

Everyday Futures and Ethnographic Methods

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Abstract

This work explores the potential of ethnographic methods for understanding the future in everyday life. Based on a selective literature review, the paper discusses how ethnographic approaches enhance:

- The understanding of future-orientated practices and imaginaries;
- The analysis of possible futures of practices in everyday life;
- The integration of everyday analysis within an innovation process - forecasts, scenarios, etc. (design anthropology, for instance) or the proposition of alternative methods (narratives, etc.);
- The role of ethnographies in developing a shared idea of futures through collaborative work with research partners.

Introduction

This essay examines the connections between everyday life, futures and ethnographic perspectives, a set of complex relationships which cannot be fully developed here.ⁱ This introductory work will, therefore, with reference to relevant literatures, propose a series of questions and topics as an aid to further exploration of the subject. Harvey (2011), suggests that ethnography is ‘the way in which anthropologists explore people’s social worlds’ through the ‘analytical, theoretical and empirical’ where ‘the specific skills and practices of specific groups’ are understood relationally. Utilising the ‘specific modes of attention’ of ethnography, it will consider both how this method has a role in analysing everyday futures in contrasting social worlds, and how it might be usefully involved in discovering more about the process of innovation and the production of futures. It will discuss how ethnographic work - the coming together of different worlds in the course of a particular enquiry - might, by its very nature, be continually constructing different kinds of future.

Understanding future-orientated practices and imaginaries

People, in everyday life, partly think and act in relation to the “future” or potential futures. As Appadurai suggests (Appadurai, 2013, discussed by Elbez, 2014), anthropology is often focused on routines, stabilities and reproductions, but ethnographic methods might help an understanding of the “future” as a native category, that is to say, built by people. As E. T. Hall suggests, ‘Future, present and past are not only intellectual concepts’, but lived experience (quoted in Minvielle, Wathelet and Masson, 2016: 49). In particular, the “capacity to aspire” (term proposed by Appadurai) is not equally shared by all social groups. For instance, the lives of people having low and intermittent income are far more subject to uncertainty than those who are wealthy or with stable revenues. Anticipation of the future is less practical, when everyday life is a struggle.

Nonetheless, the practices of “savings” (energy, money, etc.), storage, scheduling of tasks, implementing “life projects”, the upbringing of children, anticipation of life changes (retirement preparation, ‘empty nests’ (children leaving home), professional changes, etc.) all represent a “projection” into futures that can be usefully studied with ethnographic methods.

Analysing the potential futures of practices and everyday life

Popular subcultures are arenas in which, through particular practices, a different kind of future might be rehearsed. So another means of getting to grips with the practices of the future, is to undertake ethnographic studies in social groups or movements that work on projects of change. Examples might be “energy communities”, the ‘Transition Town’ movement, or people and groups who work on political

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projects which aim to facilitate societal change, such as those who are considered “pioneers” in the use of technology or new ways of living (for instance, the group of “cultural creatives”, a name given by Ray and Anderson (2000) to people with a new lifestyle based on spirituality, social activism and environmental concern, who appeared in the 1990’s in the United States). These specific or alternative ways of life are inspiring, and there are some diffusions of elements (of their discourses and of their practices) in other social groups.

The ethnographic method might allow some understanding of how ideas on lived futures are diffused through networks and their attendant bridging mechanisms. The analysis of such practises, discourses and forms of diffusion can stimulate questions about the “power” and influence of such social groups, for example, asking how important can ‘the future’ be, if the power to make a future seems not to be in your own hands.

Ethnographic methods can also be used to understand the social, technical and imaginary histories of both ‘things’ and ‘humans’ through the tracing of their biographies, observation in the domestic context, and biographical interviews which reflect on past, present *and* future. For example, anthropologies of science and technology have used these methods to analyse the “cultural biography of things” (Kopytoff, 1986), where the journey of an object carries within it traces of the past, present and future, that is, their genealogies, trajectories, diffusions and evolutions during time. This may help to anticipate the potential futures of “families” of objects and imaginaries (what is persistent, what changes, where are the hybridisations). Minvielle, Wathelet and Masson (2016), for instance, suggest making the ‘future’ more ‘present’, through drawing on fictional and popular cultural accounts of the future and developing ‘future scenarios in order to build an alternative world view’.

This approach can help an understanding of the processes through which change might occur. For instance, there are some cycles in the history of innovation: a first step with “great” versus “dark” imaginaries, followed by hybridisations, and then trivialised practices, usages, appropriation and misappropriation. This cycle can provoke a second step of creative and innovative changes in the design of the product or service. Alternatively, the ‘Diderot Effect’ (McCracken, 1988) can be considered, that is how the introduction of a technology or service will change other parts of the social system.

New and innovative practices might be supported through the ethnographic process, and anthropological work can help prepare local groups, companies and public institutions for change. For example, the anthropologist Annette Henning (2005) worked with a public energy company to prepare the infrastructure of a new district heating system, specifically focussing on the relationships between infrastructures and people, and preparing them to connect to it. But taking into account the possible future, change is only potential contribution of this kind of applied ethnography. For instance, Pink and Mackley (2016) explain that they:

“do not consider [their] task to be simply to inform designers with ethnographic insights about what people do in their homes, which might then be used to inform ways of modelling either ‘personas’ to design for to the making of prototypes to be tested” (p. 184).

They would like their work to be used to “co-design” with their ethnographic partners and in particular to “design for improvisation”. For example in an analysis of the way people go to bed, night after night, they explored the “everyday idiosyncratic forms of making, which incrementally become habitual” (p. 184). Beyond the individual practice, the anthropologist analyses a social mechanism that seeks to appropriate space in unexpected ways (for instance, at work, creating socialising locations that are not designed for that). These kind of ethnographic findings were used in design and spatial planning, transforming “hijacked” spaces into “formal” spaces. But the mechanism of “hijacking” itself is hardly taken into account during the design process. This begs the question about cycles of design and use, and discipline-specific conceptions of

future everyday practices. Design may consider them as a misappropriation, whereas anthropology may consider them as a contingent appropriation, creating room for manoeuvre in reaction to the formal rules.

Ethnography is also used as a phase into the “design thinking process” - a method of innovation which connects user experience to creativity. Ethnographic participation in this process uses observations (user-centric approaches) to design problems, and uses this ‘data’ as the basis for exploring problems and subsequent alternative practice. On the basis of this, the design-thinking method then proposes ideas for new products or services, and is then in a position to explore some prototypes and business models.

Although it is not possible to fully anticipate future practices, there are some methods that can help us understand how practices are shaped. When an ethnography is not yet possible, because the future practice does not yet exist, interviews with social science experts is one way to connect diverse parts of a question about futures. For instance, in the 1990’s, when exploring the question of “how the baby boomers might act when they retire”, for a public company, Desjeux and Garabua-Moussaoui (2000) interviewed social scientists about the life cycle, social movements, activism, and collective identity of Baby Boomers, asking them for their expert point of view. Through connection, comparison and analysis, Desjeux and Garabua-Moussaoui were then able to propose some scenarios upon retirement of this particular social group.

Analysing who is producing futures

Ethnographic work can also reveal how the everyday work of building scenarios, forecasts, imaginaries and technologies of the future is done. Whilst everyone participates in the future as a cultural category, some are more directly involved in representing it. Firstly, there are the popular cultural productions of the future, for example, comic strips, cartoons, manga, sci-fi novels and movies. Secondly, there are ‘culture(s) of the future’ in the corporate world, a commercial culture of the future involving how companies speak to each other about their futures and their customers, the latter through advertising, and corporate movies amongst other forms. Thirdly, there is a “scientific” culture of the future consisting of, for example, futurologists and prospective forecasters.

All these categories are cultural: each society, at a specific period, defines its future(s) which often reveals as much about the present as the future. Ethnographers can observe and analyse this particular practice of defining and developing a future, for instance in studying how prospective futures might be implemented in a particular administration (Weber, 2015), or how anthropology and design are used in creative and innovative processes in a large company (Suchman, 2011). Suchman suggests that anthropology needs to be relocated. After a “turn toward ‘home’” in anthropology (reinvention following the awareness of its colonial history), Suchmann suggests that the direction of the discipline should now be from home to “locations characterised by their cultural familiarity and their political and economic centrality”, for example companies or Government departments. (2011:16). Suchmann has herself practiced this through “a long-term immersion within a site identified as a centre of innovation and future-making, which became [her] professional home” (1979-1999 at Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center (PARC)). (2011: 16).

Sharing futures

Ronnie Frankenberg (2008) suggests that: ‘The social future never (just) comes. Like all other imaginable phenomena surrounding social life on earth, it has to be produced through co-operative activity, if not purposefully and deliberately then, by default’. In the same article, he indicates that the process of ethnographic work, the relationship between the ethnographer and the community in which s/he works is one that necessarily is ‘a future producing’ process’, where the ‘present’ is always contingent on the future, even if that is only the next day. This method allows both the ethnographer and the community members or individuals she or he is working with, the ‘right to narrate’ (Bhaba, quoted in Frankenberg 2008) thereby suggesting the possibility of a shared dialogue between stranger and community member and the consequent revealing of agendas and narratives and thus the interweaving of different perspectives.

Therefore, the idea of immediate futures is one that both parties will discuss as part of everyday conversation, which then may stimulate a kind of co-production of futures. Frankenberg suggests, that:

“... ‘futures’ rather than being a separate dialogue about social reality, at most levels of discourse, consists, not in displaying an historic past nor in describing an ethnographic present, but in a continually contextualising reflexive process of producing hypothetical shared or unshared futures”.

Frankenberg (2008: X) goes further: “The job of the analyst (s) of the fleeting present is to uncover all the various theoretical possibilities embedded in the presentation of the perceived past and to decide which outcomes different categories of person in interaction will seek, and/or succeed in bringing about’, thereby suggesting that inherent in any dialogue are clues or hints about ‘possibilities’ and ‘outcomes’, which are about particular futures.”

Desmond (2016) in his ethnography of eviction discusses ways of being an ethnographer. He suggests that it is more than just a method, rather a ‘fundamental way of being in the world’, a ‘sensibility’ a means of ‘building rapport with the people you want to know better’, ‘observing and experiencing what they do, working and playing alongside them, and recording as much action and interaction as you can, until you begin to move like they move, talk like they talk, think like they think, and feel something like they feel’. Whilst the language here is somewhat casual (the use of ‘they’ is problematic), the suggestion that the ethnographer should get into the groove of life in the field, is one that has to be useful for any understanding of how ‘the future is imagined and shaped in everyday practices’. Laura Forlano (2013) reminds us that in order to make ethnography work in a future sense:

"... as ethnographers, it is not enough to describe social reality, to end a project when the last transcripts and field notes have been analyzed and written up. We must find new ways to engage and collaborate with our subjects (both human and nonhuman). We need better ways of turning our descriptive, analytical accounts into those that are prescriptive, and which have greater import in society and policy. We may do this by inhabiting narratives, generating artifacts to think with and engaging more explicitly with the people formerly known as our “informants” as well as with the public at large."

Conclusion

There is a challenge to observe what doesn't exist yet. We can see that ethnographic method helps to comprehend this paradox. Humans think and act in part according to futures; they may have some definitions of what might be the future; but these vary, depending on their forms of capital and other resources. We have here suggested, that this ‘suite’ of methods may help in an understanding of emergent ideas, experiences and practices through the highlighting of “lines”, the “wires”, between past, present and future; between practices, discourses and imaginaries; between conception and use; between disciplines which explore the future.

Even when studying our own society, anthropological methods are a means of shifting and decentering our vision, thereby facilitating an analysis of how people act, speak, and imagine futures but also to get beneath the skin of these practices and the social representations. At the same time we can investigate the people and social groups that work on the social production of futures and how power and agency are distributed amongst them.

The ‘results’ of ethnographies are partly integrated and embedded into innovation processes, through design, forecasts and scenarios. An applied anthropology is developing, named as ‘design anthropology’. Anthropology tries to find a place in the debates concerning futures, not only potential or probable futures, but also acceptable futures and desirable futures. Exploring alternative, informal, grassroots-based definitions of the future highlights the various ways in which a “good life” might be achieved. We conclude with Suchman and Tsing , ‘ ...futures can be enacted only in what Tsing (2005) names “the sticky materiality

of practical encounters . . . the makeshift links across distance and difference that shape global futures—and ensure their uncertain status” Tsing (2005, 1-2, quoted in Suchman 2011: 2).

Endnotes

ⁱ This work is the first stage of an investigation which will be developed more fully at a later date.

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