Construal level condition (low = 0, high = 1). Trait perspective taking (5-point scale). Interactional justice (5-point scale).
Abbreviation: OOPT, other-oriented perspective taking (situational; 11-point scale).
[a]N = 108 (see footnote 7).
**p < .01.

TABLE 3 Study 3: Interactional justice regressed on construal level, trait perspective taking, and the interaction

	Interactional justice							
Predictor	R^2	ΔR^2	F	B	SE	β	t	95% CI
Step 1								
(*Constant*)				3.27**	.11		29.49	[3.06, 3.50]
Construal level condition				.03	.16	.02	0.17	[−.29, .34]
Trait PT				.12	.13	.09	.90	[−.14, .37]
	.01	.01	.42					
Step 2								
(*Constant*)				3.28**	.11		30.11	[3.06, 3.49]
Construal level condition				.03	.16	.02	.17	[−.28, .34]
Trait PT				−.17	.18	−.13	−.96	[−.52, .18]
Construal level × trait PT				.59*	.25	.31	2.33	[.09, 1.10]
	.06	.05	5.44*					

Note. N = 110. Higher scores on continuous measures reflect more of the construct. Construal level condition (low = 0, high = 1).
Abbreviation: Trait PT, trait perspective taking (mean centered).
*p < .05. **p < .01.

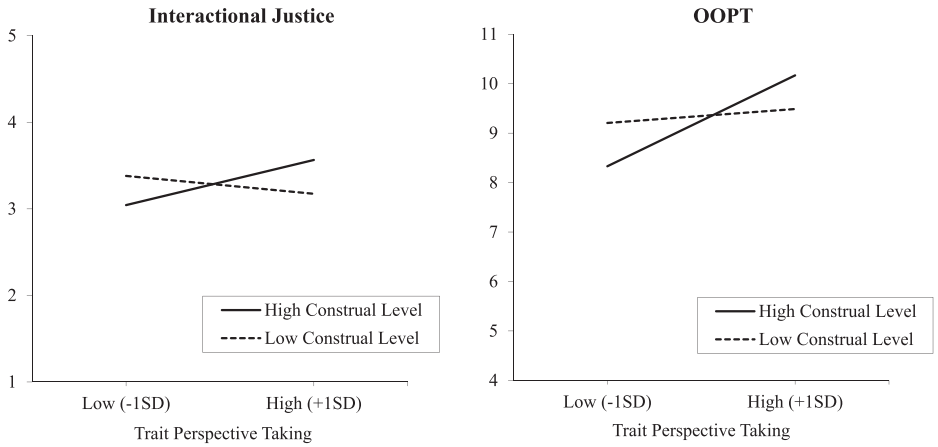


FIGURE 2 Study 3 simple slopes for the trait perspective taking x construal level condition interaction. Left: interactional justice; right: OOPT = other-oriented perspective taking (situational)

(vs. low) construal level on OOPT among those with high trait perspective taking (B = .68, SE = .31, p = .023), whereas there was a negative effect among those with low trait perspective taking (B = −.88, SE = .31, p = .005).

As shown in Table 4 (bottom panel), there is a significant positive indirect effect of trait perspective taking on interactional justice through OOPT for those in the high construal level condition; whereas there is no significant indirect effect in the low construal

TABLE 4 Study 3: Moderated mediation of trait perspective taking on interactional justice enactment through perspective taking (situational) at high (vs. low) construal level

	Unstandardized coefficients				
	B	***SE***	***t***	***p***	**95% CI**
Mediator: OOPT					
(*Constant*)	9.35	.15	61.64	.000	[9.04, 9.65]
Construal level condition	−.10	.22	−.45	.652	[−.53, .33]
Trait PT	.23	.24	.94	.351	[−.25, .71]
Construal level × trait PT	1.26	.35	3.57	.001	[.56, 1.96]
Outcome: IJ					
(*Constant*)	1.54	.61	2.52	.013	[.33, 2.74]
Trait PT	−.02	.13	−.12	.907	[−.28, .25]
OOPT	.19	.07	2.86	.005	[.06, .32]
Conditional indirect effects of trait PT → OOPT (situational) → IJ					
	Indirect effect	*Boot SE*		Boot 95% CI	
Low construal level	.04	.05		[−.05, .17]	
High construal level	.28	.13		[.07, .56]	
Index of moderated mediation	*Index*	*Boot SE*		Boot 95% CI	
	.23	.12		[.04, .52]	

Note. N = 108 (see footnote 7). PROCESS—Model 7. Construal level condition (low = 0, high = 1). Direct effect of trait PT on IJ = −.02, SE = .13, t = −.12, p = .907, 95% CI [−.28, .25].
Abbreviations: *SE*, standard error; OOPT, other-oriented perspective taking (situational); trait PT, trait perspective taking (mean centered); IJ, interactional justice.

condition. Furthermore, the index of moderated mediation is significant. Hypothesis 7 is supported.

5.3.1 | Supplementary analyses

Although trait perspective taking was our focal moderator, for secondary interest we also measured participants' trait empathic concern prior to the study. If our reasoning is correct that construal level increases interactional justice through OOPT, condition should not interact with trait empathic concern. We used Davis' (1980) 7-item trait empathic concern scale, rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *does not describe me well* to 5 = *describes me very well*). An example item is: "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." (α = .80).

Consistent with past research (Wolgast, Tandler, Harrison, & Umlauft, 2019), we found a moderate correlation between trait empathic concern and trait perspective taking (r = .58, p < .001). At the bivariate level, trait empathic concern correlated marginally with interactional justice (r = .18, p = .059). We used hierarchical regression to test the full model: We regressed interactional justice on construal level, trait perspective taking, trait empathy, and the two interactions (trait perspective taking × construal level; trait empathy × construal level). The only significant effect was that of the focal interaction, trait perspective taking x construal level (B = .66, SE = .31, p = .035), and there was no unique main effect of empathic concern (B = .26, SE = .21, p = .210).

5.4 | Discussion

Study 3 supports Hypotheses 5–7. As expected, trait perspective taking predicted interactional justice enactment when participants were thinking at a high level, but this effect was nullified when they were induced to think about the activity at a low level. Moreover, the effect of trait perspective taking on interactional justice within the high construal level condition was mediated by greater perspective taking in the situation. In short, when participants were thinking at a high level, their motivational orientation to engage in perspective taking affected whether they considered the perspective of the recipient in the situation, which in turn promoted their interactional justice actions.

The shape of the interaction on the mediator also adds greater insight into the phenomenon. In particular, examining the two-way interaction, we observed a negative simple effect of condition among people with low trait perspective taking. For these people, high (vs. low)-level construal *reduced* perspective taking in the situation. Although not predicted, the crossover pattern is intriguing. Research on regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2005) shows that engagement is higher and cognitive processing is more fluid in conditions of psychological fit vs. non-fit. According to our theorizing, because high level construal enables perspective taking (in the situation), people who are more motivated to engage in perspective taking may be in a psychological state of "fit"—there is a congruence between motivation and the situation. In contrast, people who are less motivated to engage in perspective taking are in a state of "non-fit" in the high-level

condition—for these people, *concrete construal* makes for a better fit between disposition and the situation. Regardless, participants displayed the *most* perspective taking in the situation (and the greatest interactional justice) when they were motivated to engage in perspective taking (high trait) and when enabled to do so in the situation (high construal level).

The supplementary finding in Study 3 also provides support for the idea that construal level affects interactional justice enactment through a cognitive route—thinking about the perspective of the recipient—rather than an affective route. That is, trait empathic concern did not have a similar moderating effect on the mediator, or on interactional justice. These results converge with the conclusions from the supplementary findings in Study 2—that construal level affects interactional justice by altering the extent to which actors consider the recipient perspective (cognitive empathy) rather than by altering empathic concern (affective empathy).

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

We integrated three literatures to examine a novel cognitive path to increase managers' enactment of interactional justice during the delivery of bad news. Three studies revealed support for our predictions. In Study 1, managers communicated a negative decision with greater interactional justice when they were primed to think about the activity at a high (vs. low) level. In Study 2, managers' general tendency to construe work activities at higher levels predicted greater OOPT, which in turn predicted greater interactional justice enactment. In Study 3, we added a moderator variable to provide another test of our mechanism. As predicted, when participants were thinking at a high level, individual differences in the motivation to engage in perspective taking (trait perspective taking) predicted greater interactional justice enactment via greater perspective taking in the situation. In contrast, when thinking at a low level, the effect of individuals' motivations to engage in perspective taking was nullified.

Overall, the present research suggests that how managers think about delivering negative news—whether at higher or lower levels of construal—affects the extent to which they think about the recipient perspective, which in turn affects how they communicate the news. Our research makes several theoretical contributions and generates novel questions.

6.1 | OOPT and justice actions

We contribute to research that focuses on justice as a dependent variable, particularly on interactional justice while delivering bad news. A sentiment in the justice literature is that managers will be fairer when they have greater empathy for the recipients. There are, however, different paths to empathy. Past research has demonstrated a role for empathic concern (affective empathy; e.g., Patient & Skarlicki, 2010). We demonstrate that there is an alternative path through cognitive empathy. Our supplementary analyses in Studies 2 and 3 also ruled out the role of empathic concern as an alternative mechanism through which construal level operates. Future research examining the role of empathic concern should isolate its unique effect by controlling for perspective taking, which has not been the case in the literature (Patient & Skarlicki, 2010; Whiteside & Barclay, 2016).

Given that perspective taking has been long recognized as a critical aspect of social functioning and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Davis, 1983; Galinsky et al., 2005), it is perhaps surprising that organizational justice researchers have not actively examined its unique role in justice enactment. Indeed, the interplay between the affective and cognitive components of empathy on moral cognition and justice motivation is complex (see Decety & Cowell, 2014). For example, whereas both empathic concern and perspective taking may improve interactional justice actions (due to the motivation to relieve the suffering of others), heightened affective empathy can also lead to preferential treatment, thereby violating other justice principles (Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995; Blader & Rothman, 2014). Other research shows that perspective taking can buffer actors against the negative effects of empathic concern on burnout (Lamothe et al., 2014). One interesting direction for future justice research is to delve into understanding the affective and cognitive components. Furthermore, researchers should avoid studying empathy as an "umbrella" concept.

6.2 | Construal level and justice actions

Our research adds to a growing literature examining the relevance of construal level theory for the organizational sciences (Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). To date, justice research incorporating construal level has focused on reactions of those on the "receiving" end of justice, whether employees or third-party observers. To our knowledge, our research is the first to examine implications of construal level theory for managers' interactional justice enactment. Much more research is needed because it is unlikely that the effects of construal level on interactional justice actions are invariant—more theorizing and future research will be needed to systematically examine when and for whom abstraction promotes or hinders actors' interactional justice.

Interestingly, to this point, we found that among participants who are generally not motivated to engage in perspective taking (low trait perspective taking), thinking about the task at a higher (vs. lower) level reduced perspective taking in the situation. Note that the negative trend was not significant for interactional justice actions, but this may be because the outcome is more distal. We speculated that this negative indirect effect was due to an incongruence between participants' motivational orientation (trait perspective taking) and the situation (higher construal activates perspective taking in the situation), which could have felt particularly demanding, thereby reducing actors' ability to engage in perspective taking in the situation. An alternative possibility is that individuals with lower trait perspective taking view the core purpose of delivering negative news differently (e.g., to merely get the job done) than is the case for those with high trait perspective

[8]We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

taking and thus are less effective at enacting interactional justice under high vs. low level construal mindsets.[8] An intriguing direction for future research is to examine these possibilities and to delineate dispositional and situational factors that modulate construal level effects on interactional justice and on justice actions more broadly.

6.3 | Construal level or distance?

We manipulated and measured construal level, but as noted earlier, higher construal (abstraction) enables people to traverse distance (Trope & Liberman, 2010). According to the theory, construal level and psychological distance are related functionally, and much empirical work has demonstrated that construal level can influence psychological distance and vice versa (Wiesenfeld et al., 2017). Nevertheless, construal level and psychological distance are different constructs (see Soderberg et al., 2015), which can even have different effects (e.g., Williams, Stein, & Galguera, 2014). Although we did not measure or manipulate distance directly, our theorizing implicates its role insofar as distance is needed to adopt another person's perspective. Therefore, it is possible that construal level operated on interactional justice enactment by increasing psychological distance, making distance the more proximal predictor. In line with this idea, some prior research has suggested that OOPT is associated with greater "self-other" distinction, as compared to when people focus on their own negative emotions in helping situations, which can lead to "self-other" merging (Ames, Jenkins, Banaji, & Mitchell, 2008; Buffone et al., 2017; cf. Galinsky et al., 2005).

If it is true that distance is a more proximal predictor, then there may be an interesting implication for future research. Managers may display greater interactional justice by *psychologically distancing* themselves to some degree from the recipient. This sounds paradoxical if one confuses psychological distancing with "managerial distancing behaviors." Folger and Skarlicki (1998) aptly coined the latter phrase to refer to the disengagement behaviors that managers often display when delivering negative news to cope with personal distress. (We purposefully avoided using Folger and Skarlicki's terminology at the outset of our article to avoid the possible confusion.) It may be that greater *psychological distance* (the feeling of the recipient being far from the self) can reduce managerial distancing behaviors. More plausibly, there is an inverted U function between psychological distance and interactional justice enactment, such that both too little and too much may be problematic. A direction for future research will be to manipulate psychological distance, examine effects on justice enactment, and investigate the possible differentiations between construal level and distance in this context.

Finally, we contribute to basic construal level research by examining effects on both intrapsychic and interpersonal outcomes, the latter of which is less frequently studied. In addition, whereas most of the basic construal level research examines contexts in which the target is neutral or positive, our target activity was negative. Except in Study 2, we induced construal level in relation to the target activity. This may explain why the manipulation in Study 2 did not affect the outcomes, although the current studies were not designed to examine this possibility. This may be an important avenue for future research applying construal level theory to organizational phenomena.

6.4 | Effects of interactional justice on actors

By highlighting the role of perspective taking for interactional justice enactment, our research may have broader implications. Much research shows associations between OOPT and positive health outcomes in helping situations. For example, Buffone et al. (2017) found that OOPT in helping situations induced a physiological state of challenge (vs. threat). Challenge is invigorating, whereas threat is debilitating. Such challenge and threat response patterns are a consequence of different appraisals of stress arousal—as a resource rather than as a demand, respectively (Blascovich, 1992; Jamieson & Mendes, 2016). Challenge and threat response patterns have important downstream health consequences; for example, threat is associated with increased pituitary-adrenal-cortical activity and cardiovascular disease (for review, Jamieson & Mendes, 2016).

These lines of research suggest that OOPT may have health and well-being implications for managers—it may buffer against adverse physiological reactions and burnout. Interestingly, Johnson et al. (2014) found that managers who had engaged in interpersonal justice on one day felt more mentally replenished on the next day. The authors argued that, because interpersonal justice involves positive interactions, managers receive immediate positive return, which offsets the effort that they have expended in being fair. However, there is little positive return when delivering bad news, which makes managers susceptible to experiencing burnout. Greater OOPT may help to offset such adverse physiological outcomes. Altogether, more research is needed to examine health and other effects of upholding and violating justice rules on justice actors.

6.5 | Limitations and strengths

Studies 1 and 2 used a hypothetical scenario; thus, it remains unclear whether responses would be similar in the organization. However, this paradigm enabled experimental control, has mundane realism, is engaging, and respondents were full-time managers, thus "in role." Study 3 moved to a different sample and paradigm in which participants believed that they were communicating about a real decision. That we found converging results across the different methodologies and samples offers some reassurance of generalizability. Our supplementary analyses also add in that they show discriminant validity in Studies 2 and 3.

In general, it is challenging to measure managers' justice actions. As with previous studies (e.g., Molinsky et al., 2012; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010), we coded participants' open-text responses. Although in Studies 1 and 2 managers were responding to a hypothetical situation, they wrote verbatim what they would say to Jim. We believe this method can be stronger than some alternatives, such as requesting endorsement of face valid items (e.g., "To what degree would you treat the recipient respectfully?"), which pulls for socially desirable responses. Also, there was correspondence between our qualitative measure and the quantitative measure validated by Huang et al. (2017). Importantly, in Study 3, we found converging results

when coding students' qualitative responses in a situation that was not hypothetical from their point of view. Nevertheless, it would be preferable to measure managers' behaviors in the organizational context and future research should aim to conduct research in the field.

Finally, we focused only on the communication phase of delivering bad news, but scholars have highlighted multiple phases in need of investigation (see Bies, 2013). There is a need to investigate the delivery of bad news dynamically by incorporating the role of time and by studying dyadic processes (for further discussion, see Bobocel, in press). By considering the role of time, new connections to construal level theory could become evident given the association between temporal distance and construal level.

6.6 | Practical Implications

In some situations, managers may believe it is inappropriate to display empathic concern (see Molinsky et al., 2012), but our findings suggest that managers may still deliver negative news with greater interactional justice when they actively engage in OOPT. Thus, it could be beneficial to directly train perspective taking, which may increase managers' *motivation* to do so (especially among managers with lower trait perspective taking).

Nevertheless, as we argued, even among managers who are motivated to do so, OOPT may need to be "enabled" when delivering negative news. One way could be to teach managers to prepare for the activity by adopting a higher level of mental construal. Interestingly, recent research demonstrates that people understand the self-regulatory benefits of high and low level construals and prefer preparatory activities that instantiate the level needed for task performance (Nguyen et al., 2019). It would be of interest to examine how managers prepare to communicate bad news: Do some managers understand the benefits of taking a big picture perspective for this task? Regardless, our research suggests that it will be important for managers to be both motivated to engage in OOPT and able to do so.

7 | CONCLUSION

How can managers deliver bad news with greater interactional justice? We build on insights from three literatures—interactional justice, perspective taking, and construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010)—to propose a novel cognitive path to promote managers' enactment of interactional justice when delivering bad news. Overall, our research suggests that how managers think about delivering negative news—whether at higher or lower levels of construal—affects the extent to which they think from the recipient's perspective, which in turn affects how they communicate the news. Our theorizing generates new avenues for future research and may suggest a way for those delivering bad news not only to help the recipients but also to ensure better health outcomes for themselves.

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APPENDIX A: Study 3 Vignette

Recent budget cuts in Ontario have adversely affected funding to the University of Waterloo. Due to the reduced provincial funding, the university has had to cut its Undergraduate Admissions Scholarship Budget to maintain other existing student programs.

Consequently, the university will be withdrawing 5% of the scholarship offers it has made to the cohort of undergraduate students accepted for admission in Fall 2020. As a result, some students who were promised scholarships will not receive them. The decision of who to cut was determined by information in the application file, including high school grades, extracurricular activities, and statements of interest.

Notices of scholarship withdrawal will be sent out on [*3 months from study*]. Affected students will still be admitted to their programs but they will no longer receive a financial award. The affected students do not yet know that they are losing their scholarships. As a result of the scholarship withdrawal, affected students may face certain hardships, for example, they may need to take student loans, or they may be unable to enroll at the University of Waterloo.

The Undergraduate Scholarship Committee is seeking input from current students on how to deliver the negative news to the affected students. Research suggests that letters from peers can be most effective. Therefore, we are asking you to write a letter to communicate the news to the affected students as well as to answer some questions. The committee will be examining your (anonymized) letters and will draw on them when writing the official letters to the student recipients.

APPENDIX B: Study 3 Construal Level Manipulation

After reading the memo, participants read (high-level condition):

> In helping the Undergraduate Scholarship Committee, we are also examining the possible benefits of abstract thinking. In brief, abstract thinking involves *mentally zooming out to the big picture* of whatever activity you are thinking about. Abstract thinking involves: Taking a mental step back from the specifics of the activity, thinking about the activity from a big picture perspective and taking a long-term view, thinking about the "essence" or the meaning of the activity, focusing on why you engage in the activity, and thinking about the purpose. For example, if you were thinking abstractly about the activity "studying" you might take a mental step back and think about studying from a big picture perspective, you might focus on the long-term effects of studying, think about why you study and the purpose of studying (for instance a means of self-improvement). Please now spend a minute thinking abstractly about delivering the negative news to students.

In the low-level condition, participants read:

> In helping the Undergraduate Scholarship Committee, we are also examining the possible benefits of concrete thinking. In brief, concrete thinking involves *mentally zooming in on the specifics* of whatever activity you are thinking about. Concrete thinking involves: Focusing on the specifics of the activity, looking at things from an up-close perspective and focusing on the here and now, taking in each and every detail involved in the activity, focusing on how to perform the activity, and thinking about what is feasible to do. For example, if you were thinking concretely about the activity "studying" you might think about the details involved with studying, including where you study, what materials you use, how long you study for, how you go about studying, or what is feasible to do when you are studying. Please now spend a minute thinking concretely about delivering the negative news to students.

APPENDIX C: Study 3 Independent Manipulation Check

We tested the manipulation on an independent sample of working adults. To fit the sample, we omitted the first and last sentences and changed the example activity as follows.

In the high-level condition, participants read:

> For example, if you were thinking abstractly about "working at your job" you might take a mental step back and consider what the purpose of working at your job is and why you do it, think about how your job helps you learn new skills or interact with others, or how working at your job is a means to improving your life.

In the low-level condition, participants read:

> For example, if you were thinking concretely about "working at your job" you might think about the details involved in working at your job, including where you work, what materials you use, the specifics of the tasks you currently perform, how you go about doing your job, or what is feasible to do when you are working.

Manipulation Check Items …

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Thinking about each and every detail of what I am doing							Thinking about the big picture of what I am doing
Focused on the "here-and-now"							Taking a mental step back
Thinking about *how* I am going about what I am doing							Thinking about *why* I am going about what I am doing