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Scenario thinking, affective bias, and culturally situated realism: A comparative analysis of European, North American, Asian, and Indian futures traditions

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Abstract

Scenario-based thinking and design is commonly understood as a cognitive method for managing uncertainty. This article argues that scenarios also operate as affective and cultural devices. They may amplify existing optimism, intensify threat sensitivity, or support more reflective judgement, depending on how they are constructed, framed, and interpreted. Drawing on research on optimism bias and scenario-based forecasting, the article examines how scenario practices may reproduce or challenge culturally specific distortions. It proposes that realism is not a culturally neutral midpoint between optimism and pessimism, but a corrective orientation shaped by the epistemic assumptions of a particular futures tradition. European normative futures thinking is discussed as potentially vulnerable to utopian wishful thinking; North American scenario practice as potentially vulnerable to economic reductionism; and Asian decolonial futures scholarship as responding to epistemic coloniality through plural, relational, and culturally situated approaches. The article then develops an Indian perspective in which narrative plurality, Jain epistemology, and devotional visual traditions offer resources for perspectival realism. A reflexive vignette based on the author's 1985 encounter with a *Raas Leela* ceiling painting near Agra illustrates, rather than proves, the possibility of holding plurality without collapse. The article concludes that scenario practice should not merely seek to balance optimism and pessimism. It should identify and interrupt the dominant cultural bias that a given tradition may mistake for realism.

Keywords: scenario planning; optimism bias; pessimism; cultural futures; decolonial futures; Indian futures studies; epistemology; affect; realism; plural futures

1. Introduction

Scenario planning is often presented as a technique for expanding strategic imagination under uncertainty. Its purpose is commonly described as enabling organizations and societies to consider multiple plausible futures rather than relying on a single forecast. Yet scenarios are not emotionally neutral instruments. They may reassure decision-makers, provoke anxiety, legitimate preferred futures, or create space for more reflective judgement.

This article examines the affective and cultural dimensions of scenario thinking. Its central claim is that scenarios do not automatically produce realism. Instead, they may move users toward the conception of realism already institutionalized within their cultural, professional, and institutional context. A scenario may therefore reinforce optimism in one setting, intensify defensive pessimism in another, or reproduce an unexamined assumption that Western economic and managerial categories provide universal standards of plausibility.

The article is conceptual and interpretive rather than empirical. It does not claim that all European, North American, Asian, or Indian futures practitioners share a single orientation. Rather, it identifies recurrent tendencies within influential traditions of futures thought and asks how scenario methods might be designed to counteract their characteristic blind spots.

The argument proceeds in four stages. First, it reviews evidence on how optimistic and pessimistic scenarios affect judgement, confidence, and forecasting. Second, it distinguishes European, North American, and Asian futures traditions according to their characteristic distortions and corresponding correctives. Third, it develops an Indian perspective on narrative plurality, drawing on Kaavad-inspired storytelling, Indofuturism, Jain *anekantavada*, and the visual theology of the *Raas Leela*. Finally, it proposes principles for scenario design in which realism is treated as a culturally situated discipline of correction rather than a neutral affective balance.

2. Scenario thinking as an affective practice

Scenario methods are often justified in cognitive terms: they broaden attention, reveal weak signals, and prepare organizations for uncertainty. However, scenario construction also engages affect. The emotional tone of a scenario can influence how uncertainty is interpreted, how risks are weighted, and how confident decision-makers feel about particular courses of action.

Research on optimism bias suggests that many people systematically overestimate the likelihood of desirable outcomes and underestimate the likelihood of undesirable ones. Optimism bias is defined as the difference between a person’s expectation and the outcome that follows. It is a domain-specific and method-dependent phenomenon, rather than a fixed trait that all individuals display equally in every context.[3]

A large body of research indicates that optimism bias is widespread. Tali Sharot’s review reports that, across many methods and domains, approximately 80% of people display optimism bias to some degree. This does not mean that 80% of people are unrealistic about every future event, nor that optimism bias is uniformly distributed across populations, cultures, or decision contexts.[3]

Scenario planning does not necessarily correct this bias. If participants are asked to construct easy, appealing, or strategically convenient futures, scenario work may validate pre-existing optimism rather than test it. In experimental research, Min and Arkes examined whether the difficulty of scenario construction affected optimistic prediction bias in

real-world planning tasks. They found that, in their first experiment, optimistic prediction bias decreased when participants generated a relatively difficult five-step optimistic scenario rather than a relatively easy two-step optimistic scenario.[4]

This finding has practical implications. A positive future is not inherently naïve if it requires participants to specify mechanisms, constraints, trade-offs, actors, and conditions of realization. Conversely, a pessimistic scenario is not inherently realistic if it merely extrapolates fear, crisis, or institutional failure without examining its own assumptions.

3. The asymmetric force of pessimism

If optimism is a common baseline bias, pessimism can exert a disproportionate influence once activated. Negative scenarios may be especially persuasive because threat detection is cognitively and emotionally salient. In organizational settings, a vivid account of disruption, collapse, or strategic failure can dominate subsequent discussion, even when its probability is uncertain.

Önkal, Sayım, and Gönül investigated the effectiveness of scenarios as channels of forecast advice. In an experimental study, participants received time-series information and model forecasts alongside best-case scenarios, worst-case scenarios, both types of scenarios, or no scenarios. The study examined the effects of these conditions on individual and group-based judgmental predictions.[5]

The available abstract establishes the experimental design and the comparison between best-case, worst-case, combined, and no-scenario conditions. It does not, by itself, establish the stronger claim that pessimistic adjustments persisted after group discussion. Accordingly, this article treats the direction and durability of pessimistic scenario effects as an empirical question requiring verification against the full article, rather than as an established finding.[5]

Healey and Hodgkinson provide stronger support for the broader claim that scenario techniques can have affective consequences. They argue that, when used unskillfully, scenarios can anchor and confine rather than stretch strategic thinking. They further argue that scenario construction can itself be biased, inducing new biases or amplifying existing ones.[6]

Healey and Hodgkinson also warn that, unless skillfully introduced, scenario techniques may disproportionately reduce or increase decision-makers' confidence and perceived uncertainty. This can produce misplaced optimism or threat rigidity. In some circumstances, they argue, the negative emotional impact of scenario analysis may override its potentially positive cognitive effects.[6]

This asymmetry matters for futures practice. Scenario designers should not assume that adding a pessimistic scenario automatically produces balance. The affective weight of a scenario depends on its narrative vividness, institutional authority, timing, and relationship to existing fears. A well-designed scenario set must therefore consider not only the plausibility of each future, but also its likely emotional afterlife.

4. Realism as cultural correction

The article's central proposition is that realism is not a neutral midpoint between optimism and pessimism. It is a corrective practice directed at the dominant distortion of a particular futures tradition. What counts as "realistic" depends on what a culture has learned to treat as self-evident, valuable, or unavoidable.

Tradition	Characteristic distortion	Dominant question	Corrective orientation
European normative futures	Utopian wishful thinking	"Is this future desirable?"	Ask whether the desirable future is materially and politically constructible
North American scenario practice	Economic reductionism	"Is this future viable?"	Ask whether the viable future is ethically and socially worth constructing
Asian decolonial futures	Epistemic monopoly	"Whose knowledge defines the future?"	Recover plural and local ways of knowing
Indian narrative futures	Mono-narrative closure	"Which single future should prevail?"	Sustain multiple, partially valid futures without forcing them into one

This framework does not treat cultures as homogeneous. It identifies tendencies that can become institutionalized in particular intellectual and professional settings. The purpose is not to replace one generalization with another, but to make the cultural assumptions of scenario practice visible.

5. European futures: testing desirability

European futures research has often been associated with normative and participatory approaches. In this tradition, the future is not only something to be predicted; it is something to be deliberately shaped. French *prospective*, in particular, is commonly associated with an orientation toward desirable futures and the deliberate shaping of preferable futures.

The strength of this tradition lies in its refusal to treat the present as inevitable. By articulating desirable futures, it creates political and ethical space for transformation. Its risk, however, is normative wishful thinking: futures may become morally compelling precisely because they are detached from the material, institutional, and political conditions required to bring them about.

A European-oriented corrective is therefore anti-utopian, but not in the dismissive sense. It asks not whether a future is inspiring, but whether it is constructible. Who would need to act? What resources, institutions, coalitions, and forms of resistance would be required? What would have to change in the present for the imagined future to become possible?

6. North American futures: testing value

North American scenario practice has often developed in close association with military planning, corporate strategy, forecasting, and risk management. Its strengths include methodological rigor, attention to uncertainty, and a practical orientation toward decision-making. Its risk is economic reductionism: the tendency to define futures primarily through markets, competition, growth, efficiency, technological adoption, and organizational survival.

Critics have argued that parts of futures studies risk becoming uncritically associated with market ideology, corporate power, and economically reductionist assumptions. This critique should be attributed to specific scholars rather than presented as a general description of all North American futures research. The argument here is therefore not that North American scenario practice is inherently reductive, but that its institutional history may make economic viability especially salient.

The corrective is anti-reductionist. It asks not only whether a future is viable, but whether it is worth constructing. A future may be economically feasible and still be undesirable. It may be technologically possible and still be socially destructive. Scenario practice should therefore make explicit the values embedded in its assumptions about growth, security, efficiency, progress, and success.

7. Asian futures: challenging epistemic monopoly

A broader Asian turn in futures studies has emerged through efforts to localize foresight in non-Western languages, philosophies, and ways of knowing. Sohail Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis explicitly connects futures work with decolonization and the creation of authentic alternative futures. It distinguishes between surface-level issues, systemic causes, worldviews, and underlying myths or metaphors, thereby making visible the cultural assumptions that structure conventional futures analysis.[7][8]

Inayatullah's work argues that decolonizing the future requires creating space for authentic alternative futures rather than accepting inherited developmental or modernizing narratives as universal. Causal Layered Analysis is accordingly presented not primarily as a prediction technique, but as a method for creating transformative spaces in which alternative futures can be articulated.[8][7]

Confucian futures thinking foregrounds responsibility, legacy, intergenerational obligation, and moral orientation. ASEAN foresight approaches have emphasized plural plausible scenarios rather than a single preferred forecast. These traditions do not simply reject Western futures methods. Rather, they challenge the assumption that Western categories provide a universal grammar for imagining the future.

The dominant distortion addressed by this turn is epistemic monopoly: the assumption that particular Western frameworks—often managerial, secular, individualist, and growth-oriented—define what counts as legitimate

knowledge. The corresponding corrective is anti-epistemic-monopoly. Scenario practice must ask whose knowledge is included, whose futures are considered plausible, and whose voices are treated as authoritative.

The affective target of this tradition is not naïve optimism. It is disciplined hope: the capacity to show that marginalized or subaltern futures are not inevitable outcomes of history, but possible directions that can be actively imagined and pursued.

8. Indian futures: plurality as method

India offers a particularly distinctive contribution to this discussion. In several Indian futures practices, narrative is not merely a communication device for foresight. It becomes part of the epistemic substance of foresight itself.

Pupul Bisht's adaptation of the Kaavad storytelling tradition of Rajasthan offers a futures method designed to support epistemological plurality. The method responds to the dominance of Western worldviews in futures studies and uses storytelling to enable participants, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, to articulate preferred futures informed by their own cultural ways of knowing, being, and doing.[9][10][11]

Bisht's work does not claim that Kaavad is a thousand-year-old scenario exercise. Rather, it develops a contemporary foresight method inspired by a Rajasthani storytelling tradition. The method uses narrative to support inclusion, local knowledge, and alternative futures in scenario-based foresight practice.[10][11]

Indofuturism similarly uses speculative narrative to imagine alternative futures for India beyond the inherited frame of colonial history. It seeks to reclaim aspects of pre-colonial culture lost through colonialism, foreground pressing social conditions, and critique prejudices within contemporary Indian communities. It is therefore best understood as a decolonial and speculative-cultural lens rather than merely an aesthetic style.[12][13]

Jain philosophy provides another resource through the doctrine of *anekantavada*, often translated as "non-one-sidedness" or "many-sidedness." The doctrine holds that any real and determinate object admits multiple, context-dependent predications. Viewpoints (*naya*) provide partial access to a many-sided reality; complementary perspectives may together provide a fuller account without any single perspective exhausting the object.[14][15]

This yields a fourth corrective: anti-mono-narrative. The most realistic scenario may not be the one that best predicts a single outcome. It may be the one that preserves the coexistence of multiple plausible, valuable, and partial futures.

9. A reflexive vignette: the Raas Leela ceiling

A reflexive vignette

The following observation is a reflexive vignette based on the author's recollection of a visit to a temple near Agra in 1985. It is presented as an interpretive, autobiographical case rather than as empirical evidence. It is intended to illustrate a conceptual possibility—namely, that visual and religious traditions may cultivate a capacity to hold plurality without collapse—not to establish a general claim about Indian futures thought.

In the summer of 1985, during travel through northern India, I visited a temple near Agra in the Braj region associated with traditions concerning Krishna's life. What remained most striking was a ceiling painting depicting the *Raas Leela*: Krishna dancing simultaneously with many *gopis*.

The image presents an apparent impossibility. One divine figure is fully present to each partner, while no relationship is diminished by the others. Each encounter appears complete in itself, yet the whole is held together without reducing its parts to a hierarchy. The scene does not present a single narrative sequence; it presents a plurality of relations, perspectives, and experiences within one visual field.

This observation is offered as a reflexive and interpretive case, not as empirical proof. Its value lies in what it makes thinkable. The *Raas Leela* can be read as a visual exercise in holding multiplicity without collapse. It encodes a theological claim associated with the *Bhagavata Purana*: that unity does not require uniformity, and that oneness can accommodate difference without loss.

Three interpretive implications follow. First, the resource may be indigenous rather than merely reactive: Indian futures practices such as Kaavad-inspired storytelling and Indofuturism may draw on longstanding cultural and religious traditions in which multiplicity is aesthetically, philosophically, and spiritually meaningful. Second, the image invites a perspectival account of realism: rather than asking which future is most probable, it asks how multiple futures can remain simultaneously valid from different situated perspectives. Third, plurality is presented as practice rather than abstract theory: the viewer is invited to rehearse a form of attention in which the world is both many and one.

10. Implications for scenario design

The argument has several implications for the design of scenario processes.

- **Make affect explicit.** Scenario workshops should identify the emotional tone of each scenario and consider how optimism, fear, hope, grief, or confidence may shape interpretation.
- **Require constructive effort.** Positive scenarios should specify mechanisms, constraints, actors, and trade-offs. A desirable future should not be accepted merely because it is emotionally appealing.

- **Avoid threat capture.** Pessimistic scenarios should be paired with reflection on probability, agency, response capacity, and the possibility of transformation.
- **Interrogate economic assumptions.** Plausibility should not be equated with market viability. Scenarios should ask what forms of life, justice, ecological integrity, and human flourishing they enable or foreclose.
- **Include plural knowledge systems.** Futures processes should create space for local languages, oral traditions, Indigenous and community knowledge, religious and philosophical resources, and non-Western epistemologies.
- **Preserve narrative plurality.** Rather than forcing convergence on one master scenario, practitioners should retain tensions, contradictions, and partial truths among scenarios.
- **Treat realism as reflexive.** Each scenario process should ask: which cultural bias is this exercise most likely to reinforce, and what corrective does it require?

11. Conclusion

Scenario thinking does not transport people toward a culture-free realism. It may move them toward the conception of realism already embedded in their intellectual and institutional environment. European futures traditions may need to test whether desirable futures are constructible. North American traditions may need to ask whether viable futures are worth constructing. Asian futures scholarship may need to challenge epistemic monopoly. Indian futures practice may need to sustain narrative plurality as a condition of realism.

The risk is not that one tradition is optimistic and another realistic. The deeper risk is that each tradition mistakes its own cultural bias for realism itself, and uses scenarios to confirm rather than interrogate that bias.

Realism, in this account, is not a mood automatically delivered by scenario methods. It is a disciplined refusal of the comfort most institutionalised within a given tradition. That refusal must be renewed each time a scenario is built—whether in a boardroom, a policy workshop, a community assembly, or beneath a painted ceiling that invites a different way of holding many futures at once.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Not applicable. This article does not report a study involving human participants, human data, or human tissue.

Consent for publication: Applicable.

Availability of data and materials: No new datasets were generated or analyzed. The reflexive vignette is based on the author's recollection of a 1985 visit and is presented as an interpretive case rather than as verifiable research data.

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