Tomorrow I’ll be me: The effect of time perspective on the activation of idealistic versus pragmatic selves

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that the self-system is dynamic and consists of multiple selves that emerge under different contexts. The present research describes two types of diverging self-conceptions, the idealistic and pragmatic selves. Building on a synthesis of construal level theory with research on the self, we propose that a more distal time perspective activates an idealistic versus a pragmatic self. Self-activation, in turn, influences the preference between two major motives: maximizing identity versus instrumental benefits. A series of five studies supported this conceptualization by demonstrating that: (a) distal rather than proximal time perspective enhances the preference for identity over instrumental benefits; (b) people construe themselves as relatively more idealistic than pragmatic when primed with a distal than proximal time perspective, and (c) self-activation mediates the effect of time perspective on preference. The studies also investigate boundary conditions and process measures that shed light on the interface between time, self, and preference. The final section discusses the theoretical implications for the literatures on construal level, self, and justice and the practical implications for organizational behavior, political psychology, and human decision-making.

Keywords: Time perspective; Self-activation; Decision-making; Idealism and pragmatism; Identity and instrumental preferences

And if not now, when? (Pirkei Avot, 1:14)

Contemporary research portrays the self-system as dynamic and consisting of multiple self-conceptions that emerge under different social contexts. A number of co-existing self-conceptions have been described, suggesting that people may experience a conflict between different aspects of their selves (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986). The present paper proposes two important and often diverging self-conceptions, namely the idealistic and pragmatic selves. We examine the circumstances under which these conflicting selves are activated, and the consequences for identity versus instrumental preferences (Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997).

We define the idealistic self as a mental representation that places principles and values above practical considerations and seeks to express the person’s sense of true self. In contrast, the pragmatic self is characterized as an action oriented mental representation that is primarily guided by practical concerns (Webster’s New World International Dictionary, 1998). The idealistic and pragmatic selves correspond to two opposing poles in American and other modern societies, which simultaneously espouse attributes like realism, efficiency, and materialism as well as spirituality, morality, and justice. The tension between idealism and pragmatism is prevalent in both mundane and critical decision-making and affects organizations, politicians, and individuals.
While the co-existence of conflicting selves can give rise to ambivalence and discomfort, research suggests that only a limited set of self-conceptions are activated at any single moment (e.g., Higgins & Bargh, 1987; Markus & Kunda, 1986). That is, certain features of the situation or the individual are likely to activate a specific self-representation (e.g., Bargh, 1990; Kruglanski, 1996). An important question, then, is what factors determine the predominance of an idealistic versus a pragmatic self? Further, what are the consequences of such differential self-activation for motivation and preference?

To address these important questions, we build on construal level theory (hereafter CLT; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2003), which indicates that temporal distance shapes the mental representation of events and outcomes. According to CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2003, p. 403) “... individuals form more abstract representations, or high-level construals, of distant-future events than near-future events. High-level construals consist of general, decontextualized features that convey the essence of information about future events, whereas low-level construals include more concrete, contextual, and incidental details.” The present research extends construal level theory to the domain of the self. We argue that a distal time perspective shifts attention toward the core and defining characteristics of the self, facilitating the expression of the idealistic self. Conversely, a proximal time perspective directs attention toward situational contingencies that are incidental to one’s true self, consequently activating the pragmatic self.

The paper is organized as follows: we begin by reviewing the literatures on the self and on temporal construal. Building on a synthesis of these literatures, we propose that a more distal time perspective activates the idealistic versus pragmatic self. We further hypothesize that such differential self-activation influences the tradeoff between two major motives: maximizing identity versus instrumental concerns. Study 1 examines the effect of time perspective on preferences for identity versus instrumental attributes and the role of central values in guiding distant future choices. Study 2 tests the proposition that distal time perspective activates the idealistic rather than pragmatic self and that this effect is more pronounced among people with greater self-concept discrepancies. Given that people in Western cultures are expected to have and express a coherent and consistent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), this finding suggest that variations in time perspective may reduce the tension between discrepant self-conceptions by activating differential selves. Study 3 demonstrates that the effects of time perspective on preference for identity versus instrumental attributes is stronger among people primed with an independent than interdependent self-construal. This finding sheds further light on the underlying mechanism by suggesting that an independent self-construal, which values self consistency (e.g., Epstein, 1973), is more sensitive to cues such as time perspective that allow different selves to be expressed. Studies 4 and 5 test the entire conceptual model. These studies investigate the proposition that the construction of idealistic versus pragmatic selves mediates the effect of time perspective on preference for identity versus instrumental attributes. The final section discusses the theoretical implications for the literatures on construal level, self, and justice and the practical implications for organizational behavior, political psychology, and human decision-making.

The activation of differential selves

Recent theorists have portrayed the self-system as multifaceted and dynamic, with different self-representations activated at different times (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987). Accordingly, the working self-concept has been described as a continually shifting array of accessible self-knowledge structures (Markus & Kunda, 1986). Like other mental representations, self-conceptions can be activated by certain features of the situation (Bargh, 1990; Kruglanski, 1996). Further, different selves are not necessarily compatible. For example, people can construe themselves as aggressive or compassionate depending on their current social role (e.g., stock trader vs. parent).

Researchers have examined the factors that influence the likelihood that a particular self-representation will emerge. For example, Brewer and Gardner (1996) demonstrated shifts in self-representation following the priming of “I” versus “we” pronouns. Smith and Henry (1996) showed that people construed themselves differently depending on the particular social identity that was salient. Similarly, Fazio, Effreim, and Falender (1981) demonstrated that following an interaction with an experimenter designed to produce introverted [extroverted] behavior, subjects were more likely to perceive themselves as more introverted [extroverted]. People appear to have conceptions of themselves as both introverts and extroverts, and different circumstances make either of these self-representations more accessible.

The malleability of the self notwithstanding, prior research shows that people are motivated to maintain a coherent and stable sense of true self (e.g., Epstein, 1973; cf. Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997). People employ various strategies to preserve their existing self-image, including overweighing [rejecting] feedback that supports [challenges] their self-perception (e.g., Markus, 1977; Swann & Read, 1981) and attributing behavior that is consistent [inconsistent] with prior self-conception to dispositional [situational] factors (Kulik, Sledge, & Mahler, 1986). Furthermore, expressing one’s true self is associated with increased satisfaction and subjective well-being (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). For example, Sheldon and Elliot (1999) found that people who attained more self-concordant
goals (i.e., goals that are aligned with one’s perceived true self) had a more satisfying experience than people who attained goals that were not self-concordant.

The discussion suggests that people strive to express a stable and coherent self that reflects who they think they really are. Nevertheless, people are constrained by social context and situational circumstances that often highlight diverging aspects of the self-system. These aspects may be more or less central to one’s self-definition (e.g., Gergen, 1968; Markus, 1977; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Consequently, people often behave in a manner that deviates from their perceived true self and instead express self-conceptions and make choices that are inconsistent with their core values.

In the present article, we focus on two specific selves, namely the idealistic and pragmatic selves. The idealistic self places values and principles (i.e., the core ingredients of self-conception) above practical considerations, and therefore, is more closely related to the person’s sense of true self. However, given the strong influence of the immediate situation and the malleable nature of the self-system (Lewin, 1951; Markus & Kunda, 1986), the idealistic self is not always expressed. We propose that time perspective has an important role in activating these conflicting selves. Next, we briefly review construal level theory, which provides the basis for our proposition.

Construal level theory

Research on mental representation distinguishes between different levels of abstraction. Differences between abstract and concrete representations have been described as underlying various psychological and linguistic processes, such as conceptualization (e.g., Murphy & Medin, 1985), goal construction (e.g., Little, 1989), action identification (e.g., Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), and personal striving (e.g., Emmons & King, 1988). For example, behavior can be represented using relatively abstract personality traits (e.g., “person A is gregarious”), or more concrete action terms (e.g., “A hugged B”). Whereas the former representation seems to reflect enduring and relatively stable characteristic of the person, the latter can be characterized as more contextual and situationally driven (Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

Construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003) made an important contribution to the research on mental representations by proposing that people use more abstract representations, or high-level construals, to represent information about distant than near future events. The greater the temporal distance from an event, the more likely is the event to be represented in terms of a few general features that convey the essence of the event than in terms of more contextual and incidental aspects of that event.

The implications of construal level theory were demonstrated in choice, evaluation, and prediction (for a review see Trope & Liberman, 2003). Consistent with CLT, core features of options and events (e.g., the primary function of a product, the main goal of an action) were more influential in choices for the distant future, whereas incidental aspects (e.g., the secondary function of a product, goal irrelevant features) were more crucial in choices for the near future (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2000). Relatedly, distant future experiences were more likely to reflect the ideal case or the prototype of an event category. People expected distant good and bad days to show less intra-category heterogeneity (i.e., less diversity of experiences within each type of day) and more inter-category heterogeneity (i.e., greater distinction between the two types of day).

The implications of CLT were also demonstrated in the context of person perception. Perceivers can mentally represent others’ behavior using different levels of abstraction and generality. Global personality traits constitute high-level construals of behavior, whereas mental states such as expectations, feelings, and intentions represent low-level construals of behavior (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Trope, 1989). Nussbaum, Trope, and Liberman (2002) found that perceivers relied on more global information about a target person (e.g., decontextualized dispositions) than on local behavioral and situational constraints (e.g., contextualized dispositions) when making distant future predictions about others. Furthermore, perceivers constructed different representation of the same observed behavior, depending on whether they had to predict the near or distant future behavior of others. When making distant future predictions, participants treated a situationally constrained behavior as diagnostic of a person’s attitudes and predictive of a variety of attitude related behaviors. Conversely, when making near future predictions, participants treated the same behavior as less diagnostic of a person’s attitudes and less predictive of future behaviors.

In the present research, we extend the research on mental representations and CLT to the domain of self-conception. As described next, we propose that a distal time perspective activates the idealistic, true self, whereas a proximal time perspective activates the pragmatic self. These differential selves have implications for preference between expressing one’s true identity and maximizing instrumental gain.

The impact of time perspective on idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation

As reviewed earlier, current research suggests that the self-system is malleable, with different self-representa-
tions activated at various times (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Not all of these self-conceptions are equivalent. Some self-conceptions are central, while others are more peripheral (e.g., Gergen, 1968; Markus, 1977). Central self-conceptions are typically more integrated and reflect core and relatively stable characteristics of the person. They are likely to represent a generalized, non-contextual view of the self. Other self-conceptions are more context-dependent and thus less meaningful to the person’s self-identity. Given the profound impact of the immediate social context (Lewin, 1951), these situation-dependent selves often dominate the more global and central aspects of the self, instigating behaviors and choices that are incongruent with the person’s core self-conception. A critical question, then, is when do people express central aspects of their self-identity and when do they exhibit peripheral self-conceptions that are driven by the immediate social circumstance.

As discussed earlier, CLT proposes that greater temporal distance from an event increases the likelihood that the event would be represented in terms of a few general features; such general features convey the essence of the event rather than its more contextual and incidental aspects. Building on CLT, we propose that a more distal time perspective shifts attention inwards, toward the core and most defining characteristics of the person, activating the idealistic self. This type of self places values and principles, the building blocks of a person’s identity (Hitlin, 2003), above practical considerations. In the absence of salient external demands or opportunities (e.g., when evaluating distant future outcomes), people have a greater ability to think “globally,” that is, to think outside the context of the particular choice situation and focus on fulfilling their true preferences and values and achieving superordinate goals (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Little, 1989). Relatedly, research shows that when the self becomes the focus of attention people are especially likely to behave in accordance with their personal standards and social norms (e.g., Greenberg, 1980; Verplanken & Holland, 2002). For instance, Verplanken and Holland (2002) showed that enhanced self-focus led to more value-congruent behavior (e.g., altruists donated more).

While we argue that temporal distance shifts attention inward, we posit that temporal proximity highlights situational contingencies and extrinsic inducements. The shift of attention toward the immediate situation often distracts people from their intrinsic values, true interests, and passions (Deci & Ryan, 1985). We argue that consequently the pragmatic self is likely to be activated. This type of self-representation is more realistic and cognizant of available opportunities and constraints. That is, the pragmatic self is guided by the practicality of actions and is focused on opportunities, resources, and other types of means that may be useful at the present moment. Using Fromm’s terminology (1976), as temporal distance decreases, people shift from a “being” orientation to a “having” or consummatory orientation. Next, we discuss the implications of idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation for preferences between identity and instrumental concerns.

The role of activated self in shaping identity versus instrumental preferences

Current research emphasizes the importance of self-conceptions in generating motivated or goal directed behavior (e.g., Cantor, Markus, Niedenthal, & Nurius, 1986). Researchers describe different types of general self-conceptions that guide behavior and instigate action, such as the possible selves, desired selves, and significant selves (e.g., Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schlenker, 1985). Earlier, we proposed that a distal time perspective makes the idealistic self more accessible, whereas a proximal time perspective activates the pragmatic self. An important question that needs to be addressed, then, is what are the implications of such differential self-activation for motivation and preference.

We propose that the activation of the idealistic self, which places the core ingredients of the self above practical considerations, enhances the relative importance of identity motives. Such motives relate to the individual’s notion of the self and reflect a general tendency to define, express, and even enhance the person’s sense of true self (e.g., Schlenker & Weigold, 1989; Trzebinski, 1989). Indeed, research suggests that people are often willing to forgo valuable resources like money and time for the sake of more symbolic rewards that convey information about their identity (e.g., social values, moral principles, self-conception). An important source of information about one’s identity is the moral function of the person’s social group and the quality of treatment received within that group (e.g., Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1994; Tyler, Degoej, & Smith, 1996). Thus, we expect that identity-based benefits (e.g., quality of treatment) compared with relatively more instrumental rewards (e.g., salary) will receive more weight following the activation of the idealistic self.

In contrast, the pragmatic self focuses on situational opportunities and constraints for the purpose of action guidance. The increased attention toward the situation and the salience of outcome-behavior contingencies is expected to enhance the desirability of instrumental goals and extrinsic inducements even at the expense of more intrinsic values (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Insofar as instrumental resources like money and goods (Foaa, Converse, Tornblom, & Foaa, 1993) represent an incentive that is contingently given (Kassar & Ryan, 1993), we expect that such resources will be relatively more influential following the activation of the pragmatic self.
Overview of studies

We propose that time perspective (distal vs. proximal) activates differential selves (idealistic vs. pragmatic). Self-activation, in turn, is expected to affect the relative weight of identity versus instrumental attributes in choice. We conduct a series of five studies to test our conceptual model, which is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Across the five studies, time perspective is manipulated using different methodologies. Following Liberman and Trope (1998), in Studies 1 and 3, time perspective is manipulated by asking respondents to make a decision regarding an event (i.e., enrolling in an academic course, choosing a colleague) that would occur in the near or distant future. In all other studies, the relevant event or outcome does not vary in time. Instead, proximal versus distal time perspective is primed by asking participants to describe a typical day in their life in either the near or distant future (Studies 2 and 4) or the attributes that they think would best characterize them in either the near or distant future (Study 5). Following these manipulations, we measure participants’ self-construals and/or preferences between identity and instrumental benefits. In our studies, we employ direct and indirect measures of idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation by using central values (Study 1), self-construal (Studies 2 and 5), and concerns with social relationships (Study 4).

Instrumental benefits are defined as extrinsic resources or means that can be used for achieving other positive outcomes (e.g., financial rewards), that is, action oriented benefits that increase the chances of obtaining other future outcomes. Identity benefits are defined as intrinsic reinforcements that support the expression of one’s true self and values. As such, identity benefits are expected to be more meaningful than instrumental benefits to the way people feel about themselves. As noted earlier, we expect that the activation of the idealistic self, which places principles and values above practical considerations, would enhance the relative importance of identity benefits. In contrast, the activation of the pragmatic self, which focuses on situational opportunities and constraints for the purpose of action guidance, should enhance the relative attractiveness of instrumental benefits.

Next, we report two pre-tests designed to validate the assumption that: (1) idealism is perceived as placing principles and values above practical considerations and expressing one’s true self, whereas pragmatism is perceived as being oriented toward action and primarily guided by practical concerns; and (2) the identity benefits used in the studies are perceived as intrinsic rewards that facilitate the expression of people’s true self, inner values, and principles, and are most meaningful to the way people feel about themselves. In contrast, the instrumental benefits used in the studies are perceived as extrinsic resources or means that can be used for achieving other positive outcomes.

Pretest 1: Idealistic versus pragmatic selves

Sixty undergraduate students at a large East Coast university participated in this pretest. They were asked to consider nine characteristics and classify each characteristic as relatively idealistic or pragmatic. Each of the following characteristics was classified by a significant majority of respondents (all ps < .05 using the normal approximation of the binomial distribution) as more representative of an idealistic than a pragmatic person: “places values and principles above all other considerations,” “stands up for beliefs,” “expresses one’s true self,” “contributes to the community,” and “self-fulfilled.”

Fig. 1. The interplay between time perspective, self-concept, and preference—a conceptual model.
In contrast, each of the following characteristics was classified by a significant majority of respondents (all ps < .05) as more representative of a pragmatic than an idealistic person: “takes advantage of opportunities in a given situation,” “money oriented,” “maximizes self-interest,” and “action oriented.” Overall, the results of Pretest 1 support our conceptualization of the idealistic and pragmatic selves.

**Pretest 2: Identity versus instrumental benefits**

Forty undergraduate students at a large East Coast university participated in this pretest. They were presented with three decision scenarios that were subsequently used in the main studies. In the first scenario, respondents considered a bank that was described using the following four attributes: “customers are treated with respect and dignity,” “customer complaints are considered very seriously,” “low transaction fees,” and “good interest rates on credit cards.” In the second scenario, respondents considered a student union that was described as focused on four main attributes: “negotiating better housing subsidies for students,” “negotiating more favorable financial aid packages,” “making sure students are treated with respect and dignity,” and “making sure students have ample opportunities to express their views and opinions.” In the third scenario, respondents considered an academic course that was described using four attributes: quality of treatment, professor’s procedural fairness, grades, and workload.

For each decision scenario, respondents were asked to rate each attribute on a seven-point scale ranging from “highly instrumental” (1) to “highly identity” (7). Instrumental attributes were defined as “extrinsic resources or means that can be used for achieving other positive outcomes.” Identity attributes were defined as “intrinsic rewards that facilitate the expression of people’s true self, inner values, and principles.” Additionally, for each scenario, respondents were asked to select the one attribute that they thought was most important for the way they felt about themselves.

To analyze respondents’ perceptions of the attributes in each scenario, we first averaged the ratings of the attributes used in the main studies as identity attributes and then averaged the ratings of the attributes used as instrumental attributes. We then conducted a paired samples *t*-test that indicated that in each scenario the designated identity attributes were perceived as more identity-related than the designated instrumental attributes (all ps < .05). For example, in the bank account scenario, respondents perceived the designated identity attributes (“customers are treated with respect and dignity,” “customer complaints are considered very seriously”) as relatively more identity-related than instrumental-related (\(M = 5.1, \ SD = 1.1\)) compared to the designated instrumental attributes (e.g., “good interest rates on credit cards,” “low transaction fees”; \(M = 2.4, \ SD = 1.2\)).

The results also indicate that, in each decision scenario, the majority of respondents (all ps < .05 using the normal approximation of the binomial distribution) selected one of the designated identity attributes as the most meaningful to the way they feel about themselves. For example, in the academic course scenario, 82% (31 out of 38) of participants selected one of the identity attributes (quality of treatment, professor’s procedural fairness) as the most important to the way they feel about themselves. By contrast, only 18% of participants selected one of the instrumental attributes (grades, and workload). Overall, the results of Pretest 2 indicate that the identity attributes used in the main studies are perceived as intrinsic rewards that facilitate the expression of people’s true self, inner values, and principles, and are most meaningful to the way people feel about themselves. In contrast, the instrumental attributes used in the studies are perceived as extrinsic resources or means that can be used for achieving other positive outcomes.

**Study 1**

The conceptual model presented in Fig. 1 suggests that a more distal time perspective should increase the preference for identity relative to instrumental attributes. Study 1 tests this proposition in the context of students’ choices of an academic course to be taken in either the near or distant future. This study also provides an indirect test of the proposition that a more distal time perspective affects preference by activating the idealistic self. Specifically, the idealistic self is a mental representation that places principles and values above practical considerations and reflects the person’s sense of true self. Therefore, if indeed the idealistic self is more salient in the distant than near future, then central values—which are the core ingredients of one’s self-conception (Verplanken & Holland, 2002)—should guide decisions regarding distant but not near future events.

**Method**

**Subjects**

Ninety-five undergraduate students at a large East Coast university participated in this study as part of an introductory psychology course requirement. The participants ranged from 18 to 22 years of age. As described next, participants were randomly assigned to either a near or distant time perspective condition.

**Procedure and design**

To manipulate time perspective, participants were asked to consider a course that starts either in a few days or in the next academic year (near versus distant future
outcome, respectively). Given that selecting courses is an integral part of undergraduates’ lives, the task was highly realistic for our participants. Participants were asked to rank four course attributes according to their importance (i.e., rank the attribute most important for them as “1,” etc.). These attributes were adopted from real course evaluations that undergraduate students provided in previous years. Two attributes were identity-oriented (“the professor usually treats students with respect and dignity” and “students’ views and needs are considered very seriously”) and two attributes were instrumental in nature (“the course looks good on the resume” and “the professor usually gives high grades”). The identity attributes focused on moral functioning and quality of treatment, whereas the instrumental attributes reflected concerns with resources or means that could be used for achieving other outcomes (e.g., gaining admission to graduate school, attaining a better job). We counterbalanced (between-subjects) the order of presentation of the identity and instrumental attributes.

After ranking the importance of the four course attributes, participants completed a short questionnaire with filler problems from unrelated studies. Then, participants were asked to provide background information, such as their age, degree type, and year in the program. The last question in this set included four values that were taken from the Rokeach Value Survey (1968), one instrumental value and three identity values (see Appendix A for the Rokeach Values). Participants were asked to rate each of the four values in terms of their importance as a guiding principle in their life. Ratings were made on a seven-point scale ranging from “not at all important” (1) to “extremely important” (7). We wanted to examine the correspondence between participants’ central values and their preferences toward identity and instrumental course attributes. As explained earlier, we hypothesized that central values would predict preferences in the distant but not near future condition. It is important to note that people may differ in the extent to which certain values are central to their self-definition (Verplanken & Holland, 2002). Whereas some people may view identity values as their most important life value, others may be primarily guided by instrumental values. Therefore, we expected people who are primarily guided by identity [instrumental] values to prefer the identity [instrumental] attributes when making decisions about distant future but not near future outcomes.

Results and discussion

To measure participants’ relative preference between identity and instrumental benefits, we averaged the ranking of the two identity attributes. A lower score on this preference measure indicates a stronger relative preference for the identity attributes, whereas a higher score represents a stronger relative preference for the instrumental attributes. As hypothesized, participants in the distant compared to near future condition had a stronger preference for identity relative to instrumental course attributes ($M = 2.2$, $SD = .8$ vs. $M = 2.6$, $SD = .8$; in distant vs. near future condition, respectively; $t(93) = 2.2$, $p < .05$). An examination of participants’ top-ranked attribute, indicated that 64% (30 out of 47) of participants ranked an identity rather than an instrumental attribute as the most important attribute when the course was scheduled for the next academic year (distant future condition). In contrast, only 38% (18 out of 48) of participants ranked an identity attribute as the most important attribute when the course was slated to begin in a few days ($z = 2.7$, $p < .01$).

To test the relationship between central values and preference, we first averaged participants’ ratings of the three identity (Rokeach) values and created a composite identity measure ($z = .60$). We then subtracted this composite identity measure from the rating of the instrumental Rokeach value, thus creating an index of the relative importance of identity versus instrumental values (hereafter, the “Rokeach value index”). Consistent with the notion that Rokeach values represent a stable individual difference (Rokeach, 1968), this measure of central values was not influenced by the prior manipulation of near versus distant time perspective ($M = -.43$, $SD = 1.5$ vs. $M = -.16$, $SD = 1.4$; in distant vs. near future condition, respectively; $t(91) = -.93$, n.s.). More importantly, consistent with the prediction that central values predict distant but not near future preferences, a linear regression revealed a statistically significant interaction on preference between time perspective and the Rokeach value index ($\beta = .092$, $SE = .037$; $t = 2.5$, $p < .05$). Separate linear regressions for each time perspective condition indicated that the Rokeach value index was associated with rankings of identity and instrumental attributes in the distant future condition ($\beta = .181$, $SE = .079$; $t = 2.3$, $p < .05$) but not in the near future condition ($\beta = .096$, $SE = .081$; $t = 1.1$, n.s.). That is, in the distant future condition, greater importance of identity versus instrumental Rokeach values corresponded to higher rankings of identity course attributes. Conversely, in the near future condition, there was no relationship between individuals’ central values and their preferences between identity and instrumental course attributes.

In summary, Study 1 supports the hypothesis that a more distal time perspective enhances the preference for identity over instrumental benefits. In particular, when making a decision regarding an academic course to be taken in the distant future, participants focused on whether they would be treated with respect and dignity and whether their views would be adequately considered. However, when making a similar decision about an impending academic course, participants concentrated on whether they could obtain high grades and whether the course would enhance their resume. Additionally, the
finding that central values were consistent with distant but not near future preferences supports the proposition that a distal time perspective activates the idealistic self by shifting attention to the core ingredients of the self-concept. Accordingly, in the distant but not near future condition, individuals who viewed financial prosperity as their guiding principle in life preferred instrumental over identity attributes, whereas those who viewed self-respect as a more important life value preferred identity attributes. These findings suggest that while the idealistic self is typically associated with identity preferences, it can generate instrumental choices for individuals who are primarily guided by instrumental values.

Study 2

Study 1 demonstrated that identity compared to instrumental benefits receive more weight in decisions regarding distant-than near-future outcomes. Our conceptual model (shown in Fig. 1) posits that this effect is driven by time-dependent changes in the activation of different selves. Study 1 used participants’ central values, which are the core ingredients of one’s self-conception (Verplanken & Holland, 2002), as an indirect measure of idealistic self-activation. The present study is designed to directly test the proposition that different time perspectives activate distinct idealistic versus pragmatic self-concepts. Specifically, after manipulating time perspective we measure participants’ self-construal on a pragmatism versus idealism scale.

This study (as well as Studies 4 and 5) tests the conceptual model by examining the effects of time perspective using manipulations that relate to the self rather than to the actual timing of events, options, or outcomes (cf. Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2000). In particular, we prime different time perspectives by asking participants to describe a day in their lives in either the near- or distant-future. Further, to examine more directly the interplay between self and time, we include control conditions in which time perspective is manipulated but the self is not implicated. In these conditions, participants are asked to describe a (near- or distant-future) day in the life of a friend. We hypothesize that, if the self is an important determinant of the relationship between time perspective and activated self, then self-construal should vary when participants describe a near versus a distant day in their, but not their friend’s, lives. Thus, we predict that individuals would construe themselves as idealistic rather than pragmatic when thinking about a day in their life in the distant rather than the immediate future. However, we expect no such effect on self-construal when individuals think about their friends.

Our proposition that different time perspectives activate distinct selves was based on the malleability of the self (Markus & Kunda, 1986) and the co-existence of diverging self-conceptions. Research suggests that the magnitude of self-concept discrepancy differs across individuals and that a greater self-concept discrepancy is associated with stronger emotional distress (e.g., Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985). A reasonable assumption, then, is that a greater self-concept discrepancy will magnify the impact of various factors on the activation of different selves.

In this article, we focus on the impact of time perspective on the construction of pragmatic versus idealistic selves. We propose that time-dependent changes in self-activation should be more pronounced among people with high than low self-concept discrepancy. In particular, for individuals with higher levels of conflict between different selves, priming distal or proximal time perspective can activate one or the other self. Conversely, for individuals with little or no conflict between their self-concepts, there are no unique, separable selves to prime in the first place. This analysis suggests that individuals with high self-concept discrepancy will construe themselves as idealistic rather than pragmatic when thinking about a day in their life in the distant than proximal future. However, no such differences in self-construal are expected to emerge for people with low self-concept discrepancy. Following Higgins et al. (1985), in Study 2, we measure a basic self-concept discrepancy between people’s perceived “actual self” (i.e., people’s representation of the attributes they think they actually possess) and perceived “ideal self” (i.e., people’s representation of the attributes they would like to possess).

Method

Subjects

The participants were 121 undergraduate students at a large East Coast university who received $8 dollars for their participation. The study consisted of a 2 (time perspective: proximal vs. distal) × 2 (person-frame: self vs. other) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Participants were asked to participate in a series of unrelated questionnaire-based studies. The present study consisted of the first two (supposedly unrelated) questionnaires. The first questionnaire included the proximal versus distal time perspective manipulation. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to develop a “life event inventory” defined as a “psychological instrument to assess events in people’s lives.” As part of this effort, they were asked to describe in writing a typical day in their lives. Participants were randomly assigned to a proximal versus distal time perspective condition. In the proximal [distal] time perspective condition they were asked to describe what their day tomorrow [ten years from now] would look like. Participants were
asked to provide as much details as possible. To manipulate person frame, we asked participants to describe a typical day in either their own life (i.e., self-frame) or in the life of their friend (i.e., other-frame).

Once participants completed the first questionnaire, they received a second (supposedly unrelated) questionnaire with background questions about their age, gender, and degree type. Embedded in these questions were also: (1) a scale measuring respondents’ self-activation with respect to pragmatism versus idealism, and (2) a measure of respondents’ self-concept discrepancies.

**Self-activation measure.** To measure self-activation with respect to idealism versus pragmatism, we provided participants with a brief definition of idealistic versus pragmatic personality traits. Based on Webster’s New World International Dictionary (1998), an idealistic person was defined as a “person placing principles and values before practical considerations.” Conversely, a pragmatic person was defined as a “person disposed toward actions and guided by practical considerations.” Participants were then asked to indicate how they perceive themselves on a seven-point scale ranging from “Extremely Pragmatic” (1) to “Extremely Idealistic” (7).

**Self-concept discrepancy.** Following Higgins et al. (1985), participants were asked to list the attributes of the type of person they think they “actually are.” Participants were then asked to list the attributes of the type of person they “ideally want to be.” These attributes were then coded by two trained coders (who were blind to the hypotheses) according to the number of matches and mismatches between the actual and ideal listings for each participant. Matches were coded when attributes appearing in one listing were identical to, or synonymous with, attributes in the other listing. Mismatches were coded when words appearing in one listing were synonyms of words appearing in the other (see Higgins et al., 1985). Synonyms and antonyms were identified using Roget’s Thesaurus. Inter-rater agreement was 91% and disagreements were resolved through discussion. A “self-concept discrepancy” score was created by subtracting the number of matches from the number of mismatches.

**Results and discussion**

We tested the proposition that the self is a key antecedent of the effect of time perspective on idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation by conducting a 2 (time perspective: proximal vs. distal) × 2 (person-frame: self vs. other) ANOVA. As predicted, the impact of time perspective on self-activation was moderated by person frame, $F(1, 117)=4.22, p<.05$. Individuals were more likely to construe themselves as idealistic than pragmatic when thinking about a day in their life in the distant future ($M=4.5$, $SD=1.3$) than in the near future ($M=3.5$, $SD=1.5$), $t(60)=2.8$, $p<.01$. However, time perspective did not influence self-activation when individuals were thinking about a day in the life of their best friend ($M=4.0$, $SD=1.7$ vs. $M=4.1$, $SD=1.5$; distant vs. near future, respectively; $t(57)=.30$, n.s.).

To test the prediction that the effect of time perspective is more pronounced among people with high than low self-concept discrepancy, we classified participants into two groups based on a median split of their self-concept discrepancy scores (this was done only for participants who described a day in their own life). As predicted, there was a significant interaction between time perspective and self-concept discrepancy, $F(2,48)=3.4$, $p<.05$. Individuals with high self-concept discrepancy were more likely to construe themselves as idealistic rather than pragmatic when thinking about their day in the distant future ($M=4.7$, $SD=1.7$) than in the near future ($M=3.3$, $SD=1.4$), $t(26)=2.4$, $p<.05$. However, time perspective had no effect on the self-activation of people with low self-concept discrepancy ($M=4.1$, $SD=0.9$ vs. $M=3.9$, $SD=1.6$; distant vs. near future, respectively; $t(22)=.5$, n.s.).

In summary, the findings of Study 2 are noteworthy in three respects. First, consistent with our conceptual model, they demonstrate that a more distal time perspective activates a distinct idealistic versus pragmatic self-construal. Second, the findings highlight the underlying role of the self in determining the impact of time perspective. Thinking about a near versus distant day affected self-activation only when that day was from the participant’s own life and not from the life of a friend. Finally, the findings support the notion that the differential activation of idealistic versus pragmatic selves hinges on the co-existence of, and tension among, discrepant self-conceptions.

The role of interdependent versus independent self-construal

Study 2 demonstrated that self-concept discrepancy moderates the impact of time perspective on idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation. Individuals with high self-concept discrepancy construed themselves as relatively more idealistic than pragmatic when thinking about a day in their life in the distant than proximal future. In contrast, individuals with low self-concept discrepancy did not show temporal shifts in idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation. These findings suggest that time perspective helps alleviate the conflict arising from self-concept discrepancies by activating differential selves in the distant versus near future.

Relatedly, research suggests that self-concept discrepancy induces a state of discomfort and is often associated with negative emotions and reduced
well-being (e.g., Higgins et al., 1985). One reason for such distress is that in many western cultures, people are expected to have and express a coherent and consistent sense of self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). According to an independent model of the person, there is one true self that comprises a unique configuration of internal attributes (e.g., traits, motives, and values). Inconsistency poses a threat to the core, stable, authentic self, and can result in self-concept confusion, lack of clarity, and a sense of having a divided self (Campbell, 1990; Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). In recent years, however, cross-cultural research has challenged the generality of this model by proposing an interdependent model of the self that characterizes people in non-Western cultures. According to this model, the self is embedded in social context and can dramatically change in different situations. Personal characteristics, motives, and values are only assigned a secondary role compared to the primary task of complying with the norms, rules, and expectations induced by the specific social context. Furthermore, in non-Western cultures, consistency is not assumed to be a fundamental human need and inconsistency is not assumed to be uncomfortable or tension-inducing (e.g., Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Markus et al., 1997). For example, Heine and Lehman (1997) found that Japanese students reported greater discrepancies between their actual and ideal self-views than did European Canadians, but these discrepancies were less strongly related to depression for Japanese than for European Canadians. Similarly, Suh (2002) showed that consistency was not as strongly associated with well-being for South Koreans as for North Americans.

Although most research concerning independent versus interdependent self-activation has been cross-cultural, recent research demonstrates that situational primes can also influence the salience of independent versus interdependent self-construal (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). For example, Brewer and Gardner (1996) found an increase in the activation of the independent self after European-Americans circled “independent” pronouns (e.g., “I”) in a word search task. Similarly, priming an interdependent self-construal by asking European-Americans to circle “interdependent” pronouns (e.g., “we”) increased the activation of the interdependent self.

The preceding discussion suggests that the impact of time perspective on self-activation and preference will be stronger among individuals primed with an independent than interdependent self. Specifically, focusing on the near versus distant future allows individuals with an independent self to avoid the negative impact of self-concept discrepancies by activating differential selves at different times. In contrast, because maintaining a consistent self-concept at any single time is less important for individuals with an interdependent self, time perspective is less likely to influence such individuals.¹

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that people construed themselves as relatively more idealistic than pragmatic and preferred identity over instrumental benefits when focusing on the distant than near future. In Studies 3a and 3b, we examine whether priming an independent versus interdependent self moderates the effect of time perspective on preference between identity and instrumental benefits. Specifically, we predict that people primed with an independent self will be more likely to prefer identity attributes when considering distant than near future outcomes. However, we expect a weaker effect of time perspective among individuals primed with an interdependent self.

Study 3a

Subjects

The participants were 66 undergraduate students at a large East Coast university who received $8 dollars for their participation. The study consisted of a 2 (prime type: independent vs. interdependent self) × 2 (time perspective: near vs. distant future) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Participants were asked to participate in a series of unrelated questionnaire-based studies. The present study consisted of the first two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was introduced as a study on psycholinguistic processes conducted by the psychology department. The second questionnaire was introduced as a separate (supposedly unrelated) study on academic course preferences, conducted by the business school of the same university. The first questionnaire included the independent versus interdependent prime manipulation adopted from Brewer and Gardner (1996). Participants were asked to read a short (90 word) travel story and circle the pronouns in the paragraph. The two priming conditions differed only with respect to whether the pronouns were “independent” (e.g., I, me, my) or “interdependent” (e.g., we, our, us).

Participants then completed the second questionnaire, which measured identity versus instrumental course preferences (i.e., the dependent variable). Participants were asked to indicate their preference between two academic courses, which were scheduled to start in either the current or the next academic year (near versus distant future condition, respectively). The two courses were described on four attributes: two identity attributes (quality of treatment and professor’s

¹ We thank a reviewer for raising this possibility.
procedural fairness) and two instrumental attributes (grades and workload). Participants received the score of each course on each of these four attributes. The scores were described as being the average rating of 100 past students. In addition, some student testimonials were provided (e.g., “this professor always respects your views and opinions. He makes you feel a unique and valuable individual,” “I don’t like the way the professor makes decisions. He often applies different rules to different students…” “This course is an easy A. I don’t think anyone gets less than a B.” “The workload is pretty light. The assignments are not time consuming and you don’t have to prep much for exams”). Whereas Course A was superior on the identity attributes, Course B was superior on the instrumental attributes. Participants were asked to rate their preference between the two courses on a six-point scale, where “1” indicated a preference for Course A, and “6” indicated a preference for Course B.

Results

To test the prediction that prime type moderates the effect of time perspective on preference between identity and instrumental benefits, we conducted a 2 (time perspective: near vs. distant) \(\times\) 2 (prime type: independent vs. interdependent) ANOVA. As hypothesized, the impact of time perspective on preferences was moderated by prime type, \(F(1, 62) = 6.0, p < .05\). Participants who primed with an independent self had a stronger relative preference for the course superior on the identity attributes in the distant future (\(M = 3.3, SD = 1.6\)) than in the near future (\(M = 4.7, SD = 1.7\)), \(t(29) = 2.4, p < .05\). However, time perspective did not affect the preferences of participants who were primed with an interdependent self (\(M = 3.2, SD = 1.6\) vs. \(M = 3.7, SD = 2.0\); distant vs. near future, respectively; \(t(33) = -1.1, n.s.\)).

Study 3b

Subjects

The participants in the study were 70 travelers, who were waiting for trains at sitting areas in a major East Coast train station. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 65. The study consisted of a 2 (prime type: independent vs. interdependent) \(\times\) 2 (time perspective: near vs. distant) between-subjects design.

Procedure

Participants were approached by an experimenter and were asked to participate in a series of unrelated questionnaire-based studies. The first study was introduced as a study on psycholinguistic processes conducted by the psychology department of a large East Coast university. This Study included the independent versus interdependent prime described in Study 3a. The second study was introduced as a separate (supposedly unrelated) study on decision making, conducted by the business school of the same university. Participants were asked to imagine that their colleague at work was moving out of town either next week or in six months (near vs. distant time perspective, respectively) and that they need to choose one of two new work colleagues. Participants were also told that their salary would be based on the number of project assignments that they and their chosen colleague would manage to jointly complete. Colleague A was described as superior on instrumental attributes (“Colleague A completes assignments quickly and efficiently. However, he does not always treat people with respect and dignity and you feel that your values are inconsistent with his values”). Colleague B was described as superior on identity attributes (“Colleague B creates a good atmosphere in which people feel comfortable to express their views and opinions. You feel that your values and his values are very similar. However, he is not very efficient and rarely finishes the job on time”). Participants were asked to rate their preference between the two colleagues on a nine-point scale, where “1” indicated a preference for Colleague A (instrumental attributes) and “9” indicated a preference for Colleague B (identity attributes).

Results

As hypothesized, the impact of time perspective on preferences was moderated by prime type, \(F(1, 94) = 3.3, p < .05\). Participants who primed with an independent self had a stronger relative preference for the colleague superior on the identity attributes in the distant future (\(M = 5.8, SD = 3.3\)) than in the near future (\(M = 3.6, SD = 3.0\)), \(t(47) = 2.4, p < .05\). However, time perspective did not affect the preferences of participants who were primed with an interdependent self (\(M = 5.4, SD = 3.1\) vs. \(M = 4.5, SD = 3.4\); distant vs. near future, respectively; \(t(47) = 9, n.s.\)).

The role of interdependent versus independent self-construal: discussion

The findings of Studies 3a and 3b shed light on the mechanism underlying time-dependent changes in preference between identity and instrumental motives. Members of Western cultures, with predominantly independent self-construal, are expected to have and express a unified self at any single point in time. For such individuals, different time perspectives enable the expression of idealistic and pragmatic selves without the discomfort associated with a sense of having a divided self.
In contrast, the motivation for self consistency is much weaker in cultures that foster interdependent selves. For such individuals, the co-existence of multiple selves is normative, and therefore, there is no need for preference reversals based on time perspective. Consistent with this normative, and therefore, there is no need for preference such individuals, the co-existence of multiple selves is weaker in cultures that foster interdependent selves. For

Tests of the entire conceptual model

Study 1 showed that variations in time perspective affected the preference between identity and instrumental attributes. Study 2 offered further support for our conceptualization by demonstrating that a distal time perspective activated an idealistic self, whereas a proximal time perspective activated a pragmatic self. Further, Studies 2 and 3 provided insights into the underlying processes by demonstrating that the effect of time perspective on preference is stronger among people with greater self-concept discrepancy (Study 2) and for those with an independent than interdependent self (Studies 3a and 3b). The main goal of the last two studies was to test the entire conceptual model (shown in Fig. 1) by examining whether the effect of time perspective on preference is mediated by the construction of an idealistic versus a pragmatic self.

A second objective of Studies 4 and 5 was to generalize the impact of time perspective on decision-making to a context in which outcomes do not vary in time. Similar to Study 2, in Study 4 we primed time perspective by asking participants to describe what their day would look like tomorrow or ten years from today. In Study 5, we primed time perspective by asking participants to describe the attributes that they think would best characterize them in either the near or distant future. In both studies, we subsequently measured identity versus instrumental preferences in the context of an event whose timing was held constant. To increase experimental realism, participants were led to believe that their decisions would have real consequences.

Study 4

We proposed that a distal time perspective activates an idealistic versus a pragmatic self, which then generates a preference for identity versus instrumental attributes. What type of evidence can support the idea of time-dependent changes in the activation of differential selves and in preferences? As noted earlier, the idealistic self places principles and values above practical considerations and seeks to express the person’s sense of true self. The activation of the idealistic self, then, highlights the core and most significant aspects of one’s life that are often neglected due to situational and practical constraints. An important life dimension that contributes to a person’s sense of self is social relationships (e.g., Kanter, 1972; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tyler et al., 1997). Indeed, a central part of one’s self-definition is derived from relationships with significant others (e.g., Hinkley & Andersen, 1996). Brewer and Gardner (1996) describe the relational self which is derived from connections and relationships with significant others as an important aspect of the self-concept. Relatedly, Klinger (1977) found that most people describe relationships with friends and family as the core and most meaningful features of their life. Less important were pragmatic aspects like occupational success, housing, and financial security. Several theories also emphasize the notion that maintaining close relationships with family and friends is an important life value (e.g., Hewitt, 1989). Nevertheless, relationships often receive less immediate priority than more pragmatic and tangible aspects of life. Therefore, if indeed a distal time perspective activates the idealistic self that seeks to express one’s core self-conception, then we would expect that social relationships will be more salient under a distal than proximal time perspective.

A natural, objective measure of the salience of social relationships is the frequency of mentioning such relationships (with significant others, friends, and/or family) when describing one’s life. Thus, we expect that participants will refer to their relationships more often when they are asked to describe their day ten years into the future rather than tomorrow. Further, consistent with the conceptual model, we predict that the frequency of mentioning social relationships will mediate the effect of the primed time perspective on identity versus instrumental preferences.

Method

Subjects

The participants were 31 undergraduate students at a large East Coast university who received $8 dollars for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to either a proximal or distal time perspective condition.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a series of questionnaire-based studies. The present study consisted of the first two questionnaires, which were introduced as a study on life events and a separate (supposedly unrelated) study on students’ preferences. The two questionnaires were printed using different paper, font, and layout.

Participants first completed the proximal versus distal time perspective manipulation, which was identical to that used in Study 2. They then continued to the next
questionnaire, which was introduced as a “survey about students’ preferences toward their student union.” This questionnaire measured identity versus instrumental preferences. Participants were told that the university was actually considering operating a new student union, which would have various implications for students’ lives and welfare. They were told that the questionnaire was part of an effort to better understand students’ preferences so that the best possible union could be established, and that their responses would therefore have an actual impact on the University’s policy. Participants were asked to rank four union tasks according to their importance (i.e., rank the most important union task as “1,” etc.). Four union tasks were described: two provided instrumental benefits (“negotiate better housing subsidies for students,” “negotiate more favorable financial aid packages”), whereas the other two offered identity benefits (“make sure that students are treated with respect and dignity,” “make sure that students have ample opportunities to express their views and opinions”).

Results and discussion

To measure participants’ relative preference between identity and instrumental benefits, we averaged the ranking of the two identity-related union tasks. A lower score on this preference measure indicates a greater relative preference for the identity benefits, whereas a higher score represents a stronger relative preference for the instrumental benefits. As hypothesized, participants in the distal compared to proximal time perspective condition had a stronger preference for identity relative to instrumental union-related tasks (M = 2.3, SD = .7 vs. M = 2.9, SD = .7); in distal vs. proximal perspective condition, respectively; t(29) = 2.1, p < .05). Among participants who thought of a day in their lives ten years into the future, 63% (10 out of 16) ranked an identity-related task as the most important union task; in contrast, only 27% (4 out of 15) of participants who thought of their day tomorrow selected an identity-related task as the most important union task (z = 2.2, p < .05).

To test the prediction that the salience of relationships (an indicator of idealistic vs. pragmatic self-activation) mediates the effect of time perspective on preference, we constructed a “relationship score.” This score was created by counting the number of times participants mentioned relationships (with significant others, friends, and/or family) in their descriptions of a day in their lives. To rule out the possibility of a confound, we counted the total number of words participant used when describing a near versus distant day in their lives. There was no difference in the total number of words written in the near versus distant condition (M = 126.2, SD = 71.9 vs. M = 124.3, SD = 62.6; in distant vs. near future condition, respectively; t(29) = .05, n.s.). A mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) indicated that the relationship score mediated the effect of time perspective on identity versus instrumental preferences. In particular, the following four conditions for mediation were supported: (1) the independent variable significantly affected the mediator (2.0 vs. 0.7 mentions of a significant other, friend, and/or family in distal vs. proximal time perspective; t = 2.4, p < .01); (2) the independent variable significantly affected the dependent variable (preference for identity- versus instrumental-related tasks) in the absence of the mediator, as described earlier; (3) the mediator had a significant unique effect on the dependent variable (t = 2.9, p < .05); and (4) the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable shrank (t = 1.0, n.s.) upon the addition of the mediator to the model; the effect of the mediator on the dependent variable remained significant in the full model (t = 2.2, p < .05). A Sobel (1982) test of mediation confirmed that the relationship score fully mediated the effect of primed time perspective on preference (t = 1.9, p < .05).

The mediation prediction was also supported by a causal model (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1995), whose results are shown in Fig. 2. Variations in time perspective affected the activation of idealistic versus pragmatic selves (β = .41, p < .01), and variations in self-activation influenced the preference between identity- and instrumental-related union tasks (β = .39, p < .05). Once these

Fig. 2. The interplay between time perspective, self-concept, and preference—a causal model for Study 4. ** denotes path coefficients significant at the .01 level. * denotes path coefficients significant at the .05 level.
paths were taken into account, there was no direct effect of time perspective on preference ($\beta = 0.19$, n.s.).

In summary, Study 4 supported the hypothesis that priming distal versus proximal time perspective enhances the preference for identity over instrumental attributes. This result generalizes the findings of Study 1 by using a different decision context and by priming temporal perspective rather than explicitly varying the timing of the decision outcome. Further, consistent with the conceptual model, we found that greater salience of social relationships, which indicates the activation of an idealistic rather than a pragmatic self, mediated the effect of time perspective on preference.

**Study 5**

The goal of the present study was to test the entire conceptual model using a direct measure of idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation. To measure self-activation, we asked participants to select three out of six characteristics that they thought would best describe them in the near or distant future. Three of the characteristics reflected an idealistic self-activation, whereas three other characteristics reflected a pragmatic self-activation.

**Method**

**Subjects**

Seventy participants were recruited at a public park in a large East Coast city. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 65.

**Procedure**

Participants were approached by an experimenter and were asked to participate in a series of questionnaire-based studies. The first study was introduced as a study on self-perception conducted by the psychology department of a large East Coast university. The second study was introduced as a separate (supposedly unrelated) study on banking preferences, conducted by the business school of the same university.

The first questionnaire consisted of the time perspective manipulation (i.e., the independent variable) and the measurement of activated self-concept (i.e., the mediator). Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to understand people’s perceptions about themselves. Participants were randomly assigned to either a proximal or a distal time perspective condition. In the proximal [distal] time perspective condition, they were asked to think about themselves one week [ten years] into the future. They were then asked to select three characteristics (out of six) that they thought would best describe them at that time. Three characteristics reflected an idealistic self-activation and focused on the true self and its concomitant value system (“putting my values and principles above all other considerations,” “fulfilling my inner potential,” and “contributing to my community”). Three other characteristics reflected a pragmatic self-activation and focused on the instrumentality of actions (“mostly guided by practical considerations,” “tend to make decisions that maximize my self-interest,” and “focused on financial issues”).

Participants then completed the second questionnaire, which measured identity versus instrumental preferences (i.e., the dependent variable). Participants were asked to imagine that they were about to open a new banking account in one of two banks (the timing of the decision and its outcome were held constant across the two time perspective conditions). The two banks were described using four attributes: two identity attributes (“customers are treated with respect and dignity,” “customer complaints are considered very seriously”) and two instrumental attributes (“low transaction fees,” “good interest rates on credit cards”). Participants received the score of each bank on these four attributes; the scores were described as being the average rating of 100 customers of each bank. Whereas Bank A was superior on the instrumental attributes, Bank B was superior on the identity attributes. Participants were asked to rate their preference between the two banks on a seven-point scale, where “1” indicated a preference for Bank A (instrumental attributes) and “7” indicated a preference for Bank B (identity attributes).

**Results and discussion**

To measure idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation, we created a “self-activation score” for each participant based on the number of idealistic self-defining characteristics that the participant selected. Because participants were asked to select three self-defining characteristics, this score could vary from zero to three, with higher [lower] scores representing a stronger idealistic [pragmatic] self-activation. Consistent with the predicted effect of temporal perspective on self-activation, participants selected relatively more idealistic than pragmatic characteristics when describing themselves ten years rather than one week into the future (1.8 vs. 1.4 on the self-activation score, respectively; $t = 2.0$, $p < .05$). In addition, as hypothesized, participants who thought about themselves ten years rather than one week into the future indicated a stronger preference for the bank that was superior on identity rather than instrumental attributes ($M = 4.5$ vs. $M = 3.6$; $t = 1.8$, $p < .05$).

Consistent with the conceptual model, a mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986) indicated that the self-activation score mediated the effect of time perspective on identity versus instrumental bank preferences. In particular, the following four conditions for mediation were supported: as detailed earlier, the independent variable significantly affected the mediator as well as the dependent variable when each of these was
predicted in the absence of the other (conditions 1 and 2, respectively); (3) the mediator had a significant unique effect on the dependent variable \((t = 2.4, p < .05)\); and (4) the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable shrank \((t = 1.3, p < .1)\) upon the addition of the mediator to the model; the effect of the mediator on the dependent variable remained significant in the full model \((t = 2.0, p < .05)\). A Sobel (1982) test of mediation confirmed that the self-activation score mediated the effect of time perspective on preference \((t = 1.6, p = .05)\).

The results of causal modeling (Arbuckle & Wothke, 1995) also supported the mediation hypothesis (see Fig. 3). Variations in time perspective affected the activation of idealistic versus pragmatic selves \((\beta = 0.23, p < .05)\), and variations in self-activation influenced the preference between identity and instrumental bank benefits \((\beta = 0.24, p < .05)\). Once these paths were taken into account, time perspective no longer directly affected preference \((\beta = 0.15, n.s.)\).

In summary, the results of Study 5 provided additional support for the prediction that a more distal time perspective enhances preferences for identity over instrumental attributes. More importantly, the present study shed light on the underlying mechanism by demonstrating that self-concept activation (idealistic versus pragmatic) mediates the effects of time perspective on identity versus instrumental preferences.

**General discussion**

The realization that the self-system is dynamic and consists of multiple self-conceptions has led researchers to abandon the goal of exploring the self as a unitary and stable construct. Instead, current research focuses on identifying different self-conceptions and the circumstances under which they are activated. In the present paper we described two important types of divergent self-conceptions, the pragmatic and idealistic selves. These selves express two countervailing forces in American culture and other modernized societies that stress the benefits of pragmatism but also emphasize the virtues of principles and values. We proposed that a distal time perspective activates the idealistic self whereas a proximal time perspective activates the pragmatic self. We further argued that such differential selves have implications for the tradeoff between identity and instrumental benefits. To the best of our knowledge, this research is the first to systematically examine the psychology of idealism versus pragmatism. Although researchers offered a variety of distinctions among diverging self-conceptions, there is no reference to the distinction between the idealistic self, which includes perceptions of one’s true self (fundamental values, core self-conceptions), and the pragmatic self, which includes relatively more context-dependent aspects of the self. More research is required to further examine the content and specific attributes of these two self-conceptions. Next, we review the main findings of the present research and highlight the implications for the literatures on construal level, self, and justice. We conclude by discussing the practical implications for organizational behavior, political psychology, and individual decision-making.

**Main findings and theoretical implications**

A series of five studies supported our conceptual model (shown in Fig. 1). Study 1 demonstrated that people have stronger preferences for identity than instrumental attributes when making decisions about distant than near future outcomes. Further, consistent with the argument that a distal time perspective activates the idealistic self, which emphasizes principles and values, central values predicted distant but not near future preferences. As temporal distance increases, people are more likely to express their true identity and make choices that are aligned with their values and principles.

The present research sheds light on the underlying psychological processes by demonstrating that the activation of differential selves (idealistic vs. pragmatic)
mediates the effect of time perspective (distal vs. proximal) on identity versus instrumental preferences. Study 2 demonstrated that a distal as opposed to a proximal time perspective activated an idealistic rather than a pragmatic self-concept. Further, the impact of (primed) time perspective was eliminated when people considered a day in the life of their friend, a finding that highlights the key role of the self. Studies 2 and 3 provided insights into the underlying mechanism by demonstrating that the effect of time was more pronounced among individuals who are especially motivated to maintain a consistent self (i.e., people with greater self-concept discrepancies or those with independent self-construals). Given that people in Western cultures are expected to have and express a coherent and consistent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), these findings suggest that variations in time perspective may reduce the tension between discrepant self-conceptions by activating differential selves. Studies 4 and 5 supported the entire conceptual model by showing that idealistic versus pragmatic self-activation mediated the effect of time perspective on preferences.

Implications for construal level theory

The present research extends the findings of CLT to the domain of the self. Building on a synthesis between CLT and research on the self, we proposed that a more distal time perspective shifts attention to the core and most defining characteristics of the person, activating the idealistic self. Conversely, a more proximal time perspective underscores situational contingencies that are incidental to one’s true self, consequently activating the pragmatic self. One implication of this finding is that people’s perceptions of themselves should be more similar when they think about themselves in the near than distant future. In the near future, external inducements and situational pressures may overshadow personal, idiosyncratic values. Relatedly, research by Eyal, Liberman, Sagristano and Trope (2006) suggests that people are more alike in their plans for the near than distant future.

Prior research on CLT involved events and outcomes that varied in time (see, e.g., Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2000). We contribute to this literature by showing that priming different time perspectives—while holding constant the timing of the decision outcome—also influences self-activation and preference. For example, in Studies 3 and 4, we demonstrated that preferences for (imminent) identity benefits were stronger when participants thought about their lives in the distant than near future. In these studies, we varied participants’ time perspective but held constant the timing of the decision’s outcome. Future research could examine the impact on idealism versus pragmatism of other dimensions of psychological distance (e.g., outcome probability, social distance; see Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Trope & Liberman, 2003).

Implications for the literature on the self

In recent years, the self-concept has received a great deal of attention from researchers focusing on motivation and goal-directed behavior. These researchers often view the self-system as dynamic and consisting of various self-representations that become salient at different points in time (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987). The present research contributes to earlier work on the self by demonstrating that time perspective activates differential selves (idealistic vs. pragmatic), which subsequently leads to different preferences and choices.

In his self-concept discrepancy theory, Higgins (1987) proposed that each individual has different self-conceptions: the “actual” self, the “ideal” self, and the “ought” self. Higgins argued that a state of discomfort emerges from discrepancies between different self-concepts. Discomfort or dissatisfaction may also arise from a discrepancy between the activated self and the available set of options and opportunities. For example, people may be forced to act in a manner that is inconsistent with their activated self. Future research can explore the consequences of mis/matches between activated self (idealistic vs. pragmatic) and behavior for well-being and life satisfaction.

Organismic and existentially informed theories of personality (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Rogers, 1963), emphasize that people are not always true to themselves. Instead, there are variations from one situation to another in the extent to which people pursue their intrinsic interests (Sheldon et al., 1997). The present research suggested that the power of the situation may inhibit people from expressing their true, inner self. Paradoxically, then, people may spend most of their lives focused on the pragmatics of the here and now while chronically relegating their true interests and passions to the future.

Implications for the literature on justice

Despite the wide consensus regarding the impact of justice on judgment, decision-making, and behavior, there is lingering debate about the most important mechanism underlying justice concerns. Whereas the instrumental-based approach posits that outcomes drive justice motivations, the identity-based approach emphasizes the importance of fulfilling psychological needs, such as creating a desired and principled identity (e.g., Greenberg, 1990; Tyler et al., 1997). Researchers have also highlighted the co-existence of, and potential conflict between, identity and instrumental motivations. For example, Greenberg and Cohen (1982)
argued that justice norms are motivated by normative concerns (e.g., satisfying internal standards) as well as instrumental concerns (e.g., impressing others). They suggested that the normative behavior required for attaining one’s internal standards of justice could be different from that needed to cultivate a favorable image.

The results of the present research contribute to the theoretical understanding of justice by suggesting that certain factors (i.e., time perspective and activated self-concept) affect the relative strength of the two major justice motives, namely identity and instrumental concerns. The way people think about justice will not be constant across situations. Instead, the issues that are most important in making choices will depend upon the social context. When people adopt a broader temporal perspective, they give greater weight to their values and idealistic self, and this emphasis should lead to heightened weighting of relational issues and procedural justice judgments (Tyler & Lind, 1992). In contrast, when people assume a narrower temporal perspective, they should give greater weight to issues of outcome favorability and distributive justice, since such issues are more instrumental in character (Tyler, 1994).

Implications for organizational behavior, political psychology, and individual decision-making

The tension between idealism and pragmatism is prevalent in a wide range of contexts, including organizational settings, politics, and individual decision-making. For example, employees may need to choose between jobs that allow them to follow their true interests and passions and jobs that are financially rewarding. Similarly, employees may need to decide whether to work in an “idealistic” company that is environmentally and socially responsible or in a “pragmatic” company that emphasizes revenue maximization and cost saving. Unfortunately, organizational policies that emphasize idealistic values often require sacrificing pragmatic concerns and vice versa (Tetlock, 1986). The tension between idealism (e.g., values) and pragmatism (e.g., instrumental outcomes) is particularly troublesome given evidence that organizations whose norms and values fit those of their employees attain higher levels of extra-role behavior, worker satisfaction and tenure, and organizational commitment and identification (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Handler, 2004).

Understanding the impact of time perspectives may help organizations reduce the conflict between idealism and pragmatism and increase employee satisfaction and wellbeing. For example, an organization’s mission statement can stress immediate objectives pertaining to productivity and profitability as well as promote long-term goals related to social values, ethics, and justice. Similarly, organizations can design incentive systems that provide proximal instrumental rewards (e.g., “hard benefits” such as cash bonuses and other tangible items) as well as future identity incentives that idiosyncratically fit the employee (e.g., “soft benefits” such as special treatment and unique training; see Kivetz & Simonson, 2003). Organizations can also help their leaders and managers avoid excessive pragmatism by having them intentionally assume a future time perspective. For example, Apple Corporation conducts management seminars in which groups of over 100 executives spend four days living life at Apple five years into the future (Moriarty & Kosnik, 1989). Managers in these seminars are asked, for example, to communicate what Apple will be like in the future. Such seminars have the potential to shift executives’ perspective so that they incorporate more idealistic visions in their decisions and plans.

The finding that people are idealistic under distal time perspectives but become pragmatic under proximal perspectives has important implications for the psychology of politics. This effect may explain the oft heard complaint about the inconsistency (or weak backbone) of elected politicians. More specifically, politicians campaigning for future public office frequently champion principles and party ideology, but later disappoint (some) voters with the inevitable pragmatism that accompanies the actual day to day job. This phenomenon may be driven not only by changes in the politician’s time perspective, but also by shifts in other dimensions of psychological distance like the increased realness and self-relevance of the position. Recent evidence that successful leaders balance pragmatism with idealism (Bostdorf & Goldzwig, 1994) underscores the importance of understanding the role of time perspective and, more generally, psychological distance.

The present research could have bitter implications for individual decision-making. Because the pragmatic self dominates the here and now, people may repeatedly fail to express their true, idealistic self by making choices that do not reflect their central values. This effect may be exacerbated by the mirage of future self-expression, which is used to justify excessive pragmatism at the present (“tomorrow I’ll be me”). Alas, the proverbial future always remains distant and a chronic failure to make choices that are aligned with one’s true self may result in frustration and feelings of missing out. We hope this work stimulates further investigations of the idealistic and pragmatic selves and the circumstances that promote choices that are consistent with one’s true self and personal standards. Such research has the potential to improve decision quality and enhance well-being and satisfaction across different life domains.
Appendix A. Rokeach values (Study 1)

Please rate how important is each of the following values for you, as a guiding principle in your life:

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<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Not at all important</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
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<td>Social recognition (respect, admiration)</td>
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<td>Economic prosperity (being financially well off)</td>
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<td>Self-respect (self esteem)</td>
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<td>Acceptance by others (feeling that you belong)</td>
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