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Changing attitudes to the future in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-1990s a theoretical definition of future orientation was elaborated by Hungarian futurists Nováky, Hideg and Kappéter to conduct empirical research on the capacity of human foresight under given historical conditions. Future orientation is a way human thinking is manifested, where thoughts are filled with preconceptions, imagination and expectations. Our research has shown that the following component parts characterise future orientation: thinking about the future, applying regular social techniques to limit its uncertainty, actions taken in the interest of the future, and expectations concerning the future. Based on these component parts the future orientation of Hungarian society was studied empirically in 1995 and in 2006. Comparative analysis of the findings of the two surveys is presented below.

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1. Future orientation and its empiric study

Future orientation is a way human thinking manifests itself, where thoughts are filled with preconceptions, imagination and expectations. A characteristic feature of future orientation in people is when, at a certain level of their development, they become conscious of the differences and connections between the past, present and future. Future orientation is a necessary requirement of a person's general orientation and existence concerning events in their own environment, reasons, goals and consequences of their own actions.

In order to measure the future orientation of people, Nováky, Hideg and Kappéter developed and tested a detailed survey in the early 1990s [1]. The survey contained questions about what people thought about the future; what techniques they used to limit their uncertainty and instability about the future; their future-oriented actions and their related hopes and expectations. Analysing the answers we can observe whether future orientation and its component parts are present in human thinking, how these components relate to each other, and what characterises the different social groups.

The empirical background of the article is based on the findings of two national surveys. The surveys are among the few carried out by futurists for the purpose of discovering how laymen and different groups are viewing the future; to what extent they think they can influence it and what future-shaping notions young people use in their interpretation of the future [2–6]. A characteristic feature of our surveys was the future orientation and thinking of the target population in a country that has undergone sweeping political and democratic changes. The study focuses on how the attitude to the future has changed in Hungary in the span of the 10 years that have elapsed between the two surveys during a period of abundant change.

The first national representative survey was carried out in 1995, within the “Future” block of the Omnibus ISSP” survey, organized by the Hungarian Social Research Institute, TÁRKI. Data was collected for further research, with a representative sample of 1000 persons [7]. We repeated the survey in 2006 with the same questions, yet again with TÁRKI's “Omnibus”

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Table 1

Ways of thinking about the future in 1995 and in 2006 (in %).

Statements	Not true		Rather not true		Partially true		Completely true	
	1995	2006	1995	2006	1995	2006	1995	2006
Not caring about the future	19	27	22	33	33	28	24	12
The future depends on me	17	7	22	18	43	53	16	22
Cannot influence destiny	13	23	19	31	40	34	27	11
Look into the future with trust	16	9	19	19	38	46	27	26
Afraid of the future	23	34	19	20	32	28	24	9

survey. In 2006 the sample consisted of 1034 elements. Both samples were made with multilevel, proportionally stratified probability sampling. The level of confidence was 95% in both cases.

During the 11 years that have elapsed between the two surveys, we have witnessed a period of historical change in Hungary, the changing of the political system, both of which have seen how people's attitude towards the future has changed. In this study we present findings and related data of the survey conducted in 2006 and compare them with results of the earlier survey of 1995. TÁRKI did not use the same social group samples for the two surveys, therefore the comparison is not 100% conclusive.

2. Findings on components of future orientation

2.1. Ways of thinking about the future

We were curious about how people perceived the future, how much they felt the future depended on them, if they trusted in the future and whether they had fears about it.

We asked them to decide how true the following statements were:

- I do not care about the future.
- The future depends on me.
- I do not have much control over my destiny.
- I look into the future with trust.
- I am afraid of the future.

The scale of answers ranged from “Not true”, “Rather not true” and “Partially true” to “Completely true” (see Table 1).

In 2006 we found that 12% of respondents regarded it ‘completely true’ that they did not care about the future, 28% thought it to be partially true, making a total of 40% of respondents who did not care highly about the future. In contrast to this 27% were certain about caring about the future, and 33% were to some degree interested in the future. Comparing this with the results of 1995 we can see that the number of those who did not care at all, has halved by the year 2006, and those who did not really care has dropped by 15%. In 2006 the majority (60%) were conscious about caring about the future to some degree, while this ratio was only 41% in 1995.

In 2006, 22% of the respondents completely agreed with the statement that their own future depends on them, and 53% thought that it was partially true. In 2006, a total of 75% thought that their own future depended on them entirely or partially, while in 1995 this ratio was only 59%. In 2006, 72% of respondents trusted the future, while in 1995 only 65% did. The change in the ratio of those who were fearful of the future (totally or partly) gives rise to optimism: in 2006 it was only 37% fearful of the future, compared to 56% in 1995.

Summing up the answers to the five questions we have an overview of the expansion of future-oriented or future-shocked thinking. Future orientation can be assessed from the answers to the questions: do they care about the future, does the future depend on them, can they influence their destiny, and consequently do they trust in the future. A person can be regarded to have future shock, if he answered that he does not care about the future, the future does not depend on him and he does not trust in the future, but fears it. In summary: according to the results of the survey in 2006 some 23–27% of the respondents were deemed to be future-oriented, and 7–12% could be regarded as future-shocked. In comparison to the survey of 1995, these ratios were 13–27% and 17–24%. Between 1995 and 2006 the ratio of future orientation increased substantially by over 20%, while the ratio of future-shocked persons dropped by half, even though their number is still around 10%.

In the 2006 survey, the groups of future-oriented respondents bore the following characteristic features: male, under the age of 30, living in Central Hungary or in Eastern Hungary, with no regular income or with more than £500 monthly net income, with a degree in higher education or still studying, self-employed or entrepreneur, people without children, or a family of three or more living in one household. Characteristics of persons regarded to be future-shocked: seasonal workers or females, older than 55, single, living in South-Hungarian agricultural areas, earning less than net £230 per month, attended primary school only, unemployed (senior) managers (between 6% and 23%!) or having a large family of four or more children.

Table 2

Applicable techniques in 1995 and in 2006 to limit uncertainty of the future (in %).

Techniques	1995	2006	Change since 1995
Insurance	66	59	89
Savings	33	41	124
Lottery	33	29	88
Will	3	3	100

Despite some positive signs, the overall picture is still negative. The majority of respondents still feel uneasy and ambiguous about the future. They do not care highly about the future, although they think that their future depends on them as well. They feel they can only partially trust or influence their destiny and sometimes fear the future. In contrast to the 1995 survey the generic difference is apparent in respect of the respondents' relationship with the future, the firm group of future-shocked persons has increased in numbers to include seasonal workers who were unable to stabilise their living conditions. The self-employed and entrepreneurs, senior managers or above still think in extremities. The role of education has strengthened: only those with higher education have an extraordinarily high or low future-oriented thinking; whereas in 1995 this dividing line was drawn at secondary school certificate level. Regarding the future orientation of Hungarians, territorial differences can be connected more to regional factors than settlement types.

2.2. Techniques to reduce uncertainty of the future

In order to limit the uncertainty of future events we have indicated four possible and applicable techniques: (1) insurance policy, (2) savings, (3) a will, and (4) lottery games (see Table 2).

In 2006, 59% of the respondents had some kind of insurance policy. Since 1995 voluntary pension funds and many other types of insurance have appeared on the Hungarian market. Despite changes, the number of people holding some kind of insurance has dropped by 11%. Another substantial change is that people living in the capital (Budapest) have fewer insurance policies than the rural population, and there are marked regional differences. The situation has significantly improved with regard to savings: in 2006, 41% of respondents were indicated as having some savings, while in 1995 this was only 33% with a lower dispersion. Students and inactive persons (many pensioners) did not have savings in 1995, and by 2006 their numbers has increased to include vocational workers, families living five or more in one household, and those raising four or more children. In 2006 only a few people were indicated as having a will, similar to 1995. The ratio of those having written a will in 1995 was the lowest in the Southern Trans-Danubia region, while in 2006 it was lowest in the region of East-Central Hungary. Inclination to play the lottery demonstrates how people relate to (blind) luck and/or favourable incidence. The answers show that 29% trust in their luck, which is 12% less than 11 years ago. We do not think this is a significant change, because many other kinds of gambling opportunities have been made available since.

The spread of techniques used to limit the uncertainty of the future did not increase between 1995 and 2006. There is a small drop in the number of insurances, but savings have risen. At least 40–60% of the respondents did not apply any technique to limit their uncertainty of the future, but there is a small minority which applies a wide range of techniques. Using techniques is subject to income, and the strata of the population that applies no such techniques probably have low incomes.

2.3. Actions for the future

Our questions concerning actions taken to improve the future were focusing on what the respondents were doing to achieve a better and happier life in the next 10 years (see Table 3).

In 2006, 26% admitted that they were not doing anything for the future, and 8% had not even thought about it. Thus 34% of respondents had not made any conscious plans for the future in 2006, while this was only 13% in 1995. The numbers have doubled in the past 11 years, and the ratio of persons consciously not acting for the future has risen by nearly 50%, from 23% to 34%.

In 2006, 66% of the sample groups were doing something for the future. Their activities included: working, studying, caring for their health and their family, searching for work, saving money, being entrepreneurs, building relationships, praying, gambling, etc. If we do not count other activities, the first six actions mentioned are similar in both surveys. The two main differences are, firstly: the mention of extra work as an activity for the future has decreased from 25% to 15%; secondly:

Table 3

Acting for the future (in %).

Measure of activity for the future	1995	2006	Change since 1995
Doing something	77	66	86
Not doing anything	13	26	200
Not knowing whether doing something	10	8	80

Table 4

Expectations regarding the future in 1995 and in 2006 (in %).

Expectations on	Improving		Declining		Not changing		Not be alive by then		Do not know	
	1995	2006	1995	2006	1995	2006	1995	2006	1995	2006
Your financial status	31	39	20	21	17	24	12	4	20	12
Your family's financial status	34	48	23	19	16	21	3	–	24	11
Your friend's financial status	25	33	24	21	15	21	2	1	34	24
Financial status of Hungary	25	33	31	29	12	19	1	–	31	19
Your happiness	38	52	17	18	–	–	13	6	32	24
Your family's happiness	42	59	18	17	–	–	2	1	38	23

caring for their health has become more popular in 2006 than caring for the family, probably because the number of those caring for their family has dropped by half since 1995. Analysing the data by social groups is apparent that those who are not taking any action for the future are likely to be older people, singles or persons with a large family, those who have completed only elementary school, who have a low average income, employed labourers, or those living in the Northern Plains. A person willing to take action for the future bears the following characteristics: young, living in Central Trans-Danubia, with a relatively high (monthly) income, with higher education or still studying, has never worked, has no children, or living five or more in one household.

2.4. Expectations regarding the future

The questionnaire was also extended to include the likely change of financial status and expectations of happiness in the next 10 years. Questions concerning financial status were extended to look at changes both at individual and family level, among friends and the wider Hungarian population, in the coming 10 years. Questions regarding happiness referred to personal and family life. The response options were improving, declining, not changing, shall not be alive (by then) or do not know (see Table 4).

Finance related anticipation showed a positive picture in 2006: 48% expected financial improvement in their families and 39% of their own status, but only one-third expected this for their friends and other Hungarians. 19–24% thought that the situation would not change (most of them referring to their own status), and 19–29% expected a decline (mostly at national level). The majority expected to see an improvement in their family's financial status (all other answers were negligible). Regarding personal financial future, most of the respondents thought it would improve, however every fourth person thought that it would not change. Respondents were ambiguous about the financial status of the country in 10 years time: those who hoped in the improvement of Hungary's financial status were represented at nearly the same ratio (33%) as those who thought it would decline (29%).

In 2006, expectations concerning the future were much more optimistic than in 1995. The ratio of those who expected improvement or stagnation has risen significantly, while the number of those who thought the financial status would decline is limited to 6–17%. The number of those who did not know the answer to their future financial status has also dropped indicating that people are more conscious of these issues.

Regarding personal financial status, students are most optimistic, including younger generations, those who have no income or have a higher income, the unemployed or idle, who live together four in one household, who have no children and are living in Northern Hungary. Most pessimistic are the seasonal workers, those who have four or more children, female, who earn between £130 and £230 as net monthly income, who are inactive for other reasons, who live together two in one household, and those living in the capital, Budapest. Persons most optimistic about improvement of the financial status of their family include young people, students, persons with high monthly income, the childless, the intellectuals, or those living in Central and Western Trans-Danubia or Northern Hungary. Persons anticipating a decline in the financial status of their family is typical in the case of seasonal workers, those who have four or more children, who have a maximum £65 or between £130 and £236 as net monthly income, the self-employed and entrepreneurs, those who have only attended elementary school or are inactive for other reasons, and live in Southern Trans-Danubia.

Regarding the future financial status of friends, most optimistic were groups with the highest income, students, and those living in Central Trans-Danubia. Most pessimistic are those who are inactive for other reasons, seasonal workers, those earning less than net £130 per month, and living in Southern Trans-Danubia.

Concerning the financial status of Hungary, persons with the highest monthly income, the young, the childless, those living in Central Trans-Danubia or Northern Hungary were trustful about improvements, but seasonal workers, the self-employed and entrepreneurs, or those who are inactive for other reasons, and who have less than £130 net monthly income most expected a decline in Hungary's financial status.

Expectations regarding personal happiness have definitely run high since 1995. 52% of respondents hoped they would be happy in 10 years time, which is 37% higher than it was in 1995. The ratio of those who expected to be less happy within 10 years is the same as it was earlier, 18% vs. 17%. Increasing personal happiness was expected mostly by the young, or by people with no income or one higher than £330 net monthly, those with higher education, employees, the self-employed and

entrepreneurs, the childless, those who live together four or more in one household, and live in Western Trans-Danubia. A low level of personal happiness is expected mostly by the middle-aged, who live in Southern Hungary, who have completed only elementary school, seasonal workers and the unemployed, pensioners, who have low or average monthly income, singles, and families with one, four or more children.

In 2006, 59% of respondents were trustful about increasing happiness in their family's life, which is 41% higher compared to the data of 1995. Nevertheless the ratio of those who think that their family's happiness would diminish has not changed, it is still around 18%. This includes the young, and those who have more than £500 as net monthly income, persons who only have a secondary school certificate, students, those who live in Western Trans-Danubia, and live together three or four in one household. Those who have low or very high monthly income, or who have finished only elementary school, the seasonal workers, the pensioners, those who have four or more children, and live in the Southern Trans-Danubia share the view that the happiness of their family would reduce/diminish in the coming years.

In 2006, there was a 7% difference between the ratios of those trusting in their family's happiness, including their own future happiness. Individual happiness was less expected. This kind of manifestation of family-orientation has not changed significantly since 1995. The relationship between financial status and happiness has declined: in 2006 people were most likely to hope for happiness (33%) rather than an improvement of their financial status. Those who trusted in the improvement of their family's financial status has decreased by 23% as compared to those who hoped for the increasing happiness of their family—these differences were only 23% and 24% in 1995. Expectation of personal future happiness has increased by 8%, while this ratio regarding the family has not changed compared to 1995.

3. How typical social groups related to the future, in 2006

In order to make visible the varying attitudes of Hungarians to the future, we merged the answers from different components of future orientation. This method also enables the observation of how each social group relates to the future, and which social groups can be regarded as future-oriented or future-shocked. We made this comparison by giving equal significance to all answers, i.e. by persons regarded to be future-oriented, those expecting improvements in the financial status and their happiness, those who act for the future and who apply techniques to limit the uncertainty of the future. The same method was applied to study future shock, by way of operating with the following answers: persons whose thoughts reflect future shock, who expect decline in the future, who do not act consciously (or at all) for the future, and who do not use techniques to limit the uncertainty of the future. The result of this validation is that the young, those who have more than £500 monthly income, intellectuals, those who have higher education, students, self-employed and entrepreneurs, who live together four in one household and who live in Central Trans-Danubia mostly have a future-oriented attitude. In contrast to this, those who relate to the future with future shock are mostly seasonal workers, those who have attended only primary school, who earn between £65 and £130 as monthly income, who have four or more children, who are inactive for other reasons, and who live in Southern Trans-Danubia.

Unfortunately we cannot entirely compare the data of 2006 with those collected in 1995, due to the change in the social groups who participated in the second survey. Despite this, we observed some substantial changes:

- In 1995 the possession of a certificate of secondary education played a determining role, while in 2006 this dividing line has moved up to higher education diploma.
- In 1995 the most future-oriented were those who had average or a high monthly income, but in 2006 only those who had a high monthly income were future-oriented.
- The number of seasonal workers (or unemployed) has risen significantly between 1995 and 2006, and they form the core of the future-shocked persons.

Based on the results of 2006, we have filtered the groups of the future-oriented, the future-shocked, and those who do not have a positive attitude to the future. We were curious to know what typical ways exist in people's attitude to the future, and how it is manifested. To explore this question, we made a cluster analysis, and we found four groups: "rational optimists", "commonly passive", "pessimistic parents" and persons "without hope".

The "*rational optimists*" constitute 38% of the sample group. They are convinced that they can influence their destiny, they care for the future to a degree, and are confident about it. They do not fear the future, they strongly believe that their own financial status and that of their family will improve within 10 years, or will not worsen. Only 50% of these people were confident about the improvement of their friends' or others people's financial status. Despite this they are the most optimistic, as they are confident about happiness for themselves and their family. The group of optimists includes people with higher or secondary degree education, but also students and people who have never worked before. Older people and pensioners are underrepresented in this group. There are more males than females among the optimists. In comparison to other groups, they are better-off financially: most of them earn between £230 and £500 average monthly, although only every second person from the group of persons with highest income belong to this group. Possession of modern electronic equipment, e.g. a PC, Internet-access, cell-phone, a car, dishwasher, microwave or hi-fi equipment, by members of this group are over-represented compared to others. They care about their future rationally: they are more likely to have insurance policies than others and they have substantial savings.

The “commonly passive” make up 31% of the respondents. Their characteristic feature is that they do not care about the future. Regarding their expectations they prefer stability and avoid changes in all areas of life, they do not believe in either improvement or in decline. Most of them earn between £130 and £330 monthly income, but a significant number belongs to the highest income group. They are the second best equipped with household appliances and entertainment electronics. In all other aspects they are average.

The group of “pessimistic parents” is formed by 20% of the respondents. They do not believe that the future depends on them, and they do not trust in the future. They do not believe they can influence their destiny, although they care about the future. This is mostly anxiety, because they are afraid of the years ahead. Their relation to the future is negative and pessimistic in all aspects. They expect their financial status to worsen, they also anticipate a decline or stagnation in the financial situation of others. They lag behind the average also in applying techniques to limit uncertainty of the future. The average monthly income of most members in this group is between £65 and £500, with a large dispersion. They usually own a house of high value, and they possess consumer durables rather than entertainment equipment. As to education level; most of them have a vocational or secondary school certificate.

The group of persons “without hope” comprised 10% of the respondents. They relate negatively to the future in every aspect, they do not trust nor care about it. They think they are unable to influence their destiny which is beyond their reach, and they are very much afraid of the future. They expect all-round decline, but mostly for their family. Notably, this is the only group where members expect the worsening of their family circumstances rather than their own. Members of this group predominantly think that they would not be alive in the next 10 years, despite the fact that many of them were relatively young. Most of these people did not receive any kind of (vocational) training, or finished only a vocational school. The majority are single or live two in one household, and there are slightly more females than males among them. The number of workers is relatively low among them, and seasonal workers or pensioners have higher ratio here than in other groups. Those who do work are probably labourers. Most of them receive between £130 and £330 monthly income, and they do not usually have either savings or an insurance policy. Their household is mostly poorly equipped.

The typical future-oriented or future-shocked person belongs either to the group of “rational optimists” or to the persons “without hope”. The ultimate future-oriented person cares about the future, acts for the future, and is optimistic about the future. A future-shocked person is typically not interested in, not acting for, and not expecting anything from the future. The group of “pessimistic parents” also includes future-shocked members, and most people who belong to this group are at risk of becoming future-shocked. The future does not exist for the “commonly passive” who make up one-third of the sample. They do not care about the future, do not attempt to change their situation, and do not expect the future to bring any change for them. This negative attitude to the future may be explained by the low numbers in Hungarian society who consciously plan for their future. Characteristic features of the four groups illustrate that attitudes towards the future is determined not only by personality, but also by other factors, such as education, financial and wealth status, work, marital status, and human relationships. All this has an overall influence and mutual effect on society.

4. Changes in attitudes to the future between 1995 and 2006

Between 1995 and 2006 the thinking of Hungarians showed remarkable positive changes concerning the future. The majority of Hungarians who consider the future do not always think positively or with foresight. In the course of the past 10 years it is the changes in how the majority view the future with less fear and their ability to influence it that is seen as positive. It would seem that future-oriented thinking and positive expectations has not become widespread among Hungarians. The reason behind this, according to our survey is that people are unaware of what they could be doing for their future, if at all. Those who do think they are doing something for the future, do not make efforts to think beyond their own and their family's future.

It is a welcome development that civic techniques (e.g. private insurance policies, savings, acquiring wealth and property) are being notably applied, which are designed to alleviate economic difficulties and risks, inherent in market economies. It is a regrettable feature however that at least half of Hungarians are still unaware of these techniques, instead relying on luck or other perchance happenings.

In the years following the political changes in the mid-1990s a fraction of the population still showed no interest in their future, presumably on grounds of the socialist belief that the state would continue to provide for a better future. They were under the impression that the new government to be elected to power would do its best for their citizens and for the country's future. During the past 10 years, the ratio of persons disregarding the future has fallen. A reason behind this could be the dying out of old concepts and generations, but also the realisation of the need for personal responsibility in the light of increased liberties and declining state provisions, brought about by the political changes. It is also a fact that these changes did not bring an improvement in the life of many, who in turn are now living ‘from hand to mouth’. They do not see a scope for any change or action for their future and therefore cannot see how their situation can either improve or worsen.

The massive presence of persons regarded to be future-shocked can be observed in Hungarian society. They are those who lived in hopelessness and deprivation during the socialist era, who could neither adapt nor take advantage of the new conditions after the political changes in the country. These people are mostly poorly educated, unemployed, seasonal workers, pensioners or with low income.

It is regrettable that large families (with three or more children) did not demonstrate a favourable change in their future orientation in the past decade. They are concerned about the future, but because they have little or no faith in their ability to

influence it they are very pessimistic about its outcome. This is alarming because children growing up in such a family environment will not obtain the intellectual, emotional and mental background necessary for them to become future-oriented, responsible adults and active citizens.

The past decade since the political changes in Hungary had brought great differentiation in future attitudes. Young or middle age generations of the 1990s were capable of safekeeping (or acquiring) future-orientation, they are mostly well educated, with higher than average income. Individual and family prosperity is in the focal point of their future orientation, they have some degree of interest for the future of their community and country, but they do not consider doing (or are willing to do) anything about it.

In summary, between 1995 and 2006, the attitude of Hungarians to the future has improved in some aspects while becoming more unfavourable in others. It is a favourable development that thinking about the future has become more widespread, future attitudes are more active and less frightening, expectations concerning the future have improved considerably. However, worsening trends have also been observed in the handling of future uncertainty and risk management. Future-oriented actions and concepts are very limited and a growing number of children are raised in families fearing the future (or future-shocked). Given the fact that an increasingly wide strata of the Hungarian population is affected by the unwelcome attitudes towards the future, society has become more vulnerable to imminent changes and challenges. Based on the two sample surveys we can state that during the past decade Hungarian society has not yet learned to face changes, or learned to think in a future-oriented way, or to elaborate life strategies that work towards an acceptable, tenable future. Considering that schooling in itself strengthens future-orientation and related thinking, it is therefore recommended to encourage and expand the teaching to deal a lot with the future, to strengthen future orientation and respect of future studies, in order to accelerate related social learning processes in Hungary.

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