

# Who do you think you are? That depends, researchers suggest

April 28 2016, by Tom Fleischman

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*Let any one try, I will not say to arrest, but to notice or attend to, the present moment of time. One of the most baffling experiences occurs. Where is it, this present? It has melted in our grasp, fled ere we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming.* – William James, "The Principles of Psychology" (1890)

Understanding one's present self depends not only on thoughts, feelings and activities, but also on experiences and recollections of the past and the vision of one's self into the future. In other words, it all depends on where we have been, and where we are going.

Corinna Loeckenhoff, associate professor of human development in the College of Human Ecology, and her former graduate student Joshua Rutt have published a research paper that explores how people view themselves over different time spans. Their work sheds new light on individual differences in people's perceptions of themselves and the degrees to which they change over time.

Their paper, "[From Past to Future: Temporal Self-Continuity Across the Lifespan](#)," was published online April 11 in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

Most of us would agree that when we woke up this morning, we were the same person we were yesterday, and we will likely still be the same person tomorrow. But what about longer time intervals, such as one, five or 10 years?

For most people, the sense of connection with their past and future selves declines with increasing distance from the present. In fact, when we're thinking of ourselves in the distant past or future, it almost feels like we're thinking about a different person.

Rutt, now a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Zurich, and Loeckenhoff asked people how much their present selves overlapped with their past and expected future selves and whether the same personality traits described them in past, present and future. This study was the first to assess both past and future self-continuity and to include a variety of time intervals ranging from 1 month to 10 years.

The researchers found that past and future self-continuity are symmetrical – that is, people who feel more similar to their past are also more connected to their future. They did the measuring two ways: explicitly (responses to a direct question) and implicitly (completing a task that tapped into their self-continuity).

"We extracted two different measures," Rutt said. "One of them was the extent to which their future and past personality trait ratings agreed with their present ones, and the other was simply reaction time. How fast did they press the button to answer the question? How long did they have to think about their answer?"

Rutt and Loeckenhoff also found that self-continuity decreases fairly quickly as one thinks a few months into the past or future, but continues to drop off – albeit more gradually – for longer intervals. We see ourselves, they contend, as gradually emerging from the past, then slowly slipping away into the future.

There are considerable differences in self-continuity across [people](#), Rutt and Loeckenhoff said. Perhaps most interestingly, they found that older adults are more likely to view themselves as living in an extended present

as opposed to younger adults who tend to live a temporary state suspended between a distant past and an unknown future.

Prior research suggests that feeling disconnected from our past and future selves could lead to poor decision-making regarding things like finances and health care. On the other hand, a greater sense of self-continuity might make one less susceptible to such issues, but at the same time more resistant to making necessary changes in health behavior. For example, [older adults](#)' high levels of self-continuity could lead them to accept treatable conditions as a permanent part of their identity.

Their results put Loeckenhoff in the mind of James, a pioneer in the study of psychology, who said, "The practically cognized present is no knife-edge, but a saddle-back, with a certain breadth of its own on which we sit perched, and from which we look in two directions into time."

"From an objective point of view, the present flips into the future in an instant," Loeckenhoff said. "There is the past and the [future](#), but the present isn't really there.

"But from a subjective point of view," she added, "there is an extended present, and we're sitting on that like it's a saddle. In fact, when Josh brought me the first graphs of the data we collected, it really did look like a saddle-back."

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