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Thinking about the past, present and future in adolescents growing up in Children's Homes



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A B S T R A C T

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The present study tested the hypothesis that adolescents growing up in Children's Homes differ from adolescents growing up in a family environment in how they think about their past, present and future, in the way they make decisions about future events and rewards, and in their levels of empathy and perspective taking. The participants were 40 adolescents from Children's Homes in Budapest, Hungary, and 40 age- and gender-matched controls. Group differences were found in participants' past and present time perspectives, and girls from Children's Homes showed reduced consistency in their plans for the future. Additionally, gender differences emerged in empathy, perspective taking, and in participants' present and future time perspectives. We discuss the implications of our findings for interventions to improve the future prospects of adolescents in Children's Homes.

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It is well-documented that children and adolescents in foster care, or who experience maltreatment, are more likely to engage in risky behaviours than children and adolescents who are raised by their parents. Although the types of risky behaviour exhibited by foster care youth do not differ from those exhibited by other adolescents, foster youth tend to engage in these behaviours at an earlier age, at a greater frequency, and with more intensity (cf., [McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliavin, 1996](#)). There are four major risk domains which have been investigated in foster care adolescents: sexual, delinquent, and self-destructive behaviours, as well as substance use ([Widom, 1994](#)). The typical problems identified in these domains include starting sexual relationships earlier, using inadequate contraceptive methods, having more partners, exchanging sex for money or drugs; engaging in criminal or violent behaviour; higher prevalence of suicide and self-harm; and experimenting more with alcohol and drugs, and starting at an earlier age (see [Taussig, 2002](#) for a review). It has been hypothesized that exhibiting such risky behaviours might be responsible for adverse outcomes after leaving foster care, such as not finishing secondary education, unemployment or even incarceration ([Courtney & Piliavin, 1998](#)). Further, recent findings suggest that decision processes might be impaired in foster care children ([Weller & Fisher, 2013](#)).

Given the abundant evidence for increased risk-taking in foster care youth, the aim of the present study was not to investigate risky behaviours in this population per se. Instead, we wanted to investigate some cognitive factors that are

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expected to be closely related to decision processes and risk-taking in adolescence. In particular, we aimed at investigating the following key questions. Is there a difference between adolescents growing up in Children's Homes (CH) and adolescents growing up in a family environment in how they think about their past, present and future? Do these groups differ in the choices and decisions that they make regarding present and future events and rewards? Finally, we were also interested in whether there is a difference between groups in their level of empathy and perspective taking. We decided to investigate these questions together, as the ability and propensity to consider future consequences have important implications for how people make decisions, both in laboratory experiments (e.g., Kirby & Marakovic, 1996) and in real life (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989; Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Additionally, empathy and perspective-taking skills might be linked to the way people project themselves in time (Buckner & Carroll, 2007). Indeed, people who are able to identify with their future selves, and to take their future selves' perspective, might think about their future more often, and might be more interested in future rewards than people who are less able, or less inclined to project themselves in time.

We chose adolescents as our participants for the following reasons. Thinking about and making plans for the future is especially important in times of developmental and personal transitions (cf., Seginer, 2008). Indeed, for young people in foster care adolescence is a time of transition in two different ways. Developmentally, adolescence is a time of pronounced changes in social-affective engagement, including increases in risk taking, motivation, and sensation seeking (Steinberg, 2008). Adolescence is also a period when individuals can actively prepare for the future by setting goals, planning, exploring options, and making commitments, and, thus, it can greatly influence a person's developmental course (Bandura, 2001; Nurmi, 1991). Additionally, for Hungarian adolescents, turning 18 is an important milestone, as this is when they reach the age of majority and finish secondary education. Indeed, for foster care youth, this is a time when they can choose to leave Children's Homes, and start an independent life. Given these considerations, adolescence is a particularly important period in determining the future prospects of foster care youth.

In the following sections we will introduce the measures that we employed in our study. With regard to thinking about the past, present and future, our main measures were Zimbardo and Boyd's (1999) time perspectives inventory (ZTPI), the future milestones task (Wilson & Daly, 2006), and the future discounting task (Kirby & Marakovic, 1996). Whereas the ZTPI is a self-report measure, which investigates people's attitudes towards their own past, present and future, the future milestones task involves both a self-report component, and behavioural measurement. Finally, the future discounting task is based entirely on participants' choices between response options. In addition to these measures, we also explored our participants' self-reported empathy and perspective-taking skills.

Time perspectives describe the way people think about, relate to, and interpret their own past, present and future (cf., Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999). Time perspectives are not objective reflections of a person's life, but they represent the way people "make sense" of events in their lives. Time perspectives are considered to be relatively stable personality traits (cf., Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999), and they are related to some very important real-life outcomes, such as risk-taking, health-related behaviours, coping strategies, and social status.

Zimbardo and Boyd (1999) described the following time perspectives. The *past negative* perspective reflects a negative, aversive view of the past, and it is associated with expressions of trauma, pain and regret. The *past positive* perspective entails a warm, sentimental attitude towards the past, and it is also associated with valuing family and traditions. The *present fatalistic* perspective describes a fatalistic, helpless and hopeless attitude towards the future, and life in general. The *present hedonistic* perspective is associated with a hedonistic, risk-taking, and "devil may care" attitude. Finally, the behaviour of people with a *future* time perspective is dominated by striving for future goals and rewards.

The present time perspectives (i.e., hedonistic and fatalistic) were found to be related to risky behaviours, such as risky driving (Zimbardo, Keough, & Boyd, 1997), substance use (Keough, Zimbardo, & Boyd, 1999), and having unprotected sex (Rothspan & Read, 1996). Participants with a present focus were also found to be less likely than future-orientated individuals to engage in certain health-protective behaviours, such as exercise and healthy eating (e.g., Mahon, Yarcheski, & Yarcheski, 1997), and condom use (Dilorio, Parsons, Lehr, Adame, & Carlone, 1993). With regard to coping strategies and social support, the past positive and future time perspectives were found to be related to adaptive coping strategies, whereas the past negative and the present time perspectives were associated with maladaptive coping (Holman & Zimbardo, 2009). Thus, although the ZTPI is based on self-report, time perspectives can be linked to people's actual real-life behaviour.

An additional task that we employed to assess the way our participants think about future events was the future milestones task (Wilson & Daly, 2006). A particularly interesting measure which can be derived from this task is an index of consistency in ordering future events. Participants have to make comparisons between important future events (such as finishing school and getting married), as well as these events and points in time in the future, and state which event/point in time from the pair will happen first. In the case of triads of events (e.g., events A, B and C), based on the pairwise comparisons, it is possible to tell whether the person has a consistent view of their future (for example, if event A happens before event B, and event B happens before event C, then it is necessary that event A will happen before event C). We expected that participants with more elaborated plans for their future would be more consistent in their choices.

Based on the comparisons between events and points in time, it is also possible to assess the planned time line of these events, and to compare the groups in terms of the time frame that they expect to reach these important future milestones. Such a comparison between groups is of potential interest, as people from disadvantaged backgrounds may have relatively compressed life courses, with realistic expectations of early reproduction, early deaths of relatives, and so forth (cf., Geronimus, 1996; Wilson & Daly, 2006).

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