Towards a sociology of imagination

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Abstract

Cultural sociologists have devised numerous theoretical tools for analyzing meaning making among individuals and groups. Yet, the cognitive processes which underpin these theories of meaning making are often bracketed out. Drawing on three different qualitative research projects, respectively on activists, religious communities, and gamers, this article synthesizes work in sociology, psychology, and philosophy, to develop a sociology of imagination. Current work highlights that (1) imagination is a higher order mental function, (2) powerful in its effects, which (3) facilitates intersubjectivity, and (4) is socially constructive. However, sociology can additionally contribute to scholarly understandings of imagination, which have often focused on individualistic mental imaging, by highlighting the degree to which (a) imagination allows individuals and groups to coordinate identities, actions, and futures, (b) imagination relies on widely shared cultural elements, and (c) imagination is often undertaken collectively, in groups. The article concludes with suggestions for future sociological work on imagination.

Keywords Cognitive sociology · Identity construction · Imagination · Progressive religious communities · Social movements · Sociological theory

As I walked down the sidewalk with Pete, a member of an anarchist collective, he ruminated on various groups he perceived as allies in what he called the "global uprising against capitalism." He named the Zapatistas in Mexico and various workers' collectives in Europe, before commenting that many "liberals" *want* to be a part of the movement but are too afraid to fully reject capitalism. Lighting up a hand-rolled cigarette, he said "it's okay, though. We'll all be friends in the end. Cause capitalism will inevitably fall, and someday we'll all dance on the ruins together." As he said this,

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his eyes narrowed and he stared off into the distance, as if he could actually see the utopian future he described.

Since the "cultural turn" in sociology, there has been ongoing interest in how meaning and understanding shape social action, leading to the development of a variety of theoretical concepts. Examples abound, but if we take the sociology of social movements, we find "collective identities" posited as necessary precursors to joint action (Taylor and Whittier 1992), while "frames" that help these collective actors cast blame and suggest fruitful strategies (Snow and Benford 1988). In the process, movements create and disseminate "narratives," telling stories about their past and envisioning their futures (Polletta 2006). Nearly any area of sociological inquiry could be mined for similar ideas on how shared meaning shapes social life.

Yet, despite the proliferation on such concepts, we often bracket out the underlying cognitive processes that enable individuals and groups to produce understanding. Aside from the work of a handful of "cognitive sociologists" (Brekhus 2007; Cerulo 2014; Zerubavel 1997), which has not been fully integrated into such theorizing, we largely leave conversation about cognition to other disciplines. In the above vignette about Pete, it's clear that he imagines himself and his fellow anarchists as part of a global community of allied groups, working collectively to fight inequality. He contrasts the international movement he envisions with a perceived group of well-meaning but ineffective liberals, unified by their inability to actively reject capitalism. Despite this, he pictures a distant future where all those who sought a more just world join together to "dance on the ruins" of capitalism. To fully understand how Pete envisions a global uprising collectively struggling towards utopia, it is helpful to assess the socio-cognitive processes that allow him to situate himself in a hypothetical web of social relations with distant, perceived others, as well as temporally locate himself in a timeline progressing towards an imagined future.

In this article, I examine one such socio-cognitive process by developing a sociology of imagination. I define "imagination" as the often creative, cognitive process of mental imaging, typically concerned with what is unreal, unknowable, hypothetical, or yet-to-be. By "the imaginary," I refer to the shared images and archetypes of a group of people that allows them to think collectively. While "imagination" and "the imaginary" have a submerged history within sociology, used by theorists such as Taylor (2004) and Castoriadis (1975) to make sense of how people broadly understand their society, this work has not coalesced into a theoretical literature useful for sociologists examining how culture and cognition shape social action. Yet imagination, both individual and collective, underpins many sociological concepts, including the ones discussed above. To understand oneself as part of a movement, to strategize based on a collective action frame, or to identify with a narrative, all require the use of imagination. As Wenger (1998: p. 178) states,

> imagination… is not just an individual process... it is a mode of belonging that always involves the social world to expand the scope of reality and identity…. It is through imagination that we recognize our own experiences as reflecting broader patterns, connections, and configurations. It is through imagination that we see our own practices as continuing histories that reach far into the past, and it

is through imagination that we conceive of new developments, explore alternatives, and envision possible futures.

As such, there is potential theoretical currency in turning our attention to how imagination supports many sociological concepts, as well as examining what sociology can contribute to scholarly understandings of imagination.

To elucidate imagination and the imaginary as sociologically useful ideas, I first review work from philosophy and psychology, two disciplines which have robust literatures on the topic. Then, by delineating connections between these works, I propose a theoretical synthesis that demonstrates the utility of imagination for sociological analysis, as well as suggest what sociology can contribute to the existing literature. From a sociological perspective, imaginaries represent the ways that people are able to think in tandem to envision pasts and futures, make connections between disparate elements of society, and situate identities. Held both individually and collectively, they draw on shared representations to allow actors to conceive of times they didn't experience, people they haven't interacted with, or events that haven't happened yet, serving as a lynchpin for the coordinating of social action. Sociologists are uniquely positioned to look at the shared and collective elements of imaginaries, giving us an entry point into both using existing ideas about imagination and imaginaries in our work as well as contributing to this literature ourselves. Drawing on three studies of highly differentiated groups—global justice activists, progressive religious communities, and gamers—I apply the theoretical synthesis of work on imagination and imaginaries developed here to show how both individual and collective imagination shapes social understanding and action among actors, demonstrating the utility of the concept for cultural sociology, as well as the unique tools sociologists are equipped with to examine imagination.

A synthesis of work on imagination in psychology and philosophy

The idea of imagination has been used in myriad ways in a variety of disciplines, indicating there is no unified view on what it is or how it operates. Strawson (1974: p. 50) notes that the philosophical and psychological "uses, and applications, of the terms 'image', 'imagine', 'imagination', 'imaginative', and so forth make up a very diverse and scattered family" before enumerating three areas of typical concern: (1) the mental image, (2) creativity or invention, and (3) delusion or false belief. More recently, Stevenson (2003) identified *twelve* typical uses of the term in philosophy, ranging from the ability to think of things that are not present or that could be possible, to the ability to appreciate things revealing about the meaning of life. Strawson and Stevenson provide us reason to be wary of assuming too great a consensus on the concept of imagination in either psychology or philosophy. Yet, because both fields have actively and fruitfully turned an analytic lens to the idea, I draw upon those disciplines to develop a theoretical foundation for understanding imagination.

In psychology, imagination is often used to refer to mental imaging (Markman et al. 2009). Sartre (1948: p. 11) discusses imagination this way in *The Psychology of Imagination*, asserting that the mental image is something fully created and known by the thinking subject, saying "I shall never find anything in it but what I put there."

Sartre suggests that, though unreal, we treat our mental imaging as meaningful, experiencing emotions based on things we imagine. Jung (2012), similarly, sees imagination as effective, specifically using the phrase "active imagination" to refer to the process of coming to terms with the content of one's subconscious, towards the end of establishing a greater holism between the parts of the psyche. Contemporary psychological research concurs that imagination may be real in its effects by demonstrating that mental imaging shapes our understandings of past events (Garry et al. 1996) or helps people become better at things even while not practicing (Beilock and Lyons 2009). Philosophy, on the other hand, tends to focus on what imagination *is* or how it relates to other mental processes such as desire and belief (Kind 2016; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002). Philosophers often view imagination as a form of creativity. As Tateo (2015: p. 146) suggests, "Imagination is involved in the experiencing of both past and future, bringing to life something that is no longer, or not yet, here and now." For many philosophers, imagination is what allows us to picture somewhere we have never been, cast ourselves forward into the future, or creatively envision what it must have been like to live in the past. This allows for "mental time travel" (see Suddendorf et al. 2009), which makes the future-orientation of human behavior possible. Taken together, these understandings suggest that imagination is mental imaging of some kind, that allows for the creative envisioning of things we may not have experienced, ultimately impacting our understanding or behavior.

Having pulled from psychology and philosophy to arrive at this description, I now delineate five commonalities between the understandings of imagination in these two disciplines that I suggest are useful for sociological analysis: (1) imagination is a creative, higher-order mental process that draws on a variety of material for its enactment; (2) imagination is powerful; (3) imagination facilitates intersubjectivity; (4) imagination is socially constructive, and (5) imagination concerns itself with what may not exist, has not been experienced, transcends what is knowable, or is yet-to-be.

1). Imagination is a *creative, higher-order mental process, not easily reducible to other mental functions, that draws on a variety of material (experience, knowledge, shared cultural reference points) for its enactment*. Both psychologists and philosophers agree that imagination is a unique kind of cognition that weaves together a variety of elements in its execution (Kind 2016). Liao and Gendler (2020) note that imagination both overlaps with and draws on a variety of other mental processes, including belief, desire, and memory, yet cannot be wholly subsumed under any of these kinds of thinking. Examining numerous works, they posit that there are several roles specific to imagination, including understanding the minds of others and acquiring knowledge about possibilities, which mean it must be understood as a unique mental process.

2). While it is neither innately beneficial nor harmful, *imagination is powerful,* especially when what we imagine stirs our emotions (Van Leeuwen 2014). If we imagine someone we care about embracing us or something we deeply fear happening, genuine emotions may accompany these images. This can have a variety of effects. People may become engrossed in envisioning hopeful, yet impossible futures or frustratingly obsessed with endless counterfactual examples of how things could be different (see Markman et al. 2009). Conversely, conceptualizing a series of concrete steps to take to achieve a goal or learning from past

mistakes by imagining what could have been done differently are effective tools for planning and understanding (Byrne 2016; Taylor et al. 1998). Winther-Lindqvist (2017), for example, finds that imaginative processes are foundational for young people attempting to maintain a sense of hope during the illness of a parent. The teenagers that Winther-Lindqvist studied vacillated between different mental images, including fantasies about their parent surviving, and more realistic futures based on doctors' predictions. Yet, such imaginings allowed the teens to maintain a glimmer of hope that helped them to emotionally navigate a difficult situation. These examples highlight a vast literature that finds that mental imaging powerfully shapes our emotions and understanding.

3). *Imagination is foundational for intersubjectivity*. Mental "action representation" or "mindreading," allows us to predict the behavior of others, understand and empathize with them, and coordinate collective action (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Decety and Stevens 2009; Liao and Gendler 2020; Spaulding 2016). Cooley's (1902) classic theory of the looking-glass self and Mead's (1934) foundational work on role-taking are early examples of this insight, both positing intersubjectivity as an imaginative accomplishment. In communication, we envision our own appearance, imagine the thoughts of others, and behave based on how we predict others may respond. As Gatens (1996: p. xii) suggests, our foundational understandings of bodies, agency, and hierarchies between people rely on "imaginary components of our beliefs concerning sexual difference and bodily integrity." Yet, the intersubjective imagination exists on a scale larger than immediate interaction. Awad (2017) shows that Egyptian political prisoners imagined dialogues with friends and loved ones, sometimes envisioning widespread audiences for their political writings. Placing ourselves within a matrix of social relations requires the ability to imagine the various others in the matrix, how we appear to them, where we fit in with them, and how our behavior may affect them.

4). *Imagination is socially constructive*. Since imagination involves the creative reworking of experiences and cultural material in a way that produces a reaction in the imagining subject and allows them to locate their position and the positions of others within the world, it is a key resource in social construction (Bowman 2010; Van Leeuwen 2013). Eckerdal (2017), for example, shows that the way people imagine nature shapes how they behave towards it. Zittoun and Cerchia (2013: p. 321) call imagination an "expansion of experience," using the example of a young woman reading a novel and imagining herself as the characters, giving her "a richer or more nuanced experience of the world." Specifically examining the constructive nature of imagination, Currie and Ravenscroft (2002: pp. 9,11) separate "creative imagination," which "puts together ideas in a way that defies expectation or convention," from "recreative imagination" which allows users to experience "states that are not perceptions or beliefs or decisions or experiences… but which are in various ways like those states" (see also: Van Leeuwen 2013). In other words, imagination allows both for the creative construction of the conceivable, as well as the perspective taking which makes social life possible.

5). *Imagination concerns itself with what may not exist, has not been experienced, transcends what is knowable, or is yet-to-be.* Kind (2016: p. 3) notes that "imagination is not constitutively constrained by truth." When we speak of

imagination, we typically refer to a process of envisioning the unreal, impossible, unknowable, or yet-to-come. For example, when one makes a plan, one has to imagine future events that haven't yet happened and the behaviors of relevant others with whom one may never communicate directly. Suddendorf et al. (2009) call this ability to imagine other times in an effort to coordinate futures "mental time travel." Conversely, one may cast themselves back into the past, imagining what it would have been like to live in an earlier time, perhaps informing their understanding of the present moment (see Zittoun and Cerchia 2013). Kind and Kung (2016: p. 1) call the practice that allows us to "look beyond the world as it is [and] fly completely free of reality" the "transcendent use of imagination," seeing it as a foundational mental process.

My understanding of "imagination" in this work rests on these five themes, culled from psychology and philosophy. However, I suggest sociologists have additional insights to contribute to the study of imagination. Specifically, cognitive and cultural sociology turn our attention to the degree to which imagination is *collectively held*. The material drawn on for the mental process of imagination that makes it powerful, constructive, and enabling of intersubjectivity is often shared widely by social actors. By examining how sociologists have disparately used the concept, we can formulate a theoretical synthesis for sociological analysis.

"Imagination" in sociology

Imagination and the imaginary have had a long, yet submerged, history in sociology.[1] Mills (1959: p. 4) posited that most people in society lacked the "quality of mind" to understand the connection between the individual and society, what he called the "sociological imagination." The sociological imagination, as Mills uses the term, is the ability to expand outward from one's own experience (Zittoun and Cerchia 2013) to creatively envision the workings of a society, the vastness of which one cannot grasp from their individual vantage point. Someone with a more robust sociological imagination will assumedly produce more accurate and/or innovative constructions of the social world, providing them with deep insight into the workings of their society and a greater understanding of how they fit into it.

Like Mills, Castoriadis (1975) saw what he called the "social imaginary" as a creative force, but he gave imagination a more foundational role in society. Castoriadis suggests that a social imaginary is the symbolic system of a society that allows a group of people to conceptualize themselves as an "us," collectively envisioning a common history and situating their place in the natural world. Castoriadis (1975: p. 131) sees social imaginaries represented in symbols such as a flag, which "sends shivers down the spine of the patriots" and is perceived as "what one can and must die for." Thus, for Castoriadis, the social imaginary allows for the very constitution of a society by

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[1] While the term entered the social sciences largely through Jacques Lacan's (1998) use of the term "imaginary," the concern here is not with Lacan's psychoanalytic understanding but with the idea's history within the discipline of sociology specifically.

providing meaning and emotional resonance to social actors, as well as shaping their perceptions of reality.

Taylor's (2004: p. 23) use of social imaginaries shares much with Castoriadis. He defines social imaginaries as

> the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

Taylor stresses that social imaginaries are common-sense understandings that enable social participation. Drawing on Anderson (1983), who suggests that a mass media allows for the "imagined community" of the nation, he posits that the social imaginary is the shared representation of society that provides the collective foundation for people to engage in civic activities such as voting. Warner (2002) follows a similar line of thinking, suggesting that a "public," consisting of strangers who are able to conceptualize themselves collectivity, represents a social imaginary, the nature of which shapes our conceptions of what we consider human. Ingraham's (1997: p. 275) conception of the "heterosexual imaginary," or a way of thinking about sex and gender which "closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution," likewise sees this imaginary as both broadly held, as well as profoundly oppressive to those who are marginalized by the shared representations within it.

Conversely, Perrin (2006: p. 2) presents the "democratic imagination" as how someone understands "what [they] can imagine doing: what is possible, important, right, and feasible." Similarly, Braunstein (2017: p. 11) uses the term "democratic imaginary" to refer to "an understanding of how democracy ought to work and the role of active citizens." Perrin and Braunstein understand democratic imaginaries/ imaginations as collectively held, but not as widely shared as the social imaginaries of Taylor or Castoriadis. In these uses, the term does not deal with society-wide, shared representations, but how people envision politics within groups, ultimately shaping how they understand their ability to take action. Other theorists who focus on civic engagement use the term "imagination" in similar ways. For example, Baiocchi et al. (2014: p. 55) refer to the "civic imagination" as "the cognitive roadmaps, moral compasses, and guides that… help people make sense of their place in the world… envisioning better societies and environments, and developing [plans] to make those visions of a better future into reality" Likewise, Delehanty and Oyakawa (2018) conceptualize the "moral imaginary" of social justice activists as the way they learn to internalize the connections between self and society, constructing a shared vision of how their moral behavior fits into the wider social structure.

These uses of the concept of imagination share much with the synthesized view of imagination in psychology and philosophy presented earlier. These theorists see imagination as *socially constructive*. For Taylor and Castoriadis, the very foundations of society are located in its "social imaginary," through which its members collectively imagine their relations to each other, their history, and their symbols. This also suggests that imagination is *powerful*. Through a shared social imaginary, we give form, meaning, and emotional resonance to a nation, a people, a history, a community, etc.,

shaping identities and action. Divergent social imaginaries between different groups thus suggest differentiated ways of acting and being to those who live within them. They often rely on the *unreal or yet-to-happen*. Activist groups, for example, must imagine how countless other citizens they will never meet may perceive their actions and messages when they devise a strategy. Finally, following this, sociological theories of imagination suggest that they are *essential for intersubjectivity*. How people communicate and act together relies on their ability to share images of the world and predict or creatively "mindread" (Liao and Gendler 2020) the behavior of others. As Braunstein, Perrin, Baiocchi et al., and Delehanty and Oyakawa note, people's understandings of how to behave and what the meaning of their civic action is derives from this sort of intersubjective imagination.

Towards a sociology of imagination

I suggest two primary sociological questions on the topic of imagination: (1) where is imagination held and (2) what does imagination do? With regard to where imagination is held, psychologists and philosophers often conceptualize it as *individualistic*, given their focus on mental imaging (see Jansen 2017 and Walton 1990 for notable exceptions). Sociological thinkers, however, have presented imagination as *both* individual and collective (Wenger 1998). Castoriadis, Taylor, and Ingraham use "imaginary" to mean something held by an *entire society*, structuring relations and meaning within it. A social imaginary is what enables the "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of the nation, allowing disparate individuals to envision themselves as connected to strangers who share common practices and understandings of the world. Even sociologists who focus on smaller groups while discussing imaginaries present them as shared. They are the property of social groups and communities which become ingrained in the thinking of individuals (Baiocchi et al. 2014; Braunstein 2017; Delehanty and Oyakawa 2018; Perrin 2006).

Understanding imagination as both individual and collective allows us to situate a sociology of imagination within cognitive sociology (Brekhus 2007; Zerubavel 1997). While the various cognitive sciences, such as psychology, assume a "cognitive individualism" (Zerubavel and Smith 2010), sociologists contribute to our understanding of how humans think by exploring cognition as a collective process (Cerulo 2014). Walton (1990: p. 18) posits that imagination may be both "solitary," occurring in the mind of an individual, and "social," happening collectively within a group, noting "there are collaborative daydreams as well as private reveries." The process of thinking socially occurs among what Zerubavel (1997) calls "thought communities" and "cognitive subcultures" that shape the way that our mental processes operate by providing us with norms about how to think and delineations of what is thinkable (see Fine 1983; Wenger 1998). This is not, of course, asserting that groups act as some kind of suprasubject or communal mind. Rather, in Jansen's (2017: p. 248) words, thinking collectively means that groups share "common social and cultural conditions in which different acts of imagining are embedded." By focusing on how "thought communities" provide us with these bits of information and culture which shape our cognitive processes we can better understand how human beings create action, meaning, identities, and intersubjectivity (DiMaggio 1997).

As for what imagination *does*, several of the theorists suggest that a collectively held social imaginary enables the very existence of society (Anderson 1983; Castoriadis 1975; Taylor 2004). It does this both in the interactive sense of rendering intersubjectivity between disparate individuals possible and through the socially constructive process of providing the cultural material that allows for unconnected individuals to participate in the abstraction of society. It provides an understanding to those who think within it of how they are connected to others, how their action fits into a web of social behavior, and how the various parts of society, including parts they have no access to, mesh together (Van Leeuwen 2013, 2014). Through these collectively held understandings, individuals and groups are able to envision possible actions with regard to specific problems and questions (Braunstein 2017; Perrin 2006).

Understanding imagination in this way connects it to sociological work on how individuals and groups coordinate futures and undertake collective action. Because actors must intersubjectively locate themselves within both immediate and long-term temporal planes to coordinate collective action (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013), both solitary and social imagination are a prerequisite for such interaction (Walton 1990; Wenger 1998). This mirrors the understanding of imagination used in the previously discussed studies of civic engagement and activism (Baiocchi et al. 2014; Braunstein 2017; Delehanty and Oyakawa 2018; Perrin 2006). When individuals join together to imagine what is possible, they collectively envision how society should work and what their role in bringing about this future could be.

Drawing on the above understandings of social imaginaries, cognitive sociology, and coordinating action, I posit that a sociology of imagination (1) examines how individuals and groups creatively construct projections beyond what is immediately knowable to them that allow them to understand themselves as part of a disparate collective, develop pictures of places and/or times they have not been to, make connections between different elements of society, and coordinate identities, actions, and futures; (2) seeks to understand the cultural elements, including symbols, images, and stories, that serve as the raw materials for these creative projections; and (3) reveals the connection between the individual process of imagination and also the larger collective imaginaries within "thought communities" (Zerubavel 1997) to assess how the different levels of imagination connect. Understood like this, imagination is a telescoping phenomenon. Widely shared imaginaries contain the cultural material which people in a society have available to them to envision the past, the future, and the connections between people and institutions. Within a larger social imaginary are different groups who have their own shared representations and images. Individuals draw on these various imaginaries to creatively make sense of how they fit into their own social worlds.

Detailing the workings of imaginaries is important for sociological theory for several reasons. First, dating back to Mannheim (1936), sociologists have been interested in how social actors think with others. Tools to theorize collective imagination, a key form of such processes, are thus useful for examining foundational sociological questions, such as how and why collective action is undertaken. Second, and following from this, if imaginaries are enabling and constraining of social action, then sociologists of social movements and civic engagement can enrich their understanding of these phenomena by examining the social imaginings of the groups they study. Shared conceptions of what has been, what could be, and how actors should work for change, generate social

action through delineating the boundaries of the possible, making them a notable element of socio-political behavior. Third, imaginaries are potentially sites of struggle, both internally and externally (see Zerubavel 1997). Shared archetypes and visions of the world may be contested from within or foment disagreement between groups with divergent visions. Analyzing how different groups imagine socially, or how different visions may compete with each other within a collective, provides us a theoretical tool to understand social conflict.

Data and methods

The data for this article are drawn from three different qualitative research studies. The first study, conducted from 2001 to 2005, on Global Justice Movement (GJM) activists, involved participant observation with four groups, to capture a wide ideological spectrum within the movement.[2] The key idea behind this research was to develop a sense for how participants (a) came to their sociopolitical beliefs and (b) understood themselves in relation to other participants in the movement with different ideological positions. I spent about 80 hours, total, across the four groups, which included attending meetings, social gatherings, and protest events with each group. I supplemented the observational data by conducting semi-structured interviews with 13 key members of the groups, many of whom were broadly active in a number of different GJM organizations.

The second study examined progressive religious communities in Chicago, IL and Seattle, WA from 2010 to 2015. The thrust of this study was to better understand how participants in progressive religious groups conceptualize their faith-based collective action, especially given stereotypes of religion as conservative in U.S. society. Through word of mouth, prior knowledge, and internet searches, I created a panel of groups that varied in theological tradition, polity size, structure, and sociopolitical concern.[3] This included congregations, nonprofit organizations, and communes. I spent approximately 40 to over 100 hours per group, depending on how often and consistently the group met. For congregations, I typically attended worship services, meetings, social events, and civic engagement such as protests or charity work. For the nonprofits, I volunteered to work with them, as well as attended meetings. For the communes, I visited frequently, attend meetings, social events, and retreats, and lived with one commune for three days. In addition, I conducted 86 semi-structured interviews with participants across the communities, some of whom participated in more than one group. Information about all the groups examined in studies one and two is collected in the Appendix.

Finally, the third study examined people who play tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), such as the well-known *Dungeons & Dragons*. The focus of this research was on how participation in ostensibly fictional, imagined worlds shaped the real-world personalities, beliefs, and identities of gamers. I recruited twenty participants in Chicago and Seattle through notices posted in local gaming stores between 2011 and

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[2] The names of all groups and participants in study #1 are pseudonyms.
[3] The names of groups in study #2 with an asterisk are pseudonyms. I acquired permission to use the real names of the other groups. The names of all participants in any group are pseudonyms.

2012.[4] Each participant conducted a semi-structured interview on their experiences in the hobby and how it has shaped them as a person.

Each of these three studies was initially designed to capture elements of how people construct individual and collective identities and action through interaction. Coding data from these projects, however, revealed the frequency with which subjects from all three studies actively envisioned hypothetical futures, speculated on the possible actions or mental states of people they didn't know, and discussed events or places they had not personally experienced. Simply put, a key element of how they constructed identities and coordinated action was through imagination, often undertaken with other members of their social group. The emergence of this finding led me to compare across the projects, looking for similarities in how individuals from disparate social settings constructed imaginary representations of the world, as well as to review the literature on imagination.

I used an abductive (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), multi-stage process for cross-project comparison and theory generation. First, having noticed the widespread use of imagination in action and identity formation among the groups and individuals I examined, I gave a cursory examination to all the data from each project to discover what fieldnote and interview data would potentially be useful for developing a sociology of imagination. This allowed me to gather all the relevant data from the three projects into a compendium of imagination-related material. Second, I performed an open coding on the selected data, looking for emergent themes in how participants imagined themselves and the world, both individually and collectively. This led me to the three foci of this article, detailed above, as these three codes occurred regularly. Along with this, I concurrently conducted the above-detailed literature review on imagination. I began with sociological work on "social imaginaries," then expanded my review into psychology and philosophy as I noted those two disciplines regularly cited in discussions of imagination. This review allowed me both to check for the presence the foci that were emerging from my own data analysis, as well as sharpen my general understanding of what imagination is and does for the purposes of my analysis. Finally, after developing and refining the foci through the initial data analysis and literature review, I analyzed the data again, explicitly focusing on the themes detailed in the forthcoming sections.

Imagination and the imaginary in social life

Across the three disparate social groups I researched, participants imagined in patterned ways. First, individuals regularly used their imaginations to move beyond their personal experience in an effort to coordinate identities, actions, and futures with others. By envisioning a future they wished to accomplish or how their action fit in with imagined others, groups and individuals shaped their identities and social action. Second, participants drew on widely held cultural material for imagination. Envisioning one's temporal location or picturing how one connects to disparate others often involves utilizing common tropes, archetypes, stories, and images that circulate within thought communities (Zerubavel 1997). This shared material is what is often meant by an

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[4] All participants in study #3 have been given pseudonyms.

"imaginary" within sociology. Third, imagination was consistently undertaken collectively. While individuals certainly performed "solitary imagining," the groups also "socially imagined" to construct collective identities and action (Walton 1990). To be a member of a group is often to participate in envisioning the social world and possible futures with others in the collective. I turn now to delineating each of these themes in action, before concluding with how they intersect with each other.

Expanding beyond experience to coordinate identities, actions, and futures

Identity and intersubjectivity are enabled by the process of imagination. For groups and individuals to situate themselves in the social world or coordinate action, they have to envision a past and future, connections to others (including unknown others), and a space in which they fit into the world. Participants in a wide variety of social milieus detailed their process of imaginatively expanding beyond their experience (Zittoun and Cerchia 2013) to situate themselves. By picturing alternative personas, situating themselves with imagined others, and placing their own experiences within envisioned timelines, individuals and groups construct identities and create pathways to social action.

The notion that imagination was a key part of identity construction was readily apparent to participants in the world of TRPGs (see Bowman 2010). Ben, a *Dungeons & Dragons* player, explained that playing characters in fantasy worlds was "a kind of therapy" that helped him navigate his divorce. The imagined emotions he was able to feel and the life experiences he creatively inhabited, Ben said, helped him to understand his ex-wife's point of view, providing him closure. He regularly found that playing different kinds of characters allowed him to better understand himself and his place in the world, a process Mead (1934) called "taking the role of the other." Elaborating, Ben said

[It is] how to get out of my own mindset and… imagine someone doing something… that I wouldn't do…. How I, nevertheless, can *feel* that. Feel what that character is intending, feel what that character's motivation is, where that character is coming from, and that's what's most appealing to me, in some ways, about gaming. It's not escapism, it's a kind of finding myself… in otherness.

The idea that imagination could powerfully shape one's self-identity was universal among the gamers I spoke with. For example, a gamer named Joel discussed how playing TRPGs helped him come out as gay. Imagining himself in the shoes of fictional characters allowed him to "summon up all these sorts of personas and personalities" which he came to understand as "practicing who [he was] going to be." Francine, another gamer, likewise discussed feeling disconnected from stereotypical understandings of femininity from a young age. For her, the imagined characters of TRPGs allowed her to envision different versions of herself, commenting that it was "an exploration of what femininity means when you're not sure of it yourself." Gamers understand their hobby through the lens of imagining alternative identities and situations beyond what is knowable to them (Bowman 2010). They move outside their own

experience, imagining the viewpoints and emotions of others, ultimately shaping their own identities and actions.

Similarly, religious activists discussed envisioning how they fit into traditions, discourses, and communities. For example, several religious activists discussed how missionary stories fueled their youthful imaginations. Particularly for those who grew up in environments they perceived as "boring," narratives of missionaries traveling the world seemed exciting. As Lucy, a woman who worked for a Christian homeless shelter told me,

> I was never the little girl who dreamed of my house that I would have or what kind of curtains I would have…. All I really cared about was the missionary stories because that was the excitement…. Because they were away. Which was very attractive. To remote, just completely alien places. Alien from [my small town]. And, also, because they have *purpose*… and it was *deep* and *real*. And a lot of missionary stories in movies are really dramatic…. They're walking to the village to spread the gospel or whatever and I think those things were powerful to me.

These fantasies eventually convinced Lucy to go on mission trips herself, during which she developed an interest in social justice. Likewise, Kimberly, a member of a Mennonite commune, related a similar understanding of how missionary stories shaped her desire to participate in faith-based activism.

> My cousins were missionaries [and] in my young mind, they lived this exotic life…. That is what drove me to go overseas, to see these other places…. I've never really felt comfortable with the American lifestyle. I feel a tension with it…. We go from one box to another box, to travel to another box, to shop in a box, and… I don't like that.

Kimberly's dreams of exotic missionary work inspired her to travel extensively, actively rejecting what she envisions as the "American lifestyle." These understandings and experiences eventually led Kimberly to a commune that stresses social justice and simple living. Both Kimberly and Lucy constructed pathways to action that drew on how they imagined specific places, people, and experiences. Rejecting their respective ideas of home, they fantasized about far-away places and the adventurous lives that missionaries were living in them. These visions inspired them to go on mission trips themselves, ultimately shaping their understanding of how to undertake faith-based justice-oriented activism. Similar to how gamers role-playing alternative personas shaped their real-life identities and behaviors, the dramatic images of missionaries that Kimberly and Lucy grew up with provided the impetus for them to travel the world then become Christian activists.

With regard to history, Megan, a congregant at an LGBT Jewish temple, discussed how participating in the community helped ground her in a temporal sense of both Jewish and LGBT identity.

When I [sit] down at a table to have a Passover Seder, I am feeling connected to those around me, I am feeling connected to my grandparents who are dead, my great grandparents who passed away when I was five, I am feeling connected to their parents…. It feels like I am part of history, a larger sense of history as well as my family's history…. We still say the prayers in Hebrew like we did a thousand years ago.

Later, in our conversation, she discussed similar feelings about LGBT history. She suggested that she enjoyed attending her synagogue because it embedded her in LGBT continuity, noting

There is this huge percentage of [this congregation that] are older gay people… and they have this *history* with them, and to have been able to talk to them about what it was like to come out when they were my age…. I think a lot of young gay people don't have that…. They do not appreciate that they are out and proud and crazy because there were these people before them.

Megan added that these two understandings of identity, being gay and being Jewish, are connected to her, saying

[Being gay] does tie into being Jewish, in a way, because… Jews had it the same way, where there were times when they could not be out and proud.… There is a very clear connection between being gay and Jewish in how we adapt through history.

Megan locates herself within histories relevant to her identity by imagining connections to others through time, envisioning herself within the timeline of the Jewish experience. Additionally, she understands her own sexual identity through recognizing herself within LGBT histories, connecting herself to events she had not personally experienced through conversations with her fellow congregants. Finally, Megan creatively imagines a connection between Jewish and LGBT history by noting that both groups have faced closeting and had to "adapt through history." Megan said that this understanding is one of the reasons she is proud to march each year with her congregation in the Pride Parade because it means "showing people that we exist, and I'm out there."

In each of these examples, participants engage in a process of using their imagination to construct and situate their own identity. Through imagining the lives of others, the histories one is connected to, things one may do later, etc., one ultimately constructs their place in the world. Identities are not grounded solely in what we can perceive with our senses—the people, places, and experiences that are immediately graspable to us. Rather, we imagine ourselves into distant pasts and possible futures, connecting ourselves to people we have never met. We picture ourselves in places we have never been and try on personas that are not yet our own. These imaginings then shape our identities and actions, from Joel who came out after imagining alternative personas to Megan who felt compelled to march in the Pride Parade as a representative of her LGBT synagogue. To situate our identities requires an active and ongoing process of

imagining ourselves into timelines, relationships, traditions, and places that allow us to construct ourselves, as well as coordinate our social action.

Drawing on shared cultural material

While having coffee with the rabbi of a synagogue I was observing, I asked him to envision what a "better world" looked like. He stared out the window momentarily, seemingly contemplating a response, before a smile crept across his face as he answered "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." A century ago, Jung (2012) famously posited that there were shared "archetypes" from which we draw potent images. More recently, Zerubavel (1997) has noted that cognition must inherently use the cultural material provided by the thought communities one is embedded in. Williams (1995) calls this material the "cultural repertoire." Fine (1983), similarly, finds that "folk ideas" about how the world works circulate through subcultures and shape how the participants in those groups collectively imagine. Social actors engaging in imagination as a thought process, therefore, use extant representations, narratives, and archetypes as they envision the world and their place in it. The rabbi above imagines a better future utilizing a famous passage from the Book of Isaiah. Across the various studies, participants consistently drew upon such shared understandings—stock characters, common images, and widely disseminated stories—culled from their various thought communities (Zerubavel 1997) as they imagined the world.

The Global Justice activists I interviewed often drew on shared representations of history to orient their own political work. Similar to how Megan imagined herself into understandings of Jewish and LGBT history, many activists referenced widely shared stories and images of past events to situate their beliefs. Zac, a neighborhood organizer, described how imagination aided in his political awakening.

> Whenever I see people's apathy there's this undertone… of 1930's, 1940's German regular society.... I think as soon as I learned about [the Holocaust] I was absolutely fascinated... by how there could be such a horrible thing…. I would start imagining what it was like, and... I remember having nightmares where I was, like, in a concentration camp.... I always, from that point forward, wanted to work to make things better.

Here, Zac described developing a sense of empathy through the emotions he felt picturing himself in a horrific situation. His political awakening and desire to dedicate himself to progressive activism, he indicated, flowed from his ability to imagine himself into stories and images about the Holocaust. The connection he makes between contemporary apathy and the conditions that led to the rise of Nazism and how he envisioned what he could do to counter such indifference ultimately shaped the direction of his political work.

Additionally, the activists I observed regularly drew on archetypal images of different social groups to imagine their own position in the world of politics. For example, at a meeting of a leftist group I was observing, members groused angrily

about "liberals with bullhorns" who "hijacked" protests. Apparently, the organizers of a recent march they had participated in admonished the crowd through megaphones to avoid any law-breaking civil disobedience. When I asked some members to explain what they meant by "liberals" in this conversation, they discussed a "sellout" who is more interested in working with the police to keep demonstrations calm than standing with the oppressed. One member pointedly said "liberals will do it to you every time. You saw what they did in Seattle," referencing widely-circulated stories and images of moderate activists chastising anarchists for acts of civil disobedience at the 1999 WTO protest. Using these shared stories and images, the members of the group positioned themselves against imagined "liberals" who lacked the courage of their convictions. Expanding on this idea, an anarchist named Dawn told me

> [Liberals] believe that we have to work with our friendly Democrats because we have to still stay connected to this government…. A liberal is basically somebody who is afraid of insulting somebody. Afraid of stepping on somebody's foot. Like I said, a lot of them mean well, but they don't want to take that extra step. Most liberals I know like to sit at a desk and write letters.

Dawn draws on images of an archetypal "moderate" in these evocative examples. She suggests that liberals "sit at a desk and write letters" because they're too afraid of offending someone, leading them to compromise with "our friendly Democrats." Using stock characters and images that arose regularly among the radical activists I interviewed—the fearful liberal, the Democrat enmeshed in the system—Dawn demarcates boundaries between herself and imagined others to envision her own position as an anarchist within a constellation of movement groups.

It's worth noting that the politically moderate activists I interviewed *also* drew on shared imagery of the "impractical" or "angry" leftist in their collective imaginings. At one meeting of a liberal group, for example, members complained about "black bloc" anarchists at a recent protest, mirroring how radical activists criticized liberals. One member said she was exhausted with "activisty-type activists," eliciting enthusiastic agreement from the group. She then joked that anarchists in "half naked drum circle[s] full of women who don't shave their legs" were convincing her to "become a Republican," prompting other activists to laugh and make similar statements. In an interview, one member told me that far-left activists "get stuck in their labels." The group's president commented that leftists are "impractical," noting "we have too many people who love to dream and we need somebody to direct it." Thus, for both the anarchist activists, as well as the more moderate activists, shared stereotypes pulled from larger political imaginaries about other groups, whether "sellout" "liberals with bullhorns" or "impractical" "activisty-type activists," allowed them to socially imagine (Walton 1990) who they were as activists and where they fit into their movement, shaping what kinds of political action they saw as legitimate or illegitimate, and what other groups they felt an affinity with.

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Similarly, participants in a number of milieus contrasted themselves to imagined "mainstream" people, using generic images of what the mainstream is. Alana, who grew up in a Christian commune, said

Jesus is so incredibly perfect for counterculture people, because his whole ministry was to… outcasts of society. [He was] the most punk rock of any person to ever walk the face of the earth…. I think in conservative Christianity and in mainstream America it is more about individualism…. American society has set up this world of perfect people who go to college and do everything right and play sports and all these things that we praise in our society, and then there is another group of underlings [and] all they want in their life is community.

Likewise, Maria, a Latina member of the same commune, suggested, like Alana, that most churches are too enmeshed in the culture of white, mainstream America.

If… I have to go to some church where you just sit, stand, and kneel, you know, hallelujah, and have to be fake to all these white people, then this is not for me…. Those people fit the stereotype of, like, the put together family dream…. So I feel like, with my background and everything like that, I can't get up in there and start being myself or they might say "oh, get away, you don't fit the mold." So, I… don't feel like they want what's real.

Alana and Maria draw on archetypal images of a "mainstream," conservative America and Christian church that they stand in opposition to. They populate their collective imagination with stereotypical characters—the "put-together" Christian family, the perfect athlete, the punk who stands outside of mainstream society—and use these characters as reference points to situate themselves and their faith-based identities and actions within a larger context.

Across the groups referenced here, the process of imagination typically drew extensively on widely shared cultural repertoires (Williams 1995), including archetypical characters, stock images, and widely disseminated stories. We all travel in various "thought communities" (Zerubavel 1997) that provide us with such images we can use for solitary or social imaginings (Walton 1990). By virtue of being a member of a particular society one has access to a wide variety of shared images, such as Zac drawing on understandings of the Holocaust that allowed him to envision how it would feel to experience such an atrocity. Smaller, more immediate groups provide one with more specific material related to the culture of the group. The anarchists drew on stereotypes of the ineffectual moderate while less radical groups, conversely, circulated archetypal images of the impractical leftist. Countercultural commune members contrasted their lived experience to a broad vision of "mainstream" conservative Christians. As discussed earlier, to situate oneself and one's groups in a social world requires mental images of other people, understandings of events, and constructions of histories. When individuals and groups imaginatively situate themselves relative to others, they do so by drawing on shared images and understandings culled from the various thought communities that all people exist within.

Imagining with others

Over a vegan lunch, a young member of an anarchist collective named Aaron explained to me that he and some other members of his group had recently spent an evening envisioning what they would do if the government ever collapsed. He said the conversation helped him realize he had nothing to fear in such a situation because he knew his "comrades" would support him. He and his fellow anarchists agreed that their collective was a "working model of the sort of society [they] would like to live in." As we discussed this, he began to muse about what this model might look like, saying "I imagine [small communities] would form some sort of social identity… deciding collectively how they're going to use resources," before detailing several other predictions for how an anarchist society would be organized. As sociologists since Mannheim (1936) have noted, cognition, though seemingly an individual act, often occurs *collectively,* with people thinking in tandem with each other (Fine 1983; Jansen 2017; Zerubavel and Smith 2010). Aaron recounted a process of what Walton (1990) calls social imagining with his anarchist collective. Starting with envisioning a hypothetical future, they jointly imagined the ways that such a society could work, using their own collective as a model for projecting a vision of a world yet-to-come. In the same way that we draw on wider cultural material for our imaginings, such processes are often undertaken collectively with others in our social milieus.

The notion that imagination is cooperative is obvious to gamers, whose hobby actively involves collective imaginings (Fine 1983). Some of the gamers I spoke with referred to a "shared imagined space" to describe this phenomenon. When children play "house," for example, the shared imagined space is the fiction of the make-believe game, where real life is suspended as the children imagine themselves to be parents in a home, instead of kids on a playground. Ben, mentioned earlier, described this as a situation in which the players of a game are "respecting the narrative," and everyone suspends their real personalities to fully inhabit their characters in the shared imagined space. "Let's test what characters' relationships are without our [real] personalities getting intertwined," he explained, likening it to what a group of musicians playing effortlessly together would feel. Another *Dungeons & Dragons* player, Hal, talked about how the social imagining he participated in as a gamer allowed him to hone his creativity in a way that had real world application.

> I volunteer at a [nearby] after-school tutoring thing. And they teach… kids how to write.… When I was trying to explain concepts it just naturally came back to stuff I played as a gamer.… How would I make this scene exciting and real to players? So I would ask them questions like "oh, well, what color are its feathers?" or "you say its eyes are glowing, is it fire?" or "what does this room look like, what does it smell like, what are these details, what details can you put into this room or monster to make it seem interesting and pop out?" And, so, just kind of from a creative writing standpoint, you know, helping these kids develop their own ideas, I was drawing directly on what I would do as a [gamer].

In these examples, gamers discuss the nature of the "shared imagined space." For Ben, there is a group-level cohesion that occurs as participants collectively and creatively

envision something. This powerful experience leads Hal to apply this process to a learning situation, suggesting that the approach to collective imagination he developed as a gamer is applicable to an educational setting (see Wenger 1998).

A similar "shared imagined space" is often created through participation in a faith community, particularly in the context of preaching, prayer, or discussion. For example, Pastor Diana, the spiritual leader of an African Methodist Episcopal congregation, preached a sermon one Sunday that focused on a favorite theme of hers: the idea that the congregation could always do more to help those in need. During this sermon, she pointed at various members of the congregation, saying things like

> Miss Ashley, you have those beautiful earrings on, but how many out there don't even have clothes to wear, let alone beautiful jewelry? And Miss Bonnie, you can cook up a storm for your family at Sunday dinner, but how many out there don't have food to eat? And look at me, and the other leaders of this Church. We have comfy, spacious offices in the back of the building, but how many out there don't have roofs over their heads? Could we open up the doors of this building to them?

About a week later, I participated in the congregation's weekly soup kitchen, run by some women from the church. One strictly enforced rule at the soup kitchen was that the door is closed and locked at 2:00 p.m. sharp. That day, at a few minutes past 2:00, some young men knocked on the door to the kitchen and asked for something to eat. The woman who went to speak to them initially told them the kitchen was closed. After she returned to rejoin the rest of us, however, she paused and, visibly bothered, said "now, Pastor Diana *just* preached about sharing our food with those in need and opening our doors to those with no roof." The women were quiet for a moment, then another said "yeah, I just think about folks who don't have that, like Pastor said, and…" She trailed off, and there was another lull, as some of the women quietly voiced agreement. Then, Miss Bonnie, the head of the soup kitchen, waved her hand towards the door and said "go ahead, let them in. We'll serve them."

In this example, Pastor Diana asked her congregants to imagine those who might be struggling when compared to themselves as part of her sermon, images that resonated with the congregants who ran the soup kitchen, shaping their behavior the following week. Faith communities tend to share a great deal of cultural material with which to think collectively. Members of churches coordinate action, identities, histories, and futures with each other in a way that requires shared imagination. The very act of preaching a sermon to a community, saying a collective prayer, or conducting a group ritual, draws on and triggers a collective imaginary that locates the group temporally, within a tradition, and orients them towards a future.

Members of the LGBT synagogue I observed also collectively imagined in ways that shaped their social action. They often volunteered with a mobile soup kitchen that predominantly operated in a neighborhood understood as having a large LGBT population. This allowed members of the synagogue to collectively imagine whom those they served were and why it was important to help them. For example, one night while volunteering at the soup kitchen with members of the synagogue, we discussed why this particular activity resonated them. One member noted that a large percentage of homeless youth are LGBT, particularly in this neighborhood. Another then added "we

are serving *our* community," with a third member emotionally recounting, as they gestured to the line of people waiting for food on the sidewalk, "I was a troubled kid when I was younger and there but for the grace of God could have gone I." Through visualizing possible alternative futures for themselves and imagining the connections they share with perceived others in the neighborhood, the members of this LGBT synagogue provided themselves with the motivation to engage in civic engagement targeted at those they envisioned as part of their community.

In these examples, groups imagine collectively, drawing on the cultural material in their shared imaginaries to situate who they are and what they should do. Each construct what gamers referred to as a "shared imagined space" through asking members to jointly picture other people and situations, then locate themselves in relation to them. These shared visions help the participants better understand their individual and collective identities by asking them to empathize with or distance themselves from other groups, as well as suggest action by delineating how one should act in relation to these groups. Inspired by Pastor Diana's sermon, the women of her congregation identify with their visions of the oppressed and struggling and open their doors to those in need. Members of an LGBT synagogue are able to see themselves in homeless youth because of their ability to understand themselves as sharing a community with them or imagine how their lives could have been different, so they partner with a soup kitchen to serve an LGBT neighborhood. In each of these instances, participants jointly constructed shared imagined visions which helped to situate their community with regard to others, as well as help them coordinate actions and futures.

Discussion and conclusions

Underpinning much of our social lives, from collective action to commonsense understandings of how the world works, is a process of imagination. At the macro level, theorists such as Taylor (2004) and Castoriadis (1975) suggest the "social imaginary" makes possible a society in which most members never meet, yet are able to conceptualize themselves and their actions within the "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) of the nation. On the micro level, thinking about imagined others, or distant places and times we haven't experienced, helps us make sense of the world, learn, or hold on to hope in dark situations (Byrne 2016; Winther-Lindqvist 2017; Taylor et al. 1998; Zittoun and Cerchia 2013). The very intersubjectivity that social life relies on is only possible if we imagine how we come across to others as we interact and coordinate futures with them (Mead 1934; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). Yet, despite its centrality as a socio-cognitive process, and despite occasional usages of the term by sociologists, there has rarely been an attempt to develop a sociology of imagination.

In this article, I first reviewed the literatures in philosophy and psychology on imagination, towards the end of identifying (a) themes across them and (b) what sociology can contribute to this diverse body of work. By looking across the extant literatures, we can delineate that imagination is (1) a higher order mental process, that (2) is powerful in its effects, (3) enables intersubjectivity, (4) is socially constructive, and (5) often refers to what is unreal, unknowable, or yet-to-come. Philosophy and psychology, however, have typically understood imagination individualistically and I suggest, drawing on cognitive sociology (Cerulo 2014; DiMaggio 1997; Zerubavel

1997; Zerubavel and Smith 2010), that we have much to learn when we consider the *collective* aspects of imagination (Jansen 2017; Walton 1990). Theorists who draw our attention to "social imaginaries" (Castoriadis 1975; Taylor 2004), or who demonstrate that groups think together when coordinating collective action (Braunstein 2017; Delehanty and Oyakawa 2018; Perrin 2006), point us in this direction. Specifically, I suggest that a sociology of imagination can sensitize us to thinking about (1) how social actors situate themselves temporally and via social boundaries with imagined others; (2) how shared cultural material becomes a part of the imaginations of social actors, and (3) how groups imagine collectively.

Second, I drew on three qualitative studies to show how a sociology of imagination that examines these three concerns is useful for sociologists seeking to understand the identities and actions of a variety of social actors. Across the three studies, we saw participants expand outward from their experience (Zittoun and Cerchia 2013), envisioning other places or times, constructing images of people they've never met, or envisioning what futures might look like. They drew on cultural material pulled from the wider society and the various thought communities (Zerubavel 1997) they are embedded in. Finally, they often did this collectively, coming together with social groups to collectively create a "shared imagined space" that allowed them to coordinate collective identities and action (Walton 1990). These three themes inherently intersect with each other as they underpin other concepts within sociology. For example, the visions of missionaries that allowed Lucy and Kimberly to situate their own identities drew on shared, Christian archetypes that are widely utilized within Christian though communities (Zerubavel 1997), demonstrating the degree to which all three themes of a sociology of imagination intersect. Similarly, these imaginings are housed in some of the cultural sociological concepts discussed at the start of the article, including narratives and frames, that allow individuals to circulate and make sense of the images they use to imagine.

It may be fruitful to develop studies designed to examine how groups think collectively, centered on questions specifically related to how social actors imagine. What are the actual mental images they use to think about the world, other people, space, and time? Do people in groups roughly share mental images, or do those images diverge? Does such potential divergence matter for group dynamics? Can people recall where they have pulled the cultural material they are using from? Do groups that picture futures or outcomes in different ways shape their ability to succeed when undertaking collective action? These questions may be suitable for interdisciplinary work with social psychologists, allowing for a cross-fertilization between individualistic and collectivist understandings of imagination. Until then, this article serves as a step towards bringing these literatures into greater dialogue to sharpen our sociological understanding of this particular cognitive process.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest   The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

Appendix: Names and description of groups in studies one and two

Study 1: A "moderate" liberal group called College Liberals, two "radical" groups called Urban Anarchists and Radical Media Alliance, and a community group called Neighborhood Organizers. All names of groups are pseudonyms,

Study 2: The congregations were (1) Dignity/Chicago, an LGBT-identified Catholic church; (2) Emerald City Metropolitan Community Church, a nondenominational LGBT-identified congregation; (3) Mind Body Soul Church*, an African Methodist Episcopal congregation, (4) Neighborhood Church*, a nondenominational, multiracial congregation; and (5) Welcome and Shalom Synagogue*; an LGBT-identified Jewish Temple. The communes were (1) Jesus People USA and (2) Reba Place Fellowship. The nonprofit organizations were (1) Cornerstone Community Outreach, a homeless shelter and (2) Sharing Love and Faith*, a shelter and community organization. Groups with asterisks are pseudonyms.

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