

Study is first to examine relationship between absolute and relative time estimates

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she is interested in the factors that impact employees' well-being. Her work appears in psychology and management journals, including *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, and *Journal of Personnel Psychology*. Credit: Rotman School

If you've ever noticed yourself thinking about the timing of a plan in two opposing ways—something that feels longer off than your actual time calculation—you're on to something. New research shows our different ways of estimating time don't necessarily move in lock-step.

Relative [time](#) estimates refer to how distant or close a future event feels, such as "soon" or "far away." Absolute time estimates however use objective units—days, weeks, months or years—to describe when an event may occur.

The study from researchers at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management revealed that when we consider unknown future events, such as when we'll use a [gift certificate](#), our relative and absolute time estimates tend to contradict each other. I'll use that gift certificate soon, we might think, even though our actual objective time estimate is three months from now.

As well, the frame of mind we bring to the consideration—whether we're thinking broadly and abstractly, or using more concrete, detail-oriented thinking—influences which direction our relative and absolute time estimates will flow.

Several experiments showed that abstract vs. concrete thinking tended to yield reverse results. Study participants induced into an abstract frame of mind felt that a personal activity would occur sooner than those thinking about the same activity who were in a concrete frame of mind. However,

when asked when the activity would take place in days or weeks, the abstract thinkers gave longer time estimates than the concrete thinkers.

"It reminds me that when I plan for the future, I shouldn't think just about what is the calendar date, but also how I'm looking at it—whether in an abstract or concrete mindset," said lead study author Jing Hu, a doctoral student in organizational behaviour and [human resource management](#), whose research was partly inspired by her own reflections on making plans to visit family. Sam Maglio, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Toronto Scarborough, who is cross-appointed to the Rotman School, co-authored the study with her.

In addition to the study's academic contributions, it suggests that frames of mind can affect the urgency we bring to completing tasks and projects. For example, using an abstract attitude by thinking about why we should do something vs. how, may yield a greater sense of urgency to getting it done, even though the actual time when it will occur is further away. That could be applied to a variety of situations, including leadership contexts, said Ms. Hu.

"If the leader creates a big vision for the subordinate, such as why their work is important, the subordinate will think about their work abstractly," she said. "Then, when the subordinate plans their future activities, the timing will feel shorter to them and they will start doing the work sooner because of the temporal pressure."

The study will appear in the May 2018 issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

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