Accepted Manuscript

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Author: Martin Rhisiart Guest editor Roberto Poli Guest editor Simon Brooks Guest editor

PII: S0016-3287(15)00094-4
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.futures.2015.07.010
Reference: JFTR 2045

To appear in:

Received date: 19-7-2015
Accepted date: 20-7-2015

Please cite this article as: Martin Rhisiart, Roberto Poli, Simon Brooks, Ethical issues in futures studies: theoretical development and applications, Futures http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2015.07.010

Ethical issues in futures studies: theoretical development and applications

Guest Editors
Dr Martin Rhisiart, University of South Wales, Wales, UK
martin.rhisiart@southwales.ac.uk
Prof. Roberto Poli, University of Trento, Italy Roberto.Poli@unitn.it
Dr Simon Brooks, Swansea University, Wales, UK S.B.Brooks@swansea.ac.uk

Ethics, norms and standards have been regular points of discussion in futures studies for several decades (for example, Dror, 1973; Masini et al 1976; Bell, 1993; Slaughter, 1999). The definition of ethical guidelines and standards has been part of a broader endeavour of establishing futures as a field of study and practice, 'validated' by reference both to philosophical themes and common professional norms. These are ongoing questions for the futures community, as evidenced by recent discussions that have taken place in two of its most eminent professional fora, the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) and the Association of Professional Futurists (APF). A 2012 publication by the APF, which looks at the future of futures, raises the issue of attaining a more robust disciplinary status. A key stimulus for this Special Issue was a discussion initiated within the WFSF, which has maintained an interest in this area since its early years.

The future is a concern for ethics – in the same way that ethics is a concern for futures. Philosophers and social theorists – from Kant to Habermas – have constructed frameworks that can be used to guide (future) action. Bell (1997) provides a thoughtful and comprehensive account of the role of values and ethics in futures studies, which remains one of the most significant contributions to this discussion. Poli (2011) discusses a number of ethical questions for the field, and a deontological code for futurists.

Broadly interpreted, the Special Issue brings together two categories of papers: those with a primary focus on theoretical or conceptual development (Poli; Ahlqvist and Rhisiart; Dolan); and those with an applied focus where ethical issues are surfaced in different settings or themes (Kurki and Wilenius; Bateman; Celaschi and Celi; Gary and von der Gracht).

Poli surveys the contours of a theoretically rich landscape for futures studies, departing from a review of the Capability Approach developed principally by Sen and Nussbaum. The paper sets out key elements of the Capability approach, inherent in which are the capacities that enable people to lead a good life. Overlapping and distinctive features of the main works on the Capability approach are brought into focus, contrasting Sen's emphasis on developing a general framework of assessing quality of life for people in different settings, and Nussbaum's concern for developing a theory of justice. Using key tenets and concepts from existing contributions, Poli focuses on articulating a more explicit exposition of the future orientation of the Capability approach. At the heart of the Capability approach lie two connected attributes for agents: that they have

physiological and psychological enabling capacities, and that they have opportunities to exercise these capacities freely. He uses the notion of 'developing agents' ('what s/he will become') and three categories of 'person': biological, psychological and social. Within a futures studies perspective, these arguments can be framed as following: which capacities are needed to conceive of open futures that are liberated from legacy and domination from the past? How can these liberate or enable agents to exercise choices and futures capacities? The discussion is further developed around the vitality of dynamic systems and, in particular, the Discipline of Anticipation – one of most important areas of theoretical development for futures studies in the past decade. The paper draws these strands together and sets forth three overarching recommendations – a futures ethics framework. Whilst Poli acknowledges that this is still an emerging theoretical landscape, the recommendations offer ethical and practical challenges to institutions, policy-making and those engaged professionally in futures work.

Drawing from research in other areas – particularly bioethics - Dolan's paper discusses the applicability of the principle of informed consent to futures studies, using data gathered from academic and professional networks. He probes the understanding, activities and attitudes of futurists towards the principles of informed consent. In the 'nexus of biological and social sciences' there is already a strong futures orientation, for example in the bioethics of neuro enhancement. Dolan goes further in discussing the information, willingness and understanding of human subjects across a range of activities typically undertaken by futures researchers. From this discussion, he sets the challenge of enlarging the social construction of informed consent – from the individual to the collective policy and legal levels. This is a call to action that is addressed to many other fields – not just futures studies. Dolan also raises an interesting issue on the professionalization and institutionalization of futures studies – based on the discussion of informed consent: the role of futures experts on governance and review bodies for research.

Ahlqvist and Rhisiart's paper draws on critical theory, revisiting notable contributions and junctures in the development of futures studies. They argue that the growth of futures and foresight within governmental and business environments has been accompanied by increasing instrumentality, where critical and alternative worldviews are generally lacking. The authors offer three directions or pathways for critical development within futures studies – through socio-technical practices; future-oriented dialectics, and socio-economic imaginaries.

The professional and ethical standards of those engaged in futures work have been raised and revisited by a number of authors over the years (including Bell, and Slaughter). Gary and von der Gracht expand on these debates in new ways in their paper on the future of foresight professionals. Using a Real-Time Delphi study, they have analysed the judgements of 142 experts across 29 countries on

several aspects of 'professionalisation' of futures studies and work to 2030. One of the key propositions explored by the authors is the desirability and likelihood of certification in futures studies, akin to the process of professionalization – or formation of professional communities for other occupational groups. The paper deftly reviews the evolution and profile of certified professionals from a historical perspective, emphasizing the importance of socialization and capacity to affect perceptions, positions and ability to practice in the market. Indeed, the market – and market strategy – is an interesting dimension of the conceptual model developed by Gary and von der Gracht. They employ Porter's Five Forces model of competitive advantage to explore the views of experts in the field on the threat of substitutes, new entrants, the power of buyers and the power of suppliers (four of Porter's five forces; the other force, rivalry is not explicitly addressed in the survey). Pursing an interesting methodological approach, they cluster the respondents of surveyed experts into three pathways or scenarios: assimilation, academicisation and certification. Assimiliation is the expected (and most desired) future – where other professions have absorbed foresight methods and toolkits. The least likely – and least desirable – was certification; the likelihood of a global body setting and upholding standards for futurists in 2030 was estimated at 24 per cent. These results provide interesting insights from the foresight community – new insights on well rehearsed questions of who or what should be responsible for professional standards within futures work. This suggests that the onus will remain on the market and the professional associations and networks operating in the futures field.

Kurki and Wilenius explore emergent, socially responsible models of enterprises that are driven by resource efficiency values. They adopt the theoretical lenses of Kontratiev and Schumpter on 40-60 year technology waves, disruptive installations that drive new categories of economic activities, work and skills. Adopting these macro-level perspectives on technology, the economy and socio-technical practices, the authors discuss the possibility that the 2008 financial crisis has precipitated the decline of the fifth technology wave (the information age, since the 1970s). In their paper, Kurki and Wilenius put forward the proposition that resource efficiency – and the accompanying technologies and socio-technical practices – will be at the heart of the sixth technology wave. Their research is based on the practices and attitudes of business owners and employees of five case study organisations in Silicon Valley. These can be interpreted as disruptive and emergent modes of operating – that incorporate elements such as the sharing economy and microtasking. For these businesses, acting ethically was not compartmentalized within corporate social responsibility policies but rather embedded within the fundamental approach of the company – being a resource efficient, responsible organization. The paper suggests that these values and practices constitute weak signals of potentially mainstream models of working and behaving in the sixth wave.

Education is, perhaps, the field in which the importance and claims of futures studies are most readily recognized. The learning of students – through

educational philosophy, pedagogy and content – provides critical capacities and thinking tools for young people to imagine and create futures. In her paper, Bateman addresses several ethical issues in education through action research conducted with two schools at elementary and high school levels. Whilst students may often encounter societal challenges and grand narratives of possible futures through the curriculum (e.g. environmental degradation and climate change), the paper skillfully illustrates how employing futures techniques in the classroom shifts the nature of engaging with these themes from a narrow, passive to an open, active mode. Indeed, the study recounts the dilemmas where the worldviews of students, parents, teachers and policy collide. The paper illustrates the comparative ease with which the aspirations and futures of students are (unwittingly) closed by others. It's a very salutary reminder that many educational systems do not equip their learners to think and act in open futures. Teachers deserve support and encouragement to embed futures approaches within the curriculum and pedagogy. The ethical discussions emerging from these encounters need to be facilitated with care and sensitivity.

Design is a tangible manifestation of bringing future needs and expectations into the present. Celaschi and Celi discuss the role of Advanced Design (ADD) – a branch of industrial design that focuses on the conceptual, long-term future – and its reflection on ethics, responsibilities and views of time. They argue that designers – through ADD – have an important and enabling role in mediating between different needs, people and themes: between roles and actors, between knowledge, and between identities. There is an interesting and growing body of literature on images, probes and visualization of possible futures (see for example, the Special Issue published by *Futures* on 'Exploring Future Business Visions Using Creative Fictional Prototypes': Graham et al. 2013; Rhisiart, 2013). Celaschi and Celi set out the case for theory building and integration between ADD, anticipation and futures studies. This offers scope for conceptual development and the delivery of practical application in the design field.

The papers published in this Special Issue illustrate ethical issues that are being addressed by those engaged in the futures field. There is a common thread that runs through all of the papers in this Special Issue: the importance of developing the futures field with other application environments and other branches of knowledge. Ethical issues are framed and rehearsed across a range of settings (exemplified in this Special Issue in organisational decision-making, industry approaches, and education), highlighting future-oriented questions in everyday practices. Enhancing engagement with social theory, philosophy and other areas strengthens the conceptual (and practical) frameworks for addressing ethical issues in futures studies. This Special Issue makes a contribution to this rich and important topic, which we hope will stimulate further contributions to knowledge through commentary, case studies and theoretical development, as well as supporting reflective practice.

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