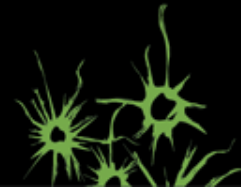
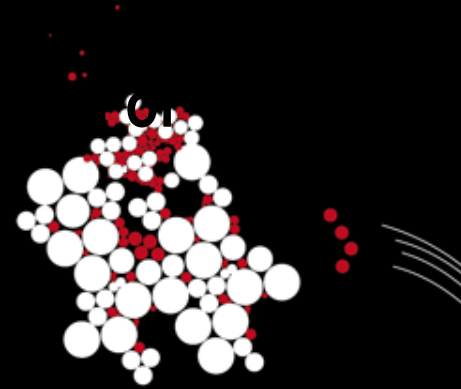


**Back from the future:
A narrative approach to study
imagining personal futures**

Anneke Sools

22 January 2020

Winterschool Stories to Live By:
Narrative and Identity



Turn to prospective methodologies in the social sciences

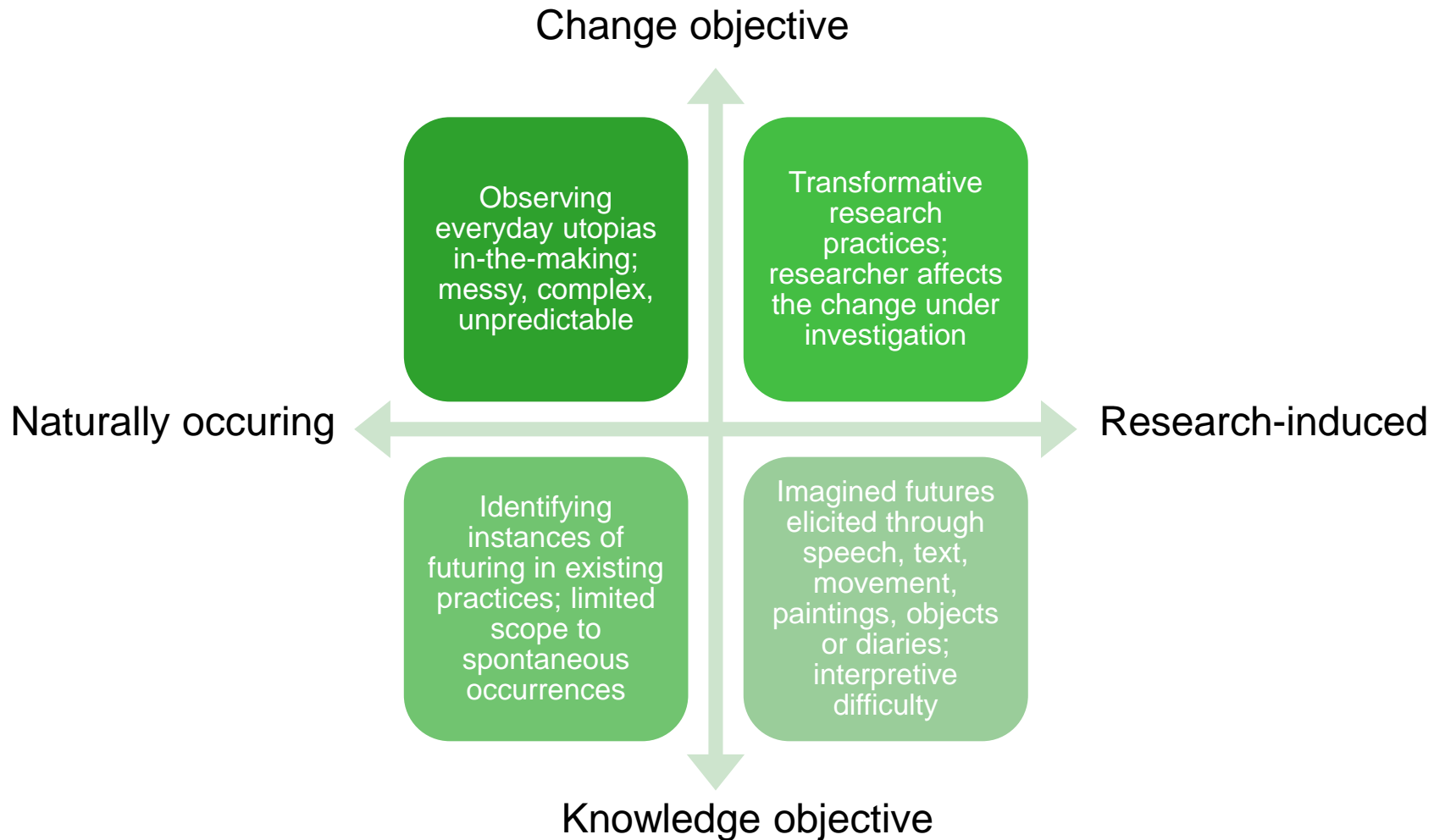
Calls for a:

- sociology of the future: “notion of *projects*, or *projectivity*, as a tool for social analysis” to gain deeper understanding of “the future images that inform social practices” (Mische, 2009)
- anthropology of the future “that can assist in the victory of a politics of possibility over a politics of probability” (Appadurai, 2013)
- psychology of the future to bring coherence to the vast but hitherto fragmented psychological research on prospection (Seligman et al., 2016; Michaelian et al., 2016; Oettingen et al., 2018)
- future-forming social science: not to “illuminate *what is*, but to create *what is to become*” (Gergen, 2015: 294, italics in original).

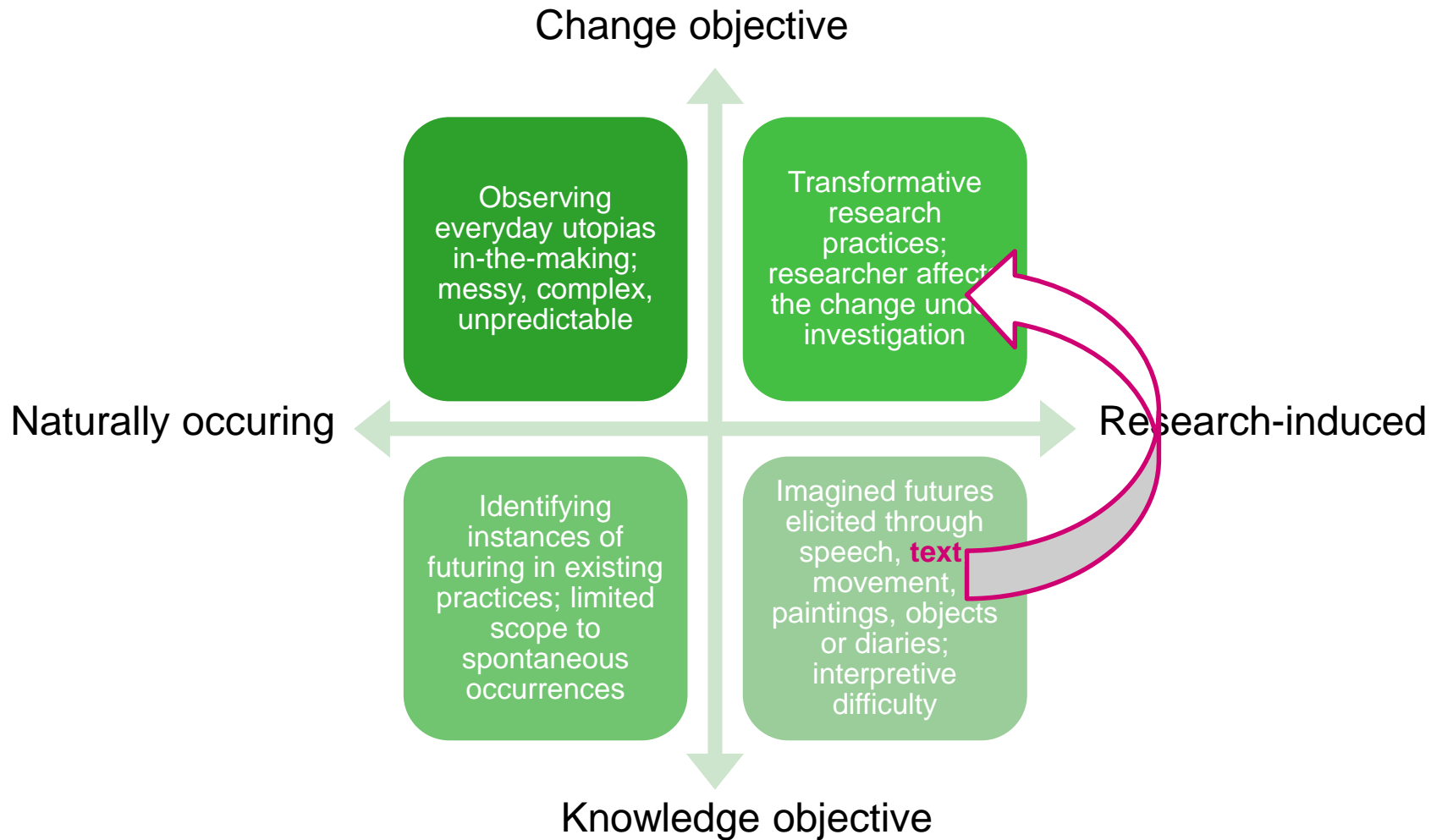
How to study the future?

- Not prediction but understanding how imagining possible futures guide and motivate present thought and action
- “impossibility to measure the future” (Seligman et al., 2016)
- problem of investigating the not-yet, i.e. how to study “an uncertain and shifting future horizon” (Mische, 2009)
- the idea is “not to embark on a disjunctive, imaginary world– a world of inquiry beyond the reach of contemporary researchers” (Gergen, 2015)
- “if imagination is everywhere and often invisible, then how are we to study it? [...] 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” (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018, p12)

Externalized imagined futures in cultural artefacts



Externalized imagined futures in cultural artefacts

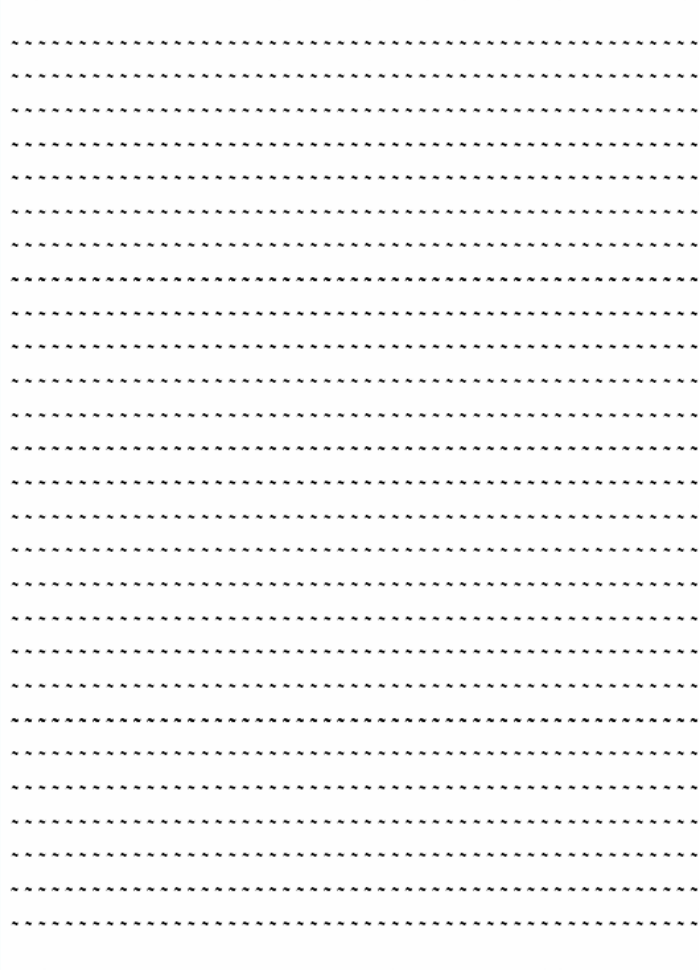


ID
Number

The Future Now Experience

My letter from the future

.....



- Time machine
- Time and place in future of own choosing
- To audience in present
- Desired situation
- Path from present to future
- Message to present

Case study

- Over 100 Letters from the Future collected online in the days before the Greek Referendum of 2015 (Sools et al., 2018)
 - Task: imagine what your desired personal life would look like after a YES vote and/or a NO vote (2 letters possible)
 - Idea: provide potential voters with a decision tool that would help them envision what the personal consequences of their quite abstract vote could be; provide a means for seeing possibilities in an anxiety-ridden time
- Example letter: to show how *cognitive dimensions of projectivity* can be elicited and analyzed in a narrative way

The use of narrative

Themes> Disciplinary perspectives	1. Balancing clarity and reach	2. The experience and meaning of time	3. Engaging the space of the possible
Psychology	Narrative as quality of a tekst		
Sociology		Narrative as socio-cultural meaning-making	
Futures Studies			Narrative as change vehicle

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(1) Balancing the projectivity dimensions clarity and reach (time-horizon)

- Episodic quality of narrative accounts of the future: what is it and does it matter?
- Techniques for eliciting personally meaningful accounts

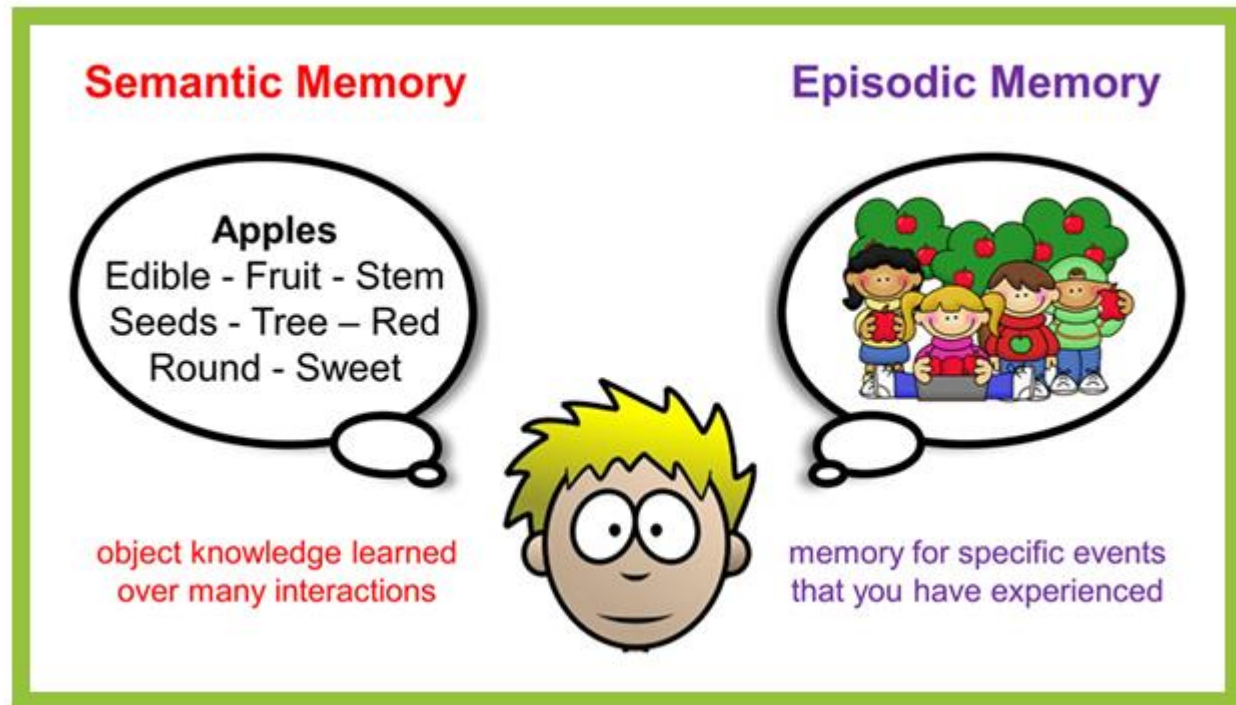
Episodic quality

The “clarity and detail with which the future is imagined” (Mische, 2009) finds its equivalent in psychological research on the vividness of future images, which can be operationalized as episodic quality, defined as:

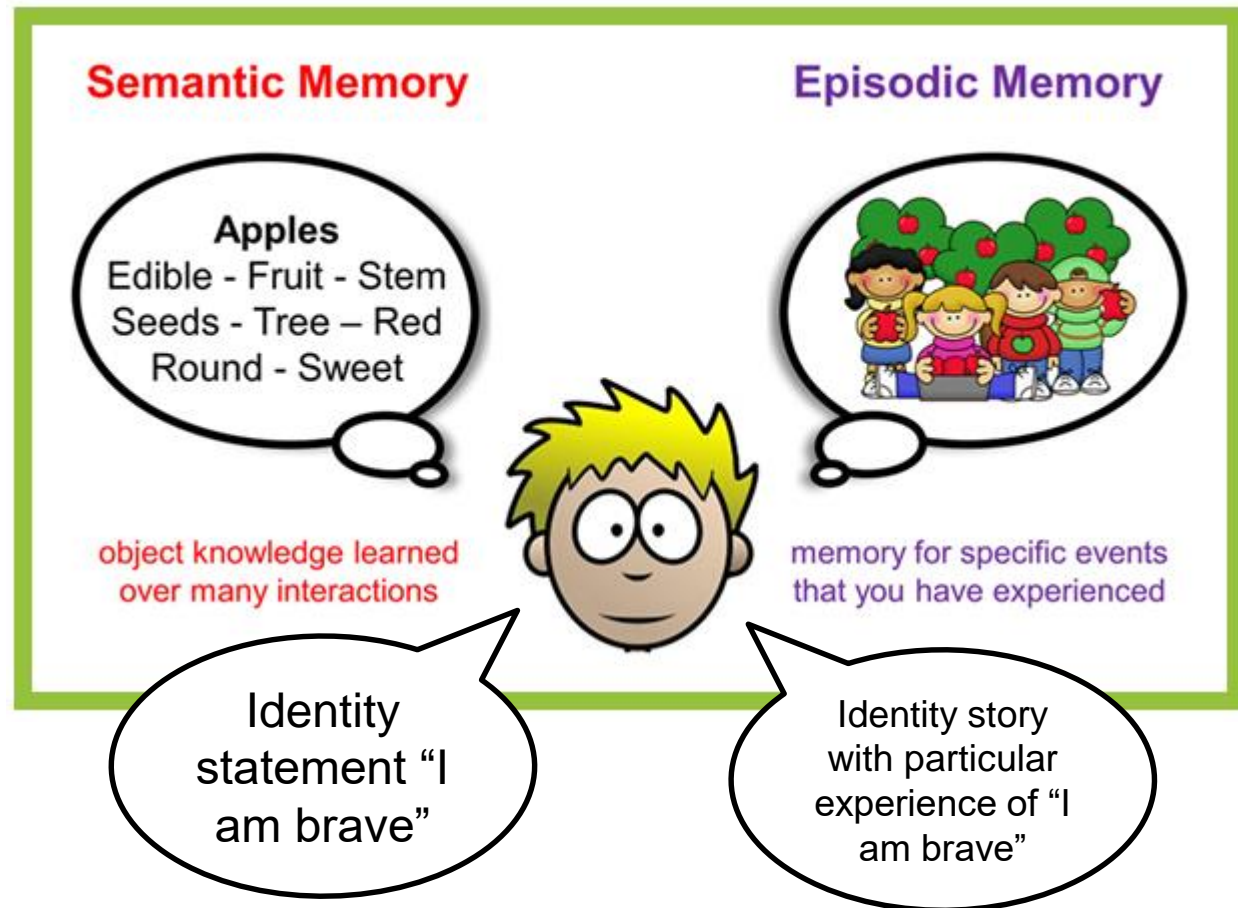
“specifics of happenings, sensory and perceptual information about the event that is recounted, but also details about inner thoughts and emotions that accompany the memory/future thought”

(Levine et al., 2002)

Autobiographical memory



Autobiographical memory and identity



Can future thought have (high) episodic quality?

- Future-oriented accounts are “**less vivid** in terms of sensory and contextual detail” (Szpunar, 2010, 148), but involve “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 et al., 2013: 425).
- Episodic quality of (past and) future thought dependent on familiarity and **distance to the present** (Szpunar, 2010); “normative cultural life script events increased with increasing temporal distance” (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010: 265).
- Short-term futures are best understood in terms of **plans**, whereas long-term futures are linked to **hope, faith, and purpose** (Nilsen, 1999; Malin et al., 2015; Cook, 2016).
- Exceptions: richly imagined long-term scenarios (e.g. utopian/dystopian novels), and individual differences in the degree to which distal goals can be imagined vividly (Karniol & Ross, 1996).

Should future thought have episodic quality?

- Vividness of (alternative) future images has been linked to positive effects such as reduced risk behavior among young delinquents (Van Gelder et al., 2013) and optimism (Meevissen et al., 2011).
- While the motivational force of (short-term) plans comes from the way they can be concretely imagined, hope provides a more global (and often longer-term) motivating horizon that is less dependent on vivid imagination.
- 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” (Mische, 2009)

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

Four elicitation techniques for episodic future thought

- Retrospective orientation: back from the future
- Pushing for narrative: particulars, happenings and experiences
- Concern-based elicitation versus open or predefined topic
- Third-person versus first-person accounts

BREAK



The use of narrative

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(2) The experience and meaning of time

- Focuses on the projectivity dimensions contingency, connectivity and volition
- Can be linked to the concepts of chronotope and genre
- This theme foregrounds socio-cultural meaning making involved in imagining the future, thereby highlighting futures thinking as cultural capacity

Chronotope

The concept of *chronotope* goes beyond mere “geographical location” to include “the holistic historical, socio-cultural, and spatial situation of the people” (Bakhtin, 2008; Jarva, 2014)

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Example letter:

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 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.*

Contingency

- *Contingency* is “the degree to which future trajectories are imagined as fixed and predetermined versus flexible, uncertain, and dependent on local circumstances” (Mische, 2009: 700)
- Two contingency views (open/closed) are not mutually exclusive, they may be flexibly adopted depending on context (Miller, 2015).
- The ability to use flexible or predictability-focused future orientation is gender and class specific (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002).
- Contingency views can be linguistically detected in meta-language and content of imagined futures

Connectivity

- *Connectivity* is understood as the “imagined logic of connection between ...actions and events”. This includes “models of causality, agency, and influence” (Mische, 2009: 701) that may be more or less explicit in narrative accounts of and from the future
- Connectivity is intimately linked to narrative emplotment (Ricoeur, 1984)
- 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: 16).

Volition

- *Volition* is 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” (Mische 2009: 701).
- Volition as **influence** is more commonly conceptualized as freedom, agency or mastery of the future
- Volition as **motion** is much less frequently employed spontaneously, indicating that volition as motion is not part of the cultural stock of framing time (in contemporary Western-european contexts).

Genres at play in connectivity, contingency and volition

1. Mythical narrative structures of comedy, tragedy, romance and satire that apply to both life and fiction (Murray, 1985).
2. Medium-specific genres (Bateman, 2016), e.g. science-fiction knowledge will help readers understand time jumps.
3. Discursive modes expressing “culturally embedded (and often socially contested) models of how social change is envisioned to occur” (Mische, 2009: 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 use of narrative

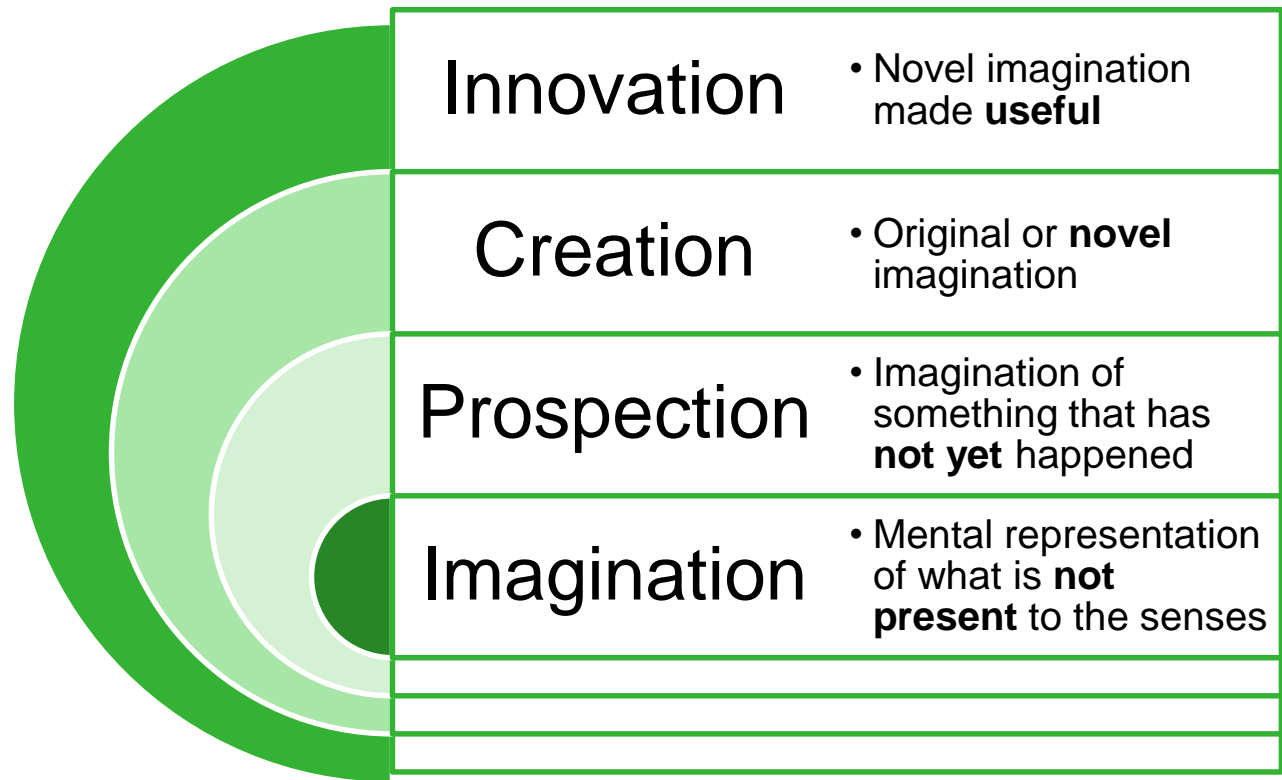
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(3) Engaging spaces of the possible

- Encompasses the projectivity dimensions breadth and expandability
- Importance of novelty and valued options
- 5 triggers to increase possibility thinking
- This theme foregrounds narrative imagination in (co-)constructing narratives of and from the future

Imagination spectrum (cognitive psychology)

Kaufman & Seligman



The imaginative and creative functions of future-oriented narrative sense-making

Both the paradigmatic and narrative mode of knowing can foster possibility-thinking only in different ways:

- The paradigmatic mode of knowing sets out to logically generate possible worlds and test these possibilities in observations based on hypotheses (Bruner, 1986, 13).
- The narrative mode of knowing “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, 113).
- Not all narrative sense-making functions equally in *generating* possibilities.

Novelty and difference

The basis for the generation of novel future possibilities is creativity. In the perspectival model of creativity (Glaveanu, 2015), 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” (Glaveanu, 2018: 527).

Mere exposure to difference is not by itself a guarantee for creative engagement with the future, but requires a pedagogy of the possible (Glaveanu, 2018), of hope (Freire, 2014) and of desire (Abensour, 1999).

A note on possibility

- The possible is not opposed to the actual (such an opposition is not fruitful for understanding how “possible worlds emerge from, respond to, but also get to drive, the constitution of ‘real’ ones”)
- The opposite of possibility may be thought of as “nothingness or the absence of possibility and, especially, of the possibility of becoming” (Glaveanu (2018: 521-523)).

Projectivity dimensions in possibility thinking

- *Openness to alternatives*
- *Breath* (e.g. multiplicity) is the “range of possibilities” envisioned
- *Expandability* concerns the “degree to which these possibilities are seen as expanding or contracting”
- *Novelty* of the imagined futures
- *Value* of the imagined futures

5 triggers to fully engage with (valued) future possibility

- 1) The time machine metaphor
- 2) Exploiting nodal situations
- 3) Dialogue with others
- 4) Fulfilled desire futures
- 5) Exotic futures

Conclusions

- Temporally close and distant time horizons can both be personally meaningful but in different ways (plans, purpose, hope). Techniques were proposed to elicit personally meaningful accounts of futures in a way that ensures openness to participant perspectives.
- 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.
- Narrative sense-making is suitable for engaging with the future as space(s) of the possible but not all narrative is equally full of possibility. 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).

Discussion

Strengths

- 1) comprehensive yet simple method for eliciting dimensions of projectivity
- 2) 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).
- 3) participants generally enjoy writing LFs

Limitations

- 1) not all dimensions (e.g. connectivity) are equally well addressed
- 2) brevity hinders gaining deeper insight in people’s sense-making underlying the imagined futures
- 3) written form depends on participant’s writing skills
- 4) a focus on product instead of process risks ‘fixing’ and consolidating imagined futures

Future directions

- 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
- (Action) research on how to enhance possibility-thinking (pedagogy of hope)
- Reflection on the normative underpinnings of such a pedagogy (e.g. 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?)

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