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# Future Time Perspective and Life Events Across Adulthood

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**ABSTRACT.** Age differences in future time perspective and the relations between future time perspective, locus of control, and past and anticipated future life events were examined in younger (ages 20 to 37) and older (ages 60 to 81) men and women. There were neither age nor gender differences in the time period participants reported thinking of most frequently. Participants reported thinking about the next few months more frequently than about other future time periods, which ranged from the next few days to many years. However, younger participants also reported thinking frequently about more distant time periods, whereas older subjects did not. Anticipation of discontinuous future events, control of impending events, and positive past events accounted for some age differences found in thinking about distant future time periods. No systematic gender differences were found.

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IN THE UNITED STATES, planning for the future has positive connotations, whereas ruminating about the past is associated with stagnation. Time perspective is not considered a static aspect of personality, however. Rather, it is thought to shift as individuals age. Younger adults are portrayed as vibrant future thinkers. Older adults are portrayed as nostalgic (Kastenbaum, 1963). Empirical evidence for such changes in time perspective remain scant, however.

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Research pertaining to changes in time perspective in adulthood is marked by discrepant results. Some researchers have found that most individuals think about the future to some degree (Kastenbaum, 1963). Others have found that older adults concentrate on the past more than the present (Giambra, 1977; Thomae, 1981). Still other researchers have found that both future and past time perspectives increase in older age (Eson & Greenfield, 1962) or that both past and future time perspectives decrease in old age (Kornfeld & Marshall, 1987). There has been little discussion of why individuals of the same age appear to have different time perspectives in different studies. If future time perspective changes as a function of aging, one would expect consistency in time perspective among age cohorts. Such a pattern has not been observed (Hagestad, 1990).

Future time perspective has been linked to implicit control in adult development. Brandstadter (1984, 1989) argued that adults are not passively subjected to development but that they attempt to control and optimize their development. One aspect of this adult-identity shaping involves having a sense of the future for which one is aiming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Lewin (1939) argued that people of all ages are influenced in the present by what they foresee as their future. In particular, he posited an increased future time perspective in adolescence, reflecting a need to deal with new goals imposed by impending adulthood. This explanation for future time perspective does not predict a decrease in future time perspective across adulthood. Rather, impending future events involved in aging may contribute to increasing future time horizon at this stage of life as well.

The purposes of this study were to (a) compare self-reports of future time perspectives of older and younger adults, (b) examine relations between several individual-difference characteristics and time perspective, and (c) explore possible explanations for differences in future time perspective. In particular, we investigated whether past and future life events help explain differences in future time perspective. We used the metaphor that individuals experience their development as a journey. Time may be viewed as the substances of movement on this road trip. As one moves through adulthood, one is passing through time toward goals, destinations, transitions, and changes (Neugarten & Petersen, 1957; Reese & Smyer, 1983). Time, like the journey that symbolizes it, is demarcated by life events. As one approaches a given destination on the trip, thoughts center around that destination or life event and structure one's sense of the journey and how far ahead one looks.

The basis of a life-events model of future time perspective can be found in other discussions of temporal cognition. Fraisse (1981) argued that time is the means by which individuals organize the changes they confront. In Fraisse's terms, time and life events are intrinsically linked; it is because of life events that one has a sense of time. Thomas and Weaver (1975) examined duration estimations and how study participants' assessments of duration

changed with the introduction of perceptual stimuli. They found that participants estimated the duration of intervals to be shorter when stimuli were present than when the interval was "blank." In terms of the present study, it was expected that participants who experienced several life events during a given time interval might have a decreased sense of the length of that interval or an increased sense of the impending future.

The relationship between life events and time perspective has arisen throughout the literature in systematic and anecdotal reports. However, there has been little systematic examination of past and future events and the structuring of future time perspective in younger and older adults.

Anecdotal evidence links major life events to time perspective. For example, Krapfl (1983) reported that, as he realized he was about to be in a major car accident, "I recall very clearly, prior to impact, thinking that time really does slow down. Apparently what I was describing was my focused attention . . ." (p. 266). Beiser (1987) studied the relationship between stress events in refugee populations and time perspective systematically and informally. He reported that during periods of acute stress, refugees focus more on the present than on the past or future. Seginer (1988) also linked time perspective to life events in young adult populations, explaining differences in future time perspective between well-educated young Arabs and young Israelis: Israeli youth, who are about to enter the army, have a sabbatical from long-term future goals until after their 2- or 3-year military service, and these soon-to-be soldiers do not think about their longer range futures. Their Arab peers, who enter university or higher education, have much more distant future time perspectives. Although cultural differences may also explain the differences found in Seginer's sample, the data are nonetheless in keeping with a premise linking life events to future time perspective. The present study examined the relationship between life events in the immediate past and the impending future and future time perspective.

The relationship between life events and future time perspective may vary as a function of subjective assessment of the events. Although stressful events have been linked to a foreshortened time perspective, positively anticipated events have been linked to increased future time perspective. For example, Albrecht and Gift (1975) discussed anticipatory socialization, in which individuals mentally rehearse upcoming life changes, concentrating on a future time period in which they are expecting a life change to occur. There may be age differences in the extent to which individuals engage in such anticipatory socialization and concentration on the future.

Other aspects of life events may also relate to future time perspective. Does the past or future event represent a major change from the present? How stressful is the event? How much control does the person feel he or she has over it? Subjective experience of events and control have been linked to future time perspective independently of life events. For instance, researchers

have found that increased future time perspective at an older age is related to increased life satisfaction ratings (Strumpf, 1987; Thomae, 1981). There is some evidence linking locus of control and future time perspective. Like people in extremely stressful situations, depressed individuals show a marked decrease in future thinking (Goldrich, 1967). Markus and Nurius's (1986) examination of different temporal aspects of self-concept revealed that general locus of control was related to possible and probable selves, two future-oriented self-concepts. An individual who believes he or she has no control over upcoming future events may be unlikely to conceive of an outcome or think beyond that event. The present study examined two distinct aspects of control as they relate to future time perspective: general locus of control (as an attribute of personality) and a specific sense of control over an upcoming life event.

Methodological issues in the assessment of future time perspective also need to be addressed. Differentiating how far ahead older adults concentrate in comparison with younger adults is, in part, a matter of how the question is posed. Future time perspective has been assessed primarily by using forced-choice comparisons of time periods. One forced-choice technique, the Time Reference Inventory, asks respondents to assign *past*, *present*, or *future* labels to a variety of life events (Strumpf, 1987). This measure introduces a confound of longevity with future thinking. That older respondents select *past* more on such a measure might simply be due to the fact that they have lived longer. Moreover, if older adults report thinking of their past more than of their future, this does not preclude their thinking of their future as often as younger adults do; they may just be more preoccupied with time in their lives altogether.

Less direct means of assessing time perspective have also been used. One metaphorical method used to measure future time perspective involves participants' selecting circles of different sizes to represent past, present, and future, and arranging these circles in a pattern to represent their sense of the relationships between these time periods (Beiser, 1987; Cottle, 1967; Tismer, 1987). Story-completion tasks and thematic apperception (TAT) methods have also been used (Goldrich, 1967; Kornfeld & Marshall, 1987; Wallace, 1956). Although such indirect techniques of assessing time perspective may provide participants with metaphors or storylines to represent their sense of time, these methods may also introduce confounds (for example, the inexact-ractability of the time-perspective response from the subject matter provided to respondents by the TAT card or story-completion stem).

Future time perspective has also been measured by asking respondents to list events they expect to experience during their lives (Lessing, 1968; Wallace, 1956). However, as Lessing discussed, this method inherently creates a shorter future time perspective for older respondents. When asked to list life events, respondents have a tendency to select culturally defined milestones

(e.g., graduation, marriage, retirement). Older individuals may appear to have a foreshortened time perspective because they are closer in age to the events or because these events are already in their past.

Self-reports of future time perspective address some of the problems found in using indirect measures of future time perspective. However, measuring future time perspective through self-report has not been adequately explored with older adult populations. Although self-report methods involve high mental demands, using a well-educated population can help alleviate some problems introduced by these demands. Educated adults are the best source for reporting their own subjective future time perspective. This study used self-report in assessing future time perspective in well-educated younger and older adult samples.

The purposes of this study were to (a) examine future time perspective in younger and older adults, (b) examine individual differences in future time perspective and life events, and (c) investigate the relationship between life events and future time perspective, as well as some of the related variables through which life events might shape future time perspective, including subjective perception of anticipated future events, general locus of control, and control over anticipated future events.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants ( $N = 88$ ) were 23 women and 15 men between 20 and 37 years old ( $M = 27.7$ ,  $SD = 4.6$ ) and 31 women and 19 men between 60 and 81 years old ( $M = 68.9$ ,  $SD = 5.3$ ). Participants were recruited through local community organizations in order to obtain active older adults and a similar group of younger adults. An effort was made to locate a wide cross-section of organizations, including senior citizens' action groups, political groups, religious groups (representing Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant denominations), arts classes, science groups, and senior citizens' community groups. All participants were White.

The participants were highly educated. The mean educational rating of the younger group was 6.1 ( $SD = 1.12$ ), and the mean rating of the older group was 5.9 ( $SD = 1.60$ , on a scale where 5 = *college graduate*, 6 = *some graduate work*, 7 = *master's degree*, and 8 = *doctoral-level degree*). The difference between older and younger adults was not significant. Although use of such a highly educated older adult sample may limit the generalizability of the findings of this study, such a sample seemed most appropriate given the task demands of a self-report instrument pertaining to future time perspective. Pilot testing and follow-up interviews revealed that highly educated adults of different ages held shared understanding of the questions in the

study. The study was limited to healthy younger and older adults in order to control for confounds between age and stressful events related to illness.

### *Materials*

Participants completed five self-report questionnaires: (a) a future time perspective questionnaire, (b) an anticipated future events questionnaire, (c) an adaptation of Phinney, Chiodo, and Perlmutter's (1988) Major Life Events Inventory, (d) Levenson's (1973) Locus of Control Measure, and (e) a background information questionnaire.

The future time perspective questionnaire was designed for this study. It contained one forced-choice item asking respondents to indicate how far ahead they had been thinking over the course of the past few months. It also contained five items asking respondents to rate how frequently they thought about different time periods, ranging from *tomorrow* to *10 years in the future*, using 7-point Likert-type scales. These five questions were designed to assess frequency of thought about five future time periods independently rather than in a forced-choice comparison. The future time perspective questionnaire also included questions pertaining to images of the self in the future. Four items involving 7-point Likert-type ratings were used. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would classify themselves as being future thinkers or not future thinkers throughout most of their lives. Questions asked in the future time perspective questionnaire are found in Table 1.

The anticipated future events questionnaire examined the most important events participants expected to experience in the next 2 years. A period of 2 years was stipulated to obtain events individuals were actually expecting to occur in their lives, not fantasies. The events listed were then rated by participants and by independent raters for issues thought to be related to future time perspective, including control, impact, and continuity.

Participants rated the degree to which they had chosen to have that event occur in their lives, their sense of control over the event (given that it was occurring), and the importance of the event on 7-point Likert-type scales. Control and choice were considered separate aspects of an event because a given event may not be under an individual's control once chosen; for example, one may choose to become pregnant but not feel in control of the course of the pregnancy and childbirth. By contrast, one may not have chosen an event over which one ultimately does feel a sense of control.

The events participants listed were also coded by independent raters for continuity, degree of role change, and the people included in the event. Events were coded for continuity along a 3-point scale ranging from *discontinuous events* (3), involving a change from present life situations (e.g., change in job, marriage, a move) to *continuous events* (1), reflecting an ex-

**TABLE 1**  
**Future Thinking as a Function of Age**

Question	Age group		Across age groups	F
	Younger	Older		
For the past few months, how far ahead have you been thinking? (1 = a few hours; 7 = many years from now)	3.84	3.38	3.59	3.26
How clear are your images of this period? (1 = no real images; 7 = very clear images)	5.66	5.77	5.72	0.11*
How often do you think about: Tomorrow?	6.08	5.60	5.81	3.64
Next Few Weeks?	5.27	5.08	5.16	0.51
This Year?	4.32	3.27	3.73	9.51****
The Year After This?	3.27	2.27	2.71	8.11***
Ten Years from Now? (1 = almost never, 7 = many times a day)	4.00	2.73	3.28	10.14****
When I think about the future the first image that comes to mind is				

(table continues)



**Table 1 (continued)**

Question	Age group		Across age groups	F
	Younger	Older		
(1 = <i>today and tomorrow</i> ; 7 = <i>10+ years hence</i> )				
When I think about what I would like to accomplish in the future, I think about (1 = <i>today and tomorrow</i> ; 7 = <i>10+ years hence</i> )	3.66	3.05	3.33	4.75*
My clearest image of myself in the future is (1 = <i>today and tomorrow</i> ; 7 = <i>10+ years hence</i> )	4.00	3.56	3.76	2.57
My image of myself 10 years from now is (1 = <i>very unclear</i> ; 3 = <i>very clear</i> )	1.83	2.15	2.00	4.04*
I usually think about the future. (1 = <i>yes</i> ; 2 = <i>no</i> )	1.14	1.36	1.26	4.75*

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .005$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .0001$ .

plicitly stated desire to avoid change (e.g., maintaining health or continuing with a present project). Events that contained no clear evidence of discontinuity or stated desire to avoid change were rated as *neutral* (2). Role changes were coded with a similar system. Events involving a fundamental role change were coded as 3 (becoming a parent, becoming a grandparent, being promoted to a new job position); those involving a retention of one's sense of self were coded as 1; and the remaining events, which involved neither role change nor explicit efforts to remain the same, were coded as 2, or neutral. Reliability coefficients were .82 and .78, respectively, for the continuity and role-change codes. Independent raters also coded whether the event listed was limited to the participant alone or included others. For example, having a child start school or get married was coded as *other*, whereas starting a new job or retiring was coded as *self*.

Levenson's (1973) Locus of Control Measure is a modified version of Rotter's (1966) Internal and External Locus of Control (I-E) Scale. Levenson's measure was used to assess respondents' general sense of control over their lives. The measure divides control into three scales: Internal, Power, and Chance. The Power scale contains questions based on a belief that the world is ordered but controlled by powerful others. The Chance scale assesses the belief that life is full of random occurrences. Reliability estimates of Levenson's scale conducted with normal samples are comparable to estimates obtained on Rotter's original I-E Scale.

In this study we used an abbreviated version of Phinney et al.'s (1988) Major Life Events Inventory, which consists of a list of 50 normative and nonnormative life events. This measure was used to assess major events participants had experienced in the previous 2 years, including major illness, divorce, changes in housing, death of a family member, becoming a parent or grandparent, and change in work status. The Major Life Events Inventory was designed for use with adult samples of wide age ranges and includes items expected to be relevant to the lives of younger and older adults. For example, items in the inventory include both starting a new job (an event more likely to occur in the life of a younger adult) and retiring from a job or having a spouse retire (an event more relevant to an older adult), becoming a parent, or becoming a grandparent or great grandparent. Whereas most of the items concern occurrences related to family, work, health, and home environment, some concern issues of a sensitive nature that might be likely to occur in the lives of older and younger adults, including mental illness, sexual difficulties, being the victim of a crime, or receiving severe punishment or physical abuse. Although we recognized the possibility of social desirability biases in response to these items, we included them to encourage participants to report all events (positive and negative) they had experienced in the previous 2 years. Participants were also given an opportunity to include unlisted events that might have happened to them or to loved ones.

Participants were asked to indicate whether they had experienced each event by checking yes or no. For each event that they had experienced, they were then asked to indicate its duration (on a scale of 1 to 7), the direction of its impact (favorable, neutral, or unfavorable), and the intensity of that impact (on a 7-point scale).

The background questionnaire included items designed to obtain demographic information and participants' subjective ratings of their current financial, physical, and mental status, with comparisons to their status on these domains 2 years previously.

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited by Karen L. Fingermaun or by the directors of community groups. Questionnaires were distributed to participants at community group meetings. Participants completed the questionnaires at leisure in their own homes and returned them by mail. The response rate for older adults was 78%, and for younger adults it was 71%.

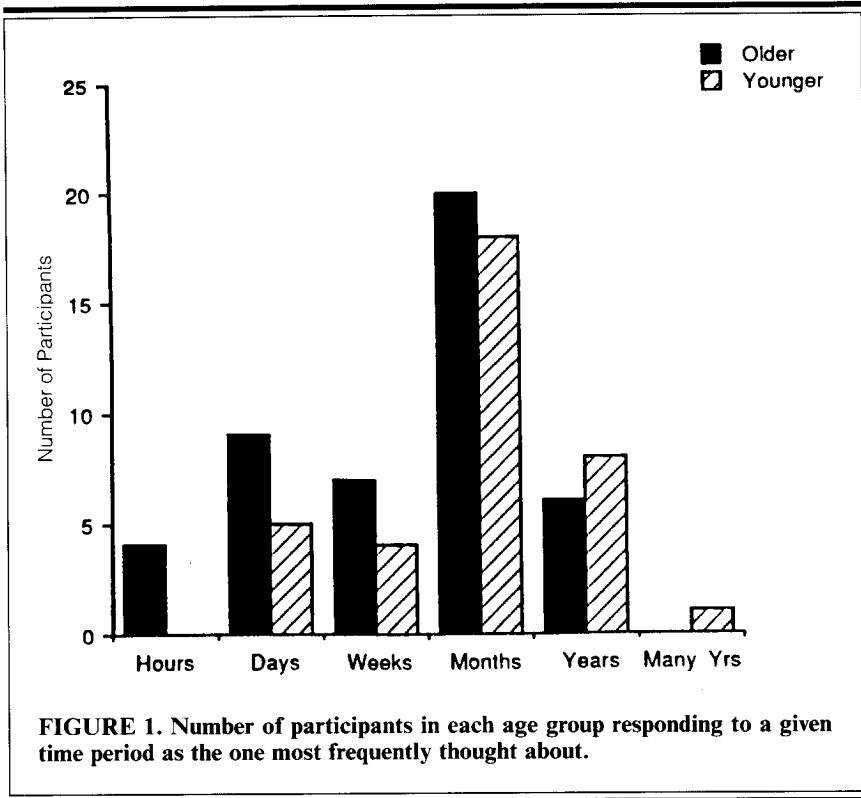
## **Results**

### *Age Differences*

*Future thought.* Figure 1 shows the number of participants in each age group who selected each time period as the one thought of most frequently. There were no significant age differences regarding how far ahead participants reported thinking on a day-to-day basis when given a six-response forced choice. A chi-square analysis examining the distribution of older and younger adults who selected each time period as the one they thought of most often was not significant,  $\chi^2(5, N = 82) = 4.77$ . A majority of adults indicated "the next few months" as the time period on which they had been concentrating recently, with 21 older adults and 19 younger adults selecting this time period.

Table 1 shows the mean ratings for thought about different future time periods and for future images of the self by age group, as well as univariate *F*s for age differences. Although Figure 1 shows a mode of "the next few months," the data in Table 1 indicate that, when asked to rate each time period independently, participants generally gave higher ratings to closer time periods. In addition, there was a progressive decline in ratings of frequency of thought about distant time periods.

Age differences in future time perspective with increasingly distant time periods can also be seen in Table 1. There were no significant age differences in ratings of thought about tomorrow and the next few weeks. However, younger adults, in comparison with older adults, reported more frequent



thoughts about the current year,  $F(1, 81) = 9.51, p \leq .005$ ; the following year,  $F(1, 81) = 8.11, p \leq .01$ ; and 10 years after the current year,  $F(1, 81) = 10.14, p \leq .005$ .

Younger adults had more distant future images of themselves than did older adults,  $F(1, 72) = 10.23, p \leq .005$ ; concentrated on a more distant future time period when thinking about what they would like to accomplish,  $F(1, 72) = 6.99, p \leq .05$ ; and rated the clarity of images of themselves 10 years hence higher,  $F(1, 72) = 4.04, p \leq .05$  (see Table 1). Younger adults were also more likely to classify themselves as future thinkers in general than were older adults,  $F(1, 70) = 4.75, p < .05$ . There was no systematic gender difference in responses to the future thought questions.

*Anticipated future life events.* Table 2 includes self-reported and independently coded ratings of the most important future life event that respondents anticipated in the next 2 years. The self-reported ratings tended to have means at the higher ends of the scale, near 5, indicating that older and

**TABLE 2**  
**Ratings of Important Future Events**

Rating category	Younger adults	Older adults	<i>F</i>
Role change (1-3)	1.86	1.35	8.62***
Actors	1.49	1.33	1.83
Continuity (1-3)	2.42	2.00	6.12*
Self-reported importance (1-7)	6.03	5.64	1.34
Self-reported choice (1-7)	5.94	4.89	6.87**
Self-reported control (1-7)	5.78	4.39	12.15***

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .005$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .0001$ .

younger respondents believed that the events they listed were important, had been their choice, and were under their control. Despite these generally high ratings across participants, there were still age differences with regard to self-reported choice,  $F(1, 68) = 6.87, p \leq .01$ , and control,  $F(1, 76) = 12.15, p \leq .001$ ; younger adults indicated that they had greater control and more choice over the events in their future than did older adults.

There were also significant age differences in the independent coders' ratings of the anticipated future life events that participants listed. The events that younger adults listed were coded as involving greater role change,  $F(1, 79) = 8.62, p \leq .005$ , and discontinuity,  $F(1, 68) = 6.12, p \leq .05$ , than the events listed by older adults.

*Previous life events.* Respondents reported that, in the previous 2 years, they had experienced, on average, 4.95 of the 50 life events listed on the Major Life Events Inventory. However, younger adults reported experiencing significantly more life events than did older adults,  $F(1, 78) = 28.55, p \leq .001$ . Having reported more life events, younger adults also had higher total scores for the impact of life events in the previous 2 years,  $F(1, 62) = 12.87, p \leq .001$ . Younger adults also gave higher ratings for the favorable impact of previous events,  $F(1, 53) = 22.62, p \leq .001$ . Despite these age differences in number of events and favorable impact ratings, there was no significant age difference with regard to unfavorable impact ratings or for total duration of previous life events.

*Locus of control.* There were no significant age differences on Levenson's Locus of Control Measure.

#### *Relationships Between Variables*

*Future events and future thinking.* The relationships between future thought and the degree to which participants were anticipating major changes in the

next 2 years was examined. Participants who were anticipating life events involving change were more likely to report thinking about the future. Anticipated future events involving a change in role were associated with how often participants reported thinking about the current year ( $r = .38, p \leq .001$ ), the following year ( $r = .42, p \leq .001$ ), and 10 years after the current year ( $r = .32, p \leq .005$ ). The degree to which the future event was coded as being a change from the present predicted thought about tomorrow ( $r = .26, p \leq .01$ ), the current year ( $r = .32, p \leq .01$ ), the following year ( $r = .34, p \leq .001$ ), and 10 years after the current year ( $r = .35, p \leq .001$ ). Participants who were anticipating changes in the next 2 years also reported thinking about the future more, particularly the more distant future. Self-reported control and choice over the anticipated future event were also positively correlated with how far ahead participants reported thinking most often ( $r = .42, p \leq .001$ , for control and  $r = .38, p \leq .001$  for choice). The pattern of correlations reflects the dimensions in which age differences in ratings of future events and in future thought were found.

*Previous life events and future thinking.* The relationship between experiencing events in the immediate past and future thought was also examined. The number of previous life events reported correlated with thought about more distant future time periods ( $r = .32, p \leq .005$ , for the following year,  $r = .33, p \leq .001$ , for the year after that, and  $r = .22, p \leq .05$ , for 10 years in the future). Number of life events did not distinguish individuals in terms of their reports of thinking about more proximate time periods (e.g., tomorrow or next week), nor did it relate to how far ahead participants reported thinking most often.

The total impact participants rated previous life events as having did not predict future time perspective, nor did the negative impact participants felt those events had had. However, participants' ratings of the total positive impact events in the previous 2 years had had did correlate with thinking about more distant time periods, including thought about the current year ( $r = .19, p \leq .10$ ), the next year ( $r = .31, p \leq .01$ ), and 10 years in the future ( $r = .29, p \leq .05$ ). Total positive impact of previous life events also related to how far ahead the first image of the self in the future lay ( $r = .26, p \leq .05$ ), and how far ahead what the participant hoped to accomplish lay ( $r = .25, p \leq .05$ ).

*Locus of control and future thinking.* Although the Internal and Power scales of Levenson's (1973) measure did not relate to future thought, the Chance scale strongly related to frequency of thought about distant time periods, such as 10 years in the future ( $r = .41, p \leq .001$ ), and to clarity of images 10 years hence ( $r = .38, p \leq .001$ ).

*Future thinking by age group.* Because of the confound between age and other predictive factors (e.g., codings of variables pertaining to past and future life events), we considered the relations between previous life events, locus of control, and future anticipated events separately for the older and younger adults. For younger adults, control over and continuity of the anticipated future event were the strongest predictors of future thinking. In addition, Levenson's (1973) locus of control scales predicted future thought in the younger adult group. The Chance scale related to thoughts about a range of future time periods, including the next day ( $r = .24, p \leq .10$ ), the next few weeks ( $r = .41, p \leq .01$ ), and 10 years in the future ( $r = .29, p \leq .05$ ).

Ratings of control and choice over an anticipated future event were also related to future thought among younger adults; subjective ratings of control and choice over the most important upcoming event were related to the period the individual reported concentrating on most frequently ( $r = .29, p \leq .05$ , for control and  $r = .49, p \leq .001$ , for choice). Continuity of the anticipated future event predicted frequency of thought about the next year ( $r = .27, p \leq .10$ ), the year after that ( $r = .38, p \leq .01$ ), and 10 years hence ( $r = .28, p \leq .05$ ). Number of past life events did not strongly relate to future time perspective among the younger adults, although it had done so in the overall sample.

Although the pattern of relationships among the variables for older adults was not identical to that found for younger adults, variables related to control over and continuity of events remained the strongest predictors of future thinking. For older adults, the Chance scale of Levenson's (1973) Locus of Control Measure was related to the frequency of thinking about the future 10 years hence ( $r = .45, p \leq .001$ ), and to the clarity of images for the future 10 years hence, ( $r = .53, p \leq .001$ ). The Chance scale did not relate to closer time periods as it had among younger adults.

Self-reported control over the most important anticipated event was related to the period each participant reported concentrating on most frequently ( $r = .30, p \leq .05$ ). Self-reported choice over the most important future event also predicted how far ahead older adults thought most often ( $r = .33, p \leq .05$ ). For older adults, role change was related to frequency of thought about more distant time periods, including the current year ( $r = .32, p \leq .05$ ), the next year ( $r = .32, p \leq .05$ ), and 10 years in the future ( $r = .21, p \leq .10$ ), as it had among younger adults. The continuity of the anticipated event predicted frequency of thought about the next day ( $r = .39, p \leq .005$ ), the current year ( $r = .33, p \leq .05$ ), and the next year ( $r = .40, p \leq .005$ ).

In addition, within each age group, we conducted analyses using age as a continuous variable to examine whether or not there were age differences between younger and older members within the groupings used in this study. Within age groups, age was not a significant predictor of future thinking.

## Discussion

This study did not confirm speculations that older adults think about the future less than younger adults do. In this study, healthy, well-educated adults of all ages reported concentrating on the near future, that is, the next few months. Age differences in reports of future thought involved primarily the more distant future—this year, next year, 10 years from now—periods that even young adults did not claim to think about most often. It is as though adults of all ages concentrate on the near future, but younger adults simultaneously consider that near future in the context of a more distant future.

Reasons for age differences in future thinking seem to reflect the events that constitute life for younger and older adults, for example, number of recent positive past events and a sense of control over and continuity of upcoming events. For both younger and older adults, positive events in the immediate past were associated with increased thought about the more distant future. This finding is in keeping with previous research that has suggested a positive relationship between future time perspective and life satisfaction (Strumpf, 1987; Thomae, 1981).

Feeling in control was also related to future thinking at both the life-event and personality level. Perception of control over an upcoming event was related to thought about more distant time periods. However, rather than control over a future event catalyzing future thought, it is more likely that lack of control suppresses thoughts about the future. If one does not feel in control of immediate future life events, it is difficult to think beyond those events.

Discontinuity of an important future life event was associated with greater thought about more distant future time periods. Discontinuity might catalyze thought about more distant time periods through the mechanisms of anticipatory socialization discussed previously. One need only think of expectant parents dreaming about their child's eventual schooling and occupation or of a retiring business executive's thoughts about a whole new stage of life to grasp how a discontinuous anticipated future event might be related to thoughts about the long-term future.

The age differences we found in future time perspective seem to be more a function of stage of life than the actual amount of time a person has lived. Older adults reported thinking about more continuous future events than did younger adults. In fact, one of the older participants summed up her feelings with a comment written in the margins of her future-events questionnaire, "There is routine and sameness in my life. I manage to keep quite active, but I can't say I live an eventful life." There is no need to consider the long-term future if it is likely to be pretty much like the present. Discontinuity in later life was related to future thought; the types of discontinuous events most frequently associated with older age—retirement and physical health



changes—were associated with more frequent thoughts of distant future time periods. The mechanisms that explain future thought in younger adults might also explain future thought in older adults. Although the relationship between time perspective and age has been thought of in terms of how long a person has been alive, the results of this study suggest that future time perspective is a function of the content of life at a given age.

Future time perspective does not seem to be an inherent developmental phenomenon. Rather, it seems that the sense of time is structured by events that constitute an individual's life. To return to the journey metaphor introduced at the start of this article, how far people look down the road appears to be related to how happy they are about where they have come from, how much control they have over where they are going, and whether or not they have to plan a stop somewhere along the way. If younger and older adults are on different travel itineraries, we should hardly be surprised if their sense of the journey is different.

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