



# iFuture

Cultures of the future:

habitus, reflexivity and capacity to aspire

Giuliana Mandich  
University of Cagliari

# The frame

- empirical research on young people's capacity to aspire
- NARRATIVES ABOUT the FUTURE
  - 250 high school student essays on imagined future
  - Digital storytelling



**Research team:**  
Giuliana Mandich  
Ester Cois,  
Valentina Cuzzocrea,  
Simona Isabella  
(Università di Cagliari).

# Focus of the presentation

- Discuss the analytical framework of the research
  - concept of capacity to aspire
  - how the capacity to aspire can be empirically studied?



- future as narrative space occupiable by a plurality of possible worlds

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# Theoretical framework

- Growing amount of studies on the future
- Future studies (Bell 2003, 2009)
- Complexity studies (Urry 2003, 2006)
- New sociology of the future (Adam 2009; Adam & Groves 2007)
- Young people and the future (Leccardi 2005)
- methodological reflections on **future narratives** (Misches 2009; Elliott 2010; Lyon, Morgan, Crow, 2012, Uprichard 2010)

# Capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004)

- Bringing the future back in

CAPACITY  
TO ASPIRE

Honneth  
recognition

Hirshman  
voice

Sen  
capabilities

# Capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004)

- The capacity to aspire is a navigational capacity, the ability to *use a map to explore the future*
  - focus on cultural capacities
  - Not evenly distributed
  - Metacapacity : at the base of action, choices, the possibility to make plans and projects lies this more general ability

# Capacity to aspire

WHAT MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE ABLE TO LOOK INTO THE FUTURE?

Past and  
present

**Stretching a rope**

future

"Hope is a rope," Desroche says, in that it, too, is founded on the unfounded, the imaginary, and yet "it holds"; it undergirds actions, it produces event (*Desroche, 1979:3*).

# Aspirations: habitus or reflexivity?

habitus



Reflexivity

- Aspiration adjusts themselves such that individuals 'cut their coats according to their cloth' (Bourdieu, 1980) ***practical anticipation*** (Bourdieu 1997)
- aspirations are strongly conditioned by one's position in a social field (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002, 2005; Devandson 2011)
- local (O'Connor 2005; Shildrick, Blackman and MacDonald (2009)
- processes of individualization
- reflexively shaping of youth biographies
- Disembedding of identities
- Global youth
- Beck
- Giddens



# Aspirations: in between habitus and reflexivity

## Putting first habitus:

- risk of ignoring the agency and own aspirations of the disadvantaged youth
- Human action, as Schutz observed, is constructed within an imaginative horizon of multiple plans and possibilities

## Putting first reflexivity

- Weightless agency
- free-floating individual, with infinite opportunities for self-making



# Back to Appadurai

- two dimensions
  - **Cognitive**: anticipation more or less complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means
  - **Narrative**: ability to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which individual wants are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs.

# How to study empirically the capacity to aspire

- the future as *narrative space* occupiable by a plurality of possible worlds
- projectivity as composed of *creative* (Joas 1996) as well as willful foresight (Mishe 2009)
- Reflexivity as a *narrative capacity*  
“comunicative reflexivity” (Archer 2003)

# Analysing narratives: looking into the cognitive dimensions of future projection (Mishes 2009)

Orientation to the future	Degree of control	Genre
reach breadth Expandability Sociality	Clarity Contingency Volition Connectivity	discursive "mode" in which future projections are elaborated

# Analysing narratives: the field of cultural production of the future

- Paths into the future are constructed within a complex narrative space in which different discourses about 'possible futures' and 'desirable futures' coexist:
- Educational institutions
- Family
- Media
- Social media

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# Conclusions

- Relevance of different narratives about possible futures
- we cannot say what young people are going to do, what their future choices would be
- But we can detect the space of possibilities and what kind of cultural resources they will be able to use
- How public discourse can erode young people's capacity to aspire



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Thank you for your attention

PLEASE SEND COMMENTS TO  
[MANDICH@UNICA.IT](mailto:MANDICH@UNICA.IT)