

# Memories and Prosocial Behavior

Margaret Butler, Dr. Marlene Henderson

Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin

## Background

- The current study focuses specifically on the interplay between self-perception, temporal distance, and social media as a mode of influence.
- Self-perception theory details how people develop their attitudes toward themselves by examining their behavior (Bem, 1972). Thus, thinking about oneself in different roles can alter one's sense of self.
- Temporal distance has been known to impact self-perception. However, it has not been examined in accordance with specific role assignments and prosocial motivation. On one hand, focusing on proximal distances engages the pragmatic self, which could potentially decrease prosocial behavior. On the other hand, engaging with distal memories allows individuals to focus on the "big picture" and prioritize their ideal selves (Kivetz and Tyler, 2007).

## Research Questions

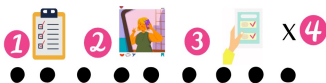
- Will observers be more motivated to behave prosocially upon viewing social media posts influenced by benefactor or beneficiary memories from the distant or recent past?
- I hypothesized that when riders think about themselves as benefactors in the distant past, their sense of self was so salient that it significantly motivated raters.

## Methods and Materials

- The participant was a member of the Texas 4000, a charity bike ride from Austin to Alaska to raise funds to fight cancer. The primary independent variables were four writing prompts that cued the participant to reflect on either a memory of giving or receiving from the distant or recent past.



- The participant completed a social media post inspired by the given prompt. The primary dependent variable is the impact of social media posts on promoting prosocial behavior, measured through scores on the prosocial intentions scale made by raters.



**Writing Prompts**

We often receive from other people. We receive when others help, contribute, donate, assist, volunteer, express compassion, or provide support to us—any act of offering their time, knowledge, skills, money, connections, or other resources to benefit us. Thinking all the way back to the beginning of the summer, around the time the Texas 4000 ride started, please write about a distant memory in which you received from another person. What did you receive, and how did you benefit?

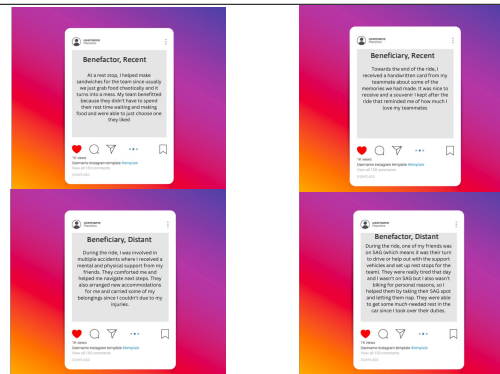
The underlined words were altered for each condition. Recent/Distant and Receiving/Giving.

---

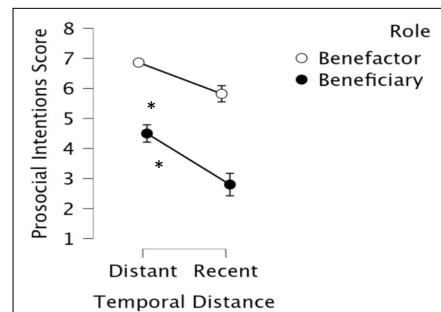
**Prosocial Behavioral Intentions Scale**

Instructions: Imagine that you encounter the following opportunities to help others. Please indicate on the scale below how willing you would be to perform each behavior from (1) Definitely would not do this to (5) Definitely would do this. Tasks include helping a stranger find a key or a missing pet.

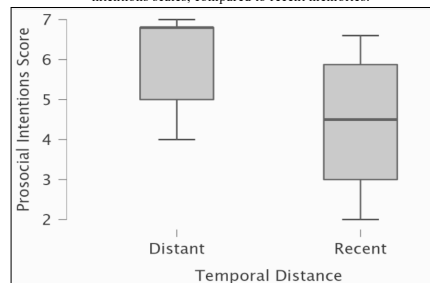
Scores are based on the average rating.



Prosocial intentions increase with more Distant and Benefactor memories



Distant memories indicate a higher mean and standard deviation on the prosocial intentions scales, compared to recent memories.



## Results

- A 2x2 ANOVA revealed that there was a significant interaction between role placement and temporal distance, as it related to prosocial motivation.
- There is a significant impact of temporal distance on the role people characterize themselves to be.

## Conclusion

- The results expand the understanding of prosocial motivation. Not only does one's self-perception impact their behavior, but the time in which they are reflecting impacts behavior.
- In addition, these results reveal how these findings are so salient, they impact behavior through social media posts
- Future research should examine an even larger temporal distance gap, as well as expanding the role types.
- Strengths of this research include the dual participant pools which allows the opportunity to widen the applicability of the conclusion, concrete prosocial intentions scale, and the fact within-subject study. However, the methodology is limited by participants' personal desire to post on social media. In addition, having such a specialized group of participants is a downfall. Further research should try to have a greater, representative sample size of posters.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all those who have supported me throughout this process. I would like to thank my family and friends, my honors cohort for their support, Dr. Jones, and my wonderful mentor Dr. Henderson, without his guidance, this project wouldn't be possible.

## References

- Bem, D. J. (1972). Self-Perception Theory | Development of self-perception theory was supported primarily by a grant from the National Science Foundation (GS 1452) awarded to the author during his tenure at Carnegie-Mellon University. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 6, pp. 1-62). Academic Press. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60024-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60024-6)
- Gino, F., & Desai, S. D. (2012). Memory lane and morality: How childhood memories promote prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(4), 743-758. APA PsycInfo. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026565>
- Grant, A., & Dutton, J. (2012). Beneficiary or benefactor: Are people more prosocial when they reflect on receiving or giving? *Psychological Science*, 23(9), 1033-1039. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797612439424>
- Kivetz, & Tyler, T. R. (2007). Tomorrow I'll be me: The effect of time perspective on the activation of idealistic versus pragmatic selves. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 102(2), 193-211. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.07.002>