

Some brief comments on plausibility

In the description of the Plausibility Project I was sent in Sept, it states: "In the futures research community, plausibility is juxtaposed against such concepts as possibility (a range of options without judgment), probability (quantifying uncertainties), and desirability (preferred options). We may situate plausibility as a reasoned verdict - yet one that is often made with little reflection on norms, power or philosophical underpinnings."

I agree entirely with the second sentence. But surely plausibility is not another category like possibility, probability or desirability, but rather a judgement about the other three. Is the possibility space plausible? Is the probability assessment plausible? Is the claim of desirability plausible?

On this reading of plausibility, note the difference between how it plays out with respect to possibility and probability, on the one hand, and desirability, on the other. In the first case, it is a judgement about whether the analysis was done well (i.e. is it scientifically plausible). In the second case, it is about whether the determination of desirability is plausible (i.e. does it reflect some real preferences in the researchers or audience for the research). This of course simply reflects the difference between approaches to the future that can (and often do) make some claim to be purely descriptive, and those that are explicitly normative. But it also illustrates the point that it is always important to be clear about "plausible to whom".

In this connection, I would distinguish between scientific or methodological plausibility and political or social plausibility. The former relates to the quality of the futures analysis itself. In principle, this should be an expert judgement on the part of those competent to judge, but in practice (as we have seen in the climate change arena) this kind of plausibility assessment often plays out in the public realm and involves many people other than those with technical competence in the analysis itself. Thus judgements about scientific plausibility become part of the public debate (e.g. discussions of 'junk science' in the media).

The latter refers to the degree to which the analysis speaks to issues of public concern or interest. It is more about the results of the analysis and less about the methods. An interesting case in point can be found in the work of the Global Scenarios group, who produced scenarios of four future 'worlds', one of which—the Barbarization scenario—described a very negative future. When the IPCC developed its four SRES scenarios, as I understand it, it was felt that such a negative future would not be useful in the policy debate, so all four SRES scenarios are intended to be 'desirable' (at least to some audiences). More recently, however, there has been quite a bit of attention to catastrophic climate change scenarios, so perhaps negative futures have become more socially plausible. In this context, the term plausible becomes similar in meaning to relevant. But not much attention has been paid, it seems to me, to the question of what makes future scenarios plausible to the various non-expert audiences that are exposed to it. (The work on the Mackenzie 'uncertainty trough' may be very relevant here.)

Notice that a given study could be both scientifically implausible and socially very plausible. Various popular media treatments of climate change might be cases in point. And the reverse may also be true: high scientific plausibility and low political plausibility (e.g. the GSG Barbarization scenario?). So these two types of plausibility are distinct (though probably not entirely unconnected).

In any case, since plausibility is always a judgement about a piece of work, it is critical to ask the question: plausible to whom?