The Three Tomorrows of Postnormal Times☆

Ziauddin Sardar, John A. Sweeney*

Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies, East-West University, Chicago, IL, USA

A B S T R A C T

The Three Tomorrows of Postnormal Times is a new method for foresight and futures researchers and practitioners. Designed and developed to explore the complexity, chaos, and contradictions of postnormal times and what might come next, the three tomorrows method uses a multi-layered approach to situate and analyze trends, emerging issues, and imaginings of the future(s), including complex, horizonspecific forecasts. In this paper, we provide a theoretical overview of the key concepts underlying our approach, including the three forms of ignorance and uncertainty as well as the Menagerie of postnormal potentialities, which we developed as a mechanism for challenging deeply held convictions, illuminating entrenched contradictions, and enlivening novel considerations.
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1. Introduction

'Everything changes and nothing stands still'. So said Heraclitus, as reported by Plato in *Cratylus*(402a), over two millennia ago (Sedley, 2003). But nowadays everything is changing at an accelerating pace on a variety of scales: social, political, cultural, technological, including geologic, as the emergence of the notion of the Anthropocene (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000) or the more radical concept of the Technopocene (Berthon & Donnellan, 2011; Sweeney, 2014) suggests. On a smaller, yet interrelated, scale, the very idea of what is the human body and what it means to be human is changing in ways seemingly beyond our control and capacity to comprehend the implications for what might lie ahead. As Enriquez and Gullans argue in *Evolving Ourselves*, we are intentionally and unintentionally changing the very conditions of possibility for evolution. While we have always adapted our being-in-the-world through artefacts, tools, and prosthetics, the compounded effects of our all-too-modern lives have ushered in an era of '*unnatural selection*' and '*non-random mutation*' (Enriquez & Gullans, 2015). Globally, rates of obesity in humans nearly doubled from 1980 to 2014 (World Health Organization, 2015). In the U.S. alone, the rate of autism rose by 119 percent from 2001 to 2010 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).

Moreover, the changes we are facing today are not incremental and isolated but occur simultaneously and are connected and interconnected. Often when these changes come together they create a sense of crisis, as noted by the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon. 'The world', he declared at the UN General Assembly in 2014, was 'living in an era of unprecedented level of crises' (Borger, 2014). The world faced a daunting list of crises – which ought to be read chaotic behavior – in 2014: Ebola, ISIS, Central African Republic, Gaza, Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, financial instability within the EU, and the deteriorating relationship between Russia and the West, in addition to the long-standing, and decidedly unaddressed, problems of climate change. What does it all mean?

All of the above adds up to a snap shot of our lives in postnormal times (Sardar, 2010, 2015). In light of such far-reaching, rapid, and simultaneous changes – a major characteristic of postnormal times (*hereafter* PNT) – an important new question arises for futurists and foresight researchers and practitioners: are existing methods able to cope with futures that are intrinsically complex, chaotic, contradictory, uncertain, and rapidly collapsing in and upon themselves? Traditionally, Futures Studies deals with plurality of alternative futures by differentiating between plausible, probable, possible, and preferable futures (Henchey, 1978, p. 26). But what is probable in a world where uncertainty and chaos is the norm? What is plausible in futures dominated by contradictions? Are our conventional methods, such as forecasting, scenarios, and modeling fit for purpose in PNT? Do scenarios about future(s) take note of changing change? Do existing scenario modeling methods adequately allow for the requisite pluralism and polylogues, including amongst humans, non- and, un-humans, needed to confront PNT? How do we produce viable policies to navigate PNT? Or, to put it another way, do our stories about the future(s) tell us something meaningful that can generate policies and strategies to cope with complexity, uncertainty and chaotic behavior?

This paper provides a theoretical overview of the concepts comprising a novel method (The Three Tomorrows of Postnormal Times) we have developed to address the above queries. In this work, we outline what we believe is a pressing need for our methodological framework and how our approach fits into the field of Futures Studies. As this research builds off established and related concepts, we believe both casual and expert readers will benefit from reviewing the core readings of PNT theory (Sardar, 2010, 2015). Ultimately, this paper represents the first in a series of research articles that will feature case studies showing the applicability of our method.

2. From dialogues to polylogues

'When all is uncertain, nothing is predictable', writes Gardner in *Future Babble* (Gardner, 2012, p. 139). Many, if not most, predictions invariably turn out to be wrong, as *Scientific American* recently found out when it performed a review of its past pronouncements about the future (von Reibnitz, 1988). In fact, Gardner argues, expert predictions and forecasts, despite the cautious probabilities, the kind we use in Delphi, add to our problems because they do 'away with complexity, incomprehension and uncertainty' (Gardner, 2012). As a means to remedy this problem, scenario planning is often used. But, as Glenn and Gordon argue, 'scenario is probably the most abused term in futures research. What usually passes for a scenario today is a discussion about a range of future possibilities with data and analysis [. . .]. It is like confusing the text of a play's newspaper review with the text of the play written by the playwright' (Glenn, Gordon, & Millennium Project, 2009, p. 2). Scenarios can never take into account, however carefully they are generated, many, if not most, of the changes that may occur between now and one's designated time horizon—we believe this very much applies to scenarios emphasizing plausibility as well.

Plausibility has always been a contentious term within Futures Studies, if only because one of the primary aims of foresight is to call into question the normative and logical lenses with which we perceive what might lie ahead. It is interesting to note that the root of the term plausible is the Latin *plausibilis*: 'worthy of applause'. In short, plausibility is as much about acceptability as it is about logical coherence, which is to say that it has much more to do with the present than it does with the future—a point well and directly addressed by Dator's Second Law of the Future: 'any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous' (Dator, Sweeney, & Yee, 2015).

This is not to say that current futures methods are in any way irrelevant but simply to point out their inherent limitations—particularly in relation to PNT. If Futures Studies is first and foremost about analyzing imaginings of futures, then perceptual plausibility is certainly something to be considered when modeling scenarios, but it need not be the only and most important metric. After all, the goal of any scenario planning exercise is to generate actions for the future by disturbing the present, but we do not believe that futures methods are keeping up with the forces and drivers that are actually disturbing the present and moving us toward Unthought Futures. An analysis of the increasingly popular Three Horizons method helps to contextualize our point.

Originally devised to help business clients 'engage simultaneously with short-term, medium-term, and long-term futures', the first iteration of Three Horizons aims to 'wind tunnel' strategy and policy initiatives using successive S-curves to model change over time (Curry & Hodgson, 2008, p. 4). Moving beyond standard management-oriented approaches, Three Horizons received a major overhaul through the work of Sharpe and Hodgson (2006, p.6), who reframed the tool to 'see our current situation in a variety of ways and help illuminate the choices available'. First, one creates an *x*-axis using the metric of time (present to future) and a *y*-axis using the metric of 'strategic fit' with a low (bottom) to high (top) spectrum as depicted in Fig. 1.

Next, one plots the three horizons. The first horizon articulates the predominant paradigms and ideologies of today, which, as the method presumes, will decline as one moves forward in time. Then, one charts the third horizon, which is composed of emerging issues or weak signals – including those most aligned with one's preferred or feared future – that are extrapolated using a growth S-curve model. Finally, one maps the second horizon to model the challenges and uncertainties relative to the first horizon, and, as it were, challenges facing both horizons. There is no question that this is the most interesting dimension of the Three Horizons method, especially as this is the only space where truly postnormal conditions might emerge, at least in theory. Our qualification, and contention, centers on the fact that the only true site of conflict in this method occurs in the mid-future, so to speak, which is to say that this approach takes little account of the complex and accelerating dynamics that continuously usurp our best practices in the here and now. In other words, the Three Horizons helps us prepare for a future that might have already passed or, perhaps even worse, might inadvertently cause us to presume