

Embracing difference and cultivating hope: The transformative potential of Possibility Studies

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pst**Wendy Ross**

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Abstract

This ending commentary on this inaugural issue of *Possibility Studies and Society* surveys the papers submitted by over 30 scholars from diverse fields and backgrounds that explore the emerging field of Possibility Studies through the lens of their respective disciplines and theoretical perspectives. It draws out the complexities of the really and ideally possible, the future and the past, and reality and imagination before moving to examine the purpose of Possibility Studies with a focus on political change, education, and hope. It calls for an embrace of non-dualistic attitudes across all domains and an engagement with the energy generated by collaborative difference.

Keywords

Future Studies, hope, modernity, Possibility Studies

This first issue of *Possibility Studies and Society* brings together over 30 scholars from diverse fields and backgrounds to explore the emerging field of Possibility Studies through the lens of their respective disciplines and theoretical perspectives. Our hope is that the ideas expressed in this collection will lay the foundation for further research in this field and inspire deeper examination of the synergies and contrasts between different viewpoints. To guide the reader in this exploration, we conclude with a reflection on some of the underlying themes that unite these truly diverse perspectives.

All contributors in this collection were provided with Glăveanu's (2023) manifesto, which outlines 15 core principles of Possibility Studies, as a starting point for their reflections. While some authors draw explicitly on these principles, others take a broader perspective. Nonetheless, what emerges from this diverse

range of papers is a shared recognition of the value of a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of possibility, which occupies a central, albeit often implicit, role in various fields. From archaeology to Future Studies, geopolitical considerations to developmental trajectories, the importance of possibility in shaping human experience – from creativity to hope to education – is a recurring theme throughout.

Possibility is widely regarded as a fundamental aspect of human experience, stemming from the extraordinary human ability to engage in hypothetical thinking or imagining what does not yet exist (Byrne, 2023; Valsiner, 2023). According to Baumeister and Alquist (2023),

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the capacity to conceive and act upon multiple possibilities is a unique characteristic of humans and is central to the human condition. Knight and Manley (2023), drawing on Heidegger, argue that possibility is not only an essential component of being but also a fundamental responsibility for humans to fulfil. Valsiner (2023) characterizes possibility as a “central pathway for the human psyche”.

As Magnani (2023) contends, humans are ‘possibility-generating machines’ which may explain why numerous disciplines emphasise the distinctively human ability to hope, imagine, and envision new possibilities for environmental action, justice, and peace (Glăveanu, 2023). It is crucial to recognise, however, that these appeals to fundamental human characteristics are challenged by other writers (particularly Harris, 2023), who reject the dualism implied by such human exceptionalism and advocate for an entanglement of human and non-human elements. Moreover, several authors (such as Meyer, Montuori and Meretoja) highlight that the concept of a single human experience overlooks those who are not involved in dominant narratives. Despite these critiques, an underlying consensus among the papers suggests that engaging with possibilities is a fundamental capacity, albeit one that may be constrained by circumstances.

Glăveanu’s (2023) fifth principle in his manifesto posits that possibility is rooted in difference, and the papers in this collection demonstrate the value of embracing diversity. While many academic fields pay lip service to interdisciplinarity, genuine multi and inter-disciplinary work is complex and demands that readers adopt perspectives beyond their own. Yet, as Harris (2023) argues in their paper, this challenge is an opportunity to expand our thinking and push ourselves to grapple with difficult questions. Emerging from the multiplicity of disciplinary allegiances represented in this collection, there are underlying fundamentals of possibility that unite these diverse voices. This is a tangible manifestation of the generative nature of difference. By embracing diverse

theoretical and methodological perspectives, we can develop foundational concepts that are truly transdisciplinary, advancing the study of possibility in exciting new directions.

We trust that readers will appreciate the plurality of perspectives represented in this issue, and the similarities and differences that emerge. What each of the contributors has emphasised is the urgent need to examine human thought, relationships, and becoming through the lens of possibility, particularly considering the complex and intractable problems we face in our post-normal world (Montuori, 2023). For the more hopeful of the writers here, humanity is at a crossroads, many others see human progress as stagnating and coalescing into a single form. By embracing possibility, we can unlock new ways of thinking and acting that help us confront these challenges with creativity, resilience and, importantly, with hope.

The heart of possibility: Navigating complexity and rejecting dualism

At the centre of the concept of possibility lies a pairing of opposites that challenges the binary thinking of modernity, inviting us to explore the space of contradictions that lies between. We use the word ‘pairing’ to emphasise both difference and connectedness, reflecting the complex and dynamic nature of possibility. We follow Harris (2023) in asserting that opposites and tensions are not necessarily binaries or dualisms. In his paper, Poli (2023) delves into this complexity by distinguishing between two understandings of possibility - the epistemological and the ontological. According to Poli (2023), the former refers to what is *conceptually* possible, while the latter refers to what is *truly* possible. Crucially, what is conceptually possible always includes the possibility of nonbeing – disjunctive possibility – whereas what is *truly* possible does not. Our understanding and assessment of the distinction between the really and ideally possible leads to the overlap with numerical assessments of probability that guide our future action (Johnson-Laird, 2023). By

acknowledging this distinction, we can deepen our understanding of possibility and recognise its full potential for generating new insights and ways of thinking.

As a future-oriented discipline, possibility inherently delves into the unknown and uncertain (Damhof, 2023), obscuring the boundary between the possible and the impossible. Baron (2023) proposes distinguishing between possibilities and opportunities, with the former referring to potential future outcomes and the latter to possibilities that can evolve into tangible realities. Conversely, Bassett and Zurn (2023) emphasise the concept of real possibility, which is grounded in the present rather than in hypothetical or formal possibilities. Regardless of the specific definition, it is evident that for many possibility necessitates actual manifestation, both for the original thinker and in interactions with others.

The tension between these two interpretations of possibility (the real and the ideal) underpins many of the themes emerging in these inaugural papers. Throughout this collection, previously distinct concepts become intermingled; the possible relies on the impossible, the future shapes the past in a recursive pattern, and the roles of the real and imaginary overlap and even invert. Grasping the possible also necessitates methodological adaptability and a readiness to cross disciplinary boundaries. Framing the actual possible and the ideal possible as mutually exclusive opposites perpetuates a binary, a kind of Cartesian dualism that contrasts the external world (the actual) with the internal world (the ideal). The contributors to this collection identify this dualism as particularly unhelpful, but across the perspectives we find that the solution is not to merge the two but rather to maintain a dialogue between the contradictions. Accomplishing this is no easy task.

Further complicating matters, Ormerod (2023) demonstrates that possibilities are not only situational properties but are also influenced by the expertise and interactions of the thinkers involved, making the possibility space

fluid and relational. Meyer (2023) highlights this relational aspect of possibility, asserting that what is possible is also a socio-cultural phenomenon shaped by the surrounding context (see also Knight & Manley, 2023). Bassett and Zurn (2023) observe that while numerous possibilities exist, it is curiosity which enables us to recognise and act upon them. Meretoja (2023) adds that the construction of possibilities is intertwined with power relations and networks. As we explore in greater detail below, the concept of possibility is continually reconstructed through narration and experience, reflecting its dynamic and multifaceted nature.

All contributors convey a sense that we are at a critical juncture in history, resulting from the failure of the Western project of modernity. For instance, Pickering (2023) addresses the despair characteristic of the modern world by examining the most problematic worldviews, as they shape our actions and interactions. He specifically points out the dualistic ontology, as it frames our actions as ‘acting on’ rather than ‘acting with’. This sentiment resonates with Sobe’s (2023) reflection on the role of children in education, questioning if education is something done to children or with them. Meyer (2023) similarly observes that modernity and linear conceptions of causation can depict ‘traditional’ peoples as confined to cyclical time, reinforcing the otherness of non-Western cultures. Gergen (2023) encourages us to abandon an ontology of separation, acknowledging the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things.

Escobar (2023) contends that renouncing the modernity project necessitates erasing unhelpful dualisms and centring those previously excluded from academic endeavours. Pickering (2023) concurs, finding hope in the margins, in the space surrounding those normally omitted from traditional academic narratives. Likewise, Facer (2023) urges transcending linear conceptions of time and eschatological narratives that exclude other timescapes. As she remarks, a Western notion of apocalypse is nonsensical to those who have already endured upheaval. Renzulli

(2023) posits that rejecting single-perspective thinking will render our possibilities fundamentally more real by making them imaginable.

By contesting binaries and dualistic thinking and by emphasising pairing and relations, the study of possibility provides a space to appreciate difference. Importantly, these binaries are not collapsed but held in productive tension. Possibility lies not in similarity but in difference, encompassing both ideal and real possibility. Rather than viewing these as opposing forces, possibility embraces the tension between them, acknowledging the potential for productive exchange and transformation arising from their interaction.

Possibility and time: The rhythm of the past and the future

Possibility is inherently focused on the future. Baumeister and Alquist (2023) contend that the past is fixed and void of possibilities, while the future offers a realm of alternative possibilities. This idea mirrors the distinction between ideal and real possibilities, as only the future can transform the impossible into the possible or convincingly reveal the impossibility of the possible. Valsiner (2023) adds that possibility is a human construct concerning the future, believed to exist in the present, emphasising its future-oriented nature. Although possibility influences our understanding of the past, it can only fully manifest in the future.

Glăveanu's manifesto highlights the significance of Future Studies and interdisciplinary collaboration for understanding possibility, acknowledging the crucial role that studying the future has in unveiling potential opportunities. Folk thinking often idealises the future as a distant, hopeful place abundant with possibilities. From this perspective, the present may appear bleak, making possibility essential for envisioning a positive future. As Glăveanu (2023) points out, dreaming of a positive future amid current challenges can be considered bold, with the future becoming a utopia of limitless possibilities. This idealised vision can serve as a source

of hope and inspiration, guiding our actions in the present and shaping future possibilities. However, this approach risks creating a "faux possibility", as Bassett and Zurn (2023) describe it – a set of empty promises or a "banal commonplace" (Sobe, 2023).

One of the initial challenges a science of possibility presents to Western modernity is questioning the linear concept of time, where the future and past are separate and distinct (Meyer, 2023). While it may seem trivial to note that we can only live in the present, this simple statement is crucial for understanding how the past and future can only be human constructs mediated through memory or projects. Challenging these notions enables archaeologists and social historians to contribute to this issue, celebrating the realm of possibilities. Although the past is fixed, its effects and our interpretations of it are not. In narratives, the past is constantly evolving, much like the future, with both being shaped by our present experiences (Hanchett Hanson, 2023). Facer (2023) argues that our world is shaped by temporal frames, which in turn structure the narratives we create about the world and guide our understanding and focus. Fixed temporal narratives obscure the plurality of such narratives, and as Facer points out, the potential for possibility lies in the differences between temporal rhythms. Disciplines examining time and development face a complex relationship with these aspects, as Meyer (2023) outlines. The past can either inform the future according to linear growth theories, or be entirely constructed, restricting its influence to the social world it belongs to. Neither approach is completely satisfactory. Time is *both* linear and constructed. Consequently, the emergence of possibility necessitates multiple timescapes and arises in the gaps between them.

While the past doesn't determine the future, it does inform it, with the present altering visions and interpretations of the past. Byrne (2023) suggests, for example, that engaging in counterfactual thinking or re-evaluating past possibilities serves as a catalyst for future

action, rather than being about the past – present rumination on the past priming for future action. Memory plays a role in constructing our future, as we can use imaginary memory traces to contrast and face significant events, like a 71st birthday (Valsiner, 2023). Hanchett Hanson (2023) notes that viewing past, present, and future as distinct from a Bergsonian perspective overlooks the world's state of *becoming*. Seligman (2023) challenges traditional notions of agency's influence by socio-historical events, suggesting psychological states can generate socio-cultural change just as socio-cultural change influences psychological states. Cause and effect are difficult to disentangle.

As well as rethinking our view of the past, linear time is also unhelpful in understanding the future. Harris (2023), referencing Haraway, warns against making the future a safe space, as it drains the present of possibility. Freeman (2023) also points out the danger of luxuriating in despair about the future, which can lead to inaction in the present. The future is not a repository for the hopes that we cannot realise in the present but is constructed by the present while simultaneously directing it (Sobe, 2023). These notions lead to a looping rather than linear notion of the idea of time. As Bassett and Zurn (2023) suggest, drawing from Hobbes, the function of curiosity is to 'exploit the possibilities implicit in the present moment – to effect a different, more desirable future'.

Linear notions of time are closely connected to Western ideas of progress and novelty, based on the premise that the past is fixed and causally influences the future. These views rely on the novelty bias discussed by Bassett and Zurn (2023) and are closely associated with colonialist notions that portray 'traditional' people as lacking progress (Meyer, 2023). Moreover, this perspective on progress is rooted in productivity and commercialism, resulting in relentless and irresponsible consequences (Harris, 2023). Due to these concerns, Escobar (2023) warns against embracing linear time as a facet of modernity because of its exclusionary nature, a sentiment shared by other authors.

Additionally, we operate under a post-Enlightenment social representation of temporal and social progress as linked and in step – as we advance through time, we advance socially. This is why Meyer (2023) is cautious of linear time and the underlying assumption that other cultures are somehow 'primitive'. For Freeman (2023), there is a linear advance in time towards a world where progress has been reversed. In this vision, social progress runs counter to temporal progress, further complicating the relationship between time and progress, advance and regress. Freeman's fears, along with those articulated by Sternberg and Fischer (2023), are that linear progress leads to a world in a state of social regress, where possibilities are restricted. For Sternberg and Fischer (2023), this is marked by a rise in authoritarian regimes which reject the fundamental political equality of democracy, however imperfect. Despair here is marked by the disruption of the Enlightenment contract that promised societal progress in line with temporal progress. As we will see below, this despair can be somewhat mitigated by moving away from the notion of a march towards a singular future that cultural imagination has started to solidify and opening up the possibilities of change and different future narratives. Such a change also reminds us, as Faggin (2023), and Baumeister and Alquist (2023) note, that we do not live in a deterministic universe, which has implications not only for individual free will but also for societal futures.

For many contributors, the importance of moving beyond linear conceptions of time lies in the potential for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of different timescapes, which in turn removes some boundaries to our perception of progress. By broadening the temporal scope, we can open up the experience of progress to various different perspectives, values and social groups, a necessary step for social advancement as Escobar emphasises. However, more than just an ethical stance, the core philosophy of Possibility Studies suggests that possibility can be found in differences

and the intersections of multiple perspectives, making the deconstruction of linear time crucial. Time, as a narrative, tends to only include those voices loud enough to be heard. Including the perspectives of those for whom progress has not been linear in our accounts of humanity is not only a social imperative but also holds significant intellectual and academic value.

Ultimately, attributing causality to either the past or the future absolves us of responsibility in the present. The possible is shaped by both the future and the past, but it primarily resides in the present, where our actions generate possibilities for the future and for the past. As Damhof (2023) contends, what truly matters is how we use the future to shape the present. Through the interplay of past and future that possibility not only permits but encourages, we are drawn to focus on the present, for it is here that possibilities are both created and realised, giving birth to future and past. As Sobe emphasises, this is not trivial; it is vitally important that we bring the future into the present.

Reality and imagination

Perhaps the most frequently mentioned complexity at the heart of ruminating on the possible is the difference between what Poli (2023) calls ‘really possible’ and ‘ideally possible’. Really possible refers to those things that currently exist while ideally possible carries with it the understanding of future projection and, crucially, includes the impossible. The really possible is grounded in the actual while the ideally possible is a product of a fertile human imagination. It is this second understanding of possibility that many of our contributors explore in more depth. For example, Baumeister and Alquist (2023) ask us to complement our work on the perception of what *is* there with understanding how people know what *could be* there. There is complexity in the relations between these two understandings. Possibility is at once the highly probable and the extremely improbable (Poli, 2023). It is not clear we are yet able to fully make sense of this contradiction.

Rather though than aiming to make sense, Possibility Studies is founded on accepting that human definitions are open and unfinished. Brillenburg Wurth (2023) describes something living as something which cannot be pinned down to a single meaning. The two meanings can contradict and co-exists and it is for us to become comfortable with that.

Of course, part of the attraction of possibility thinking is the notion that we cannot clearly predict what is impossible and so the distinction between possibility and impossibility is unclear. This allows playing with the impossible and expanding its reach. For many, what is possible and what is impossible is not fixed but, rather, is deeply tied up with political notions of power. For Escobar (2023) the project of modernity has decided what is possible and what is not possible. The unknowing which marks the future – is it possible or not – is what sparks hope for Freeman (2023). For him, our supposed final ‘state’ of awareness is actually temporary, to be swept aside by unimaginable events. This unknowing marks our experience with the future and our imagination. There is a paradoxical hope in impossibility. As Glăveanu (2023) writes in his manifesto, the impossible is not the opposite of possibility. Indeed, reading through these papers, the opposite of possibility appears to be its absence – the moments of despair which mark some of the papers refer to despair at the fixity, the unchangeable nature of the future. Impossibility marks the moment where it is not deemed possible to be so, whereas despair marks the lack of being at all.

Impossibility is also more unstable than possibility. Those who trace their disciplinary allegiances to cognitive psychology all touch on the way in which, as individuals, we understand impossibility. For Byrne, the impossible is mediated through mental models of a world which are deeply rooted in our prior experience, therefore what is impossible is that which contradicts our experience. These worlds are dynamic, iconic simulations of the possibility. Notably, this experience can be actual or imaginary. For Johnson-Laird (2023), the ease with

which we sustain notions of possibility and impossibility even if it is counter logical is a clear indicator of their importance to human thinking.

However, the relationship between the actual and the imagined is not clear cut. The first point in Glăveanu's manifesto is that possibility is distributed and is not the property of human imagination but requires a socio-material environment. Baumeister and Alquist (2023) describe possibility as human agency which involves the person acting on and working through their environment. As Crilly (2023) reminds us, in design, all imagination is mediated through the *actual*, through material and cultural instantiations of things such as drawings, models, gestures and conversations.

These ideas draw from 4 E cognitive theories that extend thinking into the environment (Magnani, 2023). The material has an effect of human thinking and being which transcends traditional ideas of human centred agency. For example, the shock that comes from the materiality of the past, reminds us that there are other ways of conceiving of the possible (Meyer, 2023). Imagination tends to be conceived of as based in the language of thought and the introduction of material objects moves away from a semantic or word-based idea of possibility to one which is enacted through modalities often left out of traditional discourse. For Kaufman and Rowe (2023), this is one of the key benefits of the theatre and theatrical production – by presenting other realities in a concrete form it allows the audience to imagine more than they would otherwise have done. The actualisation of ideas is an important part of becoming possible since, as Faggin reminds us – “the idea must be materialised in space time and made to work”. Possibilities are therefore often mediated through affordances, that is the relations between the objects in the world and the thinking in the head. This is the point made by Glăveanu in the fourth point of his manifesto – the possible is mediated. As Magnani (2023) clearly demonstrates, possibilities are not only generated through mental fantasy but through

actions on the world – the manipulations may uncover new, unthought of affordances increasing moments of discovery.

The pragmatics of the external world impinges on the mental models that we form to understand it. Mental models are iconic representations of the world and are tied to the structure of the world as we know it; it is therefore hard for us to model negations and abstractions (Johnson-Laird, 2023). Our understanding of the world comes not from logical reasoning but a comparison of assertions with this iconic model. Byrne (2023) illustrates how our ‘counterpossibles’ are related to the external reality by comparing the seeming of two impossible conditionals - “if people were made of steel, they would not bruise easily” and “if people were made of steel, they would bruise easily”. The second is a greater violation because people cannot construct a consistent mental model.

This is articulated in a different domain by Wilkins et al. (2023) who reminds us of the way that narratives require an internal coherence to be accepted – what she calls plausibility. Our imagination is constrained by the reality of our mental models of the world, as Ormerod (2023) jokingly asks – is cardboard a possible breakfast? Both remind us that imagination is limited by constraints on the possibility space. Part of the aim of possibility studies is to understand how these dynamic spaces can be breached (Valsiner, 2023) and Wilkins et al. (2023) deftly illustrate how these mental models can be updated by changing the internal logic of the narrative – for their protagonist Miranda to be a 1950s schoolgirl with a weaponised spaceship requires a back story, an adjustment to the logic we perceive as fixed. Importantly, the mental model is externalised, here in a story and from there manipulated to generate more possibilities (Magnani, 2023)

Reality as a constraint and as a scaffold of the workings of the possible moves beyond mental models to extended socio-cultural understandings. For those who are interested in political movements of change, the hopeful

positions that they describe are tempered by the reality of working in situations with historical, political, natural and technological constraints. The reality of political situations results in a warning from Sternberg and Fischer (2023) to remember that the imagination of one generation is the political future of the next. In support of this, Seligman (2023) demonstrates through linguistic analysis that the future is based on the psychological state of the present. Bearing in mind the inherent constraint of the actual is part of the argument of Knight and Manley's (2023) paper which reminds us that there is a luxury in free will, in philosophical choice in the face of difficulty and restriction of choice.

In other words, in moving from the ideally possible to the really possible we must take into account material, social and future constraints. This move, this instantiation is important to fully understand the materialisation of the possible. So, the ideally possible requires the really possible to fully understand it. If, as we have argued above, the possible requires the impossible, it also requires materialisation to know the difference between the two. Indeed, it is through the constraints of the actual that possible is both frustrated and finessed. As Baron narrates: the academic he was working with was not able to realise his ideas and inventions because of the constraints and needed an entrepreneur to make them happen. Kaufman and Rowe (2023) start their discussion of the benefits of theatre with an acknowledgement of the basic functional needs that are required for any further possibilities to be realised. They also acknowledge the challenges of funding that are paralleled in Knight and Manley's analysis of the limitation of possibility that is wrought by poverty. Possibility requires choice and difference and these two require resources.

This echoes the second call in Glăveanu's manifesto – that the actual and the possible are embraided, both different and conjoined. It is for this reason that many of the moves we make take place in the realm of the adjacent possible. Both Faggin (2023) and Bassett and Zurn

(2023) discuss the importance of the adjacent possible to our understanding of how reality and possibility interact – an incremental creep of the now across the face of the future. Bassett and Zurn (2023) clearly delineate the four ways that we can move from the actual to the possible exploiting the nodes and edges of networks – either modifying a node or edge or changing them entirely. For them, the adjacent possible is the possible networked with the actual. This is similar to Wilkins et al.'s (2023) notion of “sidling up against the implausible” as good way of generating interesting plots and new possibilities.

However, for Corazza (2023) the adjacent possible is not enough to explain human creativity and yet, even here, in the contributor who is most in favour of the supremacy of human imagination, we again see the collapse of imagination and reality. For Corazza, the things which are most creative, most breaching of the possibility space, have this quality because they avoid the adjacent possible; the adjacent possible is not enough, it does not provide an explanation at the correct level. Rather, for Corazza, it is that which is not possible, and which then becomes possible which is exciting. For this reason, he moves away from incremental notions of creativity. However, his example of Marconi underscores that great leaps of imagination can only be understood as great when realised. Marconi is not ‘great’ because he *imagined* the crossing of the Atlantic with radio waves, but because he made it happen, he instantiated the imaginary. The same with the breaching of possibilities when people could fly (Valsiner, 2023). It had to be instantiated to be a possibility breach – to know that it was not impossible.

Hanchett Hanson (2023) goes one step further and reverses the direction so that the actual is not seen as a scaffold of the imaginary but precedes it, inspires it, and gives it additional information. For Hanchett Hanson (2023), the hope lies not in the imaginary or the conceptually possible but the actual, the material world that *is*. As we have seen above, in the discussion of different temporal understandings, what the

future holds is fundamentally unknown and unknowable. Hanchett Hanson (2023) agrees with Byrne (2023) and argues that what we can imagine is tempered by the past and informed by those models of the world. It is only the unimaginable which can rupture and update these models and the unimagined must come from the real, from the actual. The imagination cannot imagine what it does not already know. Hanchett Hanson (2023) illustrates this by unpicking how hard it is to imagine those things that Lennon claimed would be easy in his song 'Imagine'.

This intrusion of reality is not always positive, for Wilkins et al. (2023) increments of possibility are at risk from the unknowns echoing some of the feelings of despair and lack of agency. The acknowledgement of the complexity of an unknowable future reality as a very real policy problem is discussed by Mulgan (2023). For him, these "unknown unknowns" require an experimental science of social policy science acknowledging that it is reality which we require imagination for. Having reality as no longer separate from imagination leads to a shift in the traditional locus of agency. Attunement reduces the shock of the real. Brillenburg Wurth (2023) draws from traditional view of Daoism to erase the boundary between the transcendental human self and things. This is the same reflexion made by Harris (2023). They remind us that nature is far more queer than humans recognise, that reality carries on despite the blind spots of human imagination. For these writers, possibility means an awakening and attunement to what is in the world rather than the flight of fancy of the imagination. For this reason, they suggest possibility and fantasy are rarely the same.

However, the relationship between the possible and the actual described by Hanchett Hanson (2023) is more complex if we take the relationship between the imaginary and the real into account. Reality is always reflected through a lens of understanding. It is not clear that we can fully access 'reality'. Just as Hanchett Hanson (2023) argues imagination is limited,

Facer (2023) argues that the world that we see is not all that is there; rather it is filtered through our own imagination and its naturalness may be limited. We may not be able to imagine 'no countries' (Hanchett Hanson, 2023) but countries are not a real natural kind – they are themselves construct of social imagination. For Magnani (2023), possibility generation is mediated through and on thinking with the actual, with objects and artefacts but these are generated through the skilled use of affordances which are seen or perceived by the user. We use and perceive the multiple possibles generated in eco-cognitive interaction rather than them being a separate, tangible property of the object. This leads Valsiner (2023) to suggest that we can use the space of Possibility Studies to engage with non-existent objects. Even supposedly rational inferences about the reality of counterfactuals require the use of imagination (Byrne, 2023) and imagination is the engine for interpersonal connection rather than confined to solipsistic mind wandering (Facer, 2023).

The relationship between possibility and reality is complex and intertwined. Whether in a pairing mediated by curiosity (as argued by Bassett and Zurn) or something else, it is not clear that the two exist in easily distinguishable spaces. The perspective of Possibility Studies is that reality is also plural and that both reality and imagination are constrained and scaffolded by each other: There is always an interaction. For Renzulli (2023) what becomes real is what is imaginable, just as illustrated by Hanchett Hanson's (2023) discussion of the relational nature of the technology in Star Trek. We would counter Hanchett Hanson's call and suggest that Reality Studies and Possibility Studies are not as far apart as it may seem.

Methodologies of the possible

Alongside the pluralities outlined above which inhabit the heart of Possibility Studies, the methodologies required to support our understanding of this complex phenomenon are also plural. Practically, this is a challenge for a

journal of this nature and the way of handling multidisciplinary submissions has already elicited much discussion from the editorial board where different disciplines draw on different foundational texts, methodologies and markers of quality and rigour. There are various languages of thought and concepts which scaffold the different disciplines that come together at the heart of possibility. As has been a continual theme throughout this commentary, we do not wish to erase or blend these differences. We hope that the dialogue between the disciplines in this inaugural issue, and in the papers that will follow over the years as this field of study matures, will allow us to find possibility in difference and cross fertilisation. As Seligman (2023) writes, “These new methods are what makes the inaugural issue of the new journal, *Possibility Studies and Society*, a far-reaching event in the history of ideas”. The manifesto calls us on to recognise that the “study of the possible requires diverse and creative methodologies” and in this issue we hope to have started that collection.

The study of possibility is by nature interdisciplinary, as it requires us to approach phenomena from multiple angles to get a holistic view. However, the academic silos that mark our research institutions and universities are part of the problems we encounter in understanding and generating possibles by fostering dualistic perspectives (Mulgan, 2023; Pickering, 2023). Transdisciplinary research may well be harder. It requires trust and comfort with entanglement and no dualism. It is therefore reliant on careful communication. Magnani (2023) makes a call for the optimal epistemic setting to be built around the principles of communication across scientific disciplines to support the optimal affordances of scientific communication. This resonates with Harris (2023) call for the relationship between the disciplines to be based on a form of deep listening. They remind us that possibility is at the heart of the educational project and that possibility requires us to imagine ‘what if?’ and is most clearly marked by an adherence to transdisciplinary research. Bassett

and Zurn (2023) claim that the fundamental capacity of curiosity and so of possibility is the capacity to connect. For Facer (2023) connection is also an important outcome of cultivating a temporal imagination, connecting across different timescales. This also extends to research authorships as Wilkins et al. (2023) demonstrates by explaining that while the words she uses may be hers but the research and ideas are deeply collaborative.

The nature of this communication and the risks of fragmentation that can be seen in design studies is one of the things which Crilly (2023) calls for Possibility Studies to carefully consider and embrace. It is one of the reasons why this commentary shies away from grouping the papers or clustering by theme, instead pulling across the diversity of disciplines when relevant. This leads to cross fertilisation across areas which are not naturally joined. For Gergen (2023) our traditional idea of how to approach knowledge and research limits us – it makes the erroneous assumption that what is under examination endures, is separate from us and that with increased research we can uncover more about it rather than being constructed through our research (although, see Hanchett Hanson, 2023, for a different perspective on the nature of scientific reality).

The nature of the methodologies prescribed by the papers in this issue encompass two different aims. The first is concerned with how we can research and understand the possible. As Glăveanu (2023) argues, the possible should be understood at the level of the system (Principle 7) yet generating methods for doing this form of analysis is not clear. Different disciplines deal with different levels of analysis and complexity and a heteroscalar approach to the possible appears necessary. However, alongside the discussion of novel methods of research, the stronger thread that has come out is not how we find out about possibility but how we generate it and foster it in people, cultures, and societies. In many ways, this highlights the importance of Gergen’s (2023) call for a repositioning of social sciences not as documenting

what is there but forming what is to come in the future. That describing and eliciting the phenomenon are entwined reflects the action oriented and democratic nature of research in Possibility Studies. Possibility is not static and so does not lend itself to the synthesis of past work or description. Rather, as Mulgan (2023) urges, it should be concerned more with change than interpretation.

Mulgan (2023), Valsiner (2023), Gergen (2023) are all concerned about the use of quantitative data without the accompanying theoretical advances. They urge us to move away from the proliferation of numbers as a basis to understand the human condition. Valsiner hopes that the field of Possibility Studies can refresh the empiricism of the social sciences and the reliance on big data. Montuori (2023) warns, drawing on Gilchrist, that what marks our machine age is a reliance on quantification, abstraction and manipulation rather than the more human functions that are less measurable. Valsiner, again, sees the ethos based around the prediction and control of behaviour as inevitably antithetical to Possibility Studies.

Perhaps the clearest methodology that links these papers is the use of narrative. Many contributors emphasising the importance of narratives in shaping our understanding of the possible from the domains of archaeology to cognitive science. Narratives are a method of research, a vehicle for change and a way of communicating new knowledge. Narratives are not only instrumental in shaping the future and the past but are also a way to explore new possibilities safely. The power of narrative lies in its ability to structure our sense of the possible, making our choices and opportunities intelligible amid the complexity of becoming. For Valsiner (2023), possibility is the study of fictions as seen in the future yet created in the present suggesting that narrative may mediate the relationships between past and future. Damhof (2023) uses narratives to explore the 'projected, possible, plausible, preferable and preposterous'.

One of the essential features of narratives is that they allow us to render complex social and political issues more accessible bringing attention to critical problems and inspiring collective action towards addressing them. As Knight and Manley (2023) show, socio-historical narratives grounded in reality can serve as a driving force for radical political movements, fostering solidarity, and working towards a shared vision of a better future. By drawing on the lessons and wisdom of the past, such movements can mobilise collective action and harness human creativity and resilience to tackle pressing social and political challenges.

Narratives can also challenge and strengthen stereotypes, as Meretoja (2023) points out, reminding us of the potential of stories to inspire change and promote social justice. The use of speculative fiction is particularly powerful in this regard, allowing us to explore new possibilities and rehearse different futures, as Damhof (2023) demonstrates in the Futures Literacy Labs. This use of speculative fiction also arises in Bassett and Zurn's (2023) paper where they use it to illustrate Bloch's assertion that art is a laboratory of possibles. The point to the disruptive nature of narratives that can allow us to enact our imaginary fantasies. We can also share them, as Kaufman and Rowe (2023) indicate in their description of the benefits of theatre. Hanchett Hanson (2023) uses science fiction to help us understand the relationship between the actual and the real.

Narratives take many forms, not all of them necessarily based on words. As Meyer (2023) demonstrates, archaeology, festivals, and performative roles (see also Kaufman & Rowe, 2023) all create narratives, offering us different ways to understand and interpret our past and present. Case studies are an interesting form of narrative that can enlighten the reader by moving from single case to wider claims. For example, Moghaddam's (2023) use of two case studies from history draws together two different time points to demonstrate generalisabilities. These then are concrete examples of

methods of research in the social sciences which draw knowing without relying on quantification and big data.

The power of narrative lies in its ability to structure our understanding of the possible, inspiring change and mobilising collective action towards addressing social and political challenges. From socio-historical narratives to speculative fiction, the potential of storytelling in shaping our future is limitless, offering us different ways to make sense of our experiences and envision new possibilities for a better world. In this way, it acts as a key component in the methodologies required to chart the new domain of Possibility Studies.

The purpose of possibility

Finally, we end this commentary with a discussion on the future role of this new field of study. Glăveanu (2023) starts the editorial for this inaugural issue by writing: “There is an audacity in focusing on the possible in an age of major personal and societal impossibilities”. Hope and the possible are not only overlapping concepts but also give us a way in to both the relationship between the past and the future, between reality and imagination, and also to the practical implications of a focus on possibility. The possible future is a place of change (stasis is perhaps the antithesis of possibility). The nature of this change is not determined, but we do have a role in its becoming. The agency required here is important (Meretoja) and the role of hope for the future is a key way of pulling back from the despair of a perceived regression (Mulgan, 2023, although see Facer, 2023, on the nature of these cyclical timescapes and Meyer, 2023, on linear time)

Moghaddam (2023) ends his essay with the example of the role of women in higher education to demonstrate how in the 100 or so years since Marie Curie was not allowed to join the French *Académie des Sciences* there has been a seismic cultural shift in the role of women in academia. The speed with which this has been achieved demonstrates how political and socio-

cultural change can happen without the need for revolution. However, these changes are based on a certain fertile environment. The exclusion of women from education in Afghanistan reminds us of the importance of not taking these environments for granted. As Pickering (2023) suggests, culture is a multiplicity of traditions of practice and there will be moves from one to the other in a rhythmic cycle.

Freeman (2023) writes most extensively about hope, the “urgency of hope, the necessity of hope, in a landscape so often bathed in devastation and despair”. This despair marks the start of Pickering’s (2023) essay where he writes about the “gloomy trajectory we seem to be embarked on”. For Freeman (2023) despair is the opposite of hope. Despair is as future oriented as hope, so its existence helps us understand the difference between the possible and the future; despair marks a future which is limited in possibilities. Knight and Manley (2023) remind us by drawing on Kierkegaard that possibility is a mix both of fear and desire to explore the unknown. It was the unknowability of the Scottish referendum that led to the hope of future possibilities but in political movements material constraints kick in. For example in post crisis Greece, options for action are limited leading to stagnation. It is important that we take seriously the warning in Glăveanu’s (2023) manifesto about the importance of not romanticising the possible or else it will lead to pushing difficult decisions into the future as Sobe (2023) argues.

Freeman was so emmeshed in despair at the start of his essay that he found it hard to develop narratives which allowed him to understand possibility. However, for him, possibility is the antidote to despair because it allows agency and free will – we are determinant of the future and through action we can bring about a new future even if we don’t know what that future will look like. Free will is essential to a world view in which there are possibilities - otherwise we are in the world where there are no impossibilities and so we cannot have a possible at all, as discussed above. Hope is not a

luxury, as Ó Brolcháin (2023) reminds us, it is essential for us, to solve some of the big challenges facing humanity.

For hope, then, we need free will and a non-deterministic universe. For Faggin (2023), the existence of creativity demonstrates that we cannot have a fully deterministic universe. As Sternberg and Fischer (2023) remind us, “the future is in our hands”. For it to be otherwise, leads to lack of possibilities, duality and despair. Knight and Manley (drawing again from Kierkegaard) describe possibility as freedom of choice, crisis as being the time of decision making or judgement. The psychological state of agency, as Seligman demonstrates, leads to change while the feeling of non-agency leads to stagnation. For Gergen (2023) we are at a pivotal moment in human history which may see the unravelling of the human project (although see Facer, 2023, on the exclusionary nature of these eschatological narratives). Therefore, a key purpose of Possibility Studies is to expand the possible and restore hope. Grand as this may seem, hope and the possible are intimately entwined. The enhancement and constriction of the borders of possibility ranges is the main mechanism for dealing with possibilities (Valsiner, 2023).

Yet free will is not an isolated act; if we conceive of it as taking an idea and turning it into shareable symbols as Faggin (2023) suggests, we are allowing that all action is shared action. It is also something that is socio-materially constrained. For Meretoja (2023) the notion of agency is essential to understanding how different groups enact their possibilities. We are reminded again of the limits on agency by Knight and Manley (2023) and Facer (2023). As such, part of the call that lies behind many of these contributions is a call to make future possibilities a part of present action and to ensure that we move away from a deterministic view of the future while also understanding the limitations and constraints. Damhof (2023) asks us ‘what if imagining the impossible has actually become a necessity?’.

This call however is tempered by what we have discussed throughout the course of this essay, we must avoid – as Glăveanu (2023) notes – fetishising the possible or holding on to an overly optimistic view of the future. Ormerod’s (2023) pessimistic view of the general ability of people to generate possibilities is tempered by an understanding that this lack of possibility generation is actually cognitively beneficial in many circumstances and can lead to greater success and moving forward. It is possible to be paralysed by possibilities if we recognised and generated them all. Hanchett Hanson (2023) reminds us that unfettered imagination can lead to a dangerous ungrounding. What is always possible to imagine is not always beneficial. Ó Brolcháin’s (2023) argument for an ethics of possibility supports this claim – we need to examine the risks that can be generated by limitless possibilities. Meretoja (2023) calls for an understanding of how possibilities are weakened or strengthened in relation to social power.

For this reason, there is an urgent need for an ethics of possibility based on wisdom, as articulated by Sternberg and Fischer (2023). There is a value saturation to the discussion of possibility, as Gergen (2023) points out, and the focus on relating may be a quintessential way of doing good. Different cultures have radically different views of possibility, making an ethics of possibility all the more necessary (Ó Brolcháin, 2023). A clear and detailed understanding of how future and past possibilities are enacted in the present will support us to develop hopeful futures for all. Mulgan (2023) suggests that the idea that we are in a time of crisis should be seen as being an excellent opportunity for the social sciences to become involved – it is in these moments that change can happen and social sciences can become more future oriented. This final section will examine two spheres that underlie the contributions to this issue – politics and education – in which action is necessary and can be enhanced by an increase in imagining the possible.

Possibility and political change

Possibility is a human project that envisions a pluriverse of multiple futures based on actions taken in the present. It is not just an academic pursuit but an applied one rooted in principles of social justice, representation, and political change. Harris (2023) calls for an activist approach to Possibility Studies that moves beyond individualist binary separations towards an entanglement with the complex and interconnected possibilities of our hearts. Ó Brolcháin (2023) notes that the framing of environmental possibilities will have practical impacts on people's actions. To view Possibility Studies as rooted in abstracted utopian thinking belies its foundation on action.

Principle 13 of Glăveanu's (2023) manifesto reminds us that the possible is political. The redirection of modernity will lead to political change, as Ó Brolcháin (2023) notes, and we must understand the underlying philosophical frameworks that shape our understanding of possibility and ethics. The politics of possibility involves constructing norms, values, and ideologies around who has the right to discover new possibilities and the recognition that in our current society, some individuals and groups are deemed 'holding potential' and others are seen as having limited possibilities (Renzulli, 2023).

The struggle against the narrowing of possibility is a political act leading to resistance, resilience, and the generation of new societal alternatives. The move towards an entangled and non-binary society which reimagines the possible is, according to Escobar (2023) perhaps one of the most complex cultural and political acts in which we can engage. However, Mulgan (2023) argues that even politicians can feel powerless when they realise the few options generated by social scientists to operate on the problem, and political change must come from action rather than critique.

Thus, the new discipline of Possibility Studies is unapologetically political and rooted in action. As might be expected, the focus on pluralism leads the writers to favour democracy as a political system. Moghaddam (2023) draws

on case studies from Iran and Russia to make the argument that it is the dogmatism of dictatorship that leads to corruption and failure of different revolutionary political systems. Sternberg and Fischer (2023) warn that the major challenge facing the 21st century is 'between an authoritarian future and a democratic one'. Mulgan (2023) cites Andreas Reckwitz in calling our current experience one of negative politics marked by a feeling that the best years are past, a sense, again of despair. Renzulli (2023) argues that change requires doing away with two mindsets: that one person or group knows the right answer, and that change is linear. The politics of possibility also encompasses ways to be more in tune with our environments, as Pickering (2023) illustrates with the adaptive, non-dualistic management of the Colorado River. Pluralism and non-dualistic attitudes are then a recipe for a successful political programme as well as an academic one and runs through the heart of possibility.

Possibility and education

Glăveanu's manifesto (Principle 15) emphasises the need to reevaluate traditional education systems, which are no longer suitable for the challenges and impossibilities of today's rapidly changing, uncertain, and complex environments. In response to these evolving circumstances, it is our responsibility to educate individuals and communities who can envision and enact new possibilities in a reflective, proactive, and ethical manner.

Possibility and education are intrinsically linked, in addition they both play a vital role in fostering political change and resisting the rise of dictatorship. As Sternberg and Fischer (2023) suggest, education is the first defence against the fall into dogmatism, emphasising the importance of Pedagogies of the Possible. A Pedagogy of the Possible starts by democratising education, raising possibilities for all. However, it is important to avoid simplistic slogans such as 'children are the future', which can

lead to problematic outcomes such as deferring responsibility and underestimating children's potential in the present (Sobe, 2023).

Damhof (2023) advocates for a future-literate education, one that encourages students to imagine different futures and incorporate anticipation in their thinking. Such an approach prepares them for an increasingly complex and uncertain world, cultivating resilience and adaptability. Harris (2023) emphasises the importance of education as an openness to possibility, entwining it with the world and fostering non-binary understandings of creative agency. This approach encourages the inclusion of multiple perspectives across cultures, fostering the development of a more globally minded society.

Crilly (2023) suggests that an education for possibility should allow for the transfer of knowledge across disciplines, focusing on understanding context rather than abstraction, and moving away from the notion of a single 'right' answer. This approach encourages students to challenge assumptions and think critically, developing problem-solving skills and encouraging collaboration. Gergen (2023) proposes shifting from transmitting fixed knowledge to understanding how values and objects change under consideration, equipping students to navigate uncertainty, as exemplified by the evolving nature of racism. This approach encourages students to engage in open-ended inquiries that inspire innovative solutions and challenges traditional narratives.

A Pedagogy of the Possible views education as an ongoing actualisation in which we respond to the question of what worlds we want to create, share, and care for. This approach emphasises embracing difference and non-binary identities, fostering an inclusive and dynamic educational environment. Renzulli (2023) confirms that this form of education can break social barriers, bridging divides, and reducing marginalisation, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and possibility-driven society.

By prioritising Pedagogies of the Possible, educators can create learning environments that empower learners to actively participate in

shaping their futures and contributing to societal transformation. This approach fosters the development of reflective, proactive, and ethical individuals, equipping them with the skills and mindset necessary to navigate and shape the uncertain landscape of the future. By nurturing future generations in this way, we cultivate a more resilient and adaptable society, capable of thriving in an ever-changing world.

Final thoughts

Faggin (2023) writes that invention can come from "forcibly hold[ing] two things together while we add a third piece in the right place to bond the two". This commentary has attempted to hold many voices in a polyphonic unity. It has been an uplifting experience as an editor and I have been inspired by the openness and enthusiasm of the different disciplines to reflecting on the possible. I hope that it has been a successful melding and yet allows a space between the bonds for growth. While I have drawn out several overlapping themes, it is not with the aim of reconciling the tensions and thereby collapsing and erasing the differences between thinkers. There remain and will continue to be fundamental points of disagreement. Instead, we are following Meretoja (2023) in recognising that becoming is a fundamentally dialogical and relational process. The double meaning in Escobar's (2023) 'Welcome to Possibility Studies' as both an introduction to a new area and a reaching out from those who already work in this space to their new colleague reflects both the ambition of Possibility Studies and its dependence on others. To aim for anything else would be to ignore the power of difference, of the true meaning of ambivalence (Harris, 2023).

In conclusion, we'd like to thank all contributors for their valuable input in this multifaceted discussion. As we delve deeper into Possibility Studies, we do so in appreciation of their diverse viewpoints and through engagement in constructive dialogue. To our readers, we invite you to join us in this ongoing

conversation, embracing the power of difference as we collectively forge a path forward.

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