Imagining the Future Through the Lens of the Digital: Parents’ Narratives of Generational Change

Aims
This study explored parents’ “digital imaginaries” (Mansell, 2012), seeking to understand how and why parents narrate for themselves and their children what it means to live in a “digital age” — in the present and in an anticipated “digital future.” It also considered how digital media are being used to tell such narratives, and what strategies and resources parents use in order to shape the present so as to optimise their child’s future.

Key Findings
- There were two kinds of parental narratives: the romantic, in which the future offers opportunities for the heroic individual to act, create, and self-actualise; and the instrumental in which the future offers resources for the skilled and rational individual to get ahead. Both tend towards optimism, drawing on utopian imaginaries in the wider culture.
- But parents also narrated a more anxious, oppressive or dystopian vision of the future that demands flexibility and adaptability in the face of lack of social mobility, the burden of individualized choices, and growing precarity, within a neoliberal future.
- The romantic and instrumental narratives especially in their more utopian versions, tended to be strongly agentic, suggesting that individualised choices make a difference and that established barriers to opportunity can be overcome.
- These narratives are not to be mapped simply onto individuals, for not only do these narratives intersect but also parents moved between and amongst them in response to changing circumstances and emerging interests, as their children grew up.
- While parents discussed the need for flexibility, they rarely went so far as to echo the language of “precarity” found in critical academic studies. Rather, in response to dystopian cultural narratives, they tended pragmatically to focus on securing strategies to navigate precarity, with more or less success, since “being reflexive, and successfully negotiating future risks, both real and perceived, constitutes privileged cultural capital” (Threadgold & Nilan, 2009, p. 48; see also Neilson, 2015).

Policy Context
Underpinning both the romantic and the instrumental narratives is the awareness of the changes in the structure of the present and future labour markets wrought from decades of increasing neoliberalism and consequent precarity (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). There was evidence of parents pragmatically appropriating public policy discourses of twenty-first-century skills to ensure that children “keep up” or “get ahead” in terms of the educational and professional opportunities afforded by the digital age (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009), and the argument that future jobs will be digital requiring technological skills and flexibility (House of Lords: Select Committee on Digital Skills, 2015).
Methodology
The study interviewed 73 families in London with dependent children in 2015 and 2016 who were diverse in socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and age of child(ren). They were not entirely representative, however, as some families were specifically recruited who had specifically sought a “digital future”— parents of children learning digital media arts, attending after-school coding club, or “geeky” parents or parents who blog about their parenting (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). It also involved parents of children with special needs who hope the digital will provide a much needed work-around to socioeconomic inclusion and a viable future (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2017).

Background
Multiple factors shape parents’ “digital imaginaries”. It is argued that the wider context of the “risk society” (Giddens, 1991) holds parents individually responsible for their children’s futures while underplaying the power of societal structures to limit choice in practice, especially for low income families (Clark, 2013). Since “late modernity further destabilizes naturalized futures” (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013, p. 928), this suggests that people “must constantly orient themselves toward multiple possible futures.” Such orientation requires them both to imagine the future(s) and to marshal their resources — economic and cultural capital in the present, memory and other symbolic resources from the past – to try to optimise the future and avoid risk.

There is a synergy between society’s long-established conception of children and childhood – flexible, creative, peer-focused, and optimistic, yet also transgressive, childish, risk-taking – and society’s more recent conception of the digital environment, also flexible, creative, networked, transgressive yet potentially transformative.

Source

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