



Abstract



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Cognitive representations of the future: survey results

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This paper reports the results of a web-based survey concerning how people think about the future. Five hundred and seventy-two people from twenty-four countries completed the survey. The results indicate that when the respondents hear the word 'future', they think about a point in time 15 years into the future, on average, with a median response of 10 years. Respondents think less about the future than the present. On the other hand, they tend to worry more about the future than the present. Respondents' ability to imagine the future goes 'dark' around 15 to 20 years into the future.

Most of the respondents are optimistic about the near-term, but become more pessimistic about the longer-term. Respondents believe that humankind is not acting very responsibly with respect to a whole host of environmental and social issues but is acting responsibly with respect to technology. Almost half of the respondents would not wish to have been born in the future. Most of the other respondents would have preferred to have been born 50 to 500 years into the future. Approximately 45% of the sample believes that humankind will become extinct.

The data suggest that Christians are more optimistic and less worried about the future and do not believe that we will become extinct. Males worry less but also think more about the future. There is a strong correlation between thinking about the future, clearly imagining the future, and being optimistic about the future. It is concluded that individuals have diverse and rich conceptions about the future but that they think less about the future than futurists might hope. Individuals' considerations of the future are highly influenced by their identities and worldviews. Future research should focus on better unraveling these relationships and on understanding their implications for futures-oriented policy-making.