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Final Paper: “The End of History Illusion” and the “Four Dimensions”

“The End of History Illusion” (Quoidbach, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2013) reveals a phenomenon that brings into question the limits of our ability to understand ourselves. The phenomenon is that individuals perceive that they will change less in the future than they have in the past. In other words, the individual believes that change of their self, e.g., personality, interests, has already occurred. This perception is shown to be inaccurate since older individuals consistently report that they changed more in the past than younger individuals predict that they will change in the future. “Four Dimensions”<sup>1</sup> (Goldin-Meadow, McClintock, & Wimsatt, 2006) presents a framework, referred to simply as the four dimensions, for navigating implications and further avenues for research of psychological phenomena, such as the end of history illusion. Briefly, those four dimensions are: level of analysis, perspective, timespan, and cause. This paper examines “The End of History Illusion” through the lens of the four dimensions.

First and foremost, the studies in the paper take place at the level of analysis of an individual—the questions being asked concern an individual’s perception of change of their self in their past and future. We can consider how the phenomenon could be studied at the neural or group level of analysis. At the neural level, which is concerned with how the phenomenon is manifested through the interactions of neurons in the brain, research into which areas of the brain

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<sup>1</sup> Full title, “Solving Psychological Problems in Four Dimensions: Heuristics for Integrating the Social and Biological Sciences.”

and patterns of activity could reveal that this phenomenon is a result of limitations of the human brain (further discussed in the section on cause) or perhaps to some other unexpected conclusion which then connects this phenomenon with an entire class of phenomena. At the group level, there are a number of approaches, but two stand out. First, research into the influence of social factors on an individual's perception of change in their *personal* history and future, very similar to the studies in the paper. The second approach is research into the influence of social factors on an individual's perception of change in the group's *collective* history and future. In our present society, we can see manifestations of this end of history illusion. For example, it's generally agreed that the majority of Americans view civil rights, for the most part, as an issue of the past. By this I mean that, acknowledging current cases of inequality, even staunchly progressive individuals generally agree that the advances in equality which occurred in the past, whether that's during the Civil War or the Civil Rights Movement, were of far greater magnitude than those that are being fought for in the present day. A possible explanation is that an individual's identification with the group's collective history might be equally as important to their understanding of self as their own personal history, allowing this illusion to manifest itself in the example described above.

Another dimension to examine the paper through is perspective—objective or subjective. The studies' goals were to examine an individual's perception of how much they might change in the future and how that perception relates to the objective assertion that their future change should be of similar magnitude to their past change. This is an inherently subjective perspective. In order to actually compare the individuals' objectively measured change in the past to their subjective perceptions of change in the future, the researchers had to correlate those individuals' perception of their past change with previous studies that objectively measured this change over

ontological periods of time. The researchers used the MIDUS study to do this, and confirmed that the individuals' perception of change in the past was as good of a measure as the objective measures from the MIDUS study. The fourth study in the paper attempted to tie the individual's subjective perceptions about the future to objectively measurable, material consequences. This took the form of asking questions about the individual's willingness to spend money on a current preference, in particular tickets for a concert with their favorite band, in the future versus their willingness to spend money on a past preference in the current moment. Though these consequences were material and objectively measurable, it didn't change that the perspective was still from the subjective view of an individual's perception on future preferences, unlike the MIDUS study which affirmed that the subjective views of past change can be considered to be on par with an objective measure. Given that the nature of the inquiry regards subjective perceptions, there's little—if any—room for expansion into more objective means of inquiry.

The third dimension is timespan. In the paper, the phenomenon is studied on the ontogenetic time span. Some of the results suggest that the effect diminishes over an individual's life (i.e., older participants report and predict more similar magnitudes of change than younger participants) though, as the authors mention in supplementary text 5, this was not demonstrated in the results from study 1, only study 2 and 3, so further research is needed. As an alternative to the ontogenetic timespan, a time span such as weeks or months could be researched to see if the phenomenon is still present. Or, historical timespan, which would be difficult to examine at an individual level of analysis, but at the group level (the latter possible approach—individuals' perceptions on the change of a group) is possible.

The final dimension is cause, separated into functional and mechanistic. The functional cause is “why” this phenomenon exists and the mechanistic cause is “how” it exists. As the

authors of the paper mention, the data do not suggest a cause, though, we are provided with two theories (Quoidbach, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2013, p. 98). The functional cause proposed is that an individual has a strong incentive to view their current self as complete and their traits as attractive. If an individual has the view that their future self will be drastically different from their current self—as they perceive the difference between their past self and their current self, and, also, presumably viewing their future self to be an improvement on their current self—then their future self is essentially a threat to their current self. Individuals commonly remark on their past self as naïve or foolish; under the view that their future self will have made an equally significant change, it is implied that their current self is also naïve or foolish. The mechanistic cause proposed is that the process of an individual *remembering* their past has a much lower cognitive load than *predicting* how much could change in the future. Study 1 was replicated to determine that the phenomenon was not a difficulty of predicting details of *how* they would change but simply difficulty predicting change at all. As mentioned in the discussion on levels of analysis, this mechanistic cause could be studied through the neural level of analysis to determine if the difference in ability of the human mind to remember the past versus speculate about the future is enough to manifest this phenomenon.

In conclusion, the four dimensions provide clear avenues for further research into this phenomenon. Using the four dimensions we have been able to see connections to larger discussions in the social sciences, such as the remembrance of collective history and its impact on perceptions of the future.