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The future as a social fact. The evaluation of perceptions of the future in sociology

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Abstract

A small but growing share of sociological research recognizes the importance of perceptions of the future for explaining social outcomes. This article, taking sociology of knowledge perspective, provides a systematic study of sociological scholarship dealing empirically with perceptions of the future. It is based on a qualitatively driven mixed methods analysis of 571 sociological research articles published between 1950 and 2019 and distinguishes between three clusters of scholarship: in the first cluster authors consider future orientations as either dependent or independent variable; in the second cluster they analyze the multifaceted ways in which actors imagine the future; and in the third cluster they are interested in the politically contested construction and diffusion of future orientations. By investigating these clusters, the article demonstrates how sociologists pay attention to future orientations in a broad spectrum of sociological fields, using a variety of methods and asking a wide set of questions about assessments of the future. The future is increasingly a realm of sociological analysis. We show how this field of research is structured and has developed over time. Elaborating on different facets of research that so far operate largely in isolation from each other, we aim to contribute to the development of the field. Sociology could benefit from more systematically integrating perceptions of the future – as they are reflected in actor expectations, aspirations, and future beliefs – into the discipline's empirical investigations and explanatory models and from integrating the existing knowledge on these issues better.

Introduction

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Sociology as a discipline is primarily directed toward the present and past. Phenomena observed in the present are seen as being causally linked to events that have taken place at an earlier point in time. They are shaped by cultures, institutions or social relations that exist in the present but have been formed in the past [1]. A much smaller part of sociology, however, breaks with this dominant temporal perspective and considers actor orientations toward the future. This break follows two lines of inquiry. First, in so called “future studies” sociologists have projected possible future developments and investigated how desired or feared states could be achieved or prevented. Second, the future orientation of actors itself has been studied as an object of sociological inquiry. This second approach proceeds from an understanding of perceptions of the future as a social fact: future orientations are seen as causal factors influencing social outcomes. In this article, we focus on the second line of inquiry [2]. How have sociologists worked empirically with perceptions of the future and analyzed them as social facts? We set out to explore this small but expanding research strand from sociology of knowledge perspective. Based on a qualitatively driven mixed methods analysis of 571 English language research articles we map the emergence and historical development of the field during the last seven decades. Capturing the main research topics, theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches, we show how knowledge about future perceptions is produced and what internal divisions govern this research field [3,4]. Complementing qualitative content analysis with elements of cluster and principal component analysis, we can show that the field of sociological research concerned with future orientations emerged from a relatively homogenous core in the 1950s and 1960s, and developed into a research field currently structured by three discernable clusters: the first one studies the future as a variable; the second is interested in what imaginaries of the future look like; and the third considers the contested processes in which future perceptions are constructed. The analysis indicates that these research clusters not only differ in their epistemological approaches but have also emerged at different points in time, were influenced by different sociological traditions and use different journals as outputs of their research [5].

Discussion

In sociology, the concept of the future as a social fact has garnered significant attention and debate. This notion posits that the future is not merely a temporal abstraction but rather a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by various societal factors such as culture, ideology, technology, and institutions [6]. Understanding how individuals and societies perceive and envision the future is crucial for comprehending social dynamics, decision-making processes, and collective behavior. One aspect of evaluating perceptions of the future in sociology involves examining how different social groups conceptualize and anticipate future possibilities. Studies have shown that perceptions of the future can vary widely across demographic, cultural, and socioeconomic lines. Factors such as optimism, pessimism, uncertainty, and risk perception play crucial roles in shaping individuals' attitudes towards the future [7]. Moreover, societal discourses, media representations, and political ideologies influence public perceptions of what the future holds.

Furthermore, the evaluation of perceptions of the future in sociology extends beyond individual beliefs to encompass collective imaginations and social narratives about the future. These narratives often reflect broader



societal concerns, aspirations, and fears, and they can shape public policy agendas, social movements, and cultural norms [8]. For example, utopian visions of the future may inspire activism and social change, while dystopian narratives may fuel anxieties and prompt calls for precautionary measures. Additionally, the study of perceptions of the future in sociology can shed light on the relationship between agency and structure in shaping future-oriented behaviors. While individuals possess agency in envisioning and shaping their futures, structural constraints and systemic inequalities can limit their ability to realize certain futures. Thus, sociological analyses of the future must consider the interplay between individual agency, social structure, and historical context [9].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the future as a social fact represents a multifaceted and dynamic area of inquiry within sociology. By evaluating perceptions of the future, sociologists can gain insights into the ways in which individuals and societies construct, interpret, and navigate temporal horizons. Recognizing the socially constructed nature of the future underscores the importance of considering diverse perspectives, power dynamics, and historical contingencies in understanding future-oriented phenomena. Moving forward, sociologists should continue to explore how perceptions of the future shape social processes, collective identities, and institutional practices. This necessitates interdisciplinary collaborations with scholars from fields such as psychology, anthropology, and futures studies to develop nuanced frameworks for analyzing future-oriented phenomena. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of the future as a social fact can inform efforts to address pressing social challenges, foster inclusive visions of the future, and promote collective well-being.

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