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## Prospective content in the friendship conversations of young adults<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Prospection is cognitive processes that involve constructing, encoding, and remembering the future. Less is known about the how these processes are evident in the prospective content of conversations. This study sought to identify and describe evidence of the prospective content in the conversations of friends as they transition to adulthood. The present secondary content analysis of the videotaped conversations of 15 young adult friendship dyads ( $n = 30$ , 16 females, 14 males, mean age = 21.3 years) in Canada examined these conversations based the following characteristics of prospection: simulation, reasoning about counterfactuals, constructing multiple possible futures, and episodic memory of the past. Four categories of prospective content were evident in these conversations, these processes were used sparingly in all but one conversation, and relatively few of them were collaborative in that dyad partners did not appear to serve to augment, clarify, or disconfirm prospective content.

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Positive peer relationships have consistently been identified as important for development during late adolescence and prior to attaining full adult status (see review in [Viner et al., 2012](#)). This period of life is also a time of significant considerations in the areas of relationships, identity, and educational and vocational futures. Peer support is often generated through conversations with friends in which youth can address future concerns. Recent literature has shown the value of conversations between peers in the transition to adulthood (e.g., [Chasin & Radtke, 2013](#); [Morgan & Korbov, 2012](#)). While the predominance of the literature on youth conversations has addressed parent-adolescent conversations, several studies have examined the content of youth conversations with peers: for example, conversational self-focus and depressive symptoms ([Schwartz-Mette & Rose, 2016](#)), dating advice ([Huntley & Owens, 2013](#)), and appearance culture ([Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004](#)). Other studies have examined conversational processes, for example, nonverbal behavior, direct questions, and eye contact (e.g., [Turkstra, 2001](#)). These conversations are frequently about the future, implicitly or explicitly. [Ellison, Wohn, and Greenhow \(2014\)](#), for example, found that adolescents' on-line and off-line conversations were contexts for adolescents to talk about the future; and, in the view of the adolescents themselves, these conversations influenced their aspirations in various ways. However, how youth discuss the future with friends has not been extensively investigated. Recent work on

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prospection as a cognitive process may provide a framework to identify the prospective content in the friendship conversations of youth. In this study, prospective content refers to the verbal content of conversations that explicitly refers to the future in some way.

Current evidence in neuroscience and cognitive psychology has identified prospection as an important cognitive process as one navigates the future (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2013). Specifically, prospection refers to “the act of thinking about the future” (Buckner & Carroll, 2007, p. 49). Although prospection is identified as a cognitive process, one may ask whether and to what extent youth friendship conversations contain explicit prospective content and what types of prospective content are represented in these conversations. This study is intended to illustrate the types of prospective content in youth friendship conversations and the extent to which that content is enhanced by the dialogue between the youth.

To examine the prospective content in youth friendship conversations, we adopt a contextual action theory perspective (Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002) in which the conversation is conceptualized as a joint goal-directed action of those engaged in it. In their friendship conversations, youth are enacting a narrative, thus suggesting a temporal sequence of past, present, and future. Conversations between friends frequently involve articulating sequences of events in time, including future time (Berger, 1997). In addition to the possibility of prospective content about the future in conversations with friends, the conversations likely engender prospective thinking about the friendship itself. Conversations between friends are most frequently the enactment of a narrative, which is a category used to identify prospection itself (Szpunar, Spreng, & Scharter, 2014). These authors noted that narrative prospective content focuses on specific autobiographical events that may take place in the future. Baumeister, Vohs, and Oettingen (2016) made a similar distinction, suggesting that some prospection reflects narrative versus propositional knowledge. These distinctions are relevant to the present investigation because the action of the conversation is part of a narrative sequence of events. The joint action of engaging in a friendship conversation is itself goal-directed. Friendship can be understood as persisting, or intentionally not persisting, into the future.

Conversation is also a means in which prospection errors may be ameliorated. Specifically, Gilbert and Wilson (2007) noted that prospection can involve only the essential features of a future event. It can over represent the best or worst features of an event. Furthermore, prospections are often abbreviated and decontextualized. To some extent, conversations between friends can address these errors because the other person may respond by identifying the error or asking for more information that may contextualize, extend, and include more common and non-essential features of the event. Other evidence for the value of conversation for prospection include finding that the presence of peers influences relational reasoning in adolescents (Wolf, Bazargani, Kilford, Dumontheil, & Blakemore, 2015). Baumeister, Hofmann, and Vohs (2015) found that one is more apt to think about more than one category of time, that is past, present, or future, when one is with others rather than alone. It is also recognized that emotion is critical for prospection during decision making (e.g., Worthy, Byrne, & Fields, 2014). Jones, Kirkland, and Cunningham (2013) make the case that evaluation is a “process of affect regulation in the moment” (p. 252), suggesting that the evaluation of future events is context as well as temporally dependent. Conversations between friends may be contexts in which emotion may be more accessible than in other contexts because of the on-going friendship.

The cognitive processes involved in prospection are not independent of context. Gilbert and Wilson (2007) showed how contextual factors, such as would be present in the conversation between friends, can influence the simulation of an event as well as the event itself. Seligman et al. (2013) advance this view by arguing convincingly that the “mental processes that produce conscious thought are closely linked to those that produce speech” (p. 130). They suggested that language has a multiplier effect on the effectiveness of prospection, that is, that many minds are better than one. This study takes the focus on prospection a step further by looking specifically at how youth speak specifically about their futures in youth friendship conversations.

This study addressed the following questions: Is there evidence of prospective content in the conversations of young adult friends? What types of prospective content are evident in these conversations? To what extent and how does the conversation facilitate the prospective aspects of the conversation?

In light of the link between conscious thought and speech, it seems important to work from established prospection categories, such as those identified by Seligman et al. (2013), to access and categorize the prospective content of conversations. In addition, the link between conscious thought and speech is addressed directly in the theoretical framework, contextual action theory, and the action-project method used in the original study. Specifically, the method undertakes to gather data about cognitions by having participants watch a video recording of the conversation immediately after it has occurred and provide recollections of thoughts and feeling for short segments of the conversation.

## 1. Method

The data for this study were collected, analyzed, and reported as an examination of the joint projects of young adult peer friends in the transition to adulthood (Young et al., 2015), using the protocol for the action-project method (Young, Domene, & Valach, 2005). The original study was intended to identify the joint transition-to-adulthood projects of friends and monitor those projects for six months. Identification of the joint project was based on a conversation between two friends on a topic they considered relevant to the transition to adulthood that was recorded and analyzed. Part of this data set, that is, the 15 dyadic conversations between young adult friends about the transition to adulthood ( $n = 30$  participants) and the

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