

## **Introduction: Expanding conceptions for research on possibility**

Kseniya Fiaduta Prokharchyk, Ryan J.A. Murphy, Vlad Glăveanu and Wendy Ross

<https://doi.org/10.1177/27538699261428416>

This special issue of *Possibility Studies and Society* brings over 15 scholars from diverse fields and disciplines to explore the theme of “Expanding Conceptions for Research on Possibility”. Emerging from the 4th Annual International Conference of Possibility Studies held at the University of Cambridge, the issue aims to bring “research”, “conceptions”, and “possibility” into a new framework for understanding. Critical reflection on research methods and practices is a persistent concern for scholars in Possibility Studies. As an intrinsically inter- and transdisciplinary field of research, the study of the Possible calls for diverse and creative methodologies, “a wider set of methods, a more consistent dialogue across methodologies, as well as new and creative methodological choices that do justice to the complexity of the phenomena under study” (Glăveanu, 2023, pp. 6-7).

The critical analysis and thoughtful evaluation of our research practices and methods becomes particularly urgent today- the world of rapid and unpredictable change demands a continuous re-evaluation of our inherited research traditions and paradigms. In the words of Kenneth J. Gergen, “as the speed and complexity of social change increases, so recedes the utility of our traditional forms of inquiry” (2023, p. 82). How are we to envision the role of possibility research in these momentous times? How do the traditional conceptions and practices of research limit and constrain our imagination? How do academic siloes and traditional divides between research and practice restrain the possibilities and capacities of research? How can we expand our understanding of what research is and what can it do for our societies and the world? What research practices can advance human possibilities and help us confront the global problems of today? How can we infuse the ethos of Possibility Studies - with its curiosity, play, wonder, anticipation - into the acts of research? How can research practices challenge the status quo and expand the scope of voices to be heard?

This special issue invites us to explore these complex questions, expanding our conceptions of research beyond traditional boundaries and siloes. In foregrounding relational, affective, embodied, contextual, ethical, and political dimensions of research, the papers in this volume articulate research as a world-disclosing, “world-making”, and “future-forming practice” (Gergen, 2014), concerned not only with how the “world is” but with creating “a world to come” (Gergen, 2023, p. 85). As the papers in this volume suggest, possibility research is not rooted in abstract utopian thinking but has its foundations in our embodied, situated, contextual being-in-the-world and in our capacities to co-disclose and co-create the world together with multiple human and non-human others. The expansion of possibility research is thus intrinsically connected with the expansion of social imaginaries, with the question of how we can generate and foster possibilities

in people, cultures, and societies. Displaying a great variety of research methods and approaches, the articles in this volume outline specific theoretical and methodological strategies for expanding the sense of the Possible in diverse educational and social contexts. The field is brimming with ideas and methods, and we hope that this special issue will inspire new dialogues, collaborations, and practices.

The volume features contributions from a wide variety of fields, including creativity, education, life-writing, health and well-being research, foresight research, music, futures literacy, and higher economic education. For the purpose of organizing the special issue, we have grouped the articles into those that seek to open new theoretical horizons, those that expand the pedagogical practices and amplify the pedagogies of the Possible with new methodologies and tools, those that seek to articulate the need to go beyond the human and develop new sensitivity to more-than-human relationalities, and those that relate possibility thinking with futures thinking and literacy.

### *Theoretical expansions*

The disciplinary expansion can take place at the theoretical level by introducing new concepts and ideas, as well as through the adoption of already existing concepts from other fields to generate new synergies and approaches. In his article, Robert A. Cleve (Saybrook University, USA) introduces the concept of creative survival as experienced by young adult gay-identified males across three cultures. The study draws on qualitative approaches, including Grounded Theory, Arts-Based Research, and Heuristic Inquiry, to analyze the narratives of 36 co-researchers from the U.S., Brazil, and Turkey. The findings of his analysis reveal how creative skills are employed by the individuals “to assist in the decision to disclose their sexual identity as an event and also how creativity effectively contributes to their survival across cultural norms, laws and traditions” (Cleve, 2026, p. tktkk). The significance of creativity in individual survival and endurance leads the author to stress the importance of starting a broader dialogue on the concept of creative survival and to consider its relevance in other societal challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and the political transformations that impact our democracies. As highlighted by the author, more attention needs to be paid to how individuals and communities across the world survive in their own creative, imaginative, and unique ways.

### *Pedagogical expansions*

An important aspect of possibility research and practice is the expansion of the sense of the Possible of individuals and communities through the pedagogies of the possible (Glăveanu, 2023, p. 7). In her contribution to this volume, Yuanting Qiu (University of Cambridge, UK) explores the affective and embodied potential of hugging as a pedagogical possibility grounded in feminist new materialism and affective methodologies. Describing her online life-writing workshop with Chinese women, Yuanting Qiu outlines hugging pedagogy as a form of resistance to patriarchal traditions, the punishment-and-reward educational mindset, and patterns of self-punishment and

self-blame. By centering embodiment, relationality, performativity, and affective presence, the workshop created space for “affective connections”, where the embodiment, vulnerability, and mutual recognition were acknowledged and embraced. In this context, hugging becomes “a feminist-affective gesture” (Qiu, 2026, p. tktktk). Resisting closures and fixed interpretations, the pedagogy of hugging invites us to dwell in “uncertainty, ambivalence, and the fluid unfolding of relational affects” (p. tktktk). As the author concludes, “in a world structured by patriarchy and the ‘tyranny of metrics’ (...) arriving at uncertainty – through hugging – is itself a political gesture. It resists the dominant logic of certainty, causality, and control” (p. tktktk).

In another contribution, David Jay (Anglia Ruskin University, UK) considers the potential of two methodological strategies inspired by agential realism- diffractive questioning and working with fragments. These two strategies are discussed in the specific context of innovative interdisciplinary Ruskin modules taken by students in their second year of undergraduate study at Anglia Ruskin University, UK. By allowing the diffractive ‘opening up’ of thought and meaning, both strategies illustrate the relevance of diffractive methodology and agential realism for the 21st century education, which embraces creativity, uncertainty, fluidity, and open-endedness. Consistent with agential realism, the article does not seek to provide a fixed formula for diffractive analysis, but rather invites readers and researchers “to engage with these strategies diffractively, for example, by questioning, developing or adapting them for different research contexts” (Jay, 2026, p. tktktk). As argued by the author, the diffractive methodology can be a powerful stimulus “for further unfolding and questioning of creative learning processes, with implications for future possibilities in interdisciplinary practice and research” (p. tktktk).

For their part, Leticia C. Britos Cavagnaro (Stanford University, USA), Erica D. Estrada-Liou (University of Maryland, USA), Christina L. Hnatov (University of Maryland, USA), Thien Ta (Quality Evaluation Designs, USA), and Gary Lichtenstein (Quality Evaluation Designs, USA) introduce the d.school Ambiguity Navigation Instrument (DANI), “a curriculum-aligned assessment tool that measures learners’ attitudes toward and strategies for navigating ambiguity”. Unlike existing instruments that frame ambiguity as an inherently negative condition, DANI conceptualizes navigating ambiguity neutrally, and as a learnable skill composed of two factors: Navigating Ambiguity Attitude (NA Attitude) and Navigating Ambiguity Actions (NA Actions). The results from their validation study at two universities demonstrate DANI’s effectiveness in detecting changes in students’ relationship with ambiguity. In an increasingly complex and uncertain world, this assessment tool provides educators with a reliable method to assess curriculum effectiveness and offer students a starting point for individual and group reflection on navigating ambiguity. The authors also highlight that Navigating Ambiguity aligns with possibility thinking, creative agency, and futures consciousness. In the words of the authors, “further exploration could reveal ways that one’s capacity to navigate ambiguity correlates with each of these constructs and how the pedagogies designed to foster one may also support the other” (p. tktktk). Further explorations in this area constitute a promising line of research.

## *Expansions beyond the human*

In “Possibility Studies: A manifesto”, Vlad Glăveanu (2023, p. 5) emphasizes that “experiences of the possible depend on more than individuals; they require a wide ecosystem that includes human and non-human actors and their entanglement”. Nature, objects, material spaces, and environments play an important role “in unpacking the dynamic of the possible” (*ibid.*). All the articles in this section advance our understanding of how the possible is entangled with environments and more-than-human engagements. In her paper, Bethan Garrett (Lancaster University, UK) takes us on a journey to Morecambe Bay, a biodiverse, coastal region in the north-west England, where an innovative educator-led movement “The Morecambe Bay Curriculum (MBC)” is exploring how place-based education, sustainability, and environmental issues can be embedded into curriculum teaching. In 2024, the MBC’s curriculum co-design project matched 22 local teachers with 18 university academics to co-design curriculum resources that weave sustainability, environment, place, and constructive hope into specific subjects and phases of education. The project generated 16 place-based resources and had a positive impact on both teachers and academics. For educators, the project offered the opportunity to build on expert knowledge in developing curriculum resources, whereas academics were able to see the relevance of their research in new, meaningful and tangible ways. By developing trust, empathy, and understanding of each other’s specific role and expertise, this project shows how teachers and academics “can build collaborative relationships based on complementary skills and knowledge” (Garrett, 2026, p. tktktk). The project also serves as a powerful reminder that education is “an essential part of the solution to the climate crisis” (p. tktktk). By creating deeper connections to the environment and local issues, educational spaces can foster agency and inspire constructive hope for the future. In her conclusion, Bethan Garrett underscores that the MBC’s curriculum co-design project can be transferable to other contexts and provides key reflections that could support the development of similar projects in the future.

In her paper “The possibilities in problematising social connection as more-than-human: A speculative case”, Lena Gan (University of Melbourne, Australia) explores ecologies of belonging by walking with research participants during museum experiences. Lena and her participants both wore GoPro cameras on their chest while the participant guided Lena through museums for up to two hours. Lena chose this approach as it revealed somatic data — the “often invisible or unacknowledged” (Gan, 2026, p. tktktk) phenomena such as interactions, conversations, and feelings that inspire relational and collective intra-action with the world. Lena shows how dimensions of belonging — kinship, citizenship, and matters of concern — emerge through the more-than-human assemblages that take place in museum experiences. She ends with a call to embrace the possibilities unlocked by considering other more-than-human socialities: “Future research might build on this speculative case by exploring the material and affective infrastructures that foster more-than-human connection in other domains such as public spaces, educational

institutions, workplaces and virtual environments along with the implications for public health and social policy. In a time of social crises and ecological precarity, acknowledging and nurturing our more-than-human entanglements is not just conceptually generative, but existentially imperative. By extending what counts as social, we extend who and what can belong” (p. tktktk).

How might music from soil expand the Possible? In “Soil music for regenerative futures: A performative approach to a radically regenerative transdisciplinary paradigm”, Silke Schmid and Raif Schmid (University of Education Freiburg, Germany) present a project in which artist and researcher work together through appreciative ecological inquiry to explore ecological imaginaries: “the shared ways in which people conceptualize relationships between humans and the more than human world” (Schmid & Schmid, 2026, p. tktktk). They use soil as a medium “for artistic, affective, and epistemic engagement” (p. tktktk) in the Possible, making processes like ecosystemic regeneration an acoustic experience. Their broader theoretical contribution, however, is to show how researcher and musician are able to use this project to catalyze exploratory, transdisciplinary, rebellious scholarship that, in turn, transforms how we — humans — relate to other (non-human) forms of life. Their article situates this exploration in Glăveanu’s (2023) ethics of possibility, presenting the “soil music paradigm” as a radical rethinking of relationality rooted (pun intended) in experienced experiments.

### *Possibility and Futures Thinking*

Angela Faiella, Irene Coletto, and Giovanni E. Corazza (University of Bologna, Italy) produce a novel classification of the cognitive constraints on possibilities thinking in “Seeing the future through colored glasses: Heuristics and biases in Futures Thinking.” First, they theorize the role of heuristics and biases as specific mechanisms of human cognition that influence the possible futures available to someone’s imagination. Second, they frame the understanding of heuristics and biases as a specific component of futures literacy, arguing that foresight practitioners should be capable of critically engaging with heuristics and biases when designing futures thinking exercises. They then conduct literature review to identify possible types of heuristics and biases that may significantly impact the possible in futures thinking. The authors selected 25 different previously-identified types of biases and heuristics and classified them into three categories using a triangulation process. To do this, they posed three research questions: (1) “How might heuristics and biases influence the information collected/ discussed during a foresight exercise?”; (2) “How might biases and heuristics related to group dynamics affect a foresight exercise?”; and (3) “How does the desirability of outcomes affect scenario visualization through cognitive biases and heuristics?” (Faiella, Coletto & Coraza, 2026, p. tktktk). These questions produced three classifications, respectfully: (1) cherry picking; (2) group bubble; (3) outcome misperception. Finally, the authors explore how these biases may emerge — and be mitigated — in three exemplars of foresight methodologies (scenario planning, causal layered analysis, and technology scouting). The authors conclude by arguing that biases and heuristics play an under-recognized

role in constraining our imagination of possible futures. Their construct of bias literacy — underpinned by their novel classification — can help improve foresight practice by rendering biases and heuristics visible and addressable, allowing foresight practitioners to “transform biases from hidden obstacles into learning opportunities that foster creativity, broaden scenario exploration, and reduce the risk of ‘future myopia’” (p. tktktk).

How might structured imagining facilitate futures and possibility thinking? Marcel Beyer (University of Bielfeld, Germany) interviewed students from socio-economic master’s programs at four German universities who engaged in futures literacy workshops (Futures Literacy Laboratories) to analyze the structural, emotional, epistemic, and institutional constraints that inhibit the capacity for imagination. Beyer’s study ultimately positions the development of futures literacy not as a skillset to learn but as a capability requiring effective pedagogical design (such as curricular anchoring, ethical facilitation, and safe spaces for dialogue) to support effective learning and practice. Beyer’s analysis revealed a number of factors in students’ futures literacy-learning experiences, including how engagement with imagining possible futures opened new potentials as well as some barriers to developing this capability. Beyer attributes these barriers to the current era of polycrisis as well as to the dominant paradigms of economic education. He argues that encouraging students in economic education to engage with imagining possible futures may open temporary possibility spaces in which futures literacy becomes a situated, relational capability that — with skilled and ethical facilitation — can be used to identify and hold these barriers as opportunities for development and pluralism. Beyer ends with a call to action: “confronting the challenges of the polycrisis through economic education requires educational approaches that acknowledge uncertainty, cultivate imaginative openness, and engage students in plural and relational ways of knowing” (2026, p. tktktk). As emphasized by the author, “Possibility Thinking is not an abstract aspiration but a concrete pedagogical response to systemic challenges. When embedded in such pedagogical conditions, FL Labs can foster new perspectives and Critical Hope: a form of hope that is not naïve or escapist but grounded in reflection, complexity, and agency. It invites learners to remain open despite uncertainty or presumptive impossibilities—and to imagine alternatives even when dominant logics foreclose them” (p. tktktk).

As conveyed by this special issue, each of the articles expands possibility studies and research in its own, unique way. Emerging from this theoretical and methodological diversity, there is a set of underlying themes and concerns that unite these diverse voices and perspectives. Most contributions emphasize that possibility is not a product of an isolated mind but a relational achievement, rooted in “the relational space of action and interaction between person and world” (Glăveanu, 2023, p. 4). As relational beings, we “become who we are in fundamentally dialogical and relational processes” (Meretoja, 2023, p. 141) with multiple others (other people, objects, materials, other species, environments, etc.). The focus on relational dimension allows us to challenge “the traditional theories of social life based on an ontology of separation” (Gergen, 2023, p.83) and shift our attention to relational processes, to the multiple “forms of

interdependency, co-constitution, and co-creation” (Gergen, 2023, p. 84). As different papers demonstrate, an important aspect of possibility research and practice is to advance our understanding of how these relational spaces can be expanded to make possible new modes of community and new forms of relationality with human and more-than-human others.

Most papers also remind us that the Possible is always political (Glăveanu, 2023, p. 6). As Hanna Meretoja observes, our worlds “are heterogeneous in the sense that they do not provide the same possibilities to everyone. Different possibilities are available from different subject positions, which are constituted through relationships of power” (2023, p. 138). Similarly, for Vlad Glăveanu, power relations constitute “a key determinant in the dynamic of the possible and the imposition of impossibility”: “the recognition of some individuals and groups as “holding potential”- and the rejection of this status for other individuals and groups- has decisive consequences for nature, human agency, opportunity to succeed, and the opportunity to enjoy a dignified life” (2023, p.6). Different papers in this volume draw attention to how norms, social structures, values, ideologies, master-narratives and normative expectations affect, shape and constrain the sense of the possible and the horizon of expectation of different social groups. For many contributors, research constitutes a powerful venue for resisting the narrowing of possibilities, challenging the status quo, and co-creating new societal alternatives. Through our research practices, we can challenge dominant social imaginaries and unequal distribution of possibilities, resist the naturalisation and reification of social structures and discourses, and open pathways for alternative imaginaries and more socially just societies. The research in possibility thus emerges as political, rooted in action and in advancing our understanding of what nourishes and limits the sense of the Possible of people in different social positions.

In addition to political dimensions, many papers in this volume foreground education as another significant venue for exploring, researching, and redistributing the Possible. Many contributors emphasise the need to reevaluate traditional pedagogies, methods and tools, which are no longer suitable for the challenges of today’s rapidly changing and dynamic world. In response to the complex social realities and problems, many authors explore the role of uncertainty as both a challenge and as a pedagogical resource, as a “catalyst” for change, creativity, and learning (Beghetto & Jaeger, 2022). By prioritising pedagogies of the Possible and uncertainty, we can empower learners and educational communities to actively participate in shaping their futures and contributing to societal transformation in a reflective and ethical manner.

Finally, a key aim of many articles is to restore our sense of critical and constructive hope. Hope and possibility are intrinsically interconnected because they keep the sense of the world, the sense of tomorrow and our agency “open, future, possible” (Grossman, 2008, p. 65). As argued by Marcel Beyer (2026) in this volume, critical hope is “not naive or escapist but grounded in reflection, complexity, agency” (p. tktkk), and in realistic understanding and knowledge of multiple constraints and limitations. Such grounded hope invites us to remain “open despite

uncertainty or presumptive impossibilities—and to imagine alternatives even when dominant logics foreclose them” (p. tktktk). Taken together this special issue aspires to inspire such a constructive hope in our readers and possibility researchers. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, through our research we can “enlarge and enrich the spaces of possibility in which we act, think, and reimagine the world together with others” (Meretoja, 2023, p. 139). The expansion of our worlds is particularly urgent and important today. The ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine, the rise of neo-totalitarian regimes in the US and Russia, climate emergency, and the fast and largely uncontrollable speed of technologic developments- these are some of the challenges facing us today. The master narratives of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin are trying to convince us that the world built on domination, limitless power, and military strength is the only alternative. At times like these, imagining, articulating, and enacting alternative forms of being-in-the-world becomes especially necessary. We believe that in these dark and uncertain times, possibility research and practice can make significant contributions to our communities and societies, expanding our common world and our capacity to imagine it anew.

To conclude, we would like to thank all contributors and peer-reviewers for their valuable input. To our readers, we invite you to join us in this ongoing exploration of the powers of research as we continue to build the future of this exciting field together.

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