

# Future Design Research: the Issues

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## Future Design Goals

One of the working goals of Future Design (FD) is to bring players into the current political decision-making process whose job is to represent the interests of future generations. A typical illustration of this approach can be observed in a psychology experiment presented in “Future Design – Evidence and Insights from Participatory Deliberations” by Tatsuyoshi Saijo and Keishiro Hara, *Journal of Japan Society on Water Environment*, 2017, Vol. 40, Issue 4). In 2015, we were asked to compile a long-term FD plan (for the current point in time through 2060) for the town of Yahaba in Iwate Prefecture. Residents were divided into two groups: one to represent the current generation and the other to take the position of a future generation, specifically of the year 2060. Each group held deliberations to devise long-term future plans.

In brief, we held a role-playing game – a type of psychology experiment – with a group representing the people of Yahaba in the year 2060. The group representing the current generation drew up a plan within the context of current limitations and issues, while the group representing future generations created a plan designed to consciously draw on regional advantages to solve difficult issues. These results highlighted clear differences in approaches and opinions.

Particularly interesting were the deliberations on water and sewage charges. Yahaba waterworks had a fiscal surplus at the time of the role-playing experiment. The group representing the current generation agreed that the surplus should be returned to residents in the form of lower water and sewage costs. In contrast, the group representing future generations were looking at waterworks in 2015 from the perspective of the year 2060. In their deliberations they were extremely conscious of the fact that the water pipes and other water supply facilities would need to be replaced during the period from 2015 to 2060. Because a huge capital outlay would be required to complete the work, they decided that water and sewage charges should be raised for residents, regardless of the surplus, to cover these costs. The deliberations had so much of an impact that the town of Yahaba in fact decided to raise water and sewage charges.

It is worth noting that the researchers involved in this project believed that this FD experiment engendered a significant psychological change in the residents assigned the role of the future generations. In interviews conducted in Yahaba six months after the experiment, the group representing future generations stated “We

were able to grasp the big picture and reconcile the interests of the current and future generations” and noted that they were very pleased with what they viewed as progress. These changes indicate the possibility that people engaged in the study could change their thinking processes.

Prof. Tatsuyoshi Saijo, funding director of the Research Institute for Future Design at Kochi University of Technology, calls these individuals “imaginary future persons”. The ultimate goal of FD is to create political players comprised of these imaginary future persons (such as a “Ministry of the Future” in the central government or a “Future Planning Section” at government offices) in order to bring them into the political decision-making process; and also to render these organizations capable of impacting current political decision-making from the perspective of future generations.

## How Does FD Work?

For researchers in the field of FD, there are two issues in particular to mention. First is the question of whether a governmental organization such as a Ministry of the Future run by “imaginary future generations” would actually be workable. That is, even if we create an organization like the Ministry of the Future, would it really be a feasible undertaking since it is in fact run by people of the present? Would these individuals truly operate in the interests of future generations?

The results of the social experiment described above, however, showed that the participants were actually able to become imaginary future persons in their own minds. If the concept of creating imaginary persons could be generalized and the viewpoint of the people representing future generations could truly change, an organization such as the Ministry of the Future could potentially work well. Because the staff of the Ministry of the Future would act on behalf of future generations, they would effectively take on the character of the imaginary future persons.

The hypothesis here is that if people are assigned the responsibility to make better choices, we can casually compare this to the ideas emphasized by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). The individuals assigned the role of spokespersons for the people of the future could win the approval of their colleagues by fulfilling this responsibility.

The satisfaction garnered through the approval of colleagues helps to solidify the idea that representing future generations is itself a

form of justice. This belief would then more strongly be supported and maintained among the staff of a political organization comprised of imaginary future generations. In another similarity to Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* the individual is transformed into an "impartial spectator". If this could actually occur, an organization run by imaginary future persons could truly work on behalf of future generations, at least subjectively.

To prove our hypothesis, it is necessary to scientifically clarify the self-formulating mechanism of imaginary future persons described here by statistical analysis in the fields of neuroscience and psychology. Researchers of FD are considering, for example, a future design social experiment examining the brain using MRI imaging to assess changes in brain activity.

### Justification by Political Philosophy

The second issue is whether the establishment of a new organization run by imaginary future generations (such as a Ministry of the Future) could be justified under a democratic government. If we can scientifically confirm that we can generate a stable supply of imaginary future persons, we can say with certainty that new systems such as the proposed Ministry of the Future will help to improve circumstances for future generations. However, to create this kind of new system – and garner broad public support – it needs to be justified under our current democratic system. For instance, if we move to create a Ministry of the Future, it will lead to limitations on the rights and benefits of the current generations of people, though there will undoubtedly be dissenters.

In another example, the Demeny voting system (in which children are given voting rights but their parents or guardians vote on their behalf) has been suggested as a way of voting that would better reflect the interests of future generations. Resistance to the idea is deep-seated, however, amongst legal and political scholars arguing that the very basis of democracy is "one vote per person". If the sole reason for making such changes to our government is to benefit future generations, the said changes will not necessarily be popular with a wide swathe of people spanning diverse backgrounds.

To garner broad-based support from the public, political philosophy rationalizing and justifying the installing of imaginary future generations is key. By invoking the social contract theory of John Rawls' "Veil of Ignorance", we can argue the point. If people can agree to a political system comprised of people imagining

themselves unaware of what their own position would be in a new society (physical and mental capacity, wealth, etc.), that is, obscured by a Veil of Ignorance, then the system will be fair and just. According to this theory, under the Veil of Ignorance, if people fear that they might be born in the most unfortunate circumstances, then they will agree to a political system where there would be the greatest positive impact on people in unfortunate circumstances.

This theory holds that where there will be disparity in a new society – particularly in regards to income and assets – compared to a set of conditions where there would be no disparity, the people would make choices for the benefit of the most disadvantaged. Rawls called this theory the "Difference Principle". Citing this principle, Rawls argued that extensive social insurance systems in developed countries following World War II were justified, rationalizing the welfare state according to political philosophy. Under the Veil of Ignorance, if people agree to social security systems maximized for the benefit of the disadvantaged, they agree to policies in line with the social welfare state. Since social welfare systems chosen under the Veil of Ignorance are justified, it follows that social security programs are justified as well. This is Rawls' logic.

### The Imaginary Future Generation as a Social Contract

The second issue is the justification for establishing imaginary future generations in the context of political philosophy. I will explain how it might be chosen as a social contract under Rawls' Difference Principle.

When a group of individuals are about to enter into a social contract – assuming that they are obscured by the Veil of Ignorance and therefore unaware of what kind of circumstances they will be born in – they fear that they will be among the most unfortunate (a generation subjected to damage caused by conditions such as global warming and financial collapse). Therefore, in order to lessen the suffering of generations of people who would endure such a fate, the representatives of the different generations agree to the "Just-Savings Principle", under which the people of the different generations save a fair amount of resources for future generations. This rule states that each of the different generations agrees to control the expansion of public debt and implement fiscal restraint. The Just-Savings Principle is agreed upon under the Veil of

Ignorance. There is, however, more to the story.

The fact is that even if the Difference Principle is agreed upon under the Veil of Ignorance, in our current democracy – where imaginary future generations do not exist – once the Veil of Ignorance is removed and the course of history resumes, any said agreements will inevitably break down. Under the Veil of Ignorance, people fear that they will be part of the generation plagued by the most disadvantageous circumstances, making decisions accordingly. In reality, once the veil is removed, people realize that they are not in fact the most disadvantaged of the population, at which point they tend to work for their own benefit. Instead of saving a certain amount of resources for disadvantaged future generations, they decide that consuming said resources during their time is more advantageous.

This means that a significant level of greed will arise because people will wish to break the promises made under the Just-Savings Principle. What is still more important here is the fact that even if the people of the present break promises made under the Just-Savings Principle, there is no “penalty” applied to future generations. Even if the people of current generations break promises to the people of the future, since these individuals are still children or have yet to be born, they are unable to “punish” the people of the present. As a result, there is little reason for the current generations to hesitate to break the promises made under the Just-Savings Principle. Any such promises are therefore easily broken.

To summarize the above, though agreement may be reached regarding the Just-Savings Principle under the Veil of Ignorance, once the veil is removed the promise of Just-Savings is broken. Further, the issue is time-inconsistent. Agreements may be reached under the Just-Savings Principle, only to be subsequently broken.

Compared to the work of Rawls, which states that a social contract is entered into under the Veil of Ignorance, clearly any agreements made between generations under the Just-Savings Principle will be time-inconsistent. The social security system justified by Rawls is essentially an issue of redistribution among the same generation. Let’s take social welfare as an example. Under the Veil of Ignorance, people agree to the creation of social welfare systems, but once the veil is removed, they then learn whether they will be among the wealthy or poor classes.

Those who join the ranks of the wealthier classes tend to lean toward the abolition of social welfare systems, yet this is difficult to achieve. This is because the poor classes exist at present, in contrast to future generations, where they do not. If the wealthy classes were

to recommend that social welfare systems be abolished, the poor classes would immediately block such a move. Because poor people greatly outnumber wealthy people, the wealthy are unable to abolish social welfare simply because they wish to do so – at least under a democracy.

Tools to achieve time-inconsistent Just-Savings work to create imaginary future generations. If, as noted above, an organization of imaginary future generations is created, it will actually work for the benefit of future generations, leading the people of the present to a political decision-making process that matches the interests of the people of the future.

Under the Veil of Ignorance, because the people are aware of the above, they are in agreement with the idea of creating a system of imaginary future persons in order to help alleviate the poverty of the most disadvantaged people of the future. Since the installation of imaginary future generations is agreed upon under the Veil of Ignorance, we can call it a fair social contract.

In addition, the organization of imaginary future generations will not be abolished by the people of the present. This is because the perpetuation of such an organization itself enjoys sufficient support from flagging altruistic behavior across generations of the people of the present. If an organization of the people of the future is sustained, the work of that organization will impact the decision-making process of many people of the present day. The result is that distribution of resources falls in line with the Just-Savings Principle.

FD is not social science. Harboring the seeds for revolutionary human development, it works through multiple areas of study including neuroscience and thought as well as philosophy. Expectations are high for interdisciplinary, diverse research in the field. **JS**

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