

Futures in Action: Expectations, Imaginaries and Narratives of the Future

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Abstract

The study of the future is a growing field of research transcending almost all research topics. Despite this rising interest, this field often seems fragmented into different approaches, as though the common object of study were vague or inconsistent. This article proposes a framework analytically distinguishing the three key dimensions of the future embedded in the course of action: expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future. For each, a definition and a short introduction to their use in the social sciences are provided, together with a description of their capacity to shape the course of action and examples. Then, the scope condition of this influencing capacity is discussed, in particular considering its situational origin and the intergenerational links of the future, with climate change as a case in point. The conclusion highlights research perspectives and methods that can be employed.

Keywords

agency, anticipation, aspirations, expectations, future, imaginaries, imagined futures, narratives, pragmatism, projectivity

Future-oriented dispositions are not thereby any less effective than the impact of worked-over experiences, since the expectations have themselves produced new possibilities at the cost of passing reality.

(Koselleck, 2004 [1979]: 267)

The study of the future has recently (re-)emerged and is garnering growing interest in sociology and related fields (Beckert and Suckert, 2021). It is a well-established area of

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research in youth studies (Cuzzocrea and Mandich, 2016), and pioneering works have stimulated other fields of research on the future, such as economic dynamics (Beckert, 2016), life-course outcomes (Bernardi et al., 2019; Vignoli et al., 2020a), social interaction (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013), public discourses (Andersson, 2018; Mische, 2014), medical anthropology (Mattingly, 2010), crime (Presser, 2018) and practices of future-making (Thompson and Byrne, 2022).¹ Nonetheless, this field of study often seems fragmented into different approaches, as though the common object of study were vague. Notions such as imagination, imagined future, imaginary, projects, anticipation, forecasting, expectations, fictional expectations and narratives of the future are frequently treated as synonyms, although they are sometimes regarded as differentiated elements with overlapping meanings (Delanty, 2021). Additionally, the role of the future in the study of social dynamics is not clear-cut. Actors are always embedded in the present, where the past has already occurred and the future is yet to come in a form that cannot be foreseen. Making plans entails aligning elements of the past in the light of an expected, imagined or wishful future. However, whereas the past often leaves ‘traces’ – at least in memories – the future cannot be examined. It is always imagined, and its realisation seldom matches expectations. Theoretical fuzziness and empirical inconsistency appear to hinder the study of the future as a potential explanation for social dynamics and to stunt the development of this field as well as its ability to make valuable contributions to public and policy debates.

Given these challenges for future research, the contribution of the article is twofold. First, in line with the pragmatist tradition, it describes the role played by projectivity both in ‘practical consciousness’, where people act without thinking about it, and in ‘discursive consciousness’, when the routine is broken. The capacity to imagine alternative futures is crucial in discursive consciousness because of the ‘polyphonic micro-dialogues’ (Burkitt, 2018: 536) over competing possible lines of future action. Second, the article examines the expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future as integral to projectivity and valuable for defining an empirical agenda for the study of the future.

The next section introduces backward reasoning, which is dominant in sociology, and describes the central role of the future in both practical consciousness and discursive consciousness. The notions of expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future are then presented. A definition and a short introduction to their use in the social sciences are provided for each, together with a description of their capacity to shape the course of action as well as examples. Then, the scope condition of this influencing capacity is discussed, in particular considering its situational origin and the intergenerational links of the future, with climate change as a case in point. The conclusion highlights some research perspectives for the field and methods that can be employed.

The Future in the Course of Action

The expected break of the future with the past is part of the temporality of modern times. The notion of progress across generations has informed the modern perception of time, with life trajectories becoming even more open to change due to the acceleration of social transformations (Koselleck, 2004 [1979]). In recent decades, the flexibility of life trajectories has increased further because of the need to adapt to rapid social change

resulting from the creative disruption of the markets (Schumpeter, 1942; Sennett, 1998). In contrast with this future-driven modern social change and, more recently, life trajectories, the past 30 years have witnessed the triumph of ‘backward reasoning’ in sociology. Sociological research has relied heavily on concepts such as legacy, path dependency and institutional trajectories. As a result of this sociological interest in the legacy of the past, a wide array of topics have been examined, from institutional dynamics to life-course trajectories. Research has demonstrated how the influence of this legacy often reaches across generations, as illustrated by the intergenerational transmission of inequalities (Bourdieu, 1973; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2002). Backward reasoning generally explains life-course and collective outcomes based on personal variables such as education level, employment status and income. Although limited in magnitude, the results are frequently statistically significant, suggesting that the legacies of the past account for some – but not all – of the social dynamics observed. The exclusive focus on past experiences is related to a deterministic approach to explaining social action, a type of ‘backward reasoning’ that can explain the ‘shadow of the past’ (Davidson, 2010: 17) and the present situation but not the ‘shadow of the future’ (Bazzani, 2022; Bernardi et al., 2019: 4).

Pragmatist and phenomenologist philosophers alike contend that actions are always rooted in a more or less extended future. In Husserl’s (1960) terminology, ‘protentions’ refer to the presence of the immediate future, that is, the notion that every action is consciously and unconsciously oriented towards its immediate consequences (e.g. towards the next step when climbing the stairs). This type of future is a kind of ‘practical consciousness’ whereby people act without thinking about it: ‘Practical consciousness consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to “go on” in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression’ (Giddens, 1984: xxiii). Routines are unreflective flows of activities in which ‘habits do all the perceiving, recalling, judging, conceiving and reasoning that is done’ (Dewey, 1930 [1922]: 177) because ‘pure activity is for consciousness pure emptiness’ (Dewey, 1930 [1922]: 191).

This flow can be interrupted by the emergence of conflict between ‘different habits, or by the release of impulses’ (Beckert, 2016: 54). Individuals are then exposed to uncertainty over the future, which demands a (new) judgement. This condition replaces routines with action models characterised by a higher level of consciousness and reflexivity over the course of action (Giddens, 1984). For instance, institutional change, new policies, technological innovation, peer experiences and parental expectations may force individuals to reconsider their daily routine and problematise the course of their actions and plans. In these contexts, practices that take place at the level of practical consciousness are replaced by discursive consciousness, which ‘means being able to put things into words’ (Giddens, 1984: 45). With discursive consciousness, past experiences and present conditions interact in an imaginative ‘dialogue’ over the future, which considers ‘competing possible lines of action’ (Dewey, 1930 [1922]: 190) because ‘choices are imagined, evaluated, and contingently reconstructed by actors in ongoing dialogue with unfolding situations’ (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 966; see also Joas, 1996). I propose to study this future projectivity in the context of three main types of future: expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future.² These are interwoven in daily life but can be addressed separately for analytical purposes. They are presented below.

Expectations

Expectations are a system of beliefs about future states of the world, be they ‘events or action’ (Witte, 2002: 115). They represent what actors expect will happen in their future given the present situation and constraints but more or less independently of their influencing capacity. All actions are oriented towards expectations, which can be unconscious (practical consciousness) or possessed of a higher degree of consciousness (deliberations and plans).

When actors consider other actors’ expectations, they generate second-order expectations (Galtung, 1959; Mead, 1967 [1934]). Given that actors make their plans and organise their behaviour around more or less realistic expectations, the ‘expected expectations’ of other actors are fundamental to the formation of one’s expectations (Giacovelli, 2016). Expected expectations are thus an important source of social coordination. For instance, the diffusion of expectations among financial actors about others’ negative economic expectations and subsequent behaviours can result in the implosion of the market and the start of a financial crisis (Bilginsoy, 2014; Langenohl, 2010). Although expectations are generally examined at the individual decision-making level, they can also be studied at the level of groups, organisations and institutions.

Expectations can differ from observations. In this case, the actor can opt for two ‘expectational modes’: changing expectations or clinging to expectations if they are considered ‘right’ (Giacovelli, 2016: 79). The first type of reaction is defined as ‘cognitive expectation’ and the second as ‘normative expectation’ (Galtung, 1959; Luhmann, 1995). For instance, when an empirical observation contradicts a physics law, the researcher’s first reaction is to verify the quality of the measure and make more observations (normative expectation) before rejecting the law (cognitive expectation). In the same vein, if more observations confirm the cognitive expectations and find social support, they can become normative expectations.

Expectations have been assigned different roles and importance in action theory over time and across disciplines. Psychology has recently taken interest in them. Seligman et al. (2013) criticise the ‘teleology’ of the ‘driven-by-the-past’ framework that has historically prevailed in psychology. Departing from the dominance of stimulus-driven behaviour and Freudian psychology, these studies suggest that behaviour is deeply goal oriented and guided by expectations (Gilbert and Wilson, 2007).

Sociology traditionally tends to be more concerned with understanding the role of the past in explaining the present than that the expected future. Even when influential sociological theories such as structural functionalism and phenomenology consider expectations an essential part of the course of action, they seem to reflect what has already happened instead of imagining a possible future. The explanation of expectations – and other social phenomena – proposed by sociology often relies on the driven-by-the-past framework wherein the ‘causes’ of actual expectations are attributed to a prolongation of the past, usually shaped by elements such as social structures and norms (Beckert, 2016: 50). This understanding originates in the work of classical thinkers. For example, Durkheim (1956 [1912], 1984 [1893]) and Parsons (1949 [1937]) see expectations as rooted in social institutions and social norms. Within the phenomenological tradition, Schutz (1964) attributes a particular role to expectations in his action theory, arguing that

the expected typicality of events informs the course of action and shapes people's expectations. Nonetheless, this concept of typicality remains anchored in the past and cannot explain the potentially autonomous role of expectations derived from past typicalities within the course of action. Expectations are also past-oriented in Bourdieu's (1973) idea of habitus. Social structures seem to determine expectations, in the sense that unequal opportunities 'determine aspirations by determining the extent to which they can be satisfied' (Bourdieu, 1973: 83). Research on the stratification of youth aspirations evidences the effect of the shadow of the past on expectations as personal expectations of the future life course are influenced by the class of the family of origin and, hence, participate in the reproduction of social stratification (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2002). However, the influence of expectations on social dynamics can be both a resource for and a constraint on personal agency. Indeed, positive and negative youth expectations of life-course achievements influence real achievements in adulthood (Hitlin and Johnson, 2015). This double function of expectations is part of Luhmann's (1995) system theory, in which expectations mainly refer to structures of generalised behavioural expectations. Luhmann (1995: 97) locates expectations as a function of the social system used to reduce complexity, guide perceptions and, thus, define 'what is typical and normative'. Thus, while expectation '*constrains* what is possible', it also makes '*visible other possibilities*' (Luhmann, 1995: 97, *emphases in original*). More recently, the sociology of expectations has been formulated as a specific field of study and has raised a particular interest, within science and technology studies, in the expectations placed in natural processes and technological innovation (Borup et al., 2006; Brown and Michael, 2003).

Economics has given greater importance to expectations as expectations of future gains or utility play a crucial role in economic dynamics. In mainstream economics, the possibility of an expected long-term market equilibrium is associated with individuals' capacity to predict the future state of affairs and their utility. This predicted future informs investments and consumption (Bausor, 1983). Neoclassical finance uses a general theory of rational expectations to model the functioning of financial markets as 'information-efficient markets, given the presence of actors who conduct their trades according to expectations which have been formed on the basis of information available to all' (Langenohl, 2010: 23).

In addition, expectations are central to the Keynesian understanding of economic behaviour. However, these are not rational expectations but a 'convention' (Keynes, 2018 [1936]). Keynes' expectations can be described as an effect of conventions, emotions and beliefs about the expectations of other actors (Beckert, 2016: 46; Keynes, 2018 [1936]: 134–138). More recently, heterodox economists have expanded on the role of the future in economic dynamics. They have argued that uncertainty is not merely a risk that must be reduced via calculations but also a real space for the transformation of the future thanks to the imagination (Bronk, 2009; Shackle, 1979). Projectivity entails the capacity to formulate expectations about future states of the world and, more radically, associated imaginaries that deviate from what can be expected based on the present situation and trends. Expectations can also be formulated regarding the violation of norms, and expectations of change can emerge in relation to the existing social structure. This transformative force over future expectations is often driven by the presence of imaginaries.

Imaginaries

Projectivity enables the construction of imaginaries for the future – that is, imagining possible future states of the world that cannot be deduced from the present context and expected dynamics. Imaginaries consist of wishful or frightening futures that combine elements of the present with some normative value orientations (Vignoli et al., 2020a). While protentions refer to an immediate and generally unconscious future, imaginaries are often embedded in long-term temporalities. They can concern collective outcomes (e.g. an egalitarian or carbon-free society) or personal goals (e.g. a family with many children or living in a house with a pool).

Lacan's (1977) tripartite intra-psychic realms (i.e. the symbolic, the imaginary and the real) have popularised the concept of imaginaries in academia. In the social sciences, Castoriadis (1987 [1975]), Ricoeur (1991) and Taylor (2004) have demonstrated the most influential uses of the concept, although the field as a whole remains heterogeneous (Adams et al., 2015). Taylor (2004: 172) considers social imaginaries a prerequisite of societal functioning because they are a 'common understanding' of our social life that is both 'factual' and 'normative'. Castoriadis (1987 [1975]: 143, 142, 369) suggests that progress in the modern age should be understood as an 'imaginary social signification' and underlines the subversive capacity of 'radical imaginary' to contribute to social change thanks to their 'perpetual orientation of otherness'. Modern social imaginaries are mostly fuelled by the scientific ideology that has greater social relevance (Balibar, 1995). I use the general notion of imaginaries to refer to a condition of non-involvement (Ricoeur, 1991) with the constraints of past and present situations. Research on the topic has mostly focused on the imaginaries of youths (Findlay et al., 2018) and migrants (Camacho, 2008), personal life plans (Bazzani and Vignoli, 2022; Cantó-Milà and Seebach, 2015) and political utopias (Andersson, 2018).

Imaginaries can influence the course of action in three ways: by de-routinising it, by helping individuals cope with uncertain futures and by fostering projective agency capacity. First, imaginaries can be a source of aspiration for a wishful future that may contribute to *de-routinising* the course of action because they are 'interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what mis-steps would invalidate the practice' (Taylor, 2004: 172). Utopian views of society are a primary source of imaginaries in modern times, which contribute to the departure from the space of experience (Koselleck, 2004 [1979]). Modern imaginaries have made eschatological hope profane and the future 'a source of disruption with the aid of teleological constructions of history' (Habermas, 1987: 12). This orientation of history towards the future can also be fuelled by nostalgia for the past, which can be a 'dynamic, motivational force that enables the individual to look ahead and take proactive action': 'When I stare at my family photo, I smile and think of all the good times to come' (Sedikides and Wildschut, 2016: 319). While nostalgia is associated with a predilection for a past time or place, it can sometimes 'be prospective as well as retrospective' because it can have a 'utopian dimension' (Wilson, 2020: 67). The longing emotion of nostalgia 'can be experienced as the desire to return to a real – or imagined – past; it can also be experienced as the desire to invoke a possible future' (Wilson 2020: 76). From a pragmatist perspective, imaginaries offer people a 'distance experience' that allows them to detach themselves from the 'contact experience' of reality (Dewey, 1930 [1922]: 58; Mische, 2009: 697).

Second, imaginaries can be a cause of uncertain futures as well as a tool for coping with them. When the future cannot be deduced based on past regularities and known constraints, imaginaries help to define and select alternative actions. Imaginaries can serve as an anchor for facing an uncertain future because ‘the void of time-to-come’ can be filled ‘only by works of the imagination’ (Shackle, 1979: 8). For example, when alternative courses of action with long-term outcomes are considered, the definition of these outcomes can be blurred, making an evaluation of the alternatives challenging. In these conditions, a normative value orientation (i.e. what one would [not] like the future to be) related to personal imaginaries may come into play and orient deliberation.

Third, imaginaries support the shift from expectations based on past experiences (which entails the formulation of new expectations) to a more open future – that is, the shift from ‘the ethics of probability’ to an ‘ethics of possibility’ (Appadurai, 2013). The ethics of probability is concerned with what will probably happen (i.e. expectations), while the ethics of possibility refers to ‘those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination’ (Appadurai, 2013: 295). The latter is guided by imaginaries.

Imaginaries can play a prominent part in discursive consciousness; however, they are not the final point of discursive consciousness as expectations and imaginaries must be embedded in a course of action thanks to a narrative of the future.

Narratives of the future

The gap between imaginaries and the present course of action is filled by narratives of the future. These are formed when imaginaries are combined with hypothetical courses of action and the causal interconnection between actions and expected consequences (Tuckett, 2018). They are the last step of projectivity, influenced by expectations and imaginaries, but they discount the evaluation of their feasibility with the available obstacles and resources and encompass deliberations and plans.

While the study of narratives is well established in psychology (Bruner, 1990), sociology (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Polletta et al., 2011) and economics (Shiller, 2020), research has only recently focused on their role in projectivity (Andersen et al., 2020). Their role in discursive consciousness can be interpreted using the five functions they perform. First, narratives of the future select the key elements of the story and exclude what is regarded as irrelevant to the events (selection). Second, they interpret the value and meaning of the key elements of the story (interpretation). Third, they connect the elements in a temporal order that enables the identification of the future ‘causes’ and ‘effects’ of an action (causal modelling). Fourth, narratives of the future support said action emotionally (emotional action support). Finally, they guide our access to the past (understanding of the past).

The *selection* process is a basic cognitive function. During the course of an action, the actors involved can focus on a small number of contextual elements, which they select consciously or unconsciously from an almost infinite set. For instance, while sitting on a bus, people are usually not interested in the type of engine powering the bus but are very focused on getting off the bus at the right stop. Social action can only consider a limited set of elements and information at a precise moment because of cognitive limitations and

the risk of inaction (Schutz, 1964). The attention zone encompasses both preconscious elements provided by the habitus and innovative elements generated by the imaginaries, which orient the focus.

The process of *interpretation* of the selected elements consists of the two primary functions of typification and classification. Typification, that is, thinking through analogy by comparison with known elements, reduces the complexity of the world (Schutz, 1967). Once the ‘type’ has been recognised, its characteristics need to be classified based on a reference model. The classification often proceeds along a matrix of binary opposition (e.g. stable/precarious, enough/not enough, short-term/long-term; Lévi-Strauss, 1966) but may also involve a more complex, non-binary system of relationships (e.g. economic sectors). The dividing lines may be nuanced, and the classification of the elements may not be an easy task, especially when long-term plans exposed to uncertainty are involved (Tuckett, 2018). In such situations, classification is often informed by specific goals or imaginaries.

The selection and interpretation of the important elements for realising personal imaginaries define the causal path of the narratives of the future with an if–then projective conditional (Seligman et al., 2013). The process of setting the conditions and elements necessary to reach the goal is the *causal modelling* of the narratives of the future (Bruner, 1990).³ This function interlocks the present course of action with projectivity and motivates present actions in the light of their expected consequences (e.g. a degree from a prestigious university is *necessary* to find a good job and, *thus*, earn a good salary). The imaginative capacity of discursive consciousness allows people to consider alternative combinations of elements or means–end sequences.

Narratives of the future fulfil the cognitive functions described above and also provide emotional *action support*. The connection between the elements of the past, present and future through hypothesised causal mechanisms sustains the emotional commitment of individuals to acting in the face of uncertainty (Tuckett and Nikolic, 2017). Especially in the case of long-term plans, people often encounter unexpected situations and are forced to adapt their plans in the light of specific goals. In such situations, narratives of the future are a cognitive resource for coping with uncertainty as well as sustaining the emotional commitment needed to confront troubles and failures together with imaginaries (Tuckett, 2018).

Moreover, narratives of the future not only shape the present experience but also guide our access to the past, thus contributing to the understanding of the past. Projectivity allows us to ‘get hold of the conditions of future conduct as these are found in the organised responses we have formed, and so construct our pasts in anticipation of that future’ (Mead, 1932: 76). The order that these narratives ascribe to the future aligns some elements of the past with the imagined future. However, if the expected future ‘breaks down, another hypothesis replaces it and another past replaces that which the first hypothesis implied’ (Mead, 1932: 11). The interwoven tradition and innovation sides of the present are made possible only by the double perspective of backward reasoning, which interprets the present and the future in consideration of past events, and projectivity, which enables the detection of the seeds of the future in past events. The latter capacity can be identified as the past-understanding function of narratives of the future.

Thus, narratives of the future have the power to reduce world complexity (selection process) to make the social context intelligible and actionable (interpretation and causal modelling), emotionally support the action and provide a specific viewpoint for the understanding of the past. The next section will discuss the situational and temporal limits of these capacities of the future in influencing the course of action, which also call for some normative considerations.

The Future Illusions

Projectivity is a powerful resource for shaping the course of action. This capacity does not deny its situational origin and the influences of the structural context, as described in the theories of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977 [1972]), structuration (Giddens, 1984) and morphogenesis (Archer, 2000), nor the different degrees of fluidity attributed to social structures (Rutzou and Elder-Vass, 2019). However, the double influence of projectivity and structure on the course of action cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between them or a teleological and circular dynamics of co-determination between these two poles (Bazzani, 2022). Given their interdependence, the influence of structure on projectivity and agency and their capacity to determine structures can be analytically distinguished as a consequence of their temporal ordering (Archer, 1995). Additionally, agency can have different degrees of influence on structures (Bazzani, 2022). Importantly, the agency capacity of projectivity cannot be reduced to a matter of choice or will in a naive representation of societies based on individuals' self-determination (Fischhoff et al., 1981). Indeed, economic means and political power are often important resources for the projectivity capacity and for achieving agency outcomes that are not homogeneously distributed among the population. For instance, the case of long-term unemployment shows how these cumulative experiences undermine prospects and the capacity to envision a different future for oneself, thereby reducing individual agency capacity and efforts in job seeking (Lindsay, 2010). In the same vein, the career expectations of the family of origin often shape individual expectations (Lund, 2018), contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities and power asymmetries (Hitlin and Elder, 2007).

The influence of the future on the course of action has situational limits, which are due to the structural context and the complex process of construction of shared narratives that influence personal narratives (Vignoli et al., 2020b). The close link of this influence with legacies of the past and understanding of the past (fifth function of narratives) also suggests the need to act responsibly with respect to both past and future 'non-living' constituencies. Benjamin (1968) identifies two main approaches that guide the present generations' access to the past. On the one hand, historicism is characterised by a tendency to treat history as a mass of facts to be collected by the historian. This approach can be associated with backward reasoning, where the sociologist's and the historian's empathy and understanding of historical facts help to fill the void of a 'homogeneous, empty time' (Benjamin, 1968: 262). In this view, the future is not indispensable to the understanding of the past, which appears to be independent of it, or, in the case of past legacies, the past clearly influences future prospects. On the other hand, historical materialism, for instance, aims to read past events in the light of future prospects. In this perspective, future prospects guide 'our access to the past' (Habermas, 1987: 13). This

approach takes a more constructivist stance regarding the exploration of the past, as in the case of sociological analyses of memory (Olick and Robbins, 1998) and time (Abbott, 2001; Bergmann, 1992). The present is in a double temporal bind as the past's future and the future's past (Habermas, 1987), which makes modern expectations about future societal transformations a powerful driver of social change.

To explain this link between past and future, Habermas (1987) rejects both the assumption of direct transmission of cultural legacies to the present and the idea of open and free appropriation of the past by the present generation. To overcome the symmetric bias of these alternative understandings of the relationship between projectivity and the past, he recognises that each generation possesses a 'weak messianic power' that generates a 'horizon of unfulfilled expectations' for all past epochs (Habermas, 1987: 14). Past expectations could remain unfulfilled and become a 'positive illusion' (Taylor and Brown, 1994). However, they are able to shape the present course of action and, consequently, influence the future conditions of choice as well. In Habermas's view, this creates a normative legacy with the present generations that need to act responsibly towards past and future ones. While projectivity occurs in the present, it is linked with the past as the condition for its emergence and able to condition the future via its influence on the present course of action, which impacts the future conditions of choice.

The intergenerational influencing power of the future is particularly salient in cases of major global challenges that see the long-term consequences of actual behaviours. The sustainability approach is a normative horizon of our time that seeks to inform most current policies and aims to satisfy the needs of the present generation but not at the expense of future ones (WCED, 1987). For instance, global warming and the resulting climate change are consequences of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions into the atmosphere, which are largely attributable to the use of fossil fuels (IPCC, 2018). Modifying the household behaviours and lifestyles of the current generation (responsible for 72% of global emissions) to curb household emissions is essential and has great potential for reaching the Paris Agreement's objective of limiting the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels (Moran et al., 2020). Although the richest 10% of the world's population is responsible for 52% of global GHG emissions, the effects of climate change fall outside the national borders of rich countries and the time horizon of the current generation. Negative consequences currently affect developing countries that are minimally responsible for GHG emissions and will impact future generations significantly more strongly (IPCC, 2018). The greatest negative effects of climate change are in fact displaced in time (Bazzani, 2021, forthcoming). Climate-change mitigation is an example of how the projectivity of the current generation requires a responsible link with future generations. The necessity of acting responsibly with respect to both past and future 'non-living' constituencies (i.e. the unfulfilled expectations of past generations as much as those of the generations to come) is a pressing feature of projectivity that needs to be considered.

Conclusion

The future is a constant presence in social life. Every moment, action and event is embedded in one or more futures. Although the future is by nature always imagined, it is no less important for understanding the course of action than any other object that people can

stumble upon – and people often stumble precisely because they are thinking about the future instead of the present. This centrality of the future to sociological research has often been downplayed because of the topic's apparent fuzziness or reduction to a matter of individual will and past legacies within different sociological traditions. The proposed analytical schema for the study of the role of the future in the course of action aims to provide the analytical tools for the development of this field of research based on a common understanding of the research objects. The article presented the three notions of imaginaries, expectations and narratives of the future as guiding analytical tools for understanding the different types of future embedded in the course of action and the functions that each performs. When practical consciousness leaves room for discursive consciousness, decision processes usually employ all three elements, assigning different degrees of importance to each and to their functions.

A more systematic and analytical study of the future and its constitutive elements can shed new light on classical sociological problems and strengthen the understanding of its proper objects of study (from personal narratives of the future to technological imaginaries and the utopianism of social movements). In particular, personal agency and social change are two fundamental objects of sociological research that can raise a new scientific interest by considering expectations, imaginaries and narratives of the future in greater depth (Bazzani, 2022). We have considered the projectivity capacity at the personal level, but these narratives are often not characterised by idiosyncratic preference but rather shaped by the social context and rely on the narratives put forward by others (Vignoli et al., 2020b). The social formation of personal narratives of the future and the latter's capacity to influence the course of action are two interconnected research topics that could also be further explored in terms of practices (Thompson and Byrne, 2022). Moreover, a 'historical sociology of the future' is a new research ground that can draw on these concepts to develop a new understanding of historical processes (Beckert and Suckert, 2021).

All the methods developed within social sciences research can be applied to the study of the future. Quantitative methods using cross-sectional or panel data often employ backward reasoning, looking at past events or conditions to assess their influence on present ideas and behaviours or across life-course dynamics. However, the same data and methods can be used to study the influence of projectivity as a dependent and independent variable on a number of achievements, such as life-course outcomes (Hitlin and Johnson, 2015; Sewell and Hauser, 1975). Recent developments in this direction suggest a strong explanatory power of the shadow of the future compared with the shadow of the past in accounting for changes in life plans (Guetto et al., 2021). The main limit of this approach is the need for data on both the past and projectivity for the same respondents: because most major ongoing surveys mainly follow a backward reasoning approach, questions considering future projectivity are scant.⁴ The influencing capacity of future expectations and imaginaries can also be analysed via experiments, using traditional priming methods or the factorial survey experiment (Auspurg and Hinz, 2014). Experimental economics and rational choice approaches have a long tradition of experimental manipulation of expectations to explain decisions and behaviours (Kagel and Roth, 2020). Recent experimental studies have shown this influencing capacity on life-course plans both in a laboratory setting (Vignoli et al., 2021) and via survey experiments (Guetto et al., 2022). For their part, discourse analysis

and qualitative interviews are mostly employed in sociology for the study of personal narratives. In particular, the study of youths' narratives of the future is well established (Cuzzocrea and Mandich, 2016; Ravn, 2022). The analysis of personal narratives can also enable the emergence of the interlocking of the past's future and the future's past as well as the exploration of the five functions performed by narratives of the future. Finally, discourse analysis has been used often in research on the processes of future construction (Jasanoff and Kim, 2009). For instance, the study of the politics of expectations of both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic groups usually relies on archival material, recordings and media and press texts.

This article has laid some of the theoretical groundwork to support the flourishing research interest in the future, which could be applied to a broad range of social dynamics involving deliberation and plans to provide a closer sociological look at the future.

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Notes

1. For a systematic overview of future-oriented studies in sociology, see Beckert and Suckert (2021).
2. For a discussion of these elements within the context of fertility research, see Vignoli et al. (2020a, 2020b).
3. Ricoeur (1984) refers to this function as the 'emplotment' that people use to make sense of their lives in the light of imagined futures. Regarding the linguistic prerequisites of the causal modelling function of a narrative, see Carroll (2007).
4. For a list of the questions about the future used in major surveys, see Vignoli et al. (2020b: Appendix).

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