

# How past intentions influence generosity toward the future

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Professor Kimberly Wade-Benzoni studies intergenerational decision-making.  
Credit: Duke University

Over time, it really is the thought that counts – provided we know what that thought was, suggests new research from Duke University's Fuqua

School of Business.

Kimberly Wade-Benzoni found that our generosity toward future generations depends more on how we perceive the intent of past generations than how well those predecessors' decisions actually played out.

"Even when the outcome for the current generation wasn't favorable, that had less influence over decisions affecting future generations than knowing the previous generation meant well," Wade-Benzoni said.

"Awareness of [good intentions](#) among our predecessors helps propagate generosity toward those who come after us."

The findings provide a fresh understanding of ways to encourage responsible stewardship of resources, even when the decisions of the past did not lead to a prosperous present, Wade-Benzoni said.

The research, "It's the thought that counts over time: The interplay of intent, outcome, stewardship, and legacy motivations in intergenerational reciprocity," is newly published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Wade-Benzoni worked with Fuqua Ph.D. student H. Min Bang and Christy Zhou Koval of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

The team conducted five studies on what influences generosity in the present to beneficiaries in the future.

In one study, 80 participants chose how much [money](#) to leave behind for the next person to engage in the same decision-making task. Some were told the previous participant had left them the maximum allowed amount; others received the least. The amount each participant received was also influenced by a 50/50 lottery draw that could double the amount, or reduce it to zero.

Participants were more generous to their successors when informed that previous participants had generous intentions than were those who were told previous participants had selfish intentions – regardless of how much money they actually received.

"When allocating money to the next participant, people tended to rely on previous participants' [intention](#), regardless of the outcome inherited," Wade-Benzoni said.

Further studies explored other contexts. One put participants in charge of a hypothetical fishery that needed to cut its harvest in order to maintain the species' population. Another placed them in the role of an organizational decision-maker who was soon to retire, and asked them to decide how much money they would like to take out of a resource pool as their individual profits and how much money to leave behind for the firm and their next stakeholders' reinvestment. Participants were told how much their predecessor had taken, with the amount varied between conditions.

"Knowing the generous intentions of prior generations significantly increased the resource allocated for future generations in all five experiments," Wade-Benzoni said, "whereas selfish intentions had the opposite effect."

The last study was replicated, with participants first asked to write a brief essay about the ways in which they would like to have an impact on [future generations](#).

Activating that "legacy motivation" prevented people from modeling the self-serving behavior of prior generations, the researchers found.

"In the face of the previous stakeholders' selfish intentions, participants who were prompted to consider their legacy were more generous toward

their successor than those who were not," Wade-Benzoni said.

The findings highlight that forward-looking decisions do not take place in a vacuum – that history matters, Wade-Benzoni said.

"These are new insights about how a preceding generation's intentions can affect the present generation," she said, "and effectively nudge the current [generation](#) to consider its responsibility in caring for the [future](#)."

**More information:** H. Min Bang et al. It's the thought that counts over time: The interplay of intent, outcome, stewardship, and legacy motivations in intergenerational reciprocity, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2017.07.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.07.006)

Provided by Duke University

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