Imagination

English

1. Futures definition

Imagination is the ability to create mental images of possible futures and to design an object or representation without that object or representation being in front of us. This creative ability allows individuals to intentionally generate, explore, and work with images, narratives, and ideas of possible futures as means to expand perception, make sense of the present, and drive agency. Imagination also allows us to question assumptions, expand the edges of possibility, foster emergence, and redefine the understanding of what is possible or desirable.

2. General definitions

Imagination is described in the literature in various and evolving ways: as a process, an ability, a competence, a capacity, a mental state, and a cognitive system, among others. These descriptors reflect the different disciplines and contexts investigating and using the term. Although distinct, these descriptors are not mutually exclusive, as they reflect different aspects or qualities of imagination.

Interpreting imagination as an ability implies that it can be trained and improved, leading to potential skilfulness. Lachman refers to imagination as “the ability to grasp realities that are not immediately present to us" (Lachman, 2017, p. 31). The *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* describes imagination as “the ability to form, or the process of forming, mental images of things, people, events, etc. that one has not seen or of which one has no direct perception or knowledge” (n.d.). In the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the term is defined as “the ability to form pictures in the mind” (n.d.).

From a neuroscience or cognitive science perspective, imagination can be described as a process, as in “the cognitive process which enables the individual to intrinsically manipulate information to create a representation of what is perceived through the senses” (Drubach et al., 2007, p. 353). Biologists Maturana and Varela, as summarised in Bermúdez et al., describe imagination as a “dynamic, inferential and integrated process” where the subject constructs the imaginative figuration of the world (2024, p. 2). Zittoun et al. define imagination as “the process by which we temporarily leave the here-and-now of current experiences to

explore and play with the past, the future, and alternative spheres of experience" (2022, p. 753).

When described as a human ability, imagination is "to form pictures or ideas in your mind of things that are new and exciting, or things that you have not experienced" (Collins English Dictionary, n.d.). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, imagination is "the power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, encompassing a wide spectrum of cognitive and affective processes" (n.d.). In the same line, Taylor also understands imagination as a capacity, describing it as "the capacity to mentally transcend time, place, and/or circumstance to think about what might have been, plan and anticipate the future, create fictional worlds, and consider remote and close alternatives to actual experiences" (2013, p. 791).

The anthropologists Rohrer and Thompson provide a comprehensive understanding that consolidates the different views by considering imagination to be both a capacity and a process: "Imagination is the human capacity to mentally (re)create what is not materially present, and the creative process of imagining and its individual and social products" (2023, p. 186). In this glossary, we try to avoid the term capacity, which is also used to discuss an amount of storage or space. We prefer to use the term ability when defining imagination.

3. Etymology

The English term imagination entered Middle English through Anglo-French, originally deriving from the Latin *imaginatio*, which relates to *imaginari* (to picture to oneself) and *imago* (*image*, *likeness*, or *representation*) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). The term's etymology therefore associates imagination with the formation and presentation of *images* rather than with just *fantasy* or *unreality*.

Boulding broadens this meaning: for him, an image is an organized structure of knowledge that "contains not only what is, but what might be" (1956, p. 26). Human action is consequently guided not simply by immediate stimuli, but by images of possible futures filtered through assumptions and values. Thus, the etymological connection between imagination and image can be understood as referring to the active formation of representations through which absent, possible, and future realities become meaningful in the present.

4. Field of terms

The term *prospection* is very similar to imagination. Prospection is used heavily in psychology and cognitive sciences, as well as in the French tradition of working with futures. In psychology, prospection is "the mental generation and evaluation of representations of possible future events. The term therefore captures a wide array of future-oriented psychological phenomena, including the prediction of future emotion (affective forecasting), the imagination of future scenarios (episodic foresight), and planning" (Wikipedia English, n.d.-b).

A *vision* in the narrow sense describes the property of the eye to see qualities of an object (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-c), which links imagination to the term *sight*, which is an element of *foresight*. More broadly, a vision may refer to "a thought, concept, or object formed by the imagination". In this sense, a vision is an output or result of the activity of imagination, prospection, or envisioning.

The term *scenario* is used heavily in the futures field. Etymologically, the term stems from the Latin *scēna* and, before that, Ancient Greek skēnḗ, meaning a stage, a scene, or a theatre (Wiktionary English, n.d.).

A *fiction* describes individuals, events, or places in the future that are imaginary. These narratives need not be plausible or consistent with facts (Wikipedia English, n.d.-a). While fiction can be solely the result or output of the activity of imagination, fictions in *science and speculative fiction* are rooted in actual science, particularly the natural sciences, and in speculations about possible technological developments.

A *phantasy* or *fantasy* denotes an unrealistic or improbable mental image (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek *phantasía*, which originally signified an "*appearance* or presentation to consciousness". Similarly, a *hallucination* is also clearly unrealistic.

The terms *reality*, *fact*, and *truth* can be seen as antonyms of imagination or at least as elements of experience that may or may not be relevant or in focus when imagining.

5. Theoretical foundations

The contemporary understanding of imagination has been shaped by many different fields throughout history, and the ways in which each field evolved bring light to the different understandings of the term. For example, one of the earliest and richest sources of understanding is *philosophy*. Among ancient philosophers, Aristotle sees imagination as an internal sense (*phantasia*) that gives access to possible worlds, things, and states of affairs that are not actually present to perception. In *De Anima*, he defines imagination as "that in virtue of which an image arises for us" (350 B.C.E., p. Book III, Ch. 3).

In early *modern philosophy*, some thinkers treated imagination as a secondary or subordinate faculty. Descartes, for example, counts imagination as one of the modes of thought related to perception and will. However, he considers imagination to be a weaker, less essential form of thought when compared to pure intellect. According to him, a "special effort of mind is necessary to the act of imagination"(Descartes, 1641, p. 66), bringing the act of imagining closer to an ability.

Kant, by contrast, elevated imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1899), presenting it as a mediating capacity between sensibility and understanding, responsible for synthesizing intuitions and concepts and thus making experience possible (Matherne, 2024, p. 50). Similarly, in the Islamic theosophical tradition, as

presented in *Mundus Imaginalis*, imagination acts as a bridge between the internal world of perception and the external world of society: a world that is between the spiritual and physical but that bridges both, in a similar vein to Kant´s understanding of imagination as a mediating capacity (Corbin, 1976).

Dewey also refers to a mediating capability, asserting that “imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction; or rather … the conscious adjustment of the new and the old *is* imagination” (Dewey, 1934, p. 272). This definition directly correlates with modern cognitive science's understanding of imagination as critical to the capacity of filling in gaps of understanding (Pelaprat & Cole, 2011).

Imagination´s capacity to drive empathy has been and continues to be studied by both Western and Eastern traditions. Moral philosopher Adam Smith focuses on the role of imagination in ethics and empathy, introducing the concept of "Moral Imagination" (Smith, 1759). For him, imagination is the mental capacity to use images and metaphors to discern moral truths and develop ethical responses, enabling individuals to place themselves in others’ situations. In the East, *Confucianism* also focuses on the role of imagination in cultivating empathy by envisioning oneself in another´s situation (the Chinese term *shu* can be translated freely as imaginative empathy), thereby developing benevolence and moral insight. More recently, in the *philosophy of mind*, imagination is the mechanism used for "mindreading", which is the act of simulating the mental states of others to understand them.

In *sociology*, imagination is understood as a collective capacity and social construct that transcends individual thought and can drive historical change (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015).

In the *futures* field, imagination is cultivated as a transformative capability, developing collective agency to transform reality and creating the conditions for social shifts. Polak (1961) argues that changes in societies depend on the collective images that a given society holds, connecting the product of collective imagination directly to the changes that happen in society. Boulding similarly states that “behavior depends on the image” (1956, p. 6).

This collective view is not the focus of Rosen and Louie’s relational biology, where imagination is about the subjective inner world of the self that contains “our perceptions, our thoughts, our ideas, our imagining, our will, and the actions that spring from them as opposed to the outside, the ambience, the world of objective reality” (Rosen, 1991, p. 40-41).

6. Use in practice

In the futures field, imagination is treated as a core ability or practice that can be strengthened through deliberate training and exercise. Imagination serves as the primary engine for various methodologies,

including Futures Literacy Laboratories (FLLs), scenario planning, worldbuilding workshops, artifact creation, and futures stories and personas. In other words, imagination is used to visualise and sense future states that do not yet exist. According to Miller, "a futures literate person has acquired the skills needed to decide why and how to use their imagination to introduce the non-existent future into the present" (2018, p. 15).

Participants in different futures practices use their imaginations to vividly create futures that enable them to simulate and anticipate potential situations and scenarios. Imagination allows them to inhabit experiences they have never actually had in their lives, expanding their perception of what is possible. As they are not constricted by present conditions, participants can freely experiment individually and collectively with different ideas and situations and consider unconventional options for the later-than-now. This experimentation process is not merely for exploration. Rather, the process enhances collective consciousness and empathy, flexing each participant's consideration of others. In group settings, this imaginative process can strengthen shared purposes and widen the range of futures that a community is willing to entertain as legitimate or desirable.

The use of imagination in practice is connected to assumptions that serve as the foundational building blocks of any imagined future. When these anticipatory assumptions are articulated, they can be questioned, recombined, or suspended. Once these building blocks of assumptions are identified, imagination can be used to break out of these frames to explore novelty and emergence. As Miller argues, exploration is about "'seeing' the present differently" (2010). Imaginary futures can function as frames for sense-making by helping people question established assumptions, reconsider how they understand the present, and identify possibilities for action that were previously unnoticed.

Futures thinking today is backed by multiple theoretical traditions to create conditions for imagining possible futures, which can contribute to better perceiving the present, bridging gaps of understanding, and creating conditions for individual and collective agency and change.

Terminologists: Priscila Grison and Angelika Neudecker

This English text is the original entry for this term. LLMs have only been used for research purposes. The published entry was written by the human terminologists, who assume full responsibility for its quality.

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