



The contingency of future vs. present orientation and status attainment

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have documented that adolescents who are oriented toward the future more than the present tend to have better life outcomes in adulthood. However, little is known about whether and to what extent adults' future- versus present-oriented perspectives are related to their childhood conditions and adulthood socioeconomic status attainment and how personal education channels this mechanism. Analyzing longitudinal Midlife in United States data, we find that childhood conditions and educational attainment matters: adults from more stable childhood backgrounds (e.g., better socioeconomic conditions in childhood) tend to show more future-oriented than present-oriented perspectives compared to those who grew up in less stable childhood conditions, although these disparities are largely explained by one's education. Additionally, we find that placing greater importance on the future than the present does not always result in better achievement. While the socioeconomic benefit of holding more future-oriented perspectives exists among adults from advantaged childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, we find that focusing more on the present than the future is equally beneficial for those from less advantaged childhood backgrounds. These findings suggest that different mechanisms may work to reward the future- versus present-oriented perspectives of those from different childhood backgrounds.

1. Introduction

Public discourse often encourages people to be forward-thinkers and promotes the belief that focusing on the future and long-term goals will bring success. Popular discourse on hope, dreams, and other assessments of the future, including meritocracy discourse, in particular, has further promoted the idea that individuals need to be future-oriented to overcome obstacles in the present and obtain higher achievements and well-being in their lives. Supporting this public belief, prior studies have largely focused on a future orientation, or other forms of future-related thoughts including expectations, aspirations, and optimism, and documented the positive consequences of such future-oriented thinking in life. People who think more about the future than the present tend to be more actively involved in goal setting and pursuit, investing their time and effort to achieve the goal they set, which helps them attain better life outcomes in the long run (Baird et al., 2021; Breen et al., 2014; Wang & Ford, 2020). Specifically, individuals who are engaged in long-term future planning and optimistic future expectations tend to obtain better outcomes, such as personal earnings, health, and life satisfaction (e.g., Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Prenda & Lachman, 2001; Schoon & Parsons,

2002; Sewell et al., 1969; see Beckert and Suckert, 2021 for a recent review).

Particularly, scholarly attention has long focused on adolescents or young adults to examine the benefits of future-oriented perspectives (e.g., Salazar et al., 2020; see Beckert & Suckert, 2021 for a systematic review). Building on the Wisconsin status attainment model (Sewell et al., 1969), the vast majority of prior research has focused on the long-term benefits of young people's future-oriented perspectives in terms of later educational and occupational achievement (e.g., Bozick et al., 2010; Burger & Mortimer, 2021; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013; Mele et al., 2023; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). This may be related to the idea that the benefits of future planning and optimistic thoughts about the future would be more clearly shown among adolescents and young adults than older adults.

The utility of future orientation among adults has rarely been empirically examined. However, there is prior evidence that there are no age differences in the overall tendency to think about the future, although the content of personal goals from early, middle, and later adulthood does vary (Nurmi, 1992). Those who are in their middle age still make decisions in their lives that likely influence the change in their

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socioeconomic status, but it is unclear whether the benefits of future orientation of the adult population could be the same as for the young population. To address this research gap, it is necessary to examine the outcome of holding the future-oriented perspectives for adults.¹

The current study builds on previous scholarship on human agency that has argued for future orientation as one of core elements in understanding human agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Prior psychological studies on time orientation suggest the importance of general time perspectives above and beyond domain-specific, positive evaluations of the future such as adolescents' educational and occupational expectations (e.g., Antonoplis & Chen, 2021; Baird et al., 2021; Carstensen, 2006; see Kooij et al., 2018 for a recent meta-analysis on time perspectives). Turning away from prior empirical focus on domain-specific expectations, recent scholarship has revisited the notion of human agency and called for empirical research on general future orientation including "future- versus present-focused perspectives" (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015:1439). By focusing on the relative importance of future orientation over present orientation, the current study brings scholarly attention to a person's general perspectives toward time, namely future-oriented perspectives and present-oriented perspectives.

Whereas prior studies on adolescents have focused on future orientation, future orientation is not the sole time perspective that could influence one's life. Present orientation is another time perspective that could shape our lines of actions. While *future-oriented perspectives* capture a person's tendency to look forward, "project [oneself] into the future" (Shoshana, 2020:2), set goals, and make plans, *present-oriented perspectives* capture a person's tendency to direct their attention toward the present.

The current study proposes drawing scholarly attention to the relative importance of the future over the present in a person's mind. Prior studies have often relied on the assumption that one's future- and present-oriented perspectives are placed at the two ends of a single continuum (e.g., Prenda & Lachman, 2001). A person who is occupied with the present may find it difficult to plan for the distant future. However, one can still "plan for tomorrow but live for today." Not making plans for the future does not necessarily mean that a person is exclusively focused on the present or that the person lives only for the moment, and vice versa.

The prior dualistic approach of placing future orientation and present orientation on a single continuum and equating being more future-oriented with being less present-oriented, and vice versa, may obscure the complexity of one's time perspectives. Prior studies on time perspectives (Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004) have suggested the possibility of having flexible alignment of different time perspectives: Some individuals could envision the future but try to be present-oriented and have their foot on the ground while some others could be neither entirely future-oriented nor present-oriented, indicating some versions of "balanced time perspectives" suggested by Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004).² In this sense, future- and present-oriented perspectives are related but not completely exclusive of each other. Relying on either present orientation or future orientation or putting the two time orientations at the extremes of a single continuum likely fails to capture these cases. Therefore, we suggest using the *relative* importance of the future over the present (i.e., future- vs. present-oriented perspectives), which

captures the salience of the perception of the future than that of the present, rather than looking at either future orientation or present orientation by using them separately (e.g., Zimbardo et al., 1997) or putting them as the two ends of a single continuum (e.g., Prenda & Lachman, 2001).

Finally, we examine whether *adults'* future- versus present-oriented perspectives play any significant role in the association between childhood conditions and adulthood socioeconomic status attainment. Childhood has been documented as a critical period for developing these time perspectives (Massey et al., 2008; Nurmi, 1991). Childhood conditions, including socioeconomic conditions, family disruption, and financial disruption, can encourage or constrain people's orientation toward the future and the present; growing up in a family where resources are unstable would discourage people from developing a long-term, future-oriented mindset and instead promote a shorter-term, present-oriented perspective (e.g., Watts et al., 2018).

Childhood conditions are not the sole factors that influence the development of time orientation. The attainment of higher education can encourage individuals to look ahead, not only by offering smooth and stable life course trajectories but also by providing individuals with an environment that is conducive to the development of agentic perspectives toward their future goals (e.g., Mirowsky & Ross, 2007; Oi, 2019). However, little is known about the role of educational attainment in the relationship between childhood conditions and general time perspectives during adulthood. Individuals from more advantaged childhood conditions could be encouraged to envision their future not only through their favorable childhood living conditions but also through their higher education, which may help them expect more predictable and stable living conditions, thereby reinforcing their future-oriented perspectives than thinking about the present.

To address these research gaps in prior literature, we analyzed the longitudinal MIDUS (Midlife in the United States) data to demonstrate whether and how an adult's future- versus present-oriented perspectives are linked to childhood conditions and how they contribute to one's status attainment outcomes 10 years later. Examining how adult future- versus present-oriented perspectives are linked to childhood conditions and later life outcomes helps us to conclude whether there is any added value of understanding adult time perspectives.

2. Background

2.1. Linking childhood conditions to time perspectives in adulthood

Prior studies have documented the enduring detrimental effect of childhood adversity on adulthood outcomes: Disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions and adverse childhood experiences such as poverty, family dissolution (e.g., parental divorce or death) and maltreatment during childhood (e.g., McLanahan, 2004) can impair children's cognitive development and academic performance (e.g., Kulic et al., 2019; Reardon, 2011) and be detrimental to adulthood achievement and earnings (e.g., Chetty & Grusky, 2017; Hout, 2018; Suglia et al., 2022), as well as to one's mental and physical health and mortality in middle and late adulthood (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998; Ferraro et al., 2016; Schafer & Ferraro, 2013). Disadvantages in childhood can accumulate over the course of life through the path dependency of adversities, suggesting childhood disadvantages have a far-reaching impact on adults' lives (Hayward & Gorman, 2004; Schafer et al., 2011).

As one possible mechanism linking childhood conditions and life outcomes, social psychological research has largely been built on the Wisconsin status attainment model documenting socioeconomic disparities in youths' perspectives toward the future (e.g., O'Rand & Ellis, 1974; Sewell et al., 1969). Childhood socioeconomic backgrounds have long-term impacts on one's future-related thoughts, including future orientation, aspirations, expectations, and optimism; children and adolescents from more advantaged backgrounds tend to hold higher levels of educational expectations and more optimistic views about their future

¹ In response to the gap in earlier research, which has primarily focused on adolescence, our research directs scholarly attention toward adulthood. We define adulthood as a broad life stage that is marked by the attainment of biological, social, psychological, and legal markers after the stage of adolescence (Settersten et al., 2015).

² While the former could "plan for tomorrow but live for today", the latter could be deemed as a little discouraged, being less engaged with both the future and the present than others. The latter may still think about the present and the future but to a lesser degree, or they could be more occupied with thoughts about the past.

outcomes than those from more disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Bernardi & Valdés, 2021; Bozick et al., 2010; Burger & Mortimer, 2021; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Johnson & Hitlin, 2017; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013; Schoon & Parsons, 2002).

Beyond the content of such evaluations about the future (i.e., “optimistic” views on the future status attainment), how individuals perceive time—more specifically, the extent to which they focus on the future rather than the present—is also closely linked to their childhood conditions. A recent replication of the marshmallow test showed that children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to delay gratification (Watts et al., 2018; also note the concept “deferred gratification” in earlier sociological work by Schneider & Lysgaard, 1953). Growing up in a family environment where family resources are inconsistent and unpredictable could promote discounting of the future in favor of the present (Hill et al., 2008).³ Using interview data from young adults in Philadelphia, Tevington (2018) demonstrated that youths from disadvantaged backgrounds are more engaged in the present and even refuse to talk about the future. Thus, individuals from more disadvantaged backgrounds might be occupied with immediate demands that should be resolved immediately (Hill et al., 2008), making them focus more on the immediate present than on the distant future. In this sense, thinking about the future can be deemed “a luxury” for them (Shoshana, 2020:7).

By contrast, adults from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are often encouraged to be more future-focused than their counterparts from less advantaged backgrounds. Tevington (2018) found that those from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, compared to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are often “privileged to worry” about the future (Tevington, 2018:204): they tend to be more knowledgeable about the social structural mechanisms (more specifically, the negative consequences of the Great Recession in Tevington, 2018) partly through cultural knowledge (or cultural capital) handed down from their affluent parents, which, in turn, motivates them to think (and worry) more about the long-term future than do those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These studies of socioeconomic disparities in future orientation suggest that people from advantaged childhood backgrounds focus more on the future than on the present (Hypothesis 1).

Hypothesis 1. People from advantaged childhood socioeconomic backgrounds focus more on the future than on the present.

On the one hand, the positive association between childhood conditions and future-oriented perspectives could imply a long-term role of childhood conditions. On the other hand, it could be more of a story about the path dependency of childhood (dis)advantages. For example, those who experience adverse childhood living conditions are less likely to obtain higher education, which may further shape their life conditions to be less predictable and more insecure, thereby constraining their perceptions about the time horizon. In contrast, those with advantaged childhood conditions are more likely to obtain higher education, which, in turn, may help them envision their future through more predictable life conditions secured by their own higher education, above and beyond their advantages from childhood conditions. In this sense, we can expect that there could be a channeling effect of education, given that factors that foster one’s relative focus on the future more than the present (i.e., childhood conditions) also help one obtain higher education.

³ Some studies reported that people from disadvantaged backgrounds display highly optimistic beliefs about their future despite adversities and believe they can improve their life conditions (e.g., Frye, 2012; Schafer et al., 2011); however, the potential benefit of optimistic future expectations could be offset by their adverse childhood (Schafer et al., 2011).

2.2. The consequences of time perspectives

Previous research has provided substantial evidence that children and adolescents’ educational and occupational expectations, aspirations, and optimistic views about the future predict their later educational and occupational achievements (e.g., Burger & Mortimer, 2021; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Mele et al., 2023; Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Sewell et al., 1969). However, these studies have largely focused on domain-specific expectations and aspirations, rather than the temporal orientations such as future orientation. Future orientation refers to a person’s tendency to look forward, “project [oneself] into the future” (Shoshana, 2020:2), which is not necessarily equivalent to domain-specific expectations such as educational and occupational expectations. To date, the few prior studies on adults’ future orientation have mainly focused on the psychological well-being benefits of holding future-oriented perspectives among adults; that is, adults who are engaged in long-term future planning and focus on the future rather than the present tend to report greater satisfaction with life and financial situations (Park et al., 2021; Prenda & Lachman, 2001).

In contrast, we know relatively little about whether adults’ perspectives towards the future and the present are related to their later adulthood socioeconomic status and how their childhood conditions and educational attainment play a role in this mechanism. While prior studies have heavily focused on demonstrating the important role of future orientations in the status attainment process of young people, our study suggests that extending the scholarly understanding of time perspectives to older adults is crucial to understand the role of future orientation in life course perspectives.⁴ Putting greater weight on the future than on the present can motivate individuals to actively engage in goal pursuit and invest more persistent efforts into their goals, which, in turn, can lead to better life outcomes (Baird et al., 2021; Wang & Ford, 2020). While previous studies have primarily centered on the power of optimistic views of the future, thinking about the future itself (independent of the content of future-oriented thinking) could be beneficial for individuals to produce better life outcomes (e.g., Kooij et al., 2018). Tevington (2018) documented that concerns and anxiety about the future motivate young adults from more privileged backgrounds to actively seek out the use of (parental) resources to strategically secure their future goals. Building on the prior literature on adolescents’ future orientation, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 2. Focusing on the future rather than the present is positively linked to status attainment in adulthood.

Another unexamined research question is whether and how the benefits of focusing on the future are contingent on childhood conditions. The cumulative advantage and the resource substitution theses (Ross & Mirowsky, 2011) predict that socioeconomic returns to the future- versus present-oriented perspectives differ by family socioeconomic background. The cumulative advantage thesis (Ross & Mirowsky, 2011) may argue that the benefit of placing greater emphasis on the future than on the present would be stronger for those who already possess resources that offer more controllability of life course outcomes. In contrast, the resource substitution thesis (Ibid.) suggests that the benefit would be greater for those who lack other resources; they could (or may need to) compensate for their disadvantages through more deliberate future planning. Together with our previous hypothesis on the positive associations between childhood conditions and future- vs. present-oriented perspectives, the latter case would imply what Ross and Mirowsky (2011) described as “structural amplification”: people

⁴ While prior studies have focused on the utility of future orientation of the young population, we should not ignore the fact that older adults also hold thoughts about their future. However, of course, we should acknowledge that the opportunity structure for older adults is less favorable than for younger adults (Wrosch et al., 2000).

from less stable childhood socioeconomic conditions tend to place less emphasis on the future than the present that would have benefited them more (Shanahan et al., 2014). Building on this prior literature, we suggest two hypotheses on the moderating effect of childhood conditions. First, the socioeconomic benefit of future-oriented perspectives will be *larger* for those from *more advantaged* childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (Hypothesis 3–1: cumulative advantage hypothesis). Second, the socioeconomic benefits of future-oriented perspectives will be *larger* for those from *more disadvantaged* childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (Hypothesis 3–2: resource substitution hypothesis).

One assumption underlying these two hypotheses, however, is that thinking more about the future than the present is always beneficial and thus results in better socioeconomic status outcomes for anyone who has such perspectives. However, the roles of future-oriented and present-oriented perspectives might differ for those from different childhood socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, Breen et al. (2014) documented that among students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, those with higher levels of risk aversion and time discounting preference are more likely to enroll in the academic track than others, while students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are not affected by these psychological tendencies when making educational decisions. Alternatively, prior studies have documented that holding up expectations and aspirations about the future is often highly encouraged among youths from better-off family backgrounds (e.g., Bozick et al., 2010). As the cumulative advantages thesis suggests, thinking about the future more than the present may thus help those who already have stable and predictable life conditions through enough parental resources attain better status outcomes. In contrast, present-oriented perspectives could be more adaptive and thus offer better outcomes for those from less stable and unpredictable environments (e.g., Trommsdorff, 1983). Therefore, for those from less advantaged childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, focusing more on the present might not bring about the same penalty as it would for those with more stable and predictable life conditions. Rather, it could be more about the different rules of the game applied to different environments (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2014).

In this sense, we expect that different mechanisms may operate to reward the future- versus present-oriented perspectives of those from different childhood backgrounds (Hypothesis 3–3: different rules of the game). Studies have well-documented that those from lower socioeconomic status are more likely to face multiple layers of distress and struggles (e.g., day-to-day financial struggles, health issues along with their lack of access to medical resources) but less likely to have coping resources (e.g., Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Thoits, 1999). Life events and problems can be more unpredictable to those from a lower socioeconomic background who lack extra funds or other resources available. For them, focusing on the immediate present could be more beneficial. For such reasons, different time perspectives could be beneficial for people with different socioeconomic backgrounds. We summarized the research hypotheses below:

Hypothesis 3–1. The socioeconomic benefit of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives will be larger for those from more advantaged childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (Cumulative advantage hypothesis).

Hypothesis 3–2. The socioeconomic benefits of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives will be larger for those from more disadvantaged childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (Resource substitution hypothesis).

Hypothesis 3–3. The socioeconomic consequences of holding different levels of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives will vary across different childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (Different rules of the game hypothesis).

To sum up, answering the call for studies on the dimensions of future orientation, including “future- versus present-focused perspectives” (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015:1439), this study focuses on the relative

importance of future orientation over present orientation in adults’ life outcomes. Little is known about older adults’ perspectives toward the future and the present and whether and how their time perspectives play any role in the relationship between childhood conditions and socioeconomic attainment in later life. To fill this gap, the present study aims to examine (a) how childhood conditions are associated with the *relative* importance of future orientation over present orientation (i.e., *future- vs. present-oriented perspectives*), (b) whether and to what extent the future- versus present-oriented perspectives of adults are beneficial for their socioeconomic status attainment in later adulthood, and (c) whether and how this socioeconomic return to future- versus present-oriented perspectives is linked to childhood socioeconomic backgrounds.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Data

The study data were obtained from a national random-digit-dialing (RDD) sample that completed both phone and self-administered mail surveys in Waves 1 and 2 of the longitudinal Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) data. Employing national probability sampling, the MIDUS team recruited the main RDD sample from households with telephones, and randomly selected a respondent aged between 25 and 74 from each household (Lawrence et al., 2022). The MIDUS was designed to target American adults in their middle ages to study the midlife development in various domains of life including health and psychological well-being. Given that the majority of prior studies on future thoughts and expectations have relied on data collected from young population (e.g., Youth Developmental Survey used in Burger & Mortimer, 2021 and Johnson & Hitlin, 2017), the MIDUS dataset offers a rare opportunity for researchers to examine the role of diverse psychological functioning, particularly future and present orientation, in adults’ lives in a longitudinal setting. The first wave of the MIDUS survey was collected from a non-institutionalized English-speaking adult population in the United States between 1995 and 1996, where male and older participants (i.e., those aged between 65 and 74 years) were oversampled. Respondents were recruited through random digit dialing and the response rate for the initial phone survey was approximately 70%. Respondents who participated in the Wave 1 phone survey were later invited to complete the Wave 1 self-administered mail survey (SAQ), with 87% of response rate. Approximately 10 years later, those who completed the first wave of the phone survey were followed between 2004 and 2006 (Wave 2).⁵

In Wave 1, those 25–74 years old who completed both phone and mail surveys were 3025. In Wave 2, the respondents who had completed the phone survey in Wave 1 were followed, and 1805 respondents completed both the phone and mail surveys. Among them, 60 were excluded from the analysis because of non-participation in the Wave 1 mail survey. Four additional respondents were excluded because the reported age gap between the two surveys was larger than the actual time interval between the two waves (11 years). Our study sample consisted of 1021 respondents who reported the socioeconomic status index, the dependent variable of interest, in both Waves 1 and 2. Among

⁵ One could argue that older adults may have limited opportunities for generating changes in their socioeconomic attainment, which likely reduces the role played by future- vs. present-oriented perspectives in shaping their status outcomes 10 years later. To address this concern, we limited our analysis to younger samples (ages 25–50, N=713) and presented the results in the Robustness checks section (also see Supplementary Material E).

these respondents, the final sample was further limited to those who did not have any missing values for the independent variables, resulting in a final sample size of 954.⁶

Following prior studies (Andersson & Glanville, 2016; Cornwell & Laumann, 2015), we weighted our regression models using attrition-adjusted weights. We first conducted a probit regression of Wave 2 participation on the variables observed in Wave 1; the results indicate that younger respondents, non-whites, males, and those who completed high school or below (compared to those who obtained a bachelor's degree or above) were less likely to participate in the follow-up survey in Wave 2. We then created attrition-adjusted weights using multivariate post-stratification weights with an inverse weighting procedure so that those who were less likely to participate in Wave 2 had greater weights (Andersson & Glanville, 2016).⁷

3.2. Measures

The *future- vs. present-oriented perspectives* in Wave 1 was calculated by subtracting the average response to present-oriented perspectives from the average response to future-oriented perspectives (*future- vs. present-oriented perspectives* = future-oriented perspectives – present-oriented perspectives) to capture the relative importance of future-oriented perspectives compared to present-oriented perspectives. This approach builds on prior research suggesting that people can have flexible alignment of different time perspectives (e.g., Boniwell & Zimbardo, 2004).⁸ Future-oriented perspectives were measured using the average response to the following three statements (Cronbach's alpha: 0.73): "I like to make plans for the future," "I know what I want out of life," and "I find it helpful to set goals for the near future." Present-oriented perspectives were measured by the average response to three statements (Cronbach's alpha: 0.64)⁹: "I live one day at a time," "I have too many things to think about today to think about tomorrow," and "I believe there is no sense planning too far ahead because so many things can change." The response categories for both questions were coded from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot).¹⁰ In this paper, we suggest that while individuals could have both future and present orientations, what makes them different from one another is whether they emphasize one time perspective (e.g., future-oriented perspectives) over the other (e.g., present-oriented perspectives). This measure of the future- vs. present-oriented perspective captures the relative importance of respondents' focus on the future and present. A higher score was assigned when the respondent rated higher on the future orientation scale than on

the present orientation scale (e.g., 3 if one rated 4 on the future scale and 1 on the present scale), whereas a lower score was assigned when the respondent rated higher on the present orientation scale than on the future orientation scale (e.g., –3 if one rated 1 on the future scale and 4 on the present scale). If a respondent rated high on both scales to the same extent (e.g., implying that the person is simultaneously both present- and future-oriented), they received scores 0 on this scale. Thus, we suggest that this measure can be used as a conservative tool to measure whether and to what extent a person prioritizes the future over the present. See [Supplementary Material A](#) for further discussion.¹¹

Adulthood socioeconomic status was measured in Waves 1 and 2 using the respondent's socioeconomic index score (SEI) provided by MIDUS. The socioeconomic index score is derived from the weighted score of occupational education and occupational earnings based on Hauser and Warren's earlier study (Hauser & Warren, 1997; also see the MIDUS Documentation of Occupation and Industry for further details). The raw scores provided by the MIDUS range from 9.56 to 80.53. To simplify interpretation in the main analysis, we standardized the scores by subtracting the mean from each score and dividing the difference between the mean and each score by the standard deviation.

Childhood condition was measured in Wave 1 by three indices: Childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, family disruption in childhood, and financial disruption in childhood. *Childhood socioeconomic backgrounds* were measured using the highest score among either the mother's or father's socioeconomic index (SEI). Following prior studies using the same data (Kwon & Erola, 2023), three quantiles of parental SEI scores were used in the analysis as a categorical variable ("low childhood socioeconomic backgrounds," "middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds," "high childhood socioeconomic backgrounds") to examine the non-linear role of family background.¹² In addition, we included measures to capture whether respondents experienced *family and financial disruption in childhood*. Not living with both biological parents until age 16 (1 = yes, 0 = no) and whether their family has been on welfare or aid to dependent children (ADC) for six months or more during childhood and adolescence (1 = yes, 0 = no) were included as proxies for family and financial disruption in childhood.

The highest level of *education* completed ("high school or less", "some college including an associate degree (e.g., AA)", "college degree or more (e.g., BA, MA, Ph.D.)") was measured in Wave 1. Age, gender (1 = female), race/ethnicity (1 = white), and self-rated physical health (ranging from 1 "poor" to 5 "excellent") at Wave 1 are also included as covariates. [Table 1](#) presents the descriptive statistics.

3.3. Analysis plan

[Fig. 1](#) summarizes the analytical framework. To test the long-term effect of childhood conditions on one's orientation toward the future and present ([Hypothesis 1](#)), we began with the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of Wave 1 future- vs. present-oriented perspectives on childhood socioeconomic backgrounds and financial and family disruption in childhood while controlling for Wave 1 covariates (age, gender, race/ethnicity, and health; the yellow box of [Fig. 1](#)). In the

⁶ Parental socioeconomic status index, as a measure of childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, was the only independent variable that had a non-response rate higher than 1% (n = 56). All other variables had a non-response rate lower than 1%. Following prior practices (Klein & Sosu 2024; Pepinsky, 2018; Warner et al., 2023), we present the main results using listwise deletion. However, we additionally conducted a robustness check utilizing multiple imputation. See the Robustness checks section for results (also see [Supplementary Material F](#)).

⁷ The multivariate post-stratification weights were generated and provided by the MIDUS to adjust the key deviation from the population demographics. See the MIDUS Documentation of Post Stratification Weighting for further details.

⁸ We found that a non-negligible number of our respondents report what Boniwell and Zimbardo (2004) referred to as the balanced time perspectives: 21.38% of the sample reported high on both time perspectives and 16.56% reported low on both. See [Supplementary Material A](#) for further discussion.

⁹ We acknowledge that this scale reports relatively lower alpha than the conventional criteria. To partly address this matter, we have conducted a robustness check excluding the second item that seemingly pits the future against the present by itself. See the Robustness check section and [Supplementary Material C](#) for results.

¹⁰ The correlation coefficient of the two scales is –0.32, suggesting a moderate, negative correlation between the two. This suggests that the two time orientations do not necessarily represent opposite ends of a single continuum. See [Supplementary Material A](#) for further discussions.

¹¹ Note that this measure cannot differentiate those who scored 0 as they reported high on both future and present scales to the same degree (e.g., high future-high present) from those who scored the same as they reported low on both to the same degree (e.g., low future-low present), but treat them as "balanced" time perspectives without distinction. Although our study's focus is on the relative importance of the future orientation over present orientation, we should note this as an important limitation.

¹² Each quantile does not have the same number of cases as some respondents have the same SEI scores. For example, the cutoff for the middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds is 45.52 where 103 respondents are located, and this makes the middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds category larger than other categories (e.g., 43% middle vs. 33% low and 23% high).

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Socioeconomic status at W1 (z score)	−0.00	1	−2.19	2.67
Socioeconomic status at W2 (z score)	−0.00	1	−2.26	2.68
Future vs. present perspectives at W1	0.95	1.10	−3	3
<i>Childhood backgrounds</i>				
• Low childhood socioeconomic backgrounds	0.33	0.47	0	1
• Middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds	0.43	0.50	0	1
• High childhood socioeconomic backgrounds	0.23	0.42	0	1
Financial disruption in childhood	0.04	0.19	0	1
Family disruption in childhood	0.19	0.39	0	1
Age at W1	43.47	10.25	25	72
Female	0.48	0.50	0	1
White	0.92	0.27	0	1
Health at W1	3.70	0.86	1	5
<i>Education at W1</i>				
• High school or below	0.30	0.46	0	1
• Some college (incl. AA)	0.29	0.46	0	1
• College degree (BA) or above	0.40	0.49	0	1

second analysis to test [Hypothesis 2](#), we followed prior studies using the same data (Waves 1 and 2 of the MIDUS data, that are collected approximately ten years apart; e.g., [Andersson & Glanville, 2016](#); [Greenfield & Marks, 2009](#)) and conducted a lagged dependent variable (LDV) model to explain socioeconomic status attainment in later adulthood measured at Wave 2 (the blue box of Fig. 1). Specifically, we ran the OLS regression of Wave 2 status attainment on Wave 1 future- vs. present-oriented perspectives while controlling for Wave 1 covariates (childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, financial and family disruption in childhood, education, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and health) and Wave 1 status attainment as a lagged dependent variable (LDV). The lagged value of the outcome variable (i.e., Wave 1 socioeconomic status attainment) can possibly “serve as a proxy for ... the unobserved between-person heterogeneity” ([Vaisey & Miles, 2017:46](#); also see [Cho & Coulton, 2016:203](#)); thus, we could expect that its inclusion would help us obtain less biased estimates. In this way, the LDV model can be considered a rather conservative test ([Cho & Coulton, 2016](#); [Upenieks, 2021](#)) by “suppressing significant effects rather than artificially inflating them” because the inclusion of Wave 1 socioeconomic status might mostly capture the variance in Wave 2 socioeconomic status ([Upenieks, 2021:2687](#)).

In addition to the LDV regression of status attainment at Wave 2 on future- vs. present-oriented perspectives at Wave 1, we tested the interaction between childhood conditions and future- vs. present-oriented perspectives to examine whether the socioeconomic benefit of focusing on the future rather than the present is dependent on childhood conditions using future vs. present perspectives as a continuous variable ([Hypotheses 3–1](#) and [3–2](#)) and three quantiles (high,

middle, and low future- vs. present-oriented perspectives) to further test the different rules of the game hypothesis ([Hypothesis 3–3](#)).

4. Results

4.1. Childhood conditions and time perspectives

[Table 2](#) presents the OLS regression results of the future- versus the present-oriented perspectives in Wave 1 on childhood conditions. The results indicate that those who grow up in relatively disadvantaged family environments (i.e., those with lower childhood socioeconomic backgrounds) are less likely to be future-oriented than present-oriented, thus supporting [Hypothesis 1](#). Those from middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds and high childhood socioeconomic backgrounds report 0.087 and 0.091 standard deviation higher future- vs. present-oriented perspectives than those from low childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, net of other factors (Model 1). Similarly, those who experienced financial disruption in childhood (i.e., whose family has been on welfare or aid to dependent children (ADC) for six months or more during childhood and adolescence) reported 0.112 standard deviation lower future- vs. present-oriented perspectives than those without such childhood adversity, net of other childhood conditions, although this difference was of borderline significance ($\beta = -0.112$, $p = 0.051$; Model 1). The effect of childhood socioeconomic backgrounds remained statistically significant, and the reduction of the coefficient was small for those from high childhood socioeconomic backgrounds ($\beta_{m1} = 0.091$ vs. $\beta_{m2} = 0.074$), even after controlling for sociodemographic information in Model 2 in addition to other childhood

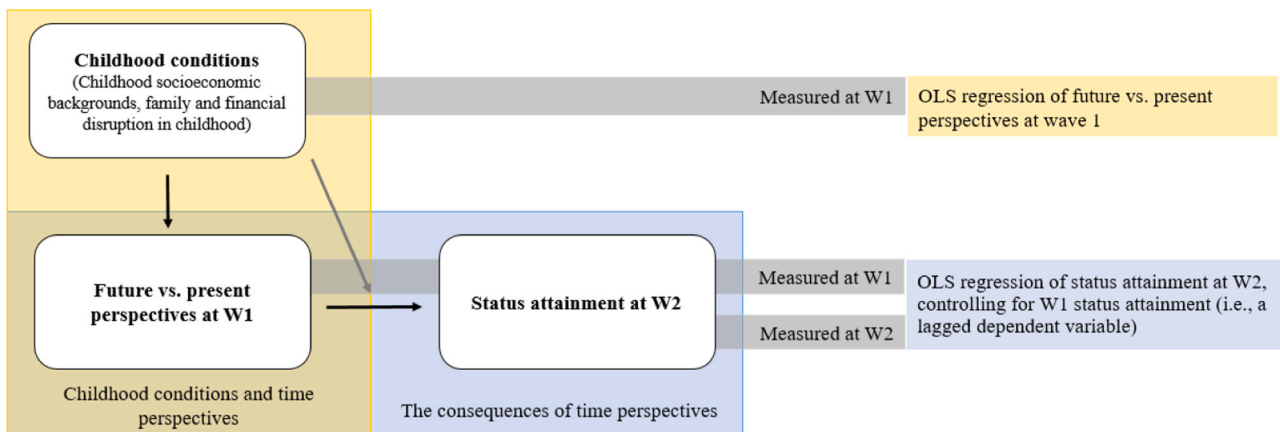


Fig. 1. Analytic framework.

Table 2
OLS Regression of Wave 1 future- vs. present-oriented perspectives on childhood conditions.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B (SE)	β	B (SE)	β	B (SE)	β
<i>Childhood backgrounds^a</i>						
Middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds	0.194* (0.095)	0.087	0.174 (0.095)	0.078	0.093 (0.097)	0.042
High childhood socioeconomic backgrounds	0.247* (0.101)	0.091	0.201* (0.100)	0.074	-0.034 (0.107)	-0.013
Financial disruption in childhood (1 = yes)	-0.564 (0.289)	-0.112	-0.480 (0.260)	-0.095	-0.430 (0.266)	-0.085
Family disruption in childhood (1 = yes)	-0.172 (0.106)	-0.065	-0.095 (0.101)	-0.036	-0.073 (0.101)	-0.027
Age			0.002 (0.004)	0.020	0.001 (0.004)	0.008
Female			-0.256*** (0.078)	-0.116	-0.250** (0.076)	-0.113
White			-0.105 (0.148)	-0.032	-0.064 (0.146)	-0.020
Health			0.217*** (0.049)	0.170	0.193*** (0.050)	0.151
<i>Education^b</i>						
Some college (incl. AA)					0.163 (0.101)	0.066
College degree (BA) or above					0.502*** (0.097)	0.210
Constant	0.809*** (0.072)		0.144 (0.282)		0.121 (0.279)	
No. of Obs.	954		954		954	
Adjusted R-Squared	0.026		0.064		0.092	

Note: Unstandardized coefficients appear above robust standard errors in parentheses. β refers to standardized beta coefficients. Regressions were weighted using multivariate post-stratification weights provided by MIDUS, adjusted for attrition at Wave 2 using an inverse weighting procedure.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

^a Reference group = Low childhood socioeconomic backgrounds

^b Reference group = High school or below

conditions. Although the effect of middle childhood socioeconomic background became of borderline significance ($p = 0.067$), the reduction of the coefficient was also relatively small ($\beta_{m1} = 0.087$ vs. $\beta_{m2} = 0.078$).

We found that childhood socioeconomic disparities in future- vs. present-oriented perspectives could be explained by education (Model 2). The effect of childhood socioeconomic backgrounds seems to be channeled to a large extent by one's own education: the beta coefficient is reduced by half for middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds and is entirely explained by education for high childhood socioeconomic backgrounds; both coefficients become statistically not significant in Model 3 ($\beta = 0.042$ and -0.013 ; $p > 0.05$). Given that factors (i.e., childhood conditions) that help individuals achieve higher education also make them more future-oriented, education seems to transmit the effect of childhood conditions on future- vs. present-oriented perspectives in adulthood. This finding suggests that while some part of one's future- vs. present-oriented perspective could be developed through life experiences largely constrained or enabled by one's childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, the major part could be related to learned attitudes or skills through accumulated experiences of achievement as they proceed to higher education.

4.2. The limited long-term benefit of looking ahead

Table 3 presents the OLS regression with an LDV to examine the relationship between future- vs. present-oriented perspectives and adulthood socioeconomic attainment, controlling for Wave 1 status attainment, and whether childhood socioeconomic backgrounds and education explain this relationship. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the results show that being more future-oriented than present-oriented at Wave 1 is positively related to socioeconomic status attainment at Wave 2 while

controlling for childhood conditions, sociodemographic factors, and Wave 1 status attainment (Model 1). Specifically, a one-standard-deviation increase in the future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (i.e., prioritizing the future over the present) at Wave 1 is associated with 0.057 standard deviations increase in socioeconomic status 10 years later, net of other factors. The coefficient of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives becomes nonsignificant when education is controlled for (Model 2); however, the effect is only reduced by approximately one-third ($\beta_{m1} = 0.057$ to $\beta_{m2} = 0.040$).¹³ The results of testing the interaction between childhood socioeconomic backgrounds and the future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (Hypotheses 3–1 and 3–2) suggest that the benefit of being more future-oriented than present-oriented does not vary by childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (Model 3).

Orienting towards the future rather than the present may not always be beneficial for life outcomes, but the rewarding mechanism could depend on one's socioeconomic backgrounds; that is, while adults who grew up in stable life conditions may benefit from their future-oriented perspectives as prior studies have suggested, those with less stable life conditions may not necessarily benefit from future-oriented

¹³ We tested the interaction between education and future- vs. present-oriented perspectives to see if the effect differs by education, but the interaction appears not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.012$, $p = 0.787$ for Some college * future- vs. present-orientation; $\beta = -0.010$, $p = 0.822$ for College * future- vs. present-orientation). In addition, we tested Model 2 controlling for education at Wave 2 despite the expected multicollinearity between the covariates (i.e., education at Waves 1 and 2), and there was no substantive change in the results: the change in the beta coefficients of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives is 0.004 when controlling for education at both waves ($\beta = 0.044$, $p = 0.117$).

Table 3

OLS Regression of Wave 2 status attainment on Wave 1 future- vs. present-oriented perspectives.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B (SE)	β	B (SE)	β	B (SE)	β
Socioeconomic status at W1 (z score)	0.641*** (0.029)	0.649	0.555*** (0.036)	0.561	0.558*** (0.035)	0.564
Future vs. present perspectives	0.049* (0.025)	0.057	0.035 (0.024)	0.040	-0.003 (0.041)	-0.004
<i>Childhood backgrounds^a</i>						
Middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds	0.163** (0.056)	0.085	0.116* (0.056)	0.060	0.069 (0.070)	0.036
High childhood socioeconomic backgrounds	0.254** (0.079)	0.109	0.139 (0.082)	0.059	0.090 (0.118)	0.039
Financial disruption in childhood	-0.073 (0.110)	-0.017	-0.047 (0.113)	-0.011	-0.049 (0.111)	-0.011
Family disruption in childhood	0.040 (0.068)	0.018	0.034 (0.069)	0.015	0.032 (0.068)	0.014
Age	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.035	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.039	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.038
Female	0.023 (0.055)	0.012	0.008 (0.054)	0.004	0.008 (0.053)	0.004
White	-0.222* (0.105)	-0.079	-0.194 (0.104)	-0.069	-0.199 (0.104)	-0.071
Health	0.014 (0.032)	0.013	0.009 (0.031)	0.008	0.011 (0.031)	0.010
<i>Education^b</i>						
Some college (incl. AA)			0.203** (0.064)	0.096	0.204** (0.064)	0.096
College degree (BA) or above			0.395*** (0.076)	0.191	0.389*** (0.076)	0.188
<i>Interactions^c</i>						
Middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds * Future vs. present perspectives					0.059 (0.050)	0.054
High socioeconomic childhood backgrounds * Future vs. present perspectives					0.059 (0.078)	0.038
Constant	0.080 (0.216)		-0.037 (0.221)		-0.011 (0.220)	
No. of Obs.	954		954		954	
Adjusted R-Squared	0.482		0.498		0.498	

Note: Unstandardized coefficients appear above robust standard errors in parentheses. β refers to standardized beta coefficients. Regressions were weighted using multivariate post-stratification weights provided by MIDUS, adjusted for attrition at Wave 2 using an inverse weighting procedure. Future vs. present perspectives refers to the future- vs. present-oriented perspectives.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

^a Reference group = Low childhood socioeconomic backgrounds

^b Reference group = High school or below

^c Reference group = Low childhood socioeconomic backgrounds * Future- vs. present-oriented perspectives

perspectives. Rather, focusing more on the immediate present may be more or less equally rewarded (Hypothesis 3–3). This suggests the non-linearity of returns to future- vs. present-oriented perspectives. To further investigate the role of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives, we tested the last model of Table 3 (Model 3) using the three quantiles of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives instead of using them as a continuous variable. We used Stata's margins command to draw Fig. 2, which shows the predicted values with 83.4% confidence intervals. Prior studies have discussed that 83.4% confidence intervals, compared to 95% confidence intervals, allow for a better evaluation of statistically significant differences in the subgroup comparison (Cumming, 2009; Knol et al., 2011; Zigerell, 2022).¹⁴ The absence of overlapping intervals indicates statistically significant differences between estimates at $p = 0.05$, and the presence of the overlaps between the intervals

indicates the lack of significant difference at $p = 0.05$ (Corrado & Magalhães, 2023; Guetto et al., 2022).

Fig. 2 suggests that those from higher childhood socioeconomic backgrounds could enjoy the benefits of holding more future-oriented than present-oriented perspectives. The difference between holding at least some level of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (i.e., middle future-present perspectives) versus having low future- vs. present-oriented perspectives is statistically significant among those from higher childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (red box); this difference remains statistically significant at the 5% level. For those from middle childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (blue box), future- vs. present-oriented perspectives do not make any meaningful differences in their later status attainment outcomes. Among those from lower childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (gray box), the difference in socioeconomic status outcomes is statistically significant between those with lower future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (i.e., low PSEI # low future-present perspectives) and those with middle future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (i.e., low PSEI # middle future-present perspectives), but the direction seems to be opposite to the finding for those from higher childhood socioeconomic backgrounds. In other words,

¹⁴ When the 95% confidence intervals overlap, this indicates a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for concluding that the difference between the estimates is not statistically significant at the 5% level. In contrast, the overlap between two 83.4% confidence intervals provides a sufficient condition to conclude the non-significance of the difference between the two estimates at the 5% level.

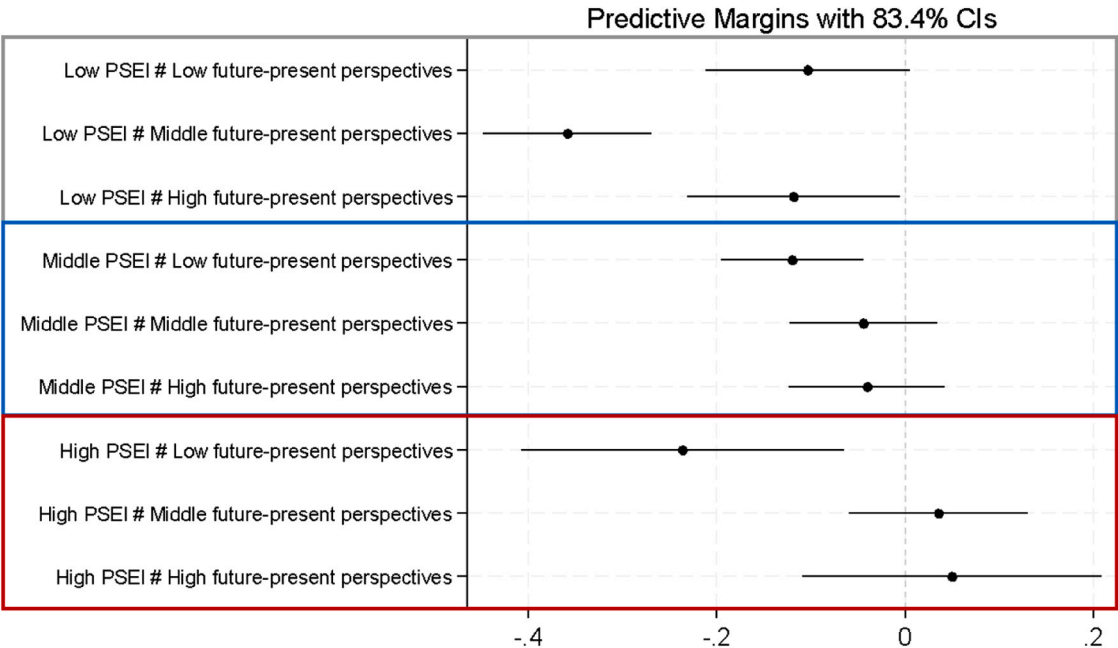


Fig. 2. The moderating effect of childhood socioeconomic backgrounds with 83.4% confidence intervals. *Note:* Predictive margins were calculated based on the interaction between childhood socioeconomic background and future- vs. present-oriented perspectives in the OLS regression of Wave 2 socioeconomic status. The model was controlled for childhood conditions (family and financial disruption in childhood), Wave 1 age, white, female, health, education, and socioeconomic status (i.e., LDV). Models were weighted by multivariate post-stratification weights and adjusted for attrition at Wave 2 using inverse weighting. PSEI refers to childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, and future-present perspective refers to future- vs. present-oriented perspectives.

those from lower childhood socioeconomic backgrounds seem to gain relatively greater increases in socioeconomic status outcomes when they hold lower future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (i.e., low PSEI # low future-present perspectives) rather than moderate future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (i.e., low PSEI # middle future-present perspectives). We additionally found that individuals who are focused more on the present (i.e., low PSEI # low future-present perspectives) seem to produce relatively similar socioeconomic status outcomes to those who are focused more on the future (i.e., low PSEI # high future-present perspectives). These results indicate that being more present-focused could produce similar results as those seen for individuals with more future-oriented perspectives. The findings suggest that for individuals who lack other (parental) resources, having balanced future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (middle future-present perspectives) could hinder their later status attainment; instead, focusing on present matters may protect them from obtaining the worst socioeconomic status outcomes 10 years later.

4.3. Robustness checks

We conducted three robustness checks to demonstrate the robustness of our finding using the current operationalization of the future- vs. present-oriented perspectives. First, we tested our hypotheses using the ratio approach as an alternative measure where the *future- vs. present-oriented perspectives ratio* in Wave 1 was calculated by dividing the average response to future-oriented perspectives by the average response to present-oriented perspectives (*future vs. present perspectives*

ratio = future-oriented perspectives/present-oriented perspectives; [Park et al., 2021](#)). A higher score was assigned when the respondent rated higher on the future orientation scale than on the present orientation scale.¹⁵ Using the ratio approach does not change our main finding (see [Supplementary Material B](#) for detailed discussion).

Additionally, we conducted the analysis excluding one present-oriented perspective item, “I have too many things to think about today to think about tomorrow,” which seemingly pits the future against the present by itself. The results largely hold with some exceptions. Consistent with the main findings, we found that those from higher childhood socioeconomic backgrounds are the only group that could enjoy the benefit of having some level of future-oriented perspectives than present-oriented perspectives (the red box of Figure C1). However, unlike the main finding, we did not find the benefit of holding more present-oriented perspectives among those from lower childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (the gray box of Figure C1): the confidence intervals largely overlap, making us difficult to draw any strong claims about the benefit of future-oriented versus present-oriented perspectives for those from lower childhood socioeconomic backgrounds. This finding appears to indicate that the excluded item might be particularly salient for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who often face day-to-day stressors. As such, excluding this particular item may make it difficult to distinguish between the roles of different relative time perspectives, particularly among those from lower childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, while affecting those from higher childhood socioeconomic backgrounds to a lesser degree. Future research should develop more appropriate scales for present orientation that do

¹⁵ However, we suggest reading the robustness check results with caution given that the inter-item reliability for the present orientation (the denominator) is lower than the conventional criteria (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.64) and the measurement error in the denominator of a ratio variable could result in bias especially when using the ratio as an outcome variable ([Bartlett & Partnoy, 2020](#)). Further discussion about this alternative operationalization is presented in [Supplementary Material B](#).

not tap into socioeconomic constraints but more precisely capture respondents' time orientations. See [Supplementary Material C](#) for the results.

Lastly, to demonstrate the utility of the current measure of future- versus present-oriented perspectives, we conducted an additional analysis using the scale on future orientation only. This additional analysis aims to assess whether being future-focused itself matters, not the relative emphasis on the future versus the present (See the [Supplementary Material D](#) for the results). The findings suggest that the main result of the current study can be observed only when we focus on the relative emphasis between the future and the present orientations, rather than examining future orientation by itself. This null finding when examining future orientation alone highlights that present orientation is not merely a mirror image of future orientation; rather, incorporating it provides more nuanced information about how people navigate their life circumstances. This result underscores the distinctive utility of using the current measure (i.e., future- vs. present-oriented perspectives) rather than relying on future-oriented perspectives alone. See [Supplementary Material D](#) for the results and further discussions.

Beyond the robustness checks on alternative operationalizations for our measure, we conducted several additional robustness checks. First, we tested our analysis using multiple imputation (see [Supplementary Material F](#) for further details and full results). Findings from the two OLS regression models largely remain consistent with the main findings (Tables F1 and F2 in [Supplementary Material F](#)). Second, we reran the final model using the Just Another Variable (JAV) approach ([von Hippel, 2009](#)) where we utilized multiple imputation by chained equations and included the interaction between three quantiles of childhood family backgrounds (i.e., low, middle, and high PSEI) and future- vs. present-oriented perspectives (i.e., low, middle, and high future-present perspectives) in the imputation model and recomputed the predicted values of socioeconomic status outcomes at Wave 2 to examine the non-linear returns to future- vs. present-oriented perspectives by one's childhood socioeconomic backgrounds (Figure F1). The main findings related to those with low childhood socioeconomic backgrounds and those with high childhood socioeconomic backgrounds appear to hold when using multiple imputation, although we have wider confidence intervals in this version, which largely overlap each other, than in [Fig. 2](#) of the main analysis.

One alternative explanation about our findings would be whether future orientation is more beneficial for those who have lower socioeconomic status at Wave 1, that is, whether placing more weight onto the future than the present (i.e., future- vs. present-oriented perspectives) benefits more for those who have more room for upward mobility in the next 10 years. To test this alternative hypothesis that the role of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives would depend on one's socioeconomic status at Wave 1, we tested the interaction between W1 status attainment and future- vs. present-oriented perspectives on W2 status attainment in the models of [Table 3](#) as well as the non-linear models (i.e., [Fig. 2](#)). The results indicate that having a more future-oriented than present-oriented perspective at W1 is not necessarily beneficial for those who hold a lower socioeconomic status at Wave 1, rejecting the aforementioned alternative hypothesis.

Another alternative interpretation about the findings could be that the null finding would be due to the age range of the sample. One might suggest that those who are at later life stages might have much less room for changes in their socioeconomic status, thereby limiting the explanatory power of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives in shaping later life outcomes. To test this possibility, we limited our analysis to younger samples (ages 25–50, $N = 713$). The replication of [Fig. 2](#) confirms the main findings (See Figure E1 of [Supplementary Material E](#)). The benefit of holding middle future- vs. present-oriented perspectives over low future- vs. present-oriented perspectives among those from higher childhood socioeconomic backgrounds holds in this younger sample. In addition, individuals from lower childhood socioeconomic backgrounds

who prioritize the present over the future (i.e., low future- vs. present-oriented perspectives) seem to produce similar socioeconomic status outcomes to those who are focused more on the future than the present (i.e., high future- vs. present-oriented perspectives) in this younger sample (see [Supplementary Material E](#) for the results).¹⁶

5. Discussions and conclusions

The present study is in line with scholarly endeavors to expand discussions on agency that have long focused on subjective beliefs about it to broader future orientations ([Buchmann & Solga, 2017](#); [Hitlin & Elder, 2006](#); [Hitlin & Johnson, 2015](#)). While future orientation is theorized to be a key component in understanding human agency in life course outcomes ([Emirbayer & Mische, 1998](#)), previous studies on future orientation have largely focused on the role of domain-specific expectations, more specifically, adolescents' educational expectations with respect to achievement and well-being outcomes. Suggesting general life expectations (i.e., life course expectations) as a measure of future orientation, [Hitlin & Johnson \(2015\)](#) call for future research on other dimensions of future orientation, including "future- versus present-focused perspectives" (p.1439).

We examined whether and how (a) one's orientation towards the future rather than the present is linked to childhood conditions and (b) it contributes to one's later status attainment outcomes. Consistent with the prior research on the long arm of childhood disadvantages ([Hayward & Gorman, 2004](#)), the findings of the present study suggest a long-term effect of childhood socioeconomic backgrounds on future-oriented perspectives in adulthood. Childhood conditions seem to shape one's life experience, which could constrain and enable thinking about the future and the present (future- versus present-oriented perspectives). As prior studies have suggested, parental resources could work as "safety nets" for adults from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, which encourage them not to worry about the present but to think (or even worry) more about the future ([Shoshana, 2020](#); [Tevington, 2018](#)). However, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have immediate concerns about their present living conditions; for example, young adults in low-income households are often expected to provide financial assistance to their parents ([Shoshana, 2020](#)). In this sense, a lack of or insufficient parental resources may shorten an individual's time horizon.

In addition, we found a socioeconomic benefit of holding more future-oriented perspectives than present-oriented perspectives: those with such perspectives tended to attain better socioeconomic status outcomes 10 years later, net of other factors. However, this benefit is only pronounced in those who are already advantaged; those from higher childhood socioeconomic backgrounds are the only group in which we could see the clear benefits of having some more future-oriented versus present-oriented perspectives on socioeconomic status attainment.

One finding that needs further discussion is that while more present-focused perspectives (i.e., lower future- vs. present-oriented perspectives) do not seem to be valued and thus less rewarded for those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (see the red box in [Fig. 2](#)), having more present-focused perspectives does not hurt the status outcome of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (see the gray box in [Fig. 2](#)); they seem to obtain socioeconomic status similar to those who are more future-oriented than present-oriented. On the one hand, this finding may suggest that a more present-focused perspective could, in part, protect those with less advantaged childhood socioeconomic

¹⁶ Additional concern would be that the relationship between future- vs. present-oriented perspectives and status attainment could vary across different cohorts due to societal changes that may contribute to different opportunity structures as well as different social environments to develop time orientations. Future research with better data should examine this possibility.

backgrounds from having worse socioeconomic outcomes as it helps them remain engaged in their immediate demands and concerns about their present living (Hill et al., 2008; Shoshana, 2020).

However, this does not seem to relate to the financial conditions. As a robustness check, we controlled for Wave 1 personal earnings income in the model shown in Fig. 2, despite the risk of multicollinearity. The results seem to hold: for those from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, holding more present-oriented perspectives is as helpful as holding more future-oriented perspectives, even after considering one's economic condition. This result suggests that, for those from lower childhood socioeconomic backgrounds, having a more present-oriented and less future-oriented perspective does not seem to bring the same penalty as those from middle or higher childhood socioeconomic backgrounds; this is not explained by one's financial condition. Rather, different rules of the game seem to apply to those with different (parental) resources (e.g., different class environment; see Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2014). Focusing more on the present than the future may be more valued and useful in lower socioeconomic living environments, where things are often unpredictable and uncontrollable for people with fewer resources to get their lives on track. While our finding suggests that, for those who grew up in less advantaged and unstable childhood family conditions, focusing on the present than the future can be relatively beneficial than holding relatively undifferentiated time perspectives (middle future- vs. present-oriented perspectives) in the attainment of socioeconomic status 10 years later, we should also acknowledge that we cannot rule out the possibility that the present-oriented perspectives can result in less beneficial outcomes in other life domains.

Another finding that requires further discussion is the role of education in the relationship among childhood conditions, future- vs. present-oriented perspectives, and socioeconomic status outcomes. Education explained the effect of childhood socioeconomic backgrounds on future- vs. present-oriented perspectives and the effect of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives on later socioeconomic status outcomes. On the one hand, one's educational attainment could work as an important resource linking one's structural (dis)advantages to future-oriented perspectives: while childhood conditions matter, individuals can also develop their focus on the future through their achievement of higher education. This finding may suggest that a future orientation could be developed as something similar to "learned expectations" (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007), which are developed as people successfully attain higher education. On the other hand, education could serve as a pathway linking future orientation to adult socioeconomic attainment. For example, education provides people with different values and lines of action. The school environment, particularly in college education, often reinforces beliefs or mindsets focused on the future rather than on the present. Through higher education, people may buffer themselves against childhood adversities that would otherwise negatively affect their future orientation. One limitation is that we did not conduct a formal mediation test on education. Future research with better data should conduct a mediation test to empirically distinguish and test the two separate mechanisms through which personal education plays a role in the development and utility of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives.

The present study has limitations, too. In our interpretation of the OLS regression of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives on childhood conditions and education in Wave 1, we assume that one's educational attainment, which is measured in Wave 1, precedes the respondent's time perspectives, which are also measured in Wave 1. This causal ordering is based on our assumption that the majority of our respondents had already completed their education in Wave 1, considering the target age of the survey (25–74 years old in Wave 1). Nevertheless, the possibility of reverse causality cannot be ruled out. The absence of a measure capturing adolescent future- vs. present-oriented perspectives brings a limitation to our study in clarifying the role of future- vs. present-oriented perspectives in status attainment. While our study focused on the role of adults' future- vs. present-oriented perspectives, it

is possible that future- vs. present-oriented perspectives developed during adolescence could also shape both educational trajectories and later adult outcomes (e.g., Finlay et al., 2015; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; Nurmi, 1991) and likely their time perspectives during adulthood. Future research with longitudinal data that includes future- vs. present-oriented perspectives during both adolescence and adulthood could test this possibility. In addition, while we focus on the role of education and childhood socioeconomic backgrounds as an example of resources that individuals could rely on when developing and utilizing the future- vs. present-oriented perspectives, we should acknowledge that we are not able to cover all the potential resources that could relate to the future- vs. present-oriented perspectives, for example, resources through the individual's networks. We acknowledge that the relationship between future- vs. present-oriented perspectives and status attainment could vary across different cohorts due to societal changes that may contribute to different opportunity structures as well as different social environment to develop time orientations. Also, we should note that our sample is predominantly white. We acknowledge that the findings of the current study cannot be generalized to other races and ethnicities. Future research with a more diverse sample should replicate this finding. One limitation of the current operationalization of the future- vs. present-oriented perspectives could be that the items measuring the future-oriented perspectives and present-oriented perspectives are not exact mirror images of each other. Given that we do not assume them to be the opposite ends of a single continuum, we found current measures to be the best available proxies for future- vs. present-oriented perspectives. Another limitation suggests future research to develop more appropriate scales for present orientation, however. The present orientation scale presents relatively low Cronbach's alpha (0.64) and findings from the robustness check (Supplementary Material C) that excludes one item, "I have too many things to think about today to think about tomorrow," which seemingly pits the future against the present by itself, imply that this excluded item might tap into socioeconomic constraints and thus making it particularly salient for individuals from a lower socioeconomic background, who often face day-to-day stressors and immediate demands. Future research should develop more appropriate scales for present orientation that more precisely capture respondents' time orientations.

The current study questions the widespread public beliefs about the benefit of future orientation: does being more future-oriented always lead to better life outcomes? As Hitlin & Johnson (2015) pointed out, agency can serve as "a mechanism for reproducing inequality" (p. 1435), and people who are more attentive to the future than the present may hold the belief that their effort could produce better life outcomes in the long run (e.g., in the form of meritocratic beliefs). The findings of this study suggest that the benefit of future orientation is limited to those who are already advantaged, and holding a more present-oriented perspective does not necessarily impose a penalty on those from disadvantaged family backgrounds. For them, the ability to react to the environment may be a more adaptive indicator of later achievement or well-being, instead.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hye Won Kwon: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition. **Jani Erola:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.rssm.2026.101151](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2026.101151).

Data Availability

The datasets analyzed in the current study are publicly available at ICPSR (<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/>).

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