


An essay, "The Psychology of Transcending the Here and Now," by Nira Liberman and Yaacov Trope in last week's Science (downloadable on the author's page, [here](#)) reviews evidence for a remarkable kind of cognitive bias: it seems that the further away from yourself you think of something as being — in time, in space, in social distance — the more likely you are to categorise it in an abstract or holistic way. Here is the abstract:

"People directly experience only themselves here and now but often consider, evaluate, and plan situations that are removed in time or space, that pertain to others' experiences, and that are hypothetical rather than real. People thus transcend the present and mentally traverse temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and hypotheticality. We argue that this is made possible by the human capacity for abstract processing of information. We review research showing that there is considerable similarity in the way people mentally traverse different distances, that the process of abstraction underlies traversing different distances, and that this process guides the way people predict, evaluate, and plan near and distant situations."

The paper sells itself short with its rather plodding introduction, but if you want to be surprised go straight to Figure 3 which describes research showing that picture puzzles are easier to solve if you think of them as being part of a task you will face tomorrow rather than today!

Fig. 3. Items from the Gestalt Completion Test. Identifying the pictures (from top-right to bottom left: a boat, a rider on a horse, a rabbit, a baby) requires visual abstraction. Participants were better at identifying pictures that they believed were sample items of a more distant future task or a less likely task.