

# Considering the role of responsible anticipation in human flourishing and the capacity to aspire.

Ted Fuller, University of Lincoln

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is explore some of the relationships between anticipation and ethics, especially in relation to responsible actions with regard to sustainable development. In doing so, there is an assumption that sustainability (as in SDGs etc.) depends upon the capacity of individuals and groups to act to protect and transform society.

How then can new knowledge about anticipation and the application of this, increase the capacity of institutions, communities and individuals to frame and act on sustainable futures, which they construct through images, visions, stories, scenarios, models and other representations.

The idea explored here is that anticipation (as well as aspiration and imagination if they are separate and different from anticipation) is a causal mechanism. That is, human's disposition to act on anticipation (aspiration, imagination) can be a cause of change.

Two research questions are raised with respect to education and research

In what ways may awareness of anticipation and self-modified images of the future, enable more effective change processes for social transformations?

Can the capacity to investigate relevant contexts in depth and to be able to articulate alternative possible futures, empower people to reframe futures in their own terms?

Answers to this may depend on the degree to which actions can be co—ordinated, rather than individualised and on the overall capacity of the collective to aspire to better futures.

## The future as cultural fact

Appadurai observes that aspiration is a navigational capacity [...] “that allows people to make their way from more proximate needs to more distant aspirational worlds. [This] capacity [is] less developed among poor communities (both rural and urban) because the archive of experiences and stories through which wealthier communities [are] able to build the sinews of the imagination that underlie the capacity to aspire is precisely what the poor lack, this experiential deficit being virtually the hallmark of poverty.” (Appadurai 2013, 213)

If, as Appadurai suggest the future as cultural FACT resides in Aspiration, Imagination and Anticipation, what is the role of each and combined in enabling the futures to be shaped by less powerful groups such that their futures are improved?

## Emergence approach to social structure and transformation

Theorizing social structure from an emergentist perspective provides an explanation of structural change – of changes in norms over time –as occurring through human agency.

Modal realism takes the realist position that entities have disposition, i.e. causal powers that are transcendental from the particular actual world context in which they are observed as being situated. Modal realism is epistemically consistent with alternative futures, a world of possibilities, where there are other possibilities than what exists now, and so this world could be different”.

{Bhaskar, 2010 #1771, p66}. For Bhaskar, modal realism is indispensable for concrete utopianism and for human freedom.

## Anticipation of social value

Seligman et al {Seligman, 2016 #1745} contribute to understanding relations between prospection, emergence and social norms. One of their propositions is this: 'what if morality is not evaluation of the present action, but the prediction of character and its thrust into the future?' (p. x). Morality and social norms, as with laws and technologies add structure to the future, making otherwise unavailable actions and outcomes possible {Railton, 2016 #1769, p22}. A causal force in this, they imply, is the idea of a future benefit or costs which regulates or motivates action. The drive towards action is thus anticipatory. Railton argues that the 'system biology' with the features necessary for making and acting on moral judgement is the affective system – human emotion. This is the system capable of representing and comparing the values at stake and allocating efforts, such that our values serve to 'orient and move us'. The affective system involves 'attention, perception, memory, inference and action-readiness in a coordinated way' {Railton, 2016 #1769, p25}.

We need to see this reasoning in the context of society, rather than individuals, as relational knowledge and action are more likely to bring about sustainable structural changes in society. Social institutions, suggests Elder-Vass, are not entities, but properties of social groups and that 'each member of the group that enacts normative practices holds a normative belief endorsing the practice' {Elder-Vass, 2008 #1460, p290}. Such beliefs of the future are, suggests Baumeister, a 'product of collective imagination and agreement.

Power arises from the assertion and maintenance of particular norms. Normativity and ethical choice are culturally political phenomena. We suggest that the anticipation of greater value arising from emergent practices or properties tends towards a destabilizing of the norm, and transforming to another stabilized state. The anticipation of reduced value, as threats or loss, leads to action that conserve stable practices. Anticipation has causal power in the politics of ethical choice because it is a mode of action that makes judgements.

## The ethics of possibility

How might anticipatory work develop the capacity to aspire? Futures education stresses human agency as a form of power, and encourages the imagination of desired futures. It can be an example of what Appadurai calls the ethics of possibility, which are "ways of thinking, feeling and acting that increase the horizon of hope, that expand the field of imagination, that produce greater equity in [...] the capacity to aspire". There is, he suggests, a tension between the ethics of possibility and the ethics of probability. The ethics of probability are ways of thinking, feeling and acting that flow out of "an avalanche of numbers" [...] diagnosis, counting and accounting [...] profiting from disaster, corruption, insecurity, "as a new branch of capitalist speculation" {Appadurai, 2013 #1514, p295}.

Perhaps our educational and research orientation in this respect should lead to the empowerment to exercise "voice", regularly and effectively so as to enhance the capacity to aspire draw on the habit of imagining *possibilities*, rather giving in to the *probabilities* of externally imposed change. Imagining possible futures, concrete in their immediacy as well as expansive in their long-term horizons, inevitably thrives on communicative practices that extend one's own cultural horizons. Appadurai (2013, 213)