

Remembering before acting:

the role of episodic memory on future prosocial behavior in young children

Mélissa Vandenberg¹, Marie Geurten^{1,2}

¹Psychology and Neuroscience of Cognition Research Unit, University of Liège, Belgium, ²Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.–FNRS)

INTRODUCTION



Do you sometimes feel like acting slightly immorally once in a while is not so bad if you are generally good ?

- Episodic memory fulfills a **directive function** (i.e., guides our future decisions by using past expériences) which has been demonstrated to emerge early [1] [2].
- According to several studies, young children (older than 3.5 years) who recall a past good deed are more likely to engage in **prosocial behavior** again in the future [3]. But other studies showed contradictory effects [4]

→ **Moral licensing theories** suggest that recalling past prosocial actions can lead to subsequent immoral behavior through a compensatory mechanism [5].



Goals of this study

Document the relation between the recollection of a past good deed in children before 3.5 years old and :

1. The implementation of prosocial behaviors

2. The time children needed to decide whether to act prosocially or not

METHOD

PHASE 1 : encoding

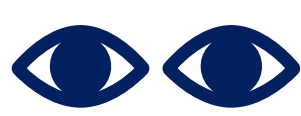
Children (N=134, 68 girls) aged between 24 and 47 months ($M = 34.2$; $SD = 6.13$), were randomly assigned to one condition :

Good deed

« Can you help me hide this birthday gift ? »



Neutral



One week later

PHASE 2 : retrieval

Free recall + cued recall → Total score (/ 7)

Hints (7 in total) : 2 objects (« box » and « gift »), 2 episodic details (« blue » and « red »), 1 action (« hiding »), 1 person (« woman »), 1 place (« under the table »)

PHASE 3 : prosocial behavior



Behavior coding :

Does the child help ?
(Yes = 1 / No = 0)

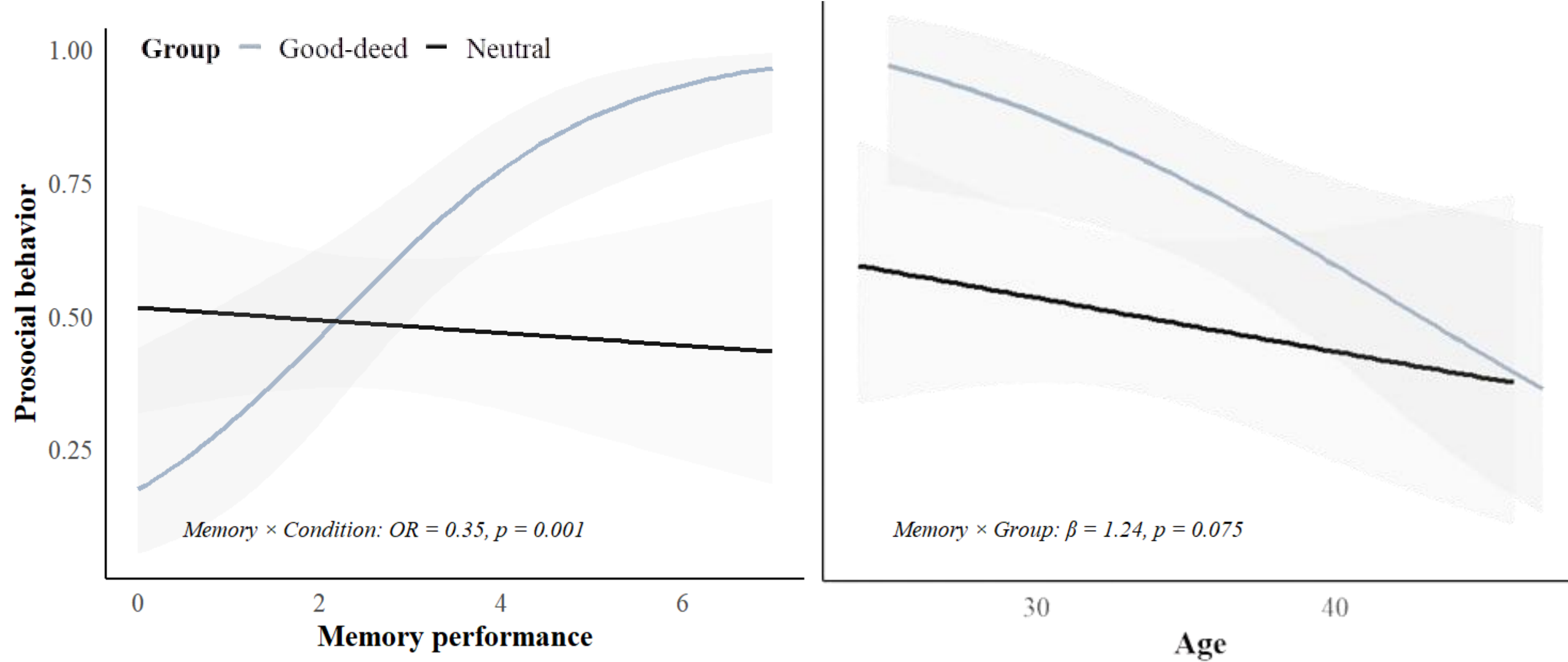
Time latency before helping
(seconds)

RESULTS

1. Implementation of prosocial behaviors

Logistic régressions showed : a significant effect of memory performance $odds = .01$, $SE = 2.78$, $Z = -1.60$, $p = .11$ and a significant interaction effect of condition x memory, $odds = .32$, $SE = .34$, $Z = -3.40$, $p < .001$. As well as a significant age x condition interaction, $odds = 1.22$, $SE = .09$, $Z = 2.13$, $p = .03$

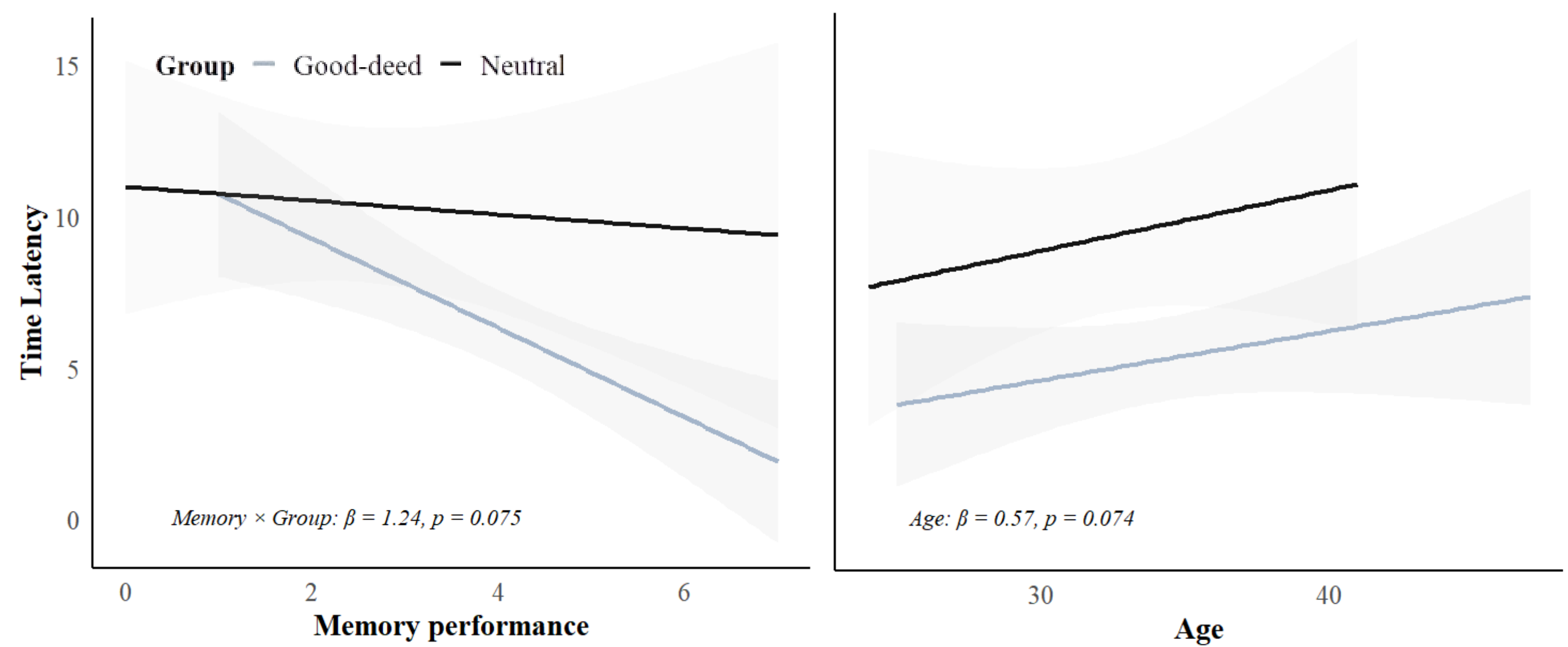
→ An increase in memory performance improved the propensity of helping behavior in the good deed condition, BUT a decrease in this propensity was observed as children grew older.



2. Time latency before acting prosocially (n=78)

Linear regressions reveal : a negative relation between time latency and memory performance, $b = -1.15$, $SE = .36$, $t = -3.17$, $p = .002$, $R^2 = .00$ and a significant effect of age, $b = .30$, $SE = .12$, $t = 2.55$, $p = .013$, $R^2 = .08$

→ Children with **higher memory performances** were slower to engage in a helpful behavior and latency scores tended to increase as children grew older.



CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

These findings highlight the key role of episodic memory in guiding prosocial decisions as young as 2 years old, and provides information regarding the mechanisms that may influence these decisions. Future studies should investigate these mechanisms longitudinally and observe other types of behavioral choices.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bluck, S., & Alea, N. (2011). Crafting the TALE: Construction of a measure to assess the functions of autobiographical remembering. *Memory*, 19(5), 470–486. [2] Wang, Q., Koh, J. B. K., Song, Q., & Hou, Y. (2015). Knowledge of memory functions in European and Asian American adults and children : The relation to autobiographical memory. *Memory*, 23(1), 25–38. [3] Tasimi, A., & Young, L. (2016). Memories of good deeds past: The reinforcing power of prosocial behavior in children. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 147, 159–166. [4] Furukawa, Y., Fuji, S., & Sugimura, S. (2023). Good children do not always do good behavior: Moral licensing effects in preschoolers. *Japanese Psychological Research*. [5] Mullen, E., & Monin, B. (2016). Consistency versus licensing effects of past moral behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 67(1), 363–385.

Illustrations were generated using ChatGpT4o image generator

Download
this poster

