

# Preferences for the long-term continuation of humanity

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## Introduction

- Most people do not want humanity to go extinct relatively soon (Schubert, Caviola, & Faber, 2019).
- Beliefs that human extinction would be bad may simply be due to welfarist or utilitarian considerations, such that people want future people to live long, happy lives.
- In the present study, we hypothesized that there is an additional important psychological factor: a preference for the continued long-term existence of humanity, above and beyond welfarist considerations.

## Methods

### Design

- Four dilemmas about preferring shorter vs. longer versions of humanity, controlling for total population (within-subjects)
  - Dilemmas varied by:
    - 1) total population size (small / large)
    - 2) durations (short / long)
- Size (# of people living at a given time):
  - **Small:** 3 million vs. 30 million
  - **Large:** 300 million vs. 3 billion
- Duration (# of years until human extinction):
  - **Short:** 300 vs. 3,000 years
  - **Long:** 3 million vs. 30 million years
- Dependent measures (DV is average of the three):  
Which civilization is...
  - 1) Preferred
  - 2) More valuable
  - 3) More meaningful

### Example question

Consider the following two possible human civilizations:

**Civilization A:**  
3 billion people exist at any given moment in time. The civilization lasts for 3 million years.

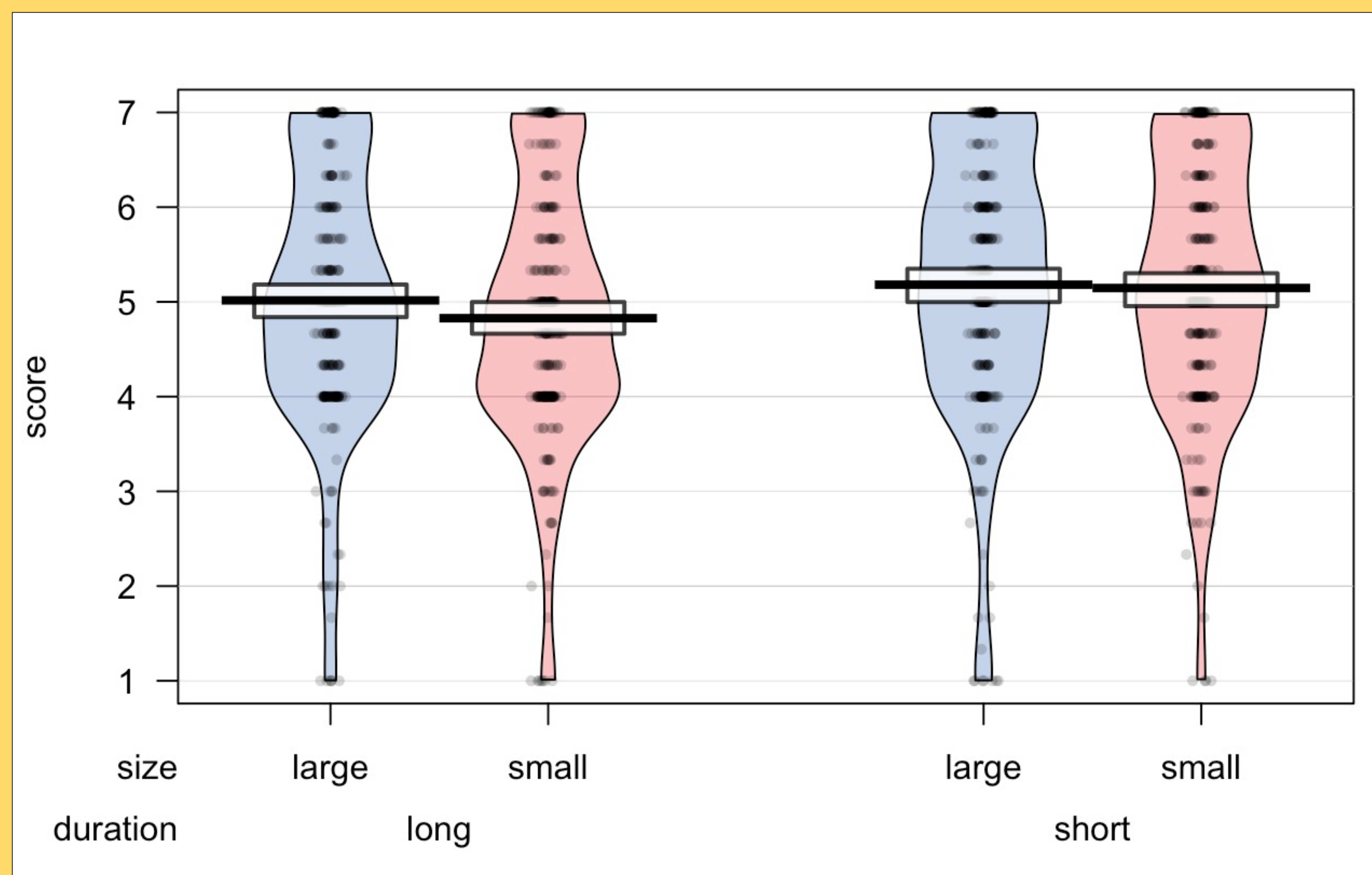
**Civilization B:**  
300 million people exist at any given moment in time. The civilization lasts for 30 million years.

The total number of people, added up across space and time, is 300 trillion for each civilization.

- If only one civilization could come into existence, which one would you prefer to exist?  
1 (Strongly prefer Civilization A), 4 (No preference), 7 (Strongly prefer Civilization B)
- If only one civilization could come into existence, which one would you find more valuable?  
1 (Civilization A is much more valuable), 4 (Both are equally valuable), 7 (Civilization B is much more valuable)
- If only one civilization could come into existence, which one would you find more meaningful?  
1 (Civilization A is much more meaningful), 4 (Both are equally meaningful), 7 (Civilization B is much more meaningful)

\*We controlled for many confounds by asking participants to assume no differences in several features, including: happiness, resource depletion, technological and cultural advancements, etc.

People prefer humanity to last longer, even when controlling for total population.



All significantly above the midpoint ( $p$ 's < .001)

## Results

- N = 248, F = 105, M<sub>age</sub> = 38.9 years (SD<sub>age</sub> = 10.56)
- One-sample t-tests (difference from the midpoint):
  - **Small / Short:** t(247) = 13.49, p < .001, 95% CI: [4.98, 5.31], d = 0.86
  - **Small / Long:** t(247) = 9.46, p < .001, 95% CI: [4.66, 5.00], d = 0.60
  - **Large / Short:** t(247) = 13.20, p < .001, 95% CI: [5.01, 5.36], d = 0.84
  - **Large / Long:** t(247) = 11.57, p < .001, 95% CI: [4.84, 5.19], d = 0.73
- No size x duration interaction effect between the dilemmas
  - F(1,247) = 2.22, p = .14
- **80% of participants scored above the midpoint** (preference for longer humanity)
  - $\chi^2 = 241.97$ , p < .001
- In a follow-up study to test mechanism, we found (contrary to our hypothesis) that people find longer versions of humanity *less* personally meaningful

## Discussion

- This work provides empirical support to moral philosophical discussions regarding population ethics.
- Specifically, people prefer longer versions of human civilization, not just because they imply greater total number of people.
- The clearest limitations are that the scenarios are hypothetical and perhaps too difficult to mentally simulate.
- Our follow-up study finding that people find *shorter* humanities more personally meaningful means the mechanism(s) underlying the preference for longer humanities remain undetermined.
- Future research should seek to further understand people's beliefs about existential risks to humanity, which may ultimately have important implications for public policy, moral behavior, and the effective altruism movement.

## References

1. Schubert, S., Caviola, L., & Faber, N. S. (2019). The psychology of existential risk: Moral judgments about human extinction. *Scientific reports*, 9(1), 1-8.

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