

**Young people's orientations to the future:  
navigating the present and imagining the future**  
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**Abstract**

This article discusses the findings of the *Imagine Sheppey* project (2013-14) which studied how young people are 'oriented' towards the future. The aim and approach of the project was to explore future imaginaries in a participatory, experimental, and performative way. Working with young people in a series of arts-based workshops, we intervened in different environments to alter the space as an experience of change – temporal, material, symbolic. We documented this process visually and made use of the images produced as the basis for elicitation in focus groups with a wider group of young people. In this article we discuss young people's future orientations through the themes of reach, resources, shape, and value. In so doing, we reflect on the paths that our young respondents traced to connect their presents to what is next, what we call their modes of present-future navigation. We explore the qualities and characteristics of their stances within a wider reflection about how young people approach, imagine and account for the future.

**Keywords:** Experimental Methods, Future, Orientation, Present, Young People, Visual Research.

**Introduction**

Young people's everyday lives and futures are widely discussed in policy, political and educational settings in the UK and beyond. On the one hand young people are positioned in linear intergenerational relationships as the bearers of the future hopes of others and 'society' more generally; on the other they are denigrated for not adequately living up to these investments. Their aspirations are too low or their expectations are insufficiently grounded (Roberts et al, 2014). In the field of youth studies, there is much research about young people's lives that focuses on aspiration, including evidence which refutes the claim of low aspiration (e.g. Roberts et al, forthcoming), there is work which explores the content of aspiration (McDonald et al, 2011; Allen and Mendick, 2015), focuses on plans (Thompson and Holland, 2002), hope (Arnettt, 2000; Harden et al, 2012), ambivalence (Threadgold, 2012), fear (Heggli et al, 2013), and the role of place (Prince, 2013; White and Green, 2015), all of which have relevance for understanding how young people imagine the future. This body of work also analyses how young people's imagination of the future reflects contemporary social, political, economic and cultural dynamics, the positions of young people in society more generally, and their capacity to take action in their own lives.

The research presented here is concerned with how young people are 'orientated' to the future, that is the stances they adopt towards their lives and futures. Whilst we are interested in the content of their dreams, hopes or fears as they surface in the research, our aim is to concentrate on the question of how they approach or tend towards the very process of imagining the future. If 'orientations are about how we begin, how we proceed from 'here' ... the point from which the world unfolds', as Sarah Ahmed writes (2010: 236), young people's orientations in time and space and the concomitant modes of navigation they develop are our starting points for exploring *how* they imagine the future. This matters because we consider the idea of *projectivity* (Mische, 2009) – how we reach to and make the future – as an important aspect of young people's agency and we reflect on the very act of *moving* toward the future.

In this article, we discuss the usefulness of the concept of orientation for analysing the future in the present, we critically examine the methodology our work is based on, then analyse the actions and reflections of our young research participants. We discuss four orientations and modes of present-future navigation: reach, shape, resources, and value. This selection of themes is not exhaustive but emerged from our reading of the project's visual and verbal material as fruitful areas for how young people approach, imagine and account for the future. These themes also allow us to demonstrate the different temporal relations between the present and the future.

### **The usefulness of the concept of orientation for researching the future**

Despite significant interest in the social construction of time and temporality in classical and post-structural sociology, the future is surprisingly absent and under-researched in contemporary (qualitative) sociology (Mische, 2009). There is empirical life course research that explores perceptions of the future but this scholarship has largely stopped short of recognising *projectivity* or what Currie (2010) calls an 'anticipatory mode of being' and Schulz (2015) calls 'future moves' as an aspect of agency. As a result, argues Mische, future imagining is not incorporated into a theory of action (2009: 695). In youth studies, there is considerable current discussion of the question of agency (for instance, Coffey and Farrugia, 2014; Spencer and Duoll, 2015; Wells, 2015). However, whilst many authors make reference to the importance of temporality in navigating the world, the significance of the (imagined) future in the present is not well articulated.

In the development of a set of tools for the study of *projectivity*, Mische specifies dimensions through which the future may be conceived and analysed: reach, breadth, clarity, contingency, expandability, volition, sociality, connectivity, and genre. Fundamental to her argument is an understanding of experience as inherently experimental, and as characterised by projection, a reaching into the unknown (Mische, 2009: 697). The present-future connection is therefore seen as central to social being and social action. In exploring different temporal horizons, our attention may be directed to the past or the future, the 'reach' of the time imagined or remembered can vary (from 'tiny stretches of time' (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013) to a long view), as may the focus of a particular temporal moment.

However, the ever-shifting present is pivotal to how we remember and imagine, construct and project (Adam, 1990). The connection between where we are now and what we can imagine next - micro present-future thresholds or 'protentions' (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013) and their relationship to broader orientations in time and space - is at the heart of our interest here.

To further explore present-future imagining, we make use of the concept of *orientations* from the work of Sarah Ahmed. Whilst Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) was elaborated for theorising sexuality, we take inspiration from thinking with and through this book about the meanings of being orientated; 'How it is that we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn' (Ahmed, 2006: 1). In order to explore this process of future-making through orientations, we reflect on the modalities of this navigation and the instruments required to settle directions, movements, and tempo.

In the research presented here, we therefore work with an understanding of the future not as a distinct and disconnected temporality but a horizon that is 'the assemblage of past and present temporalities' (Coleman, 2008). Accordingly, we are interested in how young people approach their lives, at what speed, in the company of whom, and how they envisage reaching which destinations, as well as how they describe, assess and account for their moves. In this article we discuss the stances, directions, and movements which reveal the different ways in which our young participants engage with the idea of the future; their own future and the future of the social spaces they cross and inhabit. By looking at how young people stand in front of the multiplicity of the possible, we explore the very process of approaching the future to uncover the imaginary routes connecting the present of our respondents to their futures in relation to their dreams, their sense of responsibility, and their levels of awareness of their limits. In other words, this article considers how the future is produced by 'moving' (and transforming) the present according to new and different necessities and orientations.

## **Methodology**

*Imagine Sheppey* was conducted on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent (UK), a place marked by poverty and stigmatised within and beyond the south east. It is the site of our previous research into young people's future imagining (Crow and Lyon, 2011; Lyon and Crow, 2012; Lyon, Morgan and Crow, 2012). In *Imagine Sheppey* we continue to be interested in how young people whose lives are not already anticipated through known middle-class trajectories imagine their futures since their relative lack of resource requires greater attention to the future (Bryant and Ellard, 2015; Laughland-Booÿ, Mayall, and Skrbiš, 2014). The project team was made up of sociologists (the authors of this article), the artists group *Tea*, a community partner, the Blue Town Heritage Centre, and the young participants. The project started in October 2013 and was funded by an AHRC/ESRC joint

initiative<sup>1</sup> for one year; data collection, analysis, and arts-based work took place in spring and summer 2014.

Much research into young people's futures has been based on interview accounts of what it is that young people aspire to, hope for, expect, or fear. Whilst our previous work in the *Living and Working on Sheppey* (2009-11) gathered imagined experiences, it also relied on individual narrative accounts. There are certainly innovative techniques used across youth studies (Heath and Walker, 2012), for instance timelines and collages (e.g. Bagnoli and Clark, 2010), reanimation interviews (Thomson and McGeneey, 2013), participatory methodologies (McKnight and Leonard, 2014), and respondent-generated visual data (Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2010). However, existing research about young people's futures has tended to emphasise linear sequences, place the future in an artificial temporal and spatial suspension from the present, focus on the content of imagined futures, and rely on narrative.

The ambition of *Imagine Sheppey* was to access stances which could not necessarily be directly expressed in language, as well as conscious thinking about the future. To this end, our methodology was collaborative, performative, and experimental, based on a form of interdisciplinary working that merged arts practice and sociology and 'a commitment to corporeal experience and experiment' (McCormack, 2010: 43). (For a critical discussion, see Lyon and Carabelli, 2015). Through a series of one-day *Fast Forward* workshops designed and led on Sheppey by the artists *Artists*, we engaged young people in 'making the future' (cf Soreneau and Hurducaş, 2015) in leisure, work and residential spaces with different objects and materials. For this part of the project we worked with a core group of six 16-20 year olds. The activities involved the 'doing of creative, artistic, performative practice for insights and understandings to emerge' (Douglas and Carless, 2013: 55), and working with objects and materials to document how '...being directed toward some objects and not others involves a more general orientation toward the world' (Ahmed, 2010: 237). Our starting point was to take these tendencies seriously, reading them as acquired through practice, and suggestive of wider future orientations: 'If orientations are an effect of what we tend towards, then they point to the future, what is not yet present' (Ahmed, 2010: 247).

The *Fast Forward* workshops were highly animated occasions. Different futures materialised quite literally surprising us all at how they took shape and what shape they took, and at times producing surreal images and scenes. The experience of the workshops was also a profoundly embodied one. We made use of 'disorientation device[s]' (Ahmed, 2010: 254) e.g. a hula hoop to free the dynamics of interaction and inhabitation, and other materials that could 'engage the senses'

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<sup>1</sup> *Imagine Sheppey* is part of a large Connected Communities research grant from an AHRC/ESRC joint initiative on Community Engagement and Mobilisation. The larger project is 'The social, historical, cultural and democratic context of civic engagement: imagining different communities and making them happen' – or *Imagine* for short - grant no ES/K002686/1.

(Pink, 2006) and stimulate play (Soreneau and Hurducaş, 2015). For instance, we played with fabric in the wind, feeling its resistance against our bodies in different postures, and we rolled on the ground in mirrored cones ‘curving our imaginations’ (focus group participant). We recorded the activities of each day on two camcorders and several digital cameras, meaning that we were all in and engaged in documenting our activities (Blum-Ross, 2013: 1).

We talked as we ‘played’ but it was difficult to generate reflections on the part of the young people either during or after our activities. We therefore organised a collage-making workshop for the core participants to elicit meanings and interpretation. Whilst this led to flashes of insight in relation to specific images or moments, what we had done could not be contained within language. *Artists* put together a video (<http://www.livingandworkingonsheppey.co.uk/imagine-sheppey-fast-forward-final-video>) based on our activities which is itself a document of the young people’s orientations as well as a ‘distillation’ of the data for us to interpret further. However, we felt we could do more to try to access how young people feel and think about the future in conscious as well as non-verbal ways. Therefore we conducted focus groups with a wider cohort of 20 young people (16-21) using selected workshop images to stimulate their thinking and reveal their taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways they might navigate their futures. This was also a way to involve young people in the interpretive process of the project (Mitchell, 2011), and offer confirmation or open new directions in our early readings of the workshop images (Bagnoli and Clark, 2010). We make use of the workshop and focus group data in the analysis presented below.

## **Orientations to the Future**

### ***Reach: How far is the future?***

A striking observation of our focus group participants was the way in which they differentiated between a distant and a proximate future. In other words, the ‘reach’ (Mische, 2009) of their imagined futures was both extensive and tightly bound to the present. It is important to take both these temporal relations - or this ‘two-track thinking’ (Threadgold, 2012) - seriously to gain insight into their future orientations. We therefore sought to grasp how the engagement with different temporal dimensions of the future *moved* young people in the present, which we discuss in this section.

The first image presented to the group was of a pavement with a mirror hole. We told them that through the hole they could reach *the* future. In groups they had to describe what they saw, felt, smelt, thought after jumping into the hole. Perhaps because we asked about *the* future, participants felt compelled to describe an idealised – and somehow standardised – version of the future. One group answered by asking, ‘why are all those people flying around?’ followed by the comment: ‘The future is completely different from the present, there will be flying animals...’. Another group suggested that ‘There will be more wars.... the human race doesn’t know the meaning of peace... even the world leaders are not at peace... technology will get out of hand and there will be more conflicts’. These

scenarios were extreme in their formulations. They had little or nothing in common with the participants' lived experience. As Sarah, one of the participants, observed, when we are asked to think about *the* future, our imagination sources details from science fiction to represent what is unknown and unknowable and where anything became possible. In other words, they could not position themselves in these imagined scenarios, but rather these futures were formulated by standing still in the present. These distant futures required contemplation and creativity to materialise, but there was no movement towards them. Somehow these futures were lifeless and they could not become goals; they were stories produced for entertainment or worlds that existed in disconnected temporalities. In Mische's (2009) terms, there was no 'connectivity' between now and then in these accounts.

IMAGE 1: Pavement with mirror hole



The next image presented a warped reflection of a pavement and participants were asked to consider what could happen if we did not think of the future as temporally aligned with the present. Accordingly, the group was invited to 'jump' anywhere into the future to see what it was like and then return to the present with that knowledge. We wanted our participants to explicitly articulate *the* future – made real in the act of speaking it – to see its effects on how we live in the present. The discussion became immediately personal and participants gave accounts of their own futures: what they wanted to see, their fears, hopes, and expectations. The majority wanted to know whether they had a family, nice children, a satisfying career or a decent house in which to live a comfortable life. For instance, one participant, Andrew, wanted to see whether getting a degree resulted in a job in his chosen field 'because you need a job to earn money and then you can start a family ... your life won't be open without a job and with a lot of material limitations and also you won't have a house and you won't start a family'. In a different example we also heard of life taking an 'unexpected turn'; Crystal told the story of her mum who 'did not expect to become a lorry driver and not to get epileptic fits so that now she can't do it anymore...'. As Ahmed writes, 'we are touched by what comes near, just as what comes near is affected by directions we

have already taken' (2010: 234). This second task repositioned *the* future as something close to and strictly related to the present. Participants' responses demonstrate their active engagement with this future. They are not just standing and imagining it, their imagination runs to connect and adjust what they know with what they hope for and what they are not familiar with to create dynamic links and viable paths to traverse. Hopes, dreams, fears, and anxieties about the future clearly instruct our movements. Yet, whereas hopes and dreams accelerate the future in the present (we can wish for our dreams to become real as soon as possible), fears and worries tend to slow us down and make us ponder in the present.

IMAGE 2: Warped pavement 1



The familiar present influenced the construction of personal futures also in terms of a realistic self-assessment: for our respondents, it became crucial to understand their own capabilities to move, their speed of travel, and the availability of navigational instruments to ease the way. For instance, one participant, Ashley, expressed the wish to start her own business but because she knew that her family did not have the financial assets, she presented the scenario of herself as a successful business woman as a dream that could not become an ambition or an aspiration. Ashley's realistic – rather than fantastical – perception of the future was common among all the participants: none of them thought they could win the lottery and become rich to start a new life and none of them imagined a future of fame and success, a finding also reported by the CelebYouth project that enquired into how young people relate to celebrities (Harvey, Allen and Mendick, 2015).

### ***Shape. Lines and curves in time***

One of the problems of doing research about future-imagining is the difficulty of grasping the future outside of a spatial and sequential linear conceptualisation of time (past-present-future). In recent decades, there has been considerable debate - including in this journal (e.g. Roberts, 2012; Woodman, 2010) - on the character of youth transitions and the trajectories now available for young people into adulthood which recognises huge variability in life courses or indeed 'lives without courses' (Chisholm, 2014). In addition to the discussion about their 'reach' into the

future, in this section we focus on the temporal entanglements through which young people envisage their lives. We take three examples to explore the micro temporal projections the participants revealed in different moments of the research: a visual exploration of time through collage-making; an imaginative ‘leap’ into the future using image elicitation; and an embodied inhabitation of time and space in the example of ‘rolling’.

Lisa’s collage (pictured here) is carefully composed and at a first glance the viewer is struck by the overall linearity between past, present and future. However, on closer inspection, we see that the picture fragments. Instead of legible images of what is thought of as known – albeit in a generalised and idealised style as we see here for ‘the 1940s’ – beyond the present, we cannot see clearly what will emerge. There is no sense of direction as slivers of images in the form of arrows have been put together to send the viewer’s gaze up, along, down and around. There is no ‘pre-composed plot’ that can be foreseen (Ingold, 2007: 78, 75) as there is no clear narrative. The shape of the future is yet to take shape so there is a contrast between the clarity of the past and the unknowability of the future.

IMAGE 3: Collage: ‘the future is unclear’



Our second example is taken from the *Fast Forward* workshop exploring residential futures, during which we made use of large flexible mirrored sheets, their malleability destabilising any capacity to represent in any straightforward way. They warped time and place as they reflected objects, people, and the immediate environment (see image 4 below). The mirrors themselves and the images they contained became part of a new landscape for the viewer, produced through the actions and directions of the young people themselves. Akin to Coleman’s (2008) approach to thinking about the past as something which has to be ‘jumped’ into for a particular memory to be sought, we gently pushed the young people in our focus groups to ‘leap’ into the future in relation to the image of a ‘Warped Pavement’. It was an invitation to twist and turn exploring in time and space rather than to imaginatively inhabit a specific temporal landscape into the future. This stimulated the focus group participants to think against the grain. They talked about ‘heading in a different direction’ from what might be expected, perhaps ‘bending the rules’ along the way, and calling for others to ‘curve your imagination!’. Talking through their engagement with the images allowed us to hear their thinking: ‘It’s weird, it’s

a reflection from a different angle, it shows what it's in front but from a weird angle, it shows behind isn't it?'; 'Perhaps life in the future will not be in a straight path but in different shapes'; or, the future may be 'a happy place' and contain 'more better things.'

IMAGE 4: Warped pavement 2



Our third example also took place during the residential workshop with the mirrored sheets. The mood was confident and playful and the participants quickly took over the activities. At one point, Paul spontaneously made several cones into a tube in which he could lie down and roll along the pavement. This was a profoundly embodied action yet one that refuses the facility of the feet which we see dangling mid-air, our usual point of contact with the ground and through which we move forward. Rolling can be seen therefore both an act of groundlessness and a fully grounded movement. There is a certain linearity to the roll as he moves along the pavement but his experience as the 'roller' is that the motion is circular, the turning a refusal to stay in place. There is also something – literally – self-contained about the tube - until that is the pieces of the tube threaten to separate and we see a hand emerge to hold on.

In this section, we have seen how the visual, verbal and performative explorations of the future reveal orientations that cannot be contained by a linear vision. Furthermore on two other occasions, participants' gestures suggested it was barely possible to imagine their next step. When playing with fabric in the wind, and making shapes with mirrored plastic sheets, they acted to 'blind' themselves to their environment or to the direction of movement. They literally covered their heads or faces with the materials and stood still or moved hesitantly, uncertain of their direction or what they would encounter. Our discussions of these moments with them did not elicit conscious awareness of the potential meaning of these gestures but if we take seriously a pre-cognitive form of embodied knowing or

orientation, we can read these stances as an expression of the sheer imperceptibility of what lay around or ahead. Or in the view of a focus group participant, a deliberate attempt to 'hide from my future'.

***Resources: the self and relationships in mobilising the future***

Another important aspect of our investigation into future orientations was dedicated to understanding whether and how relationships are felt as resources for mobilising the future. In Mische's (2009) terms, here we explore the extent to which futures are imagined through volition or sociality. Furthermore, Tavory and Eliasoph argue for the importance of studying the 'coordination' of futures pointing out that 'the way actors *orient each other* toward their futures has not, as yet, become a coherent research program' [*emphasis added*] (2013: 909). They go on: 'When people interact, they coordinate their orientations to the future'. In this section we discuss how young people imagine themselves moving *forward* in relation to other people, and the ways in which projected relationships are themselves modes of anticipating and marking time.

IMAGES 5 & 6: Walking into the future



To discuss relationships, we presented a new set of photographs to the focus groups. In the first picture, several 'creatures' are moving together under a white cloth in the wind. In the second, there is a group of creatures attached one to the other trying - hopelessly - to move in different trajectories. Interestingly, participants became quickly concerned with discussing these images in terms of how being part of a community might affect their own futures. For instance, John said, 'I think the future is.... Like there is a group of people doing things together, but then some of them will excel... like at school'. Andrew added 'sometimes I like to have my own space to develop myself... sometimes you have to decide what you want to do as a person and you have to let the community and friends behind and do things for yourself.' These accounts suggest a complex understanding of community that becomes both the space in which social bonds are made and sustained but also a communal space limiting the individual who strives to excel. This tension between the impulse to autonomy and connection was also made clear, quite literally, during the *Fast Forward* workshop dedicated to 'work'. Participants were asked to create their own workspace of the future and whilst

they all imagined spaces in which they could work - and live - alone, in the physical rendering of these spaces, each was entangled with the space of the others.

### IMAGES 7 & 8: Pulling together or apart?



In the next set of images, there were two figures walking together towards the horizon and a group of creatures standing on a pavement looking in different directions. Looking at them Maggie said:

the two people could be a couple helping each other out but in a way they are tied down as well because this person wouldn't have come this far without this person...whereas this one, the one on their own, they could go wherever they want.

Maggie recognises that the creatures looking in different directions experience higher levels of freedom and yet, the dependent couple seems to walk towards a happier future than the independent creatures.

Andrew also thought that success does not come through staying within the community but by taking the risk of standing out. Being successful, for him, implies being alone as if to flourish were a solo act: 'the fantasy of the sovereign self' (Berlant and Lee, 2014: 11), or what Mische refers to as 'volition'. Yet, this solitude needs only to be temporary as it does not produce happiness: 'to be happy you need something concrete like a safe house that is your place where your things are and your family is and this is where you are appreciated...you need something like this to anchor yourself' – Andrew continued explaining.

For Andrew, the 'community' can be asphyxiating and limiting, but it is the which 'couple' is instrumental to happiness and safety. Community is formed by a group of individuals who happen to be together which for Andrew leads to movements becoming struggles. We can then think about the quality of moving-with in terms of friction. Yet, Andrew would also be happy to share his future with a partner in order to gain support and companionship but in order to be successful he needs to

be alone.

In addition, during the collage workshop, Tim wrote: 'The future can be like the wind, when it gets harder to push forward, only the most determined make it to their destinations'. This fierce statement further evidences the young people's perception that the ability to succeed weighs on the shoulder on the individual who must remain focused on the final objective and overcome obstacles alone rather than through establishing alliances and solidarity networks to succeed (or reach goals) together with other members of 'the community'. Yet, Tim also wrote 'in the past, present and the future there will always be someone there even when you lock yourself away' declaring his need for human support and companionship.

Overall, our young respondents framed the conversation about their future in relation to people with ideas of career, success, and happiness. Whereas a chosen partner is here needed to be content and self-fulfilled, the absence of people can lessen competition in work environment and help enable success. What the young people's accounts reveal is also the construction of a 'shared orientation towards what is good' (Ahmed, 2010: 56); what the young participants believe they have to do in order to be happy is to have a successful career and a caring relationship. It may be that they emphasise – and idealise - 'normal' futures (Bryant and Ellard, 2015) because work and relationships are accessible sources of value (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012: 484).

### ***Value: Making a future that counts***

The relative lack of material and symbolic resources possessed by working class young people and the context of class-based antagonisms and direct hostility towards the working class in the UK means that they approach the future with more uncertainty than their middle class counterparts, in terms of the positions they may occupy and the subjects they may become (Bryant and Ellard, 2015; Laughland-Booÿ, Mayall and Skrbiš, 2014). This then intensifies the 'injunction to anticipate' (Adkins, 2011: 350). In the *Imagine Sheppey* focus groups, young participants strongly expressed the importance of achieving a future that counts, one that has *value* (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). In this section we discuss what it is that young people do in the quest for value in the sphere of work, including how they contend with anticipated limitations, and the temporal configurations through which this imagining takes shape.

Some of our focus group participants already experience themselves to be on a path to a specific, known future. Their vocational courses of study are intended to take them into a particular field of work and success is imagined as work for which their education has prepared them. In the exercise discussed earlier (in the section on 'Reach') when given the opportunity to see the future, Andrew comments: 'I would like to know if it [my educational path] pays off [...] If I was working in a call centre or as a shop retailer instead of as a graphic designer as I am studying for... you want to be reassured that my choice were worth...'. The specific imagined and hoped for future is what makes sense of the present which in turn must produce this particular future to be of value. We see here how *projectivity* (Mische, 2009) is

a central aspect of young people's agency. Clear goals do not secure the future and Andrew's plan remains marked by uncertainty, indeed in need of reassurance. His clarity may be empowering in producing capacity in the present, as well as potentially disempowering if the lived future is not aligned to the one imagined. Furthermore, this imagining produces a temporal orientation in which the projected future determines the value and meaning of the present and past. Judgements are then made about present actions and investments for their anticipated consequences, what Adam and Groves (2011) call 'timeprint'. In this orientation the conception of the future dominates the present and closes down its horizons, or in Mische's (2009) terms, limits its 'expandability'. And it is this very practice of future imagining that 'makes time' (Adkins, 2011: 354).

Moving to the future requires exertion. When discussing the image of creatures walking into the wind against a piece of fabric participants talked of the difficulty of making the future happen: 'It's a real struggle', 'It's hard to get somewhere in life', one going as far as to suggest that the fabric – seen as the pressures of the future - 'might crush them'. The fragility of the future and the present-future trajectory is powerfully voiced in the following exchange. Lynne is insistent about the benefit of knowing 'for sure' how things will work out which for her would relieve the burden and uncertainty of decision-making in the present and remove the fear that she might 'totally mess up'. Although the example she gives – missing an exam - is one about which she can already know the consequences, when Dawn points this out, it has no impact.

'I would like to see the future so that you could change it.'

[...]

'It's because you can make the wrong decision that can totally mess up your future, like miss an exam .... You know?'

*You are telling me that it would mess up your life to miss an exam, so you know it, you don't need to see the future to have the proof for it and you can avoid it...*

Yes, but you don't know it for sure .... Whereas if you saw it, you would know for sure.

Value is understood as something which circulates rather than being a 'permanent property of the person' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012: 472, 480). Work - but not a 'rubbish job' - offers an opportunity to achieve value and demonstrate worth. Tom asserted: 'You gotta have an ambition to do something... you don't want to be a Mr Nobody for the rest of your life, do yer'. The discussion continued, Alex said : 'If you're a garbage man, it makes you look a complete poor person living on the streets'. Still, the emphasis on *preparing* the future is prized and mobilised as a resource of the self. Peers are criticised for lacking a clear plan of what to do after college, presumed to lead to almost certain failure. Whilst planning – and hard work (Mendick, Allen and Harvey, 2015) - can make the future *feel* settled, plans are not directly translated into paths. They might steer and organise, and mitigate present anxieties, but they cannot offer promises. Planning itself is insufficient to achieve value but contains the promise of future value.

Whilst there are voices that assert 'anything can happen', drawing on examples of lives having taken surprising directions (both in terms of unexpected opportunities and unforeseen problems), there is recognition of limited opportunities for young people today. This is perceived as a block to making a future happen and to becoming mature adults and having responsibilities which as we have already heard (in the discussion of Resources) is widely desirable to these young people. Charlie puts it bluntly: 'There's no jobs out there for us'. She is angry about this and expresses her sense of injustice in strong, at times racist, terms. 'We're gonna be run by them ['foreigners'] sooner or later... They'll make us skivvies next, won't they, like we did to the Blacks back in the day'. Her remarks here are paradoxical and evidence her 'struggle against classification' (Tyler, 2015). Whilst she recognises past suffering inflicted through racist distinctions she fears shifting attributions of value that would further diminish her social position: '...in the end we're going to have to clean the sewers because everyone else is higher up than us. So we're just going to get nowhere in life really.' Others in the group protested at the racist way Charlie made her points although they appreciated how the experience of injustice and inequality generates visceral affective responses.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Young people are a particularly salient group for the study of future orientations. Often in transition or on the brink of making important decisions about their studies or work, a concern with the future resonates with their present experiences and possible trajectories. In this article, we have disentangled several dimensions of future orientation - reach, shape, resources and value - that emerged from the *Imagine Sheppey* project. These themes are not exhaustive but our approach does shed light on the ways in which *projectivity* – a neglected aspect of agency (Mische, 2009) - is lived.

Across our analysis, we observed how our respondents approach the future and initiate paths toward it - their modes of present-future navigation - revealing how their present affects and directs their journeys to the future. In particular, we were able to access their future imaginaries when our participants could envisage themselves walking toward this future (as opposed to the static idea of a future far in time and space), when they felt able to relate to the future as the horizon against which to measure and project their expectations, dreams, and fears. Yet, perhaps because of the strong connections between the present and the future, they found it hard to imagine that their lives could be much different from what they knew or experienced in the past and present. When they were experiencing the future in the arts-based workshops - rather than accounting for it verbally – they sometimes hid or covered their faces, which we might interpret as a refusal to look ahead and an unwillingness to abandon the present they inhabit. Furthermore, during the focus groups, our participants seemed very aware of the weight of the present. They made frequent reference to limitations in the financial, social, and cultural resources available to them producing movements to the future that were familiar rather than adventurous, rationally calculated rather than risk-taking. Crucially, we reflect on what it takes to challenge the familiarity of the present - its

comfortable routines and patterns but also its overwhelming *presence* - and whether it is possible to imagine a future that differs greatly from what we know and to which we are accustomed.

We were struck in the project by the extent to which affect underlies all of the young people's reflections and orientations. When we discussed their imagined futures in relation to its distance, its values, and the resources needed to gain speed, these movements were often described in relation to fears, hopes, and dreams.

Furthermore, the project was able to capture the multiplicity and co-existence of trajectories and orientations, recognising the various entangled ways the future takes and loses shape, and materialises in time such that actors may 'ambivalently orient themselves to multiple futures at once' (Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013: 909). As one of the core workshop participants, Tim, expressed it: 'the future is loading'. He recognised the future as an ongoing action built through the accumulation of experiences and movements, twists and turns, and always slightly beyond our grasp. This chimes with Mische's (2009) call for sociologists to recognise living as taking place within an imaginative horizon of multiple possibilities which are open and indeterminate.

In conclusion, we contend that this experimental project was able to show the importance of studying the future through orientations rather than focussing on content-based scenarios. Thanks to the combination of performative arts-based and traditional (focus group) methods, we were able to trace the process of building paths to the future. These paths were often not linear, but rather the results of negotiations between what our participants wished for, what they felt could be possible, and their existing positionalities. Overall, the analysis presented here challenges common understandings of the future as bright or fearful, and privileges an understanding of the future as a process of becoming, reshaping, and transformation.

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