

“The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward”: Past duration predicts individual and collective environmental decision-making

H. Min Bang^{1*}, Hal E. Hershfield², Elke U. Weber³

¹Duke University, ²New York University, ³Columbia University

ABSTRACT

This research highlights the importance of both temporal framing and psychological connection to future generations in long-term decision making. It suggests an intuitive sense of a society’s past duration mirrors its future continuation, and therefore leads to greater concern for long-term social issues such as environmental sustainability. Participants who were primed to think of one’s country as a long-standing entity donated more money to an environmental organization than did those prompted to think of the country as a more recent entity. This framing effect was particularly more robust for individuals who felt a stronger sense of closeness to future generations.

INTRODUCTION

*“The longer you can look back,
the farther you can look forward.”*

— Winston Churchill, 1944
(quoted by Langworth, 2011, p. 576)

This research examined the time horizon in a country’s collective mindset that mirrors the length of the country’s existence as a possible psychological determinant of pro-environmental behavior.

Gott’s principle:

Our prediction is grounded in theory by Gott (1993, 1994). According to Gott’s principle, the best estimate of the future duration of an entity is its past duration. This reasoning suggests that a good estimate of the remaining time of one’s country’s existence is its past duration. In other words, one should mirror its past duration into the future.

Psychological closeness to future generation:

Pro-environmental behaviors and willingness to invest in long-term concerns involve making trade-offs between current economic costs and current and future environmental benefits (Wade-Benzoni, 2002). For a prompt such as a long perceived country future to be effective in activating the goal of providing for future generations, a sense of emotional connection to future generations may also be required (Wade-Benzoni, 2008).

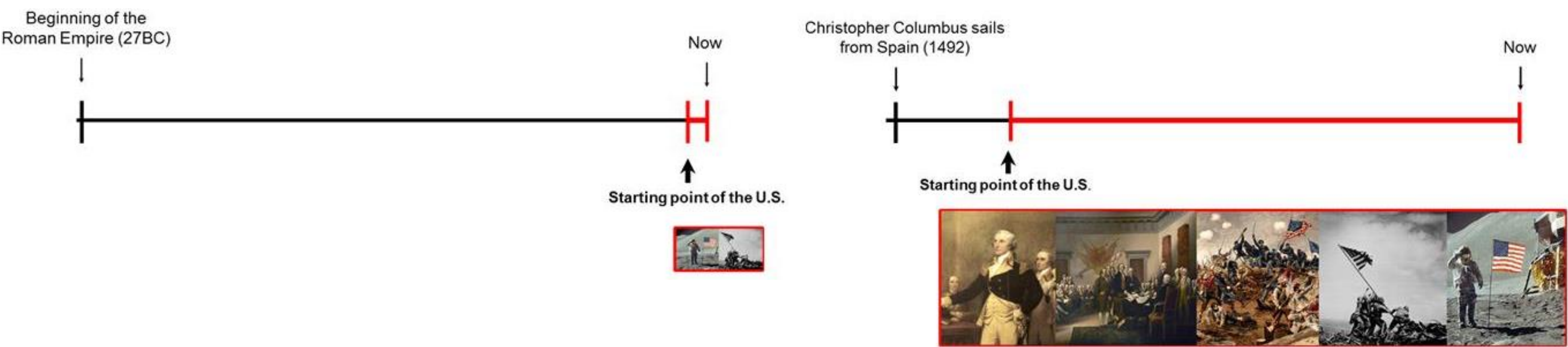
Hypotheses

1. A longer past would implicitly suggest a longer and less uncertain future and prompt environmental concerns and actions.
2. Manipulations that influence perceived country duration would be particularly effective in influencing pro-environmental behavior among individuals who felt a strong sense of connection to future generations.

STUDY DESIGN

Online participants (N=308) were shown one of two history timelines below, which were designed to influence their subjective feeling of temporal distance via the spatial distance between the endpoints (Wilson & Ross, 2003).

Temporal framing manipulation



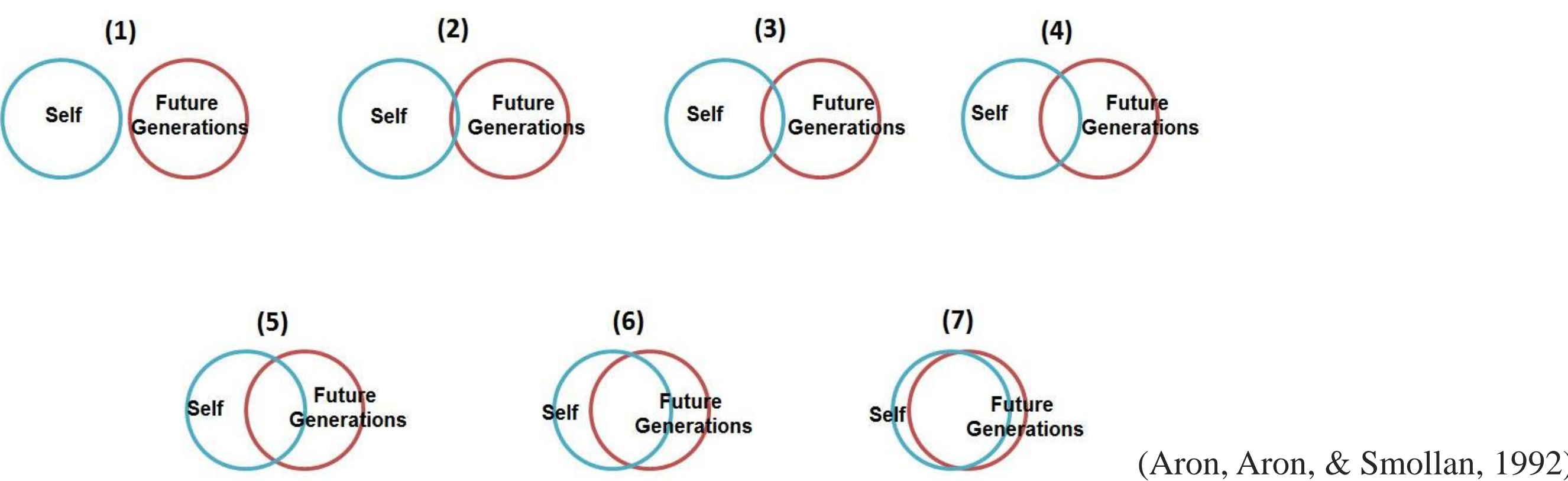
“Many historians often use the start of the Roman Empire (27 BC) as a reference point in world history. In this regard, the United States is relatively young and immature. In terms of a human lifetime, America would be a newborn baby.”

“Many historians often use the voyages of Christopher Columbus and the discovery of America (1492) as a significant marker in modern world history. In this regard, the United States is relatively old and mature. In terms of a human lifetime, America would be an 80-year-old man.”

Willingness to invest in environmental sustainability

“In this study, one randomly selected participant will win an additional \$50 bonus. We would now like to give you the option of making a real donation to the organization/NGO described below using part of your \$50 bonus. If you are the one person selected to receive the \$50 bonus for your participation, please tell us whether you are willing to donate part of your bonus to that organization/NGO, and if so, **how much would you donate (from \$0 to \$50)?** We will make that donation on your behalf.”

Psychological closeness to future generations



RESULTS

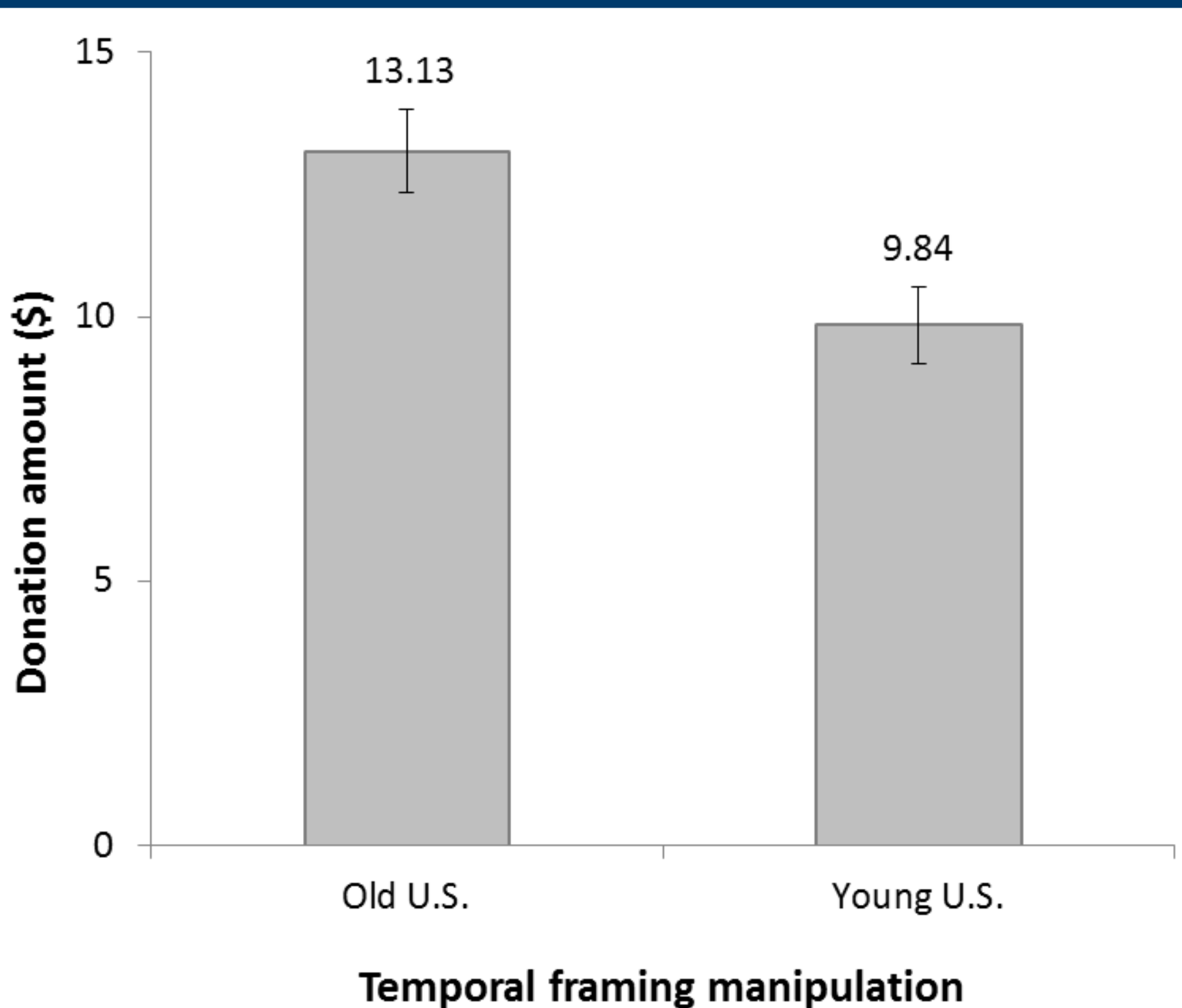


Figure 1. The difference between the mean donation amount. Participants induced to think about the United States as a country with a longer history were willing to donate significantly more of their earnings to an environmental fund ($M_{Old} = \$13.13$; $M_{Young} = \$9.84$), $t(306) = 2.17$, $p < .05$.

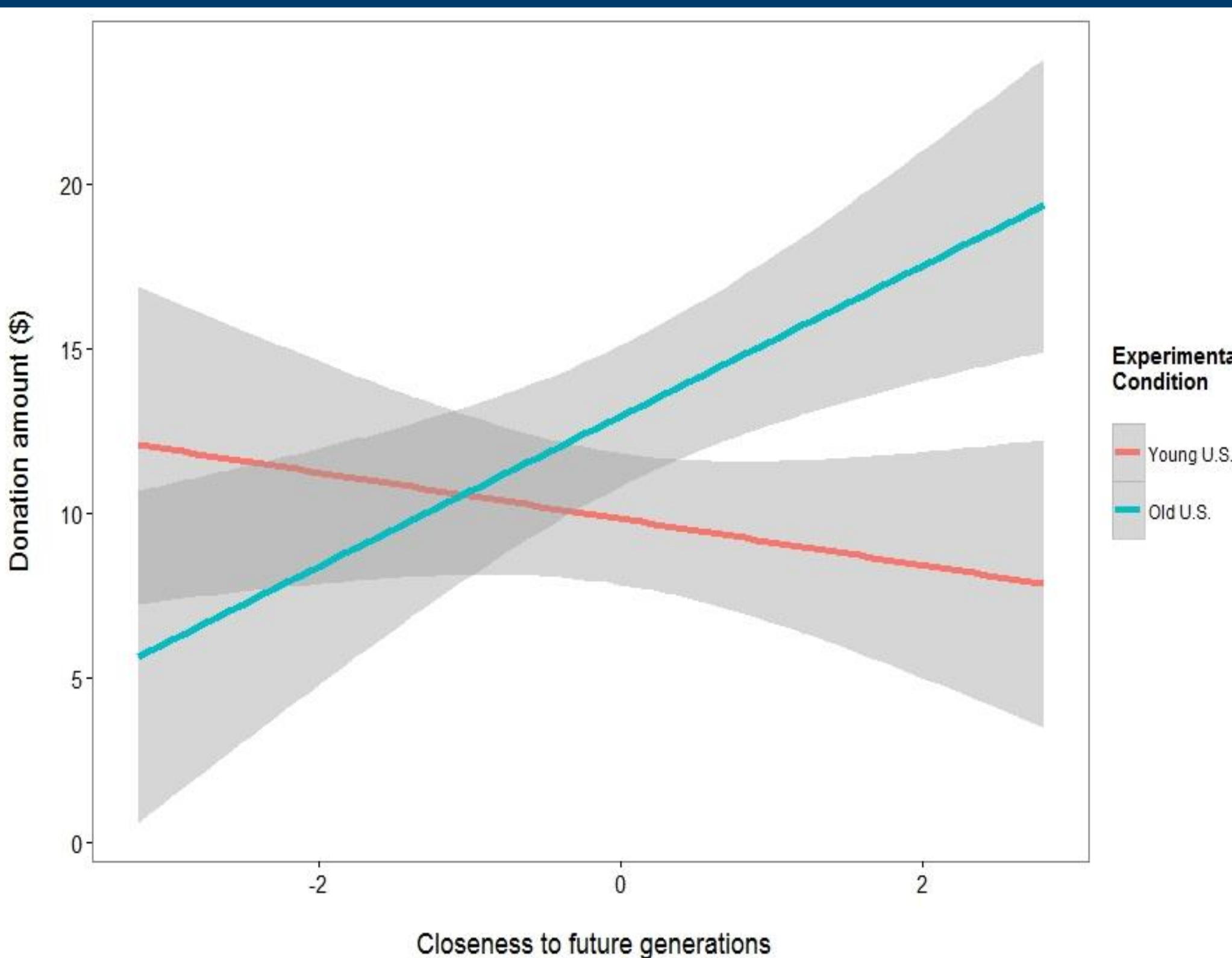


Figure 2. Predicted donation amount (with 95% confidence band) as a function of closeness to future generations in the two experimental conditions. Participants who felt close to future generations were affected by the experimental manipulation, $t(307) = 3.52$, $p < .001$

DISCUSSION

- Participants induced to think about the United States as a country with a longer history were willing to donate significantly more of their earnings to an environmental fund than were those prompted to think about the United States as a country with a short history.
- Participants who felt close to future generations were affected by the experimental manipulation, and the closer they felt, the more they were affected. However, participants who were low in closeness to future generations were not affected by the manipulation.

Conclusion

A country’s past duration may act as a mirror for estimates of its possible future duration. The longer the future appears to be, the more likely people are to act in pro-environmental ways, if they feel connected to future generations.

Implications

- Prompts that simply compare a given country with a shorter-lived entity or that promote the country’s historic past rather than existence in its current political identity may effectively change long-term environmental behavior.
- Selective prompts targeting of existing groups may be more effective at influencing behaviors than broad nudges to change behavior in directions that increase public welfare. For example, messages that appeal to a country’s long past and perceived long future could be strategically placed in areas populated by individuals who have good reason to care about future generations.

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*E-mail: hb71@duke.edu

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