



Critiquing Futures

A guide to reflect on biases in futures scenarios and ideas

Many of us seek to prepare the ground for more equitable futures. But it can be very challenging to create those futures without reproducing the same discriminatory patterns that we actually want to change. Often we are so much caught up in the status quo that we hardly notice how it seeps into our future scenarios and ideas. Moreover, each of us brings along our own (unconscious) biases, which are even more difficult to tackle.

We encounter these issues on a regularly during our work at [SUPERRR Lab](#). Trying to incorporate intersectional feminist and decolonial perspectives into it, Feven Keleta and Quincey Stumptner asked themselves: how can such perspectives be built into futures thinking in order to dismantle our biases and challenge the status quo? Answering this question is definitely a work in progress. A process of constant iteration and learning. So far their approach has revolved a lot around creating space for reflection and critical questioning.

The following method is the first result of this process and was developed based on a workshop that Feven and Quincey ran during the re:publica 2023 conference. It builds on the amazing work of many activists, intellectuals, researchers and others who have pioneered intersectional and decolonial perspectives, like the Combahee River Collective or Frantz Fanon (for more see PDF download at the bottom). It is an attempt to apply these perspectives to futures practices in order to create room for critical reflection.

We are always looking for feedback on our methods and work. If you have feedback or questions please do get in touch with: quincey@superrr.net

For whom?

The approach is aimed at **facilitators** who have already been introduced to futures work and would like to incorporate a more critical perspective into their approach. Facilitators should be familiar with the concepts of intersectionality and decoloniality or willing to make themselves familiar with them prior to the workshop. For resources see appendix.

The workshop can be realized with a diverse group of **participants**, regardless of their prior knowledge of futuring, intersectionality and decoloniality. Nevertheless, experts in these fields might not get as much out of it, as participants with little prior knowledge. If there is no prior knowledge at all, it might be beneficial to spend a bit more time introducing the concepts to participants in more detail.

How many?

For the purpose of a good discussion, it should not be more than 10-15 participants. Depending on the group size, 1-2 facilitators are needed.

How long?

The workshop lasts about 2-3 hours.

Important note: The concepts of intersectionality and decoloniality both feature a large body of work that has been developed over the past century. Therefore, this method does not claim to embody all aspects of both concepts. Nor is it meant to be used as a token or relieve its users of the responsibility to dig deeper and generate a better understanding of both concepts. We state this because there is always a danger of people in privileged positions or positions of power appropriating the concepts of intersectionality and decoloniality to serve the maintenance of the status quo rather than to change it. This being said, we encourage everyone using this approach to regard it as a starting point to dig deeper, to further their understanding of both concepts and to change their perspectives on inequalities in our societies and how to approach them.

1. Setting the Scene: Establishing an understanding of intersectionality and decoloniality

Warm-up exercise: What is your understanding of intersectionality and decoloniality? Find a partner and take about 8 minutes to reflect on what intersectionality and decoloniality mean to you. Please take notes of your thoughts.

Group share back: Please share one or two important points from the discussion with your partner on what your understandings of decoloniality and intersectionality are.

Setting the Scene 1: Short introduction to the concepts and history of intersectionality and decoloniality by the facilitator. A simple way to do this is to use quotes from important theorists in the field defining both concepts, like Frantz Fanon and the statement by the Combahee River Collective. This part can also be used to kick off the workshop if required.

Q&A and discussion: Do the definitions presented match your understanding of both concepts? Do you agree/disagree?

Resources:

- See appendix

2. Futures and the challenge of bias

Setting the Scene 2: Critically approaching futures – why? Present the futures cone to introduce participants to futures thinking and the different “types” of futures. This can also be a good point to exemplify how personal biases can lead to manifesting the status quo in futures and how the concepts of intersectionality and decoloniality can contribute to addressing this challenge.

Resources:

- [Futures cone explained](#)

3. Critical Futures Interrogation

The following questions are meant to help participants to interrogate futures ideas, scenarios and thoughts from intersectional and decolonial perspectives. By questioning futures, participants will start reflecting on how different kinds of discrimination might be present in such scenarios or ideas. Either participants can interrogate existing scenarios or use futures ideas they have developed themselves (for the latter see scenario method below). The goal is to start a reflection process about how status quo thinking and embedded, e.g. personal biases, might shape our visions of futures. Ideally, the interrogation produces a setting where these can be addressed and challenged, leading to a better understanding of the complex and interconnected factors that shape our present perspectives and visions of futures.

The following questions are grouped along different themes. There is no specific order. They can be mixed or only partly used and, of course, expanded in their scope. **It is important to note that they do not represent the complete body of intersectional and decolonial theory. Rather they are supposed to serve as a starting point and inspire to approach futures critically.**

Resources:

- [Scenario Method](#) and [here](#)

Questions

Status Quo

- How is your future scenario different from today's status quo?
- What types of societal patterns does your future reproduce, that might discriminate against different types of groups/entities/beings?
- Might your future scenario already be a reality for some? (Especially relevant when building dystopian scenarios.)
 - If yes, how does this change your perspective on privilege? And what does a futures scenario look like where this existing reality is changed (for the better)?

Power

- Who holds power in your future and how is it exercised?
- How does the distribution of power affect groups of minorities?
 - Can you make out adverse effects it might have on specific groups/entities/beings? If yes, what are these?
- How do people affected by your scenario shape this common future?
 - Do they have a voice and the ability to shape this future? If not, what is the reason?
- How do you dismantle or reproduce (historical) power imbalances in your scenario that elevate some over others (e.g. one nation over the other or one gender over another)?
 - Is this what you intended?
- How does your scenario deal with exploitative approaches to nature, knowledge, culture or human beings?
 - If it is built on such models of economy or politics, think about if this is what you explicitly chose to reproduce or if you intended to change this model in your scenario.
- Does your future scenario serve a specific interest? If yes, name it and make it explicit.
- How does your scenario dismantle or reproduce (neo-)colonial continuities?

Exclusion

- For whom is your future scenario built (e.g. geography, language, ability, origin, education, class, gender, race, age, sexual orientation, religion) and for whom is it not built? Is that what you intended?
- How does this scenario affect different groups/entities/beings in society?
 - Can you make out adverse effects it might have on specific groups/entities/beings and what are these?
- How does your future leave room for the existence of other, diverging or alternative futures?
- Does your scenario describe a future that is supposed to be “universal” or “global” in scope?
 - If yes, does this include neglecting the existence of other cultures, approaches, lifestyles and how can you justify its universal claim?
- How do you make sure that everyone affected by your scenario also has a say in the creation of this future?

Values

- What assumptions and values underpin your future scenario? List them.
 - Are these the assumptions and values you intended to use?
- What past and present-day narratives influence your image(s) of the future(s)?
 - Do you want these influences to be part of your future?
- Are you using any language(s), images, metaphors or assumptions in your scenario that claim to be “neutral” or “realistic”?
 - If yes, which are these? Where do they come from and might they imply a specific worldview beneath their “neutrality”?
- What type of language(s) are you using to describe your future?
 - Does this language hinder you from describing something new? Does this language keep you locked in the present?

- o If yes, what would be a different way/different words to describe your future?

4. Share Back and Wrap-up

Share back of outcomes of interrogation: Each group names a presenter who shares highlights/findings of their group discussion. What was the scenario about? What reflection questions did you use and what did you find?

General discussion and wrap-up: How can I incorporate critical reflectivity into my (futuring) work? How can I promote decolonial and intersectional thinking/approaches in my organization? What will I take with me from this workshop?

Appendix

Decoloniality

- [“The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options”](#); Walter D. Mignolo 2011.
- [“Decolonizing Futures: Exploring Storytelling as a Tool for Inclusion in Foresight”](#); Pupul Bisht 2017, p. 5.
- [“Decoloniality”](#), Wikipedia overview.
- “The Wretched of the Earth”; Frantz Fanon 1963, p. 63.
- [“Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Creating Spaces for Transformative Praxis”](#); Thambinathan, Kinsella 2021, p. 2-3.
- [“Cheat Sheet for a Non- \(or Less-\) Colonialist Speculative Design”](#), Luiza Prado, Pedro Oliveira 2014.

Intersectionality

- [“The Combahee River Collective Statement,”](#) The Combahee River Collective 1977.
- [“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”](#), Kimberle Crenshaw 1989.
- [“She Coined the Term Intersectionality 30 years Ago. Here’s what it means to her today.”](#), Time Magazine, Katy Steinmetz 2020.

Futures and Decoloniality

- [“What does it mean to decolonize the future?”](#), alisha bhagat et al., 2021.
- [“The Masters Tools will never dismantle the Masters House”](#), Aarathi Krishnan, 2022.
- [“Futures, Power and Privilege”](#), Aarathi Krishnan, 2019.
- [“Decolonizing Futures: Exploring Storytelling as a Tool for Inclusion in Foresight”](#), Pupul Bisht, 2017.

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