The critical posthumanities and postqualitative inquiry in psychology

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Not applicable.

Acknowledgements

We thank the editors of QRiP for their support during the curation of the special issue. We also thank all the contributors and their reviewers for their time and good work.

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Abstract

This article inaugurates a special issue on the critical posthumanities and postqualitative inquiry in psychology. Within the discipline, more of us agree that we dislike these "post" approaches than can tell what they are about. The solution we propose is not to make the "posts" more likable for psychologists, but to make a case for disliking them better. To move in such direction, one must become skilled in the art of appreciation, or connoisseurship. There is no necessary relationship between appreciating the "posts" and liking them. However, adopting the role of connoisseur requires risking one's prejudices and ideas of what is and is not good inquiry in psychology. We invite the readers to adopt this role. Such invitation is followed by some thoughts about the process and product of the special issue, which aims to support connoisseurship and answers essential questions about the critical postumanities and postqualitative inquiry, while originating new ones. We hope this work contributes to foster appreciation and expand the horizons of qualitative psychology moving forward.

Keywords: posthumanism, post qualitative inquiry, poststructuralism, qualitative psychology, ontological turn, new materialism

The standard approach to qualitative research, or what St. Pierre (2021) called conventional humanist qualitative methodology, has been recently challenged by the growing field of postqualitative inquiry (PQI) and, more broadly, by the critical posthumanities. Davies (2018) described PQI as "a play on words that invites us to move beyond the conceptual limitations of current qualitative research" and that "simultaneously invokes and works with the various 'post' philosophies, including posthumanism, that have emerged over the last 30 years" (p. 114). Braidotti (2019, p. 339) referred to the critical posthumanities as the convergence of posthumanism (i.e., "a critique of the humanist ideal of Man as the allegedly universal measure of all things") and post-anthropocentrism (i.e., "the rejection of species hierarchy and human exceptionalism").

The relevance of PQI and the critical posthumanities for psychology was first considered in an article entitled *Humanism after posthumanism: or qualitative psychology after the "posts"*. In this seminal article, Brinkmann (2017) stated that qualitative psychologists "can and must accept much of the ontological theorising conducted under the postqualitative and posthumanist banners" (p. 127). By this, he did not mean to suggest that humanism and qualitative research conventions ought to be abandoned for once and for all ("I believe [qualitative research] is too valuable to be thrown out with the postqualitative bathwater"). Likewise, he was far from implying that qualitative psychologists should make the quick turn to the "posts" ("I believe the task now should not be for all of us to become "postqualitative" but rather to reinterpret our qualitative practices… after the postqualitative critique"). More recently, Gough (2021, no page) expressed the same opinion: "Rather than belittle and disregard

‘mainstream’ qualitative methods, surely we must advocate a re-imagined qualitative research programme informed but not cowed by post-qualitative agitators”.

Agitators or “troublemakers” (Aagard, 2022) are suitable descriptors of “post” scholars. That is what scholars who engage with the critical posthumanities and PQI attempt to do: trouble the common sense of humanism and throw the historically established categories of standard qualitative methodology into radical doubt. To do so, they cross wires that do not usually touch, taking major concepts and reading them in a short-circuiting way through the lens of “minor” philosophies. Žižek (2006, ix) clarified that “’minor’ should be understood here in Deleuze’s sense: not of ‘lesser quality’, but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic” approach. Importantly, the aspiration of minor inquiry is not to leave the major behind, or to replace it with a new, better, and more accurate foundation for knowledge or regime of truth. As Aagard (2022) remarked, the prefix “post” in posthumanism and PQI does not indicate a complete desertion from humanism and qualitative research, but a will to deconstruct these projects.

It is worth reminding that deconstruction does not mean destruction. To deconstruct “is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most important, to open up a term, like ‘the subject,’ to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized” (Butler, 1992, p. 165). Let us display a deconstructive reading of the term that Butler used as an example, ‘the subject’. Conventional qualitative research treats the human subject as the privileged starting point and center of knowledge production. As Nordstrom (2013) noted, this research “is subject-centered in that it primarily uses face-to-face methods such as interviews and participant observation to draw information from people in order to produce knowledge about people and try to understand the meaning they make of their lived experiences.”

(p. 243). Importantly, people are assumed to be stable, unitary, and conscious beings who are ontologically separate and different from non-human beings. We humans inhabit a dualist world, in which we have an innate capacity to act according to our free will, whereas things and objects are inert and passive, waiting to be acted upon. Poststructuralist and critical posthumanist scholars do not negate or repudiate the subject, the person, but they insert it in non-dualistic ontological frameworks. For example, a Deleuzian ontology rejects boundaries between subject and object and highlights the interdependency between human and non-human worlds. From this ontology, the subject is "still there but now inextricably entangled with the non-human" (Pickering, 1995, p. 26). Human and non-human entities "reside on the same level of existence" (Goodley, 2023, p. 15). There are no essential distinctions between them. A person, a building, a song, a cat, a computer, they are different, of course, but the difference does not precede their relations: it emerges from them. Such a flattening of the distinctions between non/humans has implications for the practice of research. As Mazzei (2013) explained, "interview data, the voices of participants, cannot be thought as emanating from an essentialist subject nor can they be separated from the enactment in which they are produced" (p. 732). Postqualitative scholars such as St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) would argue that, at this point, and given the preceding arguments, the structure of qualitative methodology is already ruined, and there needs to "work the ruins" of that methodology to inquire differently.

In addition to 'the subject', other qualitative terms that have been deconstructed include: agency, authenticity, analysis, coding, interview, experience, representation, narrative, ethnography, empathy, voice, data, validity, and reflexivity. We might assume that these deconstructions have occurred only recently, for instance in Mazzei and Jackson's (2019) work. However, as St. Pierre (2014) reminded us, the work begun in

the early 1990s. In 1995, she wrote: “I believe the persistent critique urged by poststructuralism [i.e., deconstruction] enables a transition from traditional methodology to something different and am not too concerned at this time with naming what might be produced” (p. 209). It took her 16 years to name it PQI. Although the descriptor is and will always be inadequate (this is something that St. Pierre herself has recognized), it has nevertheless been effective to pique the interest of certain scholars that were and were not familiar with “post” philosophies. Benozzo (2021) wrote the following:

> I am always surprised by the magic power of words. These three words, post qualitative research, are a term for which the time has come; they grasped an exigence, a sensibility, a desire, and an ongoing process, to work and research in a new, provocative, and relevant way (…) When I started to read those three words in St. Pierre’s writing (2011), they affected me; they were exciting, an energy. It was as if those three words were capturing and condensing a lot of processes/feeling/thoughts which in the last few years were inhabiting my body-mind.

A number of qualitative researchers across the social sciences and the academic humanities have at some point shared Benozzo’s feelings (Camiré, 2022; Murris, 2021). Others have not been as enthusiastic, but still deemed PQI “a promising, humane, and hopeful trajectory for our future” that adds to an “already rich legacy” (Kumm & Berbary, 2018, p. 71). The critical posthumanities have equally resonated in diverse disciplines, interpellating some to be the sort of scholars who should pay attention to it. Scholars in education (Zembylas, 2017), anthropology (Martí Pérez & Enguix Grau, 2022), geography (Miele & Bear, 2022), sociology (Vallee, 2024), and sport and exercise sciences (Giardina, 2017), to name a few disciplines, have shown interest in the varied discussions surrounding PQI and the turn to posthuman ontology. While such

discussions might not be central in all these disciplines, they have sparked considerable curiosity and continue to attract new followers.

By way of contrast, these discussions have ostensibly failed to appeal to qualitative psychologists, who have left PQI and the critical posthumanities "to float in the river of not-for-me" (Frank, 2006, p. 424). The general perception is that "the old ways are better than the new" (Denzin, 1996). Compared to other qualitative fields, it could be said that qualitative psychology is "old-fashioned", in the sense that qualitative psychologists are quite attached to what Brinkmann (2015) called "Good Old-Fashioned Qualitative Inquiry", that is, the standard humanist approach to qualitative research found in the mainstream literature. This is understandable, if we consider that conventional qualitative research and the psychological humanities are just beginning to be established in psychology after decades of marginalization (Brinkmann, 2017; Michell, 2003; Teo, 2017). In this context, qualitative psychologists may ask: Why is it that just at the moment when we begin to establish our position in psychology, that just then qualitative research is decentred? Why should we saw the branch on which we are sitting? These are valid questions.

The problem is that, quite frequently, the above questions are rooted in a "protectionist paradigmatic behaviour" (Weed, 2009). By this we mean that they are formulated with the purpose of shutting out critical and alternative views and keeping qualitative psychology intact. The truth is qualitative psychologists are susceptible to act protectively and dismiss unconventional views as not relevant. As Virginia Braun expressed, qualitative psychologists "can be territorial. They have a clear vision of what they want qualitative research to be, and anything that falls outside of that provokes a strong reaction" (Braun et al., p. 152). To be sure, there is nothing wrong in defending humanism and the qualitative stance, or with animating such defence trough critiquing

the critical posthumanities and PQI, or "troubling the troublemakers" (Aagard, 2022). Over the last years, reasonable critiques have been made to the "posts" (Bhattacharya, 2021; Mayes, 2019; Osborne & Rose, 2024). We celebrate them. Like Wolgemuth et al. (2022, p. 589), we ourselves "find much to criticize about where post-qual is going—or at least where it's been taken and what is allowed in its name." In short: we are not living a romance with the "posts"; we do not unconditionally defend what they produce; and we do not feel offended or uncomfortable when they are severely criticised.

We do, on the other hand, feel quite uneasy when expressions of contempt towards PQI and the critical posthumanities are grounded on misunderstandings, fallacies, and "vulgar simplifications" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 10). Earlier this year, we watched an interview to Andreas Malm in which he carelessly categorised new materialism (a theoretical approach linked with PQI) as "bullshit". Intrigued, we searched about his views about new materialism, and we found a chapter that, quite evidently, epitomised the fallacy reductio ad absurdum (reduction to absurdity). By that time, Skivenen (2023) had already explained that Malm's account "builds largely on a rhetoric of ridicule" (p. 186) and constitutes "the textbook definition of a straw man" (p. 188). Skivenen's arguments are complex. Suffice to say that new materialism is framed as absurd because its propositions are evaluated through different and incommensurable epistemic premises, like trying to look at an orange through the image of an apple.

The case of Malm reminded us to a lecture available on YouTube in which a recognised intellectual equated postmodern philosophy with those who "are dissociated from anything that is happening", defend that "you can beat people over the head with perfect self-confidence because there is no reality anyway and it's just their narrative and your narrative", and affirm that "there's no truth, and so on and so forth". Not only

these assertions are believed but also propagate easily. In the comments section of the video, we can find interchanges such as the following:

> **Comment**
>
> "You can beat people over the head with perfect self-confidence because there is no reality anyway and it's just their narrative and your narrative". Postmodernism in a nutshell.
>
> > **Reply 1**
> >
> > That's the sentence that I was going to pick as the most instructive.
> >
> > **Reply 2**
> >
> > no that's not what postmodernism is. sorry. read a book.
> >
> > **Reply 3**
> >
> > Books are not real.

Many colleagues of ours, academics and non-academics who have not studied the "posts" at all, have assumed and reproduced this kind of straw-person arguments. They repeat casually that the "posts" are "faddish folderol" (Dunnette, 1966), "fashionable nonsense" (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999; Prus 1996) and "academic posing" (Badley, 2016). Why? Because stereotyping the "posts" as relativistic, useless, irrational, dehumanising, nihilistic, neglectful, and intentionally obscure is not only a way to avoid looking into them more deeply, but also a way to reinforce a sense of affiliation with the stance that the "posts" are attempting to trouble. Within psychology, this is often called partisan bias. Let us assure that, in making these points, we do not mean to ignore that there are scholars and practices associated with the "posts" who align with or exhibit characteristics that fit the negative stereotype described above. The problem with stereotypes, reminded Adichie (2009), is not that they are untrue; rather, the problem is that they are incomplete. They offer us an oversimplified picture that is easier to judge and disregard. A picture that is not accurate and not ethical. As St. Pierre

(2000, p. 498) stated, “easy understanding and easy dismissal are both careless, even unethical practices” and expose an unwillingness to spend time and energy reading hard philosophical texts that both describe and question our attachments -in this case, to the structures of humanist knowledge, to conventional research methodologies.

To create an adequate picture of PQI and the critical posthumanities, we have to spend a long time reading. This is axiomatic, as Kuecker (2021) explained. At the outset, the reading should not be rushed; there should be a grace period to come to grips with ideas that are yet unthinkable. During this period, readers should be allowed to “resist the urge to seek what Jameson has appropriately called ‘the mischief of premature clarification’” (Buchanan, 2020, p. 7), and dwell for a while in uncertainty. This unpractical time for preparation, however, threatens the “rapid-fire and ever-accelerating pace of academic production” (Gildersleeve, 2018, p. 699). On this, Ulmer (2020) commented the following: “As scholars are pushed to produce more, faster, these sorts of introductions can easily fall by the wayside. Consequently, we can end up disturbing inquiry traditions that we may not yet grasp, as we did not first become properly acquainted”. (p. 1). Nietzsche (1910) put it even better: “Because time to think and tranquillity in thought are lacking, we no longer ponder over different views, but content ourselves with hating them” (p. 258).

We would argue that qualitative psychologists who hate (or dislike, if hate sounds too strong) PQI and the critical posthumanities should not content themselves with that feeling. By this, we do not mean that they should strive to love (or like) them, as happened to Ulmer (“I continued to resist (…) But then, I began to more closely read key posthuman scholarship. Surprisingly, there was much to like”, 2017, p. 834). Instead, we suggest that they should attempt to become better “adversaries” of the “posts”, if what they want is to stick to humanist qualitative methodology. Unlike

enemies, adversaries can dislike the “posts” and contest their propositions while respecting, or even admiring them (Monforte & Smith, 2021). This goes beyond indifferent superficial tolerance and involves an effort to learn to dislike the “posts” properly. The plea that Lerner’s (2016) made in his book on the hatred of poetry fits like a glove: “All I ask the haters -and I, too, am one- is that they strive to perfect their contempt.” (p. 85). Through putting effort on perfecting our contempt, the contempt can be transformed. It is still contempt, but it too turns into something else: a form of appreciation. Appreciation here means attention to and awareness of nuance and detail. Eisner (1991) wrote about the importance of basing our judgements on appreciation, rather than prejudices. He emphasised that “there is no necessary relationship between appreciating something and liking it” (p. 68). To appreciate the qualities of “the posts”, for example, means to experience such qualities and to understand something about them. “It also includes making judgments about their value”. One can appreciate the weaknesses of the “posts” as well as their strengths, but nothing in that appreciation requires that our judgments be positive. “What is required (or desired) is that our experience be subtle, complex, and informed” (pp. 68–69). While appreciating “the posts” might not lead us to like them, approaching them more rigorously, perhaps though a more “rigorous confusion” (Atkinson, 2001), can possibly teach us something good. We then might be in a position to recite this 1967’s poem by Marianne Moore:

> I, too, dislike it.
> Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in
> it, after all, a place for the genuine.

It must be acknowledged, however, that reading to discover in PQI and the critical posthumanities a place for the genuine is now more challenging than ever. Given

the faster rate at which ongoing debates are developing, they are difficult to enter with each passing publication (Lee Carlson et al., 2021; Ulmer, 2017). Although we cannot help qualitative psychologists escape the labour of reading, we want to facilitate their access to the propositions, tensions, and ambiguities that reside within the critical posthumanities and PQI at present time, but also to bring these fields closer to qualitative psychologists' concerns. We do this by offering a special issue, which is entitled as the present article.

Our job as editors of this special issue has been done from the standpoint of the connoisseur. We are neither experts nor advocates of the "posts". We are not "post" scholars. Rather, like curious kids who want to see what happens when mentos are thrown inside a bottle of coke, we wanted to see what happens when qualitative psychology meets the critical posthumanties and PQI, and the other way around. We also envisioned the special issue as an opportunity to revisit both our sympathy and contempt for the critical posthumanities and PQI, and to ask once again some fundamental questions that are actually quite confusing, but necessary to navigate the subject. Here are but a few:

- What is the so-called "humanism" that posthumanists are turning away from through critique?
- What is the so-called "conventional qualitative research" approach that postqualitative scholars are trying to deconstruct?
- What can PQI and the critical posthumanities contribute to psychological knowledge?
- What is the relation between the critical posthumanities, PQI, and scientific inquiry?
- Is the subject model developed from "post" theories suitable for studying the subject in psychology?
- Are there any truly substantial reasons for considering PQI and the critical posthumanities in psychology, or is this merely a passing trend?
- What does it mean to be a good postqualitative researcher?
- How does a specific example of PQI scholarship look like in action?

- How can posthuman and postanthropocentric thinking inform psychology research and practice?
- What are the ethical, methodological, and political implications of the critical posthumanities and PQI?
- How can conventional and post qualitative researchers work together to enrich qualitative psychology?

We used these questions as prompts in our call for papers. We did not expect authors to answer the questions directly, or to cover them all. We posed them to indicate the scope of the discussion; authors were given freedom to circumnavigate them or play with them. We received few but promising abstracts. We accepted the ones that, in our view, had the potential to situate the critical posthumanities and PQI in psychology and situate psychology as a place for contemporary debates about humanism and qualitative inquiry.

While curating the special issue, we had the privilege of reading exceptional manuscripts. We invited scholars within psychology to review them, but since PQI is only beginning to emerge in this domain, we too relied on scholars in other disciplines such as education, sociology, anthropology, geography, and philosophy. We extend our gratitude to every reviewer for uplifting all the manuscripts and pulling our thought to different directions. We have learned much from them and by observing some common threads across their comments. Notably, reviewers emphasised the importance of respectfully engaging with the theoretical approaches under critique, whether humanist or posthumanist. In this regard, the authors were asked to revise their tone, bolster their arguments with additional references, refine their points, and above all, engage in closer reading to avoiding oversimplifications. This kind of requirements are difficult to meet, as they often require reading an entire corpus of an author's work to change just a couple of sentences. We commend the authors for their patience and diligence in

addressing them. Another common concern for reviewers was incommensurability. When authors attempted to bridge humanist and posthumanist systems of thought, they put a word of caution. They also asked authors to be extremely careful when using postqualitative terms and authors such as assemblage (Deleuze) and intra-action (Barad) in the same article (Hein, 2016; Murris & Bozalek, 2019). Again, close reading was required. And the authors delivered.

In closing this article, we want to resist the impulse of presenting a summary or regurgitation of each article composing the special issue. We invite readers to use their time wisely and read the articles themselves. We assure that they will be challenged, as we have ourselves been, to think about the history of psychology (how we are reading it, and how it is unfolding at present), about ontology, epistemology, and ethics, about ideas such as personhood, wellbeing and identity politics, and about qualitative traditions like ethnography and phenomenology. To reiterate an important point, we do not care if qualitative psychologists and other readers *like* these papers. We do hope, though, that they *appreciate* them, and that they find in them a useful resource to enhance their appreciation of the critical poshumanities and PQI moving forward. Simply put, we hope that this special issue contributes to developing a finer judgement about the critical posthumanities and PQI within, and perhaps beyond, psychology.

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