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The agency of the futures

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Abstract. Despite the centrality of projective reasoning for understanding human agency capacity, its role is often disregarded in agency research. Agency capacity cannot be reduced to a past legacy, nor to a rational model of free will. The article describes how the future is a crucial form of temporality of modern times that shapes social dynamics and agency capacity. The role played by projective reasoning emerges when the routine is broken, allowing for the opening of the horizon of possibilities that is a precondition for projective and deliberative agency. The article describes how each of the constitutive elements of projective reasoning, that is, expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future, can influence real agency achievements, with examples from life-course dynamics and the sustainability transition. Futures can have ambivalent effects: they can either hinder or enable agency achievements. In the conclusion, social constraints on projective reasoning are discussed considering its cultural embeddedness and the recent acceleration of social transformations as a source of increased uncertainty.

Keywords: agency, expectations, future, imaginaries, life course, narratives, shadow of the future, sustainability transition.

Nothing is more extraordinary than the delicacy, promptness and ingenuity with which deliberation is capable of making eliminations and recombinations in projecting the course of a possible activity. (Dewey 1930 [1922]: 194)

The future is a crucial dimension for understanding human agency capacity. The possibility to hypothesise alternative sequences of future conduct is provided by projective reasoning that links the present situation to the future. This capacity is the precondition for human agency as the capacity to be the ‘perpetrator’ of a given course of action (Giddens 1984: 9).¹ However, this projective capacity is often disregarded in agency research.

¹ Agency remains one of the most controversial sociological concepts. For an introduction, see Sewell 1992; Emirbayer, Mische 1998; Archer 2000; Elder-Vass 2010.

Rational models of free will reduce agency to the formulation of choices (Fischhoff *et alii* 1981), while the most common sociological accounts of agency often focus on inner socio-psychological forces that support individual achievements. They refer to constructs such as the sense of control (Ross, Mirowsky 2013), mastery (Pearlin *et alii* 1981), self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), self-esteem (Cast, Burke 2002), optimism (Frye 2012) and self-identification boundaries (Hitlin, Kwon 2016). These dimensions represent a stable set of characteristics that can contribute to real agency achievements (Hitlin, Kirkpatrick Johnson 2015; You *et alii* 2011), but they disregard the capacity of projective reasoning to shape agency capacity. In particular, the formulations of alternative sequences of future conduct create the conditions for what 'I could have done otherwise if I'd wanted to' means (Seligman 2013: 133).

Agency capacity is influenced by inner psychological characteristics but also requires projective-reasoning capacity to formulate alternative hypotheses about future states of the world. Recent developments in the capability approach have shown that real agency achievements result from a process of conversion of a given set of social, cultural and personal resources into real agency achievements (Kremakova 2013; Gangas 2016; Hvinden, Halvorsen 2018; Bazzani 2022a). This conversion process is shaped by different types of conversion factors that influence the capacity to transform resources into agency achievements and operates at the micro, meso and macro levels of analysis (Hvinden, Halvorsen 2018; Bazzani 2022a). Projective reasoning can be a conversion factor that determines the capacity to transform individual and collective resources into real agency achievements.

However, how the future can enable or hinder agency capacity is not clear. How projective reasoning takes place and whether or not it influences real agency achievements remains a conundrum. Given this challenging scenario for agency research, the article first describes how the future increased its centrality in social dynamics from pre-modern to modern times, although it remains marginal in social sciences analysis and sociology, in particular. In fact, the future has a pervasive role in social dynamics, and the need for projective reasoning emerges when the routine is broken and people experience uncertainty about their future. In this situation, projective reasoning creates a horizon of possibilities that is the precondition for projective and deliberative agency. Second, although the study of the future is garnering growing interest among scholars of different disciplines (Adam, Groves 2007; Tavory, Eliasoph 2013; Presser 2018; Bernardi *et alii* 2019; Beckert, Suckert 2021), its capacity to influence agency requires further analysis. The article discusses how the constitutive elements of projective reasoning, that is, expectations, imaginaries, and narratives of the future (Bazzani 2022b), can both contribute to agency achievements or hinder agency capacity. In a social context of increasing uncertainty, the future can be both a source of disruption that forces people to abandon their routines and a resource for coping with uncertain futures.

In the next section, the article describes the expanding role of the future in social dynamics from pre-modern to modern times. Then, the different levels of interest in the study of the future in social science disciplines are introduced, as well as how projective reasoning opens a horizon of possibilities that is the precondition for projective and deliberative agency. The agency capacity of expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future as constitutive elements of projective reasoning is discussed, together with examples from life-course dynamics and the sustainability transition. In the final section, social constraints on projective reasoning are discussed, considering its cultural embeddedness and the recent acceleration of social transformation as a source of increased uncertainty.

MODERN FUTURES

The type of experience of the future is a specific feature that distinguishes modern and pre-modern times. In a peasant-artisan world, good or bad harvests depend on wind, rain and sun, which are external forces to the human agency capacity. Technological innovation already existed in that time and had the capacity to change people's lives, but this kind of change occurred over long periods. As patterns of life could not be modified over a generation, future life expectations were stable and mostly dependent on ascribed status (Giddens 1979). In this context, expectations necessarily represent a future to be discovered, but it was also clear that the future yet to come 'did not undermine the traditional world' (Koselleck 2004 [1979]: 264). Pre-modern imaginaries were populated by prophecies that have been largely replaced by the modern imaginaries of social, scientific and technological progress

(Bontempi 2019). The doctrine of the Final Days, with the cyclical structure of the eschatological worldview, was a major source of imaginaries that was substituted by the doctrine of progress as the ‘historical norm’ (Habermas 1987: 12) through social change oriented towards a progressive refinement of society. In this context, ‘the aim of completeness was temporalized (first by Leibniz) and brought into the process of worldly occurrences: *progressus est in infinitum perfectionis*’ (Koselleck 2004 [1979]: 265). Both for the Final Days and progress imaginaries, no one generation ever saw their imaginary fulfilled, and they were passed down from one generation to another.

The experience of time in modernity corresponds to the acceleration of historical events (Koselleck (2004 [1979])). Unprecedented and rapid changes in science and political, economic and social institutions in early modernity nurtured the idea of an open future without limits. As a result of this notion, during modern times, ‘the difference between experience and expectation has increasingly expanded’ and, more precisely, the idea of modernity itself embodies a type of future with ‘expectations [that] have distanced themselves evermore from all previous experience’ (Koselleck 2004: 263). Indeed, the modern future is not only open to social change, but the pre-modern static understanding of history is also replaced with a model that assumes a break between past and future (Mouzakitis 2017). In this context, ‘the image of history as a uniform process that generates problems is formed’ (Habermas 1987: 6), and this new open future orientation shapes access to the present.

Social acceleration is not only a consequence of modernity, but it can be also seen as a key feature of modern times that drives the four modernisation processes: rationalisation, differentiation, individualisation and domestication (Rosa 2013). The process of acceleration occurs in three main domains. First, technical acceleration includes not only technological change but also the acceleration of all goal-directed processes, such as communication, production and transportation. Second, social change acceleration refers to the rapidity and increasing quantity of changes in institutions and culture that provide the background for individual action. Third, in the pace of life, interactions between individuals combine even more elements than in the past (Rosa 2013). Moreover, Novotny (1994) suggests that the acceleration of time increased between the early modern period (1800–1945) and the more recent period. In early modern times, one person’s ‘proper time’ was settled by the relationship between man and machine, in a system of time organised around standardised, arbitrarily divisible units. In more recent decades, the organisation of time become even more complex due to the temporal regime of new technologies. Technological artefacts started to organise the temporal norms around individual daily life, thus supporting the interiorisation of time discipline (Novotny 1994). This new time discipline has lost much of its previous modern openness to unending progress because the present has become overloaded with choices to make (Novotny 1992).

TEMPORALITIES IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Despite the centrality of the future to understanding the peculiarity of modern times, the interest of the social sciences in the study of the future has varied across disciplines. Economics has traditionally shown a more significant interest in the role of expectations in agency than sociology. The different temporal orientations of sociology and economics are deeply rooted in their history. They result from two key moments in the formation of these disciplines: the *Methodenstreit* (‘method dispute’) among economists in the 1880s and the dominance of Parsons’s functionalism in sociology in opposition to rational choice and pragmatist traditions. Within economics, the *Methodenstreit* led to the formation of the Austrian school, which emphasised the role of subjective preferences, in contrast with the historical school, which focused on using historical materials to explain social dynamics. Emphasising subjective preferences means approaching expectations as a driving force in actors’ decisions and market dynamics because actors ‘have no cognitive choice but to reduce the other market participants to carriers of expectations’ (Langenohl 2010: 25). The expected utility or gain are the drivers of both consumption and investments, and are often considered capable of guiding markets toward a condition of equilibrium.² However, although economic

² Criticisms of these assumptions are well known. For an introduction, see Beckert (2016). Moreover, utility is a vague, future-oriented concept that remains controversial (Strandbakken 2017).

expectations are always 'fictional' because market dynamics are always uncertain, expectations of future gains are the basic driver of the investments and innovation that bring about changes in markets (Beckert 2013; 2016).

In the disciplinary division of labour proposed by Parsons with the AGIL model (1970), sociology is mostly dedicated to studying the latent pattern-maintenance function, which is a form of 'backward reasoning' opposite to projective reasoning. Concepts such as legacy, path dependency and institutional trajectories have formed the basis for a large part of sociological research in the last decades, reflecting the greater interest of the discipline in studying the role of the past in social dynamics than that of the future. Along these lines, Olick and Robbins (1998) interpret the growing interest in the sociology of memory in the 1980s as a consequence of the spread of postmodernist ideas in philosophy and, more generally, in the cultural background of the period. Postmodernism abandoned the modern linear orientation of history and the aim to build any grand narrative (Lyotard 1979). Without a future-oriented idea of progress, the idea of the present as a contingent interpretation of the past raised interest in the arts and humanities. In this context, the study of the influence of the past on present social dynamics has been widespread among topics considering the micro, meso and macro levels of analysis. For instance, institutional path dependency and the intergenerational transmission of inequality, although rooted in different sociological traditions, reflect a rising interest in the study of past legacies in this period (Erikson, Goldthorpe 2002).

Past experiences have also been used to account for the influence of the future in the decision-making process in the form of 'forecasting', where elements of the past are projected onto the future. This type of argument that links past and future is not new. Already, Machiavelli suggested that 'he who wishes to foretell the future must look into the past, for all things on earth have at all times a similarity with those of the past' (Machiavelli 1970: 43). Sociology often emphasises the influence of the past on expectations. For Bourdieu, for example, social structures have a significant influence on expectations because unequal opportunities from the family of origin or the social context 'determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied' (Bourdieu 1973: 83). Along these lines, research on social stratification has shown how personal expectations of the future life course are influenced by the family of origin's class and, thus, contribute to the reproduction of social stratification (Erikson, Goldthorpe 2002). This past-oriented approach that uses data from the past to predict future behaviour is a limited perspective because it neglects the crucial role of the shadow of the future (Bernardi *et alii* 2019) in social dynamics. In particular, projective reasoning can open a horizon of possibilities that plays a crucial role in the 'reflective process of critique, problem solving, and social intervention' (Mische 2014: 440) and in sustaining agency capacity.

OPENING THE HORIZON OF POSSIBILITIES

Agency can be oriented towards the past, the present and the future because it is 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize for past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)' (Emirbayer, Mische 1998: 963).³ Agency can be thus analytically distinguished into three temporal orientations: iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation. *Iteration* refers to the routine reactivation, by actors, of past patterns of thought and action; *projection* denotes the human capacity to imagine possible future trajectories of action that cannot be deduced from the present; *practical evaluation* is the capacity to make practical and normative judgements regarding alternatives in the present (Emirbayer, Mische 1998: 917). Iteration is a way of understanding the agency capacity of the past to influence the present course of action. However, the future permeates the capacity agency of the present at different levels, with a pervasive presence in every action.

³ Agency is not an exclusively human capacity: it also exists in the capacity of organisations or movements to coordinate collective action and achieve their aims. In such cases, personal expectations may be influenced by group attachment and the outcomes of the agency of an organisation are not necessarily influenced by the personal agency capacity of the participants.

Even in the unreflexive routine condition, a future is always expected in the unconscious form of ‘protention’ (Husserl 1960). Protentions are the first level of the future’s influence on the course of action and are ‘so immediate that they enter into the way we utter the next sound, make the next move, or experience our present’ (Tavory, Eliasoph 2013: 911). This future is not conscious but is essential and pervasive in daily routine. However, this type of future often plays no part in projective reasoning because action involves habits and habits often shape protentions (Camic 1986).

The present is shaped by different types of forces that can interrupt the routine flows of activities and the role of protentions (Beckert 2016). Variations in habits, emerging conflicts among different habits or the release of impulses can interrupt the routine and open spaces for different types of agency (Dewey 1922 [1930]). This condition replaces routines with action models characterised by a higher level of consciousness and reflexivity, where conscious projective reasoning emerges and its role increases as the level of future indeterminacy increases (Bazzani 2022b). In such a situation, the present and the future become more uncertain, and past experiences and present conditions start to interact in an imaginative dialogue about the future (Dewey 1930 [1922]). These ‘polyphonic micro-dialogues’ (Burkitt 2018: 536) constitute the projective reasoning that can play a central role in reconfiguring habitual elements. Projective reasoning is the capacity to place oneself in one or more imagined situations, to hypothesise alternative courses of action and their effects and to formulate expectations about future states of the world. Projective reasoning can open a ‘horizon of possibilities’ to be found within each situation (Joas 1996: 133) and allows the ‘I could have done otherwise if I’d wanted to’ condition to occur (Seligman *et alii* 2013: 133). This is a precondition for the agency capacity of projection and practical evaluation.

Projective reasoning is not only a precondition for agency, but it also allows different degrees of agency capacity. Indeed, the types of futures elicited by projective reasoning influence agency capacity because they envision specific action possibilities that have a greater or lesser chance of resulting in agency achievements. The next section will describe how different types of future, namely, expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future, can be considered a conversion factor of agency and can enable or hinder real agency achievements, along with examples.

HINDERING AND ENABLING FUTURES

The agency of expectations

Expectations are a system of beliefs about future states of the world (Witte 2002). They represent what actors expect will happen in their future given the present situation and constraints. Expectations influence agency because they contribute to shaping both routine and projective reasoning: all actions are oriented towards expectations, which can be unconscious, as in the case of protentions, or possessed of a higher degree of consciousness, as in the case of deliberations and plans. Expectations can be observed at the individual decision-making level and at the collective level of groups, organisations and institutions (Bazzani 2022b). Expectations are different from other types of projective reasoning, such as fear and hope, which are also both directed towards the future but towards an unspecified wait. Conversely, expectations mean anticipating possible future states of the world that are perceived as ‘real’. The specificity of expectations ‘distinguishes them from presentiments or suspicions, their concreteness from typifications or interpretative frames. Interpretations that rely on the category of expectation thus screen the (possible) futures for concrete and specific events that might (or not) happen’ (Langenohl 2010: 24). However, while expectations are always imagined, they are not ‘falsehoods’ or ‘fantasies’ because actors choose their behaviour ‘as if’ these expectations described future states and causal relations (Beckert 2013). The ‘as if’ feature of expectations brings the future into the present as ‘real’. Expectations entail imagining plausible facts that will (not) happen and that are required to be considered in the formulation of decisions and actions in the present because expectation ‘does not permit inactivity’ (Langenohl 2010: 24). Expectations force people to reconsider present decisions in light of the expected future. This (re)consideration influences the actors’ understanding of the available options and can be a powerful source of agency.

Empirical research on expectations shows how it influences agency achievements. For instance, positive and negative youth expectations of life-course achievements have an impact on the conversion of personal resources into real adult achievements (Hitlin, Kirkpatrick Johnson 2015). Moreover, expectations also vary according to the experiences accumulated during the life course. For instance, cumulative experiences of long-term unemployment undermine personal expectations and the capacity to envision a different future for oneself (Lindsay 2010). This has an impact on agency achievements in the labour market because it reduces individual efforts in job seeking. This example shows how expectations can be a significant conversion factor that can enable or hinder agency achievements. However, projective reasoning also allows one to go beyond the expected future states of the world and formulate imaginaries that cannot be deduced from expectations.

The agency of imaginaries

Projective reasoning has the capacity to build imaginaries for the future, to imagine possible future states of the world that cannot be deduced from the present situation and expected trends. Imaginaries represent wishful or frightening futures that combine elements of the present with some normative value orientations (Vignoli et al. 2020a; Bazzani 2022b). In the social sciences, the works of Ricoeur (1991), Castoriadis (1987 [1975]) and Taylor (2004) provide the most influential uses of the concept, although the field as a whole remains heterogeneous (Adams *et alii* 2015). Imaginaries can be analytically distinguished from expectations even if ‘rational choice and functionalist theorizing in cultural sociology has schooled us not to notice future orientations sociologically, or to attribute them narrowly to “expectations”’ (Mische 2014: 441). Imaginaries are often a source of agency capacity because they elicit hope, fear and desire that motivate individuals to formulate and achieve goals.

Imaginaries can be the source of aspirations for a wishful future that may contribute to *de-routinising* the course of action. Imaginaries are a source of disruption of the routine because they allow actors to move ‘beyond inherited thought-patterns and categories’ (Bronk 2009: 201), create new ideas and identify emerging patterns. Imaginaries can be oriented towards the self and be the source of the ‘possible selves’ (Markus, Nurius 1986) and aspirations regarding what a person might become in the short or long term that disrupt the routine (Vaisey 2010). However, imaginaries cannot be reduced to aspirations because the latter often discount an evaluation of feasibility. Imaginaries represent what actors do (not) want to become, with crucial consequences for agency in terms of cognition, motivation and behaviour. For instance, in the field of life-course research, recent developments have shown that family imaginaries related to a large family or a childless future are able to shape daily life decisions and life-course trajectories. They become a guiding force for labour, family and housing decisions, thus influencing life-course agency achievements (Lebano, Jamieson 2020; Gauthier, De Jong 2021; Bazzani, Vignoli 2022).

When projective reasoning entails long-term consequences, indeterminacy and uncertainty increase. Projective reasoning is able to hypothesise different paths because ‘our cognitive configuration of possible selves provides an opportunity to experiment with and try on various potential futures’ (Wilson 2020: 68). However, the real consequences of the available options cannot be clear. Using a musical metaphor, in these cases ‘very different songs can contain the same five-note progression’ (Tavory, Eliasoph 2013: 926). In this context, imaginaries can also be elicited as a tool for coping with an uncertain future. For instance, continuing with the family plans example, a personal imaginary related to a successful career or a family with many children can shed a different light on the pros and cons of a job opportunity, in terms of career and family prospects or available free time (Vignoli *et alii* 2020b; Gauthier *et alii* 2020). In this sense, imaginaries can provide the frame within which the situation (or a specific element) is interpreted and evaluated, thus orienting individual agency efforts. For instance, beliefs about the ‘sanctity’ of the family or ultimate life goals may emphasise the emotional value of children as ‘priceless’ (Zelizer 1985) and the necessity of heavily investing in them despite the associated costs and uncertain outcomes (Bazzani, Vignoli 2022). This imaginary can offer a clear future narrative to orient one’s efforts in the present and resolve uncertainties about the roles of children, partner and career in one’s life course (Adserà 2006; Peri-Rotem 2016; Dilmaghani 2019). These examples show how imaginaries can act as conversion factors of agency achieve-

ments because of their capacity to frame an open and uncertain situation, thereby supporting enduring personal efforts to reach goals.

Overall, imaginaries make the present less determined by past experiences and more open to the influence of the future. Indeed, the agency of projective reasoning becomes central in the course of action ‘only when actors consider the future as a consequence of their own actions and not predestined by some uncontrollable force’; in this situation “reasoning backwards from the future” become plausible’ (Beckert, Suckert 2021: 11). The construction of the means-ends sequences that interlock present and future is allowed by the narratives of the future.

The agency of the narratives of the future

Whereas imaginaries are often connected to long-term futures, narratives of the future are the proximal futures that overcome protentions and link the present with imaginaries. The study of the agency capacity of the narratives of the future has a long tradition of empirical research in the field of youth studies (see Cuzzocrea, Mandich 2016; Ravn 2021). The role played by the narratives of the future in enabling or hindering agency capacity can be analytically distinguished for each of the functions they perform (Vignoli *et alii* 2020a; Bazzani 2022b). The first function of the narratives of the future is to select the key elements of the story and avoid what is considered irrelevant to the events at stake. This is a basic cognitive function that is essential to avoid the risk of inaction due to an excess of information, because ‘there is a small kernel of knowledge that is clear, distinct, and consistent in itself. This kernel is surrounded by zones of varying gradations of vagueness, obscurity, and ambiguity’ (Schutz 1964: 283). This selection process contributes to orienting agency. For instance, rising concerns about climate change and the widespread aspiration for sustainable food may spark the interest of restaurant’ customers in origin and the type of production of food, a factor often ignored in the past (Bazzani 2023). This new focus of attention can be a source of agency because it can shape consumer preferences towards more sustainable types of food production and, consequently, influence the market strategies of farms as well.

The second function refers to the capacity of the narratives of the future to interpret the selected elements: their quality must be assessed through typification and classification processes (Schutz 1967; Lévi-Strauss 1966). For instance, evaluating the extent to which a type of food production can be considered ‘sustainable’ can require a process of interpretation that involves technical expertise or detailed information using specific notions, standards, metrics and measures to create types and classes. However, even after this detailed assessment, the final interpretation of the level of sustainability can remain a matter of debate even among specialists. In the case of interpretations facing a high level of uncertainty, the narrative of the future can try to align the selected elements of the narrative in the direction of imaginaries. For instance, in the case of family planning, the interpretation and subsequent decision regarding the minimum level of family income to decide whether and when to have children may be a matter of debate among partners, which involves considerations about expected personal life standards. A personal imaginary of a large family may drive the interpretation that the actual family income is sufficient and is not an obstacle to planning childbearing (Vignoli *et alii* 2020b; Gauthier *et alii* 2020). Conversely, an imaginary of a successful career can lead to an opposite interpretation of the situation. In this sense, the interpretation of the quality of the selected elements of the narrative of the future can be determinant in hindering or enabling agency achievements.

The third function refers to the need for the selected and interpreted elements to be aligned in a causal path of means-ends sequences (Bruner 1990; Seligman *et alii* 2013). This causal modelling of the future links the present actions and efforts in light of the expected or imagined future. Ricoeur (1984) refers to this function as the ‘emplotment’ that people use to make sense of their lives considering the imagined futures.⁴ Individuals have the capacity to envision different causal models of the narratives of the future: ‘related to the narrative incompleteness of one’s life is the possibility to create several plots, to trace out a number of itineraries along one’s life path’

⁴ Regarding the linguistic prerequisites of the causal modelling function of a narrative, see Carroll (2007).

(Ritivoi 2002: 62). Narratives are different from other genres because they position the central elements (e.g. individual, self, organisations, institutions, objects, states) in a series of events that are causally connected and with an experienced or expected end. The means-ends sequence is essential for enabling the agency capacity of the future. On the one hand, this capacity of the narratives of the future to intertwine past, present and future is crucial for the capacity to build an identity because, in identity construction, ‘we try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography’ (Dennet 1992: 288). On the other hand, in the expected causality of the action chain on the future, the actor or specific social groups can play very different roles in terms of agency capacity (Bazzani 2020a; 2020b). For instance, returning to the food production example, previous experiences of successful citizen pressures on policymakers to promote more sustainable food production can support a narrative of the future where local activism plays a central role in social transformation. This type of causal modelling of the future can be a key conversion factor for citizens to start political activism and, eventually, reach their goals. Taken together, the first three functions constitute the discursive and conscious side of the narratives of the future: they enable the construction of everyday meanings and their implicit causal mechanisms (Bruner 1990).

The fourth function of the narratives of the future considers how, especially in the case of long-term plans, agency achievements often require significant enduring efforts to reach goals despite contingent constraints. Narratives of the future can support the emotional commitment needed for these enduring efforts (Tuckett, Nikolic 2017). Action requires a cognitive process that relies on emotional engagement to generate ‘a feeling of conviction sufficient to act. Narratives create experience rather than just abstract “knowledge”: they provide support for action founded on an emotionally coloured and subjective feeling of “knowing” what will happen’ (Tuckett 2018: 74). The connection between elements of the past, present and future through a causal mechanism sustains the emotional commitment required for the individuals to act.⁵

As is the case of expectations and imaginaries, for narratives of the future, the extent to which the goals and the imagined causal modelling of social dynamics are true, achievable, rational or moral and whether all the relevant elements are considered is not central here for considering their agency capacity. Those problems also require a normative point of view external to any explanatory purpose. The key here is to understand the role that a specific narrative of the future plays in terms of agency capacity. In this sense, the fact that much of the psychology used in a specific narrative is ‘folk’ is not relevant because narratives of the future provide reasons for action (Hedström 2005). As narratives of the future support agency capacity, their study can contribute to explaining the sources of this agency (Vignoli *et alii* 2020a).

CONCLUSION

The driven-by-the-past framework makes agency difficult to understand (Seligman *et alii* 2013: 127). Agency capacity has both an iterative dimension influenced by past experiences and deliberative and projective capacity (Emirbayer, Mische 1998). However, this projective capacity has often been reduced to either rational free will or some stable psychological predispositions (e.g. sense of control or mastery) driven by past experiences. The study of the future requires ‘departing from static models that aim to explain the stability of the social order or the reproduction of social stratification’ (Beckert 2016: 53). Past experiences influence agency capacity, but the past cannot forecast decisions: projective reasoning plays a key role in formulating the available set of alternatives and selecting an actionable decision. Although the future will probably never occur in the imagined form – long-term forecasting, in particular, is often inaccurate – it influences the decision-making process, regardless of its truthfulness, rationality or plausibility.

The article described the emergence of the horizon of possibilities. In a routine situation, interpretative reasoning and action motivation are automatic and mostly take place at a subconscious level without the need for a

⁵ There are contrasting opinions in psychology and the philosophy of the social sciences as to whether all the mental states and the continuity of our selves can be understood in the narrative form (see e.g. Bruner, 1990 and Strawson, 2004 for opposing views). However, this debate is beyond the scope of this article, which examines the role of narratives of the future in explaining agency.

clear narrative of the future. When routine breaks down, people experience uncertainty, and action necessitates a (new) deliberation, with more or less contingent plans elicited by projective reasoning. The experience of uncertainty forces people to reshape their plans and create a new narrative of the future capable of reducing uncertainty and sustaining commitment (Tuckett 2018). In this sense, projective reasoning has a direct influence on agency capacity because deliberation acts as a pivot and forces the individual to (re)consider the present situation in light of the strengths and weaknesses of the expected futures, thereby potentially leading to new plans. The capacity to imagine alternative possibilities and to contextualise them within the contingencies of the moment is a precondition for agency opened by projective reasoning.

Furthermore, projective reasoning has been analysed considering how its constitutive elements – expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future – influence agency capacity. Narratives of the future are the outcome of projective reasoning: they include the influence of expectations and imaginaries and provide the grounds where action can be undertaken. The degree of originality or conformity of the action depends on the specific situation, but the role of narratives of the future remains crucial, especially in long-term plans. Indeed, the broader and longer-term the effects of projective reasoning, the more a conscious narrative of the future is needed to help with selection, interpretation, causal modelling and emotional support for the action. Expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future influence individual agency capacity as conversion factors that can either hinder or enable agency achievements, as in the case of young people's life expectations (Hitlin, Kirkpatrick Johnson 2015).

However, it is important to note that the opening of the horizon of possibilities is not only due to the personal projective-reasoning capacity, but it is also shaped by the social context in which projective reasoning takes place. On the one hand, personal narratives of the future are anchored in existing cultural and institutional frames because projective reasoning is always a 'culturally constrained capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001: 54). These frames are often shaped by the narratives of peers and older generations, and press and social-media shared narratives can also play a crucial role in moulding personal narratives of the future (Vignoli *et alii* 2020b). The media and social media are increasing their presence in social life and also providing new possibilities to access others' opinions that influence projective reasoning (Johnson *et alii* 2020). The media have a significant influence on projective reasoning because they are a main source of information and provide the framework within which the expected future is understood (Entman 1993; Goffman 1974). On the other hand, the spread of uncertainty and the acceleration of social transformations are often seen as key features of our time that shape agency capacity. The notions of 'ontological insecurity' (Giddens 1990), 'existential anxiety' (Giddens 1991), a 'culture of anxiety' (Crawford 2004) and an 'era of insecurity' (Bauman 1999) aptly describe some foundational characteristics of our societies. Globalisation trends have exacerbated the sources of uncertainty (Zinn 2008) and have been accompanied by negative 'adjustments' such as salary cuts, job losses, layoffs, bankruptcies and business failures (Sennet 1998; Bandelj *et alii* 2011; Mills, Blossfeld 2013). The recent COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have shown how even health, work and daily life can be quickly disrupted and exposed to rapid changes that can undermine previous expected futures. The experience of uncertainty and disasters can reduce the capacity to envision different futures. However, the spread of uncertainty can have an ambivalent effect on projective reasoning: it can hinder agency capacity or contribute to opening new spaces in the horizon of possibilities.

The acceleration of social dynamics in recent decades may have ambivalent effects on agency achievements, as in the case of life-course plans. On the one hand, the experience of growing uncertainty often pushes people into a present of short-term choices without the possibility of envisioning a long-term future, thus discouraging family plans (Mills, Blossfeld 2013; Vignoli *et al.* 2022a). Indeed, acceleration often means that 'the present is extended at the expense of the future' (Novotny 1992: 445). On the other hand, as we have already seen, imaginaries and narratives of the future can counteract uncertainty over the future. For instance, according to the socio-psychological uncertainty reduction framework developed by Friedman and colleagues (1994), family plans can offer some degree of 'certainty' that is not found in other life domains (Bazzani, Vignoli 2022). In the case of women with uncertain labour trajectories or career opportunities, fertility plans can help to stabilise life trajectories (Edin, Kefalas 2005; Kreyenfeld 2010).

Projective reasoning is a crucial dimension for understanding agency capacity that cannot be reduced to the 'shadow of the past' of backward reasoning: it is an independent source of agency and produces a shadow of the

future. It is a major force that drives decision-making when deliberation and plans are involved. This article analysed how different constitutive elements of projective reasoning can enable or hinder agency achievements. The study of the agency capacity of the future can be useful for understanding a wide range of social dynamics to which reasoning backwards from the future is often central.

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