

Possible

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Abstract (150 words)

The possible is, by definition, a transdisciplinary topic. The study of the possible bridges the gap between the natural and the social sciences while keeping a strong grounding in the arts and humanities. In this entry, I consider four key questions within Possibility Studies and argue for the need to answer them using a transdisciplinary approach: What kinds of psychological, social, material, technological and cultural resources and processes enable our engagement with the possible? How do individual differences, environmental contexts and situational factors 'collaborate' in shaping experiences of the possible? What is the relation between individual, group, community and societal forms of becoming aware of and exploring possibilities? How do power relations structure our imagination of the possible and with what consequences for how self and society are constituted? The entry ends with reflections on how to decide which possibilities to enact and which to reject, which possibilities are valuable and which are harmful, the core of the 'ethics of possibility'.

Keywords: possible, Possibility Studies, sociocultural theory, transdisciplinary, ethics

Introduction

The possible is, by definition, a transdisciplinary topic. This is because possibilities take various shapes and forms and become manifest in the realm of the psychological, social, material, cultural, technological, and political. The study of the possible, as such, bridges the gap between the natural and the social sciences while keeping a strong grounding in the arts and humanities. This legacy of going beyond disciplinary boundaries is well reflected by emerging field of Possibility Studies (Glăveanu, 2023a; Ross, 2023), a transdisciplinary area of research examining how individuals and communities become aware of, explore, enact (or choose not to enact) specific possibilities. In fact, the need to develop a field like Possibility Study stems from a desire to overcome knowledge silos when it comes to understanding widespread phenomena such as the novelty, emergence, change and transformation. This is how Possibility Studies is becoming the meeting point between connected yet previously separate literature, including those on agency, imagination, creativity, innovation, improvisation, pretend play, curiosity, awe, wonder, serendipity, counterfactual thinking, anticipation, futures thinking, utopias and dystopias, to name just a few (for more see Glăveanu, 2023b).

Transcending dichotomies

To answer the most basic question of what the possible is, one has to look across disciplines. In philosophy, the key dichotomy set up to grasp the possible is that between the actual and the possible or the possible and the real. This is the fundamental difference between 'what is', on the one hand, and 'what could be', 'what was', 'what will be', and 'what will never be', on the

other. However, this is a questionable opposition as possibilities ground themselves in reality and come to transform the real (Hanchett Hanson, 2023). In psychology, the focus is on how individuals experience the possible. These experiences have different emotional undertones and can be connected to action or not. What psychology has to offer for deeper reflection is the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious in acting on what is possible. And yet his dichotomy doesn't hold up against closer scrutiny either given that consciousness describes a continuum and experiences of the possible we are not aware of in the moment can usually be brought into consciousness later on. Sociology adds to these reflections a more macro dimension. The possible is not only embedded in minds but also within society. The forces of agency and structure give exploration of the possible, both individual and collective, their patterned nature. However, this is also a false opposition given that agency and structure not only require but transform each other (see Giddens's classic notion of structuration, Bazer, 1991).

The list can go on. Disciplinary approaches tend to have complementary views about what the possible is and how it unfolds, but they also come with their own legacy of dichotomies and oppositions. In order to transcend them and reach new ideas, dialectically, we need to step outside disciplinary boundaries and to consider classic oppositions through the lenses of other viewpoints. For example, a psychological perspective is interesting for philosophical approaches because it shifts the discussion from possibility and reality to the perception of both. In exchange, sociological approaches challenge the assumed individual nature of these perceptions and show how society and culture constrain what is seen as 'possible' in thought and in action. And there are many other disciplines, from history to linguistic to design and engineering, that have something important to say about our engagement with the possible, contributions that come to add to but also question existing perspectives.

Key transdisciplinary questions

In this short entry, I focus on four questions that I consider central for Possibility Studies and that can benefit most from a transdisciplinary approach:

1. What kinds of psychological, social, material, technological and cultural resources and processes enable our engagement with the possible?
2. How do individual differences, environmental contexts and situational factors 'collaborate' in shaping experiences of the possible?
3. What is the relation between individual, group, community and societal forms of becoming aware of and exploring possibilities?
4. How do power relations structure our imagination of the possible and with what consequences for how self and society are constituted?

The first question concerns the processes and resources that mediate our engagement with the possible. While establishing a final and comprehensive list would be difficult, what transpires from this question is the fact that our engagement with the possible is layered and that it draws upon an entire system, from neurological processes to psychological and cultural. To take a concrete example, perspective-taking is often considered an important process for discovering new possibilities in everyday life (see Glăveanu, 2015; Hoever et al., 2012). This is the case because, taking the perspective of others basically involves an act of de-centering and re-positioning which fosters new ways of relating to self and world. Possibilities are, essentially, alternative perspectives on reality that are developed by stepping away from egocentric and hegemonic views. These other perspectives are oftentimes the perspectives of others, including

what George Herbert Mead called the ‘generalised other’, the view of society (Gillespie, 2005). Normally studied by psychologists, the act of perspective taking has a complexity that can only be unpacked fully by bringing together contributions from psychology, neuroscience, sociology, philosophy, and developmental science. Especially when considering perspective-taking as an engine of the possible, these contributions need more than being placed side by side, they should enter an authentic dialogue with each other.

The second question concerns the difference between personal and contextual factors in Possibility Studies. The latter can be further differentiated between more stable contexts for human activity and the variability of each situation we get to act in, across time. The former represents a view of what people bring to these context and situations and how these pre-existing tendencies, both psychological and biological, vary between individuals. As such, asking about individual differences, contextual and situational factors means trying to encompass person and environment, space and time, which is not easily achieved within the bounds of single disciplines. Individual differences is a branch of psychology and, as such, there are important contributions to be made here by psychological studies of phenomena such as motivation, emotion, personality, and intelligence. And yet, foregrounding these elements alone risks developing rather static and universalist views according to which engagements with the possible are over-determined by individual and psychological factors. To counter-balance this, we need a deep understanding of how contexts and situations impact which possibilities we become aware of and explore. However, this interdisciplinary, side-by-side view of person and context is not enough. People and contexts are inter-dependent and co-constitutive. Transdisciplinary views would, therefore, seek to develop concepts that cut across the personal, social, and material such as the notion of affordance which essentially argues that our action develops at the meeting point between person and world (see Gibson, 1986).

The third question points us to the social world in particular. While experiences of the possible seem to be highly personal and, as such, ‘located’ within mind or brain, our sense of what is possible is deeply shaped by interactions with others. In fact, following transdisciplinary approaches to sociocultural and developmental theory, one could argue that it is precisely social engagements that form the basis for individual experiences of the possible. Therefore, interpersonal, group and societal relations emerge as major contributors to personal possibilities. It is important, however, to think about these systemically and not just as added layers of complexity. Group explorations of the possible are more than the sum of individual explorations. Community dynamics cannot be reduced to group interactions, and neither can societal developments be explained only in community terms. The emergent effects that arise from considering the interaction between social levels – not only within each level – requires a transdisciplinary lens. In its absence, we fall prey to the reductionism that plagues, for example, some approaches to group creativity (for a wide range of approaches in this regard see Reiter-Palmon, 2017). These primarily cognitive approaches emphasize individual processes of creativity within a group context and try to articulate them with the creative outcomes of the group instead of considering actual group processes from the start and focusing on relations rather than isolated individuals.

The fourth question goes deeper when it comes to the social domain and adds a dimension to it that goes beyond social psychology and moves us towards the domains of sociology and politics. This dimension is power. Power relations are crucially important for human interactions whether they are interpersonal, group, community, or societal. Returning to the issue of perspective-taking as a key possibility-enabling process, it is important to remember that not all perspectives are sought and taken and there are many within society whose views

we ignore or actively suppress. This unequal distribution of visibility and, ultimately, of possibility, can be explained at least partially in terms of power. Not only is it the case that the perspectives of specific people and groups have a greater weight in shaping the possible for others in society but some individuals and groups are actively oppressed and marginalised; in other words, their sphere of possible actions is considerably reduced.

Conclusion

These four questions lead us to reflect on a last key theme: the issue of ethics in Possibility Studies. If possibilities are unequally distributed, what can we do to support those who are disadvantaged? More than this, what kind of values should guide the way we think about possibilities, in general, and the act of choosing between them, in particular. One important lesson coming out of Possibility Studies is that not all envisioned possibilities need to be enacted. In fact, we need to be much more selective and wise when it comes to what we choose to create, imagine, and put into the world. This is at the heart of what Sternberg (2021) recently referred to as transformational creativity or the creativity aimed at the common good rather than personal reward. The multiple crises we are collectively confronted with today – crises that make several authors refer to our era as ‘post-normal times’ (Montuori, 2011) – can find their root in the indiscriminate enactment of possibilities leading to unjust, unbalanced and unwise decisions. Any transdisciplinary study of the possible that aims to make a lasting impact needs to consider possibilities not only in terms of their processes but also consequences, intended and unintended, short and long term.

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