

DOCTORAL THESIS

Past, present or future?: the effects of temporal focus on employees' discretionary behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Subjective time perception has received considerable attention in the past decade in management research. Organizational behavioral researchers increasingly emphasize the necessity of introducing a new perspective, the temporal perspective, to explore individual willingness to engage in discretionary behavior (i.e., organizational citizenship behavior and counterproductive behavior), as behavior entailing a temporal conflict of interest (e.g., short-term individual cost versus long-term individual and collective benefit). Temporal focus, defined as the degree to which people devote their attention to perceptions of the past, present, and future (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009), is a core concept in the study of subjective time perception. However, most research on temporal focus is descriptive and vague in terms of explicating the causal mechanisms from temporal focus to individual decision-making and behavior.

In this study, I use construal level theory to explain how temporal focus affects individual levels of mental construal, which in turn influences discretionary behavioral choices. Specifically, I propose that the effect of temporal focus on construal level is dependent on individual levels of need for cognition (NFC), defined as people's tendency to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activity (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). Specifically, when high NFC persons reflect on their past, they recall, re-experience, and reanalyze the facts and details stored in their memory, resulting in a concrete mindset (low construal level). In contrast, when people with low NFC reflect on their past, they only retain or extract the general experiences, feelings, and lessons, leading to an abstract mindset (high construal level). Regarding the focus on the present, when high NFC people think about their current situation, they tend to interpret every detail and the context, leading to a constrained and narrow mindset (low construal level). Conversely, when low NFC people think about their present, they are less analytical and tend to be receptive about what is happening, resulting in an abstract mindset (high construal level). Regarding the focus of the future, when high NFC people think about their future, without involving concrete facts and details, they are able to predict global trends and aim at the superordinate goal (high construal level). In contrast, low NFC people who are reluctant to analyze, predict, and plan the future tend to simply extend the current subordinate goal into the future or just enter "daydreaming" mode (low construal level).

Based on CLT, I further propose that temporal distance serves as a moderator exaggerating the abovementioned interactive effects of temporal focus and need for cognition. Specifically, when individuals higher in NFC think of their remote (versus recent) past, past focus has a stronger negative effect on their construal level; when those individuals who are lower in NFC think about their remote (versus recent) past, past focus has a stronger positive effect on their construal level. Similarly, when individuals with stronger NFC think of their remote (versus recent) future, future

focus has a stronger positive effect on their construal level; in contrast, when individuals who have lower level of need for cognition think about the remote (versus recent) future, future focus has a stronger negative effect on their construal level.

Regarding the interaction effect of different temporal foci, I argue that for individuals with low NFC, a temporal profile consisting of low past, low present, and high future focus results in the lowest level of mental construal; for individuals with a high need for cognition, low past focus, low present focus, and high future focus result in the highest mental construal level. Finally, I propose that high construal level leads to more OCB and less CWB by increasing individuals' ability to delay gratification (to forgo immediate desires for the sake of long-term rewards) and self-control (to resist short-term temptations and to refrain from impulsivity).

I conduct a lab experiment (study 1) and a field survey (study 2) to test the proposed relationships in the model. In study 1, by recruiting 218 undergraduate students and randomly assigning them to one of three conditions where they are asked to focus on a specified temporal period of either past, present, or future, I establish the associations among manipulated temporal focus, need for cognition, and construal level. In study 2, I survey 291 employees and their immediate supervisors three times to test the entire model. The findings of the two studies confirm almost all of the hypotheses.

In the section devoted to discussion, I further explore the data, findings, and theoretical and practical contributions. Finally, I discuss how this work has limitations and identify several directions for future research.

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