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Or qualitative psychology after the "posts"

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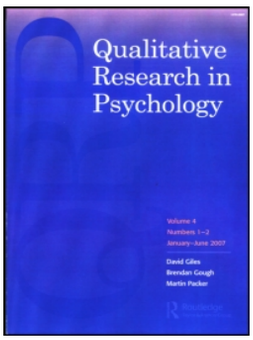

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Humanism after posthumanism: or qualitative psychology after the "posts"

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ABSTRACT

Almost 25 years ago, psychologist and qualitative methodologist Steinar Kvale conjectured that psychology might become obsolete or redundant in a postmodern age due to the modernist legacies of this science. This, of course, has not materialized, but the question of redundancy reemerges today in new philosophical guises related to the rise of posthumanist philosophy and what has come to be known as postqualitative research. In this article, I aim to (1) introduce the posthuman and postqualitative critique of conventional qualitative research with an eye to its relevance for psychology, (2) introduce a distinction between ontological and advocacy issues concerning the post qualitative critique in order to (3) propose the idea that qualitative psychologists can accept much of the ontological theorizing developed by posthuman and postqualitative scholars, and yet advocate a humanist agenda for both scientific and ethical reasons. Historically, this was attempted by pragmatists such as James and Dewey. In short, the goal of the article is to sketch the contours of a qualitative psychology after the postqualitative critique, amounting to a form of humanism after posthumanism.

KEYWORDS

Advocacy; humanism; ontology; postqualitative research; posthumanism; pragmatism

Introduction

It is well-known that qualitative inquiry has long been challenged by the what-works movement and the whole quest for quantitative evidence as the gold standard of scientific practice. Recently, however, qualitative inquiry has been challenged from within by what has come to be known as "postqualitative research" (St. Pierre 2011) and a related "posthuman" critique of key qualitative terms such as experience, voice, subjectivity, and investigative and analytical practices such as interviewing and coding. The critics claim these terms and practices are related to an anthropocentric project that privileges the experiencing and acting self, which we ought to abandon for both ethical and ontological reasons. Critics often find inspiration in the posthuman and new materialist philosophies of thinkers such as Karen Barad (2007), Donna Haraway (1991), and Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze & Guattari 1987), among many others (including, not least, the whole oeuvre of Michel Foucault).

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Although this discussion has so far been occurring in the periphery of qualitative psychology, it seems particularly important for psychology, given the fact that this discipline is connected in different ways to a humanist agenda and a scientific study of the experiencing individual. Almost 25 years ago, psychologist and qualitative methodologist Steinar Kvale (1992) conjectured that a modernist psychology might become obsolete or redundant in a postmodern age, and it appears that this question of redundancy emerges again in new philosophical guises today. Given this background, I aim in this article to (1) introduce the posthuman and postqualitative critique of (what postqualitative scholars call) conventional qualitative research with an eye to its relevance for psychology, (2) introduce a distinction between ontological and advocacy issues (inspired by Charles Taylor) concerning the postqualitative critique in order to (3) propose the idea that we can accept much of the ontological theorizing developed by posthuman and postqualitative scholars and yet advocate a humanist agenda for both scientific and ethical reasons. Historically, this was attempted by pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey. In short, the goal of the article is to defend the idea of a qualitative psychology after the postqualitative critique, amounting to a form of humanism after posthumanism. I begin, however, with some remarks about the historical appearance of qualitative research, both in and outside of psychology, in order to better understand what is meant by the more recent postqualitative movement.

The appearance of qualitative research in psychology

Not so long ago, I became interested in tracing the history of the term "qualitative" as it relates to psychology. With two of my colleagues, I wrote a chapter on what we called histories of qualitative research (in the plural). We needed the plural form because there is not agreement concerning how to define qualitative inquiry as such, and many different legitimate stories about its development exist (Brinkmann, Jacobsen & Kristiansen 2014). One of the histories that should be recounted is the simple conceptual history of qualitative research, having to do with the word itself. It turns out that talk of "qualitative research" is much more recent than one could think. The term "qualitative" in itself is not new, of course, and it is well-known that already the medieval philosophers of scholasticism made a distinction between qualia (the qualities of things) and quanta (the quantities), which was later accentuated with the empiricist philosophy of John Locke in the 17th century (pp. 18–20). Locke famously separated primary qualities from secondary qualities, the former being seen as independent of observers (e.g., extension, number and solidity), while the latter were conceived as subjective effects in observers in the form of experienced colors, tastes and smells. Secondary qualities were thus confined to the subjective mind around the time that new

natural scientists such as Galileo and Newton demonstrated that "objective reality" is nothing but matter in motion. Galileo said that the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics, and thereby implied a metaphysics of quantities as the primary ontological reality (see also Michell 2003 on the history of what he calls the quantitative imperative).

Modern science was in many ways built upon this dichotomy of the subjective and the objective, which relegated human experience, and all the sounds, sights, smells, *and* moral and aesthetic qualities that we live with, to the realm of the subjective. Although David Hartley was the first to use the word "psychology" in English in 1748 (when he developed an associationist theory of the mind), a somewhat modern psychological way of thinking had already entered the picture with Locke and other early empiricists such as David Hume, whose *Treatise* from 1739 proclaimed in its subtitle to "introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects" (Hume 1978). Newton had developed his mechanical physics for the "outer" extended world, and Hume thought we needed a corresponding physics of the mind. In this regard, and given the pervasive subjective-objective dichotomy, Alan Costall (2004) has critically described psychology as a mistake waiting to happen: "When physical science has promoted its methodology (of atomism, mechanism, and quantification) to an exclusive ontology, psychology (so conceived) was a pretty obvious mistake just waiting to happen—an essentially derivative science modeled on physics, yet having as its subject the very realm that physics rendered utterly obscure" (p. 184).

Needless to say, however, not all scholars after Locke and Hume were happy with the division of the world into "objective" primary qualities (that can be studied scientifically) and "subjective" secondary qualities. There is a great difference, Goethe argued in 1810 in his *Theory of Colors*, between studying colors in terms of Newtonian optics, and in terms of human experience, for example, and although the latter cannot reasonably be reduced to the former, it does not mean that it is any less important or amenable to systematic scientific inquiry. As an example of a field of human experience, Goethe argued that our understanding of colors had suffered greatly from being understood in terms of mechanical optics (Robinson 2002, p. 10). Giorgi and Giorgi have interpreted Goethe's theory of colors as an early example of qualitative research in the form of phenomenology (Giorgi & Giorgi 2008).

Concerning the use of the term "qualitative research" specifically, Wolcott (2009) has reminded us that "prior to the past three or four decades, not much had been written about field methods" (p. 80), adding, "as best I recall, the phrase 'qualitative research' was rarely (never?) heard in the 1960s. Of what had been written earlier, outside their respective academic disciplines, the same few references and the same few illustrative studies were cited almost to the exclusion of all others" (p. 80). Certainly, Chicago school

sociologists such as Everett Hughes, Robert Park, Herbert Blumer, and Howard Becker wrote about field methods, but usually in connection with their results and not through the common denominator "qualitative research." Wolcott (who had a background in social anthropology) referenced Malinowski's introduction to his 1922 classic *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and William F. Whyte's 1943 *Street Corner Society* as methodologically inspiring, both of which were also first and foremost ethnographies, and only secondarily methodologies treatises. Prior to around 1970, researchers would look to such classics for inspiration rather than to specific methodological handbooks on "qualitative research," and they would not yet self-identify as qualitative researchers.

Wolcott's memories seem to be corroborated by a search in contemporary scientific databases (what follows reworks a section from Brinkmann et al. 2014): A general search in all databases of the *Web of Knowledge, Science Citation Index Expanded* (which contains articles that date back to 1899 from all scientific disciplines) reveals that the term "qualitative" was used from 1900 but only in the natural sciences such as chemistry. Even today, qualitative analysis remains an important sub-discipline in chemistry (working with the analysis and classification of chemical compounds) alongside the quantitative subdisciplines of this science. The first article that appears in a broad search is from 1900 and bears the title: "On the qualitative separation of nickel from cobalt by the action of ammonium hydroxide on the ferricyandies" by Browning and Hartwell. If one excludes the natural and technical sciences, then the term "qualitative" appears in only a few early psychological papers, for example, "A qualitative analysis of tickling—Its relation to cutaneous and organic sensation," published in 1908, and "Some qualitative aspects of bitonal complexes" from 1921, both appearing in the *American Journal of Psychology*. These texts belong to the psychology of perception, and come quite close to physiology (or "psychophysiology" as it was then called).

The term "qualitative" in the early 20th century was thus quite closely connected to natural science disciplines such as chemistry, physiology, and to some extent the psychology of perception, and it appeared much later in the broader areas of social science. According to Karpatschof (2010), who has studied the emergence of qualitative methods within the social sciences, the term is hardly used until 1970, which represents a kind of historical take-off point, after which there is an exponential growth in the discourse of qualitative research and methods. This has continued to the present day, and we have in recent decades witnessed a real boom of qualitative research in the human and social sciences, which is not just seen in the output of research publications that employ qualitative methods, but especially in the numerous methodology books that are published every year. This also applies to the discipline of psychology. For years, after the other disciplines had begun to

talk about "qualitative research," psychologists still had to publish their qualitative work in journals belonging to neighboring fields such as education or sociology, but beginning in the last decade journals such as *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (established in 2004) and *Qualitative Psychology* (from 2013) have emerged, along with handbooks (one of which has even been published by the American Psychological Association [APA]), research centers, and the formation of a qualitative section within Division 5 of the APA (of course, the qualitative methods section within the British Psychological Society is much older). Prior to the 1980s, one literally finds no hits for "qualitative research" in psychology journals (Wertz 2014), but this has now changed altogether, although much "mainstream psychology" and its "flagship journals" (especially in the United States) still consider qualitative research as scientifically inferior. We should not ignore the significant differences around the world concerning the acceptance of qualitative psychology.

Although the term was not really used in psychology before around 1980, and even if qualitative psychologists were marginalized for decades (and continue to be so in some parts of the world), it is often forgotten that the science of psychology was constructed on the basis of (what we now call) qualitative studies of the human mind (Harré 2004). Many psychology students learn that Wilhelm Wundt established the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in 1879, and some are told that he developed a *Völkerpsychologie*—a study of the mind in its historical and cultural manifestations. Rarely, however, are students taught that Wundt's work amounted to a kind of qualitative research, even if he did not use this word himself.

The case is similar with many "founding fathers" in psychology, who in fact based their studies on (what we now call) qualitative inquiry, but without this being mentioned in most textbooks on psychology and its history. When we wrote the histories of qualitative research in psychology (Brinkmann et al. 2014), we referred to this as the "repressed history" of qualitative research. It has likely been seen as embarrassing to text-book writers to include such figures as Freud and Piaget among qualitative researchers, since qualitative research practices have not (until recently) figured among the respectable methods of the science of psychology. Not just Wundt's cultural psychology, but also James's study of religious experience, Freud's investigations of dreams and his clinical method more broadly, Gestalt psychologists' research on perception, Piaget's interviews with children, Bartlett's studies of remembering, and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body (and the list could go on) represent foundational *qualitative* studies in psychology. Many of these figures are routinely addressed in psychological textbooks, but their qualitative research methods are almost always neglected or repressed (Brinkmann et al. 2014).

Interpreting the increasing acceptance and use of qualitative research in psychology is a complex matter. On the one hand, it might signify a simple

realization among psychologists that their discipline has "always already" been qualitative. It seems impossible to understand the nature of human thinking, feeling, and acting without qualitative description and interpretation. As Harré argued in the inaugural issue of this journal, the qualitative methods in psychology do in this regard "meet the demands of the methodology of the natural sciences more truly than do the methods of mainstream quantitative methodology" (Harré 2004, p. 13). On the other hand, we might also look to the socio-historical transformations that have taken place over the past decades, and which Bauman (2000) has summarized as the arrival of "liquid modernity." The postmodern or liquid modern times involve a turn away from stable, bureaucratic structures in society and toward more precarious and changing social forms. We may speculate that qualitative research gains in importance after 1970 with the emergence of a new dynamic, multiperspectival, and emergent social complexity that cannot easily be captured with the use of quantitative methods. I will return to this historicist reading below when I discuss the rise of post qualitative research.

The postqualitative critique

The account given above involves the argument that psychology has been reluctant to embrace the notion of qualitative research, which is ironic, given the idea that much original psychological theory has been based on exactly that. However, now that psychology is finally beginning to arrive at the qualitative—both in practice and through terminology—some qualitative scholars already seems to be moving on in the direction of "postqualitative research." There is now an increasing postqualitative critique of what post-scholars summarize as "conventional qualitative research" (see, e.g., Aghasaleh & St. Pierre 2014). The critique amounts to a political, ethical, ontological, and methodological questioning of the assumptions and practices of qualitative inquiry as normally practiced (e.g., in the form of interviewing and participant observation and paradigms such as phenomenology, interpretivism, and ethnomethodology). How should (qualitative) psychology respond to this?

The main argument of postqualitative scholars is that what we have come to know as qualitative research is tied to a modernist humanism that ought to be abandoned because it is both ethically and ontologically problematic. Just like qualitative research as such, which is divided into many different camps and philosophies, postqualitative research is no unified movement. Sometimes terms such as new materialisms, new empiricisms, or posthumanism are used as synonyms. Across the different designations, however, lies a shared interest in ontology, that is, the study of what there is (Lather 2016). As Patti Lather and Elizabeth St. Pierre, two of the most central persons in

the postqualitative movement, put it, "rethinking humanist ontology is key in what comes after humanist qualitative methodology" (Lather & St. Pierre 2013, p. 629). And "what there is" ontologically, according to the postqualitative researchers, cannot be comprehended by using mechanical models based on Newtonian physics and the scientificity constructed on its basis. Often, the quantum theory of Niels Bohr is invoked as providing a different ontological ground than Newton's mechanical physics (especially by Barad 2007). "What there is" also cannot be comprehended, according to the postqualitative perspective, by focusing on the subjective or experiential side of the divide that came into being historically with the dichotomy of the objective and subjective as laid out above. Qualitative research is simply a faulty enterprise, the argument goes, because it concerns itself with just one side of a false dichotomy. It privileges the field of human experience and subjectivity, but our ways of thinking of this field—and the techniques and methods developed to study it—presupposes a metaphysics that was misguided from the very beginning. As Lather and St. Pierre put it:

> If we cease to privilege knowing over being; if we refuse positivist and phenomenological assumptions about the nature of lived experience and the world; if we give up representational and binary logics; if we see language, the human, and the material not as separate entities mixed together but as completely imbricated "on the surface"—if we do all that and the "more" it will open up—will qualitative inquiry as we know it be possible? Perhaps not. (Lather & St. Pierre 2013, pp. 629–30)

According to these postqualitative scholars, refusing the dichotomy between the objective (quantitative positivism) and subjective (qualitative phenomenology of lived experience), which I outlined in its historical manifestation above, means that conventional qualitative inquiry is no longer possible.

From the reflections of St. Pierre, Jackson and Mazzei (2016), we can summarize the main philosophical ideas behind postqualitative thinking along three lines: First, matter (or nature) is understood as agentic and always changing. In a way, this is an ancient idea in philosophy, going back to pre-Socratic philosophers of flux such as Heraclitus, who depicted the world as a constant flow of becoming. We cannot step into the same river twice, Heraclitus famously said, for the river constantly changes and the subjects entering it are likewise in perpetual flux. Matter is not simply cold and dead, to be studied by mechanical sciences, but a warm and vibrant process that acts and develops. This idea was taken up much later by Nietzsche and also by John Dewey, for example, whose pragmatism posited a "metaphysics of events," as articulated in *Experience and Nature* (Dewey 1925). Even more congenial to the new materialism is Dewey's *Knowing and the Known* (written with Arthur Bentley in the late 1940s), which drew explicitly from Bohr's quantum theory (Dewey & Bentley 1949), just as Karen Barad has been doing in recent years

(more on Dewey below). More recently, Actor-Network theorists such as John Law and Bruno Latour have granted agency to nonhuman "actants" within networks of practices (Latour 2005). Latour's argument, incidentally, is similar to the account given above about the historical emergence of "the qualitative" together with the subjective-objective dichotomy. In his classic *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour argued that the separation of nature (of which we may allegedly obtain objective knowledge) and society/culture/the human (for which we need phenomenology and hermeneutics) was never possible, although this was the backbone to the Enlightenment and the whole modern project (Latour 1993), *and* that from which the notion of qualitative research emerged. All in all, this first point deconstructs the constructed opposition between a sphere of passive, inert matter on the one hand and a sphere of meaningful human experiences, discourses, and actions on the other. Some follow Haraway (1991) and talk about an "entanglement" of the material and the semiotic—human living, thinking, and acting is always material, just as the material is always also semiotic. The point of emphasizing the long historical line from Heraclitus up to the contemporary scholars is not to demonstrate that there is nothing new about the post qualitative movement, but it is, rather, to situate what is new (notably the critique of what they call "conventional qualitative research") in the context of recurring philosophical ideas.

Second, as argued by St. Pierre and colleagues, there is "a heightened curiosity and accompanying experimentation" concerning existence among post qualitative researchers (St. Pierre et al. 2016, p. 102). This means that thinking in the postqualitative movement goes on not just about "what there is" but more so about what may become (or, to put it in more postqualitative terms, "what there is" *is* just a process of becoming). As Foucault was fond of pointing out, the goal should not be to discover who we really are, or realize our true, humanist, authentic selves—for these are illusions—but rather to refuse who we are and suggest alternative forms of existence (Foucault 1988). Postqualitative research continues to some extent the playful experimentation that we have come to associate with postmodernism and practices such as investigative poetry, arts-based research, and creative analytical practices in general (Richardson & St. Pierre 2005), which are also practiced within more theoretically mainstream approaches but with more emphasis on playing with theory and philosophy. Postqualitative work begins not with method but with (posthuman) theory. Theorizing is seen as generative, and there is a real semantic explosion of new words and concepts with the stated ambition of eroding the established binaries that are seen to be inherent in qualitative research.

For example, St. Pierre works with what could be called a "flat methodology" (my designation, not hers), which does not erect a hierarchy between so-called data and theory. Normally in qualitative research, we grant a certain privileged position to the empirical data, which are coded, categorized, and analyzed using theoretical concepts, but St. Pierre puts it all on the same

plane. Why do we only code what our informants say and not what Gilles Deleuze or Jacques Derrida say? As Aghasaleh and St. Pierre spell out, "knower, language, and the known are all agentive and materially and discursively constructed" (Aghasaleh & St. Pierre 2014, p. 1). This gives us a "flattened ontology" without a hierarchy of something (such as "empirical data") being more authentic or closer to reality than something else (e.g., philosophical theory).

Third, and following from the other points, there is a general critique and rejection of the philosophy of representation. The "posts," argues St. Pierre, "announce a radical break with the humanist, modernist, imperialist, representationalist, objectivist, rationalist, epistemological, ontological, and methodological assumptions of Western Enlightenment thought and practice" (St. Pierre 2011, p. 615). What Rorty attacked as "the mirror of nature" some decades ago (Rorty 1980), that is, the (mistaken) idea that the human mind is a representational device that may mirror if the proper methods are used, a world that is independent of the mind, is completely dismantled, for there is no detached human being (or metaphorical mirror). This might seem to be a form of social constructionism, but that is a mistaken interpretation, according to the posthumanists, for although social constructionists are aligned with posthumanism concerning their shared critique of essentialism and experientialism, social constructionism lives off the same modernist separation of matter and meaning as conventional qualitative research and simply focuses on the latter (or, in radical versions, claim that there *is* nothing else—the material is also a social construction). Latour for one has been very clear that he dislikes the social constructionist co-option of Actor-Network-Theory, given that they (Latour and the constructionists) operate with two very different ontologies. It is for this reason that social constructionist approaches within psychology such as discourse and conversation analysis are seen, from the postqualitative perspective, as belonging to the problematic camp of "conventional qualitative research." These approaches study discourse and symbolic exchanges, but (in most guises) do not grant agency to matter and thus remains within a problematic form of humanism.

The deconstruction of representationalism is also thought to lead to new kinds of ethics in the postqualitative movement: St. Pierre, Jackson, and Mazzei talk about how postqualitative research implies an "ethico-onto-epistemology, which makes it clear that how we conceive the relation of knowledge and being is a profoundly ethical issue, as is the relation between the human and the nonhuman" (St. Pierre et al. 2016, p. 99). Further, they say that "if humans have no separate existence, if we are completely entangled with the world, if we are no longer masters of the universe, then we are completely responsible to and for the world and all our relations of becoming with it" (p. 101). However, there is little in the postqualitative critique to help us navigate these ethical issues of responsibility, and it seems

logically possible to draw the exact opposite conclusion: If we are no longer masters of the universe, but simply a Deleuzian "fold" or circulating affects, then we have absolutely no ethical responsibility because there is nothing we can control. This discussion is likely to be significant among postqualitative scholars in the years to come.

Following from the processual and agentic view of nature, the heightened curiosity and experimentation, and the critique of representationalism—in short the dismantling of what is called humanism—comes a rejection of "humanist methodology," that is, "the failure of the humanist subject produces the failure of humanist methodology" (St. Pierre 2011, p. 618). St. Pierre provides a list of conventional qualitative terms that have been deconstructed by postqualitative scholars, including interview, validity, data, voice, and reflexivity (p. 613). These concepts are said to spring from the notion of the bounded human subjective *self* that should conventionally be called forth through *interviewing*, for example, giving *voice* to the individual and resulting in *data* that should be *coded* and *analyzed* by a separate researcher who needs to engage in a *reflexive process* in order to be clear about her *subjective standpoint*. Something like this, in short, is what postqualitative researchers frame as conventional qualitative research, and this is what they find deeply problematic.

This can be illustrated with reference to a couple of deconstructive readings of key qualitative terms. I have already mentioned "coding," that is, the practice of assigning labels to bits of one's empirical data in order to enable a quick search in the material and an inductive aggregation of the individual bits into general categories. Coding is conventionally taught as a necessary technique in qualitative research (see, e.g., Gibbs 2007) For the critics, however, coding reinforces a representationalist epistemology that reduces polyphonic meanings to what can be captured by a single category (see Brinkmann & Kvale 2015 on which the following is based). According to MacLure (2013), who represents a Deleuzean approach to postqualitative research, coding offends by positioning the analyst at arm's length from the data. MacLure argues that coding undermines an ethics of responsibility since "researchers code; others get coded" (p. 168). Coding makes everything that falls within its confines "explicable," she says (p. 169), which, from a postqualitative viewpoint, betrays the ineffable nature of reality. After having delivered a critique of coding from a Deleuzeian viewpoint, MacLure interestingly suggests that we can in fact retain it, albeit by understanding it in a different way, "as the ongoing construction of a cabinet of curiosities or wunderkammer" (p. 180). Thus, even if there are inherent ontological problems in the practice of coding from a postqualitative perspective, it may nonetheless be a technique that can spark wonder and creativity in the analyst.

Another term met with suspicion by postqualitative scholars is the key qualitative notion of experience. We have already seen examples of how

St. Pierre and colleagues reject phenomenological approaches in broad terms, and it is notably from phenomenology that qualitative psychologists have learned to place experience on center stage of qualitative studies. Critics of the phenomenological studies of experience take issue with the ambition of describing the given, which is criticized as leading to individualist and essentialist lines of work. At the same time as phenomenologists were developing their methods in the 20th century, other philosophers had already been attacking what they saw as "the myth of the given" (Sellars 1997), arguing that nothing is purely and simply given, and that every understanding is perspectival and rests on theoretical presuppositions. Furthermore, Husserl's original assumption that the goal of phenomenological analysis is to uncover the essences of experiences came to sit uneasily with the anti-essentialist stance of postmodern (and later postqualitative) thought. Derrida argued that experience as an idea is connected to what he denounced as a metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1970). The metaphysics of presence grounds knowledge in what is present to a knowing subject, but, according to "post philosophers" such as Deleuze and Derrida, this is an illusion since there are no stable grounds or foundations from which to know the world once and for all. St. Pierre (2008) shows how the qualitative notion of voice (which privileges the speaking subject and her stories) belongs together with "experience" and "narrative" to the questionable metaphysics of presence that we ought to abandon. What the postqualitative researchers often ignore, however, is the extent to which Derrida's own deconstructive poststructuralism grew out of phenomenology, owing much to Husserl's successor Heidegger, which indicates that there need not be a simple antagonism between phenomenology and its critics.

I am aware that some "conventional qualitative researchers" (in the eyes of the postscholars) have also questioned various forms of interviewing, for example, and the whole idiom of "gathering data" and "coding material." From a discursive standpoint, Potter and Hepburn (2005) have criticized the widespread use of interviewing in qualitative psychology, to give just one example, and advocate analyzing naturally occurring talk whenever possible instead. But the postqualitative critique is much more radical since it comes from a completely different ontological starting point. This has recently been summarized in a recent article entitled "Top ten+ lists: (Re) thinking ontology in (post)qualitative research" by Lather (2016). From the observation that (10) social theory has been intensely language-oriented for quite some time, she (9) heralds the recent return to materialism "AFTER Derrida, NOT old school Marxist materialism with its identity politics and economics in the last instance" (p. 125). (8) She notes that post-humanist theories move away from "the unified, conscious, and rational subject of humanism […] to the Deleuzean subject." (p. 125), which in general signals (7) a resistance to the gravitational pull of humanism. (6) A different canon then gets constructed

with Deleuze and Barad as key figures leading to (5) new postqualitative methodologies and (4) an affect theoretical orientation concerning researcher subjectivity. (3) This means that a new theory of change of called for, a kind of Nietzscheanism, which (2) works by thinking through the body rather than reflexivity as such, and the final lesson is (1) that "even something as positivist inflected as educational policy analysis can benefit from a neo-materialist approach" (p. 128). Lather's impressive tour de force through new materialist ontologies and postqualitative thinking thus ends by connecting the new to existing discourses, signaling that the new materialisms do not so much leave behind the old sets of assumptions as they insert them in a new ontological framework. I will return to this below.

Ontological and advocacy issues in (post)qualitative research

After having traced the historical emergence of the idea of "the qualitative" and the more recent postqualitative intervention, I shall introduce a different problematic related to a distinction between ontological and advocacy issues. I borrow this distinction from a paper by the hermeneutic philosopher Charles Taylor, who wrote about it in the context of the liberal-communitarian debate (Taylor 1995). This debate is not directly related to the discussion of the qualitative and the postqualitative, although there may be indirect links. The liberal-communitarian debate was particularly important in political philosophy in the 1990s with leading liberals John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and Thomas Nagel, among others, and significant communitarian philosophers Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer. Taylor himself has often been associated with the communitarian camp, but the paper in question here is meant to explain why this is not exactly in accordance with his own intentions and self-interpretation. The debate is often framed as being between liberal *individualists* on the one hand, who argue that a political system should primarily serve to protect the rights of individuals, and communitarian *collectivists* on the other hand, who argue that communities are prior to individuals, which is why the situatedness and duties of persons often become more important than their rights.

Taylor's intervention in this debate was to point out that (at least) two different discussions get run together in a problematic way. He names these two discussions the ontological and the advocacy discussion, respectively. The ontological discussion is between those atomists who see social life in terms of individuals who are coming together like social atoms to form relationships and societies on the one hand, and those, on the other hand, who see societies as pre-existing wholes. For atomists, individuals are ontologically primary, and, in social science, the atomists are frequently referred to as "methodological individualists" because they argue that one can explain social life (structures and social practices) in terms of properties of the individuals that make

up social life. Holists, on the other side, deny that this is possible and argue that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Communities of human beings are prior to the individuals, and we simply cannot understand the former by aggregating our bodies of knowledge about the latter.

The other discussion is about advocacy, that is, what we have normative reasons to promote—the rights of the individual to determine what one deems to be good and worthwhile (such as the individual pursuit of happiness) versus shared definitions of the good life that spring from historical traditions and communal life. Taylor believes that the two discussions concerning ontology and advocacy are related, but not in a simple way: "They are distinct, in the sense that taking a position on one doesn't force your hand on the other. Yet they are not completely independent, in that the stand you take on the ontological level can be part of the essential background of the view you advocate" (Taylor 1995, p. 182). The discussion gets confused, however, if one sees these discussions as two sides of the same coin, and Taylor tries to show that much of the communitarian work has been concerned with social ontology (e.g., Sandel's work on our "situated selves" that owe their existence to communities), while much of the liberal response has been concerned with advocacy (and the advancement of individual rights). Actually, as Taylor argues, either stand on the ontology debate can be combined with either stand on the advocacy debate (p. 185). One can, like the libertarian philosopher Robert Nozick, be an atomist individualist or, like Karl Marx, be a holist collectivist. These are the "pure" positions. But one can also be a holist individualist like Humboldt and thereby combine a social ontology with an individualist advocacy agenda and, like B.F. Skinner (in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*), at the same time work with an individualist ontology and yet advocate collectivism (although Taylor finds this "nightmarish"). Taylor's own position is aligned with Humboldt's, that is, a communitarian social ontology, seeing the self as always already socialized and coming to existence only within communities and their "webs of interlocution" (Taylor 1989), and at the same time, advocating individual liberty and humanist values of differences.

This position, I will argue, represents a much needed kind of humanism. It is a humanism that recognizes the embeddedness of the individual in social and material relations, it admits the existential "thrownness" and facticity that Heidegger (1927) and later posthumanists (following Nietzsche) have emphasized. It acknowledges the cultural contingency of our lives that Rorty (1989) addressed, yet despite the many ways in which the human being is ontologically decentered, it still affirms a certain kind of humanism. It still finds a use for what we have come to know as qualitative research. The remainder of this article will seek to argue that the posthuman and post-qualitative critique often runs the two discussions together, in parallel with what Taylor argued concerning the liberal-communitarian discussions. I will

argue that we need the Taylorian position that combines the ontological insights of the new materialisms with the possibility, or even stronger, the *need* to defend and advocate humanism and also "conventional qualitative research." This, of course, will be humanism and qualitative inquiry in a new light—one after the posts but one that understands that there is no reason to abandon humanist ideals and values even if one accepts the postqualitative ontology. One can (to put it in paradoxical terms) be a postqualitative qualitative researcher and a posthumanist humanist.

Toward a humanism after posthumanism

I hope the reader senses that I have much respect for the philosophical project behind postqualitative research. I have tried to characterize it in a way that does justice to the richness and sophistication of its ideas. So what could our reasons be for holding on to a form of humanism and corresponding qualitative research practices now that we are after the postqualitative critique? I will propose here a number of basic pragmatic reasons to hold on to what Marecek (2003) has called "a qualitative stance" in psychology. This, I will argue, can be seen as a humanist stance that recognizes the ontology of flux—and the whole entanglement of the material and the semiotic—but which, exactly because of this recognition, posits the need for building more stable practices (including investigative practices) around the human. I hope this will seem less mysterious as we proceed.

Initially, I should perhaps confess that I have become interested in the concept of humanism in recent years mainly for political reasons. The world is now witnessing a number of crises that transcend national and geographical borders. The economic crisis, connected to a defective neo-liberal system that leads to poverty and increased inequality; the climate crises, giving rise to new conflicts and struggles over scarce resources; and the refugee crisis, spawned by wars and vexed political interests. It is clear, as Latour (1993) pointed out years ago, that none of these crises can be understood exclusively either in terms of "the objective" (with reference to the workings of the natural world alone) or "the subjective" (with reference to the workings of the social world alone). This whole modernist separation will not lead to better understandings of the hybrid nature of our current problems. However, if we take the latter example of the refugee crisis, it still seems to me that we need the concept of humanism, not least for rhetorical reasons, if we want to argue that ethical and humanitarian, and not only economic, arguments should play a role in how to handle the problem. In my own country, Denmark, which for decades has prided itself on being something of a "humanitarian superpower" (in spite of its small geographical size), the concept of humanism has very rapidly been discursively transformed from signaling a worthy ideal to being something like a term of abuse. In public

discussions, a humanist is now seen as someone who is irresponsible and out of touch with reality, because "we cannot receive all the refugees in the world." We now have a climate of political post or even anti-humanism, and although this is quite a different argumentative context than the philosophical ideas of posthumanism discussed in this article, I believe there is a common background: that the idea of humanism is ethically too important for us to lose.

It is difficult to imagine an effective struggle for social justice without the idiom of humanism. To the extent that qualitative inquiry, and the whole qualitative stance, is connected to a democratic ethos and a social justice agenda (Denzin & Lincoln 2011), it will likely need some kind of vocabulary of humanism. I am aware that humanism is attacked by the postthinkers exactly for ethical reasons. Plummer notes that "recent attacks have denounced 'humanism' as a form of white, male, Western, elite domination and colonization that is being imposed throughout the world and that brings with it too strong a sense of the unique individual" (Plummer 2011, pp. 199–-200). In spite of this, however, Plummer defends what he calls "a more complex humanism" that sees human beings as "always stuffed full of their culture and history" and as "both embodied, feeling animals and creatures with great symbolic potential" (p. 200). This is in line with the attempt of the present article: To see human beings as *ontologically* "stuffed full" of culture, history (meaning) *and* corporeality and animality (matter), and yet—with and within all this stuff—arguing that humanism is worth *advocating* as an ideal. Some critics accuse humanists of "speciesism," that is, granting rights and dignity to humans on the basis of species membership alone. However, that would amount to accusing ants of "Formicidaeism" (the ant equivalent to humanism). Of course, ants cannot help but see the world from the ant perspective. They have a special interest in their fellow ants and the flourishing of their anthills, just as humans have a special interest in their fellow humans and the flourishing of their communities. And if anti-human critics were to object that this comparison cannot be made because there is a difference between ants and humans related to the wider human capacity for moral reflection and responsibility, then they would paradoxically have confirmed the humanism that they otherwise criticize! Yes, this difference between humans and other animals exists, and the fact that humans can be humanists because of their special skills and capabilities does not mean that they are not animals that live in a natural-social world that is constantly changing. Rather, it means that this is simply part of the human condition, a fact to be noted and acted upon and not something revered for its own sake.

John Dewey is a good source in this regard (Brinkmann 2013). For Dewey it was axiomatic that all the things we know undergo constant change, which is why we need a metaphysics of flux (Dewey thus discussed "flux philosophers" such as Heraclitus and Bergson in positive terms). However, Dewey

warned against sanctifying the contingent and changeable character of reality. He rejected what he called a romantic glorification of flux as "something to revere, something profoundly akin to what is best within ourselves, will and creative energy" (Dewey 1925, p. 51). He offered no normative valuation of reality's changeable nature. Instead, he regarded changeability as a metaphysical condition that challenges humanity: "It is something to be noted and used" (p. 71):

> Man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not to be counted upon as to their times and seasons. (Dewey 1925, p. 41)

On the one hand, Dewey cautioned against denying this basic ontological fact, saying, "our magical safeguard against the uncertain character of the world is to deny the existence of chance, to mumble universal and necessary law, the ubiquity of cause and effect, the uniformity of nature, universal progress, and the inherent rationality of the universe" (Dewey 1925, p. 44). He thus denounced the mechanical scientific enterprise of prediction and control. On the other hand, he also criticized the tendency to give the uncertain character of reality normative significance. Instead, the task of human beings is to stabilize momentarily what is unstable, to build patterns and regularities out of chaos, because this is what makes human lives, families, organizations, communities, and societies possible. This happens through the development of what Dewey called social arts, through which we may "turn the powers of nature to account" (Dewey 1929, p. 3). To invoke a simple example: Fire can consume the houses in which we sleep and the food that we eat, but humans have learned to master fire and use it for their own purposes; to keep us warm during the winter and to prepare food so that it is more easily digested. Through such arts (at once "material" and "semiotic" to use the contemporary idiom), we intervene in nature's processes and seek to stabilize and use it for our own purposes. According to Dewey's pragmatic perspective, we live in the world, and know it, through activity—through our practices—and not through passive contemplation or observation. Similarly, William James characterized pragmatism as not just a theory about knowledge (an epistemology) but also as a theory about the universe as such. James said of pragmatism: "On the pragmatist side we have only one edition of the universe, unfinished, growing in all sorts of places, especially in the places where thinking beings are at work" (James 1981/1907, p. 116). Reality comes in one edition (not two such as a material and a semiotic) and is unfinished, just as the proponents of new ontologies argue, but it is up to humans to give it some stability and form through the development of social practices and arts (Dewey 1929, p. 40).

Although the pragmatic humanism advocated here agrees ontologically with the flux thinkers, it stands opposed to their normative valuation of the unstable, for example, as articulated by St. Pierre who writes: "My desire is for post inquiry to remain *unstable* as we create different articulations, assemblages, becomings, mash-ups of inquiry given the entanglement that emerges in our different projects" (St. Pierre 2011, p. 623). In contrast, Dewey argued that "the striving to make stability of meaning prevail over the instability of events is the main task of intelligent human effort" (Dewey 1925, p. 50). According to Dewey, this is the proper response to the realization of the world's uncertain, eventful, unfinished, and dangerous character, as rightly formulated by the new ontologists. We must develop social practices through which we can master reality in the best ways possible in order to advance human values. This holds for science (the most obvious "stabilizing practice" in modern society) as well as for ethics and politics. These are all elements of our practical reason, the type of reason that involves acting well. For Dewey and pragmatism in general, practical reason provides the pattern for all reason (Garrison 1999). Ontologically, Dewey would thus agree with the posthumanists, but in terms of advocacy he would side with the humanists.

Marx and Engels famously wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* that "all that is solid melts into air" because of the "constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation [that] distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify" (Marx & Engels 1848). The destabilizing tendencies of the capitalist system have only increased since the middle of the 19th century, most recently with the epoch variously named late capitalism, postmodernity, or liquid modernity, which advances a kind of network capitalism (Brinkmann 2008). The notion of the network (Latour) or the rhizome (Deleuze) figure prominently in the new materialist ontologies. Various researchers, however, are now problematizing the ideological effects of this discursive formation. From the perspective of critical theory, Hartmann and Honneth have argued that "to the extent that the image of a society pervaded by networks takes hold as a fundamental means of societal self-description, other images of the social whole lose in influence" (Hartmann & Honneth 2006, p. 52). French pragmatists Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have concluded that the notion of network both as an organizational and institutional mechanism and as an ideology has become central in postmodernity, characterized by neo-liberal flexibilization. They argue that the institutionalization and ontologization of networks has few chances of leading to social justice, because networks do not consider those who find themselves 'disconnected' or on its margins. One is either part of

the networks and must function according to their (capitalist) logics, or one is outside the networks and consequently socially impotent. In their analysis of "network capitalism," Hartmann and Honneth agree with this diagnosis: "In network capitalism, on this thesis, citizens tend to perceive their efforts, successes, and failures as individualized, so that a reference to the greater whole scarcely seems possible any longer" (2006, p. 52). In his book on Deleuze, Slavoj Žižek has gone so far as to directly criticize Deleuze—this key posthuman thinker and arguably the most important source of inspiration for the post qualitative scholars—for being "the ideologist of late capitalism." It is worth quoting Žižek at some length in order to understand this harsh verdict:

> There are, effectively, features that justify calling Deleuze the ideologist of late capitalism. Is the much celebrated Spinozan *imitation affecti*, the impersonal circulation of affects bypassing persons, not the very logic of publicity, of video clips, and so forth in which what matters is not the message about the product but the intensity of the transmitted affects and perceptions? […] Is this logic in which we are no longer dealing with persons interacting but just with the multiplicity of intensities, of places of enjoyment, plus bodies as a collective/impersonal desiring machine not eminently Deleuzian? (Žižek 2012, pp. 163–4)

This analysis of Deleuze in effect claims that his rhizomatic network ontology mirrors and facilitates the ideology of late capitalism. As I see it, advocating humanism, and the whole qualitative interest in human lives and experiences, is needed to counteract this ideology. Transforming an ontological realization of flux into an advocacy for instability and the impersonal circulation of affect may simply come to serve some of the most problematic tendencies of our times – and contribute to melting the few remaining solids into air.

Conclusions

The acting and experiencing human being is not an ahistorical, disembodied, and universal intellect but rather a historical, embodied, affective creature that lives in a world of flux and uncertainty. Yet within that world, humans have managed historically to build relatively stable structures and routines together that make possible their experiencing and acting. Certainly, many of these structures and routines have been oppressive for various groups of people, but simply advocating for destabilizing structures and routines as such—no matter what we talk about—seems to be a risky strategy for ethical and political reasons. If the pragmatists are right, then we should think of stabilizing practices, including our scientific techniques and arts, as providing the precondition for ethical human life. Some of the stabilizing practices have been qualitative research practices, which study persons' ways of experiencing and acting in their many forms. Taking what Marecek (2003) calls a "qualitative stance"

toward human life means studying phenomena in a context of history, society, and culture; it means resituating humans in their life worlds; and it means approaching humans as reflexive and intentional agents who can create meaning and hence stability. As I have argued, this represents a form of humanism that is worth holding on to. In this article, I have argued that we can and must accept much of the ontological theorizing conducted under the postqualitative and posthumanist banners. In fact, some qualitative methodologists within the camps of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (e.g., Kendall & Wickham 1999), Participatory Action Research (e.g., Weis & Fine 2004), and Critical Realism (e.g., Maxwell 2012) already do this by working with a parallel awareness of meanings and materiality (future discussions should clarify the relationship between these various philosophies of qualitative research). But we should not transform ontology into advocacy or ideology. Instead, we should see the precarious and unstable nature of reality as giving rise to an ethical demand for humans, namely, to enact relatively stable practices in which it becomes possible to conduct flourishing lives together. Qualitative research is very important as a set of investigative practices in this regard in our liquid modern world. From the point of view of this humanism after posthumanism, humanity is not an a priori given, but represents ideals to be realized in our social practices, and this may become possible by advocating the humanist values in some form. Working on the basis of qualitative research can augment this project, which I believe is too valuable to be thrown out with the postqualitative bathwater.

As I tried to show in the account of the history of "the qualitative," qualitative inquiry need not be tied to the questionable modernist divide between "the natural" and "the social," since qualitative studies were first and foremost found in the natural sciences. I believe the task now should not be for all of us to become "postqualitative" but rather to reinterpret our qualitative practices such as coding and interviewing—and key concepts such as experience and subjectivity—after the postqualitative critique. Taking the distinction between ontology and advocacy into account could be a significant step in this regard. We should thank the postqualitative scholars for highlighting the potential ideological effects of what we have come to think of as qualitative research, but we should try to make sure that the post qualitative intervention does not itself become aligned with late capitalist ideology of destabilization that renders important ethical values and ideals impossible to enact.

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