

Identity over time: Perceived similarity between selves predicts well-being ten years later

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Introduction

Abstract

When individuals feel similar to their **future self**, they are more likely to delay present gratification and make plans for the long-run. But do these feelings of **similarity** actually correspond with heightened **well-being** for the future self? Controlling for initial life satisfaction, greater perceived similarity to the future self is associated with greater life satisfaction ten years after the original prediction.

Data

National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS)

- 4,963 respondents in two-wave panel (Wave 1 ~1995, Wave 2 ~2005)
- 1995 Gender: 53% female
- 1995 Age: mean = 46.5, min = 20, max = 75

Research Question

How do perceptions of the future self – held earlier in life – correspond with well-being ten years later?

Independent Variable

The survey asked, for example:

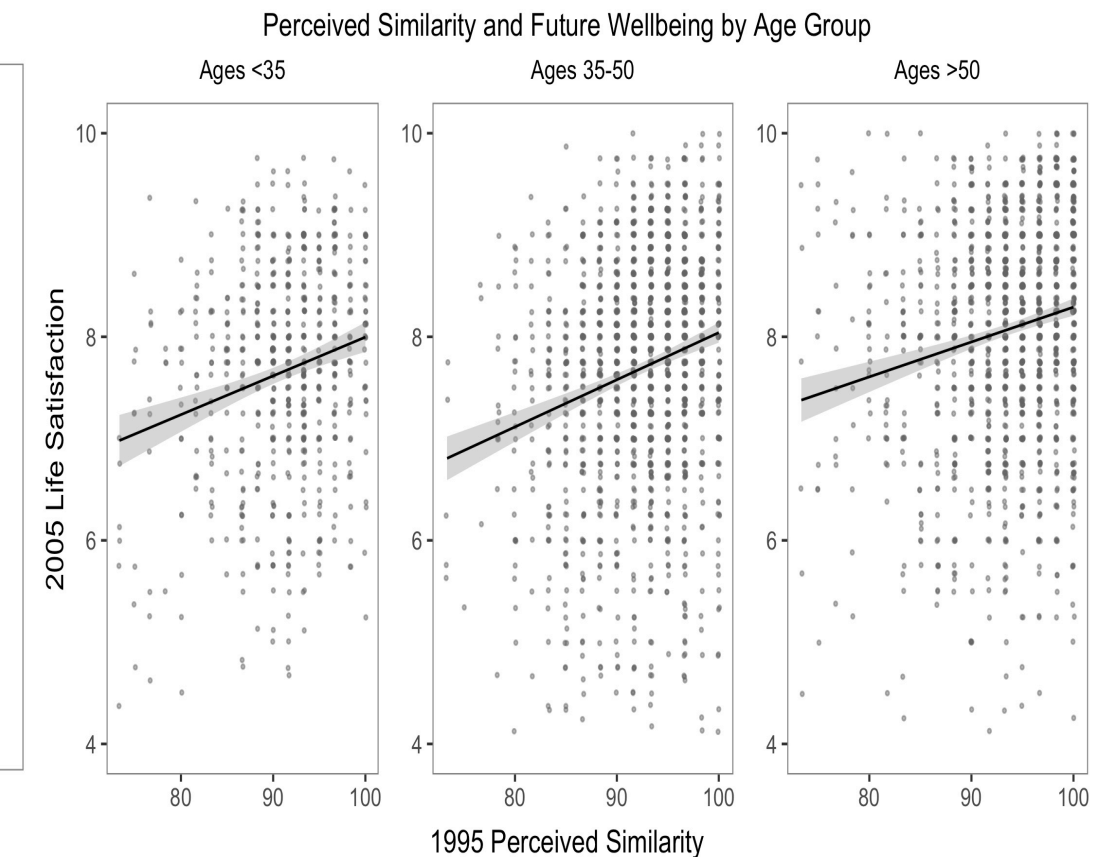
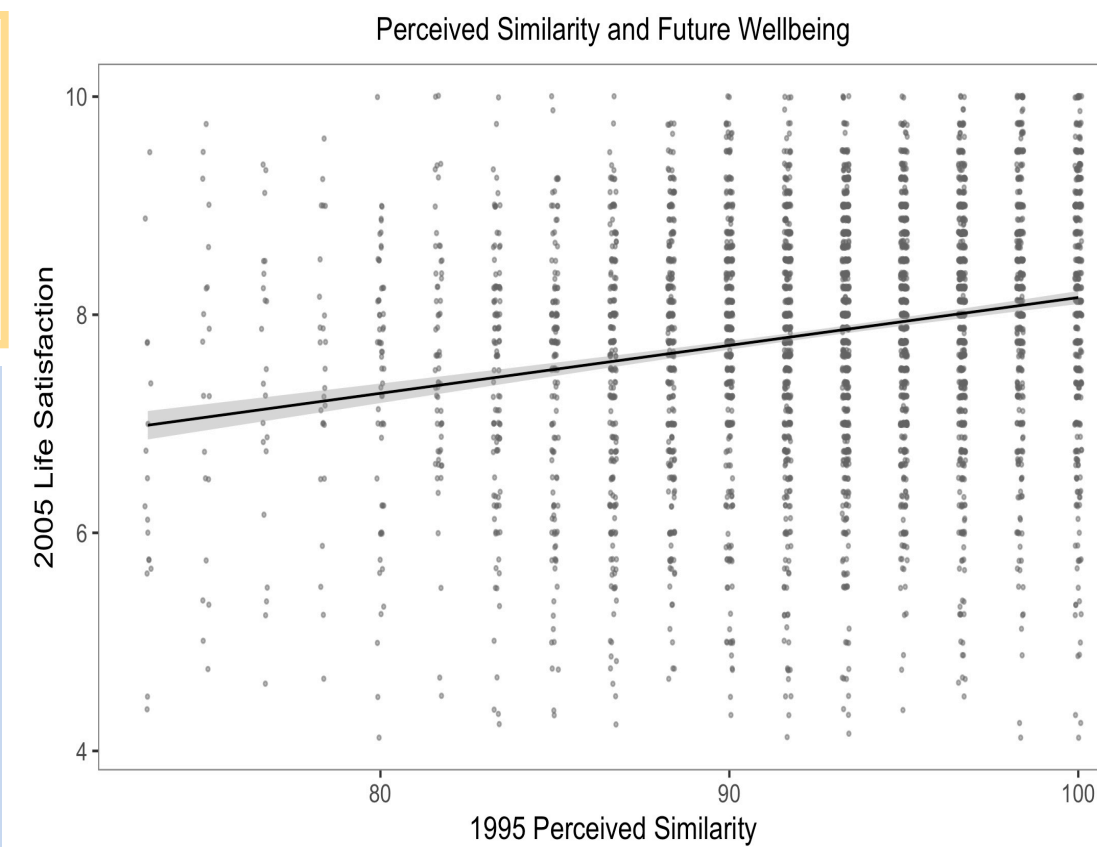
- a. How calm and even-tempered are you **now**? 0–10
- b. How calm and even-tempered do you think you will be **10 years from now**? 0–10

- **Perceived similarity**: calculated the absolute difference of the two variables above (for six different traits), reverse-coded the difference scores, aggregated together, and scaled such that 100 = complete similarity

Dependent Variable

- 2005 **life satisfaction**: combined 5-item response across different life domains

Results



Primary Analysis

	Dependent variable: 2005 Life Satisfaction		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
1995 Perceived Similarity	0.206*** (0.171, 0.241)	0.172*** (0.137, 0.207)	0.065*** (0.033, 0.098)
1995 Log Income		0.024 (-0.013, 0.060)	0.044** (0.014, 0.075)
1995 Education		0.097*** (0.063, 0.130)	0.081*** (0.051, 0.110)
1995 Age		0.157*** (0.122, 0.191)	0.085*** (0.054, 0.116)
1995 Gender		0.062*** (0.030, 0.094)	0.047** (0.018, 0.075)
1995 Life Satisfaction			0.495*** (0.463, 0.527)
Constant	0.020 (-0.012, 0.052)	0.002 (-0.029, 0.034)	-0.008 (-0.036, 0.020)
Observations	3,586	3,586	3,586
R ²	0.042	0.071	0.291

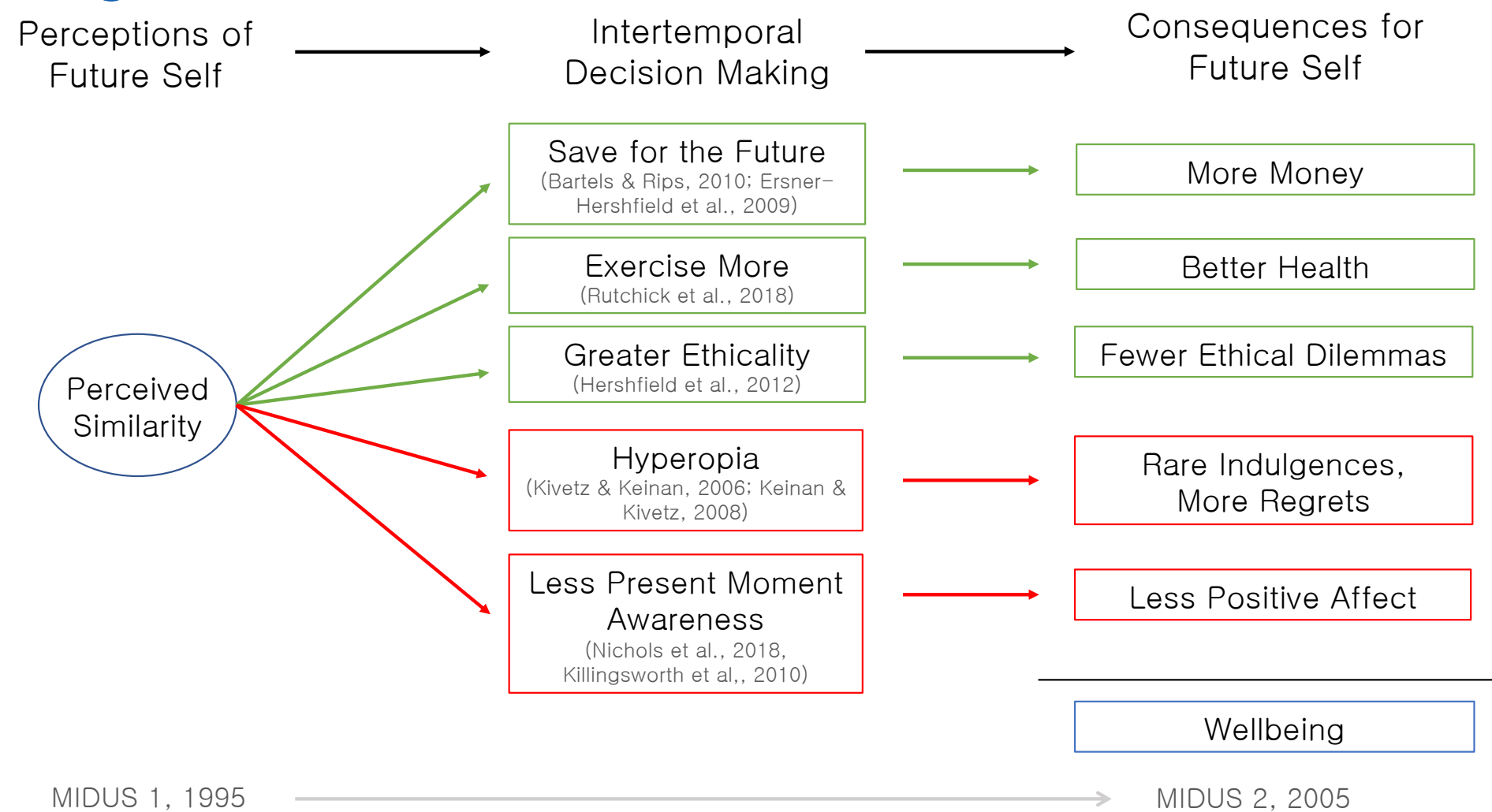
Note: The 95% confidence intervals are displayed below the estimated coefficients. All reported standard errors are heteroskedasticity-robust. Gender is contrast coded with 1: female and -1: male. All other variables are standardized. *p < 0.05. **p < 0.01. ***p < 0.001.

Summary of Findings

Perceptions of similarity at one time point are positively linked to well-being ten years later.

- Regardless of whether people predicted their traits to improve or decline, greater perceived dissimilarity in either direction was associated with less future well-being
- Not driven by the actual similarity respondents experience over the ten years
- Not moderated by age (or other demographics)

Background



Secondary Analyses

- Directional results
- Actual similarity
- Including outliers
- Using alternate dependent variables
- Controlling for optimism

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