

Ways out of the crisis: Mapping Possibility Spaces

Vlad Glaveanu

Dublin City University, Ireland

Abstract

The silver lining of every crisis rests in the possibilities bundled with it. The question is how exactly we can disentangle these possibilities and turn moments of crisis into opportunities to think and act differently. This chapter offers a sociocultural perspective on crises and possibility that focuses our attention on differences of position and perspective between people who agentically move through socio-material, cultural, and political worlds. To better understand how individuals and collectives explore the possible when faced with a crisis, the Possibility Spaces Framework (PSF) is proposed based on two axes: number of perspectives (narrow vs. wide), and degree of elaboration (thin vs. thick). The four resulting quadrants are illustrated with the help of three short case studies: micro-crises in Romanian egg decoration practices, macro-crises in pandemic-related Internet memes, and meso-crises in social mobilization practices in Colombia. In the end, it is argued that our engagement with the possible in contexts of crises and ruptures needs a strong ethics, one that can help us equally recognize the dignity, humanity, and possibility of self, others, and society.

Keywords: Possibility Spaces Framework, sociocultural theory, craft, Internet memes, community activism, crisis, ethics of possibility.

The silver lining of every crisis rests in the possibilities bundled with it. The big question is how exactly we can disentangle these possibilities and turn moments of crisis into opportunities to think and act differently. Popular wisdom advises us to never let a good crisis go to waste, and this applies to theories of creativity and human possibility. As communities of researchers invested in the study of change, transformation, and the emergence of novelty, we need to consider what triggers and shapes our creative engagement with the possible. Crises, obstacles and ruptures are part of every creative process, big and small, and it is by being confronted with them that we can mobilize the motivation and resources needed to imagine ways forward.

Let's take the climate emergency as an example. We are all familiar with and many of us have started experiencing, more and more, of the devastating effects of climate change (Clot-Garrell, 2023). And yet, action in this area is painfully slow and proposed solutions tend to be polarising. Besides the numerous practical challenges, there seems to be a crisis of the imagination at stake when it comes to envisioning radical new possibilities. Our collective imagination seems to be trapped by a few big discourses. That climate change cannot really be solved, it is something we just have to adapt to. That technology will eventually save us. That managing the crisis is the responsibility of states and individuals are powerless when it comes to this issue. These perspectives encourage specific courses of action (or inaction) and blind us towards other possibilities, some of them more mundane – e.g., making climate education mandatory from very early age – others more radical – e.g., challenging the neoliberal consensus that there is no other way forward than continuing the status quo. Why do we, individually and collectively, tend to think in rather narrow terms about the climate emergency? What would it mean to widen our range of possibilities? Is there a way to go more in-depth when it comes to these old and new ideas? Can the two approaches – wide and narrow – be complementary?

These kinds of questions are at the heart of the present chapter. Within it, crises are defined in a wide sense as obstacles for which there is no readily available or easy solution. They are often experienced by individuals as ruptures in their experience and understanding of themselves and of the world. And, importantly, they exist on a continuum ranging from minor, everyday life

occurrences to overwhelming, collective challenges. Climate change certainly belongs to the latter category. This chapter will zoom in on a range of other, ordinary and ‘extraordinary’ crises, in order to illustrate a framework of Possibility Spaces (PS). The premise behind this framework is rather intuitive: when faced with obstacles, big or small, we are compelled to find solutions. Sometimes these solutions, referred to here as perspectives, are limited in number and depth. Other times, they are both numerous and highly elaborate. Most often, though, there is a middle ground found between multiplicity and depth. The Possibility Spaces Framework (PSF) tries to capture precisely this balance between narrow vs. wide, thick vs. thin possibilities out of a given crisis. But, before outlining it in more detail, it is important to start from a more fundamental question: what exactly is the possible?

The possible in Possibility Studies

The possible designates everything we engage with, in psychological, social and material terms, that goes beyond the here and now of immediate experience. This includes envisioning ‘what could be’ (alternatives to the present), ‘what was’ and ‘what could have been’ (the past and alternatives to the past), ‘what will be’ and ‘what could still be’ (the future and alternatives to the future), and ‘what is not’ and ‘what can never be’ (absence and impossibility). According to this working definition, then, phenomena such as creativity, imagination, pretend play, wonder, serendipity, counterfactual thinking, anticipation, and utopian thinking, to name just a few, are all of interest for scholars of the possible (for a wider list of topics and processes see Glăveanu, 2023a). Importantly, while the possible is distinct from ‘what is’, which is the here and now of perception and action, its relationship with it is much more complex. In essence, any experience of the possible both grows out of and feeds back into experiences of the real (Hanchett Hanson, 2023). When we perceive we also anticipate (Möller & Groß, 1994), when we remember we also imagine (Mullally & Maguire, 2014), when we use language we also symbolically pretend (Knight, 2000.), etc. And it is because of this union between possibility and reality that our lives are transformed by the human propensity to infuse the ‘here and now’ with the ‘not (yet) here’, the ‘elsewhere’, and the ‘nowhere’.

This is one of the main premises behind Possibility Studies as an emerging, transdisciplinary field of inquiry that concerns itself with the study of how individuals and collectives become aware of, explore, and enact (or choose not to enact) possibilities in psychological, social, material, technological, cultural, and/or political terms. It is an area that focuses on more than possible futures, for as important as this ‘area’ is (see, for example, Baumeister, Hofmann, Summerville, Reiss, & Vohs, 2020) and examines, among others, possible pasts, possible selves, and possible worlds (Glăveanu, 2018a). It is also a field of study that is rapidly developing its own models, frameworks and even research tools and methods, building both of centuries of reflections on the nature of the possible and our engagement with it, and recent developments across the social and human sciences, cross-fertilised by knowledge and practices from the arts and the natural sciences.

The literature on crises, obstacles and ruptures, equally transdisciplinary, is highly relevant for Possibility Studies scholars and practitioners. First and foremost, it offers a good opportunity to consider how possibilities emerge and what the dynamic between them might be when faced with a challenge. Second, it helps clarify key distinctions within the exploration of the possible. Some of these are described below, before outlining our proposed PSF.

Some theoretical considerations

The dictionary definition refers to possibility as something that might happen or be the case, something that could happen or has the potential to occur, or something that is more or less likely to happen. These understandings all place the emphasis, implicitly, on the future and, more specifically, on estimating the future (for more details on the role of estimation for creativity see Corazza, 2016). This is a very important process indeed, but its scope is narrower than the meaning proposed here. Taken also from the dictionary, a fourth way of conceiving possibilities is in terms of *alternatives* – alternative views on what happened, what is happening, what could happen. Besides being applicable to the whole spectrum of temporality,

the idea behind alternatives is that there are things that are considered ‘common’, ‘familiar’, ‘known’, ‘conventional’, ‘prevalent’, etc., and that the possible departs from them. In other words, possibilities set up ways of thinking, acting and/or being that are modestly to radically different from what is *expected* to be, not only what is.

This makes understanding possibilities relative to the lifeworld and context of people experiencing the possible. It is not enough to judge from the outside whether something ‘is’ or ‘is not’, and label the latter automatically as reflecting the category of what is possible. One has to consider things from the *perspective* of those envisioning possibilities. To take an example, a teacher designing a class is operating, technically, within the realm of the possible. This is because the class itself is in the future and everything imagined around it concerns what could be done at that point. Still, there is a qualitative difference in terms of this experience (and presumably its outcomes) between a teacher who aims to design a class identical to previous ones he or she has taught, and one who aims to do things differently or deals with a topic he or she is not the very familiar with. In the first case, there is little in terms of alternatives to what has been done before and what the teacher knows and expects; in the second, there is a clear exploration of the possible, of what could be and was not before. As such, this view makes possibilities dependent, jointly, on person and context. What is different or radically different in terms of class design will vary from teacher to teacher based on their background, life circumstances, past experiences, current aims, environmental constraints, etc.

The fact that the possible is anchored in these types of positioning is well reflected by the sociocultural approach to this phenomenon (see Glăveanu, 2020). In essence, this approach theorizes the possible in terms of differences, positions, and perspectives. It recognizes the fact that we are all connected to the world through the positions we occupy within it, from physical forms of positioning (e.g., the location of our bodies) to social and cultural forms (e.g., occupying various social roles within contexts of interaction). From these different positions we develop perspectives that connect us to the objects, ideas, and people within our environment, including oneself. Perspectives are understood here not as mental constructions – i.e., ideas –

but as action orientations (Gillespie, 2006) meaning that they reflect not only ways of thinking but ways of doing. To take a concrete example, one's perspective on a common object such as an umbrella is marked not only by mental representations of the umbrella, for as important as they are, but take into account what can be done with an umbrella, e.g., taking shelter from the rain, in order to grasp what an umbrella 'is'. And here is where the connection between the possible and perspectives is starting to become obvious. By guiding our action, perspectives highlight specific possibilities, in this case using the umbrella when it's raining, and obscure others, for instance using an umbrella to cook. Being positioned as someone who grew up in a culture that commonly uses umbrellas to stay dry means that there is a dominant perspective and, with it, a predetermined way of thinking and acting. To think about umbrellas as big bowls for mixing food requires one to occupy a different position, perhaps that of an artist or someone who is in a very particular situation and needs a container. Intentionally or accidentally getting to develop this radically new perspective shifts one's horizon of possibility. Not only new affordances become obvious but the very existence of an alternative to the dominant view or perspective can become the engine for further questioning: what else can be done with an umbrella? What else can the umbrella be? This kind of dwelling in the realm of the possible has its origin in the emergence of alternative perspectives on what is, perspectives that point to things as they could be or they could become. Differences of perspective are, consequently, the atom of our explorations of the possible.

To effectively make use of such differences in order to expand the possible – and address ongoing crises – one needs, however, a multiplicity of positions and perspectives from which reality is considered. This multiplicity exists both in the physical and social world given that our bodies occupy various positions in space and there are many social roles one can enact. The key, however, is not to be fixated within single positions and perspectives. Being 'trapped' within singular positions and having only one perspective or action orientation at our disposal constrains the possible to the point of its abolition. More positions and more perspectives mean having alternative ways of thinking and acting and, as such, according to a sociocultural standpoint, entertaining multiple possibilities. What facilitates this dynamic is our capacity to

re-position ourselves, to take and exchange perspectives (for details about position exchange theory see Gillespie & Martin, 2014) in ways that diversify how we think and how we act in and on the world. Coming back to the example of the umbrella, it is because we can ask ourselves ‘what would a cook do with an umbrella?’, ‘what about a magician?’, ‘or an athlete?’, that we can start fostering the possible. Just like, when we manipulate physically an umbrella, we might be surprised to discover previously unnoticed qualities that help us rethink its use and its value.

In summary, the sociocultural approach adopted in this chapter considers possibilities as alternative perspectives developed on the world through acts of re-positioning, position exchange, and perspective-taking, a dynamic that comes to the fore whenever we are faced with crises, obstacles, and ruptures. The more we cultivate a sensitivity to such differences of perspective, the more we open ourselves up to the possible. Yet the number and quality of these perspectives will matter for determining the nature of this exploration and its outcomes. If we are to understand *how* exactly the possible is explored, we need a framework concerning the characteristics of the perspectives involved, a framework focused on Possibility Spaces.

Possibility Spaces: A new framework

There is a long tradition of using spatial metaphors within psychology and the social sciences at large. From Freud’s model of consciousness – preconscious – unconscious (Freud, 1915) to Kurt Lewin’s force field analysis (Lewin, 1936), psychologists in particular tend to find topological modelling useful. On the one hand this might be because it is often difficult to discuss intangible phenomena, like most of the constructs psychology operates with, and a visual depiction gives abstractions some concreteness. On the other hand, it is easier to depict processes and describe complex forms of organisation. But, of course, visual metaphors come with their own cost. For one, it is harder to reflect simultaneity in a drawing than it would be, for instance, using a different register like music. This is why some social theorists preferred to use auditory metaphors in their work, e.g., Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984). The sociocultural approach to the possible briefly described above is anchored in a topological frame of positions

and perspectives (that could be imagined as vectors relating person and world) while, at the same time, trying to overcome overly static depictions by emphasizing the possibility of simultaneity or being in two or more positions at once (Gillespie, 2006; Glăveanu, 2020).

The notion of Possibility Space continues this tradition by helping us visualize the multiplicity of alternative perspectives involved in experiences of the possible. Essentially, if positions can be imagined as a point and perspectives as lines connecting this point with specific aspects of reality (the ‘aboutness’ of a perspective), then in geometrical terms a space is created when multiple points (positions) exist, and when relationships (perspectives) are established between them. As previously mentioned, the more diverse these positions and perspectives are, the richer the space of the possible being envisioned, experienced, explored. This idea has been supported also by other authors, such as Geoff Mulgan (2022), when referring to possibility spaces as the multitude of things that can be imagined by an individual or a community. While the ‘content’ of such spaces, i.e., the content of the perspectives constituting them, can vary – think, for example, about the different domains of activity the possible is explored in (see Kaufman & Baer, 2005) – there are some fundamental, formal characteristics of such spaces that transcend particular domains. Two of these characteristics are used here to develop the ***Possibility Spaces Framework***: number of perspectives involved (‘wideness’) and the degree of elaboration of each of these perspectives (‘depth’).

If possibilities are understood, as described above, in terms of alternative perspectives on self and world, different from the conventional or dominant perspective (often the one reflecting ‘what is’), then explorations of the possible can meaningfully be described in terms of widenness and depth. These matter because they connect to more than formal attributes like number and elaboration. For example, it is likely that the more perspectives are added to one’s exploration, the more original, rare, or unexpected they might be. This is in line with studies of divergent thinking in which number of ideas generated (an indicator referred to as fluency) is often taken also as a partial measure of originality (Mouchiroud & Lubart, 2001). Divergent thinking tests also speak to the role of elaboration. Since Guilford’s (1967) Alternative Uses Task – which

interestingly uses the notion of alternative, important here as well – elaboration is part of the criteria for divergent thinking, even if it is the least used, at least by comparison with fluency, flexibility, and originality. And yet, the degree of elaboration speaks to the time, effort and resources involved in constructing various perspectives. It can also be an indicator of whether the person can move from perspective-taking achieved through the easy use of stereotypes, ‘from the outside’, or through effortful processes of identification, ‘from the inside’ (Glăveanu & de Saint Laurent, 2018). Important to note, not all less elaborated or detailed perspectives are necessarily shallow or misguided, and many times the degree of elaboration depends on domain specific and domain general knowledge (for evidence from creativity research see Amabile’s, 1988, componential model) and the ability to mobilize it in imaginative ways.

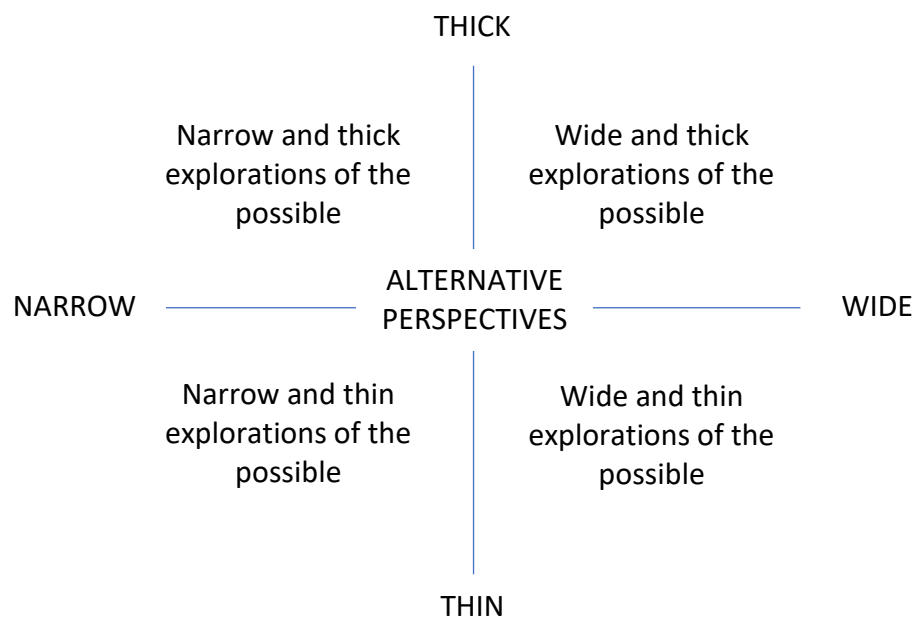


Figure 1. The Possibility Spaces Framework

The PSF includes therefore two axes (see Figure 1). The horizontal one represents the number of perspectives on the problem or issue at hand. This axis reflects the ‘spread’ of possibilities ranging from narrow (a single alternative or very few) to wide (a significant number of alternatives). As always, what makes an exploration of the possible narrow or wide in this

regard is contextual and can only be evaluated case by case and not through setting a universal numerical standard. The vertical axis gives an idea of depth, starting from the bottom with thin explorations, those in which perspectives are concise and lacking detail. At the top we can imagine thick perspectives, rich in detail, more fully developed. These two axes generate a two by two in which explorations of the possible can be narrow and thin, narrow and thick, wide and thin, wide and thick. Since number and elaboration are technically independent dimensions, given sufficient time and resources, a person can engage in either of the four 'types' mentioned above. Importantly, the main aim of this framework is not to classify explorations of the possible within stable, unified types but rather to understand their dynamic over time and the way people move from thin to thick, from narrow to wide, and vice versa, particularly in crises situations. These moves can be very sudden and take place almost unintentionally for most of us during daily interactions, and yet the development of our engagement with each quadrant is likely to have its own evolutionary, ontogenetic, and even cultural history.

In the context of crises, obstacles and ruptures, it is important for studies conducted based on PSF to observe what might trigger or prompt a particular kind of exploration, for example how people might be encouraged (or, in effect, discouraged) from, let's say, going wide or operating with thin perspectives. Equally important are the correlates of operating within the four quadrants and moving between them. For instance, in what contexts are wide and thin explorations more likely to be associated with increased levels of well-being and self-esteem than narrow and thick ones? Last but not least, it is key to reflect on consequences. What does exploring the possible in narrow vs. wide forms, thin vs. thick 'do' to our capacity to solve problems, to learn, to be agentic? What is the impact of such different explorations on human relations and community life? Before outlining examples that can help start to answer some of the questions above, a final observation is in order and it concerns the risk of creating hierarchies. Whether wide – thin, wide – thick, narrow – thin, or narrow – thick, explorations of the possible in moments of crisis can all be *pragmatically useful* and there is not particular type that is universally 'better' or 'superior' to the others. The big question, though, is which forms

of exploration are more suitable for which contexts and how we can develop both people's skills and meta-cognitive abilities to be able to shift possibility gears and to realise what to gear exactly to, and when.

Navigating Possibility Spaces

In order to illustrate the usefulness of PSF as an analytical tool that could shed new light on how people respond to moments of crisis, I will draw on studies I have previously conducted under the umbrella of creativity research. From the start it needs to be mentioned that these studies, for the most part, were neither framed originally in terms of crises or possibilities. And yet, revisiting them through this combined lens, and with the help of the PSF, the cases themselves are enriched and new understandings reached, hopefully, about what it means to become aware of and explore possibilities when faced with obstacles, big and small.

The first example is concerned with the 'smallest' of obstacles, those faced by our habitual actions in and on the world. While for many these would not qualify as a crisis, given their mundane occurrence, it is precisely the micro-ruptures they occasion that make them relevant for both the literature on crisis and the one on possibility. The concrete example is drawn from my doctoral studies on creativity in craft, specifically Easter egg decoration practices in northern Romania communities (for details, see Glăveanu, 2010, 2013). This particular context is relevant for Possibility Studies given common misconceptions that craftwork is essentially repetitive, automatic, uncreative. In other words, that craftsmanship lacks a wider horizon of possibility and its main mission is to continue and defend tradition, to safeguard 'what is'; it fundamentally lacks the kind of crises that would push craftspeople to change their style and be more creative. What my studies came to show, however, is the opposite of this view. The fact that, when conducting a detailed, micro-genetic analysis of activities of decoration, the picture is much more complex and successful artisans are, in fact, faced with a myriad of obstacles, in real time, they are excellent improvisers and well-versed at making the most of serendipitous moments. No two decorated Easter eggs are ever the same and, more than this, the process of

making them, including painting the same motif, can vary from decorator to decorator, sometimes for one and the same person. So there is rupture, change, variability and difference at the heart of what many consider traditional craft.

The question then becomes, how can this be translated in terms of the PSF and, crucially, what can such an exercise offer above and beyond the creativity analysis already conducted? First, there is the issue of possibilities as alternatives to what is familiar, known, or conventional. There are many conventions in craft and most decorators are well aware of them. And yet their work is a constant negotiation between what they know should be done and what they actually do; sometimes, these gaps can fuel micro-crises as to how decoration should continue. This dynamic tends to open wider and wider Possibility Spaces marked by the distance between conventional perspectives of what an Easter egg needs to look like, and the kinds of eggs they prefer painting and, more importantly, their clients want to buy. Indeed, one of the main engines of creativity and expanded possibility in this craft at least has to do with learning about the positions and perspectives of others, for instance foreign customers who might want other colours and patterns than the traditional ones. These kind of deviations from the norm led, across many years, to completely new types of decorated eggs, for instance eggs made with Christmas motifs which was absent from 'tradition', at least in Romania. Once perspectives like the possibility of 'Christmas eggs' emerged, they become thicker by using various work techniques to create such artifacts. Today, such rarities can be made using the old technique of decorating with the help of melted wax but, more commonly, artisans use actual painted on the egg which is, in itself, a historical innovation. Exploring one possibility begets other possibilities and making the most out of a micro-crisis can lead to developments of the craft itself.

Overall, applying the PSF to Easter egg decoration, even in a cursory manner, brings two new insights, one concerning the nature of this particular craft, the other the dynamic of Possibility Spaces within micro-crises. For the former, we get a clear sense that activities that at best would be placed in the narrow – thin quadrant for presumably rarely considering alternatives and, if doing so, adopting only shallow novelties, actually move more 'freely' up and down the

narrow – wide and thin – thick axes. The view of others can also be considered a key element for expanding the range of positions and perspectives involved in craft. As for lessons learnt concerning PSF, one dynamic in the evolution of an activity system like folk art and the way it deals with tensions and obstacles, seems to be *wideness leading to thickness*; in other words, the more alternative perspectives are added, the more tools and techniques are applied to them, increasing their degree of elaboration (see Figure 2).

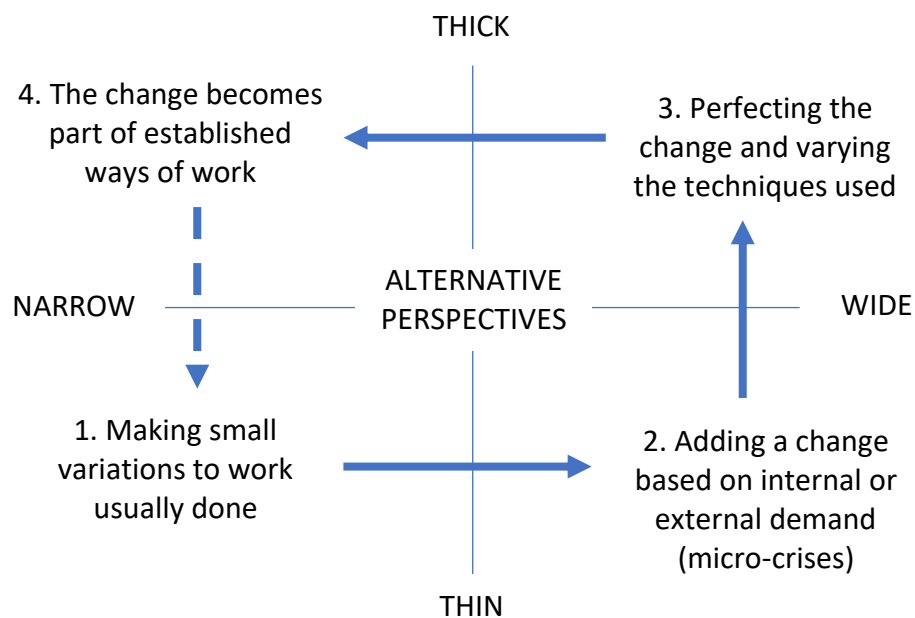


Figure 2. Using the PSF to analyse trajectories within Easter egg decoration

The brief case study above pointed to an interesting trajectory from wider possibilities to more elaboration of key alternatives, at least in the context of micro-crises and obstacles. But is this always the case? The next example suggests a potential reversal, whereby perfecting one possibility leads to the emergence of other possibilities. The context this time is much more recent and concerns a macro-crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Under conditions of restricted physical mobility, other types of movement flourished, particularly digital mobilities. People were not only online more, but large communities started expressing their concerns, views, and their creativity in the form of memes about the pandemic posted on

dedicated platforms like Reddit's Coronavirus Memes community. This flourishing forum, at the time, attracted my and my colleagues' attention and together we engaged in a detailed analysis of social representations and creativity within COVID-19 Internet memes (de Saint Laurent, Glăveanu & Literat, 2022), a project that extended to the study of political views and meme-based forms of storytelling (de Saint Laurent, Glăveanu & Literat, 2021).

What is, from the start, fascinating about this context is how similar and yet different it is compared to the example of craft. Even as the content of memes and the technological means used to produce them are fundamentally current, there are still 'traditions' of meme-making, including patterns users use (similar to decoration motifs, at some level) and, ultimately, creating memes is a very much a process of crafting, even if digital rather than manual. As such, the easy assumption that meme-making might be an exercise placed in the wide – thin quadrant of PSF, given the diversity of views expressed and the fact that many of these views remain relatively shallow or thin (reflecting the impression that social media doesn't afford public debate; Guallar, Suau, Ruiz-Caballero, Sáez & Masip, 2016), might be in fact challenged. Returning to the notion of templates, there is no denying that memes follow particular formats that they populate with more or less new information. In fact, the very notion of a meme points more to imitation than innovation. So, in this regard, an experienced meme creator might actually start from less variety of perspectives and thus from the narrower side of the horizontal axis of PSF. Also the assumption that, because the content of memes and other social media forms of participation needs to be brief necessarily implies lack of depth or elaboration of a perspective is false. Complex forms of social critique can be captured by the simplest of memes such as viral tweets, something extensively revealed by our study on political forms of participation. At the same time, elaboration can be understood also in terms of form, not only content and, interestingly, a follow-up study showed that memes that were considered creative were those that showed more attention to detail and were better crafted (Glăveanu & de Saint Laurent, 2021). In other words, the PSF might allow for the hypothesis that memes perceived as belonging to the narrow (i.e., not too unexpected for their audience)

and thick (i.e., giving the impression of time and effort put into their creation) quadrant might be more appreciated by their audience and have a greater chance of becoming viral.

The lenses offered by PSF help us launch these hypotheses and discover another pattern in this case, this time leading *from thickness of perspective to wideness* (see Figure 3). One of the many interesting features of memes, not unlike Easter eggs, is repetition but repetition with a difference. This implies not only that meme templates are available and often resorted to but that, collectively, people notice when new and effective memes have been distributed and start making reference to them. A key characteristic of meme culture is its self-referentiality to the point that newcomers have to learn the ‘codes’ used by specific communities in order to fit in. This became clear to us in the analysis of COVID-19 memes; taken out of context, memes can be hard to understand in terms of message and function and it is only by seeing what they ‘respond to’ or where they ‘come from’ that a lot of the meaning is revealed. This implies that the more a meme is commented and elaborated on, again at the collective level, the more it has the chance to inspire new productions and new perspectives. In the wider context of a large societal crisis, like COVID-19, possibilities once more beget new possibilities, and do so in a unique fashion.

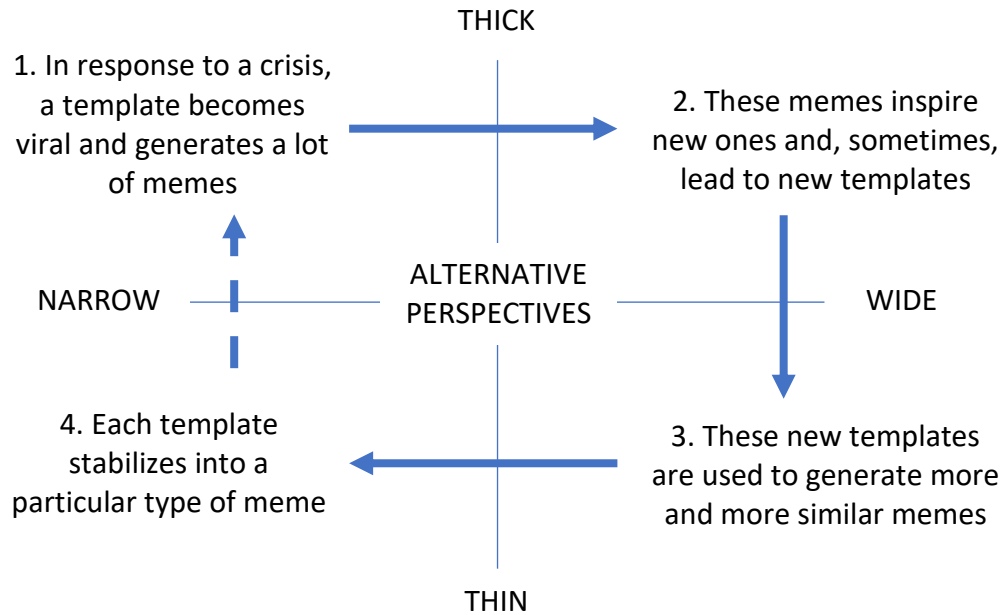


Figure 3. Using the PSF to analyse trajectories within Covid-19 Internet memes

A final example comes for a different context, that of social activism and mobilisation in rural Colombia. This project concerned university – community collaborations around topics related to creativity, leadership, and sustainability and focused on the co-construction of knowledge particularly in relation to local practices and the protection of rights in the case of rural, Afro and indigenous populations. The crisis here is neither micro, as in craft, or macro, as in the case of the pandemic, but meso, affecting entire communities. Broader reflections emerged during these exchanges about ongoing social and environmental crises and the importance of Global South worldviews on a range of issues, from nature to creativity (Glăveanu & Sierra, 2015), a topic that is particularly relevant for Possibility Studies and its ethos of engaging with multiple positions in the world and their associated perspectives (Glăveanu, 2023b). More concretely, this project offered an opportunity to understand the bottom-up dynamic of social activism and the ways in which activism manages to re-imagine the future of local communities. As such, it is fair to say that community members, together with the researchers involved in the project, are engaged in an exploration of Possibility Spaces about current crises of great complexity, from environmental and economic to social and political.

In the past, I referred to these exercises of imagining collective futures as proceeding in one of three ways: monological, when the dominant vision excludes any other alternatives; dialectical, when discussions move back and forth between two perspectives and strive towards a synthesis; and dialectical, when two or more perspectives are kept in tension with each other and divergence rather than convergence is encouraged (see Glăveanu, 2018b). In fact, as this broader research suggests, the exploration of the possible takes different forms at different stages and all the four quadrants of PSF are both used and useful in this process. There are moments within community involvement in which all perspectives are welcomed and new perspectives (or possibilities of understanding the situation) are encouraged. In order to increase the chance of reaching novel insights, people employ different methods including the use of theatre as a way of fostering inquiry and scaffolding perspective-taking. By dramatizing some of the main issues and conflicts the collective is confronted with, opportunities emerge for people to identify which positions are meaningful, what their perspectives are, how these positions and perspectives interact with each other and, most importantly, how the same scene or scenario looks like when considered from the viewpoint of others. In terms of Possibility Spaces, such activities are meant to move participants from the narrow to the wide pole (i.e., increase the number of viewpoints), and from the thin to the thick one (i.e., create complex narratives around each viewpoint).

However, later on during community conversations the focus shifts from dialogism to dialectics and a new balance is reached between cultivating difference – an established engine of possibility – and building consensus – a prerequisite for successful community activism, often in several rounds of dialogue (see Figure 4). Wider possibilities narrow down and become even thicker by adding convergent stories and arguments, making implementation plans, and mobilizing all the resources of the community towards a more or less unified goal (e.g., a demonstration, legal action, etc.). This is how, during actual marches, slogans converge on the main request and, in pleading their case, community representatives come back to similar forms of reasoning. What seems like a general reduction in possibility is, in fact, a highly

adapted technique to present a unified front and use this unity as a resource in the face of often formidable challenges from corporations and even governmental agencies. The narrow and thick quadrant offers less of the usual range of creative actions many are used to during demonstrations, particularly in the global North, and might diminish the sense of individual originality and spontaneity. But further empirical research can explore whether, indeed, communities that argue for narrow and thick perspectives aren't in fact more persuasive, eventually, and if wide and thin contributions, in particular, although displaying very imaginative views, might not hamper the chance of actually delivering social change.

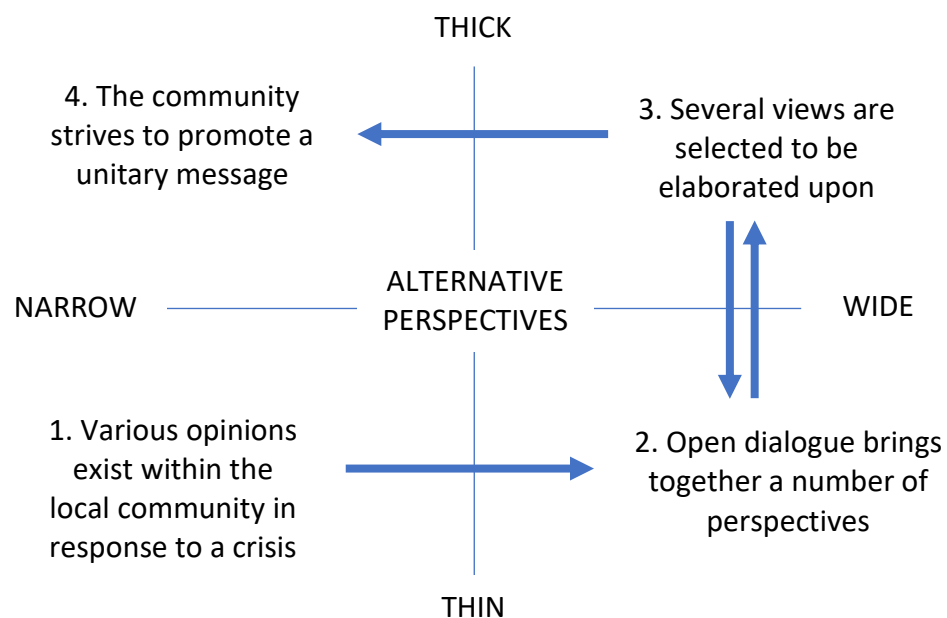


Figure 4. Using the PSF to analyse trajectories within social mobilization

This is, ultimately, an argument for the contextual benefits (and shortcomings) of the different quadrants of PSF in moments of crisis and a reminder that the way we explore the possible, as individuals and communities, is consequential for the outcome of our actions and not only for the kind of actions we decide to enact. Within one and the same activity – be it Easter egg decoration, creating Internet memes, or participating in social activism – there are situations in which differences are required and situations in which the emphasis should fall on consensus,

just as sometimes schematic perspectives are as useful if not more than highly elaborate ones. The common denominator, however, remains *the possibility of the possible in response to a crisis whether micro, meso or macro*: the fact that alternatives are proposed to what is expected, what has been done, what should be done in the future. These spark novelty, nurture openness and emergence and, in all cases, increase the chances for inclusion and participation, the chance of finding ways out of the crisis.

Concluding thoughts

One of the main premises behind the PSF and, more generally, the sociocultural approach to crises and the possible, is that for possibility to emerge difference and multiplicity are required. More than this, it is not any kind of difference that makes the difference. Traditionally, the possible is engaged with whenever perspectives are constructed that go beyond the world ‘as is’ and represent it ‘as it could be’. But, especially in contexts of crisis, it is not enough to operate based on conventional or hegemonic perspectives on ‘what could be’. Difference here means allowing oneself to be surprised, even slightly, by another point of view, to transcend not only the world not ‘as is’ but ‘as is expected’. This means that marginal perspectives are welcome and the marginal positions they emerge from become of key importance for explorations of the possible. The ethics of possibility is, thus, one of inclusion and participation, one in which the unfamiliarity of others is not immediately appropriated and transformed into one’s own perspective but recognized as different and, consequentially, as a source of new possibilities. Navigating Possibility Spaces, then, is not a merely mental act and not even a form of isolated individual action in response to crises, obstacles, and ruptures – it is a process that is, at once, psychological, social, political, and ethical.

The craftsperson solving problems as they emerge when decorating an Easter egg, the teenager creating a meme to make sense of a large societal challenge, the leader animating people for support in the face of a community crisis – they are all thinking, enacting, and communicating perspectives or possibilities. With every move, every new meme, every newly created slogan,

the space of the possible is reconfigured and it is so for more than the self. The fact that people interact while envisioning and enacting possibilities is crucial for grasping their pathway through the PSF. And it is crucial for also understanding what possibilities can and should be fostered to effectively respond to crises and ‘make the most’ out of them. The ethics of possibility reminds us that even when many things are possible, not all of them should be actualised. That the experience of Possibility Spaces is a human universal. That we all carry a responsibility, in constructing, navigating, and attributing such spaces, to recognise in others the same kind of dignity and endless possibility we find in ourselves.

References

- Amabile, T. M. (1988). A model of creativity and innovation in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 10(1), 123-167.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984) *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (trans. C. Emerson). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Baumeister, R. F., Hofmann, W., Summerville, A., Reiss, P. T., & Vohs, K. D. (2020). Everyday thoughts in time: Experience sampling studies of mental time travel. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 46(12), 1631-1648.
- Clot-Garrell, A. (2023). Voices of emergency: Imagined climate futures and forms of collective action. *Current Sociology*, 00113921231182179.
- Corazza, G. E. (2016). Potential originality and effectiveness: The dynamic definition of creativity. *Creativity Research Journal*, 28(3), 258-267.
- de Saint Laurent, C., Glăveanu, V. P., & Literat, I. (2021). Internet memes as partial stories: Identifying political narratives in coronavirus memes. *Social Media+Society*, 7(1), 2056305121988932.
- de Saint Laurent, C., Glăveanu, V. P., & Literat, I. (2022). Mimetic representations of the COVID-19 pandemic: An analysis of objectification, anchoring, and identification processes in coronavirus memes. *Psychology of Popular Media*, 11(4), 340–354.
- Freud, S. (1915), *The unconscious*. James Strachey, translator. London: Hogarth Press.

- Gillespie, A. (Ed.). (2006). *Becoming other: From social interaction to self-reflection*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Gillespie, A., & Martin, J. (2014). Position exchange theory: A socio-material basis for discursive and psychological positioning. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 32, 73-79.
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2010). Creativity in context: The ecology of creativity evaluations and practices in an artistic craft. *Psychological Studies*, 55(4), 339-350.
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2013). Creativity and folk art: A study of creative action in traditional craft. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 7(2), 140-154.
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2018a). The possible as a field of inquiry. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 14(3), 519-530.
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2018b). Perspectival collective futures: Creativity and imagination in society. In C. de Saint-Laurent, S. Obradović, & Kevin Carriere (Eds.), *Imagining collective futures: Perspectives from social, cultural and political psychology* (pp. 83-105). London: Palgrave.
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2020). *The possible: A sociocultural theory*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2023a) (Ed.). *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible*. Cham: Springer.
- Glăveanu, V. P. (2023b). Possibility studies: A manifesto. *Possibility Studies & Society*, 1(1-2), 3-8.
- Glăveanu, V. P., & de Saint Laurent, C. (2018). Taking the perspective of others: A conceptual model and its application to the refugee crisis. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 24(4), 416-423.
- Glăveanu, V. P., & de Saint Laurent, C. (2021). Social media responses to the pandemic: What makes a coronavirus meme creative. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 569987.
- Glăveanu, V. P., & Sierra, Z. (2015). Creativity and epistemologies of the South. *Culture & Psychology*, 21(3), 340-358.
- Guallar, J., Suau, J., Ruiz-Caballero, C., Sáez, A., & Masip, P. (2016). Re-dissemination of news and public debate on social networks. *El profesional de la información*, 25(3), 358-366.
- Guilford, J. P. (1967). *The nature of human intelligence*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

- Guilford, J. P. (1975). Varieties of creative giftedness, their measurement and development. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 19(2), 107-121.
- Hanchett Hanson, M. (2023). Reality studies: Reflections on the possible and actual. *Possibility Studies and Society*, early view.
- Kaufman, J. C., & Baer, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Creativity across domains: Faces of the muse*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Knight, C. (2000). Play as precursor of phonology and syntax. In Knight, C., Studdert-Kennedy, M. & Hurford, J.R. (eds.) *The evolutionary emergence of language: Social function and the origins of linguistic form* (pp. 99–119). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewin, K. (1936). *Principles of topological psychology*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Möller, R., & Groß, H.-M. (1994). Perception through anticipation. In *Proceedings of PerAc '94 – From Perception to Action*, pages 408–11, Los Alamitos, CA. IEEE Computer Society Press.
- Mouchiroud, C., & Lubart, T. (2001). Children's original thinking: An empirical examination of alternative measures derived from divergent thinking tasks. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 162(4), 382-401.
- Mulgan, G. (2022). *Another world is possible: How to reignite social and political imagination*. London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd.
- Mullally, S. L., & Maguire, E. A. (2014). Memory, imagination, and predicting the future: A common brain mechanism?. *The Neuroscientist*, 20(3), 220-234.