

The influence of future thinking on prosocial behavior

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INTRODUCTION

- Future thinking or prospection is the ability to mentally travel and explore possible futures (Atance & O’Neil, 2001)
- Cognitive functions such as episodic future thinking, episodic memories and perspective taking may share a common process: “scene construction” (Hassabis & Maguire, 2007)
- Mental simulations and episodic memories can foster prosocial intentions (Gaesser & Schacter, 2014)
- The link between future thinking and prosociality is not fully understood

OBJECTIVES

1. Test the link between future thinking and prosociality
2. Assess whether future thinking fosters prosocial behaviors
3. Assess whether there is a relationship between prosociality and empathic traits

METHOD

Participants

- **48 adults** (M age = 23.58 years, SD = 2.09; age range: 19-28 years)
- **No differences between the two conditions in education, age, prosocial behaviors** (measured with the Prosocialness Scale for Adults, Caprara et al., 2005), **empathic traits** (measured with the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index*, IRI; Davis, 1983) and **depression** (measured with the *Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale*; Radloff, 1977)

Procedure

- **Prospection Instructions** (n = 24): we induced future thinking with a variant of the **Personal Future Task** (MacLeod, et al., 1993). Participants generated as many future simulations as possible during one minute
- **Control Instructions** (n = 24): Participants in this condition were asked to name as many animals as possible during one minute (**Semantic Fluency Task**, Godefroy, 2008)
- After the future or semantic induction, participants played the **Zurich Prosocial Game** (ZPG; Leiber et al., 2011), an ecologic measure of prosocial behaviors.



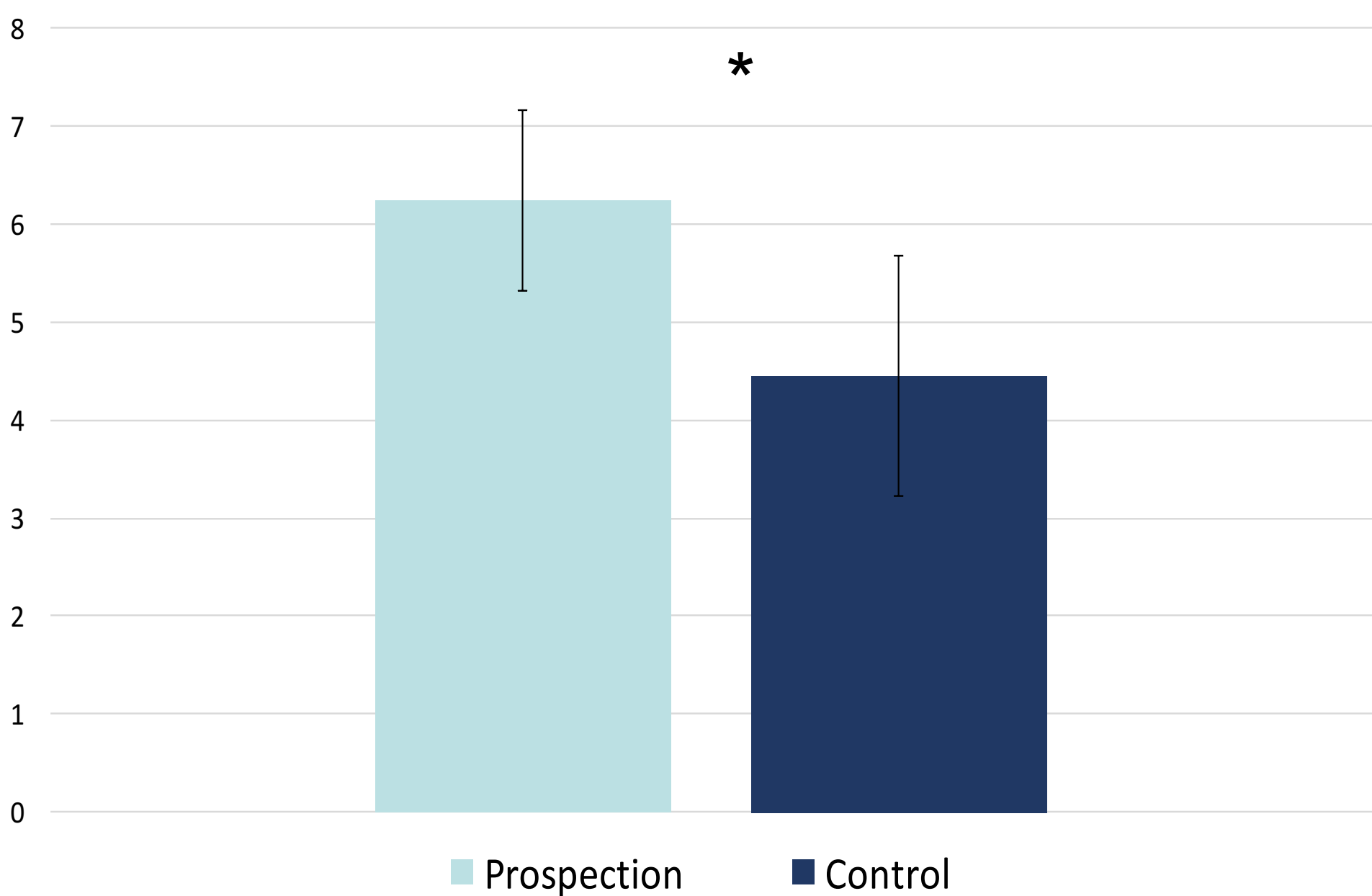
Figure 1. Game platform with the two players: character's participant (1) and fictional participant (2).

Participants were instructed to reach a treasure in a maze in a limited amount of time. **Every time the participant helped the other player, it was coded as a prosocial behavior.**

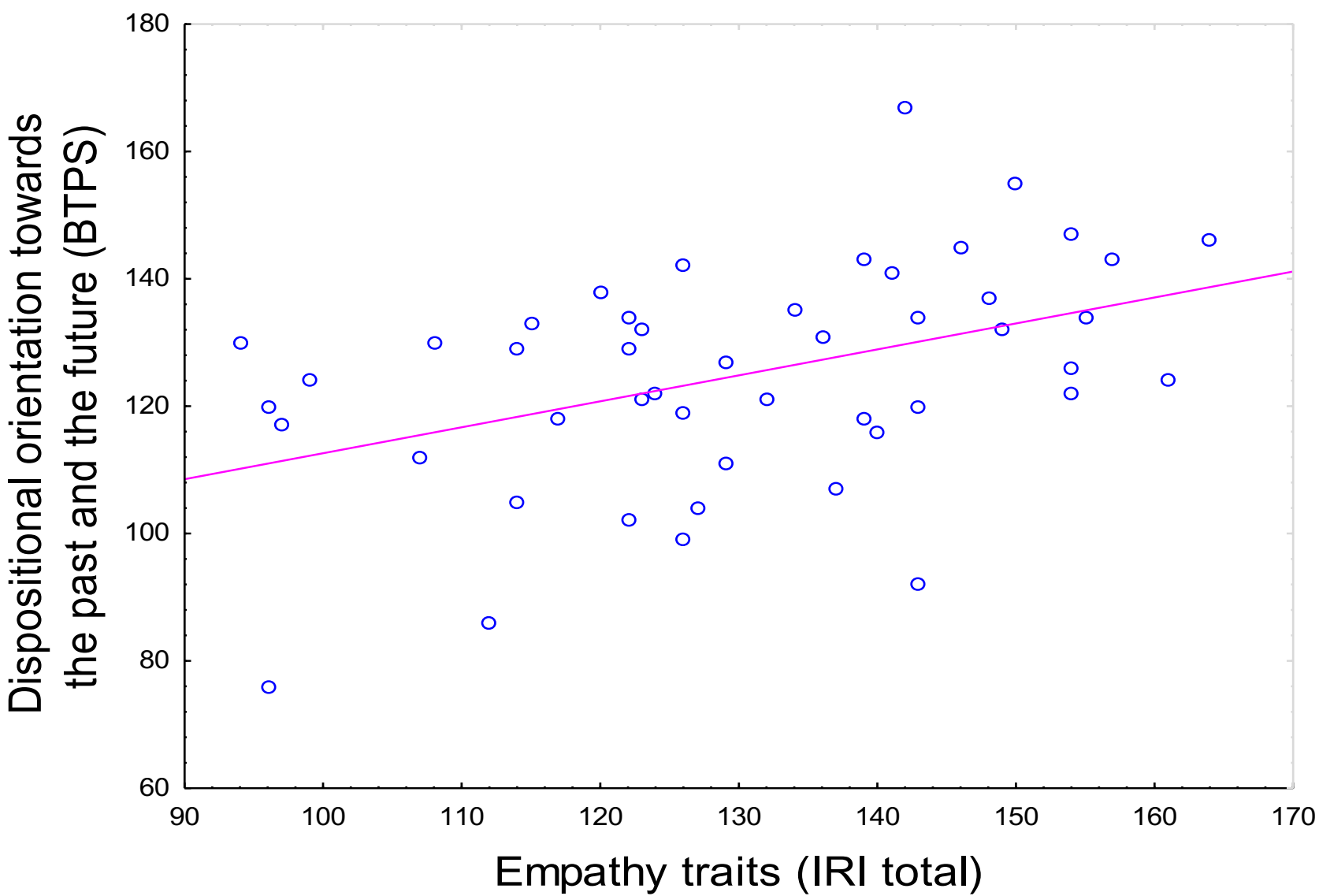
Dispositional orientations towards the past and the future were measured with the **Balanced Time Perspective Scale** (BTPS; Barsics et al., 2017)

RESULTS

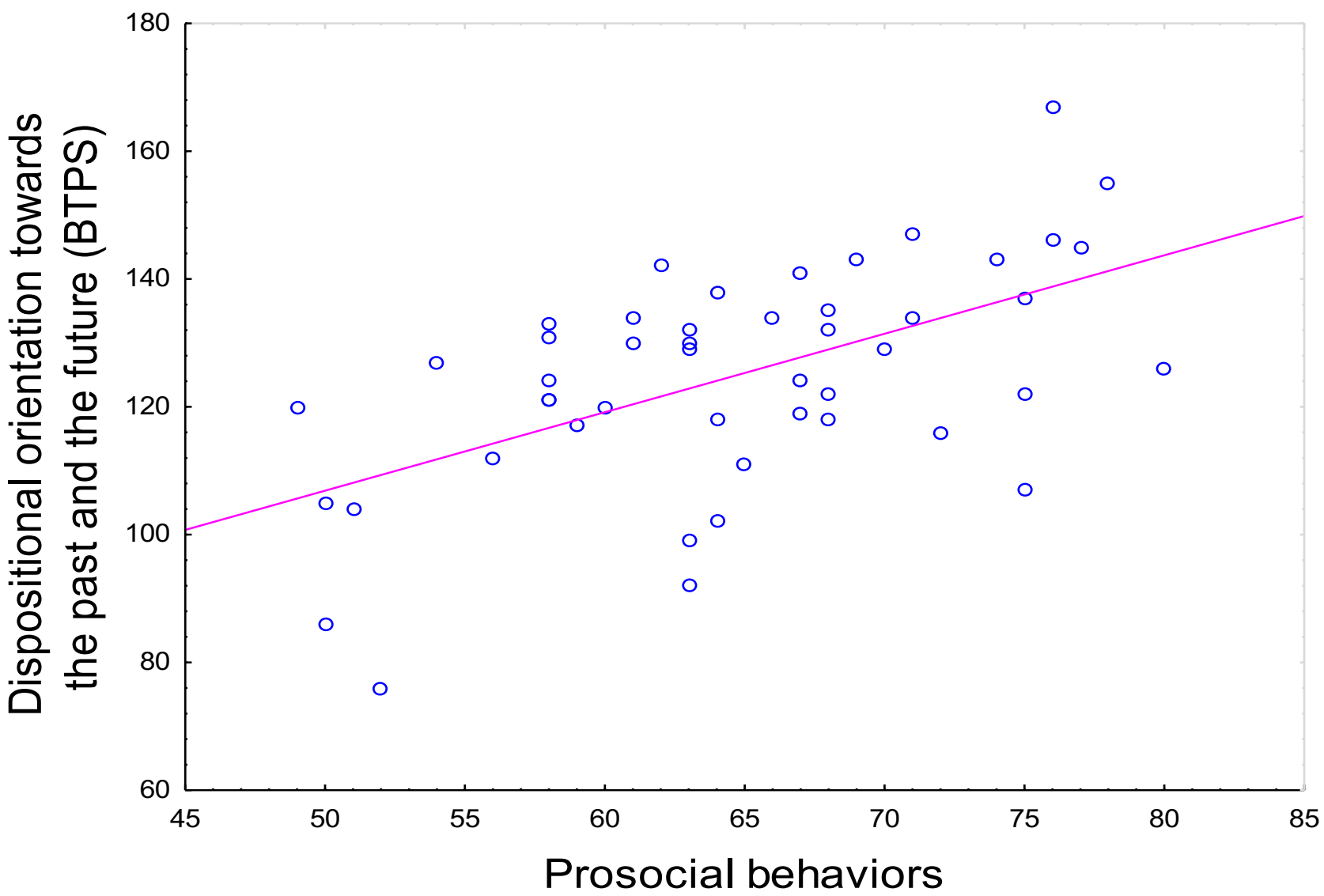
Effect of the prospection condition on helping: ANOVA: $F(1,46) = 8.11$; $p < .01$



Link between BTPS and empathy: $r = .43$, $p < .01$



Link between BTPS and prosocial behaviors: $r = .56$, $p < .01$



Empathic traits are related to prosocial behaviors in ZPG

Table 1
Intercorrelations between subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and helping behaviors

Empathic traits & Helping	Empathic concern	Perspective-taking	Fantasy
Perspective-taking	.47***		
Fantasy	.40**	.14	
Helping	.30*	.24°	.38**

Note. $N = 48$. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, ° $p < .10$

CONCLUSIONS

- Short-induction of **future thinking can foster prosocial behaviors**
- Tendency to **mentally travel in time** (dispositional orientations) **is related to empathic traits**
 - Future thinking and empathic thoughts **share common processes** (Hassabis & Maguire, 2007)
 - Future thinking enhances conflict resolution (Huynh et al., 2016) and reduces social discounting (Yi et al., 2016)
- **Empathic traits are related to prosocial behaviors**
 - Empathic concern predicts prosociality (Klimecki, 2015)

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