

Images of the future and educational decision-making

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Anticipation 2017
London

Three aims:

- To connect education research to wider literatures on images of the future.
- To ask about the mechanisms that relate images of the future to action in the present.
- To explore how some existing accounts of agency might describe these mechanisms.

All to help education researchers think about the nature of the work done by the aspirations of young people.

Aspiration is important in education research.

It shapes decisions made in the present that lead to future flourishing. But it is classed, diverse, and not universal.

Images of the future are important in other fields.

Expectations shape technology. Fictions underpin economics. Future images shape society.

Alloway et al. (2004)
Archer & Yamashita (2003)
Ball et al. (2002)
Ball et al. (1999)
Bok (2010)
Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson (2011)
Prosser et al. (2003)
Raco (2009)
Sellar & Gale (2011)
Sellar et al. (2011)
Spohrer (2011)
Watts & Bridges (2006)
Zipin et al. (2013)

Arnaldi (2008)
Borup et al. (2006)
Brown & Michael (2003)
Beckert (2014)
Hicks & Gidley (2012)
Polak (1973)
Raven & Elahi (2015)
Rubin (2013)

Throughout these literatures, there is a general assumption that ideas of possible future states influence agents' action in the present.

It follows that people's futures result from their imagining them.

'Imagine a future so you can walk towards it'

There is a metaphor in futures studies:
that images of the future exert some
attraction on the present:

*at once pulled forward by its own magnetic
images of the future and pushed from
behind by its realized past*

Polak (1973), p. 1

*these possibles 'beckon' to us to make them
real*

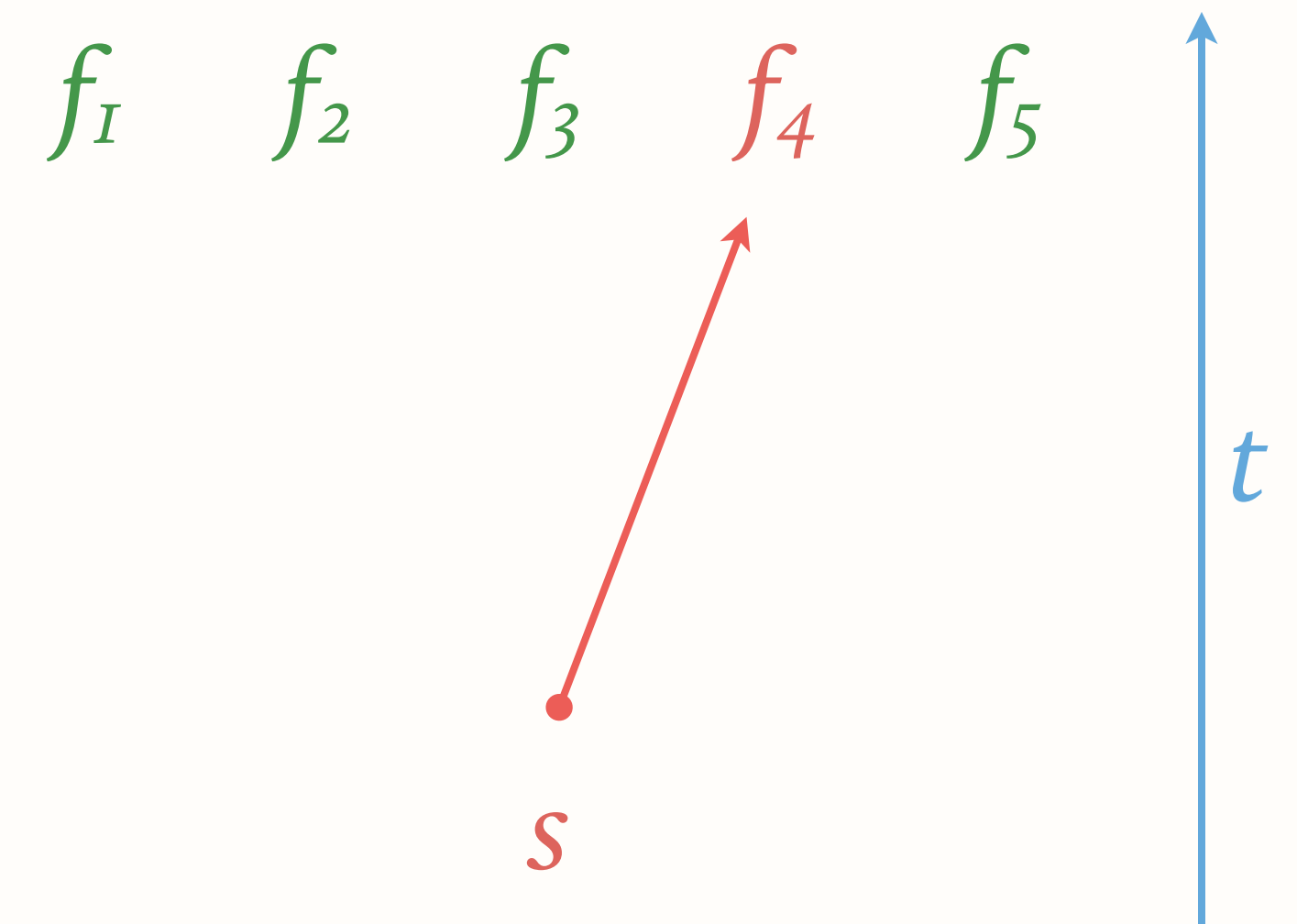
de Jouvenel, 1967, p. 27

*people's images of the future can be said to
'pull' them forward*

Dator, 2002, p. 8

A more general model is something like:

- multiple possible futures are imagined
- the utility of each is assessed
- the future with the greatest utility is chosen
- subsequent actions have the purpose of bringing this about.



Unimagined futures are not pursued.
Imagined futures are inherited.

This happens.

Choosing a house, buying insurance, ...

It also doesn't happen when it could.

Exercising more, leaving Facebook, ...

So it is not sufficient as an account of the link between future images and action.

The mechanisms through which ideas of future circumstances lead to individual action in the present are not well examined.

This makes it difficult for education researchers to claim that aspirations are important factors in young people's eventual flourishing

(rather than being, for example, simply incidental products of present-day structural constraints, such as class.)

The question of just *how* these imagined futures lead to decisions is rarely asked.

What is the work that they do in the process?

“ ”

I was kind of lucky but unlucky in some senses, so like the year above, they got five options from-from, but, say engineering, last year it classed, it would have taken up two options? [R: right] so now it only takes up one option [R: ok] so in some respects I'm kind of luckier and then not as lucky because I could have picked five options instead of four

...

Ok that would also have meant more revision if I had had five, it would have meant more work, but I'm kind of happy that I had the four I have.

I took business and economics because I'm very interested in money, and how the world works, through money, computing, because my Dad, works, well he's a data analyst [R: oh is he?] so he does it, as a career, er, and triple science because I've always been interested in science and how the world works, I've always thought erm, having a good understanding of science is the only way you can actually improve, erm, so I, picked subjects which I knew, if I was going to get a, career outside the military, er, they're all things I'd be interested in and I'd be good at, hopefully, so, erm, I've taken subjects which, I'm, quite high level at?

“ ”

...All my subjects are As or Bs [R: good for you] so I'm hoping that's what I'll actually get in my GCSEs, erm, but if it doesn't go to plan and I can't get in the military I'd like to study psychology? [R: oh ok] er and get a degree in that, someday, so triple science should, be handy there, er [R: yeah] through biology, erm, but it's just, I don't know where I'll end up, to be honest.

“ ”

How can we talk about agency?

Agency is exercised rationally in the
pursuit of specific futures

~~Agency is exercised rationally in the
pursuit of specific futures~~

—but this ignores the role of context and
history.

Agency is a product of historic structural forces

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—but this makes it hard to account for choice.

Agency is oriented to past, present and future

Agency sits “within the flow of time”

*Emirbayer and Mische (1998), p.
963*

Past: social structures that shape action

Emirbayer and Mische (1998)

Future: imagined alternatives

Present: immediate context within which decisions are made

*the past, the present and the future intersect
and interpenetrate one another*

*Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992)
p. 22*

In any moment actors are oriented to all of these, though one may be uppermost.

This is thinking about a subject.

Archer (2012, 1995)

Subjects have concerns, or commitments to particular ends.

Concerns are realised through projects, or particular courses of action—we have to do certain things to realise concerns, or bring about certain ends.

Archer (2012, p. 43; 1995, p. 199)

Concerns come from what we value.

Imagine a future and walk towards it

~~Imagine a future and walk towards it.~~

Care about something, then imagine a future where that care is fulfilled.

Adam and Groves (2007)

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Care about something, then imagine a future where that care is fulfilled.

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Images of the future don't have any power without values of the present.

We need to **think about the people imagining them** and working towards them to understand their role in action.

Thanks

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