



# Desired images, regulating figures, constructed imaginaries: The future as an apriority for society to be possible

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## Abstract

This article deals with the future as a crucial element for the webbing of our individual and social life. In accordance with Simmel's reflections on the apriorities for the very possibility of society, the authors maintain that the webbing of society as we know it would not be possible without its members imagining at least some kind of future. To illustrate the importance of the future for webbing any kind of social relationship, and in order to analyse the possibilities of creating different imaginaries of the future, the authors present a case study of 60 autobiographic interviews of men and women from different class contexts collected in Germany and Spain. The authors look for what they call the images, figures and imaginaries of the future – images as the concrete objects, moments or relationships that are expected, feared, or hoped for in the future, figures as the archetypes that give meaning, inform and shape the contours of our future imaginations, and imaginaries as the webbing together of the figures and images in a narration in the future tense of our own life story, relating this imaginary to other cultural practices. The results of this research show how deep the certainty of a future, and the concrete imaginaries of the future to come, mould and shape who we are, and the directions in which we wish, can and will go.

## Keywords

Bourdieu, desire, future, habitus, imaginaries, Simmel

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This article deals with the future as a crucial element for the weaving of our individual and social life. Despite being different for all of us, shaped by class, gender and our individual biographies, the future itself is at the heart of society's very possibility. In accordance with Simmel (1992), we believe that the weaving of society, as we know it, is not possible without imagining at least some kind of future.

To illustrate the importance of the future we present a case study, centrally based on autobiographic interviews with men and women from different class contexts. In their narratives we analysed what we call the images, figures and imaginaries of the future – images as the concrete objects, moments or relationships that we expect or hope for in the future, figures as the archetypes that give meaning, inform and shape the contours of our future imaginations, and imaginaries as the weaving together of the figures and images in a narration of our own life story in the future tense, relating these imaginaries to other cultural practices. The results of our research have shown how deep the certainty of a future, and the concrete imaginaries of the future mould and shape who we are, and the directions in which we wish to, can and will go.

## The future as empirical category of analysis

Despite its fundamental importance for weaving our daily life, sociologists have largely failed to conduct empirical studies on the role the future plays in narrative self-constructions. This article focuses on the future as an object of sociological research from an empirically informed perspective.

The 'future' as a category of sociological analysis implies viewing the future as a time category, which reflects the unique events that will follow those that have already taken place or that are taking place.

Our work has been inspired by Bourdieu's elaborations on an empirical analysis of the future, as well as by Simmel's sociological work on the apriorities for social life, which he developed in the first digression of *Sociology* (1992). Based on their ideas, this article presents as its main hypothesis the idea that social relations as we know them would not be possible without weaving the future into our lives implicitly or explicitly, without imaginaries of the future existing for each member of society. This does not imply that one or another *specific* imaginary of the future is necessary for a society to hold together, but it certainly does imply that the existence of *some* form of narrative, image, figure and imaginary of the future is required. However, the relativity of the importance of concrete images, figures and imaginaries also does not mean that they are completely arbitrary. In fact – and this is our second hypothesis – imaginaries of the future emerge and change within the different socio-historical contexts, somehow stable and somehow constantly shaped by the reciprocal actions and effects (*Wechselwirkungen*) that, in fact, *are* society.

## Theoretical framework

Looking at our empirical data it can hardly be denied that almost everything human beings seem to do when they relate to each other is actually based on the reflected or non-reflected assumption that there will be a future. Future confers on our everyday life a longitudinal dimension, allowing us to picture our life beyond the present moment.

This picture of our life beyond the present moment is closely related to a certain place that we assume we have (and will continue having in the future) in society. It is this place that enables us to experience our life's longitudinal dimension, which gives us a feeling for a future.

Having identified an own place as being important for us as individuals (and for our ability to engage in social relations), Simmel's 'How is society possible' (the first digression of *Sociology*, 1908) provides some great theoretical thoughts, underlining the importance of a place in society. In this digression, Simmel discussed necessary apriorities that had to be fulfilled so that society becomes possible (Simmel, 1992: 42–61). If these apriorities are not fulfilled, society will cease to exist.

Simmel elaborated on three apriorities which can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. Human beings apprehend others as well as themselves, to a certain extent, in a typified manner.
2. Human beings are social beings and, beyond this, something else (which is purely individual).
3. Human beings need a place in society, and they need to believe that there is a place for them within society.

For this study, the most interesting apriority is doubtlessly the third apriority. According to Simmel, a certain harmony needs to exist between the impersonal places to be filled within the social web, and the individuals, searching for and hoping to find a special place within that web. It is of great importance that this harmony is not only given but also felt and experienced. One's place is the location in society where one's qualities needed by society and the capacity/imagination/desire of an individual to fit into this place find each other. The relation between the individual, the social and the places are constructed in reciprocal actions and effects. Once found, the place becomes a *durable* part of an individual's (social) identity. Bearing this durability in mind, it becomes clear that Simmel's third apriority necessarily points to a temporal dimension.

The temporality and durability of the place we inhabit in society is synonymous with having a past, a present and a future. However, a 'special place in society' can be experienced by the prevalence of one of the three tenses: past, present and future.

For example, pre-modern societies tended to be held together by a place, given to each person by their belonging to a family, or to other particular groups (by the past); modern societies, with their growing anonymity, and their multiple possibilities to live one's life are based on the idea that individuals will find their places by themselves, that they will figure out and develop towards that which they are able (and want) to become (future).

Today's search for one's place in the future makes out of one's biography a journey of inventing, discovering, acquiring and defending one's own place in *Wechselwirkung* with others throughout a lifetime. Today, we recurrently find the future, as the point where the *special* place of *one's own* can be found. The ways in which we develop, the directions in which we go, who we want to be, all this is crucially related to that which can be imagined, and that which we, limited by what is imaginable, wish to become.

Here we have already introduced a concept, crucial for a sociological analysis of the future: imagination (closely related with desire: *Begehren*). From our point of view, it is

through the desires, wishes and hopes that we have (shaped and defined within the social contexts to which we belong) that we engage with our future.

The frame of the imaginable is another concept that we have used for our analysis, varying for each individual, according to the 'habitus' this individual has incorporated and the desires he/she has learned to have.

The modern search for one's place in the future, and the vanishing direct influence of the past, might sound for some like a great development towards freedom, in which now we decide where we go. However, our desires, imaginaries and our decisions partly based on them are deeply social, moulded by the differently distributed capabilities, dispositions (to use Bourdieu's concept) and possibilities to imagine and desire a future. What we hope for, what we wish and desire depends on the place we belong to, on the socialization we had and on the possibilities we believe to exist (moulded by our class, gender, race). Furthermore what we believe to be possible and what we desire depends on our biography, on the people we have met and the things we experienced. Our individual place is to be found in a highly complex relational net woven throughout our lifetime.

Furthermore, our bodies/habitus as concrete places, wherein pasts, presents and futures are interweaved, make of our imaginations and possibilities a partly non-reflexive process. What we desire and what is accessible are deeply incorporated in parts of ourselves that are neither reflexive nor rational. According to Bourdieu (2000) we have to read our future projections not as negotiation between conscious processes of imaginaries and possibilities but as a negotiation process that is pre-shaped and channelled by our bodies as decisive 'unconscious archives' by the help of which we are disposed to connect with the future and a possible future place.

Apparently superior to the body, rational thought and reflective adjustments of possible future projects are based on our dispositions and the habitus we possess to imagine, desire and connect with certain places. What we do and what we think are based on our habitus. The possibilities to imagine a future and to talk about this future are regulated and shaped by our bodily and mental memories, contained within our dispositions and reflected in our habitus. Thus, our autobiographical narrations of the future are conglomerates of our past experiences, internalized into our habitus and discourses, anticipating and expressing consequent hopes and imaginations, desires and fears.

## Study context and methods

One hypothesis behind the decision to work with autobiographical interviews was that, by telling the story of their lives, the interviewees would produce a narration that would depart from the present moment, and thus they would look back and recall that which they had lived and experienced, and they would anticipate and project possible ways to continue forward. We assumed that if Simmel's third apriority is indeed a 'must' for society to be possible, this search for a place should be reflected in the collected life stories. Moreover, we assumed that if it was a must for society to be possible, it should appear in the autobiographical narrations without us asking any particular questions about it. Thus, we, as we saw later correctly, expected that a future dimension would be unveiled within the stories presented by our interviewees.

In the cases in which the future was not spontaneously incorporated into the narrations (which were surprisingly few), the ideas about (and plans for) the future were more or less directly asked about at the end of the interview.

After the interviews were collected, we proceeded with the analysis, questioning: (1) whether some evidence for Simmel's third apriority could be found in the interviews; (2) whether this evidence pointed to the future as the main location of this special place of one's own in contemporary society, as our hypothesis had assumed; (3) what happened (and had happened in the interviews) if the two points above were not fulfilled; and (4) what imaginaries and figures of the future could be identified in the autobiographical narrations and to what extent social structural factors (such as class and gender) played a relevant role in the shape of these imaginaries and figures.

The analysis of our interviews followed Strauss and Corbin (1990: 55–181). We developed the following future-related coding concepts:

1. '*Imaginaries of the future*' were conceived as the symbolic universes comprising different figures and narratives of the future. These imaginaries can be viewed as the general framework, which makes particular *hows* and *whats* possible, while others are not. They relate figures and images of the future to a wider field of cultural and social discourses and practices.
2. '*Images of the future*' are the concrete pictures, which people trace when they imagine and speak of the/their future. Images of the future are always concrete pictures of that which the individuals hope, fear, wish, envisage or forefeel that will come: a happy or an unhappy family, four children, many grandchildren, no children at all, a broken love, a fulfilled professional life, a terminal illness, suicide, a plane crash. Thus, images of the future are about the contents, the *whats*, of the individual imaginaries of the future, closely related to the dispositions the individual has to imagine and desire a certain future.
3. In contrast to the sequence of momentary images of that which is to come, we borrowed the concept of '*figures*' from Marc Augé (2004) to grasp the forms which give shape to the sequences of images just mentioned. Thus, figures of the future are about the *hows* of the individual imaginaries of the future. They would be to a certain extent an equivalent of Simmel's concept of 'form'.

## Findings

### *The interviews*

The empirical basis for this research consists of 60 narrative autobiographical interviews realized in Germany and Spain in the regions of Saxony, Westphalia and Catalonia. We chose Germany (30 interviews) and Spain (30 interviews) because both, as two highly developed European industrial countries, promise a certain comparability between future imaginations and future possibilities, traceable from their collective perspective, but also a possibility for differences, big enough to make a comparison interesting and fruitful.<sup>1</sup> Thereby, we assured also that our findings would not be biased by a regional idiosyncrasy. We opted mainly for interviews in cities (Bielefeld, Leipzig, Barcelona, Girona),

**Table 1.** Socio-economic classification of interviewees.

	Catalonia (Barcelona, Girona)	Westphalia (Bielefeld)	Saxony (Leipzig)
Working-class	7 women 4 men	2 women 2 men	4 women 4 men
Middle-class	6 women 6 men	3 women 1 man	3 women 3 men
Middle-upper-class	4 women 3 men	1 woman 1 man	3 women 3 men
Total	30	10	20

however we decided to do some interviews in rural areas because we were given the chance through snowballing. These interviews did not bring much of a difference to the findings we made in the rest of the interviews.

The interviews were conducted over the period of four years (2005–2009). We stratified our sample along three axes: gender, age and class.

Seven interviewees (3 in Catalonia, 2 in Bielefeld and 2 in Leipzig) were contacted directly by the interviewers, who took criteria of gender, socio-economic status and academic formation into account in order to have the most differentiated range of interview partners in the first selection. The rest followed by snowballing. There was one working-class man (35 years), one middle-class woman (46 years) and an upper-class woman (21 years) in Catalonia, a working-class woman (49 years) and a middle-class man (25 years) in Bielefeld, and a working-class woman (22 years) and an upper-class man (41 years) in Leipzig in our first selection of interview partners. The gender/class stratification was important for us (see Table 1) as we did not just want to research whether the future is a necessary dimension for making social life possible (Simmel's third apriority) on a general level, but also hoped to find possible differences in the narrations of individuals from different class and gender contexts (thus relating to Bourdieu's account on the future through the lenses of habitus).

Having pursued the first interviews, we used the connections of our interviewees to continue. In order to ascertain the social class of interviewees, we analysed the detailed accounts of the interviewees' lives in the collected narrative interviews. Furthermore, we asked the interviewees at the end of each interview to answer a few short questions that collected the basic data we needed to evaluate their profiles (age, educational biography, professional status, income, number of books at home, theatre visits per year, the jobs of their three closest friends).

After an interview with a person who had suffered from drug abuse, we decided to interview other people who suffered from drug addiction to make sure that the results gained could be generalized. The exploration of life stories of people whose life and life chances have been disrupted became very helpful for our analysis (cf. Bourdieu, 2000: 219). Following principles of grounded theory, the work in the field contributed to define and shape our sampling.

The first significant result that we obtained after the analysis of the first interviews (and which the interviews that followed confirmed) is that the hypothesis that had led us

to opt for narrative interviews, and thus not to ask any concrete questions about the ‘special place in society’, and about ‘future perspectives’, was a very fruitful one. Indeed, almost all interviewees (55 cases) referred spontaneously either to their special place in society, or to their search for it (successful, failed or, in most cases, in process).

Second, all 55 cases used a certain form of talking or implying a future for defining their place in society and for giving meaning to their life story. The future appeared either in direct form ‘I will ...’, or ‘hopefully I will ...’, or in indirect form ‘when I take care of my grandchildren ...’.

Furthermore, we observed that the interviewees had different ways of starting their narrations and, related to the way in which they started, they used elements of looking backwards and looking forwards, as a consequence of memorizing, and projecting their possible future, connecting their lives with pasts, presents and futures. Analysing the interviews, we found three characteristic ways of starting, and thus structuring, the narration:

1. From the interviewee’s birth to the present moment, with some final accounts about future expectations and imaginations. This was the most common way of narrating (38 cases).
2. From the present moment towards the past and then towards the future (11 cases).
3. Starting with what the interviewees believed to be now, moving then forward and backward to significant and relevant past, present and future that explain the current image of the self. This was the least common form of structuring the narration (6 cases) and, simultaneously, also the form that led to the longest narrations (about one and a half hours, without interruptions).

The remaining five cases are those in which the interviewees ‘failed’ to produce a narration (three in Leipzig and two in Barcelona). Their narrations (or, better, non-narrations) had some elements in common. Usually, after a few attempts to respond to the input with rather unconnected sentences, the person interrupted the narration. For instance:

Yes ... (2 minutes’ silence) and here I am ... approximately three quarters of a year after my psychosis began ... (half a minute silence) also through the drugs ... came the psychosis ... do you know what a psychosis is? (Marco, 18, Leipzig, living in an assisted flat for he had had a drug addiction and had developed a psychosis)

Or:

I don’t know what to say. My life has nothing special. I got married when I was twenty-two, had two children ... they’re grown up now. She’s nineteen ... the boy’s sixteen ... yes ... in the morning I clean the house, in the afternoon I am here, in the office ... then I go home and cook dinner ... There is really not much I have to say about my life. (Carme, 43, Barcelona area)

The five interviews in which the narration did not lead to a narration are of great relevance: it is from these interviews that we learn what is almost invisible in the other interviews, i.e. that special conditions are required for adult individuals to be able to

produce an autobiographical narration. Being able to deliver an autobiographical narration requires a fully socialized individual who can order the facts of her/his life according to the 'rules of the game' of an autobiographical narration. In order to be able to produce a life story, the existence of Simmel's three apriorities is necessary in the minds of the interviewees. In this sense, our 'failed cases' also affirm Bourdieu:

Just as, as psychologists have observed, the annihilation of chances associated with crisis situations leads to the collapse of psychological defences, so ... it leads to a kind of generalized and lasting disorganization of behaviour and thought linked to the disappearance of any coherent vision of the future. (Bourdieu, 2000: 219)

Focusing the analysis on the narrations of the 55 interviewees who did deliver a life story after the initial input, we will first work with the images found within their narrations, and then turn our attention towards the figures/forms which are filled with these images. In the analysis of the images we focus on those which are recurrent throughout the interviews and try to analyse them regarding gender and class.

The figures of the future do not appear as such in the interviews. They are ideal types we have abstracted from the analysis of the interviews. As will be shown after their presentation, individual narrations can include two or more figures. By combining the found images with the figures, the contours of the imaginaries of the future can be drawn.

### *Images of the future*

The collected autobiographical narrations included several ambits of an individual's life: (a) family, (b) children, (c) partnership, (d) school and profession, (e) hedonistic experiences. These ambits or images are by no means exclusive; there can be more than one, sometimes even two contradictory images within a narration.

(1) *Family*. All 55 interviewees talked, briefly or extensively, about their parents and siblings (if they had any). Delivering narrations of the past, however, often connected to a future moment in which the interviewees pictured themselves having children.

(2) *Children*. The image of having children was present in almost all young people's narrations (group 18–24 years: 13 cases; group 25–44 years: 14 cases). Women especially tended to see themselves as having children in the future (18 cases) – if they did not have any already (9 cases). (In Germany the tendency for using the image of children was stronger [13 cases] than in Catalonia [12 cases], reaching almost unanimity among the young female interviewees.) In some interviews (18 cases) the intention to have children was made explicit by the interviewee (normally female interviewees), in others it was taken for granted. Consequently, in these cases it was not directly presented as a goal to be attained, but as something obvious (normally male interviewees – 6 cases).

And one thing is sure: I want to have children and more than one. To be very concrete three, three is a pretty cool number. (Jenny, 22, Leipzig)



Well and ... I see my future as a future with the family I want to have. (Martin, 34, Leipzig)

And yes, children if the right one comes along, if not I have to do it in vitro. (Maria, 32, Barcelona)

Children are recurrent as images of the future, but the interviewees seldom mentioned the ways in which they want to raise their children, or the reasons for desiring parenthood. This points at its taken-for-grantedness that was only broken when the interviewees positioned themselves against it, asserting that they did not wish to have any children.

(3) *Love/partnership*. This was an important issue in all the interviews (56 cases). In the cases in which the interviewee did not have a relationship, she/he mentioned the hope for, or the certainty of, a relationship in the future.

... perhaps a girlfriend ... Having a girlfriend would be nice. I've been single for almost a year now... (Paul, 22, Bielefeld)

Or:

I hope I will realize it when the right man comes along. I am not interested in one-night-stands, no ... I want true love or nothing at all. (Anna, 32, Barcelona)

In those cases in which the interviewee already had a relationship (44 cases), she/he mentioned either the hope for (14 cases), the certainty or the ignorance of the continuity of the relationship (20 cases), or simply took the relationship for granted (10 cases), incorporating it into the pictures of the future. Those who had an unhappy relationship (4 cases) used a lot of 'past future' in their narration, narrating what they had hoped for, and had not come true, or referring to the wishes they still had.

(4) *Job/career*. The images related to job, career and, for the younger interviewees, studies are central to most of the interviews collected (44 cases). Most men (23 cases) and approximately half of the women interviewed (15 cases) make their academic/professional life the central axis of their narration. Six people said that work and career are very important, even central, but that there is or are other images that are more important. Thus, the sequence: school (in some cases college) – job – future job/retirement is the structuring sequence of the majority of the collected interviews.

Only those people who worked at home (5 women in our case) did not open another field of narration for talking about their work – it was mentioned together with the family. Whether they thought that they would continue being housewives, or whether they expected any changes in their work was not mentioned as an image of the future in any of their interviews. However, the issue of 'reproductive work' was an important issue for women who had taken a paid job, had children and also did housework (6 cases).

I suppose when the kids are older, things will change a bit. I will have more time for myself, more time for my job ... Now it is all ... like running. If I am not working at the office, I am working at home. (Diana, 38, Barcelona)

Two housewives we interviewed talked about their work in the ‘past future’; i.e. they did not talk about their work when they explained how they pictured their lives in the future, but while telling their past they mentioned moments in which they thought of their work in the future.

(5) *Travelling, experiencing, hedonistic lifestyle.* This image appeared in nearly all narrations (53 cases). It especially shapes the narrations of young people (18–24 years: 16 cases; 25–44 years: 16 cases) regarding the near future and the sphere of romanticism and leisure time in the narrations of nearly all interviewees.

... And travelling. To make beautiful trips is nice and important. (Marina, 28, Barcelona)

I don’t know but I want to go out at the weekends to some clubs and hang out with my friends. (Thomas, 26, Leipzig)

(6) *The future of the planet, the future of the society.* Seldom, we found images of the future that concern the future of society beyond the scope of one’s own family, job, or enjoyment. These rare images appeared mainly in the narrations of the oldest generation (3 cases), and in the cases of a young man engaged in politics, and a young man engaged in the environmental movement. For the rest of the interviewees, there seems to be nothing much beyond the scope of one’s own life.

Sometimes I get sad when I think about the future of my grandchildren. I won’t be there to see it ... but I guess it’s going to be very hard for them. Things are not getting any easier ... I fear they will have to struggle as hard as we did ... In comparison to that I must say that my children’s adulthood was calmer. They did not have to worry about the basics. (Josep, 78, a village by Barcelona)

I cannot understand why all these people keep on having children, buying cars, building houses ... can’t they see that the planet is collapsing? Will awareness arrive before it’s too late? (Abel, 35, Barcelona)

### *Figures of the future*

Now our attention will turn towards the identified figures of the future; those figures which we have distilled from the narrations, thus building ideal types:

- a. Continuous return, eternal circle (in 4 interviews).
- b. Life as an adventure (in 42 interviews).
- c. Continuous progress/evolution (in 6 interviews).
- d. New chance/new beginning (in 7 interviews).
- e. Apocalypse (individual or collective) (in 10 interviews).
- f. Haphazard, chance, chaos theory (in 16 interviews).
- g. Destiny, fate, the future is already written (in 32 interviews).
- h. We make our own future (in 50 interviews).

The most important figures deriving from our analysis were the following:

(b) *Life as an adventure*. Life as a journey towards the unknown. It is not possible to know what the future will bring, and one has to experiment, and find a way through this unknown that is close to one's goals or ideals. This is a very common figure among the younger generations.

I don't know what will happen. I don't care either. Whatever happens, I'll try to make the best out of it and be faithful to myself. (Arnau, 21, Barcelona)

(e) *Apocalypse (individual or collective)*. This figure is often associated with the current economic crisis, the transformations of the welfare state, with ageing, and with unhappy relationships. In some narratives it colours the whole life story, but they are rather an exception. Often this figure is associated with a particular historical aspect, or a particular sphere of life.

Well, and now with the newest developments I don't know whether we, I mean society will survive that. I mean there are no jobs. And the last time it happened we started the Second World War. (Michael, 45, Leipzig)

(f) *Haphazard, chance, chaos theory*. Those who 'dress' their future with this figure talk less about their future. It implies the belief that one can never know what the future will bring. The future follows little logic, and depends little on the things and work we do.

One can never know why some things work in life and others don't. The more I live the less logic I find in the meaning of life. (Núria, Barcelona, 55)

Or:

It was all going well, and then it happened again. They caught me on drugs again, and sent me to rehab. Nothing much I could do about that ... (Mareike, 20, Leipzig)

(g) *Destiny, fate, the future is already written*. This figure presents the future as already written. There is nothing unexpected; there is neither chaos nor free moulding of the future. Things happen because they had to happen, and there is nothing or very little one can do in order to escape fate.

I am a person who has just a couple of friends; that might be because of my Chinese Zodiac sign. (Dana, 21, Bielefeld)

The accident was terrible. But I simply wasn't meant to die on that day ... You know ... fate. (Maria, 32, Barcelona)

(h) *We make our own future*. This figure views life as the path towards self-set goals. It is a very common figure among young people, and among successful older people (though in a softened version). Possibly, all in all, it is the figure that appeared the most in the interviews we analysed.

I know I'll have to work hard to get there. I don't mind. You have to know what you fight for. Some people blame others for that which they do not manage ... I won't do that. (Robert, 25, Bielefeld)

The figures presented within this list are ideal types. In the interviews collected they rarely appear in the pure form we have distilled them into. They are intertwined with one or some of the other figures.

Interviewees often used different figures, sometimes even in order to recall the same or similar events. Contradictions between different figures did not hinder the narrators to apply them to the same event. This coexistence of differing figures invites us to make three assumptions that help to explain why such coexistence is possible:

1. The coexistence of many factors (reflective, emotional) and influences that shape the reading of one's life situations, contributing to different figure uses, which can however coexist.
2. The differences in the reading of a situation from an individual and a social perspective can contribute to contradictory figure uses. Ideal and 'normal' answers might differ, reflecting about it interviewees might use both.
3. Figures are related to each other as overlapping fields on a horizon of possible figures. Thus they might directly or indirectly point to each other even if they are contradictory.

## Discussion: From images and figures to imaginaries

If the figures and images that have been presented are combined together, the contours of the imaginaries of the future can finally be traced. Let us concentrate first on the ways in which the different recurring images combine with the distilled figures.

There are two main clusters of images that appear in the great majority of narrations. In a way they reflect the two main discourses of modernity when it comes to the life of the individual: (1) the life defined by a continuous passing through different institutions: family, school, profession, partnership, children, retirement, on the one hand, and (2) the life as an adventure composed of exciting and hedonistic experiences (friends, partying, travelling, multiple love or sexual relationships) which served, according to our interviewees, not just to relax but also to find out about who they were.

These two clusters of images relate to different types of figures. While the first cluster (family, school, profession, partnership, children, retirement) was actually used by the interviewees to fill any type of figure, the second cluster of images (life as a hedonistic, experimental and experiential journey) related especially to figures (b) (*adventure*) and (h) (*we make our own future*).

Within the interviews, the two clusters of images did not exclude each other. Many narrations (38 cases) combine both of them, and the interviewees who combined them, however, used them (and their associated figures) discriminately. If, for example, a father of a family talked about travelling, the image he drew differed clearly from the images painting daily quotidian life. Young people quite often referred to the second image cluster when they talked about their near future. Being asked concretely about the way in

which they pictured their future life, the majority of these interviewees changed the register of their narration to the first image cluster, and talked about a later future. When they looked into these later futures, they talked about work, family and partnership. Interestingly, the change in images and figures was accompanied by a change of the whole behaviour and self-presentation, even of the tone of their voices, pointing at the deeply embodied dimensions of future imaginations.

Furthermore, what at first sight seems to be impossible, the combination of two contradictory clusters of images within the same future moment or period is possible, within the same narration even typical. Nearly all interviewees who did not use figures of apocalypse and chaos theory used both clusters by explaining different things in their future imagination. While hedonistic images referred to questions of lifestyle, leisure time, being young, feeling good, feeling free, life's exciting moments, the first cluster became related to responsibility, being mature, everyday life, work life, family life. Friends, and above all partners are groups that relate the interviewees to both clusters. There were also differences in the frequency of using the clusters according to age, gender and class. A 65-year-old working-class woman would relate far less to hedonistic images than an 18-year-old upper-middle-class boy.

The imaginaries of the future seem thus to be strongly intertwined with the modern discourses of 'normal' biographies. The somehow rivalry between the 'institutional' and the 'hedonistic' discourses separates the field of imaginaries of the future, creating a fissure over which the autobiographical narrations have to 'jump' when they give account of one's own life. In a way, the rivalry between both discourses, between both options of structuring and viewing one's imaginaries of the future (as well as one's account of one's own life) is surpassed by determining moments of life in which the hedonistic, experiential approach is allowed, and even expected and desired (not least by the leisure industry). However, the approach that is still viewed and experienced by our interviewees as the dominant expected frame is the institutional one:

Well, when the time comes to settle down, I will surely see things different, live different ... I know that the kind of lifestyle that I have is not compatible with a family, for instance ... but I am young now. I have to live my life, gain experience ... and yes ... why not say it? Have fun! (Thomas, 26, Leipzig)

Or:

I'm not fooling around anymore. Now I'll be waiting for the right man to come along, and I'll be there for my family, and I'll work as hard as I can. (Maria, 32, Barcelona)

Furthermore, specific themes have a limited spectrum of figures. Thus, 'we make our future' or the 'apocalypse' appeared very seldom with regard to love relationships while 'destiny' has been nearly never used for job/career. Within the thematic ambit, the figures limit a horizon of possibilities for how to imagine and to present a possible future.

Another relevant result of our analysis is that the imaginaries of the future are strongly structured by gender and class. The images that are recalled in the autobiographical narrations are somewhat different in the majority of cases between men's and women's

narrations, but, above all, the figures used to encompass these images differ according to gender. Let us focus on one example to illustrate this gendering of the imaginaries of the future, which also illustrates the combination of different (somewhat contradictory) figures within an individual's autobiographical narration.

In the analyses we have found that surprisingly often young women combine a decided use of figure (h) (*we make our own future*) when it comes to their work life and their studies with a strong use of figure (g) (*fate, destiny*) when it comes to love relationships. Let us illustrate this combination with the case of Dorothee, a young (24) German woman living in Leipzig, and studying psychology. On the one hand, referring to her professional life she asserts:

Planning is very important to me when it comes to my studies. I know what I will do each semester until I get my *Diplom*. I know that I will have to work hard, and I know I will work hard. I know what I am doing this for, and I'm going to get there, it depends on me.

On the other hand, when referring to her current partner she asserts:

And then I met Steffen. From the very first moment I knew it was him. I don't know why he failed to recognize it as quick as I did. I spent a very miserable year. But at the end we came together. It was destiny.

If we compare this to the combination of figures and images that we find in most men's narrations we can assert that, while most men also referred to both ambits of life (partnership and profession) in their autobiographical narrations, they did not have such a huge discrepancy regarding the figures they used to frame love and work images. In most cases, they had a mixture of figure (h) (*we make our own future*) with either figure (b) (*adventure*) or (f) (*haphazard, chance, chaos theory*), sometimes all three of them together.

If we look more closely at the way in which the interviewees depicted their relation with, and search for, that 'special place' for them in society, we realize that motherhood was the main place that the interviewed women saw for themselves in society – either as a 'past future' narration or directly as an image of the future. Those women who did not identify their future place necessarily with motherhood commented upon it as intensely as those who were looking forward to it. The weight of social pressure, and the resulting questioning of themselves, coloured their narration.

Most men did not find their main place in fatherhood – and those who did (a minority) did not find it only in fatherhood. Their place was to be found in their profession and, for those who engaged in the hedonistic search for pleasure and adventure, in their travelling, experimenting and clubbing.

A result of our gender analysis of the interviewees is doubtlessly that women and men fulfil, at least in their narratives, stereotypes. The affirmation that we imagine our futures according to stereotypes shows how strong socially produced gender differences frame hopes, desires, experiences and therefore possibilities and imaginaries of the future.

Similarly, imaginaries of the future are class-structured. Class-belonging makes a difference in the narration of one's own life and future. However, it is also extremely important to mention that for some aspects class-belonging did not make a difference.

When confronted with the possibility of not having a place in society, interviewees from the working-class, middle-class and the upper and upper-middle-class showed equally fear and anxiety within their interviews. Facing this possibility, our interviewees resorted to figure (e) (*apocalypse*), combining it with figure (f) (*haphazard, chaos*) or (g) (*destiny, fate*), and contrasting them with the figures based on the image of the reaction they wished or thought they would have regarding this situation. Those who saw the possibility of getting out of the situation, and of finally finding a place for them, resorted to figure (h) (*we make our future*).

Accordingly, neither anxiously fearing to lose one's place in society, nor the colouring (figure use) of a possible response to such a situation depends on class. The crucial difference between working-class, middle-class and upper-middle-class people does not lie in the frequency of the felt fear and anxiety or in the figures used to shape and respond to this fear and anxiety, but in the *images* associated with them; or, put in a different way, in the cluster of themes rising within the images. While in working-class narratives the possibility of having no place was related to work, family and (social) survival, in middle-class narratives the fear was rather the inability to have a romantic love relationship, a harmonious family, to keep friendships alive or to choose one's profession. Failing to find a place pointed in lower-class narratives to an existential fear (anxiety). The fear in upper-middle-class narratives was the fear of losing social capital (status anxiety). While working-class interviewees did not perceive the lack of travel or personal realization as a threat to their future, upper-middle-class people did. They perceived these scenarios as a huge limitation to their desires and freedom(s), as an attack on who they were. Furthermore, upper-middle-class people were afraid of having to choose certain undesirable places in society. They did not perceive the place of a working-class person as a place where they could settle – thus these places were outside their imaginable future options.

## Concluding remarks

Within the discussion we have presented the ways in which different images of the future are produced within autobiographical narrations, as well as the ways in which our interviewees made use of specific figures of the future according to the main social discourses they were referring to, and the desires by which they were driven. These figures shape the individual narration, while figures and images shape the collective narratives and imaginaries.

We have also shown how images and figures indicate and represent different perceptions and evaluations of future, past and present life situations according to class and gender. Imaginations, possibilities and their limits change along the axes of gender and class. This affirms the ideas of Bourdieu about the relation between time and the social distribution of dispositions and habitus. Within the narrations we can see the future imaginaries of each interviewee providing (or at the worst case neglecting) a possible place for individuals within society. Thus the arena of the future narrations is where the social and the individual meet, where life becomes possible or impossible and where class and gender are reproduced.

The figures of the future which we abstracted from the narrations helped us to understand the ways in which social places will or can be filled (the *hows*), while the images

told us with which content they will or can be filled (the *whats*). The figures and the images intertwined with each other, presenting imaginaries of the future, providing (in most cases) a place for the interviewees. The search for this place is what dominates many individual narrations. As Simmel said, more than 100 years ago, a place for the individuals in a society is society's very apriority in order to exist.

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## Note

1. The empirical findings of this article are based on interviews collected in Europe. However, many ideas and concepts developed throughout our research and presented in this article are also valuable outside Europe. Bourdieu's work in Algeria (1962, 1979) signals the many parallels that can be drawn between conclusions stemming from our interviews in Europe, and those developed on the basis of interviews and field observations outside Europe. However, the meaning of gender and social class in societies outside Europe can be very different from European societies, and other factors might play a role. It is therefore not only useful but also necessary to understand the specificity of the ways by which individuals gain access to their place within a specific society.

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### Résumé

Cet article examine le futur en tant qu'élément crucial à la création du réseau sur lequel repose notre vie individuelle et sociale. Conformément aux réflexions de Simmel sur les apriorités à la base de la possibilité-même de la société, nous pensons que le réseau social tel que nous le connaissons ne serait pas possible si ses membres n'imaginaient pas une certaine forme au moins de futur. Pour illustrer l'importance du futur dans l'élaboration de toute forme de relation sociale et afin d'analyser les possibilités de créer différentes imageries du futur, nous présentons une étude de cas portant sur 60 interviews autobiographiques effectuées en Allemagne et en Espagne auprès d'hommes et de femmes issus de différents contextes sociaux. Nous avons examiné ce que nous appelons les images, figures et imaginaires du futur - images en tant qu'objets concrets, moments ou relations que nous prévoyons, craignons ou espérons dans l'avenir, figures en tant qu'archétypes qui confèrent un sens, informent et façonnent les contours de nos imaginations du futur et imaginaires en tant que toile de fond regroupant ensemble les figures et les images dans un récit au temps futur de notre propre vie, reliant cet imaginaire à d'autres pratiques culturelles. Les résultats de notre recherche ont montré la profondeur de la certitude d'un futur et comment les imaginaires concrets du futur à venir moulent et façonnent qui nous sommes et les directions que nous souhaitons adopter, pouvons adopter et choisirons d'adopter.

### Mots-clés

Futur, Bourdieu, désir, habitus, imaginaires, Simmel

### Resumen

Este artículo trata el futuro como una dimensión importante de nuestra vida individual y social. Siguiendo a Simmel y sus reflexiones sobre cómo la sociedad es posible, trabajamos sobre la hipótesis de que la sociedad no es posible sin imaginar al menos algún tipo de futuro. Además no sólo existe un imaginario del futuro, si no que existen diferentes horizontes e imaginaciones de futuros, esperanzas y posibilidades en personas de diferentes grupos o clases sociales. Con el fin de mostrar la importancia del futuro de relaciones sociales y en nuestras vidas tal como las conocemos, así como para

analizar las posibilidades y las diferencias de los imaginarios del futuro, hemos analizado sesenta entrevistas autobiográficas de hombres y mujeres de diferentes contextos de clase en Alemania y en España. En estos análisis hemos identificado lo que llamamos imágenes, figuras e imaginarios del futuro - imágenes como los objetos concretos, cosas, momentos o relaciones que esperamos o deseamos para el futuro, figuras como los arquetipos que dan sentido, forman y configuran esas imágenes del futuro e imaginarios como el tejido del conjunto elaborado con las figuras e imágenes y que derivan en un futuro imaginario de nuestra propia historia de vida. Los resultados de nuestros análisis muestran la profundidad y la intensidad con las cuales los imaginarios del futuro moldean quienes somos, a dónde vamos y en quién nos convertimos.

**Palabras claves**

Futuro, Simmel, Bourdieu, desear, imaginarios del futuro