

Futures Made Mapped and Minded
An Exploration of the Futurist's Toolkit for Action, Knowledge & Ethics
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PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP

Workshop Outline

1. Conceptual introduction by Barbara Adam
2. Experiencing one or more of the presented assumptions
3. Small group discussion of implications of 1) & 2) for own work context
4. Sharing with larger group one significant outcome of group work

Conceptual Introduction

Creating Futures = Daily Occurrence

To create futures and to anticipate what might happen as the result of our own and others' actions is what we do on a daily basis without needing to think about it. Along the way we wander through different futures in our mind, considering what might be the best option, the most lucrative choice and what might be the right thing to do in the circumstances. To come to a decision we tie these considerations to memories and experiences and relate these to the context of action.

At the wider social level too futures are created continuously, across the world, every second of the day. They are produced by the full range of social institutions: politics, law and the economy, science, medicine and technology, education and religion. Futures, we can therefore say, are produced at all levels of social relations: the individual, the family, social groups, companies and nations. Moreover, these created futures extend temporally from the very short to the extremely long-term and spatially from the local to the regional, national, international and global.

This means that on a daily basis futures are concerned with action, knowledge and ethics. However, we need to appreciate that these three elements of social action do not play an equal role in every future-oriented situation. Mostly action is in the foreground and that includes considerations about actions. In contexts of planning and innovation knowledge will move into the dominant role, that is, into the foreground of concern. Ethics, finally, tends to be a secondary concern to both action and knowledge unless, that is, people very close to us are implicated or decisions have to be made about ethical implications of an innovation. In such contexts, ethics plays a major role in politics and medical science, for example. In approaches to the future the relation between action, knowledge and ethics is therefore not fixed and changes according to context. Moreover, historically there have been major shifts in that triple base to approaches to the future.

I want to briefly outline these as they give us a clue about the many paradoxes that dominate contemporary future making, efforts to know futures and concerns to do right by the future.

Future-Oriented Action, Knowledge and Ethics in a Historical Perspective

In the distant past (and in contemporary traditional cultures) the future did not belong to people but it belonged to their ancestors, their gods or their one god (or in rare cases to their sovereign). The issue of who owns the future is an important one because it has knock-on effects at every level of social being, that is, action, knowledge and ethics.

If the future is owned by ancestors or gods then it is they who have set the future in motion, have set out what is to happen, and pre-determined the fate of people. Action in this context has to fit in with the plans and wishes of the owners. Knowledge is about anticipation of pre-destination – experts are therefore prophets and oracles, sages and shamans, who can bridge the domains of extraterrestrial ownership and terrestrial social existence. Ethics, finally, is about treading carefully, not upsetting the owners, and doing right by their intentions.

Contemporary relations to the future in industrial societies are clearly no longer of this kind and even where people are deeply religious and therefore have maintained the belief that God is the owner of the future, they have to marry that belief with contrasting assumptions that underpin contemporary approaches to the future.

It is these underpinning assumptions that I want to outline for you in this conceptual introduction as they help us the better to understand some of the contradictions and problems that plague our future making and our attempts to know and what to do for the best.

Contemporary Implicit Assumptions

Assumption 1 - Ownership

Today people are the owners of the future. This means that at the level of action the future is ours to use. It is ours to make and shape. It is ours to colonise and trade. It is ours to consume and discount.

Assumption 2 - Expertise

Knowledge experts of this future are not prophets with special access to a world pre-destined by ancestors or gods. Instead they are specialists with expertise in the behaviour of people – psychologists, sociologists, economists, business consultants, insurance brokers etc. Their task is to anticipate potential human action and its consequences and facilitate planning and strategic management by identifying probable, possible and preferable options.

Experts on the modern future use a variety of tools that allow for deliberate extension into the future. Each of the tools is a variation on the theme of knowledgeable extension into the future. They include among others foresight, trend analysis, horizon scanning, scenario planning, forecasting and back-casting, as well as the Delphi method.

Assumption 3 – Future as Fact vs Fiction

When the future is not pre-determined by extraterrestrials but is instead subject to human will and desire it is no longer pre-existent. That is to say, when the future is planned, projected and produced by people, it becomes an *open* and *non-existing* realm of potential and choice.

Contemporary Futurists therefore work with the Latin distinction between *facta* and *futura* (Jouvenel 1967: 3). *Facta* refer to past events, done, achieved, completed and thus empirically accessible as *facts*. *Futura* encompass that which has not yet come about, something non-factual which *will* become a *factum* only after it has occurred. While the one has already taken (unalterable) form, the other is still open to influence and thus ‘capable of ending or being completed in various ways’. A different way of expressing the distinction is to say that ‘there are no past possibilities and there are no future facts’ (Brumbaugh 1966: 649 in Bell and Mau 1971: 9). On this understanding of the future, therefore, the *past* is closed to influence, thus open to factual knowledge, while the *future* is open to choice and efforts to colonize and control, and thus closed to factual inquiry.

This means that when the temporal realm is divided into *facta* and *futura* then past efforts to tell and know ‘the’ future have to be considered *futile* since, on the basis of that distinction, ‘the’ future does not pre-exist but is instead open, yet to be formed, shaped and designed. Not ‘the future’ is *real* therefore but only *present possibilities* are. The future as the domain of the *not-yet* becomes real only after it is activated into present existence by our actions.

Assumption 4 – Source of Knowledge

Knowledge of the past can provide evidence about the future, which means that we can extrapolate future occurrences from the known past. This assumption applies to contexts where a) extensive evidence of the past allows for trend analysis and projection into the future, b) where the social context is a largely stable one and c) where continuity can be expected with reasonable certainty.

It does *not* work, however, in contexts of high innovation and accelerated change, that is, where the new dominates. The faster the pace of social life in general and innovations in particular, the greater is the scale of the accompanying social change. Increase in pace and scale of change means that the past becomes an ever less reliable guide to the future. Bertrand de Jouvenel (1967: 275) therefore suggested that ‘our knowledge of the future is inversely proportional to the rate of progress.’ That is to say, *increased* progress is tied to *decreasing* knowledge about the future. It means, therefore, that the greater a society’s capacity to produce innovative change is, the less that society can rely on scientific knowledge of *past facts* to provide knowledge about the consequences of the change processes set in motion. Or, to put it differently, evidence-based science is the wrong socio-political tool in such contexts.

Assumption 5 – Future as Empty Territory or Vessel

The future is an empty territory or vessel to be filled with our visions, plans and decisions. On closer inspection we realize, however, that the future is anything but an empty territory, that it is instead *always already occupied*. It is occupied by the future visions, plans and decisions of predecessors that have already materialised or are in the process of materialisation. Moreover, actions, transactions, interactions and

products of the past populate our and our successors' presents and futures, just as our actions, transactions, interactions and products populate our successors' presents and futures. With accelerated change and ever-increasing innovation the supposedly empty future becomes an exceedingly crowded place.

It means, first, that we are invariably dealing with *process* futures that are *already in progress*, that is, with futures already on the way. Unlike *futura* in the *facta-futura* distinction, the futures in the making have *reality status* even if they have not yet materialized into phenomena and symptoms: think, for example, of pension futures, financial futures, labour market futures, health and illness futures, or radio-active waste futures. None of these are empty and open futures. Rather, they are futures in progress, real and material, even if their networked time-space distantiated outcomes elude our grasp.

It means, secondly, that since 'our' future is the present of successors, it is they who have to deal with the consequences of our colonisation and appropriation of their rightful domain. This makes us (and our political representatives) trespassers in that realm, and our time-transcending products illegal migrants, occupants and agents in our successors' domain.

It means, thirdly, that these futures in the making are not amenable to the *facta-futura* distinction since *facta* and *futura* shade into each other. This interpenetration is increasing in contexts of accelerated change and innovation where our actions cast ever longer shadows.

Assumption 6 – Foresight?

The future is amenable to foresight. However, the term foresight suggests that the future is amenable to the sense of vision, that we can *see* what lies ahead, and that to better know the future is a question of better and more accurate vision.

Yet, this does not square with the assumption of an open and empty future, with the assumption that the future is 'not yet'. If we assume that there is something to be *seen*, then it has to be pre-existing. This clearly is diametrically apposed to the idea that the future is *open* and subject to human shaping. Since the future is not a sense datum, it cannot be accessible to sight, but can only be grasped through thought and action. Fore-sensing and forethought, therefore, may be more appropriate terms to capture the process.

Alternatively we could take yet a different approach: we could reverse the relation and think of the past in front of us and the future behind us, that is, out of our field of vision. The known past with its produced relics and facts could then be the field of vision in front of us while the unknown/unknowable past would exist behind our back, outside our field of vision. As such it would be amenable not to seeing what is already there but to cautious intuition/sensing-creating – like walking backwards into a world that is both continuous and unknown/unknowable.

Experiential Exercise

Division into Small Groups (max. 10 people per group)

This first part of this exercise is done *without* group members talking to each other

- 5 minutes to represent the future on paper without talking to each other
- After 4 minutes participants are asked to hand their piece of paper to the person to the right of them. This person is then asked to continue the predecessor's representation.
- After 3 minutes the process is repeated
- After a further two 2 minutes participants are asked to return the representation to the original person who is then asked to complete the work for another 2 minutes.

Small Group Discussion

Discussion with group members about

- what has been going on
- relate it to one or more of the assumptions
- relevance to own context of assumptions and explore implications of
- a making implicit assumptions explicit
- draw conclusions that can be shared with large group – choose one to discuss in detail

Feedback to Large Group followed by Discussion

- Pick most significant, relevant, poignant element(s) of discussion to share with large group
- Consider implications of exercise

Biographical Details

Barbara Adam is Professor of Sociology at Cardiff University. She is founding editor of the journal *Time & Society* and has published extensively on the social relations of time. Her most recent monograph is *Time*, published in 2004 as part of the Polity Press 'Key Concepts' Series. She currently holds a three-year research grant under the UK's Economic and Social Research Council's Professorial Fellowship Scheme in which she investigates the social relationship to the future. E-mail:

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www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/futures