

Introduction

❖ Would people feel worse about themselves in the present after thinking about their future (vs their past)?

❖ While counter-intuitive, individuals think of their temporally distant selves more like an other than their self (O'Brien, 2015; Pronin, Olivola, & Kennedy, 2008; Wilson & Ross, 2001).

❖ When evaluating the ability of temporally-distant selves, people tend to think of their past as being worse and their future as being better (O'Brien, 2015; Wilson & Ross, 2001).

❖ However, social comparison with better others harms one's current disposition in relevant domains. Inversely, social comparisons with worse others improves one's current disposition in relevant domains.

Do people contrast their current selves against their own organically-imagined bleak pasts and rosy futures?

❖ We hypothesized that individuals lead to think of their future self would rate present evaluations on a given trait as worse than individuals lead to think about their past self.

Methods

❖ We recruited 250 participants from mturk for Study 1 and 201 participants from mturk for Study 2.

❖ We recruited 361 participants from first and second year psychology subject pools for Study 3.

❖ Participants were randomly assigned to a temporal distance condition (future vs. past). We prompted participants to either recall their past selves or imagine their future selves and write 5 traits about that individual. We then asked participants to rate how wise that individual was/will be on a 7 point scale, where 1 indicated "not wise at all" and 7 indicated "very wise".

❖ Participants then completed a brief filler task asking their opinions on charter schools and education policy in the past and future.

❖ Lastly, participants were then asked to rate how wise they felt their present self was on a 7 point scale, where 1 indicated "not wise at all" and 7 indicated "very wise".

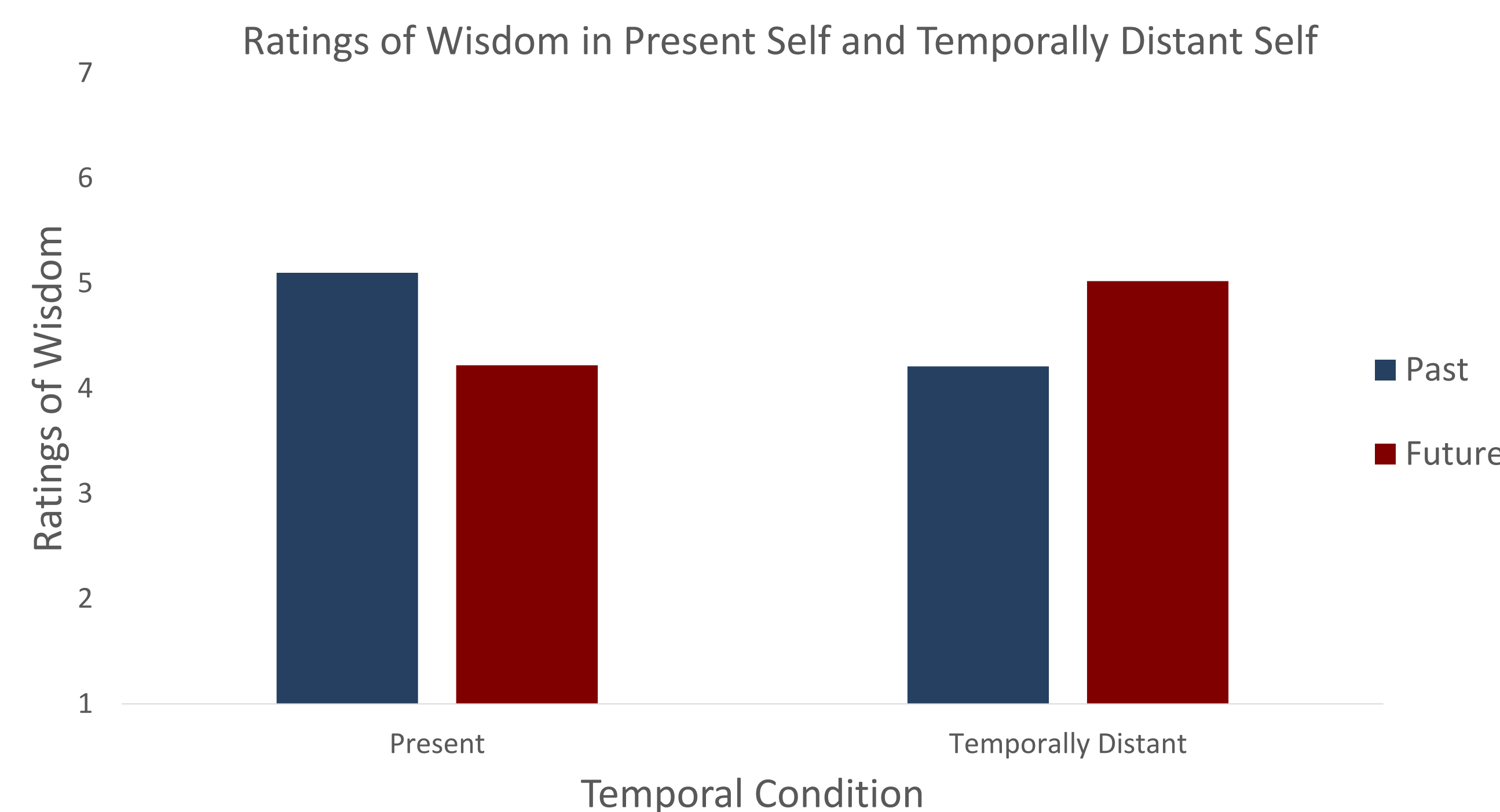
❖ We used independent samples t test to test differences between both distant and present wisdom scores based on temporal comparison target.

❖ All hypotheses were pre-registered at:
<https://osf.io/hmyng/registrations>

Results

❖ **Study 1:** Participants evaluated their **past** as **less wise**, ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.53$) and their **future** as **more wise** ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(216) = -4.74$, $p < .001$.

❖ Participants who were directed to recall their **past selves** demonstrated higher ratings of present wisdom ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.30$) than those directed to imagine their **future selves** ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(242) = 5.40$, $p < .001$.

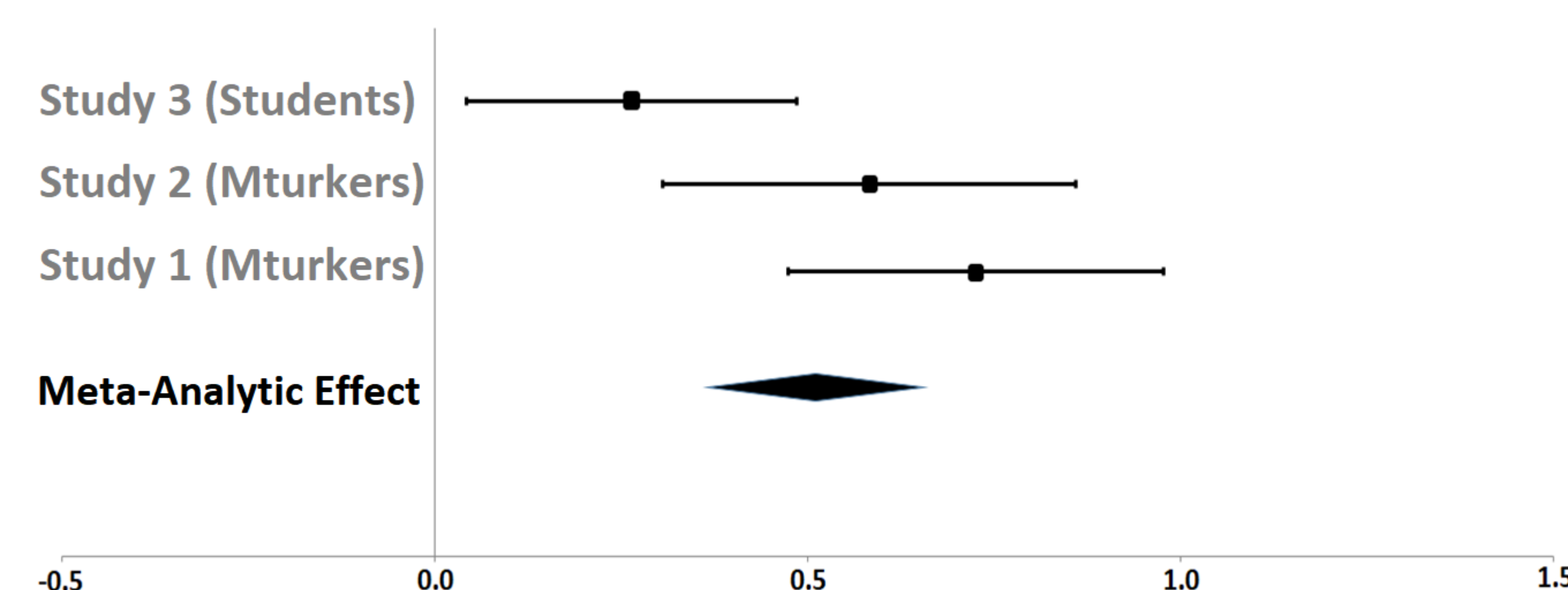


❖ **Study 2:** We replicated the effect found in Study 1, showing that present evaluations of wisdom were affected by thinking of **past** ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.28$) and **future** ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.27$) selves, $t(217) = 3.77$, $p < .001$.

❖ **Study 3:** We further replicated the effect found in Studies 1 and 2 with university students, showing that present evaluations of wisdom were affected by thinking of **past** ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.30$) and **future** ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.20$) selves, $t(310) = 2.28$, $p = .023$.

❖ However, unlike Studies 1 and 2, there was no difference of evaluations on wisdom in **past** ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.28$) and **future** ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.211$) selves, $t(309) = 1.17$, $p = .242$.

❖ We used a meta-analytic method to form a better estimate of the size of this effect across three studies (see below).



Discussion

❖ These findings demonstrate that individuals experience social comparison effects when thinking of their past and future selves much like they would a different person.

❖ When directed to freely recall the past, individuals will tend to feel better about their present traits, and when directed to freely imagine the future, individuals will feel worse about their present traits.

❖ While we expected the difference in present ratings were driven by the difference in ratings of past and future, in Study 3 there was no difference in the temporally distant condition but still a difference in the present ratings. This suggests that the mechanism operating this difference may be simpler than growth-narrative social comparisons.

❖ Effects might be due to a halo/horns effect of future and past. That is, when imagining the future, individuals feel it is better in all positive aspects, and this drives the social comparison.

❖ While robust, the present findings are limited to a single trait. It is unclear if this process generalizes to other growth-domain traits, or is unique to wisdom.

Future Directions

❖ Potential future directions include exploring three potential questions:

1. What other traits does this affect occur with? This could involve assessing this effect on a variety of growth-domain traits, rather than just wisdom.

2. How are decision-making processes affected by this bias? For instance, if matching with a partner, would individuals thinking of their past self aim for a higher value partner than individuals thinking of their future self?

3. Is a growth narrative necessary for this process? Is the process driven by a comparison target which individuals feel has grown in relevant domains, or do people simply have a future = better and past = worse bias which drive comparisons?

References

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