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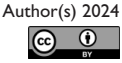

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Stimulating Political Imagination With Arts-Based Methods: The Case of Utopia Consultation

Inna Perheentupa
University of Turku, Finland

Pilvi Porkola
University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

In this article, we identify ways to methodologically stimulate political imagination in sociological research by exploring an art concept called 'utopia consultation' and related arts-based exercises. We investigate how political imagination can be stimulated and practised through arts-based research methods in sociology, and what tangible tools arts-based research offers for studying the intangible. Our analysis builds on recent work on utopia, understood as a tool rather than a blueprint, and sociology of the future, which focuses on the future as an analytical category. We draw on 18 one-on-one utopia consultation sessions conducted in 3 upper secondary schools in Finland, and 3 facilitated collective discussions with the participants in each education institution to discuss their experiences of the one-on-one utopia consultations. Based on our analysis, we suggest four key methodological practices for stimulating political imagination: dialogue, play, cultivating a hopeful orientation to the not-yet, and collective utopian negotiation. We advance sociological discussions of methodology around utopia and political imagination, and contribute to sociological work on the intangibility of discovering the not-yet through arts-based methods by identifying tangible practices and tools for studying the intangible.

Keywords

arts-based research, participatory research, political imagination, sociological methodology, utopia

Corresponding author:
Inna Perheentupa, University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 7, 20014 Turun yliopisto, Finland.
Email: inna.perheentupa@helsinki.fi

Introduction

The current intertwined social, economic and ecological crises show that social change is imperative. There is a pressing need to reconstitute society in both imagination and reality, as 'our very survival depends on finding another way of living' (Levitas, 2013a: xi–xii). Worries have been aired about whether the skills necessary to imagine alternative kinds of realities are recoverable, given the desiccation of the Western political imagination following the victory of liberal capitalism (Fisher, 2009; Eskelinen et al., 2020: 4). We believe that invigorating political imagination and related skills is not only possible, but necessary. However, this requires active revitalisation and creation of novel practices around it. This article therefore engages with a call to cultivate political imagination and hopeful engagements with the not-yet in social sciences (Coleman and Tutton, 2017: 445; Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 2; Levitas, 2013a) and aims to awaken these through arts-based methods.

In this article, we explore the art concept of utopia consultation, performed by two Finnish artists Talvikki Eerola and Maria Santavuori. Utopia consultation is a participatory performance in which the artist consultant assists the participant into a state of utopia, and the participant's reflections and thoughts become the theme of the performative encounter. The concept is based on dialogue and modifying normative ways of observing the world, thereby stimulating participants' utopian visions using arts-based methods. We consider utopia consultation to be ideal for studying political imagination, as it involves exercises that stimulate the imagination and create alternative, embodied forms of knowing. The article draws on 18 recorded utopia consultation sessions conducted with students in 3 upper secondary schools in Finland, and additional recorded group discussions between the participants in each institution.

We understand political imagination as consisting of the process of imagining and its methods, as well as actual visions of a better, more desirable not-yet. We define it as a transformative and emancipatory practice that emphasises collective processes of imagining alternatives (Salmenniemi et al., 2024), and analyse it as cognate to *radical imagination* (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 4). The latter builds capacity to think critically and innovatively about the social world and emphasises collaboration and 'ability to empathize with others'.

In our view, studying political imagination and creating tools for its methodology are inherently political as these activities are inevitably connected with social norms, values, and power relations. Indeed, scientists have pointed out that despite often being ignored in political studies, imagination is key to politics in how it enables individuals and communities to dream of a better future that they can strive for (Duncombe and Harrebye, 2021; McBride, 2005). Political imagination is understood in this context as simultaneously personal and political, and thus the best tool for changing the world (Duncombe and Harrebye, 2021; McBride, 2005). We apply a wide definition of politics as being rooted in the everyday practices of ordinary people (Haenfler et al., 2012). We also consider our own engagement to be political, as our experimental work aims to expand sociological methodology, and in doing so produce alternative performative spaces for imagining the desirable not-yet (Law and Urry, 2004).

This article addresses two research questions: how can political imagination be stimulated and practised through arts-based research (ABR) methods in sociology; and what

tangible tools can ABR offer for studying the intangible? To answer these questions, we build on recent work on utopia and sociology of the future. First, we draw theoretically on the concept of utopia, understood as a tool for imagination (Eskelinen et al., 2020). The contemporary definition of utopia runs counter to a goal definition and explores the potential content and contexts of human flourishing (Levitas, 2013a: xi). According to Levitas (2013a: xi), the concept of utopia not only exposes the limitations of the current social order but also facilitates genuinely holistic thinking about possible, more desirable futures (Levitas, 2013a: xvii). Second, our work resonates with sociology of the future that 'engages with the future as an analytical object, and not simply a neutral temporal space into which objective expectations can be projected' (Coleman and Tutton, 2017: 441). We especially draw from work in this field that engages with stimulating the sensory to cultivate a more hopeful orientation to the not-yet in the present (Coleman, 2017; Lyon and Carabelli, 2016). We also connect with earlier research on ABR that provides ways to reconsider what knowledge is by engaging with alternative forms of knowing and imagination (Camargo-Borges, 2017; Leavy, 2018).

This article brings novel insights to sociological methodology by identifying arts-based ways to stimulate political imagination. We argue that this can be achieved using four key methodological practices: *dialogue*, *play*, *cultivating a hopeful orientation to the not-yet*, and *collective utopian negotiation*. We also introduce the utopia consultants' tools, including *stepping aside*, *time stairs*, and *emotional shower*, as concrete exercises for studying the intangible not-yet (Coleman, 2017; Eerola and Santavuori, 2018; Lyon and Carabelli, 2016).

In the remainder of this article, we explain how we understand the concept of utopia and study political imagination. We then discuss earlier uses of ABR in social sciences and its benefits. After presenting the performance concept of utopia consultation and our research material, we analyse elements that broadened our research participants' sense of the possible during utopia consultations and cultivated a hopeful approach to the not-yet. We also discuss the collective utopian negotiations.

Utopia as a hopeful tool for expanding a sense of the possible

Amongst interpretations of the concept of utopia, we align with scholarly works that approach it as an open concept, defined as a tool and a method rather than as a blueprint for a perfect society (Eskelinen et al., 2020; Levitas, 2013a; Sargisson, 1996). Indeed, the tendency to connect the concept with perfection, and even totalitarianism, tends to paralyse its key function for contemporary societies, which is to envisage alternatives to the current order (Eskelinen et al., 2020: 5–6). The two key functions of utopianism are to foster social imagination and promote social transformation; utopia is thus not only a method for reflection but also a 'compass' for changing the world (Eskelinen et al., 2020: 11–12). As Ruth Levitas (2013a) points out, 'the core of utopia is the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively' (p. xi). Understood in this way, it is an expression of what we lack in a given society and culture (Levitas, 2013a: 66–67). Indeed, utopias are deeply relational, in that they are conceived in relation to the current order

and its deficits. Thus, in making alternatives available, utopias are always critical of the present and what we wish to transform (Lakkala, 2021).

Utopias are also holistic, dialogic, and reflexive in nature (Levitas, 2013a). Levitas (2013a) connects the concept with producing distance from the existing state of affairs, which 'allows us to judge what we are doing in the light of what we could or should do' (p. xvii). However, utopia need not be constrained by what seems possible in the near future. This connects it with a kind of speculative sociology that plays with ideas relating to the possible reconstruction of society. Thus, the concept also challenges what is conventionally understood as knowledge in sociology, as it takes knowledge regarding possible futures seriously (Levitas, 2013a: xv–xviii).

According to Ernst Bloch (Rahkonen and Sironen, 1985), utopian features stem from what we lack. This lack constantly creates wishes and wants, and induces humans to strive for better. This and the 'not-yet' are the negative that creates the positive, hope. Hope encourages us to surmount the 'not' that begs to be overcome (Rahkonen and Sironen, 1985: 22–23). Hope and overcoming despair are thus central to utopia (Anderson, 2006). A hopeful orientation also helps us to become aware of alternatives to the current order, thereby expanding our sense of the possible. Indeed, the 'possible' and its expansion are another key dimension of utopia. We are socially constrained both by what we consider possible and by what we consider possible to imagine (Levitas, 2013b: 46). Utopianism undermines dominant understanding of what is possible (Fownier, 2002: 192) and thus helps us to engage with practices that enable our sense of the possible to expand.

The analysis is structured around these two key aspects of utopia, a sense of the possible and an ethos of hope, in exploring utopia consultation and how it might inform sociological methodology of political imagination. We also consider collective negotiations and democratic aspects elementary to the utopian (Eskelinen, 2019), and thus uncover how such research practices might be fostered. We define utopia as a sibling concept to and a tool for invigorating political imagination. By bringing these concepts together, we ourselves engage with desirable, sustainable, and democratic practices and visions of the not-yet, rather than dystopian visions and practices connected with political imagination (Duncombe and Harrebye, 2021; McBride, 2005).

The article also builds on studies on the sociology of the future germane to our work (Coleman, 2017; Coleman and Tutton, 2017; Lyon and Carabelli, 2016). Sociology of the future need not necessarily adopt an affective orientation to the future imbued with hope, like utopia, but some works do take a hopeful approach, and uncover potentialities and possibilities connected with the not-yet in the here and now. We contribute to these studies, as well as contemporary work on utopia, by detailing some tangible practices and tools with which researchers might engage to study the utopian not-yet, as its intangibility makes it challenging to grasp methodologically (Coleman, 2017; Lyon and Carabelli, 2016).

Arts-based methods stimulate senses and imagination

In order to identify practices and tools for studying political imagination, we engage with ABR and its methods. This means incorporating an artistic process into our research (Gerber, 2022; Leavy, 2018; McNiff, 2008), as we recognise the need to conduct

methodological experiments in terms that inform methodology (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 2). More specifically, the article follows an existing performance concept, with the aims of informing sociological methodology and overcoming current methodological constraints (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Gerber, 2022). In our view, a key reason for social scientists to adopt ABR is its holistic approach, thereby raising critical awareness and challenging stereotypes and dominant ideologies to create new, transformative ways of producing research material (Leavy, 2018: 10). ABR produces a deeper understanding of a topic by engaging with artistic stimulation that enables participants to express their feelings and perspectives (Smartt Guillon and Schäfer, 2018: 511). It also embraces imagination, allowing a more fluid view of meaning, and spontaneity and novelty (Camargo-Borges, 2017). Imagination gives space to emerging processes, which are seeds of ideas that may bring new possibilities. In short, imagining is the capacity to go beyond established reality and experiment with new meaning (Camargo-Borges, 2017: 92–93).

ABR aids researchers in producing alternative and embodied forms of knowledge that meet the needs of contemporary, often complex and ambivalent ways of inhabiting the world. As Degarrod (2013) points out, 'art making creates a new dimension in which to view and understand knowledge'. Some forms of knowing are not easily verbalised, but rather are physical and take place in interaction with material surroundings and in sensory experiences that constitute a different form of knowing (Mason and Davies, 2009; Pink, 2009). In such contexts, knowledge is discovered dynamically and is inevitably situated in a particular place and moment inhabited by individual knowers (Degarrod, 2013: 403). Thus, knowledge is understood in the context of ABR as not only interactive, emergent, and creative but also corporeal and processual (Degarrod, 2013: 405; Pink, 2009).

ABR has been used in social sciences in many, often participatory ways, for instance, by inviting research participants to take photographs, video, write fiction, or create performances (Smartt Guillon and Schäfer, 2018). Social scientists have adopted ABR owing to their increasing interest in sensual and intangible aspects of social life. It has helped them to develop a sensory methodology (Lyon and Carabelli, 2016; Mason and Davies, 2009; Pink, 2009), to explain how to study the future as an analytical category, and to cultivate a hopeful orientation to it by creating or discovering performative spaces (Coleman, 2017; Coleman and Tutton, 2017; see also Denzin, 2003). ABR has been deployed especially in studies of children and youth, who are considered particularly open to its methods (Coleman, 2017; Lyon and Carabelli, 2016).

Arts-based methods offer tangible tools for studying the intangible and its new formations in the present, as doing research on the future is epistemologically and ontologically challenging (Coleman, 2017; Lyon and Carabelli, 2016: 442). Like previous researchers, we engage with participatory ABR methods and study an existing art concept, as well as facilitating collective discussions designed by an artist, in order to inform sociological methodology (Coleman, 2017; Lyon and Carabelli, 2016).

Research materials and methods

Utopian consultation is a performance concept created by Reality Research Centre (RRC), an artists' collective in Finland. Originally a 'performance service' offered by a

group of RRC artists in 2012, it was subsequently developed further by Talvikki Eerola and Risto Santavuori (2018) in their *Utopia Consultant's Handbook*. The one-on-one performance concept has been used in various institutions, including homes for the elderly, day centres for the homeless and arts festivals, to reach out to different social groups, carving out space for them to imagine alternatives and discover the utopian. Consultations have been offered without charge to these groups and have taken place in museums, parks, streets, and forests. They are also available to anyone for a fee through RRC.

Utopia consultation offers a fruitful case for examining methodological practices to animate political imagination, as it focuses on stimulating participants' imagination and centres their ideas and wishes. In the open-ended, experimental performance, the participant becomes both spectator and performer, whose reflections and thoughts in interaction with the artist consultant become the theme of the consultation. The aim of a utopia consultation is to guide the participant into utopia, but what this constitutes is defined differently in each consultation. In our research material, participants connected the concept of utopia with words such as imagination, dream, impossible, possible, the future, and no-place or dream-like place. Our idea of collaborating with the utopia consultants arose from an earlier pedagogical collaboration with the artists. We were able to participate in individual consultation sessions, which left us in awe of this innovative approach for discovering the utopian through arts-based exercises. This made us consider the concepts' possibilities to inform sociological methodology of political imagination. We thus suggested a research collaboration to the consultants, to be conducted among upper secondary students in Finland.

Utopia consultation focuses on the utopian in participants' everyday lives. The aim of the performance is to stimulate participants' imagination and possibilities of seeing and doing things differently in the context of their lives, rather than dealing with social structures directly (Eerola and Santavuori, 2018). Utopia consultation can be considered political in how it takes utopias seriously and expands space for discovering them with ordinary people, hence stretching towards alternative, more desirable futures.

Two types of audio-recorded research material are used in this article: 18 one-on-one utopia consultations conducted in 2021–2022 in three upper secondary schools in Finland, and three facilitated group discussions with all participants in each education institution after the one-on-one sessions. The latter were designed by artist-researcher Pilvi Porkola to bring the participants in each institution together to practise political imagination, as we consider the collective aspect elementary to this. We aimed to focus on how personal utopias were shared, how they were seen concurrently, and how they would affect each other.

Six participants were studying to become musicians, six were studying in a general upper secondary school, and six aimed to become practical nurses or youth workers. The three education institutions were chosen to represent both creative and social sectors, and to include general upper secondary students who were likely to continue to higher education. Our aim in choosing the three educational institutions was to attract as diverse a pool of participants as possible, and to offer unique opportunities to participate in utopia consultation to people of different backgrounds, including both those who defined themselves as artistic and those who might not. The participants in each institution also

included individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. In Finland, educational paths are somewhat classed. For example, practical nurses tend to come from working-class and increasingly diverse ethnic backgrounds. However, as our analytical focus is on methodological practice, we do not analyse the participants' social class in depth, nor was this discussed directly during the recorded sessions.

The consultations and discussions were conducted on the schools' premises, apart from six consultations and one facilitated discussion that took place in a public library. Each personal consultation lasted between half an hour and an hour, and the facilitated discussions less than an hour. All the sessions were audio-recorded, and no audiovisual material was collected. Following each personal consultation, participants could decide whether they wished to allow their consultation recording to be used as research material. Written consent was gathered only after the consultation session, and participants could withdraw from participation at any stage. The participants were recruited by the school teachers on a voluntary basis and were informed in advance that the consultations were being conducted as part of a research project.

We only accepted participants who were over 18 and could decide themselves whether they wanted to participate in the research. Thus, they were mostly young adults, along with a few older participants who were switching career paths. We wanted to engage young people in this research project because they tend to have a lot invested in the future and are thus eager to view the variety of possibilities connected with it (Coleman, 2017: 532). The young age of most participants undoubtedly made them relatively open to testing a new concept. Some told us of their enthusiasm for participating in the experiment, although they were quite often nervous, realistic, and sometimes even pessimistic about the future during the sessions.

We gave the consultants a free hand to conduct the consultations. Each consultation followed a similar structure. The consultant and the participant walked around the neighbourhood. The artist-consultant guided the consultation through a loose dramaturgy that usually included a short imagery exercise with the aim of orienting in a new way to the surroundings. Other exercises aimed to follow material impulses offered by the space in order to stimulate participants' imagination and sensitivity to see the environment in alternative ways, and reach the participants' utopian visions. Both the beginning and end of the process were marked by transitions, with 'now this begins' or, at the end, 'now we return'.

As researchers, we did not observe the one-on-one sessions live, but managed the recording, research consent, and data protection. However, we did facilitate the collective discussions. We analysed the recorded data by looking for repeated practices that stimulated political imagination in the transcribed audio recordings, and by examining dialogue around these. In bringing the article together, Perheentupa undertook the sociological and ABR analysis, while Porkola played key roles in creating the ABR design, applying it in practice and adapting it to our proposed viewpoints on sociological methodology for political imagination. As we come from different disciplines, this article is our attempt to experiment with how arts-based methods might enrich sociological research.

In the following analysis, pseudonyms are used for all participants, and extracts are edited for readability.

Widening participants' sense of the possible

The utopia consultant asks Lucy, who studies music at a vocational school, what she would like to do during the consultation, if anything were possible. Lucy responds: 'I wish I could fly, as I always fly in my dreams'. Following this, the consultant suggests that perhaps they should fly today, and Lucy laughingly accepts this: 'that would be fun'.

As this snapshot shows, even impossible things may become possible during a private utopia consultation session, if the participant accepts the consultant's invitation to go on an imaginative journey. This section dissects two methodological practices that broadened participants' sense of the possible through arts-based exercises in utopia consultations.

The first key practice, on which all the others in this article build, is *dialogue*. Dialogue with the participant, who is invited to take an active role in discovering the utopian, distinguishes the concept of utopia consultation from other art and performance concepts. Centring dialogue also resonates with contemporary understanding of utopia, which likewise emphasises dialogue, thus confirming that it should be methodologically embraced to stimulate political imagination and utopian visions (Levitas, 2013a).

In Lucy's case, for flying to become possible, the consultant centred the dialogue on flying and began to ask specific questions such as:

Consultant: How does it feel, flying in your dreams?

Lucy: Supergood! It is simultaneously a little worrying, as people do not fly and not having your feet on the ground is scary, but at the same time it is connected with a sense of freedom.

C: Can you describe what that freedom feels like?

L: As if one had no sternum, nothing pressing on it.

C: I recognise something from that strongly. So you feel like there are no worries; and when there is no sternum, you kind of lose your outline and blend with the surroundings? . . . What would you say if we were to start looking for ways to fly today, as we now have the possibility of such a utopian life?

To explore Lucy's wish to fly, the consultant enquires what flying feels like, and later asks what might be the opposite of flying. It soon becomes clear that, for Lucy, flying is a symbol of freedom and creativity, two utopian desires that the pair then start to explore more deeply. The extract also illustrates how the consultant shapes a dialogue centring on the participant's sentiments and what she is drawn to at that particular moment. The consultant thus adopts the role of a companion who, rather than setting the agenda for the session or interrogating participants, takes everything they say seriously and amplifies their utopian impulses, while participants are encouraged to take charge of what is discovered. Thus, central to the performative encounter are not only posing further

questions but also the art of listening carefully (Back, 2007) by being empathetically present and looking for key issues of interest to the participant.

However, in utopia consultation, the dialogue takes place not only between consultant and participant but also with the material surroundings. As Eerola and Santavuori (2018) point out, if one starts to listen, 'also the surrounding environment may start speaking' (p. 52). In order to receive answers from the surroundings, consultants pose questions such as 'what are the material elements around like?', 'what object is especially inviting?', and 'what does the chosen object seek to tell you?' In Lucy's case, she says that a painting on the wall of the library seems interesting. The pair then examine the painting more closely, after which the consultant suggests an exercise in which Lucy might fly in the painting.

One way of interacting with the material surroundings during consultations is to move across them. By moving in space, the pair can take different perspectives on material objects and get a sense of a journey. It is thus no wonder that consultation sessions often adopt the metaphor of utopian travel. Movement in space seems to be connected with a sense of flow during the sessions, enabling new insights. This explains why movement in space is deployed not only in contemporary art but also in the 'walking method' of ethnographic research, which allows embodied, active, and multisensory approaches (Pink et al., 2010: 2–3). Producing such embodied knowledge by interrogating the sensory has been observed as a strength of ABR methods (Degarrod, 2013; Pink, 2009). Engaging with the sensory also helps participants to practise imagination (Mason and Davies, 2009). Dialogue, with both the consultant and the material surroundings, is a key practice of utopia consultation, allowing the formation of new sensory ideas, knowledge, and seeds of political imagination.

The methodological practice of dialogue also helps participants to 'step aside', a major aim of utopia consultation. As Eerola and Santavuori (2018: 55) point out, the dialogue between consultant and participant is construed in order to encourage participants to observe and imagine the surroundings differently from usual. Utopia consultants challenge how participants are used to observing their surroundings and actively suggest new angles for observation. Everyday observation is thus queered, as participants are invited to look at their lives critically from outside (Muñoz, 2009). Such queering of the norms appears to be essential to free the imagination and be liberated from the social norms and limitations of what is considered possible (Levitas, 2013a). Queering of everyday norms is characteristic of many artistic practices; however, utopia consultants also offer tangible techniques for queering the normative. One such exercise is called 'utopian framing' (Eerola and Santavuori, 2018: 39), whereby attention is framed as if through a camera lens to focus on a very small detail and what it might communicate.

Queering of norms is not only encouraged by dialogue but also by engaging in play. Indeed, the second methodological practice for broadening participants' sense of the possible that we identify is *play*. According to the consultants, when a playful state is achieved, the material surroundings 'plasticise for imagination' (Eerola and Santavuori, 2018: 39). Participants are invited to engage in joint play with the consultant, both in relation to the space and its playful use (like Lucy flying in the painting), and also by playing with meanings. Material objects may be renamed, and the pair may also engage with synaesthesia by expressing current moods with colours or displaying inner feelings

in movement or posture (Eerola and Santavuori, 2018: 38). Thus, in utopia consultation, one may also engage in dialogue with one's body: if there are no words for certain sentiments, they can be communicated with movements and gestures instead.

Play is an important element of arts-based methods, yet is often dismissed in dominant research methods (Gerber, 2022). However, it seems to be a key element of utopia consultation, stimulating imagination and enabling new unexpected ideas. According to Forcer et al. (2022), engaging in play is methodologically helpful, especially when studying complex research topics. Arts-based methods may simultaneously allow playfulness in research settings, while opening up a more candid and holistic understanding of the multiple dimensions of the studied topic (Forcer et al., 2022). Eerola and Santavuori (2018) also identify play as the 'best way to approach utopia and the paradox hidden in it, which separates it from usual, goal-oriented and solution-oriented thinking' (p. 10). Engaging in play thus connects with conventional rules and norms being in flux, and with discovering new ways of being in space and in relation to others. Like dialogue, engaging in play enables withdrawal from common norms and ordinary life, and momentarily building a different order of things (Huizinga, 1998 [1949]).

The two methodological practices of *dialogue* and *play* help to create spaces for imagination and possibilities, like the liminoid spaces characteristic of artistic practice (Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman, 2014; Turner, 1979). According to performance theorist Soyini Madison (1999), such spaces offer 'transformation and transgression, dialogue and integration, as well as acceptance and imagination to build worlds that are possible' (p. 472). In such spaces, traditional ways of observing the world are no longer valid, and new ways and rules are developed. These spaces are full of potency and potential, and are connected with experimentation and play. At best, the limits of the self and the environment are undone in such spaces (Turner, 1979: 466). Artists naturally have the professional skills to create such performative spaces that escape social norms and offer participants new transformative insights, but researchers might also experiment with the key practices introduced above.

Cultivating participants' hopeful orientation to the not-yet

In this section, we discuss the third methodological practice for stimulating political imagination: *cultivating a hopeful orientation to the not-yet*. One way of doing this during utopia consultations is to invite participants to imagine themselves in a future situation and enter into dialogue with their future selves. For example, Sasha, a general upper secondary student, spoke to herself from the future and sent a message: 'Do not give up. You have goals and you have achieved them also before. It is all possible!' Shirin, Sasha's schoolmate, whose dream was to become a physician, travelled through time with her consultant, uncovering emotions that she would feel in her future profession. To make visiting the not-yet more concrete, the pair used their material surroundings and senses as vehicles for time travel. As Shirin felt uneasy about finding signs of the future in the school premises, the consultant broke down the journey to the future into smaller parts. They were ultimately able to adopt a different perspective on time by physically climbing the stairs in the schoolyard (an exercise called 'time stairs'). Indeed, stairs and doors

are often used in utopia consultations to concretise the passing of time, or to leave behind certain sentiments, as with general upper secondary student Helen:

Consultant:	Would you like to go to the corridors or outside . . .?
Helen:	Let's go out. . . .
C:	Yes. We have . . . doors in front of us. We could, as we pass each door, leave something behind and think of what we want to strengthen? . . . so what would you want to leave here?
H:	I want to leave cowardice.
C:	Let's leave it here . . .. And what do you want to leave here?
H:	Overthinking.
C:	. . . So now that they are left behind, what is it that opens to you?
H:	Possibilities.
C:	That's right. I am now stepping with you into the world of possibilities.

This passage shows how the pair leave behind certain emotions and ideas as they pass material elements such as doors. In this way, the consultant helps the participant to open up to future possibilities and imagine them in a more active way. Indeed, in orienting hopefully towards the not-yet in the present, emotions are a central aspect of consultations. However, this does not mean that 'negative' feelings are dismissed. On the contrary, they are discovered, for example, by using the 'emotional shower' tool. According to Eerola and Santavuori (2018), 'one can recognise emotional showers below trees or shelters flowing with certain sentiments. One can then discover these sentiments by either going under the shower or by distancing oneself from it and the uncovered emotion' (pp. 25–26). We understand this exercise as enabling the discovery of an emotion by sensing it, and also by building distance from the feeling and looking at it as something that takes its own form based on its intensity, like a shower.

The young participants often expressed frustration or inability to envision the not-yet hopefully without limitations. They felt a need to find realistic solutions that would, for example, not be too expensive or take too much time. Others, like Shirin, did not believe they could achieve their wishes as they had been told they were dreaming too big. Some also expressed a sense of despair about the future because of the social, economic, and climate crises. In such situations, the consultants helped participants to uncover this sentiment and then build distance from it by pointing out that during consultations no ready-made solutions or realism are necessary and that participants should rather concentrate on discovering emerging feelings and ideas.

The past is also visited during consultations. For example, Alex brought up an unpleasant memory from years previously. The consultant asked him what had happened between the memory and the present moment. According to Alex, he had matured and found his own thing and a more optimistic attitude to life, but he was still ashamed of his earlier behaviour. To this the consultant responded, 'but at the same time, it [the memory]

helps you to realise the change'. Pink (2009) observes that sensory memory is an essential aspect of how we know in practice, and an important part of the process through which knowing is constituted. Muñoz (2009) also elaborates on how 'utopian performativity is fuelled by the past as the past plays a pivotal role in how we are able to imagine the desired not yet' (p. 106). Indeed, memory and the past are also important temporal dimensions in construing the utopian, as 'the past contains the future' (Rahkonen and Sironen, 1985: 22). We suggest that visiting the past can be used as an ABR exercise to assist participants in construing a hopeful orientation to the passage of time and temporalities in the here and now, as it helps them become aware of how desirable change is possible with time.

The consultation sessions also dealt with participants' sense of time. For example, in Shirin's case, the consultant helped her to look for patience in the material surroundings, which she ultimately found in mundane objects such as tea bags that reminded her of being present. Others, like music student Cai, felt stuck in time and thus nervous about it. These examples speak of the constant acceleration of everyday life (Rosa, 2013), but also connect with the methodological necessity to engage with slow time, which is often missing from our everyday experience (Martínez, 2019: 555). The consultants' exercises helped root participants in the here and now, enabling them to realise that they were often distracted from the present because their minds lingered in another time, which often added to their anxiety.

We suggest that all the exercises introduced above cultivated participants' open, active, and curious relationships with the not-yet. The exercises addressed the future as potentiality in the here and now, by cultivating a hopeful orientation to it (Coleman, 2017), and simultaneously highlighting presence in the moment. Again, the arts-based methods of utopia consultation enabled alternative forms of knowing by engaging with emotions and embodied sentiment, much like sensory methodology (Mason and Davies, 2009; Pink, 2009).

Collectively negotiating utopia

The final methodological practice we suggest as pivotal to sociological methodology of political imagination is *collective utopian negotiation*. Practically, this element might be added to research designs by organising facilitated collective discussions, as we did.

Our three facilitated discussions in the education institutions were built on the dialogue dimension of utopia consultation: we now brought the participants together for dialogue on what they had experienced during the one-on-one sessions. This was designed to bring a collective layer to the research material, which we consider elementary to political imagination. While the personal consultations focused on the participants' individual utopian visions, the goal of the joint sessions was to enable sharing of experiences. Both parts appeared essential to us. The first enabled participants to build distance from social norms and expectations by participating alone, and thus to imagine alternatives in a liberated way. The second part allowed them to build something together based on their consultation experiences, but in a more liberated manner.

During the discussions, first the participants were asked to write down or draw five things that they had found meaningful in their personal consultations. We asked them to

focus on verbs in order to orient them in an active way. Second, the participants were encouraged to share their chosen words with others. Third, we advised them to find and create connections between their own meaningful words and those mentioned by others. Finally, the student groups were asked to negotiate a shared utopia based on their earlier observations during the discussion. This process enabled us not only to hear live responses to the consultation experiences but also to create spaces for the participants to practice political imagination together. During the joint sessions, we deployed the idea of negotiation as a cornerstone of utopia and of democracy (Eskelinen, 2019: 129), and sought to test negotiation as a utopian practice. We wanted to see how the participants would reconcile their personal wishes and desires in order to build a shared utopia democratically. We also sought to create a collaborative process in which the participants could empathise with others (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). This kind of exercise connected with daily life practices is familiar from Live Art, in which collaborative and participatory methods are essential. Art historian Riikka Haapalainen (2018: 252) states that a mundane utopia is momentarily born, for example, with the help of artistic stimulation, where people already spend their time, and from the materials that already exist there – in this case the school premises or library.

The collective sessions gave the whole experience a more explicitly political layer. For example, the students discussed the limitations and challenges of their field of expertise, or a sense of not being heard on social issues that appeared central to them, such as increasing mental health problems among general upper secondary students. The practical nurse students, on the other hand, lamented the lack of time for care in their profession, and even suggested that, in a utopian world, their profession would perhaps no longer be necessary. The music students were artistic by nature, but importantly this was sometimes accompanied by a sense of anxiety about the future. Thus, the joint sessions accrued social layers connected with the realities of the professions that the students were aiming to join. However, the sessions in each institution also contained many common elements. For example, all participants highlighted the importance of feeling liberated and being present – aspects elementary to utopia consultations. These two themes also formed the core of the collectively drafted utopian visions in all institutions. In addition to individuals wanting to be free, for example, from social norms, the collectively drafted visions highlighted a need to respect others in their difference and choices.

The facilitated discussions opened up new dimensions of imagining, as they enabled participants to hear other people's perceptions, which helped them to realise limits in their own thinking. Engaging in collective dialogue and negotiation helped them to move beyond the individualised accounts characteristic of the private sessions (see also Lyon and Carabelli, 2016: 441). The sessions also aided the participants in verbalising some of their experiences from the one-on-one sessions. Our findings thus resonate with earlier research that highlights the value of talking about the sensory and creating moments of negotiation in ABR material (Lyon and Carabelli, 2016; Mason and Davies, 2009: 595).

Some of the most interesting moments during the facilitated discussions were when the participants produced shared spaces, where they were looking for similarities across difference and respectfully observing how they saw issues in different ways. This forced them to stretch towards each other's experiences. Despite their differing views, the participants had no difficulty negotiating common issues. Here, we refer to parallelism,

dialogue, ability to listen to others, and trying to understand other participants' views, as well as reconciling different views in a respectful manner. These are elementary to a lively democracy (Eskelinen, 2019).

Conclusion

This article has explored the unique art concept of utopia consultation to identify four key methodological practices that stimulate political imagination. First, in order to broaden participants' sense of the possible, we identify *dialogue* as the central methodological practice for animating political imagination. This practice is paramount and should thus guide engagement with all the other identified practices, as these are enabled by empathetic dialogue based on deep listening, as exemplified by the utopia consultants. However, dialogue refers not only to dialogue between the participant and the producer of the research material, whether artist or researcher, but also to dialogue with material surroundings, thereby centring participants' physical and emotional experience and imagination, which are often difficult to verbalise. The second methodological practice identified is *play*, which, like dialogue, enables new rules to be formed, leaving behind the normative thinking in which the participants often engaged and that prevented them from imagining alternatives. The third element identified is *cultivating a hopeful orientation to the not-yet* in the here and now. This means, among other things, leaving behind emotions such as worry and realism that limit active and hopeful orientation to the future. The final, yet central element identified is bringing research participants together for *collective utopian negotiation*. As we have discussed, many experiences gained during private consultation sessions are not easily verbalised. Collective negotiations help make the private experience more tangible verbally, and also invite participants, despite their differences, to negotiate utopia respectfully – and democratically. We define all the key aims of the sessions discussed – first becoming aware of social norms and expanding sense of possibilities, then cultivating a more hopeful orientation to the not-yet, and finally, negotiating utopia collectively – as essential aspects to political imagination, as they stimulate it.

We suggest that all the methodological practices identified above emphasise research participants' tolerance of uncertainty and amplify the dialogic nature of research practice. Indeed, the dialogic design of both the consultations and the facilitated discussions in this study gave space to participants' own ideas, without overly directing their focus. In order for the methodology of political imagination to be democratic, it must centre on participants' ideas and views, and not define politics itself in overly narrow terms. Democratisation of methodology is supported by arts-based and open-ended methods (Lyon and Carabelli, 2016), rather than traditional methods such as research interviews. Our argument connects with Sinha and Back's (2014) encouragement for researchers to engage in two-way dialogue with research participants and solve problems together.

Our experimental study has also introduced tangible methodological tools that enable study of the intangible not-yet through imagination. Supplementing the facilitated utopian negotiations, these utopia consultants' arts-based exercises include *stepping aside*, *time stairs*, and *emotional shower*. In addition to experimenting with the identified practices and tools, we encourage sociologists to collaborate with artists to produce research

materials that stimulate political imagination and capture not only the process of political imagination but also actual utopian visions.

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ORCID iD


Inna Perheentupa https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7083-3516

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Author biographies

Inna Perheentupa is a postdoctoral researcher specialising in political sociology, feminist theory, and ethnographic and creative research methods. She is interested in issues of everyday politics, political imagination, and orienting towards a socially and ecologically sustainable future.

Pilvi Porkola (DA) is an artist-researcher, writer, and pedagogue. Previously, a senior researcher on a project entitled 'Political Imagination and Alternative Futures' at the University of Turku, she is currently a researcher at Uniarts, Helsinki.

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