



Visions of transition: centering the future in engaged sustainability research

Anna Willow¹ 

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Abstract

This article calls on sustainability researchers to place visions of the future at the center of their analyses. Recognizing humans as reflexive elements of socio-ecological systems, it proceeds from the premise that how people think about the future has significant consequences for the realities that ultimately ensue. The ideas presented here are informed by a qualitative/open-form survey designed to illuminate respondents' visions of the future. Completed by participants in the Transition movement for climate change resilience, survey responses indicate that Transition participants' visions are both exceptionally holistic and consciously connected to their present actions. These findings have important implications for the development of sustainable programs and systems. More broadly, this article argues that exploring how individuals and groups envision the future offers (1) a new appreciation of conceptions of the future as distinctive (sub)cultural attributes, (2) an understanding of how visions of the future influence actions in the present, (3) an enhanced capacity for anticipation and proactive response, and (4) opportunities to inspire diverse audiences by conveying the possibility of positive futures. Acknowledging the ability of engaged scholarship to change not only how people imagine the world but also how the material world takes shape, this work underscores researchers' moral obligation to contribute to the creation of more sustainable futures.

Keywords Engaged sustainability research · Futures · Transition · Visioning/backcasting · Visions of the future

Introduction

Across the environmental social sciences, scholars interested in advancing sustainability have paid extensive attention to how people think about the past and present. They have traced the continuing consequences of historical ecologies (e.g., Balée

✉ Anna Willow
willow.1@osu.edu

¹ Department of Anthropology, Ohio State University, OH 43210 Columbus, USA

1998), investigated diverse motives for pro-environmental behavior (e.g., Barr 2007; Dietz et al. 2005), and identified intersections of environmental, health, and social justice campaigns (e.g., Agyeman et al. 2002; Checker 2005). Only rarely, however, have sustainability scholars considered how visions of the future influence and inspire action. This article follows the lead of sustainability and resilience movement participants in centering the future as an essential topic of inquiry.

Over forty years ago, renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead explained why visions of the future matter. As she put it,

How hard we are willing to work for the future depends largely upon our image of what that future will be like. If we take the pessimistic view that human nature is getting progressively worse and our future will be grim, it is tempting to just give up, refuse to bring more children into the world, and to live out our lives consuming all the gasoline we can. If, on the other hand, we feel that it *is* possible to master our present-day problems, we can summon up the dedication and political will necessary to create a better world (Mead 2005 [1977], p. 331).¹

Today, as we confront the conjoined crises of climate change, ecological decline, and social injustice, these words reverberate with new urgency. Recurring natural, political, and economic disasters have increased the collective level of anxiety and, as a consequence, elevated the significance of hope in our lives (Kleist and Jansen 2016). Our moment of crisis is also a utopian moment; in times of profound uncertainty, write Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight, “time opens up beyond ourselves” and we view tasters of potential futures that await (2019, p. 198).

What roles might visions of the future play in sustainability research? And how can engaged scholars contribute to the future creation process? Acknowledging the ability of new understandings of the world to effect real and durable change (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010), this article goes beyond documenting existing realities to embrace researchers’ moral obligation to contribute to sustainable and resilient futures (Pink and Salazar 2017). Drawing on a qualitative/open-form survey of participants in the Transition movement for climate change resilience, I discovered that Transition participants’ visions of the future are both unique and consciously connected to their present actions. More broadly, I suggest that exploring how individuals and groups envision the future can offer sustainability researchers (1) an appreciation of conceptions of the future as distinctive (sub)cultural attributes, (2) an understanding of how visions of the future influence actions in the present, (3) an enhanced capacity for anticipation and proactive response, and (4) opportunities to inspire diverse audiences by conveying the possibility of positive futures.

¹ These remarks were featured in a 1977 lecture entitled “Our Open-Ended Future” and reproduced in a 2005 volume edited by Robert B. Textor (*The World Ahead: An Anthropologist Anticipates the Future*).

Literature review and research context

The future exists in relationship to the past and present, with memory and anticipation guiding the sense we make of our here-and-now lives (Gell 1992). We perceive the present directly, but both yesterday and tomorrow are imagined and elusive. Being envisioned rather than embodied renders these temporal realms no less significant. While the roles of history and tradition in explaining individual and collective interpretations of reality are well-documented, people's ideas about the future have suffered from relative neglect. When the future has been considered, computer models devised to warn of impending collapse (beginning with Meadows et al. 1972) have garnered far more interest than diverse citizens' visions and the pragmatic pathways they imply. Although unsurprising given broad scientific anxiety surrounding the study of unknowable domains, the lack of qualitative attention to visions of the future is problematic for a fundamentally future focused field.

Increasingly, however, sustainability researchers are recognizing that visions of the future matter. Far from an empty expanse, we now accept that the future abounds with hopes, dreams, and fears (Appadurai 2013) and that visions of the future exert a profound influence on the realities we create (Bell 1996). In our uncertain era, formulating robust visions of a more sustainable, just, and fulfilling world is a necessary prerequisite to imperative change. Responding to academic momentum as well as practical necessity, centering the future requires shifting our temporal focus from what currently exists to what *could* exist and *how* it might transpire.

Not surprisingly, people agree on neither the form the future should take nor the role they should play in creating it (Willow in press). When we center the future, these discrepancies are illuminated. Futures are inherently contested, with people in specific societal positions designing opportunities that mirror their own perspectives and interests (English-Lueck and Avery 2020). As groups compete to turn their visions of the future into reality—and concurrently preclude the realization of others' visions—the future quickly becomes a political arena. Contemporary future-making practices like Transition become “powerful tools for creating (new) orders, empowering or excluding actors, and even for preserving or transforming fundamental values” (Knappe et al. 2019, p. 891). In this context, exploring visions of the future as distinctive (sub)cultural attributes produces a fuller and more functional comprehension of differences that arise within and between groups.

Beyond shedding light on diverse worldviews, addressing future visions also elucidates the processes that give rise to alternative possible worlds. Our ability to influence the future is one of the foundational premises of futures studies; the future “is still being made,” observes futurist Wendell Bell; it is something that people “can shape and design through their own actions” (1996, p. 28). How people envision the future—and themselves within it—guides the choices they make. Each day, ordinary citizens strive to create futures they wish to see, exerting agency and making life choices with cumulative consequences for the moments, days, weeks, and years to come (English-Lueck and Avery 2020). Individuals who wish to create a more sustainable future often strive to live more sustainably today and may pursue various options to help them convert vision into reality. Those who join intentional

communities or ecovillages² and those who participate in the Transition movement share a common rejection of mainstream values and practices (i.e., individualism, consumerism) they perceive as ecologically destructive and socially damaging. They also propose similar solutions, emphasizing sustainable building, agriculture, and energy along with economic relocalization and the creation of resilient communities (Lockyer 2010). Recent studies suggest that small scale, deliberate decisions to reduce environmental impact can make a significant difference, with ecovillage residents using far fewer resources and emitting much less carbon than the general public while enjoying a high quality of life (Jones 2014; Lockyer 2017; Bocco et al. 2019). Unlike ecovillages, Transition initiatives exist within (rather than apart from) mainstream social structures. Yet intentional communities are not always emplaced; they may also exist as “communities of spirit” that cut across space and time to forge common histories, practices, understandings, and identities (Brown 2002, p. 3). In this way, Transition likewise demonstrates the potential of small groups of people to create the future they desire by implementing sustainable values and practices in the present (Kirby 2017).

According to a socio-ecological systems perspective, we inhabit a complex and dynamic system that is simultaneously natural and cultural. With humans now a dominant force shaping global climate, landforms, and ecosystems (Crutzen 2002), the futures we strive for and the actions those strivings promote have profound implications for the state of the world. Literally a new geological epoch but figuratively an indictment and a warning, the Anthropocene poses a challenge to Western ontological divisions between human/cultural and environmental/natural realms (Becker 2012; Purdy 2015). For participants in Transition and many other environmental social movements, the Anthropocene is accepted as shorthand for our current global reality and serves to inspire and justify their stance and strategy (Willow 2021). Living in the Anthropocene not only means admitting human culpability, but also acknowledging humans as reflexive, creative, and capable of taking deliberate action to influence the future in positive ways. Environmental social scientists now recognize the potential of “individual and collective agency to transform the systems and structures that contribute to environmental change” (O’Brien 2013, p. 74). When we center the future, we are better positioned to understand how visions of tomorrow influence actions taken today and how, in turn, those actions determine the realities that take shape.

Centering the future also has direct practical benefits. Understanding what people expect to happen and how decisions made today catalyze trajectories of transformation allows us to anticipate imminent changes and respond in proactive ways with appropriate policies and programs (Textor 1985). Perhaps even more importantly, at a time when many people feel overwhelmed by climate change induced grief, fear, and despair (Bendell 2019), researching and writing about future visions is a source

² Ecovillages are “intentional communities that use integrative design, local economic networking, cooperative and common property structures, and participatory decision-making to minimize ecological footprints and provide as many of life’s basic necessities as possible in a sustainable manner” (Lockyer and Veteto 2013:15).

of much-needed hope. Convincing citizens that alternatives to the dystopian images that capture headlines are not only possible but also worth actively endeavoring to achieve is a powerful tool for inspiring sustainable livelihoods and lifestyles.

With an explicit focus on taking action in the present to transform the future, the Transition movement is an ideal place from which to explore the potential of future-centered sustainability research. Transition is an international community-based movement that aims to build resilience in anticipation of the conjoined challenges of climate change and declining fossil fuel availability. Transition originated in the United Kingdom in 2005–2006 and has since expanded to over one thousand registered groups in forty-three countries.³ It is set apart from the broader environmental movement by its overt goal of changing and generating culture. Accepting change as inevitable, Transition is about moving “from one ideology to another” (Polk 2015, p. 92) and shifting the stories communities tell about themselves and their trajectories (Hopkins 2011).

Several additional—and interrelated—attributes make Transition exceptional among environmental endeavors. First, Transition is self-organizing. Celebrated as “a social experiment on a huge scale” (Hopkins 2013, p. 48), Transition is designed to spread horizontally and assume the characteristics of its communities of emergence (Biddau et al. 2016; Felicetti 2017). Second, by encouraging simple, material responses to monumental geopolitical problems, Transition crosses scales to make positive change appear tangible (Martindale 2015). Profoundly skeptical about what top-down processes can achieve, Transition is not a protest movement in any conventional sense but rather empowers participants to determine their communities’ destiny through practical here-and-now action (Henfrey and Kenrick 2015). Third, Transition is distinguished by its positive tone. While environmentalism has often been critiqued as a purveyor of doom-and-gloom, Transition regards our current crisis “not as a cause for despair but as a transformational opportunity, a prospective change for the better that should be embraced rather than feared” (Alexander and Gleeson 2019, p. 106). This “applied optimism” (Hopkins 2008, p. 15) has been welcomed by concerned citizens struggling to respond constructively to the social and ecological crises we face.

Methods

This article is informed by a qualitative/open-form survey completed by 22 Transition movement participants. While this work largely follows a standard pattern of social scientific research, it is exceptional in its explicit emphasis on visions of the future. Two very different sources converged to guide the survey’s design. First, Transition movement participants frequently use visioning and backcasting as techniques to motivate participants and guide ambitions. The visioning process asks individuals to generate a positive vision of the future, setting a near-future date and

³ For more information on the Transition movement, see <https://transitionnetwork.org/> and <https://www.transitionus.org/>.

probing for tangible details (Hopkins 2011). Backcasting takes the process one step further, inviting participants to imagine a positive future and then work backwards in time to identify the steps required to realize it (Henfrey and Kenrick 2015). As I argue elsewhere, visioning and backcasting are not only practical social organizing strategies, but also powerful research tools (Willow 2020).

Second, my research design takes inspiration from future visioning studies in and beyond my home field of cultural anthropology. Currently considered an emerging genre, the anthropology of the future has precedents in the Ethnographic Futures Research (EFR) developed in the 1980s by Robert B. Textor and colleagues. EFR uses “anthropological knowledge and ethnographic methods, appropriately modified and focused, to anticipate change” (Textor 1985, p. 4). While recognizing that future facts cannot exist, EFR attempts to anticipate the future by monitoring ongoing observable change and conducting interviews that elicit stakeholders’ optimistic, pessimistic, and most probable scenarios. The informed anticipation that results can be used to formulate sound policies and effective programming. More recent work in applied environmental anthropology highlights the use of iterative scenario building (e.g., Murphy et al. 2016) and environmental impact assessment analysis (e.g., Westman 2013) to discern the influence of visions of the future in contexts such as climate change preparedness and fossil fuel extraction. These projects investigate contrasting visions of future worlds and their implications for present power structures, decision-making, and policy generation and implementation. At the same time, the allied field of design anthropology employs innovative methods like dramatizations, opportunity maps, and experience models to not only comprehend but also actively create novel futures (Otto and Smith 2013).

Recent future-oriented scholarship in other social scientific fields similarly affirms ordinary citizens’ ability to inform the future in significant ways and demonstrates how research can provide a forum for influencing policy debates from the bottom up. For example, Rosa et al. argue that engaged research designed around participatory foresight that involves citizens in processes of visioning and innovating desirable futures increases people’s “capacity to recognize and embrace uncertainty while collectively shaping a preferable vision of the future” (2021, p. 3). These methods build essential bridges between citizens’ practical needs and the assumptions and requirements central to policy generation. Riel Miller’s equally pertinent notion of futures literacy likewise advocates approaching the future in more nuanced and constructive ways. Distinguishing between envisioned futures guided by contingency, optimization, and exploratory discovery, Miller argues that individuals must develop “the capacity to use the future in a range of different ways, and not be limited by prediction or by narrow conceptions of a desired future” (2011, p. 27). Energized by the growing acceptance of future visions as worthy of scholarly attention, I draw on and contribute to an innovative body of conceptual, methodological, and applied work that takes diverse visions of the future—and their tangible effects—seriously.

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, between July 23 and November 15 of 2020. Unable to pursue planned in-person ethnographic research, I developed a survey to discover how individuals involved in the Transition movement view the future of their communities and how visions of the future correspond to current actions. Deliberately designed to approximate the tone of an

ethnographic interview in a written format, the survey comprised 22 open-ended questions, along with several basic demographic ones. Compared to in-person ethnographic interviews, survey research is inherently decontextualized in nature and typically includes more curated and self-censored responses, yet being able to distribute a survey online greatly enhanced the geographical breadth and diversity of respondents and succeeded in engaging many individuals in a personally meaningful and creative visioning process. Respondents were instructed as follows:

Begin by imagining your own community 20 years from today. If you would like, you may close your eyes for a few moments to mentally step into this world. It is a positive future in which we have managed to overcome fossil fuel addiction and are adapting successfully to a changed climate. It doesn't have to be a utopia, and you are not expected to have fully formulated (or "perfect") ideas. Your job is simply to brainstorm what life in your future community is like. Be creative and respond deeply.

Participants were initially invited to reflect freely on what life in their communities will be like (Question 1). They were subsequently prompted to provide additional details about their vision in relation to the themes of water, food, waste, energy, work/economy, transportation, the built environment, values, leisure, and relationship to the natural world (Questions 2–11). Next, participants were asked to postulate how the world of the future developed through a series of backcasting questions (Questions 13–17). Questions about goals, present sustainability and resilience practices, and current resources and limitations were also included (Questions 22–25). A twenty-year increment was selected to encourage visions of a realistic near-future reality distant enough for respondents to trust that change could occur, but not so distant as to fade into abstraction. In addition, a twenty-year time period allows one to envision the journey from one life stage to the next, with today's children becoming adults and today's adults becoming active elders. Because this survey was conducted in 2020, respondents were asked to envision life in the year 2040. The survey can be viewed in its entirety in Online Resource 1.

Participants were identified with assistance from Transition US and Transition Guelph (a link to the Google Forms survey was included in Facebook posts and emails, and the survey was promoted during an online leadership course). 22 individuals responded. Almost all were based in North America (7 in Canada, 3 in the midwestern US, 3 in the southern US, 5 in the eastern US, 2 in the western US, and 2 in other locations). Participants were older than the general population, with many having already raised families and established—and in some cases completed—careers (1 participant was in their 20 s, 1 in their 30 s, 3 in their 40 s, 3 in their 50 s, 4 in their 60 s, 7 in their 70 s, and 1 in their 80 s. Two respondents did not provide their age). The length of involvement with Transition and related movements varied widely (5 people were involved for less than 1 year, 4 were involved for 1–10 years, 5 were involved for 10–20 years, and 8 were involved for more than 20 years). Of the 22 respondents, 11 identified as female, 5 as male, and 1 as nonbinary (5 people did not respond to this question). My understanding of the movement was enriched by long-term participant-observation research and interviews conducted in a central Ohio Transition group, of which I am also an active member. As a "native

anthropologist,” I share the broad goals of the movement but simultaneously strive to advance it through constructive critique (see Willow 2020). Looking through a social scientific lens at assertions and episodes that might otherwise be taken for granted and using comparative analyses to uncover similarities and differences of perspective, experience, and behavior that coalesce to contour this diverse movement are essential to this work.

Data, discussion, and research directions

Answers to the survey’s opening question were highly detailed, with many respondents offering multiple paragraphs describing how they envision their community in the year 2040. Responses were diverse in terms of both the visions shared and the writing styles chosen to communicate them. Content coding was used to interpret and track the frequency of references to themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

Themes expressed in future visions

Responses to Question 1 provided a clear view of how surveyed Transition participants envision the future. By far, the most common element of participants’ visions concerned positive connections with other people and a strong sense of community, with 11 of 22 respondents commenting on community in their answer to Question 1. Participant 11’s statement that “all persons in our community engage each other as neighbors in support of a better environment for our children, grandchildren, elders, and young adults” is illustrative. Other common themes included respect for/harmony with nature (mentioned by 7), growing food (mentioned by 7), family (mentioned by 7), economic equity (mentioned by 5), mental health (mentioned by 4), and green transportation (mentioned by 4). The prominence of these themes (along with several less common ones) is summarized in Table 1. Particular aspects of desirable futures and various routes for reaching them were described in response to specific visioning (Questions 2–11) and backcasting (Questions 13–18) prompts (see Online Resource 2).

Transition was established to address the quintessential twenty-first century environmental issues of climate change and resource depletion (Hopkins 2008) and is commonly regarded as an environmental group. Those who approach Transition expecting to find environmental issues prioritized above all else, however, may be surprised by the fact that survey respondents placed issues most people would classify as social—community cohesion, family, equity, and mental health—above or on par with conventional environmental issues like land protection, energy efficiency, and emissions reduction. While this emphasis may have been intensified by the social distancing of the pandemic, my previous experience suggests that social issues are central to Transition’s *modus operandi*. Indeed, it appears that Transition participants’ visions of and goals for the future are as much about personal well-being and community cohesion as they are about expressing environmental values and beliefs (Willow 2021; see also Goodwin et al. 2001; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Table 1 Themes mentioned in open-form responses to the question: "What is your community like in 2040? What stands out first and foremost in your mind?" ($N=22$)

Theme	Number and percentage of respondents mentioning theme
Community (human)	11 (50%)
Respect for/harmony with nature	7 (32%)
Growing food	7 (32%)
Family	7 (32%)
Economic equity	5 (23%)
Mental health/Inner Transition	4 (18%)
Green transportation (walking/biking)	4 (18%)
Renewable energy	3 (14%)
Restorative justice	2 (9%)
Racial/cultural diversity	2 (9%)
Public transportation	2 (9%)
Local business	2 (9%)
Public control of resources	1 (5%)
Vegetarianism	1 (5%)
Green buildings	1 (5%)
Rainwater collection	1 (5%)
Local currency	1 (5%)
Reuse/repurposing	1 (5%)

Transition's holistic focus on community, fulfillment, and equity (alongside climate and other environmental issues) seems to suggest the existence of a subculture distinct not only from mainstream North American society but also from other groups within the broader environmental movement. In the complex context of the Anthropocene era, this begs important questions for further research: How are the categories of "environment" and "society" understood by the diverse groups that contribute to contemporary environmentalism? How are these domains shifting in response to changing socioecological circumstances? And what does environmentalism mean today?

Future visions and present actions

The relationship of future to present—which includes how visions of the future guide current actions as well as how current actions shape the future—also merits attention. Question 25 asked individuals to describe how their current actions promote the positive futures they foresee. Content coded responses indicate that Transition participants perceive a strong relationship between today and tomorrow. Survey respondents described a wide range of ongoing activities. Many listed simple everyday actions (growing food, walking/biking, reducing waste, buying local

Table 2 Themes mentioned in open-form responses to the question “How are your visions of the future supported by the actions you take today? What are you doing now to make the positive future you envision a reality?” ($N=19$)

Theme	Number and percentage of respondents mentioning theme
*Growing food	7 (37%)
*Reuse/repurposing	5 (26%)
*Community (human)	4 (21%)
*Mental health/inner transition	4 (21%)
*Green transportation (walking/biking)	3 (16%)
Buying local	3 (16%)
*Respect for/harmony with nature	2 (11%)
*Family	2 (11%)
*Economic equity	2 (11%)
Vegetarianism	2 (11%)
Education/training	2 (11%)
Living lightly	2 (11%)
Green buildings	1 (5%)
Composting	1 (5%)
Building sustainable ecosystems	1 (5%)

An asterisk designates responses also present in Question 1/Table 1

products, vegetarianism) among their contributions to a better future, while others discussed the development of community networks and personal perspective shifts (known within the movement as Inner Transition).⁴ Table 2 summarizes themes that appeared in respondents’ descriptions of present actions taken to promote a positive future.

Examined at an individual level, connections between visions of the future (described in response to Question 1) and current actions (described in response to Question 25) become even clearer. For example, Participant 3 articulated a detailed vision centered around life in a small village with a strong sense of community. There, he explained, “growing our own food and resiliency are our strong suits. About 25% of the houses grow food in their yards. We have four large community gardens, greenhouses, and fruit and nut trees all along the streets.” This individual’s synopsis of his current actions likewise included growing food, composting, and a vegan diet. Emphasizing personal and collective wellbeing rather than concrete activities and attributes, Participant 17 celebrated Inner Transition and mental health in both her vision of the future and her current approach. Such parallels comprised a common pattern. As Participant 10 summarized, “my actions completely support [my] visions. I am trying to live

⁴ For details about Inner Transition, see <https://transitionnetwork.org/do-transition/inner/>.

like it already is 2040, building resilience at home and in my community and inspiring others.”

Without a compelling image of how things *could* be, premeditated change is impossible (Wallman 1992). While Participant 10’s statement on this matter is particularly lucid, Transition participants appear to agree that visions of the future have a significant effect on present actions which in turn, shape the realities we create. This is true whether we are planning careers, managing corporations, or designing campaigns to end fossil fuel addiction. If, for example, my vision of the future features organic food being grown in small backyard plots, I am likely to implement elements of that future in the here-and-now. I will plant a garden. If, on the other hand, I envision futuristic scenes in which food reconstitutes and arrives instantaneously through a portal, I am apt to invest in food processing technologies or (more realistically) wait for someone else to bring this vision to life. Creating a more sustainable future demands that we bypass dominant dystopian rhetoric and instead “tell new stories of human settlement on Earth, stories that seek to expand the conditions of possibility and open up space for new imaginaries to lay down roots” (Alexander and Gleeson 2019, p. 145). When we conjure tangible mental images of delightful futures, we take necessary first steps toward their achievement (Hopkins 2019). The close correlation between Transition participants’ visions of the future and the actions they take today indicates a group of people who are both cognizant that present actions have profound consequences and confident in their ability to build a better tomorrow.

In addition to documenting themes respondents chose to highlight, it is interesting to consider which questions they declined or struggled to answer and which topics they sought to avoid. While responses to questions about the future of food (Question 3) and the built environment (Question 8) were particularly rich, there were no questions or topics that were categorically dismissed or which garnered disproportionately brief answers. Throughout the survey, the same individuals tended to provide dependably detailed responses, while others were consistently concise. The clearest pattern that emerged by the end of the survey was response fatigue and a perception that one’s answers were redundant (in these cases individuals often referred back to earlier answers). In considering the prevalence and non-prevalence of particular themes, respondents’ future visions appear to emphasize common topics of current discussion, which include those they feel comfortable and knowledgeable discussing as well as those that are perceived as exciting and attractive. This has important implications for future research; not only are visions of the future capable of influencing current actions, but what we do and discuss today also guides our visions of the future. While a full examination of the complex interactions among present, future, action, and vision is outside the scope of the present article, these recursive relationships represent an important area for further investigation.

Implications for engaged sustainability research

As noted above, Transition participants imagine the future in ways that reflect their commitment to community, equity, and holistic wellbeing as well as their respect for nature and dedication to sustainable ways of life. They take deliberate action in the present to facilitate their version of a desirable future. Like other culturally transformative movements, Transition creates connections between visions and actions expressed at the individual level and those advocated by the collective. Transition members' dreams and decisions are their own, to be sure, but they are guided by a shared—and in this case self-selected—set of expectations, values, and competencies. Notably, the Transition movement celebrates the community as the ideal scale for effective change, arguing that individual action will be too little, waiting for government will be too late, but acting collectively, as communities, “might be just enough, just in time” (Hopkins 2019, p. 6). While many of the themes included in survey respondents' descriptions of their visions and associated actions appear to be solitary endeavors (e.g., gardening, composting, biking), these topics are discussed frequently within local, national, and international Transition forums, with information and encouragement widely available. Other Transition themes are more clearly collective (e.g., community meetings, support groups). And in many instances, connections between individual and collective possibilities are readily discernable. Participants may urge one another to plant backyard gardens while also investing in community gardening projects, for example, and they may compost at home while working together to develop a municipal composting program. With its emphasis on generating new cultural values that support individual and local action on issues of global import, Transition's scale-crossing ability has been noted as one of the movement's distinguishing features (Martindale 2015) and could be investigated as a model for global/local engagement.

While understanding what makes this (or any) group unique merits academic attention, information about people's positive futures can also be applied to the creation of effective sustainability programs and policies. Systemic anticipation is a “powerful means for clarifying and prioritizing the values held by an individual, a community or a society” (Textor 2005, p. 20). In this case, anticipating the changes citizens hope to make expedites the introduction of attractive options, communications, and incentives, thereby increasing the odds of success for both programs and progress toward environmental goals. For instance, knowing that Transition participants see community as central to a sustainable future suggests likely support for efforts that bring people together for collective action. Widespread interest in growing food can be transformed into education, tool/seed sharing, and plot access programs that make this vision a reality, leading to reduced reliance on industrial farming and long-distance transport. And because many Transition participants envision a future in which people walk, bike, or travel together, we can expect improvements in walking/biking trails and public transportation to eliminate barriers to car-free living, thus decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. When we center the future, we learn what people hope, what they fear, and what they are prepared to do—or *not* do—as a result.

The practical utility of future-centered research also lies in its ability to carry people from hopeless paralysis to productive action. Around the world, struggles to influence the future are motivated by fear and anxiety as well as by encouraging visions and aspirations (Halse 2013). Indeed, although this survey asked participants to share their views of a positive future and respondents' tone was accordingly optimistic, several backcasts featured futures that were far from ideal. Participant 15, for example, imagined dark days ahead with respect to the water system of 2040: "We are at the mercy of extreme weather events set in motion by the previous centuries. When our water regions become uninhabitable temporarily, we ask for and often receive short-term hospitality from a nearby water region. Sometimes no one is able to take us in. We have developed resilient, spiritual ways to meet widespread death." Comparable statements surfaced regarding the collapse of food and other essential systems.

Still, far more abundant were spontaneous declarations of hope, such as those offered in response to Question 12's open invitation to share additional thoughts about the visions just described. "This vision will become reality," wrote Participant 3, "our world will be a heaven on Earth." Participant 16 envisioned a future with "well-being, abundance, love, joy, harmony, and peace for everyone" and concluded by exclaiming, "let's go, the world we dream is possible!!!" While fear will always play a role in the present/future relationship, recent studies suggest that hope is a far more powerful path toward the future we seek. It appears that the best way to overcome our locked-in carbon-dependency "may be to develop a vision of feasible and attractive low-carbon lifestyles, and make examples of them visible" (ISSC/UNESCO 2013, p. 16). Future focused research can provide the examples we need to reframe our current systems' decline as not a catastrophe but a promising new beginning.

This research highlights Transition participants' unique visions of and relationships to the future and considers their implications for the promotion of sustainable systems. While hitherto limited in scope, the methods employed here could easily be expanded and adapted to other research populations and areas. When the COVID-19 pandemic is safely behind us, innovative ethnographic methods like dioramas and dramatic enactments that allow individuals' visions of the possible to be observed in real time (Halse 2013) could be used to augment the qualitative survey data analyzed here. This work also points to several exciting possibilities for further future-centered research on and beyond the Transition movement. Investigations comparing Transition participants' future visions and present actions with those of other environmentalists (and with the general public) could accentuate conceptions of the future as a key cultural attribute. Longitudinal research to discover if and how Transition participants' visions are realized over time could shed additional light on the effectiveness of visioning and backcasting in the future creation process. And while this research concentrates on primarily positive visions, examining how hope mingles with fear in present/future formulations offers an intriguing direction for additional study. Above all else, this work underscores the future as an essential component of engaged sustainability research.

Conclusion

I thus conclude by calling on sustainability researchers to place the future at the center of their analyses. Exploring how people envision the future has much to offer. First, future-centered research can demonstrate what sets (sub)cultural groups apart as well as what holds diverse citizens together. In the case of the Transition movement, focusing on the future reveals a holistic perspective in which community and equity are seen as inseparable from climate and ecology in the quest for long-term sustainability. Second, because visions of the future guide current actions and because humans are reflexive (rather than merely reactive) elements of socio-ecological systems, how we think about the future has significant consequences for the realities that ultimately ensue. This research establishes clear and intentional connections between Transition participants' visions of the future and the actions they undertake each and every day. Third, understanding people's positive futures makes it possible to anticipate the types of changes they are likely to embrace, thus providing valuable data to guide the development of successful and sustainable interventions. Finally, a focus on the future can serve as a powerful source of hope, amplifying inspirational narratives and encouraging research participants and audiences to formulate their own positive visions.

In an era of converging socioecological crises, environmental social scientists increasingly accept that the time for research “for its own sake” is long past. It is our responsibility to contribute to the creation of a more sustainable world, not only for the people we study today, but also for their entangled ecological communities and the human generations who will follow. Research that pays and draws attention to alternative futures has the capacity to change both how people imagine the world and how the material world takes shape (Collins 2007). As I have argued, focusing on how people envision the future can catalyze sound policy decisions, illuminate options beyond the taken-for-granted, and keep imaginations open. In our roles as scholars and communicators, we can ethically document examples from communities around the world who possess—or are now discovering—sustainable ways of life. We can find inspiration in affirmative visions of the future and broadcast time-tested techniques for their realization. By collaborating with research participants and audiences, we can become “co-creators of desirable futures” and “facilitators of knowledge and meaningful practices that transform the present” (Otto and Smith 2013, p. 13; see also Miller 2018). Such work entails a fundamental shift in how we conceive of research and its purpose, complementing long-standing goals of contributing to empirical knowledge and theory with updated expectations that researchers become active agents in the process of positive change.

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Data availability Anonymized survey data are available upon request.

Code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author is both a participant in and a scholar of the Transition movement. She shares the broad goals of the movement and simultaneously strives to advance it through constructive academic critique.

Ethical approval The research that informs this article was approved on June 11, 2020 by the Ohio State University's Institutional Review Board as exempt research under category 2b (study number 2020E0577). All research was performed in accordance with relevant ethical guidelines.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all research participants.

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