

NOTE: This note was produced to assist colleagues active in the Collaboration of Science and Technology (COST) Action A22 to prepare their final reports. See www.costa22.org for details.

Dear COST Colleagues

Following a very interesting discussion during and after the Final MC in Brussels this week, We offer you some thoughts of guidance on how you might take account of the Action in your publications that are COSTA22-inspired. We refer in particular to the planned books and special editions.

The key idea from COSTA22 was a modernisation of methodology in support of the wider use of foresight methods amongst a diversity of contexts.

The aphorism <<from Oracles to Dialogue>> underlies an overt recognition of the socially constructed nature of <<knowledge about the future>> and the reflexivity that operates in constructing meaning from this knowledge.

The guidance note takes this discussion further. Please download it from this link on the COSTA22 web site, as it is too long to include in an email message.

Thanks

Ted Fuller and Peter De Smedt

Modernisation of foresight methodology: Reflexivity and the social construction of knowledge.

A note to authors in COSTA22

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In finalising the analyses of case studies in COSTA22, and in the assertion of particular methods or techniques, or configuration of techniques, a reflection of the more general themes arising from the overall Action would add presence to the major findings.

These findings are that:

- a) Foresight[1] is a professional practice that supports significant decisions, and as such it needs to be more assured of its claims to knowledge (methodology)
- b) Foresight is practiced across many domains and is not the preserve of specialised 'futurists', or indeed of foresight specialists. However, the disciplines of foresight are not well articulated or disseminated across domains, leading to re-inventions and practice that does not make best use of experience in other domains. The maintenance of a 'futures' elite will not serve the cause of society in producing and

responding to forward looks.

- c) While the above implies the necessity for evaluation and dissemination of foresight practice, this Action chose to focus on the modernisation of foresight methodology[2]. *The main finding in this respect was that foresight methodology lacks reflexivity.* Reflexivity is a relatively modern epistemological position in the social sciences. Its position is, simply, that social knowledge, including the interpretation and use of scientific knowledge, is created through the interactions between people (discourses, language, social action etc.), and this process gives rise to changes in self-identify, interpretation of meaning, practice and anticipations of the future.
- d) The methodological development of foresight in COSTA22 is firstly to empower the actors within the Action to make explicit, and reflect on, their implicit methodologies; secondly to begin to critique current practice from this perspective and thirdly, to begin to design foresight practice with greater reflexivity.
- e) The characterisation of a social constructionist approach was the aphorism, “from oracles to dialogue”, used in the final conference, and indicating a move from ‘given’ expert-predicted futures to one in which futures are nurtured through the dialogue between “stakeholders”, i.e. those with a stake in the future of the particular issue under study.

Therefore, in producing your accounts of foresight, it would be consistent with the findings of the Action to state in what ways your publication reflects the above perspective.

1. How does your reflection on practice or methodology help you to articulate the explanation as to “How we know?” (see below), or the limitations on “how we know” in the context of your foresight study or practice?
2. What is your critique of the implicit methodology and more importantly, of the knowledge produced (i.e. a critical reading of the outcomes of the foresight practice), from the perspective that knowledge of the future is socially constructed?

For instance

2.1 Which particular groups were privileged or dominant in the establishment of the terms of reference of the study, the problem articulated, the questions asked?

2.2 By whom and in what ways were the analytical frames of reference and patterns established?

2.3 Similarly, by whom and in what ways were the conceptualisations used in synthesising results developed? What discourses were inherent in the dissemination of these?

3. To what extent was there a generative process of knowledge creation as a result of the combinations (and dialogue) of stakeholders, i.e., the emergence of ideas and practice – solutions to puzzles perhaps – that were uniquely developed from the

interactions? For instance, a cross-over or cross-fertilisation of methods or ideas from one domain to another (e.g. social to scientific)

4. What reflexivity is apparent in the way in which the creation of knowledge by participants gave rise to meaning, which in turn had performative effects on those participants, i.e. changed their sense of priority, or practice, or identity?

The notes below may help or hinder your understanding. They are abstracted from Fuller and Loogma "Constructing futures; a social constructionist perspective on foresight methodology" References are given in this paper.

This is published on the COST website / WG0 and is forthcoming in Futures Journal (The Special edition from COSTA22).

Social Construction of knowledge

The central idea of social construction is that whenever we employ words or other symbols to refer to objects in our social world, we are constructing them, quite literally, as meaningful social objects that we can take account of in our actions. There are several forms of constructivism/constructionism and the "common thread between all forms of constructivism is that they do not focus on an ontological reality, but instead on the constructed reality." .

Reflexivity

The concept of reflexivity is consistent with a constructivism, and in particular that our self-identities and social identity are shaped through the interaction with others and the knowledge available to us. Such identities are the result of how people meaningfully regard their actions, and how their identities and interpretations of the external world are constructed and reconstructed from their continuing experiences of that world. This provides what Maturana and Varela called 'structural plasticity', i.e. the power of individual interactions to reshape and create meaning in and of society.

Methodologically, reflexivity is a description of the performative power of social discourse. It suggests that by engaging in reflections of futures, which directly challenge self and community identity, people can produce change. It also suggests [] that reflexivity is an ongoing process, producing ever-changing ontologies and discourses, and that any captured articulation of a view of the future is an abstraction of time and space.

The methodological implications of foresight as a social construction

Methodological choice depends on the intention or puzzle to be 'solved', and in relation to this, the context. There are many different aims of foresight activities including decision-making, learning, exploration of possibilities, articulation of desirable outcomes, sharing of knowledge, persuasion, encouraging action etc. These aims are set in many different contexts and are concerned with phenomena that behave in many different ways, i.e. have particular ontologies. The commonality is that foresight activities produce

knowledge in relation to a future time and such instrumental knowledge is generated by social action, e.g. discourse, language, negotiation.

It appears that social constructionism is highly resonant with the production of foresight knowledge. Central to foresight methodologies is the way in which knowledge is produced and used. Methodologically, the accuracy of the knowledge is less significant than the process by which the knowledge is produced. Gergen says that social constructionism has no position on relativism. However we argue that foresight does have a position on how the salience, accuracy and relevance of knowledge is accepted, rejected, modified and used by society. What is crucial to foresight methodology is an explicit reflection on how, with what legitimacy, and to what social good, knowledge is produced. These issues can be addressed methodologically through the perspective of social constructionism.

This is not to say that the content of knowledge about the future is irrelevant, but quite the opposite. Relativism can be extremely dangerous in the creation of futures. An understanding of social constructionism is essential for the moral and physical futures of humanity. (Socially constructed) knowledge is fallible, partial, privileged and contestable. The process of social constructionism produces new knowledge, not as a matter of empirical discovery, but as a process of creation.

Knowledge as a creative social process is a powerful explanation for the unpredictability of futures. The future is built on the creation of knowledge and on the way this knowledge guides everyday choices. Work associated with anticipating the unpredictable is constitutive of the future. What is taken as knowledge about the future becomes empirical. The powers that are enacted by and through such knowledge are real. It is essential that such work is methodologically robust.

The analysis in this paper has indicated some of the ways in which social constructionism guides the focus for designing robust foresight methodologies. At an overarching level is the central concept that knowledge, meaning and subsequent actions are produced through the interactions between people. In relation to some of the specific characteristics of foresight methodology, this perspective requires that claims to knowledge should take an explicit account of the:

- Construction of time within the context of the study at hand.
- Power manifest in representational choice
- Performative power of symbolic representations
- Mode by which domain knowledge is produced
- Meaning generated by the community that engages, and what performative power such engagement has
- Degree to which the production of meaning must be embedded in its constituency, in relation to the responsibility taken for subsequent actions
- Performative power of social discourse and challenges to self and community identity
- Dominant discourses and languages through which participation in the generation

of knowledge actually occurs

- Interaction between knowledge and action
- Values that accompany the interpretation of meaning

Foresight is both a social construction and a mechanism for social construction. Foresight, as a concept and as practice, is a social construction; there are many examples of how society accepts the value and necessity of anticipating and contemplating futures (e.g. risk assessment, planning, storage and tool-making), so these activities are done. These acts, often institutional, and which are part of everyday life and constitute preparation for the future, are socially constructed. Foresight as a process of contemplating futures is a mechanism for the social construction of knowledge. In the process of enacting foresight programmes and processes, people construct knowledge. Thus most significantly for this article, foresight methodology, the processes and perspective that provide an explanation of 'how we know' something, is a mechanism for the social construction of knowledge.

The above analysis has demonstrated that far from being a 'new idea' social constructionism has been implicit in the foundations of modern (and post-modern) futures studies. We have shown that this is implicit in the way that more overtly constructivist accounts (visions, hopes and fears, imagination etc) have been assumed to somehow form collective meaning and action and implicit also in the confluence of epistemological and ontological relativism. However, because a constructionist perspective has been implicit, the well grounded foundations of futures studies are open to less than rigorous interpretation. We started this article by considering the place of symbols in the articulation of futures. It is easy to produce symbols of possible futures and in doing so make claims to knowledge about the future. Foresight methodologies that produce symbols without regard to inter-subjective meaning neither anticipate, nor produce futures.

[1] *Foresight*

The Action was comprised mainly of various actors who recognised themselves as being involved in some way with the practice of 'foresight'. The great strength of the Action was that the contexts and types of activity varied. No one definition or version of 'foresight' emerged from the action, nor was that singularity expected. It can be assumed that 'foresight' broadly means the practice of making 'forward looks', of anticipating change, or making studies of future possibilities.

[2] Methodology is also a word with multiple meanings. It is necessary to distinguish "methodology" from "method". Method implies techniques or processes with some form of logical structure and activity, which can be carried out with a degree of consistency. . Methodology is a more substantial concept meaning 'methods of knowing', i.e. an explanation of 'how we know' something, which implies an explicit epistemological account. A methodology needs to be appropriate to the nature of the object under study and the purpose and expectation of the study. Methodologies require us to make explicit assumptions of what the world is and what stands for knowledge.