



## Thinking further ahead: Can temporal distance in thinking about one's future influence affect experienced by people with low self-esteem?



Kinga Lachowicz-Tabaczek<sup>a,\*</sup>, Beata Bajcar<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Psychology, University of Wrocław, Poland

<sup>b</sup> Psychology and Ergonomics Group, Faculty of Computer Science and Management, Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Poland

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### ABSTRACT

People with low global self-esteem tend to have more negative self-evaluations and experience less positive affect than do individuals with high self-esteem. However, they appraise themselves better when thinking about the distant future than about the near future. The aim of this study was to determine if temporal distance in thinking about one's own future is also related to better affect in individuals with low global self-esteem. In Study 1 ( $N = 177$ ), wherein participants envisioned their future selves while comparing it with their present selves, people with low global self-esteem appraised themselves better in the distant than in the near future, and experienced, as a result, better mood and had higher state self-esteem. In Study 2 ( $N = 169$ ), in which participants assessed their future selves with no reference point, individuals with low self-esteem had better self-appraisals in the distant than in the near future. However, future thinking had no impact on their affect. These results suggested that the increased distance in thinking of one's own future is related to a better mood and more positive self-feelings among individuals with low self-esteem, but only when assessing their future self by comparing it to their present self.

### 1. Introduction

Global self-esteem is mostly understood as a generalized attitude or affect towards oneself (Baumeister, 1998; Rosenberg, 1965), and is considered a highly stable trait that plays a central role in self-structures (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012; Tesser & Martin, 2006; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2013). This central role manifests in how people differ in the way they think, evaluate themselves, and react to emotional self-relevant experiences according to their global (trait) self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem (HSE) perceive and evaluate themselves more positively than do people with low self-esteem (LSE) in almost all aspects of functioning (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Sinha & Krueger, 1998). They also have a tendency to experience positive affect more frequently and negative affect less frequently (Orth et al., 2012; Pelham & Swann Jr, 1989; Watson, Suls, & Haig, 2002), have higher life satisfaction, and are happier than are people with LSE (Diener & Diener, 1995; Lyubomirsky, Tkach, & DiMatteo, 2006).

Individuals with HSE react to positive results, such as success or positive feedback, with increased self-appraisals, mood, and positive feelings towards the self. Meanwhile, persons with LSE react to such events with various feelings—while they sometimes might experience

satisfaction (Brown, 2010), they can also experience anxiety or an increase in negative thoughts concerning the self (Heimpel, Wood, Marshall, & Brown, 2002; Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, & Ross, 2005). They also have a tendency to reject positive feedback or success at the cognitive level, perceiving it as not representative of the self or attributing it to external sources (Jussim, Yen, & Aiello, 1995).

People also react differently to failures according to their level of self-esteem. Persons with HSE respond to failures in a self-protecting way, attributing the failure to external factors or focusing on their own strengths, which allow them to sustain their mood and self-esteem effectively (Dodgson & Wood, 1998; VanDellen, Campbell, Hoyle, & Bradfield, 2011). By contrast, among individuals with LSE, failures result in a lowering of mood and state self-esteem. Their self-evaluation also drops, even in areas not directly related to the subject of the failure (Brown, 2010; Brown & Dutton, 1995). Furthermore, instead of protecting their mood, individuals with LSE might act in a way that leads to its further decrement (Smith & Petty, 1995), which might be reinforced by the belief that their negative mood is normal and acceptable (Heimpel et al., 2002; Mayer & Stevens, 1994).

Taken together, the above results indicate that affective and cognitive responses to events concerning the self are in many respects consistent with an individual's self-esteem (Swann Jr., Rentfrow, &

\* Corresponding author at: Institute of Psychology, University of Wrocław, ul. Dawida 1, Wrocław 50-527, Poland.  
E-mail address: [kinga.lachowicz-tabaczek@uwr.edu.pl](mailto:kinga.lachowicz-tabaczek@uwr.edu.pl) (K. Lachowicz-Tabaczek).

Guinn, 2002; Wood et al., 2005). What is obviously beneficial for individuals with HSE might create an internal barrier to improving self-image and affect among individuals with LSE. This can create a vicious circle, with low self-esteem driving down an individual's efficiency both in the achievement (see Brockner & Hultton, 1978) and interpersonal domains. Research on social relations indicates that a decrease in the quality of social bonds as a result of low self-esteem predicts health problems, which reciprocally leads to the further lowering of self-esteem (Stinton et al., 2008).

Nevertheless, when considering the beneficial consequences of a positive self-image and the power of egotistical drives, it can be presumed that individuals with LSE do want to appraise themselves positively (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003; Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, to fulfill that desire, they seem to require conditions favorable to increasing their need for a positive self-evaluation and to ascertain their own potential for improvement (Brown, Farnham, & Cook, 2002). Potentially, thinking about one's future can create these conditions by inspiring people to think about possible, future improvements and positive changes in the self.

### 1.1. *The future self and current affect*

When thinking about their past, people tend to recall both positive and negative experiences. Sometimes, they even downgrade their past selves to put their present state in a better light (Wilson & Ross, 2001). When imagining the future, however, most people seem to focus on positive scenarios (Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003; Robinson & Ryff, 1999). It manifests in that appraisals of one's future self improves as the future temporal distance considered increases (Heller, Stephan, Kifer, & Sedikides, 2011; Kanten & Teigen, 2008; Lachowicz-Tabaczek & Bajcar, 2017; Weinstein, 1980).

Drawing on existing theoretical approaches on the mechanisms of thinking about the future, it is reasonable to expect that focusing on the future at different temporal distances might have influences not only on future self-appraisals but also on currently experienced affect. An image of one's future self might activate various possible representations of the self related to one's wishes and goals (Markus & Wurf, 1987) that have not been realized yet but could be fulfilled in the future. This might create hopes for development and improvements (e.g., through convictions such as “I can be a different, better person in the future”) leading to a rise in their current affect.

Focusing on a more distant future self might also lead to a feeling of lack of continuity in one's self-image (Hershfield, 2011), which can have positive impact on the present affect by allowing individuals to emotionally distance themselves from the currently experienced stress and negative emotions (Raney, Bruehlman-Senecal, & Ayduk, 2017).

Thinking of different temporal representations of the self also activates temporal comparisons. According to the assumptions of temporal self-appraisal theory (TSA), temporal comparisons might have similar consequences to social comparisons (Wilson & Ross, 2001)—that is, with one subject of the comparison being perceived as better, and the other being viewed in a less positive light. Studies have indicated that having a more negative assessment of one's past self might enhance one's perception of the present self (Wilson & Ross, 2001). However, the present self might be viewed in a less favorable light when compared with a highly positive image of one's future self, especially a self viewed at a greater future distance (the near future self is usually perceived as an element of the present self; see Wilson, Buehler, Lawford, Schmidt, & Yong, 2012). The consequences of such temporal comparisons for current affect might depend on how much the individual cares for their present self.

### 1.2. *Self-esteem and consequences of thinking about the future*

In most situations, both LSE and HSE individuals (Lachowicz-Tabaczek & Bajcar, 2017; Stephan, Sedikides, Heller, & Shidlovski,

2015), along with people with depression (Sokol & Serper, 2017), exhibit more positive predictions concerning their future self with increasing temporal distance. The results of research on how HSE and LSE individuals appraise themselves in the near and distant future also make it reasonable to claim that the tendency for LSE individuals to appraise their distant future self as better than their near future self is highly consistent. Specifically, regardless of the method used for appraising their future self (i.e., by comparing it to the present self or to other people, or with no point of reference), LSE individuals tend to appraise themselves better in the distant than in the near future. Additionally, this occurred regardless of the dimensions on which the appraisal was made, namely, on specific dimensions of the self (e.g., achievements or social competencies) or on general traits (e.g., conscientiousness). By contrast, among HSE individuals, this effect occurred only when they appraised themselves on general dimensions (Lachowicz-Tabaczek & Bajcar, 2017). Taking into account the above-mentioned mechanisms of thinking of the future, we predict that the process of envisioning the distant future (as compared to the near future) will be especially beneficial for LSE individuals and might lead not only to better future self-appraisals but also higher current mood and positive feelings towards the self.

Possibly, the perceived discontinuity between the present and distant future self allows LSE individuals to think of their current, less positive self-appraisals as non-permanent and susceptible to possible improvement. This possibility would make the perspective regarding the fulfillment of the representations of possible, desired selves (Markus & Wurf, 1987) more plausible, which should have a positive effect on their current mood and temporary feelings towards the self. The perception of the present self-image as non-permanent may be less desirable for HSE individuals, as they may be mostly interested in maintaining their current positive self-view in the future.

Drawing on the assumptions of TSA theory (Wilson et al., 2012), we might also predict that temporal comparisons between the current and future self are more beneficial for LSE individuals, especially when the future distance is high. Whereas a very positive appraisal of one's distant future self might be threatening to the positive current self-image of HSE individuals, those with LSE might obtain emotional benefits from such appraisals by thinking about possible changes to aspects of their current condition that they are unsatisfied with.

### 1.3. *The present research*

The present research builds on the results of prior studies concerning the relationship between self-esteem and thinking about one's future self, which have suggested that the more distant the future imagined, the better LSE individuals appraise their future self (Lachowicz-Tabaczek & Bajcar, 2017). However, as in another study that considered the role of self-esteem in assessing one's future self (Stephan et al., 2015), the focus of this previous study was on the influence of thinking about one's future on the cognitive-evaluative processes involved in making self-appraisals. Therefore, the present study sought to determine if the relationship between future temporal distance and current affect—including mood and current feelings towards the self (i.e., state/momentary self-esteem)—is moderated by level of global self-esteem. Relying on the mechanisms described earlier and the consequences of thinking about the future, we hypothesized that only LSE individuals would have a significantly better mood and higher state self-esteem when thinking about the distant future (as compared to thinking about the near future). We also assumed that this relationship between future temporal distance and affect in LSE individuals will be mediated by their future self-appraisals.

In both studies, we tested the same model of the assumed relationships between the analyzed variables (Fig. 1) by using two different methods of appraising the future self. In the first study (Study 1), the appraisals were made in comparison with the present state (which we termed *comparative future self-appraisals*). In the second (Study 2),

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