

Applied Sociology Thematic Group
Contact Email for April 2014
For the Australian Sociology Practitioner

Greetings everyone,

An article in the April 5th 'New Scientist' on how various communities around the world not only believe in climate change, they are actually dealing with it. One quote in the article particular caught my attention. It was from Kirstin Dow from the University of South Carolina:

"Predicting the future isn't the solution. Society always makes decisions under uncertainty. We're perfectly capable of it. We do it for the stock market with billions of dollars. The key is to find out what is at risk, what people are doing to buffer that 'risk, and what else could be done."

It seems to me that this quote is basically a sociological approach but perhaps not in the way we usually think about it.

A lot of effort goes into predicting the future, often ignoring the uncertainty principle and where does it get us? I have heard several people recently reviewing recent history and adding the comment that what actually happened could not have been foreseen.

Predicting there will be climate change in the future tells us nothing. When it happens it will affect different areas in different ways. The detail will need to be dealt with at the local level.

Our ideas about the future usually expect the future to be the same as the past, more or less. The world has built bigger and bigger fishing boats because the world need a never ending supply of fish. But suddenly, the vast stocks of fish are not there any more. I am getting old but I still think I can carry on as I have always done. The suddenly the uncertainty principle raises its head. Yesterday I was told I must have a 'pace-maker' inserted at the end of the month. Until then I cannot drive, which means that a lot of the things I do are beyond me at the moment. Last week the future did not contemplate such a situation. Now I must deal with what is.

When we do sociological research that is to inform future action I think Kirstin Dow is right. The key is, there is a constant shifting of the possibilities that might occur in the future. To understand the future is a matter of risk management. It is a matter of constant vigilance to identify possible risks and what can be done to meet them. This need not be from a long term view. I had not given any thought to the possibility of needing a pace-maker. How many people had expected the resignation of the NSW Premier? Many businesses failed to understand on-line sales.

These changes to the expected future have significant effect. What is required is the ability to deal with the unexpected. The world moves on and if we are to stay with it, we must always be able to effect change in ourselves to cope with it. This needs to be understood by every person, every business, every association, every organisation of any sort and by every government. The future is never a fixture.

Alan Scott, Continuing Education Officer