

Reflecting on your legacy could make you more philanthropic, new research finds

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People have a tendency to leave their wealth to family members and other loved ones. However, Andrew Carnegie, a famously wealthy industrialist, once said "I would as soon leave to my son a curse as the

almighty dollar." Indeed, Carnegie donated over 90% of his fortune to charity.

New [research](#) in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* shows that people can be spurred to look beyond [close relationships](#) in favor of philanthropy by having them reflect on their legacy. The researchers called this phenomenon the "Andrew Carnegie Effect".

"As society grapples with sustainability and intergenerational responsibility, our findings provide a suggestion for potential policy nudges or public campaigns," says lead author, Ph.D. Candidate Jessica Paek, of Duke University. "By harnessing legacy motivation, organizations and governments can potentially encourage individuals to support efforts that address broader, global issues."

Across four studies that involved 3,656 participants, Paek and her collaborators found that when people are prompted to consider how their lives will impact [future generations](#), they allocate more of their wealth to collective causes like charities and less to [family members](#).

While this might appear to have a minor impact, magnifying it across a large population could have major societal benefits.

"If a large number of people make small contributions driven by this legacy reflection, the collective impact can effect significant positive societal change," says Paek. "This means that the average individual, upon reflecting on their legacy, can be inspired to engage in broader moral considerations, affecting not just their financial decisions but their daily actions and behaviors."

Paek cautions against overgeneralizing the current findings, which predominantly focused on [white people](#) in the United States. She also notes the potential short-term nature of the legacy reflection task and its

focus on monetary allocations in the current paper, but welcomes future research to examine its long-term implications beyond just monetary allocations.

Looking ahead to future research, Paek proposes tracking participants over time to determine the enduring impact of legacy reflection on how they distribute their wealth. She explains that it is also important to consider that [different cultures](#) can have varying interpretations of what constitutes a legacy, and understanding these nuances could help make legacy [reflection](#) more effective.

"The 'Andrew Carnegie Effect' as highlighted in our studies does not suggest that individuals should exclusively prioritize societal contributions over familial or close relational beneficiaries," says Paek. "Instead, it reveals the potential of broadening our sense of responsibility and beneficence when made to think about the long-term impact of our actions."

More information: The Andrew Carnegie Effect: Legacy Motives Increase the Intergenerational Allocation of Wealth to Collective Causes, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506231201684](#)

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