

Uncovering a new angle on mental distance

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Why does the second hour of a journey seem shorter than the first? According to research from University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) and the Rotman School of Management, the answer lies in how we're physically oriented in space.

In a series of six studies, Sam Maglio, an assistant professor in UTSC's Department of Management, demonstrated that a person's orientation—the direction they are headed—changed how they thought of an object or event.

The research is forthcoming in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the

Association for Psychological Science.

"Feeling close to or distant from something impacts our behavior and judgment," says Maglio. "We feel more socially connected, more emotionally engaged, and more attuned to the present when something is perceived as close."

What we don't know is what leads to a feeling of closeness, he says. Previous studies have focused on changing objective measures, such as distance or time, to make something feel subjectively close or far.

"But people move around their environments, constantly going closer to some things and farther from others," says Maglio. "We wanted to see if this movement changed how people perceived their surroundings."

Using everyday locations and objects such as subway stations, lottery draws, and Starbucks drinks, Maglio and Evan Polman (University of Wisconsin-Madison) found that people heading in a certain direction considered the places ahead to be physically nearer than those behind, although the actual distance was the same.

People also felt events that occurred in the direction they were headed happened more recently and that those events would be more likely to occur. Interestingly, the feeling of closeness occurred regardless of whether events were good or bad. Strangers who were coming towards participants were thought to be more similar to themselves than when those same strangers were headed away.

Maglio says the research supports previous findings showing that something that feels close in one way, such as physical distance, will also feel close in time, probability, and social similarity. "That's why a phrase such as A long time ago in a distant land makes more intuitive sense than in a nearby land."

According to Maglio, this research could potentially impact business, such as retail:

"Firms that induce a sense of orientation towards the customer might be able to create psychological closeness and connection."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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