

Cultural-Historical Anticipation Perspectives

Peter Jones, OCAD University, Strategic Foresight & Innovation

Introduction

Foresight practices that have evolved from Western models of futurism and future studies have promoted methodologies for creation of desirable future prospectives, often described as *preferred futures*. Yet if we apply the epistemic and social critiques that animate discourse in other fields, we might ask whether futures practices address the questions of the sociocultural power of people to define a future in which they have a stake. Arguably, without holding a stake for performing action toward a preferred future scenario, foresight exercises risk becoming resources for passively advising future prospects, without the intentional interest and agendas of committed individuals situated within a motivated cultural-historical context.

When we convene foresight studies with policy, corporate, or issue-based stakeholders, a net future power unfolds in asking the very question “whose preferred future.” The emerging critique argued by the decolonization movement holds the “power to decide” as a central ethical question, of current issue in design studies and social change discourses. A further analysis reveals the ontological approach of ensuring an appropriate method and orientation to futures for those whose future is, as it were, at choice. An ontological perspective may not resolve power imbalances or social inequities between futures stakeholders, but rather it embraces the valid imperative for self-determined cultures (or communities) to define preferred futures through culturally appropriate foresight.

Conventional foresight studies, as with contracted research, typically follow the epistemology and represent or embed the values of the sponsor stakeholders. This is entirely appropriate, as foresight-led advising provides a service to a requesting organization that serves their strategy and learning needs. A service relationship is inevitable in practice, as the user of foresight will require concepts that match their capacity to apply the models. The practical demand to channel futures products to match a client epistemic framework, even if they are unaware of their biases, is a well-known phenomenon in design and innovation research. In mixed-methods research informing applied problems, findings must be presented and defended in terms commensurate with an organization’s collective orientation to knowledge and the validity of claims. If not, disputed observations are easily dismissed because of methodological or validity concerns, which obviates any argument regarding content and findings.

Western-oriented foresight methods will appear as epistemologically valid and meaningful to Western (and by extension, global) corporate and public sector organizations. The increased demand for futures studies during the period of intensified globalization (1998 – 2018) may lend an undeserved universalism to foresight methods that have been used extensively to argue for globalized futures. By default, non-proprietary futures studies of sectors or social problems titled “the future of” embed the claims of an increasingly globalized and technologically-driven world. Examples contrary to these embedded values systems are difficult to locate in open sources. For these reasons, but among others, our foresight methods provide high flexibility for adaptation, but might be insensitive to significant cultural variations unless these are explicitly demarcated.

Anticipation for Cultures, with Histories

We can define several normative aims relevant to matching foresight methods and advising to culture:

- a) Futuring methods are historically developed in and from Western traditions and must be critiqued to ensure their cultural relevance to communities of concern.
- b) The literature often develops methods without considering the fit to culture. Researchers and practitioners have little guidance to select or reinvent appropriate methods in culturally complex settings.
- c) How do we respect democratization (everybody deserves to envision their future)? Futuring methods ought to be readily available and culturally relevant to non-traditional and marginalized communities.
- d) Stakeholders ought to be able to update trends and assumptions delivered in foresight. Opaque or poorly-matched methods can inhibit the owners of received work from continuous learning.

Even as futuring methods have evolved (we might observe) from expert/advisory to stakeholder/participatory, foresight studies will involve a mix of stakeholders selected for their association with a project, not typically sampled from known cultural contexts to reflect representative social variety. While we might not require so much a general theory of the stakeholder for futures context, we might at least acknowledge the questions of stakeholder selection for representative perspectives and their temporal preferences. Otherwise, we have no way of discriminating whether futures stakeholders reflect temporal cognitive biases driven by individualism, societal concerns, or cultural affiliation. An early theory is articulated in hopes of adapting methods ethically sensitive to cultural views of temporality, knowledge, and desirable futures.

We can propose a social system model that specifies several nested (inclusive) levels of stakeholder function in futures thinking, to which we could conceivably orient and fit method selection. Levels of system associated with *epistemology* might include activity, organization, profession, society, and culture. Levels of social system defined by *ontology* include the individual (psychic system), their commitments to belonging, religion or belief system, and culture (as civilization). A relevant perspective (here, meaning an intersection of theory and epistemology) can be developed from activity theory (Engeström, 2009), a distributed cognition theory of action, based on constructivism and cultural-historical relationships to work and culture. While activity theory has been applied to human-computer interaction and collaborative work (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006), the framework was developed from Vygotsky's (1980) learning theory applied in cultural histories, known as Cultural-Historical Activity Theory.

Recent developments of activity theory have found productive settings in education, sociotechnical systems, and cultural studies (Sannino, et al., 2009). However, its application to anticipation has been relatively non-existent. This might be due to some extent that its framing of the concept of *activity* is that of an ongoing, temporally persistent, culturally situated act of mediated action. This model has relevance in sociotechnical studies as, for example, when a significant technology is integrated into a work practice, such as MRI imaging in cancer diagnosis, it become a mediating instrument within a continuing medical activity, not necessarily a "new activity." In every case that the MRI is used in imaging, it creates new actions, and for some roles, new activities, but for the oncologist, a new mediated action within an activity system. Such a view stands counter to the common narratives in technology-driven futurism and the theories of disruptive innovation. Instead there are significant implications of the extension of cultural histories that challenge the ways in which social futures are both imagined by stakeholder and unfold in reality in actual human cultures.

This early stage study argues for what we might call Cultural-Historical Anticipation Perspectives, extending the framework of activity theory to the multiple temporality perspectives implicit in the unit stages of action (activity, action, and operation) and addressing the anticipatory demand of the aim of an activity, the “object” or result of motivated actions. Activity is always culturally situated, which is not only grounded in historical formative contexts, but to expected future outcomes of activity to a culture. The unit of analysis of activity extends to culture (through learning and participation). But it also extends (within the same scale) the function of what Daly-Buajitti (2015) refers to as “future objects” as the desired objects of a culture. This analysis is not as simple as the process suggests, however, in that the extension to culture requires the extension of histories influencing the culture. In this expansion of histories to futures, we can locate activity as an evolving, yet culturally consistent and persistent human endeavor. The possibility of such a “CHAP” perspective is to offer a theoretically grounded methodology for identifying core cultural behaviors as activity systems that anticipate social futures in one, or many cultural systems touched by futures studies.

This perspective on activity through cultural histories yields trajectories of the “short now,” or futures encapsulated in current culturally significant events. By this, we might locate activities of cultural self-organization through ethnographic observation that might well extend, conserve or even “regress” its futures consistently with cultural values. For example, I argue that the Gilets Jaunes, the French anti-globalization movement, is demanding such a conserving future in its specified grievances against a so-called progressive government. If we merely accept political arguments for these events and fail to interpret them as “history making,” then we also fail to imbue these creative social actions with the social relevance they demand as coherent visions of the future that diverge from a normative progressive view. By re-imagining these events as consistent with cultural-historical activities, the symbolic meanings can be interpreted consistently, and cultural futures consistent with a collective will (the essence of democracy) become visible and clarified.

References

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