

EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF THE FUTURE

Sohail Tahir Inayatullah

Tamkang University, Taiwan; University of the Sunshine Coast, and Queensland University of Technology, Australia

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Summary

Futures study is the systematic study of preferred, probable, and possible futures including the worldviews and myths that underlie each future. Futures research has moved from external forces influencing the future—astrology and prophecy—to structure (historical patterns of change, of the rise and fall of nations and systems) and agency (the study and creation of preferred images of the future).

Futures studies has been eagerly adopted by planning departments in organizations and nations. Yet there are clear differences between the planning and futures framework. Planning seeks to control and close the future, while futures studies seeks to open up the future, moving from the future to alternative futures.

To understand the future, there are range of exemplary methods. These, for example, include emerging issues analysis, age-cohort analysis, causal layered analysis, and scenarios. These methods derive from different types of futures studies. Four types are crucial. The first is predictive, based on empirical social sciences. The second is interpretive, based not on forecasting the future but on understanding images of the future. The third is critical, derived from post-structural thought. It is focused on asking who benefits by the realization of certain futures and which methodologies privilege certain types of futures studies. The fourth is participatory action learning/research. This approach is far more democratic and based on stakeholders developing their own future, based on their assumptions of the future (for example, if the future is linear or cyclical).

Ultimately, while futures studies is largely about the study of the future, at heart, the reasons behind the study are not only academic but about transforming the future, so that a more sustainable world can be created.

1. Introduction

The task of this entry is to introduce the epistemologies and methods used in exploring the future. This entry first touches upon the history of futures studies, then compares the futures approach to planning with traditional planning and policy frameworks, proposes a typology of futures studies, presents a range of methodologies and then as exemplars, articulate scenarios for the futures of the world system.

In most civilizations, humans have had a deep interest in what will happen to them, as individuals and as groups. Glossing over human history, we can identify three types of attempts to understand the future: astrology, prophecy, and forecasting.

In the *astrological* view, life has patterns as evidenced in the pattern of the stars. The basic ontological position was: as above, as below; heaven and earth should match. Not only could the world within be predicted but so could the world without. By and large, the purpose of astrology was to help individuals avoid dangerous circumstances by providing an early warning system. However, belief in the astrological system was essential since warnings and forecasts as well as psychological analysis were of a general nature.

Prophecy assumes that certain individuals have access to deeper levels of mind, thus allowing them to see the future—to give glimpses of not only what might be but more importantly of what can be, the seer as visionary. The universe for the few with higher, or more complete, minds can be predicted. Unlike astrology, prophecy was and is not based on the relationships between stars or other criteria, rather it is visionary in nature. Prophecy is used to create new systems, new worlds, rather than predict specific events. The act of prophecy is often located in one individual or a group of individuals.

While astrology and prophecy are given less credence by the moderns, it is *forecasting* that has become the technique par excellence of planners, economists, and social scientists. Behind this is a perspective that desires to make the world more stable and to control the future. The assumption behind forecasting is that with more information, particularly more timely information, decision-makers can make wiser decisions.

Having more information is especially important now since the rate of technological change has dramatically increased. However, the need for information, as in times before, is necessitated by a fear of the future, a feeling of impotence in the face of forces we cannot understand, that seem larger than us.

In recent times, futures studies, in particular, has grown and, like astrology and prophecy, become semi-legitimate. In doing, so it has been modernized and adopted by corporate planners, policy institutes and government planning bureaus. Futures studies has become linked with short- and long-range planning. But there are significant real differences between futures studies and planning, which we develop below.

2. Planning and Futures

When compared to planning, the futures approach is:

1. longer term, from five to fifty years (even 1000 years) instead of one to five years;
2. more concerned with creating the future instead of predicting the future;
3. committed to authentic alternative futures where each scenario is fundamentally different from the other; when planners use scenarios, they are often mere deviations from each other;
4. less likely to be used in a particular bureaucracy, for example, in the Ministry of Economic Development;
5. committed to multiple interpretations of reality (legitimizing the role of the unconscious, of mythology, of the spiritual, for example, instead of views of reality for which only empirical data exist);
6. more participatory, in that it attempts to include all types of stakeholders instead of only powerbrokers;
7. more concerned with the planning process, which is, if not more so, as important as the elegance of the plan itself;
8. less instrumentalist, concerned with more than just profit or power; and,
9. while a technique, is also very much action oriented. It is as much an academic field as it is a social movement.

From the view of the planning discourse, futures is merely one approach among many necessary to create a good plan. Planning can have many dimensions, of which four are critical: a problem orientation (immediate challenges); a goal orientation (what we want, objectives); a political orientation (to assuage the administration or leader); and a futures orientation (long term). For planners, futures studies is useful as long as it aids in planning for the future and not in making problematic planning and policy-making.

3. Policy Analysis, Planning, and Futures Research

The growth of futures studies is also a result of the desire of government to find information that can aid in making better policy. Futures studies, along with systems analysis, is used to better understand the second- and third-order effects of specific policy decisions. For many, futures research is merely long-term policy analysis or research and should not be seen as a separate field or discourse. However, there are real

and important distinctions between futures research and policy research/analysis. Some of these are as follows:

1. While policy analysis is short-range oriented, futures studies is long-range in its theoretical and action orientation, to the extent that some futures research takes a 1000-year perspective.
2. Instead of choosing one policy, examining the range of futures is the focus of futures studies. However, as with policy research, the goal is not only to create new organizational directions but to clarify current management decisions. While we may not know the future, we can determine what we want (this is the distinction between the probable and the preferred future).
3. Futures studies, particularly in their critical dimension, is more concerned with making basic assumptions problematic. Through what-if questions and scenarios, the intention is to move out of the present and create the possibility for new futures. Policy analysis is concerned with analyzing the viability of particular policies but without calling the entire discussion or the framework of decision-making into question. Like planning, policy analysis is more technical in its orientation.
4. Futures studies is more vision oriented than goal oriented (which is central to policy analysis and planning). Futures studies attempts to move from goals to visions. Visions work by pulling people along. They give individuals and collectivities a sense of the possible. They also inspire the noble within each person by calling individuals to sacrifice the short term for the longer term, for the greater good. Finally, they help align individual goals with institutional goals. Moreover, while goals or objectives can be operationalized, visions cannot. An organization or nation or civilization without a compelling vision of the future will decline, argues Fred Polak in his *The Image of the Future*. A vision thus must be extra-rational, must include a leadership dimension, a spiritual dimension, and a material dimension. This clearly is more than the traditional planner or policy analyst is willing to consider in his or her planning process.
5. The role of the policy analyst/planner and futurist in an organization often differs. Within most planning exercises, plans are written so that the nation or organization can appear modern, so it can give the appearance that the future is under control. The futurist might want actual fundamental transformation while the planner might want to fulfill economic targets that the leader or chief executive officer has set out to reach.
6. While futures studies attempts to acknowledge the different ways individuals construct the world, policy analysis often takes a limited view of knowledge approaches. For example, individuals behave quite differently in learning situations, whether at conferences or boardroom meetings. Some are creative; some are critical; some are practical; and others are passive. Very often, placed together in one room are those who want to get something done today; those who want to create a new future; those who want to criticize past, present and future; and those who want to do nothing. There are different knowing styles (intuition, authority, reason,

emotions, and sensate, for example) and different leadership styles (authoritative, negotiable, consensus, for example) as well. To gain legitimacy in any policy-making process it is crucial to acknowledge these differences. Good planning, policy analysis, and futures research need to acknowledge contributions from all these sorts of people, knowing and leadership styles.

In general, in planning and policy analysis, the future is often used to enhance the probability of achieving a certain policy. The task is to make the future less certain. The future becomes an arena of conquest and time becomes the most recent dimension to colonize, to institutionalize and domesticate. Futures research, however, intends to liberate time for strict technique, from instrumental rationality. It asks what are the different ways one can “time” the world? How, for example, do different cultures, groups, organizations imagine time?

Of course, policy analysis itself is a dynamic field. For example, new models of policy development have attempted to move beyond muddling through (as needs or problems come up), rational-economic decision-making (material goals) and *satisficing* (do what you can, given political and budgetary limitations), arguing primarily that these strategies are not useful during times of rapid change and dramatic crisis. Muddling through, in particular, is not useful during times of turbulence since incremental policy change does not help the organization or nation transform to meet dramatic new conditions. The rational-economic model is useful at setting and achieving objectives but it does not take into account extra-rational efforts. It is overly dependent on quantitative factors, reinscribes self-interest and national self-interest (balance of powers). *Satisficing*, while getting the job done, does not ask was the job worth doing. Interest in finding ways to include the possibility of discontinuous change, of forecasting trends before they emerge, has been a natural progression in the evolution of the policy sciences. Futures studies fits well into the effort of finding better ways for government and business to incorporate the unknown within decision-making.

While policy researchers would prefer an investigations into the future that were more short term, immediately beneficial to the organization, and framed within the language of the organization, by and large, futures research is often less concerned with predicting the future than with attempting to envision novel ways of organizing how decisions are reached and who is eligible to participate in these decisions. It does this by asking participants to envision their ideal organizational world and then aid in creating strategies to realize that world.

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Key websites:

www.futurefoundation.org [Website of the Foundation of the Future—focused on 1000 year forecasting.]

www.ru.org [Focused on preferred futures.]

www.worldfutures.org [Website of the world futures studies federation.]

www.wfs.org [Website of the world future society.]

Biographical Sketch

Sohail Inayatullah is visiting professor, Center for Futures Studies, Tamkang University, Taiwan; adjunct professor, The University of the Sunshine Coast; visiting academic, the Communication Centre, Queensland University of Technology; and professor, International Management Centres Association, University of Action Learning. In 1999, he was UNESCO Chair, the University of Trier, Germany and Tamkang Chair, Tamkang University, Taiwan.

He is also a fellow of the World Futures Studies Federation and a fellow of the World Academy of Art and Science. He is the coeditor of the *Journal of Futures Studies* (www.ed.tku.edu.tw/develop/JFS) and associate editor of *New Renaissance* (www.ru.org). He is on the editorial board of *Futures*, *Development* and *Foresight*. Among his authored/edited books are: *Macrohistory and Macrohistorians*; *Situating Sarkar*; *Understanding Sarkar*; *Transcending Boundaries*; *The University in Transformation*, *Judicial Foresight*, and *Transforming Communication*. His CD-ROMs include: *Futures Studies: Methods, Issues and Civilizational Visions* and *The Views of Futurists*—Volume 4 of *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*. He is the author of over 200 journal articles, book chapters, and magazine pieces.