

**Call: Post-humanism and Social Work? Empirical and theoretical explorations.**

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Social work has undergone a significant transformation since the turn of the millennium. Digitalisation, climate change and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic pose major challenges to society and thus also to social work and call for innovative approaches. Social work research and practice are called upon to deal with these developments and their effects. Conceptualisations of climate or environment-oriented social work, technological developments in the context of digitalisation and care work, or (algorithm-based) assessment tools for risk and protective factors, e.g. in child and adult protection or the correctional system, are increasingly the subject of research interests and in social work literature. To address such kind of issues, a debate on various "post" theories (post-anthropocentric, post-humanist and trans-humanist) and social work have been going on for a few years, especially in the English-speaking world (Bozalek, 2023; Bozalek & Pease, 2021; Webb, 2021). This discussion is inspired by feminist, post-colonial, materialist and other theoretical traditions and so far offers a primarily theoretical approach to conceptualising social work as an activity for the *more-than-human*.

The special issue invites to think social work from the perspective of "post" theories and to critically relate this thinking to existing theoretical approaches and intervention models of social work. We would like to characterise this reconceptualisation of social work through four elements (Richter, 2023): *First*, "post" approaches relativise the human-centred reference of social work activity. In this understanding, the human being is entangled with non-human organisms and non-organic matter. In particular, the work of Karen Barad (2007) and her concept of *agential realism* or, more generally, the ontological turn in social sciences, associated with names such as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing or Gilles Deleuze can serve as a point of reference here.

*Secondly*, "post" approaches promote the importance of social work in the context of environmental issues. This broadens the horizon from social justice issues to environmental justice (e.g. Bozalek & Pease, 2021). In this respect, post-humanism also argues that, given the human connection to and dependence on nature, social problems (poverty, migration, etc.) cannot be solved regardless of ecological care for fauna *and* flora (e.g. Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2021).

With the social-ecological interconnectedness of the world, post-humanism – *thirdly* – breaks with the theoretical premises of the Enlightenment. Specifically, it decentres the human being from the ontological worldview and – *fourthly* – turns away from the binary way of thinking, which sees the heterosexual, white man as the norm at the centre and devalues 'deviant' human realities on the basis of their gender, race and body (e.g. Daigle, 2021). Consequently, post-humanist approaches recognise the subject only in the relational dimension of human, non-human and more-than-human experiences (Braidotti, 2013). This radically pushes thinking beyond the dual pattern of thought between nature/culture, mind/body, human/animal, etc.

For social work, such a new conception has several consequences. The overcoming of the humanistic image of man and the human rights associated with it calls into question a central pillar of current self-understandings of social work. The dimension of the working relationship with the focus on the dyad between the professional and the service user in social intervention is judged to be constricting instead of empowering (Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2021) and needs reorientation. Finally, subjectivity and *agency* in a post-humanist view are not (only) related to the individual, but always emerge from the moment, from

the interplay of different elements (Braidotti, 2019). Seen in this way, in "post" approaches the material and non-human beings (animals) are no longer judged based on their usefulness to humans, but are on an equal footing with them, each with their own needs.

So far, the debate on post-humanist approaches in social work has mainly been on a theoretical level, while empirical studies and links to social work practice are scarce (for an overview see Richter, 2023). Therefore, we would like to encourage a debate on "post" theories for social work as a profession and discipline in Switzerland, as it has been going on in the English-speaking world for some years. The following questions can inspire this debate: To what extent can the discussions initiated be transferred to the Swiss and other national contexts? What new and different insights into empirical material can post-humanist perspectives provide? Which challenges and opportunities arise when conducting research approaches that are oriented towards post-humanist concepts? To what extent are current theoretical approaches and models of intervention of social work compatible with these perspectives? And to what degree does such a perspective offer fruitful considerations for the further development of social work as a profession and as a discipline? What beneficial insights can be expected with such ontological and epistemological premises in research?

Empirical, methodological or theoretical contributions can explore and critically reflect on these questions.

- Submitted papers can discuss *empirical* findings from post-humanist-oriented research or re-analyse data/materials from existing studies through the post-humanist lens. To what extent is the post-human subject (human, non-organic, material) to be considered in the social world and thus also in social work? What role do space and matter play, for example, in professional practice or the living conditions of a specific target group? What does the relationship between the professional and the service user in social work look like when the focus is not only on people but on everything more-than-human? What kind of "materialistic vitalism" (Braidotti, 2013) can documents or technical tools take? These questions can also be transferred to other fields of work and research subjects.
- We also welcome *methodological* contributions, which suggest ideas on research approaches under post-humanist premises. What does it mean to conduct post-humanist research and how can this be implemented methodologically? What challenges arise for data collection and analysis from a post-humanist perspective? What are the implications of a post-humanist perspective for research ethics?
- *Theoretical* contributions can offer critical considerations on the foundations of post-humanist perspectives and their significance for the formation of theory in social work. Is it even possible to think of a post-humanist practice of social work and how would it be conceived? What challenges arise for the conception of social work as an action science from such a perspective?

This broad overview offers a first synopsis of contributions to the discussion on post-humanist perspectives in the Swiss context and beyond.

#### **Submission of articles:**

Articles for the thematic dossier are to be submitted before 30th of april 2024. The contributions are to be submitted via the journal's platform under [www.szsa.ch](http://www.szsa.ch)

Publication of the dossier is scheduled for 2025.

In addition to the call, the journal continues to accept thematically open contributions. These can also be submitted at any time via [www.szsa.ch](http://www.szsa.ch)

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