

## COMMENTARY

## Reflections on Personal and Collective Time Travel: Some Additional Findings and Suggestions for Future Research

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Liu and Szpunar (2023) have provided an impressive overview and organization of personal and national event cognition. They cover a vast amount of event cognition literature and a comprehensive framework for understanding how event cognition operates and interacts at the individual and collective (national) level. In our brief commentary, we will provide several elaborations, additional findings, and questions for the topic area moving forward.

### Measuring Personal and Collective Pasts and Futures

The primary method for assessing positivity and negativity biases for the personal and national past and future is the event fluency paradigm (Shrikanth et al., 2018; Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016; see also the future thinking task, MacLeod & Byrne, 1996). In this paradigm, people report what events they are “excited” or “worried” about in their own personal future and their country’s future, usually for spans of next week, year, and 5–10 years (see specific cues and findings for other studies in Table 1 in Liu & Szpunar, 2023). People may also be asked to list positive or negative events from their own past and their country’s past for the same time spans (last week, year, and 5–10 years; Shrikanth & Szpunar, 2021) to measure personal and collective memories in addition to personal and collective futures. These event fluency paradigms can be timed (~1 min per cue) or untimed, and the number of unique positive events (or those they are “excited” about) and unique negative events (or those they are “worried” about), as well as the proportion of positive to negative events (Yamashiro et al., 2022) are the primary measures used. These measures reveal dissociations in emotional valence between the personal and collective pasts and futures. Specifically, as Liu and Szpunar document, the typical finding for Western countries is that the personal past and future are remembered or imagined as more positive than negative (more positive than

negative events are listed), whereas the collective past and future are remembered or imagined as more negative than positive (more negative than positive events are listed).<sup>1</sup>

The event fluency paradigm offers a straightforward approach for assessing how one feels about their own and their country’s past and future, though there are some limitations to its exclusive use. A possible problem with the event fluency paradigm is that inferences are made about a person’s perspective on the past and future from a simple listing of events that come to mind. That is a good beginning, but converging evidence from other possible paradigms would be welcome. One direction for future research is to use more in-depth measures of personal and collective mental time travel based on written or oral protocols in which participants would provide narratives about their vision of their (or their groups’) past and future (Yamashiro et al., 2019). That is, rather than merely listing discrete events for a positive and negative cue, participants could provide lengthier narratives and additional context for past and future events they are excited or worried about, or even just the past and future as a whole without cuing explicitly positive or negative events (e.g., Topcu & Hirst, 2020). For example, participants could be asked to write a paragraph about the past and future of their country or their own lives, or to write sentences addressing national events they feel excited or worried about for the past and future (or for their own past and future). Longer written responses can better capture psychological content including emotion, personality, and motivation (Pennebaker & King, 1999); moral intuitions and values (Graham et al., 2009); and other underlying cognitive processes (Kennedy et al., 2022). Not only could this technique provide additional insight into the dynamics and cultural influences of personal and collective past and future thought (e.g., Wang & Ross, 2005; Wertsch, 2002) but it may overcome some potential limitations of listing discrete events in the event fluency paradigm where every event is weighted the same (each unique event counts as 1), and so an overall positivity or negativity bias may not account for the fact that some events are perceived as much more or less positive or negative than others. Some studies have somewhat addressed differences in valence intensities by including ratings (from very

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<sup>1</sup> Some exceptions to this pattern have been reported, such as positively biased collective memories (Cyr & Hirst, 2019; Yamashiro & Roediger, 2019) and neutral or positive collective futures (Mert et al., 2022; Topcu & Hirst, 2020). Though we briefly discuss the collective future discrepancy, the specifics of these articles are outside of the scope of this article.

negative to very positive) for events (e.g., [Cyr & Hirst, 2019](#); [Shrikanth & Szpunar, 2021](#); [Topcu & Hirst, 2020](#)) but may benefit from additional context and allowing for more emotional variance than a single continuum ranging from negative to positive.

Similarly, more in-depth narratives or responses to potential future events may provide much-needed nuance to the emotionality of events; that is, potential future events can and often do induce both excitement and concern, such as feeling excited about finding a future career but feeling worried about the job market or whether wages will keep up with inflation. Such nuance is evidenced by findings from [Schuman and Scott \(1989\)](#), who asked 1,410 Americans to name one or two especially important national or world events from the past 50 years, as well as to report why they chose the event. World War II was the most listed event by close to one third (29.3%) of the participants. Though war might be classified as a “negative event” or more worrisome than exciting, more than half (51.2%) of the justifications provided for listing the event were positive (economic prosperity, winning the good war, creating a world structure, patriotism), 37.0% were mixed (personal experiences in the war, the large impact of the war), and only 11.8% were negative (lives lost, wartime shortages; see also [Scott & Zac, 1993](#); [Zaromb et al., 2014](#)). Such nuanced classifications are evidenced in other responses, as well, such as a negative event like The Great Depression being discussed in terms of negative aspects such as various hardships but also positive aspects such as the passing of New Deal legislation to better society. These findings suggest that not only can events themselves be difficult to classify as exclusively negative or positive but also that the sentiments and narratives concerning those events can provide a much more complex picture ([Yamashiro et al., 2019](#)) and become increasingly important and relied upon as events become more temporally distant in the past or future ([Berntsen & Bohn, 2010](#)).

Another way to provide a more comprehensive picture of the way people think of past and future events could be to use a wider variety of cues other than “excited” (positive) and “worried” (negative). One such approach used in studies of personal autobiographical memory and episodic future thought is the Galton–Crovitz word-cuing technique ([Crovitz & Schiffman, 1974](#); [Galton, 1880](#); see [Szpunar, 2010](#), for a review). In this word-cuing technique, participants are provided a variety of different word cues (e.g., birthday, car, house) or categories (e.g., people, places, life events) and are asked to elaborate on an autobiographical memory or generate a future scenario for each word cue. Whereas the event fluency paradigm reliably produces positively valenced personal past and future biases, such positivity biases are not robustly observed for personal past and future events when using this word-cuing technique (e.g., [Berntsen & Bohn, 2010](#); [Rubin & Schulkind, 1997](#)), thus making this technique a potentially useful approach for further elaboration of and examination of boundary conditions. Conversely, providing no specific cues and instead using an open-ended prompt, such as asking for a set number of events that may occur in your country’s future without specifying positive or negative events, less commonly results in negative biases for the collective future but instead finds neutral or even positive biases for the collective future of one’s nation ([Mert et al., 2022](#); [Topcu & Hirst, 2020](#)). Further study is warranted in examining discrepancies in collective future valence between studies explicitly asking for positive and negative events and those asking for events without specifying a particular valence.

A final methodological question worth considering is to what extent our various laboratory measures of personal and collective pasts and futures align with other real-world indices of such measures. [Liu and Szpunar \(2023\)](#) review many studies that indicate the robust finding that, at least in WEIRD (i.e., Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) nations, personal pasts and futures are positively biased, whereas collective pasts and futures are negatively biased. Yet, collective future thought for one’s country may be more aligned with indices of personal well-being in general than with measures of personal future thought. That is, measures such as an ever-increasing suicide rate in Western nations (particularly in the United States, where the rate increased 30% between 2000 and 2020), overall rise of mortality due to other “deaths of despair” (e.g., death from substance abuse/drugs/alcohol), decreased life expectancy, and increased socioeconomic inequality and psychosocial stress ([Ilic & Ilic, 2022](#); [Puka et al., 2022](#); [Sterling & Platt, 2022](#)) seem to indicate that many people have a bleak outlook on their own future and try to escape it. These indices contrast sharply with personal positivity biases from the event fluency paradigm.

The biases in Western cultures may not be universal. Studies with Chinese participants do not demonstrate negative collective future biases using fluency measures ([Deng et al., 2022](#); [Mert et al., 2022](#)), which may better align with China’s trend of a continual decrease in suicide rate and increase in other quality of life measures and life expectancy ([Ilic & Ilic, 2022](#); [King et al., 2022](#); [Zhang et al., 2022](#)). These real-world national trends are undoubtedly complex and the result of many different factors; however, the dissociation in emotional valence for how one feels about their country’s future may be somewhat reflective of or influenced by those large-scale phenomena.

### High-Impact, Epoch-Making Events

[Liu and Szpunar \(2023\)](#) note that a possible mechanism underlying negatively valenced national future reports may be current salient news events occurring nationally or globally and that affect individuals’ view of the future. They provide examples such as participants from late 2017 listing their greatest future concerns as Donald Trump and North Korea ([Shrikanth et al., 2018](#)) and participants from late 2021 listing the economy, inflation, and COVID-19 vaccines as their greatest concerns ([Liu & Szpunar, 2023](#)). In their conclusion, they expand on these influential concerns and ask whether such “epoch-making events” like the COVID-19 pandemic might bring personal and collective valences for the past and future more in-line with one another and contribute to greater identity fusion between the two.

A recent study by [Yamashiro et al. \(2022\)](#) provides additional insight into how an event like the COVID-19 pandemic influences identity fusion via past and future thoughts for the self and the nation. In this study, online participants from the United States and the United Kingdom completed the event fluency paradigm at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (March and April 2020; Study 1) and at the “end” of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (April 2022; Study 2) to investigate the extent to which individual and collective pasts and futures are bound to one another. At the start of the lockdown, individual and collective future thought were both more negative than individual and collective remembering (an implicit temporal trajectory of decline), indicating that such a pervasive public event can reverse the commonly observed positivity bias for personal futures and potentially increase identity fusion between people and

their nation. After COVID-19 lockdown measures were lifted, however, collective futures remained negatively biased, whereas personal futures became neutral (i.e., no longer biased in either direction). Thus, the asymmetries between personal and collective futures from the beginning to the end of the lockdown, particularly within a close temporal window of the lockdown timeline, suggests identity fusion may be short-lived even during high-impact, epoch-making events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the shared experience of such a major event, the degree to which personal and collective futures fuse may be dependent upon the extent to which the event personally changed one's life long-term and became self-defining (Reese & Whitehouse, 2021; Shi & Brown, 2021), the extent to which an individual has agency or control over the event (Liu & Szpunar, 2023; Topcu & Hirst, 2022), and what stage of life someone is in during such events (Koppel & Berntsen, 2016). Only time will tell whether the disruptive transition introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic will produce a lasting shift in personal and collective past and future thoughts or whether it will merely represent an interlude in our life scripts (Brown, 2021).

### Group Identity and Collectives Other Than Nations

Liu and Szpunar (2023) primarily discuss the collective in terms of a nation, and such national event cognition tends to focus on negative past and future events (Topcu & Hirst, 2022) that are often mediated by cultural phenomena (Wang, 2021) and exposure to mass media (Anderson, 1983/2006; Soroka & McAdams, 2015). Exposure to negative public events via mass media likely causes negative collective memories to therefore be more accessible than positive ones (Shrikanth & Szpunar, 2021). The nation is an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983/2006), so for many individuals within that collective—as just described—identity fusion between personal and national future thought may be limited even during consequential events such as the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (Yamashiro et al., 2022). Thus, another question moving forward is how different groups, particularly groups one strongly identifies with, differ from the national collective and to what extent personal and collective pasts and futures merge (Reese & Whitehouse, 2021). Each of us belongs to many different groups and coalitions, and the extent to which we identify with such collectives can be variable across people and change over time (Wertsch et al., 2023). Thus, on average, we may identify more strongly with our age group or generation, our political party or religious affiliation, our place of work, our family, personal relationships, our sexual or gender identity, and so forth. The extent to which one more strongly identifies with different particular groups, and how one views the past and future for those groups, may reveal more instances of stronger identity fusion between how personal and collective memories and future imaginations align with one another. Little research exists on future and past perspectives on groups besides nations in the cognitive psychology literature, though there is a rich collection of studies in social and personality psychology that is outside the scope of this article (see Topcu & Hirst, 2022, for an overview of some relevant findings), so research on this topic represents a ripe area for future investigation.

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