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Back from the future: a narrative approach to study the imagination of personal futures

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ABSTRACT

This article responds to the call for prospective methodologies in the social sciences by developing a narrative approach to study the imagination of personal futures. The approach encompasses an analytical framework regarding dimensions of projectivity and an elicitation method (*Letters from the Future*). Using an example letter from a study about post-Referendum futures in Greece, the article draws on psychological, sociological, and futures studies research to elucidate key issues in projectivity research. The article clarifies potentials and challenges in three thematic clusters: (1) *Balancing clarity and reach* concerns the quality of narrative accounts of the future and proposes techniques for eliciting personally meaningful accounts; (2) *The experience and meaning of time* foregrounds narrative sense-making involved in imagining the future, thereby highlighting futures thinking as cultural capacity; (3) *Engaging spaces of the possible* foregrounds imagination in (co-)constructing narratives of and from the future. Finally, the article reviews strengths and limitations.

KEYWORDS


Narrative; anticipation; future imagination; life writing; possible selves

Introduction

Although scholarly attention to the future is not new, over the last decade prominent scholars in numerous disciplines have argued for a sociology of the future (Mische, 2009), an anthropology of the future (Appadurai, 2013), a psychology of the future (Oettingen, Sevince, & Gollwitzer, 2018; Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2016) and a future-forming social science (Gergen, 2015). These turns to the future share the idea that researching the future should have a more central place in their respective disciplines, be it for different reasons. Mische (2009) argues for a revival of the ‘future-oriented dimension of action’ and the ‘notion of *projects*, or *projectivity*, as a tool for social analysis’ to gain a deeper understanding of ‘the future images that inform social practices’. Appadurai’s *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013) is in dialogue with Giddens’ perception of risk society in an era of globalization. Reflecting on housing activists fighting ‘against the slumification of Mumbai’, he urges for an anthropology ‘that can assist in the victory of a politics of possibility over a politics of probability’. Several publications set out to bring coherence to the vast but hitherto fragmented psychological research on prospection (Oettingen et al., 2018; Seligman et al., 2016). Gergen (2015) calls for a future-forming science not to ‘illuminate *what is*, but to create *what is to become*’ (p. 294: italics in original). If the twentieth century culminated in the height of the interview society (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002), perhaps the twenty-first century is the age of prospective methodologies.

These authors concur in stressing the relationship between the future and the present. Their interest is not in predicting the future, but in understanding how imagining possible

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and preferred future guides and motivates present thought and action. Their methodological strategies depend at least partially on an evaluation of how futures are imagined and how this might bring about personal, social and societal change. Gergen (2015) displays an ambiguous attitude towards the imagination by saying that the idea is ‘not to embark on a disjunctive, imaginary world – a world of inquiry beyond the reach of contemporary researchers’ (Gergen, 2015). The disjunction may be less about a divorce between imagination and practice as it is about the ‘impossibility to measure the future’ (Seligman et al., 2016). Mische (2009) directs attention to a specific problem of investigating the not-yet, i.e. how to study ‘an uncertain and shifting future horizon’. Social psychologists Zittoun and Gillespie (2018, p. 12), who developed a sociocultural approach to the imagination, ask ‘if imagination is everywhere and often invisible, then how are we to study it?’ They conclude that ‘the only access we have to people’s meaning-making is through externalization, that is, the part of these semiotic dynamics made perceptible to others’.

The externalization of imagined futures in cultural artefacts currently studied in social science research can be divided into naturally occurring and research elicited data. First, existing datasets with observational, archival and interview data are re-analyzed with a focus on instances of future imagination (Appadurai, 2013). This type of data is however limited to naturally occurring instances of future imagination. For a more full, extensive and systematic coverage of how, when and why future imagination occurs, triggers for future imagination may be needed such as ruptures with taken-for-granted reality, boredom and overstimulation, or problem-solving (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018). In possibility-deprived cases, what-if analysis has been proposed as an analytical lens to investigate emerging threats of possibilities in, for example, illness saturated interviews (Sools, 2012).

Second, on-going future-oriented practices are sought out for empirical sociological investigation. A notable example is Cooper’s book *Everyday Utopias* (2014), which investigates how utopian spaces such as equality governance ‘work by creating the change they wish to encounter’ (Cooper, 2014, p. 2) Third, researchers themselves take part in transformative research practices with a clear future orientation such as scenario research, action-research, and appreciative inquiry (Gergen, 2015; Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015; Ramirez, Mukherjee, Vezzoli, & Kramer, 2015). Fourth, researchers elicit imagined futures ‘through speech, text, movement, paintings, objects or diaries’ (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018). A good example of a research project that combines essays about future orientations with artistic expressions and performances is the restudy of the 1970s *Imagine Sheppey* project (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016; Lyon & Carabelli, 2016).

A comprehensive study of future imagination, broadly conceived, would need multiple methods and modalities in which imagined futures are externalized. For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on narrative accounts of imagined futures that are elicited for research purposes. Combining psychological, sociological and futures studies literature, I will identify and describe three key challenges in a narrative approach to researching personal imaginations of the future. Starting point is the nine dimensions of projectivity proposed by Mische (2009) as there seems to be consensus in all three disciplines/fields on the relevance of these dimensions. The dimensions will be categorized into three thematic clusters each focusing on another aspect of narrative and proposing ways of addressing key methodological issues. Theme 1 *balancing clarity and reach* draws on psychological literature into the social-cognitive processes of futures thinking to address the quality of narrative accounts of the future and propose techniques for eliciting personally meaningful accounts. Theme 2 *the experience and meaning of time* emphasizes the multiplicity, ambiguity and sociocultural shaping of future time dimensions. This sociological research foregrounds narrative sense-making involved in imagining the future, thereby proposing futures thinking as cultural capacity. Theme 3 *engaging spaces of the possible* foregrounds narrative imagination and the (co-)constructive nature of narrating the future. Drawing on futures studies, (action) research ways of fostering possibility thinking are proposed. Before describing these themes in more detail, I will first tell the story of how the *Letters from the Future* exercise, that forms the basis of the proposed methodology, found its way to me.

Letters from the future: introduction to the methodology

After years of narrative interview research, in which I studied often lengthy life stories, I became intrigued by a simple yet powerfully moving creative writing exercise *Letters from the Future* (LF). This exercise has a background in health promotion, where it was used in creative writing groups for older people with mild depressive symptoms (Bohlmeijer, 2007). The instruction is to imagine travelling to the future in a time machine, and consequently, write a letter to an audience in the present about the depicted future and the path that led to this future (see [Box 1](#) for the full letter instruction). When I was asked to teach an introductory psychology course with only limited space for narrative psychology, I decided to use the LF exercise to explain the concept of narrative identity to students. My idea was that by writing their own LF and reflecting on what this letter would tell about who they were, they would get a more experiential grasp of what narrative identity means. Despite my experience in interview research and the benefits storytelling holds for both the teller and listener, I was excited by the richness of this seemingly simple exercise as well as the effects students reported. They enjoyed the exercise that provided many of them with insights into their selves, evoking a range of emotions, and setting in motion possibilities for change. I also noted the analytical potential this material holds.

Box 1. Instructions for writing a letter from the future.

In three variations: written, audio and focus group
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1. Instruction for pencil-paper and online data collection

The following suggestions are hints which give you an idea about what your own letter from the future might look like. Feel free to use these instructions as a basis for writing the letter your own way. Don't worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar but simply write anything that comes to your mind. Keep in mind that it is a letter that is written backwards from a desired future to the present, so you imagine *a desired future situation as if already realized*. Feel free to use your full imagination: Remember that it is about the future which has not occurred yet. Consider it an opportunity to think about possibilities that could happen.

Where and When?

Imagine that you are travelling in a time machine. Imagine as vividly as possible where and when you are in the future. When. How far into the future do you travel? This may be an hour, a day, a week, years, decades or even millennia later. Where. Where you are travelling to and what does the environment look like? (e.g. a place, a country; in space; at home or your garden; in the city or in nature; a crowded or a deserted place; a colorful or a dull place; a noisy or quiet place; etc.) You may also think about what you look like yourself, what you are wearing, who else is present.

What?

Future image. Imagine that a *desired* future has become true. This could entail the fulfillment of wishes, positive changes, dreams or that you accomplished ways of coping with a difficult situation. Tell your story of a *specific day*, a *specific moment* or a *specific event* in that it comes clear how you have solved a problem or have found a good way of dealing with it.

Trajectory. Describe the *path* towards this future, how it came into being and how you look back on your life.

To Whom?

You decide to whom you want to write the letter and give a *message* to this person in the present.

To your present self

- To another person (for example: your child or grandchild, friends, the next generation, etc.)

Guideline for the duration of writing the letter is about 20 minutes of writing or a maximum of 400 words/ 1 A4 page.

2. Audio instruction with guided meditation emphasizing sensory detail see [supplemental material](#)

3. FutureNowExperience focus group

This focus group methodology generally adheres to the following format: after a guided meditation letters are first written individually, then read aloud and consequently reflected on in a group discussion (Sools, Mooren, & Tromp, 2013). The letter instruction and reflective questions are adapted to the purpose and composition of the focus group, but participants are always given the opportunity to share their experiences of writing, reading and listening. Participants are given agency on what and when to share (or not).

Of course, LF is not a miracle exercise. I also encountered the pitfalls of low data quality, e.g. very brief and vague letters. This echoes the experiences of Lyon and Crow (2012), Lyon & Carabelli (2016, p. 433) who were fascinated by the potential of the essay-writing technique they learnt from Ray Pahl yet were also ‘frustrated by some of the limitations of the technique’. Moreover, although most participants in my research and teaching projects were enthusiastic, some thought the exercise was childish or unrealistic. This critique is commonly found in art-based research and research on imagination and fiction more widely (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018). Altogether, this set me on a journey to learn about the art and science of imagining the future (Sools & Mooren, 2012; Sools, Triliva, & Filippas, 2017; Sools, Tromp, & Mooren, 2015). In this article, I share some of the lessons learned on this journey including the fruits of my latest encounter with the sociological literature on imagined futures of everyday lives.

Throughout the next sections, I will use for illustrative purposes an example letter from a study on post-Referendum futures complemented with examples from focus groups in which LFs were shared and reflected on. The example letter is derived from a study in which we collected over 100 LFs in the days before the Greek Referendum of 2015 (Sools, Triliva, Fragkiadaki, Tzanakis, & Gkinopoulos, 2018). In this online study, we asked participants to imagine what their desired personal lives would look like after a yes vote and/or a no vote to the Referendum. The aim was to provide potential voters with a decision tool that would help them envision what the personal consequences of their quite abstract vote could be. Moreover, we wanted to provide a means for seeing possibilities in what was for many people an anxiety-ridden time where banks were limiting withdrawals and a Grexit was looming large. Out of these letters, that varied significantly in length, the following relatively extensive and detailed letter will be used as an example throughout this article.

Example letter: Identity struggle in the voting booth (man, 22-year-old, unemployed, YES-letter)

The city where I am from

3 years from now

My dear self,

- (1) *I am in my childhood bedroom; it is night-time, and I am tired [...]. And as it happens a*
- (2) *lot lately, thoughts from the past, old anxieties and dilemmas flooded my mind. How*
- (3) *did I get to this point? How did things get to this point? And the most important, where*
- (4) *do I go from here. The referendum of 2015 seems like it was so long ago. It is 3 years*
- (5) *ago, but in my mind it seems like it was in another life. The unrest, anxiety, fear,*
- (6) *decision making.*
- (7) *I was sure that I would vote NO from the very first moment. The propaganda from the*
- (8) *channels, the people who supported the ‘Yes’ vote and the manner in which they did*
- (9) *this, constantly nudged me toward the NO vote. I resisted, struggled, I would choose to*
- (10) *take the risk rather than to stay in a horrible situation because of cowardice. I*
- (11) *advertised the NO, I fought for it and that Sunday morning I woke up to go with the*
- (12) *same fortitude to vote. I was never the type of person who became fanatical with*
- (13) *political situations, but things had gone too far. [...] I went to the voting centre, and*
- (14) *decisively entered the voting booth. I had the ballot in my hand, it would not take a*
- (15) *long time, I had told my parents to wait for me so that we can all leave together. I take*
- (16) *the pen in my hand and I almost place it on the NO box. But I did not do it. The only*
- (17) *thing that I remember is putting my vote in the ballot box, having voted yes. What*
- (18) *happened? How did this happen?*
- (19) *As much time as will pass, I will always travel back to that moment, where everything*
- (20) *transpired without understanding why. I remember my panic. I remember my hand*
- (21) *trembling. I remember complicated thoughts. “You are going counter to this just to go*
- (22) *counter”, “You are not making informed decisions”, “You are not thinking of those who*
- (23) *have much more to lose”, “Are you ready to take the risk, are the others ready?” [...]*

- (24) *it was the moment that something inside me changed. I recognized that I was not the*
 (25) *person I believed I was. I was not a rebel. Very difficult days would transpire... and I*
 (26) *deserved them.*
 (27) *I finished my studies, tried to find work, the plans for graduate training fell apart*
 (28) *because of economic difficulties and one failure followed the other. The economic*
 (29) *situation in the country got worse. [...] But the main reason that I have ended up here*
 (30) *in my childhood bedroom having given up every hope and dream, was not the political*
 (31) *situation. It was my vote, the realization of my fear. It was the moment that will*
 (32) *always haunt me. Because we are our decisions. And I chose fear, hence it will*
 (33) *accompany me in life. My dear self, who is reading all this, I do not impel you to vote no*
 (34) *[...] I advise you though, to think about the person you will become [...] Inside the chaos*
 (35) *that exists in your brain, try to get rid of fear. Don't become a coward. Don't become*
 (36) *me [...].*

Theme 1. Balancing clarity and reach of imagined futures

The 'clarity and detail with which the future is imagined', one of the proposed dimensions of projectivity outlined by Mische (2009), finds an equivalent in psychological research on the vividness of future images. Vividness of (alternative) future images has been linked to positive effects such as reduced risk behavior among young delinquents (Van Gelder, Hershfield, & Nordgren, 2013) and optimism (Meevissen, Peters, & Alberts, 2011). Vividness can be operationalized as episodic quality, defined as 'specifics of happenings, sensory and perceptual information about the event that is recounted, but also details about inner thoughts and emotions that accompany the memory/future thought' (Levine, Svoboda, Hay, Winocur, & Moscovitch, 2002).

Levine et al. (2002) developed a coding scheme for analyzing the quality of episodic memory in autobiographical stories that can also be meaningfully applied to episodic future thought. This distinction between outer and inner detail, for example, can be found in narratives of and from the future such as LFs. Some letters mainly depict the writer's inner flow of consciousness (e.g. contemplating the choice to move to another place) with few if any references to the world and events in which thoughts and emotions take place. Others mostly concern descriptions of events (e.g. finding a job, starting a family) with limited or no reference to how the person feels or thinks about this new job. Finally, there are also letters combining the inner and outer aspects of episodic quality as can be illustrated in the example letter from the Greek Referendum study. In this letter, a lot of detail is provided on the main happening (e.g. the voting booth event) and a second happening (e.g. the nighttime anxiety). Sensory and perceptual information about the voting booth event is recounted in rather general terms, but there is a reference to time (Sunday morning), place (the voting center but also more generally the political climate), the people (his parents). Most dominant though in the letter are vivid details about inner thoughts and emotions accompanying his dilemma of not becoming a coward.

Research comparing the episodic quality of past and future thought shows conflicting findings. Some research indicates that descriptions of imagined future events are 'less vivid in terms of sensory (e.g. visual, auditory) and contextual (e.g. visuospatial context) detail' (Szpunar, 2010, p. 148; see also Berntsen & Bohn, 2010), while others found that accounts of future thought 'involved inner speech to a greater extent, were more personally relevant, more realistic/concrete, and more often part of structured sequences of thoughts' than past and present-oriented accounts (Stawarczyk, Cassol, & D'Argembeau, 2013, p. 425). A possible explanation for the mixed findings is that episodic quality may not depend on whether past events are recounted or future events imagined, but rather on how familiar imagined events are and how far ahead they take place (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010; Szpunar, 2010). There may be instances when "a long-term scenario can be richly imagined (as in utopian or dystopian visions) (Mische, 2009, p. 700), and there are great

individual differences in the extent to which distant futures are spontaneously imagined and the degree to which distal goals can be imagined vividly (Karniol & Ross, 1996). It has also been suggested that short-term futures are best understood in terms of plans, whereas long-term futures are linked to hope, faith, and purpose (Cook, 2016; Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015; Nilsen, 1999). While the motivational force of plans comes from the way they can be concretely imagined, hope provides a more global motivating horizon that is less dependent on a vivid imagination.

Szpunar's point (2010, p. 145) that episodic future thought should be 'relevant to one's own future' aligns with a more widely shared concern that imagined futures should be 'intelligible and plausible rather than fantasies' (Lyon & Crow, 2012, p. 505). However, my experience is that there is a lot of self-censorship among participants that may actually hinder them to imagine less conventional yet perhaps more empowering, sustainable or meaningful futures. As Mische (2009) points out, the role of socialization should not be overlooked in that "we may develop greater clarity about possible futures that are modeled around us, and have trouble visualizing the 'roads less traveled.' Indeed, Berntsen and Bohn (2010, p. 265) found that in imaginations of the future 'normative cultural life script events increased with increasing temporal distance'. In sum, reach (time horizon) is related to the clarity of future images, yet there are benefits to imagining proximate as well as distant futures (that may be the greatest when these have personal relevance).

Bearing this in mind, I would propose the following four techniques to elicit future thought: a retrospective orientation, a focus on happenings, concern-based elicitation, and third-person accounts. The first two techniques can also be found in the imagining Sheppey restudy, where the instruction given to young people was to 'imagine that you are towards the end of your life. Look back over your life and say what happened to you' (Lyon & Crow, 2012, p. 504). First, the instruction here is to retrospectively look back from the imagined future, instead of prospective towards the future. As we have argued elsewhere (Sools et al., 2015), such a retrospective outlook on a future *as if already realized* is conducive to experiencing 'being an agent in a future situation' (Erikson, 2007). The *as if already realized* instruction encourages writers to gain an embodied sense of self in a future that has not yet occurred (hence without actual experience to narrate).

Second, high episodic quality can be achieved by asking for particular stories about what happened to a person on particular days, moments, or situations (Wengraf, 2001). Therefore, specifying a more generic question about a future situation (as in the original LF instruction) or more general happening (as in the *Imagine Sheppey* essays) into one about a particular story of what happened in a particular future situation would increase chances of getting high episodic quality. Following recent developments towards multisensory methods (Pink, 2011), I further extended the instruction – employing a guided meditation technique, see [Box 1](#) – by asking what the future looks, feels, smells, and sounds like.

Third, in the *Imagine Sheppey* essays (Lyon & Crow, 2012) the time horizon was fixed and long term (the end of life). This may be a less optimal time horizon for this age group of young people (Klineberg, 1967). Lyon and Crow report having struggled with seeking more freedom for the young people to express themselves and then encountered the problem that a 'lack of future reference points' resulted in lack of narrative sensemaking as well as collapse of future time into the present (Lyon & Carabelli, 2016, p. 439). An alternative to fixing the time horizon yet providing enough guidance is to use *concern-based* elicitation. This can be achieved by asking participants to imagine a *desired* situation, e.g. a situation that has personal relevance to them (rather than a broader reference to 'their future'). To further support participants transporting to a personally relevant future situation, a guided meditation can be provided (see [Box 1](#) for an audio file). A concern-based elicitation task could also be research-driven, for example, aimed at understanding how people suffering from enduring psychological distress anticipate their recovery process.

Fourth, a promising variation in the instruction is to ask for third-person accounts in which a person looks at her future self from the standpoint of an observer. When compared to first-person accounts of future actions, third-person accounts are construed with a higher level of abstraction that 'highlight their larger meaning and significance' (Vasquez & Buehler, 2007).

All in all, there are pros and cons to eliciting narrative accounts of and from the future with high clarity and detail. The importance of gaining episodically rich accounts needs to be balanced with topical interest in futures that are less familiar and further away (yet maybe more humane or sustainable). When designing studies, it should be taken into consideration that clarity and detail are dependent on time horizon (distant or proximal). While standardization of time horizon may be useful for getting reliable and comparable results, this procedure misses out on many of the nuances of subjective time experience and its genesis.

Theme 2. The experience and meaning of future time

In the second thematic cluster, the projectivity dimensions *contingency*, *connectivity* and *volition* Mische (2009) are drawn together to produce a nuanced picture of the experience and meaning of future time. In the following sections, contingency, connectivity and volition will be linked to the concepts of chronotope and genre to draw out the sociocultural aspects of how time is experienced and given meaning.

From reach to chronotope

When looking then at the resulting spatio-temporal orientations participants have depicted in their letters, a close reading of linguistic nuances in these orientations provides a window into understanding the *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 2008) characteristic of an imagined future. The concept of chronotope goes beyond mere 'geographical location' to include 'the holistic historical, socio-cultural, and spatial situation of the people' (Jarva, 2014). In the example letter from the Greek Referendum study presented earlier in this article, we learn that the writer locates himself: *in a city* (in contrast to, for example, writers depicting life in nature), which is qualified as *where I am from* (in contrast to, for example, writers referring to having *moved* to an island, or those naming a specific city like Thessaloniki), *3 years from now* indicating objectively a relatively close timespan without a specific day and time of which the felt duration is later qualified as *It is 3 years ago, but in mind it seems like it was in another life*.

The writer responds here to the LF instruction that does not fix the time horizon but rather invites participants to give particulars about an imagined time and place when a desired situation has happened. Hence, the selected desired situation, typically related to a concern in the *present* lives of the writer, directs the choice for time and place. Consequently, it is up to writers which particulars they mention and the degree to which they provide details, remain vague in their descriptions or chose to ignore the instruction and not specify the chosen timeframe. The interpretive task for narrative researchers is then to understand what, why, how and to whom (Riessman, 2007) this chronotope is narrated. I suggest that for the interpretation of the narrated chronotope, we can draw on the other dimensions of future time (contingency, connectivity, and volition) and the genre¹ in which they are narrated.

Contingency, connectivity, and volition

Contingency is 'the degree to which future trajectories are imagined as fixed and predetermined versus flexible, uncertain, and dependent on local circumstances' (Mische, 2009, p. 700). The two contingency views (fixed and open) relate to two main anticipatory systems and processes distinguished by futures-researcher Miller (2015). First, a control-oriented, closed form of anticipation (preparation and planning of a knowable future) is exemplified by a focus group participant who explains that she set the exact date of her imagined future (her birthday 5 years ahead), which functions as a milestone that gives her story meaning and purpose. Second, open anticipation (discovery or invention of the unknowable) is seen in a participant voicing her preference to keep an open, receptive attitude towards the future rather than deciding and controlling herself when her

dream is realized. The two stances are not necessarily opposed. Open anticipation to the future does not foreclose the vivid imagination of goals, dreams and wishes as they may have their own function in providing a horizon people can use in reflexive, provisional trajectories in which the path emerges as one goes along (Levitas, 2013). Miller argues that future literacy (something he conceptualizes as a meta-competence), involves the ability to flexibly adopt both stances depending on the context. As Brannen and Nilsen (2002) indicate, the capacity to use adaptive (or predictability-focused) future orientation is gender and class-specific.

Connectivity is understood as the ‘imagined logic of connection between ... actions and events’. Part of the dimension of connectivity are ‘models of causality, agency, and influence’ (Mische, 2009, p. 701) that may be more or less explicit in narrative accounts of and from the future. An example comes from a participant who expressed his belief that naming a specific date would act to prevent a desired future from happening. Connectivity is intimately linked to narrativity. According to Brockmeier, ‘narrative is not only the most adequate form for our most complex constructions of time (such as simultaneous scenarios of diverse times), it is the only form in which they can be expressed at all’ (1995, p. 103). Ricoeur (1984) uses the concept of *emplotment* to describe how narrative functions to connect actions and events into a plausible and coherent whole. Both past and future are involved in *emplotment* in that past events are retrospectively given meaning with a ‘valued ending’ (Gergen, 1994, p. 190) in mind. *Emplotment* does not necessarily result in linear and teleological plots. Rather, ‘narrative structures consist of sequences of events which are arranged in a temporal succession, be it linear or multilinear, circular or elliptical succession, be it direct or reverse, continuous or discontinuous’ (Brockmeier, 1995, p. 16).

To understand what kinds of temporal succession are socially and culturally understandable and acceptable, we can look at the *genre* in which a narrative is told. Mische (2009, p. 701) defines genre as ‘the recognizable discursive “mode” in which future projections are elaborated’. There are different types of genres at play. First, there are the well-known mythical narrative structures of comedy, tragedy, romance and satire that apply to both life and fiction (Murray, 1985). The voting booth example letter conforms to a tragic plot in which the hero struggles and fails to keep the dreaded future at bay. In this example we also see what Mische calls *volition*, defined as ‘the relation of motion or influence that the actor holds in regard to the impending future ... as coming toward us ... [or seeing] ourselves as moving toward the future’ (2009, p. 701). While *volition* as influence – more commonly conceptualized as freedom, agency or mastery of the future – can at least to some degree be analyzed in all LFs based on, for example, active and passive grammar, *volition* as motion is in my experience much less frequently employed spontaneously. This could be an indication that, at least in the mostly European contexts in which I conducted my research, *volition* as motion is not part of the cultural stock of framing time. Second, there are medium-specific genres (Bateman, 2016). Readers who are familiar with the genre of science-fiction in books and movies will have no problem understanding time jumps in LFs. The example letter from the Referendum study shows complex time travel common to science-fiction: first, a jump forward to the bedtime future, then a flash-back to the Referendum time, followed by a fast-forward to the bedtime future again, and ending in the present for the coda of the story. Third, genres ‘express culturally embedded (and often socially contested) models of how social change is envisioned to occur’ (Mische, 2009, p. 701). These could be models for personal change (e.g. growth stories, *Bildung* novels) and social change (e.g. revolutionary, evolutionary, pragmatic and ideological orientations).

All in all, the concepts of *chronotope*, *contingency*, *connectivity*, *volition* and *genre* emphasize the multiplicity, ambiguity and sociocultural shaping of future time dimensions. The examples in this section show what a narrative approach offers in understanding how people sense and make sense of time when imagining the future.

Theme 3. Engaging spaces of the possible

In this section, the imaginative function of narrative sense-making relevant to generating possibility thinking is central. According to Bruner (1986) both the narrative mode and the paradigmatic (logico-scientific) mode of thinking can be used for the imagination of possible worlds but in distinct ways. The paradigmatic mode sets out to logically generate possible worlds and test these possibilities in observations based on hypotheses (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). The narrative mode, on the other hand, ‘deals in human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course. It strives to put its timeless miracles into the particulars of experience, and to locate the experience in time and place’ (Bruner, 1986, p. 113). While imagination is the underlying capacity enabling all future thinking, not all narrative sense-making functions equally in *generating* possibilities. Enhancing the capacity to generate possibilities requires an orientation, similar to action research, in which elicitation techniques do not simply mirror what is but to imaginatively create what is to become (Gergen, 2015).

Turning to futures as spaces of the possible, the dimensions of *breadth* and *expandability* (Mische, 2009) come into view. Where breadth, also referred to as multiplicity, is the ‘range of possibilities’, *expandability* concerns the ‘degree to which these possibilities are seen as expanding or contracting’ (Mische, 2009). To fully capture futures as spaces of the possible, the *novelty* and *value* of the imagined future needs to be taken into account in addition to having multiple options. Imagining drinking a cup of tea for breakfast tomorrow is arguably less novel than imagining having breakfast on Mars. Drinking tea may, however, be a much *valued possibility* as is so eloquently described in the *Book of Tea* by Okakura Kakuzō. Having breakfast on Mars on the other hand may be critiqued for not being a very realistic option. According to Glăveanu (2018, p. 521), an opposition between possible and actual is useful for definitional purposes, but not fruitful for understanding how ‘possible worlds emerge from, respond to, but also get to drive, the constitution of “real” ones’. Instead, following Heidegger, he argues that the opposite of possibility is ‘nothingness or the absence of possibility and, especially, of the possibility of becoming’ (p. 523). A focus on becoming and novelty requires methodologies for ‘engaging with the possible’ that involve ‘both becoming aware of it and actively exploring it’ (Glăveanu, 2018, p. 519).

According to Glăveanu, ‘multiple perspectives, growing out of difference and enhanced by dialogue, are the basis of the possible in all its forms of expression’ (2018, p. 527). The basis for the generation of novel future possibilities is creativity. In the perspectival model of creativity (Glăveanu, 2018), creativity is seen as the result of a dialogue between perspectives. ‘It is by being able to “see” a problem, situation or issue from multiple perspectives that we become freer, more flexible and more open-minded in relation to it’ (Glăveanu, 2018, p. 527). Mere exposure to difference is not by itself a guarantee for creative engagement with the future, but requires a pedagogy of the possible (Glăveanu, 2018), of hope (Freire, 2014) and of desire (Abensour, 1999).

Triggers to fully engage with valued possibility

The initial LF instruction, designed to promote health, already has some features conducive to engaging with the possible which have been further improved over the years and can be improved even further. Five potential triggers for possibility-rich imagined futures to be discussed in this section are: 1) the time machine metaphor, 2) exploiting nodal situations, 3) dialogue with others, 4) fulfilled desire futures and 5) exotic futures.

First, the *time machine metaphor*, similar to the ‘jump’ technique used in the *Imagine Sheppey* restudy (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016, p. 1115) instantaneously brings the future into the present and brings with it the possibility of ‘folded futurity that brings multiple, future generations into the present’ (Mansfield, 2017, p. 355). Writers can at least theoretically consider ‘the range of possibilities considered at different points in time’, but the letter format pushes towards selecting a ‘single possible trajectory and outcome’ (Mische, 2009, p. 699). A step towards achieving a ‘wide range of

alternative outcomes, possibly branching off into multiple directions' (idem), was made in the Referendum study where potential voters were invited to write two letters for the futures resulting from a Yes and No vote. However, not all participants used this option and when they did the letters were often quite similar. The lack of multiplicity may be because simply asking for multiple letters may not be sufficient to engage with multiple perspectives. Or the yes and no vote futures did not constitute viable alternatives but in fact presented a double-bind situation of two undesired futures (Sools et al., 2017).

A second suggestion then is to focus not on multiple outcomes but on multiple trajectories emerging from a *nodal situation* defined as 'a situation that allows for more than one continuation' (Bode & Dietrich, 2013, p. 2). While Bode and Dietrich refer to a nodal situation in the present, in LFs this would be a future node from which trajectories are imagined backwards (so-called backtracking is a common technique in scenario research). We experimented with this idea in the Hacking Habitat project www.facebook.com/toekomstverbeelding in which we organized a focus group with around 30 stakeholders from the penal-care system (police, justice department, parole office, homeless shelters, addiction care, debt management, social work, ex-prisoners and their relatives, artists and researchers) to image how the future system could be different. Preliminary analysis of individual letters shows a multiplicity of trajectories resulting in two new nodal situations: Humanizing the current system and a society without prisons. The next step would be to reflect further with the group on the implications of realizing these two imagined futures and how the two realities relate to each other. This would not only support reflective engagement with multiple perspectives envisioned within one individual, but also with perspectives from others that can expand the range of perspectives.

This leads to the third trigger for difference, e.g. LFs engagement with the *other* is built in the letter format that asks to specify the recipient of the letter. While this could be any audience in the present, often participants choose their present self as a recipient. Consequently, they engage in a dialogue between their future and present self, with the future self speaking from a position of supposed advanced and expanded knowing. A technique to further extent reimagining the other is to write a letter from the perspective of another person, for example a parent taking the future perspective of their child (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). In the voting booth example letter the sender is the future self and the recipient is the present self. It lacks a greeting at the end thus leaving a blurred sense of audience. Moreover, the letter is "peopled" with others whose actions and reactions are seen as intertwined with our own' (Mische, 2009, p. 701),² e.g. '*You are not thinking of those who have much more to lose*'. The moral dilemma that the letter is thinking through comes from inconsolable differences between not wanting to be a coward and bearing in mind the social consequences of his vote. Despite the temporal jumps, the letter reads as a continuation of a pressing present concern of which the emotional content becomes very tangible for the reader. This leaves the impression of a subjectively proximate and familiar future, yet desired by the writer to be far away. This is just a brief illustration of a more general point that analysis of the subjective and cultural distance as well as the narrated (dis)continuation between future and present self and world can provide insight in the novelty of the imagined future (Sools et al., 2017).

Fourth, the ambivalent example letter, full of undesired consequences, was written in response to the instruction to imagine a *desired future as if realized* after the Referendum vote. This technique of starting with the fulfillment of a desired future and backtracking from there is inspired by Levitas' work on *Utopia as Method* (2013, pp. 4–5): 'the claim here is that utopia works towards an understanding of what is necessary for human fulfilment and towards a broadening, deepening, and raising of aspirations in terms different from those dominating the mundane present'. Accordingly, I modified the original health-promoting instruction from envisioning a positive future to one imagining a (deeply) desired future situation. Although this minor modification in itself is not enough to ensure tapping fully into utopian desire, it tends to work to at least avoid a one-sided, simplistic notion of positive futures that neglect negative experiences, obstacles and difficult circumstances. A desired self could, for example, be the one who dies with dignity or

manages to leave a meaningful life despite chronic illness. More importantly though, a focus on fulfilled desired futures serves the purpose of engaging with the possible in ways that a neutral instruction would not. While neutral instructions are relevant to revealing ‘taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways they might navigate their futures’ (Carabelli & Lyon, 2012, p. 1113), such neutrality may not be sufficient, especially in contexts governed by ‘an ethics of probability’ (Appadurai, 2013). In circumstances where possibilities are depleted, it may be even harmful to reinforce conventional (i.e. possibility-deprived) ways of narrating the future that endorse the status quo. In the anxiety-fraught sociopolitical context of the Greek Referendum, the writer uses the letter to rehearse the complex interplay between desired and undesired consequences in an imaginary ‘space in which the reader may, temporarily, experience and alternative configuration of needs, wants and satisfactions’ (Levitas, 2013, p. 4). The result is not opening to possibilities per se, but to reflectively engage with the consequences of (not realizing) possibilities that are deeply valued. A follow-up study could have revealed how the rehearsal affected his actual vote.

Finally, what may also be considered is the use of *exotic* future images that work to ‘estrangle’ (Abensour, in: Levitas, 2013) or alienate (Motlagh, 2010) from familiar experience. An example is a study we conducted about how people in various life stages and income levels imagine their own flourishing lives in a future where the universal basic income had become a reality. This kind of experimental task provides knowledge about people’s ideas about the relationship between money and self-actualization as well as their views on human nature (e.g. lazy). It seeks to enable a creative experience that breaks from known, past experiences (Sools et al., 2017). This way, LF writing could become a more distinctly critical life writing practice by fostering self-consciousness in the reader, providing ‘a means of emancipating an overdetermined “subject”’ (Kadar, 1991, p. 12) and ‘destabilize discourse around the constitution of the social and the subject’ (Tamboukou, 2011).

All in all, these five triggers show some of the potential and limitations of using LF research to engage meaningfully with the future as space of the possible. Active guidance toward a difference in its many forms is especially important to not only reveal but expand possibility-thinking beyond possibility-depleting realities. The endeavor of actively engaging spaces of the possible foregrounds narrative imagination and the (co-)constructive nature of narrating the future.

Conclusions and discussion

In this article, a narrative approach to researching the imagination of personal futures has been developed consisting of an elicitation method (LFs) and an analytical framework (organized in three themes) based on Mische’s (2009) dimensional approach to projectivity. The first theme, *balancing clarity and reach*, brought to the fore that temporally close and distant time horizons can both be personally meaningful but in different ways. Plans to reach close futures tend to be imagined in more detail, while distant futures may provide purpose and hope. Suggestions were made regarding techniques of how to elicit personally meaningful accounts of futures in a way that ensures openness to participant perspectives. The second theme *the experience and meaning of future time* illustrated how the concepts of chronotope, contingency, connectivity, volition and genre can be used as heuristic devices to analyze temporal complexity in accounts of the future. These concepts highlight futures thinking as cultural capacity. Under the third theme, engaging futures as spaces of the possible, five triggers were proposed to generate novel and valued possibilities that can counter reproduction of the status quo. Altogether, the proposed narrative approach balances an assumed sense of human agency and freedom with the recognition that past, present and future narratives are culturally, socially, and historically shaped (Murray & Sools, 2014). Navigating between agency and structure is necessary for understanding (future) ‘imagination as an intentional, creative and sociocultural process’ (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018).

Reflecting on LFs as a method to elicit narrative accounts of and from the future, a strength is its capacity to elicit all dimensions of projectivity proposed by Mische (2009) in one relatively simple method. Another strength is that written narratives allow participants ‘to develop their narratives at

their own pace and in their own preferred direction’ perhaps more than interviews do (Crow & Andrews, 2019). A limitation is that not all dimensions may be equally well addressed. For example, the extent to which genre is visible in LFs varies greatly between individuals. Genre is often largely implicit, hence limiting the potential for sociocultural analysis of how people make sense of the future. Also, the method is probably least suited to gain insight in the dimension of connectivity (link between past, present and future) as references to past and present may be absent in the letters. More generally, when the research aim is to gain deeper insight into people’s sense-making behind the imagined future, additional interactive data collection (interviews or focus groups) may be helpful (Crow & Andrews, 2019). Another limitation is that the method, at least in its written form, depends on the participant’s writing skills. Therefore, it may be useful to consider art-based approaches to externalizing personal imagined futures (e.g. drawings, paintings, film, drama, dance). Finally, a limitation of using LFs is that a focus on imagined futures as products risks ‘fixing’ and consolidating imagined futures that are envisioned in one particular moment in time. However, I would argue that the proposed methodology lays the basis for a longitudinal study of the genesis, development and effects of imagining the future in contextualized and nuanced ways.

I envision three future directions for developmental research on the imagination of personal futures. The first is descriptive research on stability and change in narratives of and from the future, and on what affects change in terms of personal characteristics, contextual affordances and in relation to enduring and fleeting concerns. The second direction – in agreement with the calls for a pedagogy of possibility, desire and hope – is action research on how to enhance possibility-thinking. The third direction is to reflect on the normative underpinnings of such a pedagogy. Should the aim, for example, be to enhance possibility thinking, to become aware of one’s personally and culturally preferred way of imagining the future, or to become empowered to create more hopeful, humane and sustainable futures?

A shared ethical concern in descriptive, transformative and normative research is how to deal with people’s capacity (or lack thereof) to imagine futures, especially when faced with deprived circumstances and uncertainty about the future. This may require ‘management of disappointment and loss’ (Crow & Andrews, 2019, p. 567). While some researchers see ethically responsible research as research that respects or even enhances agency, others emphasize the importance of hope. Some propose so stretch the concept of agency so that it incorporates hope (Bryant & Ellard, 2015) or to stretch hope so that it encompasses agency (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). I would argue, however, that it is important to analytically separate hope from agency to enable the investigation of possible linkages between agency and hope: A sense of agency over the future may result in hopeful futures and vice versa hope may be a precondition for creating agentic futures (Nunn, 1996). Moreover, for a pedagogy of possibility that fosters hope rather than hopelessness, it could be important to consider relational agency in which the agent is part of a larger community, with an extended sense of self, and an extended view of time (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). Finally, a pedagogy of possibility should not foster unhealthy or uncritical adaptation. Teaching people to become more creative and imaginative risks commodifying human potentiality for capitalist ventures. Therefore, we need a critical pedagogy about what it means to move and being moved toward a flourishing and sustainable world in which humanity and the planet are intrinsically valued.

Notes

1. Genre is one of the nine dimensions of projectivity (Mische, 2009) that seems to have a different status than the other ones and can perhaps best be viewed as a meta-dimension of how the other dimensions are culturally and socially made sense of.
2. Sociality (e.g. how future imaginations are peopled with others) is one of the nine dimensions of projectivity proposed by Mische (2009) that seems more content-related while the other ones are about the processes or capacity to imagine the future.

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