Social Work and the Post-Human

Jim Ife
Western Sydney University
What is the Post-Human?

• The ‘post-human’ is not anti-human. Rather it implies beyond the human, or beyond the anthropocentrism that began with human settlements and ideas of ‘man having dominion’, and reached its extreme form with Enlightenment Modernity.

• The ‘human’ is not an empirical fact, but rather a construct, that has changed historically (e.g. slaves as non-human, Indigenous People, Nazi anti-semitism).

• The dominant construct of the human in Modernity is individual, separate from the ‘natural world’. The nature/culture binary. Other cultural traditions are different, e.g. Indigenous.

• It also assumes a human/machine or human/technology binary.

• The Post-human turn is about questioning these binaries and rethinking the ‘human’. It is a complex and contested area, drawing on Feminism, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Biology, Literature, Anthropology and Environmentalism. This is my own take on it, drawing on Haraway and Braidotti.

• There are three strands of post-human thinking:
1. The Anthropocene and the nature/culture binary

- The Anthropocene has fundamentally challenged the way we see humanity. We are living with the consequences of ‘man having dominion over’ the ‘natural’ world. The realisation that the ‘natural’ world ‘has dominion’ over us.
- We can no longer treat nature as simply resources for human benefit.
- The new biology emphasises the interdependence of humans with other living and non-living beings, and the cooperative symbiotic aspects of human evolution. This includes microbes, pets, cattle, horses, insects, and plants.
- Indigenous People understand that ‘the land owns us’, and that humans are embedded in, not separated from, an ecological ‘community’. The non-human world makes demands on us.
- Our ‘humanity’ cannot be defined in isolation from ‘nature’. Beyond the nature/culture binary. Are we humanimal?
- Haraway and the Chthulucene. Tentacular thinking: being in the arms of others.
2. The human/technology binary and the cyborg

- We live our lives in symbiosis (evolving together and interdependent) with machines and technology.
- Body parts, glasses, hearing aids, dentures, pacemakers, surgery,
- Medication
- Machines to make us ‘fit’ and ‘healthy’
- Clothing, jewellery, watches
- Mobile phones, computers, tablets, television, radio, cars, furniture,
- We are not only surrounded by machines and technology, but we interact with them and they become part of our humanity. Where would we be without them?
- We interact with AI. We are data, and part of a big data community
- Robots
- Haraway and the cyborg
3. The erosion of our accepted ‘humanity’.

- The comfortable assumption of ‘humanity’ in Western culture is being eroded from within, by its own contradictions and its unsustainability.
- The individualism of neo-liberal capitalism has produced one-dimensional humans.
- The sterility of mind/body dualism.
- The erosion of community, the commodification of culture, the subordination of everything to private profit, economic fundamentalism, the marginalisation of poetry, art, mystery, spirituality,
- The privileging of a narrow empirical ‘rationality’.
- In a world searching for certainty, there is no room for awe, wonder, puzzlement, perplexity, chaos. Spirituality is marginalised.
- “We are the hollow men” (let alone women!) – our humanity is hollow.
- Colonialism and Patriarchy have privileged one white male version of ‘humanity’.
The ontological challenge

• So we face an ontological or existential crisis. And ecological imperatives give it an urgency.
• Our humanity is being necessarily drawn in two directions – towards ‘nature’ and towards ‘technology’, while at the same time being eroded from within. We may be comfortable with addressing one of these, but three are hard to cope with.
• So we enter the period of the post-human, when what it means to be human must be radically re-imagined.
• This adds to the sense of uncertainty and despair, which affects social workers, those with whom they work, and the organisations they work in.
• Humanity has been understood differently in the past, and in different cultural contexts. We are now experiencing another transition.
Social Work

- Theorists of the Posthuman such as Haraway and Braidotti draw on many intellectual traditions that are familiar to social workers: feminism, social justice, ecological perspectives, postcolonial encounters, Indigenous knowledges, postmodern messiness, and the humanities. But we need to add the biological.

- We see the coming together of the sciences and the humanities: C.P. Snow’s two cultures are talking to each other again, and finding common cause at this time of crisis. Each needs the other.

- The new biology is a biology of relationships: symbiosis, synergies, interdependence, etc., both within and between species. Social workers are experts in relationships; we understand relational reality in ways that others are only just discovering.

- Social workers need not be frightened of the new sciences, but must have some scientific literacy in this age of ecological crises. Environmental social work. Weather and natural disasters.
Beyond the anthropocentric ‘social’

- Understanding ‘the social’ and ‘community’ in posthuman terms.
- Social work ‘clients’ have relationships with microbes, animals, plants, gardens, bush, surf, mountains, and many of these are ‘therapeutic’. Like other relationships, they can be relationships of power and domination. But they can also be nurturing and reciprocal. Social workers have ethical duties to the non-human (e.g. abused pets).
- The ‘clients’ also have relationships with their smartphones, computers, motor cars, TVs, and so do social workers.
- And their relationships with other humans are often mediated by technology (social media etc).
- We need to be able to recognize, understand and work with these relationships and with the communities that they make up. As we reinvent humanity we reinvent community. What does this mean for community work?
- Social workers have been extending their work in this way, but perhaps we need to see it as central rather than peripheral.
Social Work Knowledges

• Recognising a variety of situated knowledges.
• Challenging the nature/culture binary
• Validation of Indigenous knowledges: but also more than just validation. Recognising them as central and as necessary for a posthuman world.
• Scientific knowledges.
  • not the sterility of the ‘hard’ sciences: rather the wonderment and awe of Brian Cox and David Attenborough
  • The fluidity and interconnectedness of the new biology
  • Earth System Science
• Interrogating ‘the human’ in social work, and therefore:
• The humanities: they are about exploring the human, and telling the (hi)stories of humanity. But not confined to the Western Canon.
Understanding technology as having been part of our humanity since the first tool makers:

- The need to move beyond the separation of humans and technology
- Technology is not neutral, nor is it purely instrumental
- We evolve with technology, and it evolves with us, in a similar symbiosis to the biological
- Social workers have either mistrusted technology as dehumanising, or have taken a purely instrumental approach.
- It is not a simple embracing of technology, but rather an engagement with it.
- A recognition that our humanity is embedded in our technologies and in the mechanical
- Social work that works on our relationships with the technological, and assists people and communities to engage with technologies
Uncertainty and Precarity

- We do not know where this is all headed.
- Moving beyond linear history and the assumption of inevitable progress.
- Social work can no longer assume it is working towards certain improvement.
- We now know that things won't get better and better for the vast majority of the world’s population. Rethinking past-present-future.
- Rather than obsession with progress, helping people to live well. While acknowledging our connections and debts to the past and the future, we struggle with the present.
- Haraway: ‘staying with the troubles’
- Learning to accept precarity as part of the human condition, recognising that the false certainty of Modernity’s narratives (including capitalism, socialism, science, religion) is a myth.
Community and ‘radical help’

• Community of some form is inherent in the human condition and has been present throughout history except in Western societies in the last 100 years or so. It has been the basis for the meeting of human need.

• And it is likely to be so in the future when obscene neo-liberal capitalism collapses under the weight of its contradictions. What will come after is uncertain. But if any form of human civilization is to survive, it will be based in some form of community. And it will be a posthuman civilization.

• If social work is to have anything important to contribute it will need to rethink its role in posthuman community. Many writers see community as the necessary way forward in view of the crises facing humanity.

Extending Diversity

- Diversity is key to life, and to ecological sustainability
- Western Modernity has difficulty with diversity, and Anthropocentrism has been tied up with White Western Modernity
- And Social Work, which grew and matured within White Western Modernity, has also found diversity difficult. There is racism embedded within much conventional social work.
- This is seen in social work’s colonialism, its Anglo-centrism, its preference for universal narratives of human rights etc, the fact that it has had to make conscious decisions to ‘address diversity’, and many social workers’ discomfort with Critical Whiteness studies.
- It will be even more challenging to expand diversity to include the non-human, but this is what Posthuman analysis requires.
- Simply embracing diversity is not enough: that implies social work is separate from diversity. Rather, we can develop social work that is grounded in diversity.
Disruptive Social Work

- Social work that disrupts Anthropocentrism
- Social work that disrupts Whiteness
- Social Work that disrupts colonialism
- Social work that disrupts Patriarchy
- Social Work that disrupts the nature/culture divide
- Social work that disrupts Modernity
- Social work that disrupts progress
- Social work that disrupts certainty
- Social Work that disrupts instrumentalist ideas of technology