

### Critical Post-Humanism and Social Work in the City: About Being Entangled as Researcher and Professional

Richter, Marina

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Richter, M. (2023). Critical Post-Humanism and Social Work in the City: About Being Entangled as Researcher and Professional. *Social Inclusion*, 11(3), 210-219. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v11i3.6786>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Article

## Critical Post-Humanism and Social Work in the City: About Being Entangled as Researcher and Professional

Marina Richter

School for Social Work, University of Applied Sciences (HES-SO Valais/Wallis), Switzerland; [marina.richter@hevs.ch](mailto:marina.richter@hevs.ch)

Submitted: 1 February 2023 | Accepted: 15 May 2023 | Published: 28 August 2023

### Abstract

Social work has a long history of dealing with social issues and working towards an inclusive city. The complexity of these issues requires conceptual thinking that goes beyond “the human” and encompasses spatiality, materiality, as well as non-human beings and their connectedness. I propose to explore “post”-theories for this purpose, which constitute a major reconfiguration of thinking in the field of social work and research on social inclusion in general. This article outlines important elements of “post”-theories that connect with major claims of social work such as the aim of social justice, empowerment, and ethical stances towards research and practice. It further outlines in which sense these elements connect with social work and what that could mean for analysing social problems and how to approach them. The contribution provides thoughts on how post-humanism might provide inspiration to think as researchers and act as professionals concerning questions of social justice and inclusion.

### Keywords

assemblage; critical post-humanism; ethics; new materialism; social work

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “In/Exclusive Cities: Insights From a Social Work Perspective” edited by Karine Duplan (HETS Geneva, HES-SO / University of Geneva), Monica Battaglini (HETS Geneva, HES-SO), Milena Chimienti (HETS Geneva, HES-SO), and Marylène Lieber (University of Geneva).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio Press (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

Social work has a rich historical link with cities, dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries when social work emerged as a profession in response to the problems of poverty and social inequality prevalent in urban areas. The settlement movement, which began in the UK with Toynbee Hall and in the US with Hull House, played a pivotal role in the development of social work as a profession and in the promotion of social justice in urban areas. These settlement houses, which were located in impoverished urban neighbourhoods, provided a range of social services and support to the local community, including education, healthcare, and housing assistance. Social work, therefore, has a long history of dealing with questions of inclusion in cities.

The notion of the inclusive city is strongly linked to questions of social struggles. Lately, the concept of inclusive cities has gained increasing attention, as

cities around the world grapple with the challenges of urbanization, globalization, and diversity. Inclusive cities are seen as essential for promoting healthy economic environments, social cohesion, and sustainable development, as well as for ensuring that all individuals and communities have access to the benefits and opportunities that cities offer. Social work has a key role to play in building inclusive cities, as social workers are trained to work with diverse communities and individuals, to promote social change and social justice.

In many research articles on social work, the city is seen as the site where social problems are situated and where social work develops its interventions. What this site, with its materiality, constitutes and how it relates to the social problems and the social work practices is only very rarely considered in conceptual terms in social work research (e.g., ten Brummelaar et al., 2018). Social work usually addresses the needs of actors, analyses problems in relation to actors, organizations, and structures, and

often forgoes its material and spatial implications (for some examples of a debate on social work and spatiality see Bondi & Fewell, 2003; Diebäcker & Reutlinger, 2018). What I argue in this article is that the city constitutes a complexity that goes beyond what social sciences and social work usually focus on. The city *is* materiality; it is sound and smell, as well as non-human inhabitants such as animals and plants. There is much more to the city than actors, organisations, and structure. And what does the concept of “the inclusive city” mean if we focus on plants and animals as well?

I propose to use a post-human lens to reconfigure social work and understand inclusive cities in a way that gives the word “inclusive” a meaning that goes far beyond its usual social connotation. My starting point is that there is much to gain in using “post”-theories to address issues of social inclusion and develop fruitful approaches to social work. Thus, I propose a post-humanist approach to social work research and professional practice.

A couple of contributions have been made recently in the field of social work that use and translate “post”-theories for social work (Boulet & Hawkins, 2020; Bozalek, 2023; Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023; Bozalek & Pease, 2021; Godden, 2021; Gonzalez Benson, 2021; Livholts, 2023). In fact, it seems that the debate is just starting. Although these contributions provide relevant initial thoughts, there is a need to further the debate and think beyond the often-evoked link between social work and pressing environmental issues.

Post-humanism is a theoretical perspective that challenges the traditional view of human exceptionalism and advocates for a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the world. In the context of social work and inclusive cities, post-humanism offers a valuable lens through which to explore the complex interrelationships between humans, the environment, and technology. Post-humanism highlights the need to move beyond the anthropocentric approach that has dominated social work and urban planning and to recognize the role of non-human actors such as animals, plants, and technology in shaping urban environments and human experiences.

This article addresses this claim in three steps. First, I will give a few indications of what and how critical post-humanism contributes to social work research and practice and how it can be comprehended. Second, I will address the important questions of why such an approach can make a difference in research and practice. I believe there is a need to think thoroughly of good reasons to convince practitioners and not only researchers for a “reconfiguring of social work ethics” (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023). Finally, I will sketch how such an approach could be made fruitful for analysis (research in social work), practice (the profession of social work), and ethics (justice in social work) towards a more just and inclusive social work.

## 2. Critical Post-Humanism: Conceptual Approaches

It is not an easy task to describe in a nutshell what “post”-theories are about. There is much reading to be done, as Elizabeth St. Pierre wrote, to start the journey into “post-thinking” (St. Pierre, 2021). With this new way of thinking about our world and our entanglement in it, there are new concepts one needs to grasp, and it takes time to learn and understand this new language. The difficulty also lies in the way different “post”-theories are converging and nourishing from different angles of the debate. There is the philosophical heritage of Deleuze and Guattari (1980) that is often subsumed under the term “assemblage thinking” that, nevertheless, provides a plethora of concepts and “lines of flight” for a new ontology. More recent philosophical contributions, such as the writings of Braidotti (2019), point towards a decentring of the human towards post-humanist conceptions. There is the feminist current, with contributions that challenge us to think beyond dualisms—in particular, gender dualism—and strongly argues for the importance of the body, with its materiality, emotions, and affect (Ahmed, 2004; Butler, 1993). New materialist theories have stressed the materiality of life and how separating the mind from the body only provides a very partial understanding of the way people live in this world (Coole & Frost, 2010). These philosophical and social science theories are further inspired by writers such as Barad (2007), who base their contributions on insights from quantum physics.

This very rich and inspiring debate provides plenty of concepts to think differently and—maybe even more important—do research in a different way, considering that “post”-theories are always about combined ontology, epistemology, and ethics. They imply that separating the three is impossible and propose an ethical-ontological entanglement (Barad, 2007) of research. Therefore, I will outline the conceptual lines of thought that seem most inspiring to me for social work research, practice, and ethics, while necessarily leaving out much of what needs to be said about this rich theoretical debate.

### 2.1. Relationality and Entanglement

Deleuze and Guattari, most prominently in their book *Mille Plateaux* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). develop, among other things, the notion of the rhizome as opposed to a structured and hierarchical vision. According to the authors, space and its characteristics are defined in relative terms: as distance or density always in relation to the objects (including humans) within it. The distance differs with the nature of the object: For a slug, one metre corresponds to the tenth part of the distance it travels in a day; for a human being, it corresponds to one step. Therefore, the objects are constitutive of the relationships and of the quality these relationships imply. Proximity and distance do

not depend on the measurable distance between two objects, but they depend on the characteristics and relationship of the objects.

The ontological importance of relationality implies there is no existence outside or without relationality. Relationality, the connection objects have to each other and their materiality, brings them into existence for each other. Everything that exists—space, objects, and human beings—exists, or rather comes into existence, through relationships, connections, and interactions. For instance, a natural hazard only exists as a hazard because there are humans, other species, or otherwise “valuable” objects that are endangered. Likewise, a neighbourhood is only poor because of its relationship to other neighbourhoods in the same city and because poverty is defined in economic terms.

Relationality also implies that the hierarchical ontology of space and all social phenomena, which is often apprehended by notions of scales such as micro, meso, and macro, is thus replaced by a notion of flatness, or as geographers Marston et al. (2005) conceptualized it: a flat ontology. The plain constitutes a form—many times, at first glance, a rather chaotic one—of relationships that intersect, intermingle, arise, and disappear. This implies that the focus lies less on how things, phenomena, and events are structured hierarchically but to look at how elements are connected and how inter- and intra-actions (Barad, 2007) happen across the plain. Such perspective allows us to apprehend questions across otherwise delimiting borders, such as acknowledging the transnational perspective in migration or the political action that cuts through the levels of the local to the national and links, for instance, issues in the city to other places, or to border-less issues such as climate change.

Others have described this relational conception as a profound entanglement in the world. Matter, time, and space are jointly entangled as a “spacetime-mattering” (Barad, 2007) that, instead of dividing the notions of space, time, and matter, blurs the boundaries between them. Inspired by quantum physics’ impossibility to separate measurements of matter in time and space, Barad (2007) develops this notion in philosophical terms. Translated into social sciences, this results in the impossibility to analyse spaces without their temporality and materiality. For instance, there is a specific “space-time-mattering” to a street at night or during the day. This relational perspective contrasts clearly with structural and hierarchical ontologies of the world such as in structuralist thinking.

## 2.2. Post-Anthropocentrism

“Post”-theories aim to decentre the human and, more specifically, the anthropos from our understanding of the world (Pease, 2021). Enlightenment thinking is based on the principle that the human being is the focal point of ontology. It is for the human to understand the world, to use it based on that knowledge, and to dominate it. Apart

from the damage this view has done regarding current global environmental problems, there are also important theoretical objections. Already if one understands the world, and therefore humans, as entangled and relationally connected, it becomes apparent that there is a need to think beyond the human as a clearly delimited individual and as the central figure of social sciences.

Importantly, according to Enlightenment thinking, the human is conceptualised as anthropos, meaning male, white, heterosexual, and so on. Feminist theories, post-colonial theories, and more have written against this notion and demasked the powerful norming principles that underlie the concept of human. Therefore, decentring the human also provides a strategy to fight against powerful differences among humans and acknowledge specific entanglements, while forgoing anthropocentrism (Livholts, 2023).

With the critique of anthropocentrism also comes a critique of species-centrism (Braidotti, 2019). Decentring the human also means that humans are in this world among other living beings. There are many animals—and the human animal is but one among them. Critical post-humanism adopts a strong multi-species perspective that looks at the entanglements humans have with other animals, the way humans share their existence on this planet with other animals, how humans depend on them, and how humans exist because of and in relation to them. Cities are a good example of species-centrism, as they are prominently conceptualized as solely human spaces with the occasional appearance of animals as pets. All other animals are either a surprise—such as so-called wild animals appearing in cities during the Covid-19 pandemic—or pests.

A multi-species perspective leads to a notion of “being of the world rather than in the world” (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023, p. 1). Post-anthropocentrism contributes to understanding “the human” as part of this world. Reading various recently published accounts about indigenous struggles against environmental problems (e.g., Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023; Godden, 2021) clarifies that this notion is not very novel. It might be novel to people from the Global North who have been trained to think based in the principles of Enlightenment. However, there have always been other ways of understanding the world and humans’ position in it. Environmental problems that industrial expansion has caused (e.g., referring to the specific case of the Adani coal mine in central Queensland, Australia, see Woods & Hölscher, 2021) are seen in very different terms by affected indigenous people versus politicians or representatives of the industrial sector. An Australian indigenous leader expressed his concerns regarding the opening of a coal mine by explaining that these lands are “an interconnected living whole; a vital cultural landscape. It is central to us as People, and to the maintenance of our identity, laws and consequent rights” (Burrugubba as cited in Woods & Hölscher, 2021). The “we” thus becomes enlarged; it refers to “people” as the entanglement of land, stones, animals, and humans.

### 2.3. Post-Human Subjectivity: Embodied, Affected, Entangled

At first light, it seems that subjectivity is not a term that fits post-human thinking. Nevertheless, Braidotti (2019) developed a notion of post-human subjectivity that adapts the subject into the world view I have described thus far. More importantly, it argues against the autonomy and separateness of the subject as known from Enlightenment thinking. Rather than conceiving the subject as a single identifiable mind and body delimited by the outer border of the skin—the very skin is where people are touched and affected by the world—the outer limit begins to blur in the intra-action with the environment (Ahmed, 2000).

The post-human subjectivity is embodied, affected, and entangled. It is embodied in the sense that it cannot be separated from the body such as in the distinction between mind and body. Rather, there is no being in this world without materiality and body. Subjectivity is always expressed in embodied sensory experiences, in embodied intra-actions. Humans are very much bodily beings with very material needs such as food, air, water, warmth, shelter. The body mainly makes humans vulnerable to the effects of the world. The Covid-19 pandemic was a good example of this (e.g., Gonzalez Benson, 2021).

Affect theories (Braidotti, 2019; Massumi, 2002) explore the connection between the body, the embodied subjectivity, and other species, other living and non-living beings, the world. Thereby, affect is the body's capacity "to affect and be affected" (Massumi, 2015, p. 3). This means there is a possibility or a potential for affect to happen; it is not a rule but a potential. Affect may happen or not and it can always happen in both ways—one can affect or be affected.

Finally, subjectivity also needs to be seen as entangled in the sense that there is never a subject as a stand-alone entity. It is connected to the world, its species, and non-living elements. This idea of entanglement goes further than the notions of connectivity known from network thinking, it means there is no subject outside of entanglement, it is the entanglement in the world that forms the subject in the very specific moment, in the very specific "spacetime-mattering" (Barad, 2007). That means there is no subjectivity in itself, but it always emerges from the entanglement in its embodied form, affecting and being affected by the world. There is no fixed and autonomous subject, as it is always becoming, as Rosi Braidotti explains in an interview:

We have to start by eliminating identities. We will never arrive anywhere if we have identity as a starting point. In fact the whole process of *becoming* is a process of abandoning identity and entering in the construction of subjectivity, subjectivity being per definition transversal, collective. This is an enormous switch because even the political movements I have known in the '70s were identitarian move-

ments: Women's movements would fight for women; gay movements would fight for gays. (European Alternatives, 2018)

This moves the meaning of inclusion towards a radical openness and away from specific groups. Further, the subject is entangled with the world in all its materiality. Matter has the potential to affect or, as Bennett (2010, p. 108) termed it, matter is vibrant:

If human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans, then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontologically heterogeneous) "public" coalescing around a problem.

### 2.4. Beyond Dualisms: Cutting Apart

Dualisms structure most of human thinking, such as the gender dualism of man/woman, the othering dualism of us/them, North/South, West/East, and further mind/body, or subject/object. It seems that the dualism of nature/culture lays the foundation for most other dualisms and that the elements on the culture side are to dominate the elements located on the nature side. There is always a hierarchy implicitly or explicitly inscribed into these dualisms, making them—while socially constructed—very powerful social structures that are significant to the lives of people.

Post-humanism challenges these binary concepts by questioning unitary identities. The entangled subjectivity, always becoming, is a way to apprehend the specific emerging subjectivity instead of identifying fixed or unitary identities. In particular, the phallogocentric and humanist ideals of "man" as differentiated from "woman" is strongly questioned in post-anthropocentric thinking. By decentering the human in post-humanism—and, in particular, the human as "man"—the gender binary is profoundly challenged. Further, by understanding "the human" as always entangled with the world, the nature/culture binary is also challenged because there cannot be a binary where there is entanglement. Again, the pandemic provides a good example:

SARS-CoV-2 is not just the *virus itself* but, to borrow the term introduced by Karen Barad, an intra-action between the virus and humans, pangolins and bats, Asian stereotypes, discourses about communism and democracy, the failure of nation-states, the spectre of the military, the sham of American exceptionalism, the dwindling prospects of justice. (Akomolafe, 2020, p. 17)

Barad's notion of cutting apart provides the means to consider separate entities together. While humans are

entangled in and with this world, at the same time, there are notions of difference, of elements, and of bodies that affect each other. There is an intra-activity, that is, the activity of affect within an entanglement. Thus, there is a need to differentiate while simultaneously relate the elements together in an entanglement. Barad (2007) calls this the agential cut; it cuts things, elements, bodies, apart, while leaving them entangled. A good example is a border between two countries. While it separates the two countries, at the same time, it provides a connection, a space that unites; the separating border becomes the very reason why there is exchange and contact.

### 3. Arguments for a Critical Post-Humanist Perspective for Social Work

In the short time since writing the first version of this article and revising it, a couple of contributions have appeared. In social work research, an interest in “post”-theories awakens (Boulet & Hawkins, 2020; Bozalek, 2023; Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023; Bozalek & Pease, 2021; Healy, 2022; Webb, 2021, 2023). This interest is still very fresh and rather on a theoretical level, while empirical studies as well as translations into social work practice are still missing or remain rare (for some examples see Godden, 2021; Gonzalez Benson, 2021; Tudor & Barraclough, 2023). There is still much work to be done.

Although “post”-theories have been debated in other areas of research for quite a while, it took social work a much longer time to engage in these debates. This can be related to the ethical impetus of social work, to empower people, to work for a more just world for humans and thereby putting the human always at the centre of analysis and action. Not in vain, social work is claimed to be a profession based on human rights. At the same time, there are first contributions from within academia but also from the profession and the teaching of social work. A volume of *Social Dialogue*, the free magazine of the International Association of Schools of Social Work, takes Black Lives Matter as the starting point to thinking, along various contributions, about what it means to de-colonise social work. Several contributions use post-colonial as well as post-human thinking (IASS, 2022).

What I argue here—and I am not alone in this—is that social work and other professional and political initiatives for social inclusion such as inclusive cities can profit from “post”-thinking in a very productive way. I will develop this along the four elements of “post”-theories outlined above.

#### 3.1. Relationality: At the Core of Social Work Analysis and Practice

Social work is very much oriented towards the relational. Most social workers would agree that building relationships with people constitutes the basis of their

work because a working collaboration requires trust and understanding. Social work essentially is relational work. In German, for instance, we call the union that is achieved between the social worker and the client a working alliance (*Arbeitsbündnis*). There is no work without a form of alliance in which both parties have their interest and their intentionality. The way to achieve this requires relational work between the social worker and the client.

Nevertheless, the relational perspective in “post”-theories stretches beyond the alliance between social worker and client; it is a way to comprehend social problems and how humans are entangled in them. While many theories of social work have a systemic perspective that aims at understanding the individual in a complex setting, social work—in particular the work of practitioners—has the tendency to isolate the human and to forget about their embeddedness and entanglement. It is not only about understanding the broader picture and not looking at humans as isolated in their social problems such as poverty but also to seek an understanding through the entanglement of a person in a complex setting. This means that the focus can never be solely on the human but always on the connections to other (human) animals, objects, and structures.

Returning to social work practice, relationality, creating connections and networking have always been an important part of how social workers aim to support their clients. Post-humanism supports this in a much more radical way. Social work, then, would be about supporting potential entanglements in the neighbourhood, in the city, in the world. Support requires enhancing emerging properties and increasing connections to allow for new and more just entanglements. This requires reconfiguring social work beyond the individual and, importantly, acknowledging humans’ sensory entanglement, affect, and emotions and their full potential (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023).

#### 3.2. Post-Anthropocentrism: Environmental Social Work and Beyond

Increasingly, social work also acknowledges the importance of the environment for questions of justice and thereby enlarges social justice towards environmental justice (see Bozalek & Pease, 2021; Healy, 2022). Ecological or environmental social work takes up global environmental problems and addresses them from a social perspective. Problems such as climate change have a great effect on people’s lives. Environmental issues related to economic activities such as the extraction of natural resources affect people in their daily lives.

Regarding the current dimensions of these problems on a global scale, it seems more than pertinent that in many books on current critical contributions to social work, there are always various chapters on environmental perspectives (Boulet & Hawkins, 2020; Bozalek & Pease, 2021; IASS, 2022). One could understand the



concern with the environment as a concern with the context in which people live, that is, the surroundings of their daily lives. From a post-humanist perspective, and various contributions argue in that direction, the concern lies much deeper. Humans live entangled in the environment and social issues are part and parcel of environmental issues. The disconnection of the environment from the social world, as inscribed in Enlightenment thinking through the culture/nature divide, obscures this entanglement and reduces environmental issues to technical problems of pollution and its effects. The indigenous perspective evoked above points to a much deeper entanglement and therefore, a deeper—for instance, emotional—concern with environmental problems—they are problems of the human species and humans are directly and deeply affected by them in a very visceral way.

During the pandemic, migrant farmworkers, who before the pandemic, society and politics had often seen as unwanted migrants, became “essential” to the food production of countries such as the United States (Gonzalez Benson, 2021). Farmworkers were entangled in a complex web of discursive practices of unwanted migrants versus essential workers. At the same time, they had to work under the same difficult conditions as before and were only scarcely protected from a virus that was still rather unknown while, for many other people, the lockdown meant to work from home in secure spaces. The virus, as a non-human lifeform, was part of this entanglement and affected politicians, public discourse, and farmworkers altogether.

### 3.3. Post-Human Subjectivity: Political Opportunities

As post-human subjectivity points towards a non-autonomous subject that is embodied, affected, and entangled, this provides an important inspiration to reorient social work. Although there has always been a critical strand to social work, unmasking powerful structural problems, the neoliberal-inspired managerialism in current government-mandated social work imposes a very different direction. In line with neoliberal individualism and individual responsibility in particular, it is the individual that lastly is deemed responsible for their situation (e.g., poverty) and has to find a way out. The activating welfare state (*aktivierender Sozialstaat* in German; see Blanke, 2004; Lamping & Schridde, 2004), which urges, through social workers and social security programs, the individual to leave social benefit programs and enter regular institutions such as the labour market, transfers the responsibility for their precarious position to individuals themselves. It remains the individual’s task to find strategies to combat their situation while social policies forgo a general critique of the conditions of the individual’s situation.

From a post-human standpoint, there can never be a solely individual responsibility and there cannot be a solution to social problems that lies in the actions of one individual alone either. The entanglements need

to change; some connections need to become stronger, others must be replaced, and others are simply too fixed to be altered or removed. The entanglement—or assemblage, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980) term—is what needs to be worked on and the subject has only limited power over selected parts of the assemblage. This is not to say that the subject is powerless, but it is hypocritical to demand subjects reconfigure their lives while being trapped in powerful societal and economic entanglements that they cannot influence.

### 3.4. Challenging Dualisms: Ethics of Social Work and Social Justice

Finally, challenging dualisms such as nature/culture and man/woman is very much connected to working against separation and differentiation and towards a shared concern for the global problems humans face. An ethics of care for all (human) animals, non-living parts of the world, the environment, and so on, responds to such a shared concern. Ethics of care, as developed by Fisher and Tronto (1990), provided a starting point for such concerns. The authors conceptualise care as profoundly relational and therefore include the recognition of needs and the capability of delivering care as well as receiving it. From this, four elements of such ethics emerge (Tronto, 1993): (a) *attentiveness*, since a need for care has to be recognised and attended to, while ignoring others has a contrary effect; (b) *responsibility*, which links one’s doing, as well as what one does not do, to the need for care, highlighting the fact that humans have a responsibility towards each other; (c) *competence*, which relates to the notion that, while one may acknowledge the responsibility for caring about someone else’s needs, not everyone has the abilities, resources, or knowledge to address needs in an effective way; and finally (d) *responsiveness*, which focuses on the relationship of caring, that is, taking account of others’ vulnerability and understanding their needs from their point of view, as they express it.

The ethics of care has inspired many texts that aim to rewrite research, teaching, and political activism in the current world (for higher education see Bozalek et al., 2021; for social work see Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023). This is because “the politics of caring have been at the heart of our concerns with exclusion and the critiques of power dynamics in stratified worlds” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 86). Such ethics of relationality, responsibility, and hope (Vela Alarcón & Springgay, 2021) links to social work ethics of justice, empowerment, and support of the vulnerable and provides means to reconfigure social work ethics (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023).

A post-human social work ethic could be similar to an octopus, as Bozalek and Hölscher (2023) have argued. In becoming an octopus, they write, “a highly attentive creature, octopuses use their sensory capacities to deeply attune to their surroundings,” one is entangled in the world, in a multi-species encounter, with highly developed sensory capabilities (Bozalek &

Hölscher, 2023, p. 1). The image of the octopus stresses the multi-species approach and underlines the necessity to use the senses to attune to the world and become fully part of this world again. The “becoming octopus” proposal goes together with ethical notions based on critical post-humanist and post-anthropocentric thinking. Being attuned refers to the sensory potential to link and make connections to the world. This immediately bridges the subject/object divide because being in the world and perceiving it in sensory terms means to let one be affected by it and, therefore, enter the many-fold entanglements. This also implies a curiosity towards multi-species, the world, and its elements. Attentiveness and response-ability—literally, the ability to respond to affection—link post-human ethics directly to the ethics of care.

#### 4. Post-Humanist Social Work as Research, Practice, and Ethics

What does it mean to reconfigure social work along with critical post-humanist thinking? Most importantly, what does it mean to go beyond research as well as practice and the ethics inscribed into the social work profession? Although most contributions develop fruitful approaches for researching the topics of social work—such as environmental problems and migration-related questions—there remains the need to think more specifically about social work not only as a field of research but also as a unique combination of a profession, a practice, and an academic discipline.

##### 4.1. The Academic Perspective

Research in social work includes three main types of research. It focuses on the fields social work addresses, on social problems, and on their effects on humans entangled in the world. It also focuses on the practice of social work, that is, interventions such as policies and concrete social work practices in a community or counselling work, the methods and instruments used, and the stance social workers have towards the problems and the involved humans and other species involved. Finally, considering social work as both an academic endeavour and a profession, there is also social work research that combines both: the *doing* and the research. Social work practice can be part and parcel of social work research and thereby opens novel ways of engaging with research questions. In particular, this latter focus links strongly with critical post-humanism and the entanglement of humans in the world but also of researchers as practitioners with their research.

Along with the debate on “post”-thinking, there have also emerged debates on how such theoretical premises might be translated into research practices. If one understands “post”-theories as a journey into ethical-ontological thinking, one also has to develop a methodology that provides a way to research empirically with these concepts (St. Pierre, 2014, 2021; Taylor,

2017). Some years ago, Elisabeth St. Pierre developed the notion of post-qualitative inquiry. As she outlines:

I don't claim that the structure of humanist qualitative methodology is wrong or in error. I do argue, however, that its assumptions about the nature of inquiry are grounded in Enlightenment humanism's description of human being, of language, of the material, the empirical, the real, of knowledge, power, freedom, and so on and, therefore, are incommensurable with the descriptions of those concepts in the posts [theories]. (St. Pierre, 2014, p. 5)

Therefore, there is a need to leave the well-trodden path of qualitative methods, to engage in a “post” way with research. St. Pierre proposes to use concepts to guide individuals in their research instead of predefined methods. Concepts can lead individuals during research and break the literature/data division to connect reading and empirical research in a combined move. As a second possibility, she points towards theories after the ontological turn such as new materialism. Using concepts such as assemblage and rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) or agential realism (Barad, 2007) can lead research in ways that slow down the research process and guide the empirical work conceptually. This does not mean to forget about the rich plethora of methods we know. It rather points towards a usage of methods that remains open to what emerges in the field and that does not follow a pre-scribed application of methods. Not in vain, much research that engages with “post”-theories uses ethnographic approaches.

For social work as practice and research or practical research, the embodied entanglement seems particularly fruitful. If one understands the social worker as practitioner/researcher as entangled in their research while conducting research and simultaneously being affected by the research, new paths for inquiry open. Conducting research then becomes a corporeal, lived experience (Simonsen, 2007). Researchers/practitioners are entangled with their senses and their body in the research. They are affected, feel uncomfortable, astonished, or surprised during research. Research becomes a sensory experience for the researcher. This means that research—as an assemblage—and the topic or event focused by the research—also an assemblage—mutually affect each other (Fox & Alldred, 2015).

This directly opens social work research to consider the non-human elements in the analysis of the phenomena that interest them. Spaces in their materiality, cities in their full complexity, furniture, trees, food, and so on are elements that affect, that is—have an effect on—people. They can be understood as resources, but I would like to emphasise that they are elements that have a productive force; therefore, these elements must take a more important place in an analysis to understand fully the social problems and professional responses towards them (Richter & Emprechtinger, 2021). The inclu-



sive city, therefore, is not a mere context for inclusion, but it is an assemblage with many elements and connections that have the potential of becoming inclusive not as a once-achieved quality but as an emergent property in specific events.

#### 4.2. Social Work as a Post-Humanist Practice

To transform social work practice into a post-humanist practice is a hard task because it not only implies social workers but also the structures in which their practice is embedded. There is a strong political implication that comes along with this. Structures such as institutions where social workers are employed, the aims that these institutions define, and the social policies of welfare states narrow the practitioners' discretionary power. Therefore, there is a need for political struggles to claim to reform these structures to decentre the human and acknowledge their entanglements in a complex world. In particular, such struggles can be based on a post-human concept of subjectivity that opposes the notion of the autonomous subject. The city as a place, a materiality, a site for encounters, offers much in this sense to rely less on the institutionally mediated relations of single client–professional constellations (such as in counselling) and to develop more social work that situates itself directly where vulnerable subjectivities emerge: in the neighbourhood, in settings where struggles take place, etc.

On the level of concrete practice, post-human theories provide many clues for developing and reconfiguring social work. The concept of entanglement can help to grasp social problems differently and understand social workers' practice as work that helps to reshape these entanglements for a more just world. Therefore, social workers need to acknowledge the way other humans experience the world and their situation, how they relate to the world's different elements, and how the world affects them. As Webb (2021, p. 2976) writes, referring to the concept of agential realism by Karen Barad:

If agential realism is correct, it literally turns our common assumptions about social work processes and relationships inside-out. In the posthumanist world of Barad, we would barely recognise ourselves because social work is reconfigured through the foregrounding of the dynamic relation of the human and non-human as ontological processes of materialisation, in enactment.

As a consequence, not only are the service users entangled in the world but also social workers are entangled, and the relationship between social workers and the service users constitutes an entanglement. Therefore, social workers need to see themselves as part of such entanglements and acknowledge how these relationships affect them. Becoming a professional in (post)social work means challenging the powerful client–professional relationship.

#### 4.3. Social Work and Post-Human Ethics

Social work as a profession that bases its ethical principles on human rights requires a thorough reconfiguration in light of post-human ethics. A possible key in achieving this is that “post-human” does not mean “anti-human” but rather constitutes a rupture with the humanist tradition grounded in Enlightenment thinking. Social work needs an ethics that acknowledges the human not as a rational individual defined by the abilities of the mind (analysis, decision, strategies, etc.) but rather in the sense of the post-human subjectivity outlined above: embodied, affected, and entangled.

The tracks of post-human theories link to the ethics of care towards the environment—nature, animals, species—but also the different people in the world. Social work as an actor of change, reorganisation, or assemblages, operates in a complex ethical context. This ethics considers that humans are all part of this world and of these current issues: climate change, social inequalities, species extinction, and so on. At the same time, this “we” (humans) is fragmented, differentiated, and multiple. As Braidotti (2019, p. 157) says: “We-are-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same.”

Decentring humans from the analysis and action also provides a powerful argument to question current neoliberal politics that put the burden of social problems on the already disadvantaged. If a social problem such as poverty, delinquency, or disabilities is not centred on individuals, but rather the individuals are seen as nodes in a complex web of objects, materialities, powers, and politics, then critique and action need to address the whole assemblage. An ethics of care provides a strong framework to reconfigure professional social work ethics.

### 5. Conclusion

I have tried to make the connection between theoretical tracks that I consider to be very productive for the analysis and understanding of social work. I find them productive because they provide a new perspective that departs from the primordially of reason and the human being developed in Europe during the Enlightenment. They help in understanding aspects of the world that are neglected in much research: body, affect, emotions, and humans' involvement in and with this world in its entirety.

Social work research has until now mainly used post-humanist thinking in the analysis of environmental and health topics. These first journeys into post-humanist thinking and research provide examples of how such a perspective provides fruitful openings. In the same vein, there is a need to address social questions in cities from a post-human perspective. Understanding social problems and pressing social issues such as inclusion as an entanglement in materiality and the multiple elements of the “city-assemblage,” provides novel

ways to understand the problems and address them. Cities have grown in the last decades to unseen sizes and the current speed in social, economic, technological, and environmental changes is contributing to an increasing complexity of the cities. There is a need to equip social work with lines of thought that are made to apprehend complexity, interconnectedness, and mutual affectedness.

The task has just begun and the translation of “post”-theories into social work research as well as practice requires more debate. In particular, there is the important task to get practitioners on board and thereby bring post-human research and ethics into the realm of politics and social work practice. Braidotti (2019, p. 122) makes a strong argument as to why this is so much needed in current times:

We cannot solve contemporary problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them, as Albert Einstein wisely reminds us. The challenges of our times call for adequate forms of accountability for the great advances as well as resistance to the injustices and perils of the present, by thinking outside the conventional categories of analysis.

### Acknowledgments

I am thankful to the organizers of the 2022 conference of the Commission of Social Work among the various schools of the HES-SO, Switzerland. They invited me to present a first version of this article. I am also very grateful to three anonymous reviewers who helped me improve the article substantially.

### Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interests.

### References

- Ahmed, S. (2000). *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge.
- Akomolafe, B. (2020). *I, Coronavirus. Mother. Monster. Activist. Chennai, India*. Self-Published. <https://describd.com/document/459868833/I-Coronavirus-Mother-Monster-Activist>
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway. Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.
- Blanke, B. (2004). Governance issues in “activating” the German welfare state. In B. Müller, S. Löb, & K. Zimmermann (Eds.), *Steuerung und Planung im Wandel* [Control and planning in transition] (pp. 139–159). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-80583-6\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-80583-6_9)
- Bondi, L., & Fewell, J. (2003). “Unlocking the cage door”: The spatiality of counselling. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 4(4), 527–547. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1464936032000137948>
- Boulet, J., & Hawkins, L. (Eds.). (2020). *Practical and political approaches to recontextualizing social work*. Information Science Reference.
- Bozalek, V. (2023). Agential realism for social work. In S. A. Webb (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of international critical social work: New perspectives and agendas* (1st ed., Chapter 42). Routledge.
- Bozalek, V., & Hölscher, D. (2023). Reconfiguring social work ethics with posthuman and post-anthropocentric imaginaries. In D. Hölscher, R. Huggan, & D. McAuliffe (Eds.), *Social work theory and ethics* (pp. 1–30). Springer Nature Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-3059-0\\_20-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-3059-0_20-1)
- Bozalek, V., & Pease, B. (Eds.). (2021). *Post-anthropocentric social work*. Routledge.
- Bozalek, V., Zembylas, M., & Tronto, J. C. (Eds.). (2021). *Posthuman and political care ethics for reconfiguring higher education pedagogies*. Routledge.
- Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman knowledge*. Polity.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter. On the discursive limits of “sex.”* Routledge.
- Coole, D., & Frost, S. (2010). Introducing the new materialisms. In D. Coole & S. Frost (Eds.), *New materialisms* (pp. 1–43). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392996-001>
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1980). *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie, tome 2: Mille Plateaux* (Bd. 2) [Capitalism and schizophrenia]. Editions de Minuit.
- Diebäcker, M., & Reutlinger, C. (Eds.). (2018). *Soziale Arbeit und institutionelle Räume: Explorative Zugänge* [Social work and institutional spaces: Exploratory approaches]. Springer.
- European Alternatives. (2018, July 24). On nomadism: A conversation with Rosi Braidotti. *Political Critique*. <https://politicalcritique.org/world/2018/nomadism-braidotti>
- Fisher, B., & Tronto, J. (1990). Toward a feminist theory of caring. In E. K. Abel & M. K. Nelson (Eds.), *Circles of care: Work and identity in women’s lives* (pp. 35–62). State University of New York Press.
- Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2015). New materialist social inquiry: Designs, methods and the research-assembly. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(4), 399–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2014.921458>
- Godden, N. J. (2021). Community work, love and the indigenous worldview of *buen vivir* in Peru. *International Social Work*, 64(3), 354–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872820930254>
- Gonzalez Benson, O. (2021). On becoming “essential”: Coronavirus lessons of ontology—From the migrant farmworker and us who consume the fruits of her

- labor. *Qualitative Social Work*, 20(1/2), 186–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325020973340>
- Healy, K. (2022). *Social work theories in context: Creating frameworks for practice* (3rd ed.). Bloomsbury Academic.
- IASS. (2022). *Black lives matter: Developments in decolonising social work*. IASS.
- Lamping, W., & Schridde, H. (2004). Der “Aktivierende Sozialstaat”—Ordnungs- und steuerungstheoretische Aspekte [The “activating welfare state”—Theoretical aspects of order and control]. In S. Lütz & R. Czada (Eds.), *Wohlfahrtsstaat—Transformation und Perspektiven* [Welfare state—Transformation and perspectives] (pp. 39–65). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-80944-5\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-80944-5_3)
- Livholts, M. B. (2023). *The body politics of glocal social work: Essays on the post-anthropocentric condition*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003193593>
- Marston, S., Jones, J. P., III., & Woodward, K. (2005). Human geography without scale. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30, 416–432.
- Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*. Duke University Press.
- Massumi, B. (2015). *Politics of affect*. Polity.
- Pease, B. (2021). Fostering non-anthropocentric vulnerability in men: Challenging the autonomous masculine subject in social work. In V. Bozalek & B. Pease (Eds.), *Post-anthropocentric social work* (pp. Chapter 9). Routledge.
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Richter, M., & Emprechtinger, J. (2021). Social work in confinement: The spatiality of social work in carceral settings. *Geographica Helvetica*, 76(1), 65–73. <https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-76-65-2021>
- Simonsen, K. (2007). Practice, spatiality and embodied emotions: An outline of a geography of practice. *Human Affairs*, 17(2), 168–181. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10023-007-0015-8>
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2014). A brief and personal history of post qualitative research. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 30(2). <https://journal.jctonline.org/index.php/jct/article/view/521>
- St. Pierre, E. A. (2021). Post qualitative inquiry, the refusal of method, and the risk of the new. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 27(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419863005>
- Taylor, C. A. (2017). Rethinking the empirical in higher education: Post-qualitative inquiry as a less comfortable social science. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 40(3), 311–324. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2016.1256984>
- ten Brummelaar, M. D., Knorth, E. J., Post, W. J., Harder, A. T., & Kalverboer, M. E. (2018). Space between the borders? Perceptions of professionals on the participation in decision-making of young people in coercive care. *Qualitative Social Work*, 17(5), 692–711. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325016681661>
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003070672>
- Tudor, R., & Barraclough, S. (2023). Thinking boxes, behavioural boys and the politics of love: “Doing” post-qualitative social work research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 22(1), 176–190. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250211056600>
- Vela Alarcón, A., & Springgay, S. (2021). The ethics and politics of care. Relationality, responsibility and hope in post-secondary art education. In V. Bozalek, M. Zembylas, & J. C. Tronto (Eds.), *Posthuman and political care ethics for reconfiguring higher education pedagogies* (pp. Chapter 10). Routledge.
- Webb, S. A. (2021). Why agential realism matters to social work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(8), 2964–2981. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa106>
- Webb, S. A. (Ed.). (2023). *The Routledge handbook of international critical social work: New perspectives and agendas* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Woods, G., & Hölscher, D. (2021). Return of the post-human: Developing indigenist perspectives for social work at a time of environmental crisis. In V. Bozalek & B. Pease (Eds.), *Post-anthropocentric social work* (pp. Chapter 10). Routledge.

## About the Author



**Marina Richter** is a professor of social space at the HES-SO Valais-Wallis School for Social Work. She is a geographer and sociologist interested in questions of justice in contemporary, complex, and plural societies. Her focus includes research in the fields of criminal justice, migration, and transnationalism, as well as questions of gender and social difference.