

Goals of Futures Studies (RC07)

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It is a pleasure and an honor to write a few words about the goals of futures studies, as requested by Reimon Bachika, President of the ISA Research Committee 07. Of the many specific objectives of futures studies, I believe that four are most important. They are the study of **images of the future**, their contents, causes, and consequences; and the study of the **three Ps: possible, probable, and preferable futures** (Bell 1997; Marien 2002).

“**Image of the future**” is a central concept in futures studies. Sociologists of the future, for example, find some of the chief determinants of human behavior not only in the social and cultural profiles and settings of individuals, but also in their images, anticipations, or visions of the coming future. As they travel through time, people orient and guide themselves and make choices and decisions, using to be sure their past experience and their beliefs about the present, but they also rely on their cognitive maps of the future (Bell 2002). Thus, investigating people’s images of the future—their expectations, their hopes, and their fears—contributes to an understanding of their behavior.

Images of the future may be powerful, dominant, and sweeping cultural imperatives or they may be deviant, subversive, and revolutionary threats to the status quo; and they may be small-scale, particular visions of individual futures or they may be widely shared images of the future of groups, organizations, or entire societies, even of the planet and the universe. Thus, they shape not only individual behavior, but also can influence the major trends of history.

Images of the future, of course, do not appear out of thin air. People create them, more or less consciously and intentionally. People invent them, elaborate them, teach them to others, and modify and reshape them. Thus, futurists also study how such images are formed, the conditioning and determining social factors that lead people to produce particular images of the future in given times and places.

Turning to the three Ps, let’s begin with **possible futures**. Present possibilities for the future are real. Present capacities of individuals, groups, and society for change, no matter how suppressed and unrecognized they may be, are factual. The potential for future development and growth exists in the present and, thus, can be investigated.

Consider a fragile glass that I hold in my hand. If dropped on a tile floor, it would break. Before it is dropped it is breakable. Yet it may never be dropped and may never actually be broken. It is part of the glass’s dispositional present that it could have a future in which it would be dropped and broken. The fact that it could be broken remains a real present possibility for its future. The same idea can be seen in the study of things that are soluble, heatable, combustible, expandable, or shrinkable. In fact, all words ending in “able,” “ible” or “uble” generally describe possibilities.

As futurists, we want to know not only what *was* and what *is*, but also what *could be*. The world is full of alternative ways of seeing, making, doing, and relating to others, and of things becoming different than they are or were. But often these alternative possibilities are unrecognized, as people trudge through their daily lives blindly following past routines of behavior. Thus, exploring the possible is to break out of the straitjacket of conventional thinking, to see the present in new and different ways, and,

hence, to expand the range of individual and social choice for the future.

Another futurist aim is the study of **probable futures**, how the world *will* likely be, i.e., the most probable future under particular assumptions within some stated time period. What will most probably happen if things continue as they are? What, to the contrary, would be the most probable future if we changed our behavior and did X or Y or Z? As we all know, a forecasting industry has developed, largely in response to the policy needs of knowing, reliably and validly, the probabilities of various future outcomes under different assumptions and contingencies. What is most probable, obviously, involves considerable knowledge about the phenomenon under study, including knowing causes and their effects.

Also, determining probable futures requires taking into account relevant feedback loops, including the self-altering properties of forecasts themselves. For social phenomena, forecasts—(contingent predictions or statements of probable futures)—are often mechanisms of social control. That is, they become the basis for decision-making and action that can affect the predicted outcome itself. Hence, such predictions may be self-fulfilling or self-negating. For example, how well children do in school is partly a response to the expectations of their teachers, a self-fulfilling prophecy. An example of a self-negating prophecy is a prediction of an oil shortage that leads to actions that either increase the supply of oil or lower the level of consumption of oil so that the shortage never actually occurs.

To become competent, effective, and responsible, people need to know what alternative futures are possible and what the probable futures will be, taking into account the consequences of their own acts and those of relevant others as well as the effects of social forces beyond their control.

But they need to know more if they are to make informed choices. They also need to know what is **preferable**, the relative desirability of the different alternative futures open to them.

To do this, futurists must study, evaluate, and apply human goals and values. They must concern themselves with the standards of evaluation that they use. Why, for example, is a sustainable society better than an unsustainable one? Why should present generations care for the well-being of future generations? Why should people want to cooperate with others, work toward a just society, desire peace and harmony, tell the truth, work hard, be loyal to others, respect authority, be generous, and so on?

The study of preferable futures includes studying the values people hold and their definitions of the good society. It includes constructing and justifying some objective standards of value judgments by which values and goals themselves can be evaluated. It includes, too, making traditional ways of value judging problematic and reexamining their possible future roles in society (Bachika 2002).

There are, of course, other, subsidiary purposes of futures studies, including exploring the theories of knowledge underlying assertions about the future, interpreting the past and orientating the present, integrating knowledge and values for planning social action, increasing democratic participation in imaging and designing the future, and, in some cases, communicating and advocating a particular image of the future. Then, there are the goals of teaching the perspectives and insights of futures studies to others (Dator 2002), building links between futures studies and its sister sciences, including sociology (Bell 1999, Masini 1999, Ruben and Kaivo-Oja 1999), and trying to

create and maintain the kind of society in which people are free to do futures research and to openly and critically discuss alternative possibilities and preferences for the future.

As we go about these specific tasks, we futurists, of course, should not lose sight of our most general objectives: to maintain or improve the freedom and well-being of humankind, including having a special concern for the welfare of future generations; and, some among us would add, a concern for the welfare of all living beings, plants, and the Earth's biosphere as well.

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Objectives of RC07

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A long experience in teaching and fieldwork in the area of Future Research seem to confirm the objectives of RC07. These objectives were set in Varna, Bulgaria, in the ISA Congress of 1970, when the Committee was first proposed and started by Bertrand de Jouvenel, the great French future thinker who initiated many groups in these studies. He also wrote a basic book on the art of conjecture (de Jouvenel 1964).

The objectives were and, I believe, are still very pertinent. First and foremost comes concern for the future. Considering what might happen in terms of consequences of present trends and of present and past decisions is important for all social sciences including sociology. As usually understood, the aim of sociology is to carefully assess and analyze the present so as to guide action. It is exactly this point that is very important and has become a pressing need as the years have passed by and changes have become more and more rapid and more interrelated. This itself shows the need for looking ahead. The second aim of RC 07 was, and is, to encourage an interdisciplinary approach to issues related to the future. A third aim is viewing values as a basic starting point of all futures studies as well as the content of its research. This third aim is touched on in this Newsletter by Reimon Bachika, who is much concerned with this issue.

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